The Concept of Identity and Fragmentation in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad

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Abstract:

This study discusses the concept of identity and fragmentation in Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018). In his novel, most events are realistic pictures of what happened in Baghdad after the US occupation in 2003. This study clarifies the concept of identity on the individual and societal levels and how political and social crises affect this concept. The novel's protagonist, Hadi, is a junk dealer who collects parts of different bodies to create a monster made up of several bodies, which is the focus of this study because it indicates the fragmented identity in Iraqi society. The experiences and contradictions of this character and his portrayal as an unstable entity in the novel embody the fact that Iraqi identity is unstable. Among the issues addressed by this study are the social and political fragmentation left behind by the US occupation and the sectarian war that negatively affects identity. This study shows a deep vision of the fragmented identity through the prominent literary work of the writer Ahmed Saadawi and how he blends fantasy and reality and depicts the divisions in Iraqi society. Finally, the study analyzes the significance of fragmented identity for Iraqi society and how the novel reflects the internal tensions and conflicts that Iraq is experiencing. It also calls for thinking about the future of collective identity in light of these challenges and whether rebuilding is possible.

Keywords: (Identity, Fragmentation, society crises, Frankenstein in Baghdad, Al-Saadawi).

الملخص:

تناقش هذه الدراسة مفهوم الهوية و التجزأة من خلال رواية احمد السعداوي *فرانكنشتاين في بغداد* (2018). من خلال هذه الرواية التي اغلب احداثها هي صورة واقعية لما جرى في بغداد بعد الاحتلال الامريكي لبغداد٢٠٠٣ توضح هذه الدراسة مفهوم الهوية على الصعيد الفردي و المجتمعي و كيف تأثر الازمات السياسة و الاجتماعية على هذا المفهوم. من خلال بطل الرواية هادي تاجر الخردة الذي يجمع اجزاء من اجسام مهتلفو لخق وحش مكون من عدة اجزاء والذي يكون محور هذه الدراسة لدلالتة على الهوية المتجزأة في المجتمع العراقي. من خلال تجارب و تناقضات هذه الشخصية وتصويرها على انها كيان غير مستقر في الرواية والذي هذا تجسيد على ان الهوية العراقية غير مستقرة. و من بين الامور التي تتناولها هذه الدراسة هي التجزأة الجتماعية و السياسية التي خلفها الاحتلال الامريكي و الحرب الطائفية التي تنعكس سلبا على الهوية. تبين هذه الدراسة رؤية عميقة للهوية المجزأة من خلال العمل الادبي البارز للكاتب احمد السعداوي و كيفية مزجها للخيال و الواقع و تصويره للانقسامات في المجتمع العراقي. وأخيراً، تحلل الدراسة أهمية الهوية المجزأة للمجتمع العراقي وكيف تعكس الرواية التوترات والصراعات الداخلية التي يعيشها العراق. كما تدعو إلى التفكير في مستقبل الهوية الجماعية في ضوء هذه التحديات وما إذا كان إعادة البناء ممكناً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الهوية، التجزأة، الازمات الاجتماعية، فرانكنشتاين في بغداد، السعداوي).

1. Introduction

The terms of identity and fragmentation represent a challenge all over the world. It is a challenge for people all over the world. Identity is concerned with social life, and most thinkers are involved with it because of its importance in several aspects of human life. Nonetheless, fragmentation is also related to human life. Sometimes, these two terms become a dilemma when harming individuals and community well-being. Psychologists believe that identity affects all communities, whether negative or positive.

An identity is a group of significant characteristics that relate to the self, such as interests, social roles, a structure of norms and values, and social connection, which create a personality characteristic. It is something unique

that makes us different from other people, and we build it with time by collecting its special features from our nature, social traditions and personal behavior. According to Oyserman, the concept means:

> The traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is. Identities can be focused on the past—what used to be true of one, the present— what is true of one now, or the future—the person one expects or wishes to become, the person one feels obligated to try to become, or the person one fears one may become [. . .] Identities make up one's self-concept variously described as what comes to mind when one thinks of oneself, one's theory of one's personality, and what one believes is true of oneself. (Oyserman et al., 2012, p. 69)

This personal or individual identity needs a mutual relationship with various external variables to ensure its continuance. For the "self" to be recognized, a relationship with an "other," a larger social collectivity, is required. Identity is not only something we hold personally, but it is also something we share with those we consider to be similar to ourselves (if not identical) in order to define and reflect something larger, all-encompassing, and greater. This is true for some forms of identities, including social identity, national identity, cultural identity, religious identity, and gender identity, among others. Here, identification represents a fit between who I am (who I believe I am) and who or what I am attempting to do. Ruthellen Josselson (1987) analyses the causal link by claiming that:

> Identity provides a match between what one regards as central to oneself and how one is viewed by significant others in one's life. Identity is also a way of preserving the continuity of the self, linking the past and the present [. . .] at the same time that

our identity if fundamentally interwoven with others' to gain meaning, contrasting ourselves with others heightens our sense of what is uniquely individual. (p. 10)

Fragmentation is another important postmodern tactic seen in several postmodern works. Some modern British and Irish writers have popularised fragmentation in their writing, which denies consistency, wholeness, and linearity and causes gaps. According to Hans Jost Frey, "the fragment is not a popular subject for literary scholarship" since it "does not fulfill the presupposition of wholeness" and "it cannot be controlled"(Frey, 1996, p. 32). However, the reappearance of fragmentation in the twenty-first century highlights the complexities of modern writing. Fragmentary writing takes on a central role in postmodern writing. Before delving into the many forms of fragmentation in literature, it is important to define fragmentation first. According to Camelia Elias in The Fragment: Towards a History and Poetics of a Performative Genre, "much of the appeal to the fragment rests on the fact that one can never be certain of what exactly constitutes a fragment"(Elias, 2004, p. 2). Frey describes fragmentation as "hostile to meaning and resists understanding" (1996, p. 2). Fragmentation makes incompleteness appear as if something has been removed from the whole. Furthermore, the origins of the term have been investigated, and in Latin, fragment stem from frango, which means to shatter, crash, or lose. According to its origins, fragmentation is frequently connected with scarcity, loss, and vulnerability.

Here is the Iraqi Ahmed Saadawi joining this phenomenon in Western and Arab literature with his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad,* which was nominated for the long list for the Arabic Booker Prize, directly referring to Mary Shelley's novel Frankenstein. Saadawi takes the well-known idea and placed it again in Baghdad in 2005 following the US invasion of Iraq, starting from actual reality and surreal daily events witnessed by the Iraqi citizens in Baghdad every day. The English novel begins with the story of the student Victor Frankenstein, who was able to invent a new giant creature who rose seeking revenge on the tyrants and getting rid of the evil leaders who were the cause of the destruction of the world by their poor use of science, so they established evil instead of good and enslaved people everywhere.

However, the monster rebels against his inventor and turns into another killing machine until he ends up killing Victor Frankenstein himself after he kills his wife and brother. Saadawi takes this plot and the origin of the well-known idea to bring it down again in Baghdad in 2005 following the US invasion of Iraq, so he started from an actual reality and surreal daily events that the Iraqi citizen in Baghdad witnesses daily, the reality of the bombings that turned into a dark daily context that became worthy of a great appearance. Iraq seemed to be waiting for "Godot" to emerge from the swamp of blood, and because Godot was associated with desperate waiting, Frankenstein was the solution for Saadawi.

The relationship between identity and fragmentation in literature and philosophical thought is complex and deeply interconnected, with

fragmentation often used to explore or depict identity in ways that go beyond traditional notions. In contexts of trauma or social chaos, such as war or economic crisis, identity becomes fragmented as a result of the dispersion of experiences and the breaking of traditional ties that form identity. Fragmentation reflects the loss of a sense of coherent identity and shows how individuals or communities experience fragmentation. In novels such as Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, this is demonstrated as the identity of Iraqi society after the invasion is expressed through fragmented characters and discontinuous events. The relationship between identity and fragmentation is exploratory, with fragmentation used to deconstruct and understand identity by presenting it as an unstable concept formed from contradictory or disparate parts. This approach reflects the complexity of identity in the contemporary world, whether in literature, philosophy, or everyday life.

2. Literature Review

To understand the structure of Iraqi society that constructs the novel's main character and the specific historical, political and cultural context, it is also important to know where most novel events happen to study society. To answer all of these inquiries about the political and cultural setting of Baghdad under US occupation, Phebe Marr and Ibrahim Al-Marashi present their works T*he Modren History of Iraq* and *the Occupation of Iraq: Wining the War, Lossing the Pace* by Ali A. Alawi(ALLAWI, 2007). This study draws

on these two works to understand society after the occupation, which provides a comprehensive view of divisions and disturbances that affected society during that time and the dire consequences that Iraqi society suffered due to the occupation.

Ahmed Saadawi presents his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, which embodies the events in Baghdad after the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and what came after. The novel deals with many topics, the most important of which is identity and fragmentation. The characters in the novel live in an important transitional phase, from the era of dictatorship under the former regime ruled by Saddam Hussein to the era of the US invasion and the overwhelming chaos that afflicted the country, which created divisions among members of society. The central point discussed in this study remains the topic of identity, represented by the Iraqi writer Ahmed Saadawi, who is considered a contemporary of these events.

Belamghari argues that identity is a concern over time time. The main reason with this concept is the globalization phenomenon that leads to social crises and geopolitical. His study states that "identity is the process of becoming rather than being, and it thus formed in compliance with the exigencies of each and every time"(Belamghari, 2020, p5). So this can lead us to the identity is not dependent on factors of sameness and\or difference but is also determined by unique space and time constraints. What used to operate as identity in the past may no longer work in the present or future. Changes include continuity as people travel through time and location, new ways of

making sense of their identity emerge, and the marks and processes they employ to construct their being and personalities.

Angela McRobbie argues that fragmentation deals with issues related to contemporary culture in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture.* One of the problems that McRobbiedeal has with it is that fragmentation as a term can used to discuss the problems of the multiple meanings of contemporary culture (McRobbie, 1994, p 22). Fredric Jameson states that schizophrenic persons of collective consciousness represent the weaknesses of popular culture(Jameson, 1991, p 399). Stuart Hall has another opinion that consciousness lets the person emerge and be divided, which is the main step of postmodernism. He mentions that the new center of society disregarded people according to fragmentation subjectivity (Hall, 2005, p 469). Jean Francois describes postmodernism as an age of fragmentation and heterogeneity (Lyotard et al., 1984).

3. Theoretical Framework

The use of fragmentation in the narrative method can distract the reader, especially when the subject of the narrative is about identity, which is often an intertwined and complex subject because it studies the individual's conditions and impression in light of the society in which he lives. The events of novels that raise such topics are usually about events in the past and present at the same time, which creates chaos in the reader's mind when trying to understand the events and connect them. The best example of this is the novel

Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi, which deals with several topics, including the fragmented identity of the Iraqi individual, especially after the US occupation of Iraq.

Hadi, "I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I"(Saadawi, 2018, p. 47-89). He tries hard to find the body of his friend, who was lost in one of the explosions that occurred in Baghdad. After trying hard to no avail, he decides to collect the parts of the bodies from different explosions to arrange them together to present them to his friend's family as the body of his missing friend. This body rises to take revenge on all those who contributed to the explosions that tore apart its components.

The state of destruction that the Iraqi of Baghdad is experiencing, as the writer sees and experiences it, has stripped the place of its original concept and references related to civilization, security, housing and stability and has made it an aggressive, repellent and untrustworthy place(Alhashmi, 2020, p. 92). It is a place plagued with tragedy, stained all the time with blood, a space that was disintegrated after being built as a reflection of the image of the targeted Iraqi whose limbs were scattered in the terrorist bombings.

This flying space and these scattered limbs required the appearance of Hadi Al-Atak, the seller of antiques in Baghdad, who would rush after every bombing to pick up a human organ from one of the victims to build a strong

being that would rise in the form of a giant who would seek revenge on the terrorists who caused those bombings(Schneider, 2021, p. 208).

The new being, then, is the unity of the victims and martyrs because it is made up of those who were martyred in distant bombings, and it does not represent an individual identity. It does not carry an ethnic, tribal or even ideological identity. It reflects the Iraqi in his raw state. This is the deep meaning of this sublime intertextuality with the original Frankenstein, which did not carry this meaning. The emergence of this genie to take revenge on the forces of evil represented by the terrorists is a creative and cultural call for all Iraqis to emerge to confront one enemy, which is terrorism, and to exclude all types of affiliations, the emergence of living bodies in defense of life targeted by the emperors of murder(Mustafa, 2008, p. 28).

3.1 The Fragmented Identity of Society in Baghdad After US Occupation

Ahmed Saadawi conveys a realistic image in his novel about the events in Iraq in an artistic way and the needs of society in that period; as he pointed out in the interview with The National, "People with logical minds understand the need for imagination in times of crisis and violence." For Saadawi, imagination is one of the most important elements in dystopian narratives: "[i]t gives vitality and brings out the overwhelming imaginative powers of writing. But there is a deeper reason for me [Saadawi]. The Iraqi society itself has created permanent forms of imagination—and treats them as facts" (East, 2018 para. 7). Thus, the events that Saadawi deals with are not imaginary.

Still, most of them are real, and they happened in Baghdad after the invasion led by the United States of America. For the Iraqi reader, Saadawi's images are real events that do not extend to strangeness except in some simple joints. In The Monster Unleashed: Iraq's Horrors of Everyday Life in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Alyan states that the state of Iraqi society after the occupation was one of panic, disintegration, fear, and terror that can be likened to a dust storm that leaves chaos behind after it ends and leaves nothing untouched(Elayyan, 2017).

The important thing that Saadawi is trying to convey is Whatsitsname, which represents a different group of the Iraqi people because it comprises various bodies to other people in terms of identity, thought, and belief. It is considered a realistic image of Iraqi society because the body consists of different corpses. The image that Whatsitsname presents through its parts can reflect what Bakhtin suggests: "Grotesque images may, of course, present other members, organs and parts of the body (especially dismembered parts)"(Bakhtin, 1984, p. 318). This can provide a clear explanation of what Saadawi is trying to clarify through Whatsitsname because this creature can represent all Iraqis. "[I am] made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 146–47). This could be Saadawi's message through Whatsitsname, which is a sound to all the Iraqi people to reconcile, away from ethnic and religious backgrounds, and thus Saadawi succeeds in

producing "I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 146).

3.2 Whatsitsname's Fragmented Identity and the Quest for Justice

Saadawi presents Whatsitsname as having the ability to change its parts easily. This trait is necessary, as Bakhtin suggests "the grotesque body … is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" where some of its parts need to be constantly replaced because some of them rot "When I got up the next day, I found that many parts of my body were on the ground, and there was a strong smell of rot" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 148-49). This change is necessary for Whatsitsname to survive; without it, he cannot live. This image that Saadawi shades is a reference to individuals in Iraqi society to continue to coexist with each other without violence even if there are differences in terms of race or religion, as the false image that the occupation tinted after its occupation of Iraq must disappear. Iraqi society must remain tolerant and accepting of the other despite the existing differences. In this regard, Bakhtin raises:

> There is nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the [grotesque]. They combine a senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed. Life is shown in its two-fold contradictory process; it is the epitome of incompleteness. And such is precisely the grotesque concept of the body. (1984, p. 25–26)

Al-Saadawi deals with fragmented identity and the search for justice in a way that reflects the literary technique known for using fragmentation and division. This technique accurately reflects individuals complex and turbulent experiences in unjust societies or under the influence of oppression. Al-Saadawi treats personal and societal identity as fluid and unstable and uses fragmentation to illustrate this concept. Her characters often feel an internal or external separation from their original identity(Ghazi, 2023, p. 27). Whatsitsname, itself, reflects the character's loss or separation from his roots and reality. This fragmented identity can be a symbol for societies that are subject to injustice or authoritarian regimes. The idea of justice appears as a major theme. Due to the fragmentation of their identity, the characters find themselves in a constant search for justice, whether personal or social. The fragmentation that the characters experience reflects the state in which justice finds itself divided and incomplete. The search for justice in an unbalanced world requires a search for a lost identity. Al-Saadawi uses the fragmentation technique in the narrative to reflect the characters' state and the world they live. Sometimes, the narrative may be non-linear or contain multiple stories that intersect and intertwine. This style uniquely embodies the idea that human experiences are messy and complex, not always clear or neat. It offers profound insights into fragmented identity and justice in troubled societies, using disintegration as a literary means of understanding these human issues.

4. Methodology

Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi is a profound reflection of the chaos and fragmentation that Iraqi society witnessed after the US invasion in 2003. Through events, characters, and narrative worlds, the novel highlights the effects of war and violence on the fabric of Iraqi society. It shows how these events led to the dismantling of social and national identity and the fragmentation of the individual and the group. Through the fragmentation of individual and collective identity and individual identity, the character Whatsitsname is the clearest representation of the fragmentation of individual identity in Iraq during this period(ALLAWI, 2007, p. 228). He is a being composed of the remains of corpses of victims of bombings and sectarian violence, making him a mixture of multiple and disparate identities. This unique assemblage symbolizes the fracture of individual identity in a society living in a constant state of violence, where the individual no longer has a unified or clear identity but becomes merely part of a larger body that mixes disparate elements. The Whatsitsname has no name or specific identity and is called Whatsitsname (its mean thing or nothing). This point reflects the loss of identity and belonging, not only for him but also for many Iraqis who lost their ability to define their identities in a society fraught with chaos.

Through the collective identity, the "fragmentation was not limited"(Print et al., 2021, p. 62) to individuals only but was reflected in Iraqi society as a whole. This novel presents scenes reflecting the sectarian conflict and

political and religious divisions that disintegrated the Iraqi identity. Cities and neighborhoods became divided according to sects and affiliations, reflecting the social and geographical disintegration of the war.

On the other hand, the security and social chaos, as the novel, strongly highlights the state of security chaos that prevailed in Iraq after the US invasion. Baghdad becomes an unsafe place, where car bombs explode randomly, and bodies are spread in the streets without anyone being able to provide protection or order. As Saadawi notes, "things such as the lack of trust among people, the absence of law, the absence of security, increased fear" (Arango, 2014). This chaos embodies the complete collapse of state institutions and their weakness in the face of this massive amount of violence. The character of General Surour reflects the role of the security authority that tries in vain to impose order. General Surour symbolizes the Iraqi state's attempt to impose control, but these attempts are often ineffective and may even contribute to increasing chaos through the use of violence and repression.

Social chaos Through the characters' lives, especially Hadi Al-Attak and other ordinary residents, it is evident how daily life in Baghdad has become a mixture of fear and chaos. As he describes, "When the Americans invaded Baghdad, their missiles destroyed the telephone exchange, and the phones were cut off for many months. Death stalked the city like the plague" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 6). The population lives in a state of constant anticipation, where violence can strike at any moment, and death becomes a normal and

familiar thing. Al-Saadawi shows how the war has fragmented the social fabric, as individuals no longer trust each other but deal with each other with caution and fear.

Sectarian and political division Al-Saadawi also shows how the war has contributed to the fragmentation of Iraqi society along sectarian and political lines. Baghdad is no longer unified but has become divided into areas controlled by different religious groups or militias. These divisions are not limited to geography but also affect social relations and individual identities(Teggart, 2019, p. 6).

Sectarian violence The novel reflects the spread of sectarian violence and how it has led to the disintegration of society, where people no longer see themselves as Iraqis but rather as members of competing sectarian groups. This state of sectarian fragmentation increases the severity of chaos and makes restoring order or a sense of national unity difficult.

Destruction and destruction as a symbol of disintegration Baghdad as a destroyed city: Ahmed Saadawi describes Baghdad as a city that is disintegrating and disintegrating as the monster faces. The ruined buildings, empty streets, and scattered corpses all provide a symbolic image of Iraq as a whole. Baghdad, which was once a symbol of civilization and history, has become an empty city torn apart by violence. This image reflects how the chaos that destroyed the city demonstrates the internal disintegration that society suffers from.

Interrupted narration The narrative method in the novel, which relies on time shifts and multiple voices, reflects the state of fragmentation. The non-linear and fragmented narration demonstrates the instability and dispersion that the characters and the city are experiencing. This narrative style increases the reader's sense of chaos and makes him live the uncertainty that Iraqis are experiencing at that time.

Moreover, The effects of wars on the mind and the human psyche. Al-Saadawi states, "I wanted to shed light on several issues with this book … One issue was the paradox of identity diversity in Iraq and how people understand themselves. All my characters are from different backgrounds"(Hankir, 2019). The character of Hadi, the junk dealer, is one of the most important characters in the novel, whose interest is focused on creating a monster that seeks to respond to the violations surrounding him. Mahmoud, the journalist, is another character who tries to understand the events around him. He becomes psychologically disturbed and becomes disturbed due to his inability to adapt to events. He tries to reach the truth amidst the chaos surrounding him to obtain his existence and identity, which he lost due to those events. It was useless and led him to be lost between reality and imagination. All of these characters reflect the state of loss and psychological disturbance that Iraqis lived in at that time.

In addition to the theme of justice and its absence, which Saadawi represents, "I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce" (Saadawi, 2014, p. 146) through the monster. The monster that Hadi created, which

hopes to provide a small portion of justice, is evidence of the absence of justice and resorting to those who do not(Alhashmi, 2020). Its absence is not lost from a legal standpoint, but even from a social and moral perspective, and the pursuit of Whatitsname to achieve it and with care becomes part of the cycle of violence.

The role becomes clear through the absence of the state and the legal system, which led to the spread of chaos in Baghdad, which makes it difficult at this stage to achieve justice, leading to the loss of identity because the legal system is absent and the state is disintegrated. This leads to individuals trying to achieve justice through their simple capabilities, which are often at the expense of others and contribute to increasing chaos. Finally, the novel proved its ability through its characters and plot to reflect the chaos and fragmentation that afflicted Iraqi society as a result of the invasion and sectarian war. The novel presented a deep critique of the violence and chaos that swept the country after the invasion and the conclusion that chaos has an impact not only politically and socially but also psychologically and philosophically, from which all members of society suffer.

5. Conclusion

Through his prominent literary work *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi presents an artistic depiction of the concept of identity and fragmentation of the Iraqi individual in general and the Baghdadi individual in particular in light of the sectarian war of 2003 that resulted from the invasion. Hadi, the

junk dealer, collects parts of bodies scattered by the bombings left behind by sectarian violence to create a creature he later calls the monster, which is the focus of the novel. This monster reflects a heterogeneous symbolic image of Iraqi society because it comprises parts of different bodies. Therefore, identity in this context is not fixed because it includes other parts of various bodies, as Saadawi described. The monster seeks revenge on the killers to give meaning to his existence, but in the end, he becomes the biggest contributor to creating chaos because the waste he left behind cannot be controlled. The efforts of the characters in Saadawi's novel to find a stable identity, whether through nationalism, religion, or politics, are all challenges that hinder their owners from obtaining a cohesive and stable identity.

Frankenstein in Baghdad is a perfect example of the fragmented reality of Iraqi society at that time. The US invasion, sectarian war, violence and tensions all contribute to the creation of a fragmented and troubled identity, all of which Saadawi depicts through the daily lives of the characters. Hadi's monster, in his search for justice and revenge, helps blend reality with fantasy and, at the same time, serves as a mirror to reflect the tension of identity that is happening in Baghdad.

Overall, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers a stunning portrayal of the fragmented identity of post-war Baghdad. Al-Saadawi's creativity in blending realism and fantasy distinguishes it by highlighting the violence and sectarian conflict and their impact on identity, making the novel a call to reject

everything that calls for fighting among members of society and to rebuild a culture that enjoys its own stable identity.

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