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## Provenance of Rani Laxmi Bai: Polemics of Representation and Subaltern History vis-a-vis Orality

Quleen Kaur Bijral

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### Abstract:

In the paper the attempt has been to formulate three major findings in order to propose a methodology which expounds the major debates of representation vis-a-vis subalternity. These have been: (i) representation that breaks superficial or gallant depictions; (ii) misrepresentation and subalternity; and (iii) Orality as complementary to subaltern history. Hence the attempt has been to recognize how fabricated representations result in the production of bogus histories that act as official contagion of falsehoods or misrepresentations. The end result being that the subaltern in question remains relegated to the margins as an outsider, as well as an unsung participant to the point of being criminalised or scandalised as witnessed in the case of Rani Laxmi Bai. These issues have been investigated with respect to Mahasweta Devi's novel *The Queen of Jhansi*. In examining the novel, it was palpable that incorporation of oral sources substantially resolved these polemics of representation and subaltern history. Hence, the attempt is to highlight how history can be doctored or tampered with to produce a false history. The target of the paper aims to address this falsification of history as strategically executed to change the course of history that is highly in contradiction to the reality of past.

### Keywords:

Representation, subaltern history, orality, Queen of Jhansi, Mahasweta Devi, subalternity

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### I. Introduction: History as a Witness of Past

In the printed texts of national and colonial historical records, the image of Rani Laxmi Bai occupies kaleidoscopic versions, saying which can and cannot be deemed as praise. When it comes to her representation, the intent of the paper is to highlight the myriad depictions of Laxmi Bai from scandalous to hyperbolic or mythicised, to folkloric as well as heroic depiction. Do these various representations serve an agency for the subaltern to speak or disfigure the real identity of the individual thereby fabricating his/her real or subaltern history? In the paper it is argued that such innumerable and rather contaminated representations which are far from the truth are damaging to the true essence of an individual, and with time establish themselves as the only legitimatised records to know the subaltern. To add more, when such an immutable legitimacy is provided to these historical records, it disallows any rectification of the same even if such representations are found to be one-sided, false or inadequate.

In the light of the above arguments, the paper examines Mahasweta Devi's work *The Queen of Jhansi* (2002) to highlight how this novel works as an intervention in creating a personal history of the queen vis-a-vis Orality. That is, what measure of intervention does Mahasweta Devi's work serve as an investigation and rectification of the official records on Laxmi Bai. It is true, when it comes to figure of Rani Laxmi Bai, she has been commemorated and profusely represented in the historical texts, cinema, and other modes of knowledge-production, but the question this paper intends to ask – Is it justifiable to say that a figure has been copiously represented hence does not need any revisiting? In order to answer these polemical arguments, the paper firstly will analyse the colonial as well as nationalist renditions of Laxmi Bai and then establish how Mahasweta Devi's historical technique arrests the false representations and dismantles the power structures which produce subalternity. In doing so, the complicity between power and representation will be attacked to create a subaltern history that aims for an authentic depiction of the subalternized historic figures.

## II. Liaison Between Subalternity and Representation

While investigating the modes of representation as outlined in Subaltern Studies, one discerns an association between subalternity and representation and can also observe the effect of each on the writing of an authentic history. It is certainly necessary to examine the ways representation - misrepresentation or underrepresentation in historical texts produce subalternity and how such a violent subversion of truth can be challenged. In the context of Laxmi Bai's representation in the official histories of colonial as well as nationalist records, the paper explores how Queen of Jhansi has been:

...variously represented as a heroic Aryan, a sexually promiscuous Indian whore, a Hindu goddess of nationalism and as a folk symbol of indigenous resistance...(the paper also exposes the) monstrous rendering of the Rani which aided the British colonial project...(and how Indian nationalism) apotheosised her as a national symbol...Why is she reduced in magnitude, to colonial and postcolonial concerns, when she ought to serve as the ordinary figure of her own story?...the details of her life remain ancillary (marginalised) to the dominant ideology of twentieth century colonials and twentieth century nationalism.

*(The Rani of Jhansi 2-26)*

It is evident in the above statements that Rani Laxmi Bai has been drawn in diversified shades to serve as instrument of colonial as well as nationalistic agenda. In this propaganda, the true figure of Rani Laxmi Bai has been either lost or gravely mutilated that she is no longer a heroine of her own story but a mere puppet at the hands

of power structures. Her gallant stature in the history has been propagated not to acknowledge her pioneering role in India's freedom struggle or to present her as an individual fighting for her people and the nation, but to serve the colonial as well as nationalist agenda of self-aggrandizement. From colonial to postcolonial records of history, the real-life history of Laxmi Bai hence has surrendered to the dominant ideologies of power. For this reason, be it colonial, or nationalist authority, the historically rendered "sexual, linguistic and caste-based formations of the Rani" have endured even today which hence attest to the emergency of scrutinizing "historical novels that purport to give accurate accounts, popular fictions that ride upon sensationalised memories of the historical events and cinematic representations to configure history through the screen" so that such distortion of history is apprehended and immediately rectified (*The Rani of Jhansi* 27).

In the paper, Mahasweta Devi, for instance, read the available histories on Laxmi Bai and finding the representation of the Queen as detached from the spirit of the person, she hence endeavoured to write a personal history. While doing so, Devi has, owing to her objective, represented Queen as a multitasking woman with activities ranging from rearing her kids and fighting a war on the other side. Devi in her testament has declared, "I was interested in not only learning about her fight against the British and the facts of that war, but wanted to get under the skin of the person...interested me intrinsically (*The Queen of Jhansi* 317). In this assertion, it can be analysed that Devi moulded a representation that was based on what interested her about the character.

Hence her agenda is implicit in the representation of the Queen as a people's queen. Firstly Devi's representation does not malign the figure as that would have been an 'epistemic violence'; secondly after the careful scrutiny and verification of record and documents available, Devi has incorporated both oral and written sources to render this representation; thirdly she has not claimed to be telling the absolute truth, and has highlighted both sides of the story in that she has mentioned colonial version of Laxmi Bai as well as the nationalist versions; finally Devi has corroborated the same by tallying these version with the oral sources collected by her. The novel hence serves as a scaffold of popular talk vs officially sanctioned record of the past.

The academic discourse of Subaltern Studies identifies powers structures which distort representation and consequently cause subjugation of the marginalised sections of the society. Based on this tripartite enterprise of power, subalternity and representation, the paper rests on the argument how representation leads to the condition of subordination which is subalternity. That is:

The term "subalternity" refers to a condition of subordination brought about by colonization or other forms of economic, social, racial, linguistic and/or cultural dominance. Subaltern Studies, is therefore a study of power... (while) Power is intimately related to question of representation ... (The) provocative question (being): How can academic knowledge

seek to represent the subaltern when that knowledge is itself implicated in the practices that construct the subaltern as such?

*(Subalternity and  
Representation 2)*

This statement as asserted above finds it echoes in Spivak's claim that a subaltern is a subaltern as s/he has not been and cannot be adequately represented by academic knowledge; rather, academic knowledge is in truth a practice which produces subalternity. Academic knowledge as implied by Spivak refers to knowledge which is used as means rather a commodity to justify dominance. In India, this dominance, for instance, had been justified by the elite who reserved the knowledge of the Vedas and other Hindu texts to validate for instance Sati – the act of forcing women to die with her spouse on the burning pyre. Spivak, here, asserts that knowledge of sacred texts warranted this inhuman act as right and represented women as doing it out of their own free will! Spivak further attacks this power of knowledge, which firstly represents the women by speaking for them and secondly which justifies its dominion by exclusive control over the knowledge. Hence, knowledge in this context is a justifier of physical force imposed by the elite.

This forms the core of our argument as to how representation if is corrupted, it can serve to be a trigger for subalternity.

### **III. Dialectics of Mapping Truth in Literature & History**

How representations can tell the truth? True, representations cannot exactly replicate the past, but by means of degrees, it can be calculated how far or near the past, does a history stand in its representation. This assumption can be further substantiated in noting how Spivak justified that literature also tells the truth like history but the difference between the two is a matter of degree. In her assertion, we can draw a corollary that though history cannot exactly capture the past, it can but in degrees. Spivak asserts:

That history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones may now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind. The difference between cases of historical and literary events will always be there as a differential moment in terms of what is called “the effect of the real”. What is called history will always seem more real to us than what is called literature. Our very uses of the two separate words guarantee that. This difference can never be exhaustively systematized.

*(In the Other Worlds 335)*

In these analyses, it can be proposed that the interpretation of truth which is being examined in the paper is – to calculate it by means of degree than whether a text carries truth in verbatim. Consequently, at this juncture, it can be asked - how Mahasweta Devi has attempted to achieve a reasonable degree of truth while recording the past. The interpretation of truth that can be gathered from reading Devi's works is the depiction of reality as perceived by the subaltern for the subaltern.

During her survey of oral sources, Devi was flabbergasted that the people who were related to Devi were not given precedence and this activity is what she calls, a deliberate silencing of the truth (or a measure of it as the whole truth cannot be captured). Hence the truth which the paper intends to explore is the truth of Laxmi Bai heard from the people who lived and had an association with the character; but had not been allowed to speak, and if they were their reflections on Laxmi Bai were taken to be tenuous as they conflicted with the official version.

It is due to this elision of the subaltern voices that Devi visited the birth place of Laxmi Bai and collected oral sources to substantiate her recordings of the past. One such episode which can attest to this official laxity is when the historians of India, R.C. Majumdar or Suren Sen, ignored the views of G.C. Tambe (grandson of the Queen) saying "He comes every year but how can we take him seriously when there is so much published material contrary to what he claims?" What G.C. Tambe states about the Queen is a good measure of truth due to his proximity and nativity, and this truth is what Devi has intended to discover and incorporate after meticulous scrutiny. Hence to put it idiomatically, truth as examined in the paper is what his heard from the horse's mouth – the people of Queen's birthplace, and others who knew her better than an outside third party.

#### **IV. The Polemics of Representing Rani Laxmi Bai**

The misrepresentation of Rani Ki Jhansi can be ascertained when Lakshmi Bai was accused of being an instigator in the infamous Jhansi Massacre. In analysing the British as well as Indian depiction of the event with respect to Laxmi Bai's rule, one can witness that even today this topic remains an anathema which no historian wishes to research in an authentic light. Hence, this leaves Laxmi's Bai representation an ambiguity – she is guilty or she is not guilty but at the end of the day, the allegations still manage to mar her image and lead to a crass misrepresentation. Tapti Roy in speaking about the event, remarks on the ambivalent and rather ambiguous approach taken up by the historians who have not been able to decisively put to rest the various interpretations of the event. He states:

To Indian scholars, it was Lakshmi Bai's subsequent actions, her valiant resistance to British forces and her death fighting them created the image of undying heroine and a martyr. For the British biographers, her complicity or her innocence in the

ghoulish act (The Jhansi Massacre) decided if she were to be compared to Joan of arc or Jezebel.

(*Raj of the Rani* 110)

In this context, in examining Mahasweta Devi's work, it was discerned how Devi, after having analysed the official sources (colonial and Indian) as well as oral sources, outrightly comments that Queen was not complicit in the massacre. She attacks the historical work by Kayle and Malleson titled *History of The Indian Mutiny* for severely tarnishing the name of the Queen in relation to the massacre. To contradict this character assassination on the Queen, the author cites letters from colonial officers namely Colonel Martin who in contradiction to the colonial verdict negated the same and confessed:

We have treated (Laxmi Bai) with extreme injustice and cruelty. Nobody knows the truth as much I do. That innocent women of a noble character was not in the least involved with the massacre of June 4, 1857....a single survivor of the massacre could have determined the truth.

(*Queen of Jhansi* 114)

This is one such instance that embodies the message of the novel - to rectify the errors in the representation of Laxmi Bai. On the similar vein, Mahasweta Devi has taken up scores of other such events after meticulously scrutinizing the colonial as well Indian sources to put forth a subaltern story of the queen.

While investigating the Victorian narratives about Laxmi Bai, Harleen Singh comments that mostly the colonial narratives depicted the Queen as a "disobedient subject", "an unruly queen" and also "real life representation of the blood-thirsty Indian goddess Kali" which could be a sign of the anxiety faced by the British regarding their own female monarch (*The Rani of Jhansi* 4-11) Some of the colonial texts which perpetrate such disreputable representations are: Gillean's *The Rane: A Legend of the Indian Mutiny* (1887), Hume Nesbit's *The Queen's Desire* (1893), Philip Cox's play *The Rani of Jhasni* (1993) and George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman in the Great Game* (1975) depict Rani in derogatory and highly objectionable metaphors of erotic overtones (*The Rani of Jhansi* 25). In analysing her from the nationalist concerns, Singh further states that as Laxmi Bai has been consecrated as a divine figure, such a depiction has "relegated" her and other historical figures "to the space of myth and legend" which hence discounts "the political and military acumen of the national female leader... (And) do not extol women's aptitude to lead" (*The Rani of Jhansi* 4). Singh also cites the Time magazine's photographic montage of history's 'Top Ten bad- Ass Wives' to show that though her story is being retold but such a retelling is taking place under the "crass metaphors of tabloid headlines (*The Rani of Jhansi* 17). Due to these

contrasting and polemical stances on the apparent history of Laxmi Bai, the provenance of Laxmi Bai has become a contentious subject.

Further understating the misrepresentation of Laxmi Bai especially by the colonial texts, one can approach on how the imperial regime viewed the native women of India. The colonizers legitimatised their right to rule India based on the perception that, “British were saving Indian women from the barbarities of their archaic world... (and it) was built upon the perceived state of persecution faced by native women” (*The Rani of Jhansi* 17). Now if the native women of India were seen as damsels in distress and under such a milieu, there were to occur a rebellious woman who took it upon herself to fight the injustices, how will the coloniser recognize her then? In such a case, the imperial stratagem to enslave the country becomes redundant and almost collapses, as there is no need of their governance once the apparent victims are defending themselves on their own. Considering these observations, if Rani had been a victim of social exploitation, she would have cherished the commiseration of the British, but she rebelled as an “insurrectionary subaltern” against the regime and hence was seen as a threat that was therefore subdued through deliberate misrepresentation. It can be averred:

As an Indian woman relegated to a life of purdah, the Rani may have garnered sympathy, but as an Indian Queen who came out of the veil in rebellion against the British, she posed an interminable problem of representation and comprehension. And as an Indian widow who had become sati or shaved her head and dedicated herself to a life of hardship, she may have excited a chivalric response, but as a royal widow who commanded troops and took British lives, she defied both rescue and reform. ...(Rani hence) posed a real and symbolic threat to the nation, Britain, undermining both material and ideological foundations of the imperial project.

(*The Rani of Jhansi* 18)

In the Indian context, women are generally stereotyped as “docile”, ‘self-sacrificing’ so much so that Mahatma Gandhi also highlighted this one-sided representation of women while completely disregarding the historical figures like Bhima Bai Holkar who fought against the British in 1817, or even Rani Chennamma who fought the East Indian Company in 1824. This grim picture reveals how women have been subalternized in the society due to their limited as well as provincial depiction by the masses as a whole. In these archetypes, the evidence of why a history gets contaminated or altered can be evidenced. It is by choosing in which type, should the historian dress history, that history is removed farther from truth. We know (are made to know) about women, as docile and subservient as that is how women are generalised and hence known in our society. Now in writing a history of say Laxmi Bai, the entrenched knowledge of this archetype will certainly interfere with the writing of



history as it is through it the different shades of history will be stroked, Certainly then, if such had been the dominant themes of representation of women in India, the figure of Rani Laxmi Bai as a subaltern insurgent surely subverts and breaks the stereotypical images rendered as the only legitimate and accepted images (*The Rani of Jhansi* 20). The objective in discussing these archetypes of women in India is to emphasise on why Rani Laxmi Bai has been misrepresented both by nationalist and colonial powers and how Mahasweta Devi arrests these gendered metaphors to depict Laxmi Bai as a human in totality - freedom fighter, administrator, wife, mother, and a Queen. It is to be further emphasised that though Laxmi Bai was not a victim or subaltern, the question of subalternity that is being discussed here is in her representation. Her representation has been an aberration that has eclipsed the truth of her life, that is;

Neither entirely victim, nor agent, the Rani is objectified by colonial and nationalist discourse (which) necessitates a larger, multilevel project of representation...(there is no) paucity of narrative about her, but (the countless ways) in which she is textually articulated defy any attempt to uncover a singular historical archive or literary figure.

(*The Rani of Jhansi* 23)

Hence Laxmi Bai does not embody a “lost voice” but exemplifies a “lost text” that “remains eclipsed, elided or erased within a prolific retelling” and due to this misrepresentation continues as a tradition without any scope left for correcting the same (*The Rani of Jhansi* 24).: In analysing Laxmi Bai as a lost text than a lost voice, the impetus has been to suggest that Laxmi Bai was capable of speaking in that she was not a subaltern who could not speak or be heard. But the notion of subalternity that is observed in her is in the representation of her history. There have been, as the paper has attested, histories on the life and struggle of Laxmi Bai; most are inaccurate, most exaggerated and glorifying while other pungent in reproach etc. One has to waddle through multitudes of texts to find the histories which are reasonably able to capture the truth of Laxmi Bai. Hence it is like finding a needle in a haystack that Laxmi Bai is examined as a lost text than a lost voice.

## V. A Consciousness of History

In the novel *Queen of Jhansi*, Mahasweta has put forth a question, “What is history/ What is history made of? If history is about people, then I would say that the history created on the roads of Jhansi that day was unparalleled...the history that was made that day by thousands of Indians is the real history of India” (*Jhansi*, 209). The importance of history has been aptly enforced by Mahasweta Devi as it is through history the general public can recognize the subaltern or realize the true representation in the web of countless ones. It has been her attempt to unearth ‘the truth of history’ which she has found in ‘folk songs, rhymes, ballads and in various popular stories’ that

form the rich oral repository of Bundelkhand (*The Queen of Jhansi*). The novel *Queen of Jhansi* is a testament to the continual neglect of oral tradition that has been overlooked to canonize the published word. Mahasweta has ventured into the local terrains of Bundelkhand to know first-hand the Orality and accordingly integrate the written histories in search for a subaltern historiography. The author has built her novel with an aim to recover the oral history and examine the misrepresentation of history that surrounds Laxmi Bai. She has diligently scrutinized the available histories about Laxmi Bai, and instead of neglecting them, she has weighed both sides of the story.

The intent of Mahasweta Devi hence has been to write an authentic history of the Queen of Jhansi. What drove her on this objective was the dearth of written material available on the personal picture of the Rani of Jhansi, which the conventional historians had not been able to highlight. In the backdrop of 1857 rebellion, the novel explores written as well oral sources to weave a biography which serves as a history that reclaims history and historiography at large. Mahasweta Devi has averred:

(When) I acquired...a consciousness of history, my curiosity about our national life increased and a wish arose to write an entire book about Queen of Jhansi...at the very beginning of the project I saw that our opportunities for learning about the revolt of 1857-58 were extremely limited. There was a complete absence of books based on factual evidence other than those by English historians...British authorities (to hide the truth) erased...history...seized all papers and documents related to the uprising in order to eradicate the direct evidence of its occurrence. It was also extremely difficult to obtain letters and other documents relevant to the topic. (Rather) There had been no notable attempt to write an authentic volume ...from the Indian point of view

(*The Queen of Jhansi* ix)

Mahasweta Devi when asserts 'consciousness of history' does not imply history as past but how she grew cognizant of its powerful ramifications such how history can serve to empower the subaltern either faithfully or overly; can also criminalise the subaltern; relegate him/her to the fringes while forgetting some altogether; and trivialise and over-commemorate the individual etc. It is this awareness of the powerful aspects of history that drove her to identify sources that could, for instance, narrate the story of the tribals as official history was on a strategic path to dump their existence in a stroke of amnesia.

In reading these statements, one can discern that the urgency to rewrite and reclaim past of Jhansi ki Rani was mobilised by many serious factors. Firstly, limited research on the topic was a severe gaping hole in the story of the Queen vis-a-vis 1857 revolt. Secondly, the historical records and documents available for the general public were manufactured by the colonial historians hence begging a question on the Indian

side of the story. Besides, the English historians were naturally motivated to frame a history which would eclipse, discredit and even malign the role of the Indian rebels and the Queen while allowing a separatist version of their own interests to speak for history as universalised history. Thirdly, if at all the documents on topic were available, the sheer inaccessibility of the same further marred any hope of knowing the history in its true light. Finally, Mahasweta Devi asserts that barring Rajnikanta Gupta, there has been a wretched dearth of systematic and properly organised work on the history of the revolt. Mahasweta Devi in this regard indicts the history writing in India of being “guilty of unconscionable neglect” for not recognizing the immediate need to rectify this serious blunder. Realizing these polemical issues of fabricating history, Mahasweta Devi hence found the road to truth through Oral literature. In her words:

However the truth of history does not get lost so easily. I found evidence in folk songs, rhymes, ballads and in various popular stories of how local people viewed the rebellion in the places where it happened...No one will forget the Queen, even if there is a no worthy memorial raised to her.

*(The Queen of Jhansi x-xvii)*

Mahasweta Devi is not only critical of the English authorities but also the Indian elite who failed to resolve the offence played against the Queen of Jhansi and the revolt of 1857. Placing her attack on both sides of the power structures and how they have produced a representation which defies the truth of history, Mahasweta Devi exclaims:

...no measures have been taken yet by the Indian government to erect a memorial for the Indians who were slain (in the revolt)...Other than a statue, there is no monument to the Queen of Jhansi. And only a tiny memorial in Gwalior marks the place of her final rest.

*(The Queen of Jhansi xi)*

Similarly, attacking the colonial powers, she declares:

Those who usurped the throne also controlled the pen. So we have studied, learned and believed only what they write, what they taught us, in what manner it pleased them.

*(The Queen of Jhansi xi)*

As vital and imperative these issues, are, Mahasweta Devi realized the import of each to take a decisive step towards their exposition. She has explored the works of renowned Indian historians such as Sri Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Sri Surendra Nath

Sen, Sri Pratulchandra Gupta, Govindram Chintamanai Tambe and others who she is indebted to in providing authentic documents and research for the novel. She has also examined works by English historians as in: T.R. Holmes' *The History of the Indian Mutiny* (1898), W.H. Sleeman's *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, Thomas Lowe's *Central India During the Rebellion of 1857 and 1858* (1860), Lt. Gen. James McLeod Innes's *The Sepoy Revolt* (1897), and G.W. Forrest's *History of Indian Mutiny* (1904) and so forth. In order to collect oral sources and corroborate the written ones, the author also met first-hand the surviving family of Laxmi Bai, Queen's grandson, Sri Lakshman Rao Jhansi-wale and other residents of Jhansi to write a subaltern history of the Queen. Mahasweta Devi reiterates that the book is not to be considered as history per se as otherwise it would imply a collection of plain facts, prosaic detailing of past, record and chronicle of events etc, which it is not. Rather, the book is a personal history – a biography of the Queen which serves as a history as well as personal statement to rectify the gross errors in the representation of Laxmi Bai in history.

#### **VI. Conclusion: The Subaltern History of Laxmi Bai**

In conclusion, the attempt of the paper has been to recognize history as a witness of past and to expose firstly : how this witness is either threatened to commit perjury or intentionally forswears itself for elitist agendas; secondly how if it's given protection against the interference of the elite, it can subvert these fabrications; thirdly how this record of past should include the subaltern voices than exclude them; and finally history should not claim itself to be a gospel truth, or the only record which is legitimate as this self-ennobling of history discourages any correction that it might call for.

The paper in this regard hence has attacked the homogenizing of history which eclipses other histories and disallows rectification.

Consequently, while analysing the fabricated histories of Laxmi Bai (which are fabricated not because of the inherent error of history, but due to the intentional stratagem of the elite to undermine and disparage Laxmi Bai), it can be said that this model indeed serves to reach a degree closer to truth by retrieving the 'lost text' on Laxmi Bai. The novel by Devi, as observed in the paper, cohesively addresses the human element of Laxmi Bai in the backdrop of revolt of 1857. Further, as claimed by Devi, the sources she has collected for her work have been written as well as oral wherein written sources comprise colonial as well as nationalist works while oral sources include folklore and memory. The purpose of Mahasweta Devi has been to address the people's narrative about Rani and to highlight her story as a story of the common masses.

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**BIO-NOTE**

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