



Orientalism: Past and Present

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الملخص:

يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على المراحل المختلفة التي مر بها خطاب الاستشراق وأسبابها وأهدافها منذ قرون وحتى اليوم، كما إنه يكشف أيضاً العداء الأيديولوجي الخطير بين الغرب والشرق والمسيحية والإسلام مما أدى إلى وجود عدداً كبيراً جداً من الافتراءات والمفاهيم الخاطئة والأكاذيب داخل خطاب الاستشراق فيما يتعلق بالشرق. يحاول البحث إثبات أن الاستشراق هو منهج غربي بحث لبُعدته عن الواقع في تمثيل الشرق الإسلامي، فقد كان دائماً سلبياً وغير عادل في وصف كل ما يتعلق بالشرق. إنه في الواقع يُستخدم كأعداد وتبرير للاشتباكات العسكرية والأيديولوجية الغربية وأجندتها الاستعمارية في الشرق. يتضمن هذا البحث مقدمة ومحورين وخاتمة، يقدم المحور الأول خلفية مفصلة حول الأسباب المختلفة وراء ظهور وتطور الاستشراق عبر التاريخ بينما يوضح المحور الثاني تاريخ الاستشراق من الماضي حتى يومنا هذا. يستنتج الباحث إلى أن الاستشراق ليس وليد اليوم ولا يمكن فهمه على أنه خطاب متجانس، لأنه قد تغير وتحول وتحور عبر التاريخ. إن الاستشراق عبارة عن مجموعة ضخمة من النصوص الغربية الأدبية أو التاريخية أو الاجتماعية التي تهدف فقط إلى الهيمنة وإعادة الهيكلة واستعمار الشرق. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاستشراق، المستشرق، الشرق، الشرق الإسلامي.

Abstract:

This paper sheds light on the various stages, reasons, goals and agendas that the discourse of Orientalism has gone through since early centuries onwards. It exposes the critical ideological hostility between the West and the East, as well as Christianity and Islam, which has resulted in the proliferation of countless fabrications, misconceptions and lies within the discourse of Orientalism considering the Orient. The paper attempts to prove that Orientalism is a solely Western style that has never ever been pure or realistic in representing the Islamic East. However, it has always been negative and unfair in dealing with everything related to the Orient. Indeed, it is used as both a preparation and justification for the Western military and ideological clashes and colonization on the Orient. This paper includes an introduction, two sections and a conclusion. The first section provides a detailed background about the various reasons behind the appearance and development of Orientalism throughout history while the following section tracks the origin of Orientalism from the past up to the present day. The paper concludes that Orientalism is not a new phenomenon and it cannot be understood as a homogeneous discourse, yet it has changed, transformed and mutated throughout history. It is the huge Western body of literary, historical or sociological texts that only aims at dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.

Keywords: Orientalism, Orientalist, Orient, the Islamic East.

Introduction:

How it feels to be fixed, captured and framed! Being an Easterner, no matter who you are, whatever you can do or wherever you belong to, you were, are and will be the same in the eyes of the West. The West has a preconceived notion of the East and looks at it through the lens that distorts its actual reality and identity. For the West, all Eastern people are identical, uncivilized, irrational, lazy,

barbaric, terrorists and sexually perverts. They are seen unfamiliar, strange, violent and threatening as they are ready to kill in the name of their God and religious traditions. Of course, these ideas are utterly imaginary and not real. They are full of distortions and misconceptions that aim at colonizing not only the lands of the Middle East but its people's minds as well .

Such a biased look and false representations of the Orient, specifically Arabs and Muslims,

make it crucially urgent to investigate the Western motives and interests behind such degradation and racism. Academically speaking, the Orient has always suffered from those matters that all come under the scope of Orientalism. For ages, Orientalism has been a literary phenomenon discussed by many writers and critics who have disputable degrees of fabricated lies and whose racial prejudice have diverged and varied depending on their imperial and ideological backgrounds .

Consequently, the current conception of Orientalism differs from the one the literary world was familiar with around a century ago or so. Previously, Orientalism has reflected its so-called pedagogical interests referring to, according to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the “scholarship, learning or study in Asian subjects or languages; the study of the history, languages and cultures of the East” (“Orientalism, N.”). However, as stated in *Cambridge Dictionary*, its definition has recently shifted to “the Western ideas about the Middle East and Southeast Asia, especially ideas that are too simple or not accurate about these societies being mysterious, never changing, or not able to develop in a modern way without Western help” (“Orientalism, N.”).

The term Orientalism did not appear until the thirteenth century. In *The Oriental Phenomenon*, Mazin Mutabaqani, however, states that it had been heavily and widely practiced by many critics and writers before. For example, the Greeks were considered as the first to have started the orientalist studies imbued by their intellectual and political ends (3). Later, they affected both Christianity and Hebrew which in turn started studying the Islamic culture considering it as a real threat to their existence, both politically and religiously. Hence, one cannot make a difference between the goals and motives of such orientalist studies on the East in general and the Islamic East in particular. Whatever their goals were, are or will be, Henry Schaller (2018) believes that all those goals are meant only to serve the Western religious and political superiority. In *Crusader Orientalism*, Schaller acknowledges that the “Islamic Pagandom was a convenient entity in

which to create a foil to Christianity allowing Christendom to resolve anxieties about sexuality, greed, and heresy while facing an enemy that was much more advanced in almost every respect” (41).

Though it was commonly practiced before the eighteenth century within its older notion, the study of Near and Far Eastern societies and cultures by Westerners, Orientalism only, then, appeared as an academic discipline which was introduced in literature later by the Romantic writers in the nineteenth century. Since then, the term has been mainly used to refer to the study of the East during the period of European imperialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, being the first era to discuss it academically. According to Hübinette, Orientalism has been used to describe “the subject and the works of the Orientalists, scholars versed in the cultures, histories, languages and societies of Asia or the Orient, since the eighteenth century when the tradition was born” (Hübinette).

A current incarnation of Orientalism has been established after the acute incidents that had occurred and caused a deep sense of antipathy between the Orient, Islamic Middle East, and the Occident, Europe and America. Such incidents include the Islamic expansion and Christian missionaries in the eleventh century, the Crusades and the need to learn the Arabic language because of the threat of the Islamic Ottoman Empire in the thirteenth century and finally in the sixteenth century with the emersion of communal Orientalism and then the imperialistic Orientalism in the seventeenth century. By the eighteenth century, the need for learning Eastern languages was serious since it was fueled by the Western colonial domination in Asia. Later, the period from 1837 up to 1912 is considered as the golden age of Orientalism beginning by the first orientalist congress in 1837 in Paris and ending with its new name in 1973 as the *International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa*. According to Tobias Hübinette, this marked “a new beginning and a crucial change in international political ontology” (Hübinette).

A. Orientalism Past and Present:

Tracking down the origin of Orientalism is not an easy task as neither the first date nor the first Orientalist can be ever figured out. Some researchers bring it back to the eleventh century, others to the twelfth with the first translation of the Holy Qur'an or to 1312 with the church council held in Vienna. Then, the question is not only when but also where, why and how Orientalism has emerged. Many people wonder about the reasons for the hostile relationships between the Orient, particularly the Islamic East, and the Occident, Europe and America. To answer this inquiry so fairly and precisely, a deep investigation and close analysis of the wide body of knowledge including language, religion, culture and history would be undertaken.

The deep-rooted Christian negative perceptions of Islam and its adherents have not come out of nowhere or developed in a vacuum. Among many others, Ali Alnamlah (2010) believes that this East-West antipathy started in the third decade of the seventh century. This came along with the emergence of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and its spiritual and intellectual development and rapid political and economic spread across the world. Though there were many other religions and cultures nearby, Islam for Christianity was the most powerful, political and cultural alternative with which Christians were for centuries engaged in military and ideological conflicts. According to Zachary Lockman (2009), Islam was the dangerous enemy right door which had always been a serious threat to Christendom (37).

In her article "The Development of Laws and Jurisprudence in Islam" (2020), Gloria M. Moran mentions that "the interaction among Muslim and Christian kingdoms and empires channeled [sic] political struggles and military clashes, but also crucial cultural encounters and economic exchanges in the Medieval and Modern eras" (141). Generally speaking, European scholars and priests perceived that the Islamic world was full of all what their culture might benefit from. In response, they sent their scholars to the Arabic countries in order to gain as much knowledge as they could. So, they translated, studied and disseminated

the voluminous Arabic-language writings on Medicine, Astronomy, Mathematics and Philosophy and other fields.

Furthermore, those Christian scholars quoted from many Islamic scholars' writings including those of Ibn Rhushed, Averroes, and Ibn Sina, Avicenna. Lockman indicates that most scientific and mathematical terms in the Western language have been derived from Arabic language. Some examples of those are, *alchemy* (from which Chemistry comes), *alcohol*, *algebra*, *algorithm* and *alkali*, as well as the names of many stars (32). For the West, this period was a point of admiration, not only of Islam but also of the wisdom of the Arabic culture, knowledge and civilization. However, such respect "faded away into indifference and routine denigration" as soon as they realized that such glory of Islam would attract those Christians whose life and reasons had been framed and blocked by Christianity for a long time (37).

Funnily enough, Lockman argues that Islam was generally thought of as more alien and certainly more threatening. The Western church scholars' aim of acquiring knowledge and understanding the Islamic culture was solely motivated by the attitude of 'know your enemy'. They believed that they had to understand their enemy's ideology in order to combat it effectively. Therefore, they started translating the Holy Qur'an and the biographies of the prophet of Islam, Mohammed (PBUH). Then, they "produced what would eventually be an extensive polemical literature designed to refute Islam as false, heretical and incompatible with Christian doctrine" (30). Islam was, and is still, depicted as a religion of violence, blood and cruelty, its adherents as fanatics and its prophet is a magician and sorcerer who used his evil powers to seduce men into embracing his false doctrines (35).

Nevertheless, many historians and writers affirm Moran's perspective. She justifies that "the emergence and early expansion of Islam . . . [was] an effect but not a cause of a long period of wars, rebellions, migrations, political instability, and uncertainty in the borderland between the Roman and Persian empires

clashing with each other for almost seven hundred years” (140).

In his book *Orientalism: Meanings and Consequences*, Salah Al-Ashraf (2015) blames both the East, the Islamic East, and the West for the hostility, prejudice and distortions found in the Orientalist work and Western people's minds. Muslims do not consider such Christian missionaries as serious and dangerous. They welcomed all the European scholars who had come to their countries to learn and translate their holy books during the eleventh and twentieth centuries. Muslims thought that it was an academic exchange of knowledge. However, it was really a means of destruction, violation and stealing. While the church was killing the scientists and calling them sorcerers during that time, Muslims had already achieved advanced progress in all scientific fields. This fact forced many Christians to convert to Islam and disclose to Muslims the bloody face of Christianity which in turn became weak and fragile.

To solve such an acute problem, the church started stealing the Islamic and Arabic scientific books to increase its knowledge and get its adherents' respect back. The number of the stolen books reached thousands but none of the Muslims seemed to care a bit. Ismail Amayra (1992) asserts that bitter fact and he further elaborates that during the Golden Age of the Islamic conquests, Muslims cared little for the positive informational effect they should have associated and emphasized along with their military triumph (11). In fact, they did not know that they helped in preparing the worst and most powerful future enemy for their nation and religion. Muslims' devotion to Islam has fueled their hearts with love and respect to all religions including Christianity. They have dealt with Christians by hearts while the Christians have used their malevolent impulses in dealing with whatever is related to Islam.

The crusades were almost what all critics agree on as being the crucial reason behind such persistent antipathy and misconceptions in the perceptions of the Western minds about the Islamic East. Though some historians believe that it ended in 1683, the period of the crusades is thought to have started in the eleventh

century and lasted until 1291, the year in which the expansion of the last Islamic empire into Europe stopped at Vienna. Being the most powerful empire at that time, Rome waged many attacks against Muslims in order to stop their spread and control over a wide range of empires. Those attacks ended in 1071 by the decisive loss of the Byzantine empire and the capture of the emperor Romanos IV Diogenes in the Malazgirt battle. In 1095, there was a call, from the Pope Urban II, to Christians everywhere to unite, mobilize and attack the 'enemies of god'. For the Pope, the crusades were only a way to enhance the political and spiritual power of the church he led. For other people, it was for the sake and “promise of salvation, others hoped for adventure or personal gain” (Lockman 28). In short, that call marked the beginning of the crusades and the long-term hatred between Muslims and Christians .

According to Habib Bouag (2005), “the seeds of the oriental other were sown before and during the crusades and developed since then into a vast and coherent body of knowledge most of which persistently strove to degrade and dehumanize the Orient” (1). This period witnessed the first efforts by the Western scholars to gain more understanding of Islam. However, alongside with the crusades, it also witnessed the elaboration and diffusion of a great deal of sophisticated knowledge about Islam that was more distorted than anything had ever come. Richard W. Southern (1912-2001) perceives that the West, during the 1120s, had some picture of what Islam meant and who Mohammed was. That picture was “brilliantly clear, but it was not knowledge, and its details were only accidentally true. Its authors luxuriated in the ignorance of triumphant imagination” (qtd. in Lockman 25). Prejudiced Western thinkers kept writing and believing in the information and stories of the fanatic tales told by the returning crusaders, merchants, travelers, ancestors or those of the fertile imagination of poets and story-tellers. Clearly, the crusades, as Mohammed Sharafuddin (1994) announces, resulted in producing a literature full of “misconceptions of

Mohammed as an anti-Christ imposter and the Muslims as pagans” (xv).

Lockman notifies that it was by the end of the thirteenth century that the era of the crusades was essentially over. In the seventh crusades 1248-1254, Muslims defeated the Christians and caught Louis IX who was later released and announced that Muslims would not be defeated without beating their Islam off first. Moreover, there was only little interest or energy among Western European Christians for further campaigns to combat Muslims or regain the holy land. They finally realized that Islam was unlikely to be destroyed by a military force. Luis' devilish advice was later taken into consideration since Raymond Lull (1232–1315) started applying it by focusing mainly on destroying the Islamic identity, history and culture. One of those attempts was the famous French campaign led by Napoleon Bonaparte in the Ottoman territories of Egypt and Syria.

Thus, the goal was transformed from preventing the Christians from converting to Islam to arming the Christians with tools they would need to reasonably convince Muslims that their faith was ultimately false and Christianity true (Lockman 39). Therefore, in 1312 a church council was held at Vienna calling for the establishment of Arabic chairs at the universities of Paris, Oxford, Bologna, Avignon and Salamanca. Later, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Islam was not the imminent military and ideological threat of Europe anymore. No military wars took place anymore, rather, other more devastating weapons were used instead. Things changed since many East-West relationships were established and trade across the Mediterranean flourished. However, the previous images and depictions of Islam and Muslims continued to be generated and spread. Images of Muslims as others, different, exotic, fanatical, violent and lusty were still drawn in people's minds by knowledge rather than sword. This period was, as many critics approve, considered as the main reason behind the serious crisis which the Islamic world has been suffering from so far.

Another main reason for the Western writers' hostility and their distorted images of the East is the absence of real encounters of the

West with Islam as a religion and Arabic as a language and culture. Alnamlah believes that most of those Orientalists who wrote about Islam depended on their imagination and low understanding of Arabic language and Islamic culture expanding the earlier distorted images of their ancestors (54). Bernard Lewis (1993) states that “history of the Arabs has been written in Europe chiefly by Christians who knew no Arabic, or Arabists who knew no history” (qtd. in Mutahar 17).

Obviously, the reason behind that action is to feed themselves and their culture from the rich knowledge of the Muslims and Arabs at that time. However, Said Abdel-Wahed (1992) alleges that it is only a way to “masterfully fabricate their own image of the Middle East, an image which was by all means and standards of an enemy” (35). They aimed at reminding their Christian readers of the way they must shape their feelings towards Muslims. There were no interests in representing the real identity of the Orient. They rather studied Islam and translated Islamic books “for the double purpose of protecting Christians from Muslims blandishments and converting Muslims to Christianity,” Lewis admits (qtd. in Mutahar 17).

In the seventeenth century, Europe vivified the military and the cultural trends, via imperialism and missionary activities. The threat of Orientalism was fueled with serious political and imperial interests which violate the content and knowledge presented in the orientalist works. Such a knowledge, as Said believes, does not show Orientalists' pure personal interests; it was rather “motivated and often cooperated hand-in-hand-with the imperialistic aims of the European colonial powers” (8). Then, they created a body of literature in which the “relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power of domination of varying degree of a complex hegemony” (5). This relationship distorts the real Orient creating a very wide gap between the mere representation and reality, texts and context. Thus, it is a knowledge-power relationship rather than a knowledge-reality one. Therefore, the Orient in the orientalist literary works was constructed and transformed

by and through this knowledge. Mutahar confirms that “whatever the method [or aim] used [or sought], the end is determined- the unquestionable inferiority of the East” (10).

While revolting against the new materialism of that time, the eighteenth Romantic writers believed that the freedom of mind is much more important than the physical one. Hence, they followed their ancestors and started enjoying their mental freedom while blindly analyzing and interpreting the Eastern and Islamic cultures as a way to show their hostility and affirm their modernity. They started writing and disfiguring the image of the Orient in order to escape their own imprisonment in their culture and, at the same time, take revenge by imprisoning the Islamic East in their writings. In their writings about the Orient, they mainly depended on the weak translations of the orientalist books and tales, such as the different unreliable translations of the Holy Quran and The Arabian Nights during the medieval period and William Beckford’s novel *Vathek* (1786), the thing which reflects their interest in using improper sources.

Being Romantics, they looked for what was foreign and strange and they connoted a sense of exoticism to anything Arabic or Islamic. This image describes any extended use of non-Western, especially oriental settings, motifs or cultural references. They never thought of finding any possibility to understand the behavior of the Other, the Orient. However, their motivations were to stress the differences and distinctiveness by distorting the image of the Islamic East and reinforcing the traditional negative stereotypes of their ancestors.

For many scholars including Naseem Alnaqeeb (2018), it was only by the mid nineteenth century that the field of 'Oriental studies' started developing into a recognized academic discipline. Since then, Orientalism has been seen as a field that has its weight in various disciplines, not merely literature. In addition, that period has characterized literary Orientalism with various misconceptions and fabrications about the Orient, Islam, Arabs and their culture in particular. In fact, the nineteenth Orientalists have considered the Islamic East a region of slavery, superstition and cruelty and

its people mere tyrants abusing all those weak in mind and body. They have used Orientalism as “a Western style for domination, restricting and having authority over the Orient” (Said 4).

This form of Orientalism is the “representative of the Westerners' colonial mind, justified by the concept of the ‘white man’s burden’, which denotes the idea that the white Christian man has the 'burden' to civilize and educate peoples of other religions” (Alnaqeeb 9). They mistakenly believe that they are advanced in life, civilization and education, which makes them responsible for educating and elevating all other nations. Such justifications provide them with the needed excuses to conquer the oriental lands and colonize its people’s minds. A look at their writings and actions nowadays demonstrates that they do aim at “controlling not guiding, exploiting not advising, destroying not improving and proving inferiority not trying to elevate [the Orient]” (Mutahar 58).

B. From Orientalism to Neo-Orientalism:

The subject of Orientalism, as a literary phenomenon, has gone through furious debates because not all critics have the same understanding of its connotations. Edward Said believes that Orientalism is a way of “dealing with [the Orient] by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, setting it, ruling over it” (3). He is completely against the existence of what others call real or pure Orientalism. However, Dr. Mohammed Sharafuddin claims that Orientalist works cannot be negative since they only form a reflection of what he unfairly calls 'realistic Orientalism'. Surprisingly, Orientalism, for Nigel Leask and others, turns to be a merely European representation in which its anxieties towards the Other are exposed reflecting the fear of the external world so as not to be mastered by (Leask 2).

Orientalism has gone through many stages and taken many shapes according to the ideological Western agendas of each period. Each kind of Orientalism looks at the Orient according to the way it serves its goals and

interests. Being culturally-directed, Early Orientalism, British and French Orientalism, has seen the Orient as passive, inferior and backward. Later, American Orientalism added the unreasonable violence phenomenon as a new characteristic to the Orient in order to satisfy its inhuman political and economic interests in the Islamic East. The more the picture of the Islamic East is shown as weak, miserable, lost and violent, the more the West, its assumed opposite image, is proven strong, organized, civilized and peaceful. As a matter of fact, the Orient has never been truly read or genuinely represented, yet it has always been, directly or indirectly a way of defining the West as its contrasting image and identity.

Nowadays and throughout this hematic conflict, many Orientalists have attempted to perform their national duty as intellectuals by reflecting this conflict in their orientalist literary works. Instead of bridging the gap between the Orient and the Occident, they have been deliberately making it deeper and worse. Consequently, Orientalism appears in a new form which is recently termed as neo-Orientalism. This recent incarnation of Orientalism appeared after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the *USA*. Like its early form, neo-Orientalism has become the critical term on which many intellectuals have been debating since 2001. Early Orientalism has heavily influenced neo-Orientalism making it almost an exact replica of its aspects and theories but in a postmodern way. Neo-Orientalism still keeps the same distorted images of the Islamic East, fabricated stories about its history and false projections of Arabic culture and nation. The year of 2001 is seen as a 'transformative moment' in the Arab-American relationship in which the Americans see Arab Muslims as fanatical, violent, and lacking in tolerance" (Altwaiji 315).

Neo-Orientalism is a twenty-first century phenomenon that keeps the same colonial and imperial interests of its Early Orientalism. Many recent critics affirm that it "has found medium in post 9/11 Western literary discourse that associates Islam with terrorism, thus re-inventing newly rigid borders between

a Muslim East and non-Muslim West" (Shafie and Aljahdali 3). Hence, it is considered as a style of representation that focuses on 'othering' the Arab world and projecting Islam's adherents as absolute violent terrorists. Like its precursor, neo-Orientalism views Arabs as irrational, uneducated and savage, and it portrays Islam as a religion of terror, violence and superstitions. It has led to the notion of Islamophobia that deals with the Orient as violent, timeless and barbaric. In short, this new style of Early Orientalism is seen as "a monolithic discourse based on binarism between the superior American values and the inferior Arab culture" (Altwaiji 313).

Salim Kerboua provides detailed information regarding Orientalism and its various historical paradigms which have given it different shapes and labeled it under various terms. Kerboua's "From Orientalism to neo-Orientalism" (2016) clearly records the reasons behind the emergence of Early Orientalism, American Orientalism and neo-Orientalism. Every one of those terms includes critical shifts according to the historical contexts it has emerged from and the political agendas it has been created to serve. Quoting Kerboua's words, he states:

Whereas the first two paradigms of Orientalism created a body of knowledge about the peoples of Orient, and more specifically the Arab-Muslim world, the third has a less territorialized dimension. Moreover, the scope, agenda, and sources of what we can call a twenty-first century neo-Orientalism are more different. This latter operates within a 'Clash of Civilizations' paradigm in the United States and European public space, and its constructed objects are the Islamic faith and Muslims in the Western and Muslim worlds alike. (27)

Both Early Orientalism and neo-Orientalism concentrate on the necessity of the West's ownership and domination over the East and the degradation of the Eastern image worldwide. However, the increasing number of Eastern people in the Western countries leads to a remarkable shift between the two terms. Early Orientalism was mainly focused

on by Western writers and critics. Differently, neo-Orientalism is practiced by both Eastern and Western writers and critics who heavily support the Western Eurocentrism. It is mainly motivated by strong political, social and economic interests. Not only does it look at the East as a violent entity but it, more specifically, looks at the violence phenomenon as an inherent part of Arab culture.

Conclusion:

Knowledge is the shortest way to gain control and spread power over other nations. Thus, the West creates the discourse of Orientalism as a means to acquire much knowledge and, more importantly, spread more fabricated information about everything related to the Islamic East. Deliberately, it directs its Orientalists to produce a Western discourse full of distorted knowledge that is loaded with countless lies and misconceptions about the Islamic history and Arabic civilization in order to elevate the Western nation, religion and culture. Those Orientalists depict the Orient as exotic, irrational, barbaric and violent. Additionally, the culture, history, values, and languages of the Islamic East have been neglected and even distorted for the sake of dominating its peoples, exploiting its wealth and colonizing its lands and minds in the name of elevating, civilizing and even humanizing those backward nations. All in all, Orientalism, in all its kinds, has never been pure or realistic since it always shows Muslims and Arabs in a typical image of an enemy by all its indications, colors and shades.

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