



Amazigh Women: an Illusion

The Depiction of Different Forms of Gender Bias in Kabyle Folktales

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“With Khalti¹, it was different. Whilst the stories, we were she and I beings apart, she knew how to create -for each piece- an imaginary domain over which we reigned. I became adjudicator and support for the poor orphan who wants to marry a princess; I attended the triumph of the little M'Quidech² who defeated the ogress; I whispered wise replicas to Hechaïchi³ who tries to avoid the pitfalls of the bloodthirsty sultan.....”⁴

Mouloud Feraoun, The Son of The Poor Man, 1954

Abstract

The aim of this study is to identify and to decipher the gender hierarchies, and social divisions based on gender from discourses born and created within the Kabyle culture, and by the actors of tradition themselves. That is to say, born from folktales which are created and produced by women and grandmothers in order not only to entertain their children and their entourage, but also to convey messages and express themselves. The analysis aims at shedding the light on how gender is constructed, and mainly how females are represented, considered and conditioned in the Kabyle society. To reach the purpose of this work, and to figure out how gender is constructed in the Kabyle society; some recurrent themes, characters, and images be they implicit or explicit- in the folktales – have been spotted and analyzed from a gender perspective. The analysis of covert and overt representations revealed that the female/male relationship and women lives are not always magical as it seems when first reading the tales; besides, the portrayal of woman reflects how she is perceived in the real life by Kabyles, which means that the female storytellers did not dare draw another picture of themselves even though the production of story is based on imagination and everything is allowed in imagination.

Keywords: folktales; gender bias; Kabyle culture; Kabyle oral literature, feminist literary criticism, discourse;



Introduction:

Language has always been "an instrument of power"(Bourdieu,2001) a valuable weapon that is used to manipulate, to dominate, to denounce or contest; that is why in societies dominated by male values, it has always been a man's prerogative. The North African society in general, is extremely stratified regarding public speaking. In this area, men take precedence over women, and older on younger. Language use is an art, in some areas of Kabylia boys and young men were sent to spend some time with persons called in Kabyle *iheddaden bbwawal* (the language smiths)⁵, to learn the art of speaking from them as they master language uses such as the double entendre ,hidden meanings ,idioms; and they also master the different codes and metaphors in a language.

Traditionally, children, adolescents, and women are in fact deprived of speech, and therefore power (Yacine, 1988, p. 16); that is to say, for men the speech of these dominated groups is regarded at best, as a useless verbiage, without consistency and without consequence and at worst, a thoughtless and subversive language that threatens the balance of the group and which must be excluded from the public sphere and decision making meetings.

This language finds then a refuge in other modes of expression such as poetry and storytelling. Oral productions allow women to escape the silence imposed on them, and to escape the individuals who impose that: "men". This strategy is also used by men; it allows them escape the domination of the group, although to a lesser extent. It is indeed for the feminine element that is liberating.

Accordingly, this article proceeds from the fact that Kabyles and even non Kabyles attached to Kabyle women some stereotypical images which portray them as one entity and one prototype, this stereotypical images project Kabyle women as faithful, docile, submissive and hardworking; but at the same time, respected, valued, and well considered by their males and society. They are also thought to be more free and independent than the rest of Algerian women. These paradoxical prejudices and others will be discussed, proved or disapproved throughout this investigation.

Kabyles belong to the Imazighen ethnic group, the word Amazigh means free, in the title the author preferred to write Amazigh women rather than write Kabyle women in order to convey the ideas of paradox that is the illusion of free Kabyle women.

The paradigm of this research is defined by the following questions:

How are women and men depicted in the different tales?

Do the storytellers link the gender perspective constructed with real life events?

What primary female and male concerns are expressed?

The aim of this study is twofold, first it aims to identify at what levels of the folktales gender bias is manifested, that is, characters and their positions, images and symbols that reveal "maleness" or "femaleness" according to the values ,shapes, status ,nature and qualities of the objects they refer to . The second aim is to observe and to determine how girls and women are expected to behave, so that to be accepted by the society.

The two above aims branch into the following:



Uncover gender-related themes that the ordinary Kabyle people derive from their folktales., Establish the background and social cultural values that shape the gender ideology perpetuated in the narratives, Determine the overt and covert attitudes and ideologies -which the Kabyle folktales direct and promote- through the examination of how biological differences between men and women are presented and how these empowered or disempowered both sexes, and identify the power relations, which are promoted through gender roles, which manifest themselves in the Kabyle folktales through examination of social roles and tensions in society.

As the aims of the study impose it, the researcher based her work on, feminist literary criticism and the analysis of the covert and overt attitudes and representations related to gender, for, folkloric productions are system of symbols created within the Kabyle socio-cultural milieu, and which are framed by gender and framing gender relations at the same time.

The Importance and Role of the Oral Tradition in the Kabyle Society

Kabyle people are Berbers among others who live in Algeria and mainly in the eastern part, in the cities of Tizi Ouzo and Bejaia; they constitute the largest Berber community in Algeria. In several other countries of the world such in peasant Russia of the half of the last century, there was general enthusiasm for storytelling, and the best storytellers were often men ,but in the Mediterranean countries ,in North Africa ,and specifically in Kabylia, the best storytellers are illiterate old women who narrate with art, magic and detail. They respect the time, place, gender and age of listeners and also respect the obligations related to the narrative of this kind of tale that we call "*Tamachahut*". They generally narrate the tales by a traditional fireside in winter; and they really give importance to the respect of taboos, magic spells, and rituals associated with this literary genre, and they involve children at the beginning and the end of the tale.

Folktales are mainly designed to address children even though adults also are welcomed to listen to them, in this respect the woman telling stories shall carefully choose their words and plots, characters and symbols, for the audience is made of both boys and girls and they shall teach both of them, but differently; in addition to that, these tales together with other genres constitute the codes and the literature of a people.

The literature of a people is with no doubts a mirror that reflects their traditions, beliefs , fears ,and ambitions ,it also faithfully represents its society's hierarchies and norms, and each group ,be it important or not ,is typified by the different characters of the literary pieces as it is the case of Kabyle women and the characters they refer to them . The literature of a people reminds them of the past; teaches them in their present life and anchors the society's norms and traditions in their minds for a better future. It is important to mention that the oral literature that has defined the Berber societies for centuries plays these roles of entertaining, teaching and nurturing; this is because it is usually told by those to whom lived the events, all by using symbols and images and



adapting different imaginary characters. The oral literature emphasizes more ideas and meanings rather than aesthetics as it is the case for the written one, yet the sentences are rhythmic and beautifully rhymed. Nevertheless, as “parole” is very important to the Berber people and plays a key role in the socioeconomic fields ,it is through speech that people make deals ,and show their commitments and impose themselves in the society ,that is why women storytellers use words and produce tales .Yet , women know that folktales are double bladed swords; it is true that they enable them to express themselves but they must at the same time respect the norms of the patriarchal Kabyle society when formulating their plots .

However, the vast and rich heritage of the oral literature -which equates books of history, culture and tradition on the one hand and books of language, idioms, and metaphor on the other hand - was threatened by the conquering countries, their cultures and their norms which lead some groups and more particularly the young communities to no longer be interested or care about their literature. Some intellectuals who were concerned about the value and the future of the oral literature , and among whom we mention Mouloud Mammeri, Tassadit Yacine, Taos and John Amrouche, and Camille Lacoste Dujardin , devoted time and effort to collect ,record and write different poems, songs, riddles, idioms and folktales ,some of them are translated into Arabic or French as well .

Feminist literary criticism

Feminist literary criticism focuses primarily on the portrayal of women in a piece of literature; it also looks at the gender of authors and how that impacts the text.

Feminist literary criticism really started to form in 1970 after the second wave ,feminist believe that there is historical male dominance ,and patriarchal oppression has been prevalent in language ,social and political institutions such as government and religious systems, women have been oppressed ,they prescribe social roles and inequality in various aspects of daily life because of this.

Feminist critics believe that it is through the study of literary and cultural texts that we could recognize how women have been influenced by patriarchal oppression as well as how they have resisted and rejected it ,for instance ,a critic will look at how a female heroine in a story behaves and examines how a certain type of oppression has influenced her character’s daily life, beliefs ,actions or perceptions of other women. In addition to that, they will examine traces of resistance to the actions of female character in the text. A critic can also examine the narrator common beliefs and reactions to different gender systems, they examine characters that disagree on women’s roles and trace of development and fate of those characters in the story, for example, the critic can analyze the ideas and the themes communicated through the treatment of female characters that either subject or resist social roles.

Guerin (1999,p. 196-197) assumes that feminist literary criticism is often a political attack upon other modes of criticism and theory and its social orientation moves beyond



traditional literary criticism and that “*feminist critics see the very act of speaking – of having a language – as a focus for studying women writers, so often silenced in the past*». Feminist literary critics try to explain how power imbalances related to gender in a given culture are reflected in or challenged by literary text.

Forms of Covert and overt attitudes towards gender

As Bourdieu put it, language is a tool of intimidation, harassment, abuse ,an instrument to show and express respect, politeness and means to convey and transmit messages and knowledge from one generation to another. Language is also used to convey implicit or explicit messages about how the social hierarchy should be, how relations between men and women should be framed, such as the messages in idioms, songs, and folktales, which are either covert or overt .

The overt attitudes and markers include for instance the frequency with which female characters are viewed as heroine or main characters in different pieces of literature compared to the frequency with which male characters are viewed as heroes or main characters.

The covert attitudes, on the other hand, are indirect or implicit images or discourses. They include for instance the meanings of a word which change according to the gender they refer to, or according to the morphemes we add , the most common example is the word “master” which means the boss or the ruler when it is masculine, and which becomes “mistress” when it is feminine , in this case the mistress is a woman other than a man’s wife with whom he has a sexual relationship .

Methodology

The corpus of the present article is the oral Kabyle folktales collected and written by Mouloud Mammeri in his book of tales entitled “*Conte Berbere de Kabylie*” (Berber tales of Kabylia) ,the specific stories are Aubépin (Hawthorn) ,La Fille du Charbonnier (The Coalman’s Daughter), Blanche-Colombe (White-Dove), l’Oiseau d’Or (The Golden Bird), Zalgoum , La Fiancée du Soleil (The Bride Of The Sun),Les Ogres (The Ogres), Le Prince Guêpier et La Princesse Émeraude(Prince Wasp's Nest and Princess Emerald).

The data have been read and selected from the book mentioned above. Moreover, the analyzed data are discourse fragments, sentences and phrases translated by the researcher and put in categories according to different themes and situations that have been discussed. The book and stories selection was based on two main criteria. First, the tales must belong to the Kabyle culture, and they should represent the Kabyle society or be adapted to it in terms of characters, settings or customs. Second, the tales should be produced, collected, written and if necessary translated by a Kabyle and Mouloud Mammeri’s book fulfills these two criteria.

Results and discussion

The data to be analyzed are viewed in the following tables

Table 1: *Concordance and collocation of male characters*

- They lived happily for several months. Then she gave birth to a **boy**
- To her **father**, she gave the head of the chicken because he is the **family head**
- To her **brothers**, she gave chicken's chest because they are the **bulwark** and the **defenders**
- They got terrified by the idea that they would lose their only **son**,... So they agreed that he gets married to his sister as he wished
- One upon a time a **king** who had an only **son**,
- The **king's son** was vigorous and a great lover of hunting

Table 2: *Concordance of female characters*

- To her **mother**, she gave the chicken's back, because , the weight of the house rests on her back
- To her **sisters**, she gave the chicken's wings as they must one day take husband and fly
- Once upon a time two brothers, one of them was **poor** and had seven **girls** and the other had seven boys. The father of seven boys was very rich
- You're rich, he said, you've boys. While you live in abundance, you see that I'm **miserable** and that I hardly manage to **support** and feed my seven **daughters**

Discussion:

In tables 1 and 2, the pieces of discourse in which the different words belonging to the semantic field of “male” and “female” show that the happy ending in these stories is associated with the birth of baby boy. Moreover, most kings have an only son or an elder son, the successor and the heir of his father, this male heir is most of the time vigorous and courageous.



On the other hand, having daughters is the share of the poor, helpless men like the coalman and the hero of “the ogres” story, as if they were a curse. Moreover, recurrent situations emphasize on the idea that men are strong and able to survive by themselves and take the responsibility of a family while females are passive and need a man’s support, and they must get married.

Table 3: *Collocation of space , labor and gender*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A man who passionately loved hunting.... Went into the forest in pursuit of a quarry. ➤ The evening when the hunter comes, she served him dinner ➤ She (sister of Aubépin) was digging in her garden. ➤ You (sister) and my wife will be working in the garden. ➤ One day, when women were going to cut the wood in the near forest. ➤ He now went out every day to the square to play with peers of his age. ➤ As she was bored of always being home alone. ➤ All housework, they left it to their youngest sister, she took care of with pleasure and zeal. ➤ In the evening, when their father came home tired, she took his sandals off, washed his clothes full of black dust, the clothes that he might wear the next day. ➤ (Brother of Zalgoum) spent his time hunting and taking long walks in the forest. ➤ “Zalgoum! Take this clay and coat the walls of your brother’s room», says the mother to her daughter . ➤ The mother asked her daughter to sort the wheat for the party. ➤ “Here, roll some couscous for your brother's party,” the mother asked Zalgoum.

Discussion

In table 3 text fragments, men and boys are hunters and breadwinners, they spend their time outside of the household and in the forest playing, walking or chasing preys while women and girls are housewives, daughters or sisters doing different house chores such as coating the walls, cooking and washing, they serve their brothers and fathers, the outside space they go to is the garden that they take care of or the near woods from which they bring wood for fire.

Tassadit Yacine (1999) reminds us that the supremacy of men over women finds its roots in old Berber mythology, wherein it is said that the woman gave up on her status of the *mother of the world and of humanity* to become a *villain witch*. And since that time, she was excluded from all the spaces men go to and the activities these latter do. Therefore, the division of space and labor between males and females constantly reminds us whether implicitly or explicitly of male supremacy over females who are

trapped in this socio-cultural submissiveness imposed on them which once more was created by men, and for men.

Table 4: *Collocation of intelligence and wisdom*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The king's subjects were desperate. They had several times consulted and took the advice of men they knew insightful. ➤ “But”, says the youngest of his daughters, there is nothing easier than to solve the riddle of the king.”The coalman could hardly believe it ➤ So he went to consult the wise man of the village ➤ The rich man thought that his brother was right and had great shame for being so selfish previously ➤ Above all, she was renowned throughout the country for her intelligence. ➤ The king was happy to have in his house a wife who could solve his riddles and play with him the games about puzzles and allegories on equal terms. At the same time, he feared that one day the queen would end up by surpassing and defeating him <p>I know that among all men, and all women living in my kingdom, you are the only one who can put one over on me. But I warn you: I am the king and I will never admit that your word goes on my own, in any occasion be it. If this were to happen one day, remember well: that day will be the last that you would spend here, as you get out of this palace never return.</p>
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Table 5: *Negative intelligence*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ She (sister in law) seeks since then to separate her from her brother and if possible banish her forever ➤ The sister in law pretended to be very sad ➤ “start eating my head”, said the man to the ogre, “for it is it that listened to the advice of my wife” ➤ She waited a long time in vain and eventually developed a violent jealousy of her stepson and tried, by all means, to push the king to kill his son
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Discussion:

Table 4 shows that when men need advice they consult the wise persons, in our tales the wise are always men , however a few women have been portrayed as intelligent,

such as the coalman's daughter who was able to solve riddles ,but despite that, she was not entrusted to solve the king's riddle and when she did her father had doubts about her credibility, on the other hand among all the heroine in this book she was the only one who had been chosen as a wife for her intelligence, however, her husband set his rules and warned her that she must never try to surpass him . Nevertheless, table 5 shows that women use trickery to fulfill their evil goals such as the stepmother who wants to get rid of her stepson in "Blanche Colombe", or the sister in law who wants to get rid of her husband's sister as did the wife of Aubépin.

The two tables also show that men are objective and admit their mistakes as did the rich man in the story of "the ogres", while women are subjective and selfish, as the wife of the rich men who manipulated her husband and asked him to get her money from the ogres' house, and when he got caught, her husband asked the ogres to eat his head first because it listened to his wife's words.

Lacoste Dujardin(2013) asserts that only 5% of the female characters are portrayed positively in Kabyle folktales in contrast to the 95% who are portrayed negatively as Tseriel (ogress), stepmothers or sisters in law, who are portrayed as superficial and follow their emotions, jealousy, and greediness, as it was shown in our analysis.

Table 6: *Collocation and concordance of physical traits and beauty*

- A man and a woman had two children: a daughter, Zalgoum, beautiful as the day with her long golden hair
- Hita, silver collar
- Hita ,silver collar showed up. All the girls cried out when they saw her beauty.
- He was strong and beautiful and it lacked for nothing
- She became a beautiful girl, lots of young people come and ask her to marry them.
- But the new bride -seeing that her sister in law is more beautiful than her- got madly jealous....
- The king was so dazzled by their beauty (his daughters in law)that he forgot to eat, and a strong desire to have them in his palace possessed his heart
- The woman he had just saved in the wood was of a marvelous beauty.
- And also to come and tell him if his future queen was beautiful.

Discussion:

The analyzed tales reveal that when boys and girls are described, the storyteller focuses on the girls physical appearance and on the boys physical and mental capacities. Among all the characters in the book three males only are said to be beautiful without

any other details such the hero of “ *L’oiseau D’or* ” and “ *Prince Guepier* “. The ideal beauty trait in the tales seem to be whiteness in addition the blond hair.

Table 7: *Collocation of marriage*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ «In my country? She said. “I don’t have one anymore: my brother and his wife abandoned me in the forest”. “In this case”, said the rider, “will you marryme?”» ➤ The girl, glad she was all at once saved from the animals and got rid of the snakes that lived inside her, consented. She married the rider and they lived happily for several months ➤ In just twelve months, my men will come to take her and I will marry her ➤ “Well”, he said, “if you find the woman to whom this gold thread(hair) belongs, I promise to marry her” ➤ “Since both of us are exiled”, said the prince, “Would you marry me?”, <i>Blanche-colombe</i>¹ was happy to get out of the abandonment to which she was condemned ➤ “Hita Col d’Argent”, she said, “is the daughter of the king of the genii, you should marry her ...”

Discussion:

The analysis of the data in table 7 shows that to the different female characters, marriage is a solution to their problems; they get married to escape family conflicts or punishments like “Blanche Colombe” did. Marriage also means shelter to some heroines, Aubepin's sister, for instance, accepted to marry the rider who passed by and saved her life because she had nowhere to go. Thus, marriage to men is like a new quest to possess new properties, the hero in “*La Fiancé Du Soleil* ” wanted to have the sun’s bride by his side just because the witch told him that marrying her would make of him a famous prince since everybody seeks to have her. In “Blanche-Colombe” the hero married, Hita Col Blanc and Aicha De Room just because his step mother told him about their powers and how it will be good to have them in his house, even though the stepmother intentions were to get him killed while trying to reach them. It is also important to note that the female character’s beauty is very important, whenever a male desired to marry a female character the criterion of beauty was motioned too no matter who the female character is or what powers she has.

Table 8: *women dependency on men*

¹ White-dove



- “I hardly manage to **support and feed** my seven daughters”, said the man
- Here is your baby brother, raise him, take good care of him, until he becomes a man and can come to your **help and support** you
- The sister found a pot full of goldshe did not touch anything, waited for years for her brother to grow and become a man so that he **decides** how to spend the money
- My brother will soon come **pick me up** and we will go back to the village

Table 9: *men saving women*

- If you like, said the rider, you will spend the night in my house
- The man saw that the woman he had just **saved** in wood was beautiful
- The girl thinks that in her woe, it was still a chance for her, the rider wanted to **shelter** her

Discussion:

The data in tables 8 and 9 not only portray women as weak, passive and dependent on men, men’s help and support, but it also conveys the idea that men are heroes, savers, and responsible. Nevertheless, the heir asked Aubepin’s sister to take care of him until he becomes a man and support her, her brother was eventually much younger than her but she did not spend her money until he got mature and decided how to spend his sister’s money.

Table 10: *Women empowering men or causing stability in their lives*

- But she did not want to leave Aubepin (little bro) before he was old enough to no longer need her
- “How to reach her? Even if I could manage to do so, the king of the genii would kill me”. “For this”, Aisha said to her husband , “you do not have to worry”
- “I will take care of that. Nothing easier”, Aisha said to her husband, and she showed him how to proceed.
- “Accept” said Blanche-Colombe to her husband, “and do not worry, I’ll take care of the rest”
- Prince returned and told Blanche-Colombe about the task and the difficult situation the king put him in.-“ It's nothing”, she said. Take this ring and”
- Hita says: “it is my business. Blanche-Colombe made you conquer Aïcha des Rum. Aisha gave you the means to win; I’ll have you back in your country.”
- She got up, grabbed the head of Aubepin by the hair and, with all her strength, pulled. The body first resisted, but the young woman did not let go. Soon the ground began to give way. The top of the skull of Aubepin, then the head, shoulders, bust, waist, legs, knees, and feet were finally unearthed.

Discussion

In addition to the different contexts in which female characters are given the tasks of cleaning and cooking to their fathers, brothers or husbands, the female characters were also there to help the male heroes or male characters get stronger, survive or achieve their goals, *Aisha de Rum* and *Blanche Colombe* were of a great help to their husband, the hero of the story, in his pursuit of getting a second and a third wife.

In the story of *Aubépin*, even though Aubépin betrayed and expelled his sister thinking that she committed a sin and that she was pregnant out of an illegal relationship, this latter saved him when the ground pulled him down and he got almost buried.

Table 11: *Men disempowering women or causing instability in their lives*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ I was your daughter, your daughter, Zalgoum said, You were my father, my father, But now you are my father in law as you want me to marry my own brother ➤ “You've betrayed me brother , but God will punish you” said Zalgoum ➤ “keep the partridge well attached so that it cannot escape, if you lose it your father will expel us all from the house” said the mother to her daughter ➤ “You go out ,both of you, and do not come back if you do not find the partridge” said the man to his daughter and wife ➤ Aubépin (her brother) and his wife had abandoned her in the woods ➤ My brother thinks I'm pregnant and, for that, he led me to lose myself in the woods ➤ No, said the queen to the king , for you have expelled me from your palace

Discussion

As it was mentioned previously, female characters depend on male characters in many instances and situation and it was also mentioned that male heroes saved some females and helped them; however, table 11 shows that this is not always valid, male characters cease being the guardian angels of female characters when their own interest and honor are at stake, for instance ,the king expelled his beloved queen when she disobeyed him ,the hunter drove his wife and daughter out of the house when his partridge flew away.

**Conclusion:**

The present article has attempted to highlight some issues related to gender construction and perception in Kabyle society through the analysis of some Kabyle folktales by applying feminist literary criticism and analyzing the covert and overt attitudes towards males and females. This investigation has tried to find and determine the relationship between the different themes and characters of the tales and the ones in the Kabyle society.

Through the analysis of the selected fragments, we found out that the norms, the rules, and hierarchies of the Kabyle society are the same in the tales, gender roles, and identities are also perpetuated both implicitly and explicitly.

Women are portrayed as beautiful; no place for ugly protagonists, beauty goes hand in hand with kindness and intelligence, in addition to that, female heroines represent modesty, sacrifice and the preservation of the social hierarchies and norms. Alas, main female characters are there to help the main story character (the hero) fulfill his goals, but they are not heroines. Nevertheless, the main female character even a heroin often needs a man, a son to manipulate, or a hero to save her at the end or to marry her. In this respect men are the main protagonists, they are intelligent, wise and strong.

Rebellion female characters are considered as evil and deviating from the norm even if they only try to fight for their own rights as the case of Zalgoum.

To wrap up, In Kabyle folktales men and women are represented as opposite entities but complementary according to the hierarchy of the Kabyle society. These complementarities are not as fair as it may seem, because the hard job and the submissive positions are held by women.

The folktales are told and produced by women to teach the new generation even if these women do not agree with the norms and values they are taught. Ergo, female storytellers do not focus on their own feelings, desires, and anger, they rather reproduce what had been taught to them by their mothers and grandmothers, they are there to preserve the hierarchy and men's norms.



Notes

¹My aunt

²Kabyle folklore character , little hustler who defeats more powerful than him

³ Kabyle folklore character, dreamy, solitary poet.

⁴ Trans -mine

⁵ Tassadit Yacine :the art of saying without saying in kabylia

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