

**MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN  
SUSAN ABULHAWA'S *MORNINGS IN JENIN* AND  
*THE BLUE BETWEEN SKY AND WATER***

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Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.

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The novels *Mornings in Jenin* (2010) and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) by the Palestinian American writer Susan Abulhawa are brilliant portrayals of the Palestinian experience pertaining to their exile from Palestine and subsequent refugee crisis. Born in 1970, to parents who were refugees of the 1967 War, Abulhawa later migrated to the U. S. Her debut novel, *Mornings in Jenin*, was spurred by the need of a wholly Palestinian narrative. Following the heels of the first book appeared *My Voice Sought the Wind* (2013), a collection of poetry, and *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015). She is not only a writer but also an activist for the Palestinian cause.

Replete with many women characters, Abulhawa's works offer brilliant analyses of mother-daughter relationships against the backdrop of the Israel-Palestine conflict. As Marianne Hirsch says in her essay "Mothers and Daughters: A Review," "[F]emale writers' accounts of the mother-daughter bond are the most articulate and detailed expressions of its intimacy and distance, passion and violence, that we can find; they are the most personal and at the same time the most universal" (204). Since the time period of the two novels span decades, they show intergenerational mother-daughter

relationships with apparent shifts in the emotional bonds forged between mothers and daughters.

Mother-daughter relationship that defines the core of these novels point to a feminist discourse of identity emerging out of the peculiar socio-political background of their lives. Although they are not the central focus of these works, the presence of mother-daughter bonds in varying degrees cannot be overlooked in these two narratives. In her essay “The Metaphysics of Matrilinearity in Women's Autobiography: Studies of Mead's *Blackberry Winter*, Heilman's *Pentimento*, Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*,” Stephanie Demetrakopoulos has introduced the concept of the “matriarchal realm,” also called the “matrilineal consciousness,” by which she means the influence of the mother or mother figure on the daughters (182). Daughters' growth into women are strongly affected by the relation with their mothers. The two novels studied in this paper reveal similar as well as dissimilar patterns of daughters embracing or rejecting the identities of their mothers.

Mother-daughter relationships in these texts are studied with respect to three aspects: silence, body and identity. In other words, these are the ways of communication whereby daughters forge a bond with their mothers and vice versa. Drawing upon the works of French and American feminist critics, Marianne Hirsch had written about “an emphasis on multiplicity, plurality, and continuity of being” in every mother-daughter relationship (209). The daughters in the two novels do not take for granted their mothers' identities as their own. It is only through an ongoing, constant dialogue of identity with the mother that the daughter opts for or against the mother in terms of identity. The identities of the mothers, in turn, are shaped by their individual reactions to their social, cultural and ethnic roles as well as the trauma

and irreparable changes wrought in the contours of their existence by the Palestinian historical events and wars. The absence of fathers due to death or disappearance in most of the cases discussed in the novels triggers the importance of the mothers' bond with their children, especially daughters. There are several pairs of mothers and daughters in Abulhawa's works whose relationships can be analyzed based on the aspects of silence, body and their mutual identities.

Silence is an important aspect in the mother-daughter relationship of Dalia-Amal and Amal-Sara in *Mornings in Jenin*. It is also a way of communication between these mothers and daughters, though the meanings are deciphered only years later. Dalia is said to have learned to be a stoic mother, “communicating the demands and tenderness of motherhood with the various tempers of silence” (*MJ* 52). Dalia's words to her daughter are described as “[M]atter-of-fact, efficient, tough” (57). Unlike her elder brother Yousef, Amal refuses to accept the silent temperament of their mother simply because he had seen the livelier part of their mother before the Nakba and exile whereas she had not. She tries to rebel against “this quiet detachment” of her mother (52). According to Lynn Z. Bloom, “The impact of these more distant mothers has not been intentional, nor has it emanated from them; rather, it has been willed into existence by the daughters at an early age”(296). For Amal, her mother's silence is diametrically opposite to the attention she got from her father. Her father told her stories about his lost land and home but all of the past was buried in mother's silence. The silence between them is initially a communication gap which prevents the daughter from knowing her mother properly.

Silence and madness are the refuge sought by Dalia in her attempt to come to terms with the traumatic events of her life. The loss of her son Ismael during the Nakba (the Palestinian exodus in 1948)

makes her face the new life of a refugee with the shield of silence while the disappearance of her husband Hasan during the Naksa (the Six-Day War in 1967) plunges her into the abyss of madness. But Amal, with the impulsiveness and demanding nature of a child, is not able to fathom her mother's heart. Finding her mother still as a statue in the relief camps after the Six Day War, Amal reproaches the vacant-looking Dalia for not identifying her. Unable to comprehend the condition of shock that her mother was in at the time, Amal instantly disowns her before a relief worker, with the lie "I don't know her" (74). Later, the guilt of leaving behind her mother to deal alone with her deranged mind among the countless displaced people haunts Amal throughout her life. It is through memories that Amal pieces together her mother's real identity and gets to know her for what she really was. At the time of Dalia's death, Amal realizes that "her mother" had departed the shell of her body years before she actually died. By means of stories heard from elders and her own recollections involving her mother's firmness and sincerity of action, Amal, for the first time, is able to strike a bond with her mother, who is dead by then.

There is another way of communication between this mother and daughter that penetrates the silence between them. Though Dalia seldom showcases the emotional overtures of her motherly love towards her daughter, she passes on the maternal or motherly identity of a woman to Amal at a very young age, by imparting her the midwifery skills and knowledge, albeit in a very matter-of-fact manner. Thus, the mother and daughter who stand far apart from each other in terms of the external performance of sentiments and affection are drawn closer by means of the same biological mother-daughter bond. By making Amal her assistant, Dalia the midwife provides her daughter with a glimpse into motherhood and childbearing and, thus Amal experiences a feeling of solidarity and oneness with her

otherwise stoic mother.

Despite being in a totally different socio-cultural atmosphere in the US, Amal's relationship with her daughter, Sara, is not dissimilar from her own experiences with her mother Dalia. The Shatila massacre that left her widowed made Amal reluctantly embark on motherhood, "with only a thread of will" (230). Amal confesses that she kept her distance at mothering, "going only through the mechanics of caring for a newborn" (229). As a mother, she nourished her child, but merely "for the sake of duty" (230). Had she not stopped herself consciously, Amal would have gone mad, just like her mother did after the traumatic events of the Naksa. She needed to couch herself in silence and hard-hearted indifference in order to hold herself from drowning in madness. In the process, motherly love and affection had to be compromised for stability and integrity. Overcome with a strange fear, Amal refrains from touching her daughter, lest she infects the latter with her own tragic destiny. Describing herself as "a woman of few words and no friends," Amal speaks of Sara as "a threat to my hardness," with her daughter's scent trying "to fan the flames of motherhood" (246). In spite of longing to display her motherly love with an open heart, Amal maintains the distance from her daughter who starts reciprocating the same distance with her mother as well. In this way, both Amal and Sara live behind their individual solid barriers of existence, "each craving the other's love" (246). Amal's way of responding to her motherhood is best explained in these words: "it was for a perverted selflessness that she denied her daughter, and herself, the rhapsody of that magnificent love she felt to her core" (255). When the grown up Sara spends most of her time in the company of friends, Amal realizes "the painful truth that her daughter wanted to avoid the still and quiet company of her rigid mother" (258). Amal's pain is similar to what her mother Dalia

once felt when Amal openly said that she wished she had “a better mother” to present the Mother's Day craft she made at school (67). It is only after the visit of David, who was in fact Ismael, the long-lost brother of Amal, that Sara learns the truth behind her mother's tragic and lonely life and the reason why she could not help being a silent and indifferent mother. The final visit to Jenin kindles the mother-daughter bond of Amal and Sara when stories and memories of the mother finally unfurl for the daughter. At this point, the long eclipse of silence changes the maternal bond to one of words and warmth and the realm of the maternal is replenished with a new life. Before Amal's death at the hands of Israeli soldiers, she had given her daughter the love and affection she held back all those years. On her part, Sara gets to know the past of her mother. This reconciliation that occurred in Palestine, helps the mother and daughter get past all their former misunderstandings towards each other. Thus, the return to the land of Palestine symbolizes the journey to the maternal.

Juxtaposed with the silence in the relationships between Dalia-Amal and Amal-Sara are the loudness and warmth of maternal affiliations between Nazmiyeh and Alwan in *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. Known for her tongue and her “legendary ire,” Nazmiyeh's vivaciousness contrasts well with the stony silence adopted by other mothers (*TBBSW* 55). Despite the traumatic events of her life and the tragic losses of dear ones in the Israel-Palestine conflict, Nazmiyeh never loses the vitality of her spirit. This is why she is able to develop a maternal bond with not just her daughter, Alwan, but with other women as well. Alwan, on the contrary, is a woman of few words. Compared to her mother Nazmiyeh, Alwan's meek and docile nature becomes pronounced throughout the novel. Nazmiyeh's silly jokes and angry protests are lewdness and blasphemy for Alwan. She has not acquired her mother's loud and

outspoken ways. Often Alwan decries her mother's impropriety of language and indecent talk while Nazmiyeh teases her daughter back by saying that the midwife might have switched her at birth. Alwan's friends also tell her that she does not take after her mother. In a way, Alwan resembles her grandmother Um Mamdouh who had a quiet and subdued nature. The vivaciousness of Nazmiyeh, in turn, is passed on to her granddaughter RhetShel, who is Alwan's daughter. So, it seems that women of alternate generations resemble each other in this mother-daughter series. Although the very nature of these mothers and daughters vary from one another, they do get along very well. Concerned with her widowed daughter's health, Nazmiyeh urges Alwan to consult a doctor for her persistent cough, but in the tone of a mother scolding her naughty daughter, "If you don't go to a doctor in the next few days, I'm going to beat you with my slipper like you're a little girl" (191). At the very next moment, Nazmiyeh attends to her little granddaughter, who is startled to imagine her grandmother beating her mother black and blue.

In this novel, the strength of the mother-daughter bond often lies in the togetherness of their everyday lives and the warmth present in even the most inconsequential daily exchanges. One of the instances shows how Nazmiyeh makes breakfast for Alwan, who has started to go to her job at the women's co-operative store after her son Khaled's death. Expecting her daughter to be angry and frustrated with the tedium of daily life, Nazmiyeh says in all her maternal love and kindness, "[D]on't be mad at your old mama, habibti" (281). When Alwan promptly replies that her mood would depend upon the breakfast, Nazmiyeh happily chimes in with "[Y]ou are definitely my daughter! Nobody switched you at birth" (281). Mother-daughter ties as these are depicted as having an important role in providing the women with the impetus to go on with their lives, despite the missile

attacks and bombings they have to endure from time to time. Towards the end of *The Blue Between Sky and Water*, all the women characters including Hajje Nazmiyeh, Alwan, Nur, RhetShel and the beekeeper's widow come together, developing mother-daughter bonds among each other. Hajje Nazmiyeh and the old beekeeper's widow become the elderly matriarchs of the household while Nur is a mother-like figure for Rhet Shel, besides her biological mother Alwan. Rhet Shel grows up in this matrilineal consciousness, surrounded by many mother figures. Nur, on her part, is about to become a mother. The words of the French feminist Helene Cixous that motherhood is present in every woman as that which “repairs and sustains and resists separation, a force that won't be severed” holds true in this context (*Sorties*172). Moving towards each other in this matriarchal realm, mother-daughter relationships acquire a language of their own, where they easily relate to each other in joy and sorrow alike.

Women's body, subject to various biological changes, functions as a site of shifting maternal allegiances in Abulhawa's novels. In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal's first menstrual period occurs soon after the Six-Day War in 1967 that results in the disappearance of her beloved father and her brother's decision to join the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). At the time, left with just her mentally ill mother, Amal feels intense loss and loneliness. It is in the midst of this existential crisis that she senses the rush of blood between her thighs, signaling her journey into the much-awaited territory of womanhood. But this maturation comes devoid of its former fancy and charm and instead, becomes something painful for Amal, given the current turn of events in her life. Yet, the symbolic territory of womanhood that Amal finds herself in, standing amidst “the first row of trees” is also, in the physical realm, the territory forbidden to Palestinians, as per the new rules that have come to



prevail following the military occupation of the Palestinian land by Israel (116). This realization of her feminine subjectivity is instantly and ruthlessly smashed by the bullet that pierces her belly, aimed as it is by the Israeli soldiers who have started to patrol the areas of late unbeknownst to Amal. Thus, the unhappy, disillusioned welcome of her womanhood is forever marked by the scar of the gunshot wound. Her maimed belly is something that metaphorically underlines Amal's sense of inadequacy and identity crisis as a woman until her marriage.

The themes of pregnancy and childbirth recur throughout both the novels. They are portrayed as having different impact on different women, based on the ways in which the Palestinian historical trauma has personally affected them. For Dalia in *Mornings in Jenin*, the birth of her daughter after her two sons with a long gap of eight years is significant, for Amal is her first (and only) child to be born after the Palestinian displacement and exile, without the dangers of miscarriage Dalia initially suffers in the refugee camp. It signals the fact that she had grown attuned to “the waiting for things to go back to normal” in their refugee lives, filled with the hope of a return to their homeland and old ways of living (51). The birth of this child also splinters “the rigidity of her mourning” - the mysterious disappearance of her six-month old son Ismael during the long procession into exile in 1948 (50). Thus, Amal's birth momentarily recreates “the spirited gypsy” that Dalia once had been (51). On the other hand, Amal gives birth to her only daughter Sara in the heights of her traumatic depression. Having returned from her ten-year long life of deliberately formed cultural indifference in the U.S., and settled into the closer spaces of family and community in Beirut, Lebanon, Amal longs to become a mother herself, seeing her brother Yousef's wife, Fatima, nurturing their daughter, Falasteen. Though

the news of her pregnancy brings enormous happiness to Amal, her gestational period becomes increasingly fraught with tension, following the mounting number of attacks and daily wars waged between the Israeli military forces and the PLO in its refugee base in Beirut. After receiving the news of her husband's death in one of Israel's attacks, Amal, once again stranded in the U.S. all by herself, goes into labour with the full force of her grief. In the midst of labour, Amal remembers her mother's words "[W]hatever you feel, keep it inside" (228). This is the advice imparted by a stoic mother to her daughter growing up in the midst of socio-political turbulence; an advice by a woman to a fellow woman who realizes the sheer importance of will power and endurance that women must possess in order to go through the troubled lives of Palestinians. Adjusted always to inward repressions and containment, Amal's life finds a metaphoric parallel in her refusal to push her baby out till the baby's instinct for life finally conquers her. The act of pushing her baby out becomes Amal's way of atonement for the injustice of the gift of life that she has, when her parents, siblings and husband had had to suffer immeasurable pain and torture before they died. Holding her newborn daughter in her hands, Amal resents the baby for forcing upon her the will to go on living. Here the act of childbirth becomes a tool for Amal to live out the pain and injustice she has felt all through her life.

In *The Blue between Sky and Water*, Nazmiyeh's life after the painful episode of her gang-rape and the brutal death of her little sister Mariam during the Nakba, is punctuated alternatively with pregnancy and childbirth. Despite bearing boys in succession, the mother in Nazmiyeh waits for the daughter that one day she would have, with the pain of childbirth as familiar to her as "the chill of winter or the sweat of summer" (46). Nazmiyeh had to wait till her twelfth pregnancy in which "destiny was redeemed" and her

promised daughter Alwan was born (59). On the contrary, Alwan's initial inability to bear children is juxtaposed with the fertility of her mother Nazmiyeh's womb; if the latter had been praised by the womenfolk on account of the plenitude of her children, motherhood comes to Alwan after years of waiting and humiliation, interspersed by many miscarriages and stillbirths. Likewise, the novel ends with Nazmiyeh's grandniece Nur's illicit pregnancy, open-ended and unclear about the implications of her motherhood.

The body is also shown as defining the identities of mothers and daughters, often setting each other apart. Nazmiyeh's huge and voluptuous body is equated with that of her extensive maternal love and affection in her youth as well as old age, as she is a mother to all her children and grandchildren. Thus, her body testifies to her role as a beloved matriarch of the refugee camp. Nazmiyeh's enormous body also stood for "her haughty defiance and irreverence" and thus her personal freedom and non-conformity to all of society's demands. In stark contrast with this, her daughter Alwan was slender and her body was "angled, with thin limbs and few curves" (107). Her body becomes synonymous with her silent and reclusive nature, subservient to the patriarchal society. Another pair would be Nur and her mother, whose bodies clearly demarcate the shifts in identity between them. Nur's mother always bragged about her slim waist and pointed towards Nur's slightly obese body as something that cast her out from identifying with her mother. This differentiation based on the body goes all the way to bringing forth cracks in their mutual relationship as mother and daughter.

Mother's identity is one of the important factors that characterize the individual as well as group identities of daughters. It is through the mother that both the family and society reach out to the daughter right at an early age. Abulhawa's novels resonate with the

questions regarding the identities of daughters, carried forward from those of their mothers in different wavelengths and frequencies.

The way a typical patriarchal society persuades mothers to restrict their daughters is clearly brought forth in the lives of Dalia and her daughter Amal. Although the historical events like the Nakba and the Naksa turn Palestinians into refugees and occupied subjects, the Palestinian community remains inherently patriarchal. By depicting the repetitiveness of this patriarchal schooling in the lives of mothers and daughters, its working principle down different generations is clearly underlined. The repression of “the gypsy colors” in Dalia is eagerly demanded by the society through the words “Break her, beat her, teach her a lesson” (*MJ* 14 - 15). Dalia's careless and undaunted nature is said to remind the older women community of “an irretrievable old bliss that they had willingly discarded” (14). These societal forces are shown as quickly assuming that “the girl would simply grow out of her ways” and they ask her unnamed mother to read Quranic verses over her (14). Later on, the womenfolk of the village agree that Dalia ought to be “broken” and urge her mother to crush the exuberance of her daughter (14). It is to be noted that Dalia's mother does not appear as a character in the novel, except in this role as a channel whereby the Bedouin society can suppress the wild, untamed spirit of young Dalia. Her mother is presented as not performing any action in this regard, for, it is Dalia's father who publicly punishes Dalia so that his honour shall not have any blemish before the society. So the totally silent mother conveniently sides with the male parent in conditioning her daughter to the expectations and approval of the society.

Much in the same way, after an interval of years, Dalia is asked to tame and prune her daughter Amal who is born as a refugee child in the camps of Jenin. From behind the curtain of her “quiet

detachment,” Dalia senses her little daughter to be a reincarnation of her former self, smothered long ago by the tentacles of patriarchal silencing (56). Not surprisingly, Dalia the mother is also asked to “break” her daughter free of “the devil's habits early” (56). The words “Break her. Beat her. Teach her a lesson.” ring the echo from a bygone era when Dalia too had been pressed and beaten to conform to the society's needs and commands (57). Dalia differs from her mother by boldly opting not to execute blindly the societal orders, reinforced from women to women through countless generations of mothers and daughters.

The identity of Dalia as a midwife has a strong impact on Amal even without her knowledge. The adult Amal who takes up medical profession as a temporary vocation is reminded of her mother whenever she attends any childbirth. Months before her marriage to Majid who is a doctor as well, Amal impresses her future husband with her midwifery skills when she rearranges and corrects the fetal position inside the womb of an expectant woman using her hands and thereby avoids the chances of a complicated parturition or delivery by caesarean . When Majid tries to applaud her knack in delivering babies, Amal is not able to pay attention to his words, for she is reminded of her deceased mother who had taught her long ago to correct wrongly positioned babies inside mothers' wombs. This reflects Virginia Woolf's statement that “[W]e look back to our mothers, if we are women” (82). It is only in retrospect that Amal realizes the strength of Dalia as a woman and a mother, and she misses her mother badly. The weak bond Amal had with her mother is actually strengthened and renewed as she grows up into a woman and becomes a mother.

Abulhawa's novels portray mothers forming a bond with their unborn daughters. The instances where daughters are named well

before their births and thus their identity and place secured in mothers' hearts, clearly point to the same. In *Mornings in Jenin*, even though Amal jokes to Majid with “[D]on't all Arab men want a son first?”, she and her husband eagerly await their first daughter whom they wish to name Sara after Majid's deceased mother (187). Similarly, in *The Blue between Sky and Water*, Nazmiyeha waits her prophesied daughter “Alwan” for more than twelve years before finally giving birth to her. Alwan's daughter RhetShel, in turn, is named much before her birth after the American woman Rachel Corrie who had volunteered relief work in Gaza and had died a martyr. In spite of living in Arab patriarchal communities where the first son of the family renames his parents as 'Um \_\_\_' and 'Abu \_\_\_' after his own name, mothers are depicted as eagerly looking forward to the birth of daughters. Nazmiyeh and Alwan look forward to begetting their daughters, though their first-born sons already impart them the titles of 'Um Mazen' and 'Um Khaled' respectively. Thus naming as a motif of identity is explored in both the novels.

One of the most constrained mother-daughter relationships in Abulhawa's works is that of Nur and her unnamed mother of Spanish origin, in *The Blue between Sky and Water*. The difference it has in the relationships of Dalia-Amal and Amal-Sara is that Nur is unable to reach an emotional reconciliation with her mother even after becoming an adult. Her mother's total absence of love and care is the reason behind this, which Nur comes to realize fully as she grows up into an adult. It is with much reluctance that her mother permits the child to be given an Arab name, as per the grandparents' wishes. On retrieving the custody of Nur after her paternal grandfather's death, her mother severs her connection with her roots by erasing the Arab language and culture she had imbibed earlier. Her mother changes her name from “Nur” to “Nubia” Nur's mother thus prevents her from

possessing an Arab identity, and at the same time, she disowns her by saying that Nur does not resemble her in any way, where by Nur experiences an identity crisis. By belittling Nur's hard work at household chores and studies, ignoring her needs and even health issues and remaining ignorant of the daughter's daily sexual abuse by her boyfriend Sam, Nur's mother represents all those that a mother should not be. Uncaring and cruel, the mother is depicted as selfish to the point that she does not care for her own child even as a human being. The writer deliberately chooses to leave such a mother unnamed, so that her role seems cold and detached. Nur, on the other hand, craves for her mother's love from the beginning. She tries everything to win her mother's love and attention, from being obedient to being highly studious. Even as a child, Nur learns to repress her longings and worries, suppressing even her tears and keeping everything to herself. This is a different type of "matrophobia", (a term used separately by feminist critics Lynn Sukenick and Adreinne Rich) which means the daughter's fear to feel one with her mother, lest the latter's inferior and subservient nature clings to her own identity. Here, Nur's matrophobia towards her mother is due to the abusive treatment and violent temper of the latter. Yet she admires and wishes to look like her mother, with a slim and beautiful physique. Here what Rich has said about the simultaneous attractive and repulsive tendency of matrophobia becomes relevant: "[B]ut where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her" (235). This is the very condition where a daughter is unable to come out of the influence of her mother all her life. There is a deep-seated wish to embrace the mother's identity. Even years after the separation from her mother, Nur writes unanswered letters to her and even goes to visit her. Seeing her mother from afar, Nur feels "weak with a sense of forgiveness"

and earnestly hopes for a reconciliation (*TBBSW272*). According to Rich, even if the deserted daughter can bring herself to forgive the mother, the girl-child who always felt lost without her mother's love feels lonely and unmothered even as a woman. The cold response of her mother even after the long interval bears an imprint on Nur who opens her heart to Nzinga, the social worker who is the closest she has to a mother: “[T]here is something extraordinary about being rejected by one's mother. It impoverishes the soul. It leaves holes everywhere and you spend your life trying to fill them up. With whatever you can find... You do it to feel the abandonment over and over because that's the only thing you know of your mother” (273). When Nur becomes pregnant, she fears about the kind of mother she would turn out to be. She plainly confesses her fear to Nzinga, who assures her that there is nothing in her that “remotely resembles” her mother who can be best defined as “a classic textbook narcissist” (270).

In a nutshell, mothers and daughters in Abulhawa's novels communicate with one another by means of their silences and words, bodies and identities. Each woman in the family tree is a focal point in these multi generational saga, where there are mutual intersections in the matrilineal consciousness, with most of the characters depicted as both mother and daughter in the respective works. Thus, motherhood, sisterhood and friendships between women lavishly nourish the terrain of female bonding in Susan Abulhawa's fiction.

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