

Received: 15 September 2024 ,Accepted: 20 October 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33282/jssr.vx2i4.12>

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## PORTRAYAL OF CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN RIZWAN AKHTAR'S POETRY

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### ABSTRACT

*Rizwan Akhtar's Lahore, I Am Coming is a collection of short poems mostly dealing with postcolonial studies. Pakistani individuals' identities face many challenges due to colonialism. Identities are no longer the same due to culturally hybrid situations. The ongoing struggle of individuals is present in our data source, which is selected poetry of Akhtar's. My research aims to find the impacts of cultural hybridity on identities of postcolonial individuals. The major theorist Homi Bhabha's work on Third space in postcolonial times is the relevant concern of the research. The method that helps me in doing the research is "Thematic Analysis". The study first explores the element of cultural hybridity in the selected poetry. Then, it identifies the effects of cultural hybridity on postcolonial individuals. Through an extensive analysis, it is explored that no individual is free from a hybrid state which formulates new identities. Data shows that various factors of cultural hybridity are directly related to identity crises. The main focus of the work is on the factors confronting understanding of transformed identities, such as the sense of double consciousness, cultural memory, and cultural exchange. In dealing with the identities, Bhabha's application of the third space becomes essential for the survival of new identities. The research*

*helps in highlighting the role played by cultural hybrid conditions in identity-formation. It also contributes to the postcolonial discourse and creates an image.*

*Keywords: individuals' identities, hybridity, transformed identities.*

## INTRODUCTION

Rizwan Akhtar is a Pakistani English poet whose anthology of poems, *Lahore, I am Coming* was published in 2017. In the book, he comes out as a cross-cultural poet. His poetry is linked with the past and anticipates the future. His understanding of the richness of culture in Lahore is reflected in his poems.

The primary focus of the research is the theme of cultural hybridity in Akhtar's *Lahore, I am Coming*. Akhtar also participates in global culture. The major portion of his poetry is centered on South Asia. In the book *Transnational Poetics*, Ramazani (2015) talks about the twentieth and twenty-first-century postcolonial poets. He suggests "these and other poets also participate through poetic, ideological, and other global circuits in transnational imaginaries (p. 12)." Akhtar's poetry is also heteroglossic and transnational, like other postcolonial poets

In general, hybridity is defined as the mixing of distinct forms and creating something new. This term has been utilized by various theorists. In the past, this term was accountable for the destruction of the natural order according to the theorist of races. The hybrid race is considered to be an oppressive in historical times. Hybridity is connected with culture, and some believe in cultural mixing from the very early stages. In Canada, for instance, the French language is imposed on them, which gives evidence of the presence of linguistic hybridity from the beginning (Hart, 2012, p. 140). The famous historian Bentley (1993) claims that "cross-cultural encounters have been a regular feature of world history since the earliest days of the human species'

existence (p. 7)" after studying several countries. To justify his remarks, he takes Islam as an exemplary example. When trade of between various countries and the Muslims flourished, many Sub-Saharan Africans adopted Islam. This trade helped Muslims in enhancing their local power.

As far as hybridity in poetry is concerned, the major portion of English poetry comes from former British colonies. In postcolonial times, writers faced difficulties in choosing the form of work because of hybrid conditions. By accepting culturally hybrid conditions, writers find various mediums through which to enhance their skills. These postcolonial writers have added many indigenous words to the English language, yet despite all their work, poetry remains more obscure than other genres. Eliot once said in *'The Social Function of Poetry'* (1945) that "No art is more stubbornly national than poetry." It shows that poetry does not deal with an objective point of view. It is a local and a completely subjective approach. It is not an internationalized genre because of local elements (Ramazani, 2017, p. 3).

The research examines Akhtar's perspective on cultural hybridity which provides valuable insights for Asian society to see the world through a poet's eyes. Following the footsteps of Anglophone poets, Akhtar has written poetry with the central theme of postcolonialism. In his poetry, one finds diverse themes. In the short documentary prepared by the Ewing English Society (2018), various speakers put forward their views about Akhtar's book *Lahore, I am Coming*. From the documentary, we come to know that Akhtar is influenced by Romantic poets.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How does Akhtar portray the construction of identity in a culturally hybrid environment like Lahore?
2. What is the role of cultural hybridity in shaping individual and collective identities in the poems?

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Postcolonial literature is rapidly growing in present times as a struggle against colonial practices. "Post-colonialism", according to Ashcroft (1998), "deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies" (p. 168). The book "The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures" of Ashcroft et al. (2002) explains a concept of postcolonial to show imposed cultural practices under imperial rule. The writers of this book demonstrate that "no society can ever be entirely free of such effects and that contemporary forces such as globalization are evidence of continuing control of the West over the rest" (p. 194). The book gives credit to Edward Said for putting forward the 'discourse of post colonialism.' Fanon is a pioneer in the Postcolonial field though Said has also contributed to Postcolonial literature. His works *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) are the landmarks in Postcolonial literature. The writings from colonized states, such as those by Indians and Africans, are initiating a whole new concept of postcolonial practices. Renowned Indian English scholar, Homi Bhabha (1994), gives shape to cultural hybridity saying, 'A new culture emerges when more than one culture clashes.' He views that mimicry weakens the stance of colonial powers as it creates ambivalence in colonial discourse. He saw this upheaval in a new way in his essays in *The Location of Culture*, and termed this as "third space".

In 2010 Lucy Karanja entitled, "'Homeless' at Home: Linguistic, Cultural, and Identity Hybridity and Third Space Positioning of Kenyan Urban Youth," conducts research on postcolonial discourse to explain multilingual and multicultural conditions of Kenyan urban youth.

Besides exploring the acceptance of hybridity in Postcolonial lands, identity crises due to cultural hybridity remain an ongoing topic in the research field. In 2018 a paper entitled "Lost-Identity; A Result of "Hybridity" and "Ambivalence" in Tayeb Salih's Season of Migration to the North" published in the International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature, an Iranian writer Esmail Zohdi asserts that when colonized people get in contact with colonial rule, identity crises emerge. He follows up the famous theorist Bhabha, to explain the concept of hybrid and ambivalence situations.

An article in 2007 entitled "Acceptance of Hybridity and the Expansion of Identity: Focusing on Seamus Heaney and William Butler Yeats", focuses on the acceptance of hybridity by Irish poets. Their work denotes that differences between colonizer and colonized is vital as it helps to depict their picture properly. Their poetry shows that "local identities" do not remain an issue any longer as people accept that their land is hybridized now. Analysis of their work using Postcolonial discourse shows that poets are trying to locate their identities with the use of landscape, loss of language and history.

Use of memory and language in culturally hybrid condition to show Postcolonial identities is analyzed in a thesis entitled "*FROM THE ROOT OF THE OLD ONE*": *RECONFIGURING INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN ANGLOPHONE AFRO-CARIBBEAN POETRY*. The researcher in 2007 observes the impacts of cultural hybridity on texts and identities.

He applies Bhabha's theory of mimicry, ambivalence, and hybridity on the selected poems of Afro-Caribbean poets.

### RESEARH METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses how I answered my research questions. I have taken the book *Lahore, I am Coming* as a primary source to analyze the issue of identities due to cultural hybrid conditions in Postcolonial societies. For this qualitative research, I have applied Van Manen's Interpretive Phenomenology (1997) as a methodology for data analysis. According to Van Manen's Interpretive Phenomenology, a researcher reads a text and then examine its content deeply to establish something 'meaningful' or 'thematic.' Applying Interpretive Phenomenology to the selected poems helped me in examining cultural hybrid phenomena and its consequences on identities in the Postcolonial society.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this research, postcolonial theory is used as a theoretical framework to analyze the theme of cultural hybridity in the selected poetry of Akhtar. Postcolonial theory is still in a developing process due to its contested nature.

### ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The process of colonization not only targets colonized lands but disrupts their culture as well. This process results in "double marginalized" conditions. The literature written in the postcolonial period discusses double marginalized practices. In the selected work of Akhtar, the subcontinent breathes Mughal and British cultures heavily. The colonial rules had long-lasting impacts on subcontinent individuals as Akhtar is highlighting Pakistani individuals using poetry.

In the poem, “The Dancing Courtesans of Old Lahore,” he grapples with Mughal colonial rule and historical hierarchical positions. The poem has seven stanzas illustrating the blending of cultures and the colonial rule. Following the opening line, the narrator describes a condition of old Lahore where ubiquitous sounds echo continuously. One can hear sounds coming loudly from the walls of an old crooked veranda, thereby exhibiting the sensory texture of the Mughal colonial period.

At that place, sounds from the stairs usually come when someone walks on them. The rooftop is full of creepers and gramophone sounds are coming behind the open doors of old buildings. The italicized “raqasa” signifies hybridity in culture. Raqasa is a Persian word that means “dancer”.

In further stanzas, night plays a vital role in circling messages in well-decorated bazars. In those bazars, women wear anklets:

arabesque alleys continue  
under bras messages hibernate  
ogling in the The Dancing Girls’ Bazaar  
nights reveal in sitar and anklets (Akhtar, 2017, p. 1)

Further, their "hennaed feet" perform intricately in those gatherings. Courtesans chew “betel-leaf” along with the poems in their hands. It highlights the leisure and intricate attitude of the Mughal colonial time. The last stanzas verify tyrannical colonial rule of Mughals:

over rickshaws and donkey carts  
a dim moon smudges the songs  
sung by the concubine Anarkali

planted alive in bricks by the Emperor – (Akhtar, 2017, p. 1)

Local vehicles like “Rickshaws” and “donkey carts” are still on duty at night time. Using these local vehicles, colonizers perform illegal acts. It symbolizes that colonizers fulfill their immoral actions making locals as their resource for their source. It helps in maintaining hybridity in society. People are engaged in the hybrid societies having imperialistic mind working as a sorcerer with devil intentions. These thoughts are wonderfully put together in another poem entitled “Birds.” In this poem, the imagery of birds is used to encounter the colonizers' experiences.

### **Reconfiguration of Individual’s Identities Using Cultural Memory as a Constructive**

#### **Effort:**

Connecting past with the present is a social and political phenomenon, apart from being personal. One way to recover from colonialist trauma is to revisit memories for various purposes. It is highly linked to conscious effort. People tend to forget their own culture and revisiting memory helps them to balance newly formed identities. According to Quashie (2004), “memory is a political practice linked with consciousness and decolonization...it is an essential and defining corpus, a quintessential characteristic of personal but especially collective identity” (p. 100).

Memory reconstruction is necessary to generate new identities in third space for the modifications in the identities of Pakistani individuals. The act of remembering and forgetting is taken as a "counter-memory" which is helpful for postcolonial writers. It helps them to see ascending issues that arise due to colonial processes from new perspectives. By taking memory as a source to heal past trauma, writers help postcolonial societies in understanding various perspectives to fill hollow gaps. It leads to the creation of “interstitial space” where identities are



defined and redefined. Homi Bhabha describes this space as a cultural hybrid space that engraves cultural memory.

Akhtar has an emotional link with the ancestral memories. He is well informed about the landscapes of his native colonized land. The speaker of the poem “Exiled” explores the complexity of the relationship between places and serves as “Memory Bridger.” The narrator talks about Lahore city, which is longing for shades in Postcolonial times. For a soothing effect, he searches for local culture to calm his senses in the extreme heat of Lahore. In this “tea-brown heat”, phlegm is running from the noses of people. Paradoxically saying, the river is there to fill the thirst but water is tired just like the Lahore city itself. Even boats are not in their proper positions on that tired water. It gives a sense of apocalyptic visions.

The narrator diverts the attention towards “crows land with an antagonistic intent” (Akhtar, 2017, p. 2). He speaks for the wrongdoings of the colonizers. On the land of this variant traffic, people are abusing each other. The symbol of “different traffic” is used to represent hybridity in societies. In the hybrid society, he tries to achieve an equilibrium state of mind. The phrase “heterogeneity of traffic” illustrates the presence of different cultures which shows hybridity of land. There is a long list of remembrances to recount in the hybrid land. One such place is "Kamran's Bara Dari." Recollecting the memories of the golden past times, old people spend time near it. Kamran's Bara Dari is a Mughal-era monument which is situated near the Old River's hedge. The building stands for cultural heritage, “of old men killing time near banks / of Lahore's lonely river hedging Kamran's Bara Dari.” (Akhtar, 2017, p. 2) The flowering memories offer healing and benediction to the old people. Opposite roads have arched shape structure and meetings take place between couples who sneak out into long bushes. These couples find dead

bodies of nocturnal animals near that monument. It can be seen that these animals are silently killed:

whose vaulted pavilions cusp paradoxical doors

from which couple sneak through tall grass

of the garden finding bodies of nocturnal animals

exiled into bones. (Akhtar, 2017, p. 2)

The dead bodies of nocturnal animals are taken as a metaphor to suggest the wrongdoings of colonizers. It depicts that when subjugated class does something against the wishes of colonizers, they get killed. The title of the poem “exiled” suggests that living in hybrid situations with the fragments of memories is not easy. People go on with the effects of the tremendous psychological and physical journey. Not only monuments are worthy of a revival of memories, but a remembrance of the atmosphere plays a vital role as well.

In “Epicurean Monsoons,” Akhtar formulates an ambiance of the times when people appreciate common things like monsoon season and local food. The narrator takes us back to the times when life was carefree. In the prologue, the narrator starts sharing a long list of memories related to the pre-colonial past. These cultural memories of the land release pleasurable chemicals in minds and influence indigenous people with the local ritualistic practices.

After the first rain of monsoon season, leaves from dry earth spread profound smell. In this season, boys play in the pools of mud. The old people shout and walk with long steps in a joyful mood. Apart from these happy moments colonialism has different plans as the narrator

confirms “straws and dung balls glide / the old men yell and stride / the small tides hide bigger plights” (Akhtar, 2017, p. 142)

The narrator further adds that there was the time when people of Lahore enjoyed spicy Indus “fishes” and “jalebis” in a karahi. Other men prefer “Steaming white rice” in this season. Every delicious food develops lust in locals and they lick their plates profoundly. Besides food, women arrange mosquito nets and couples make love to each other. Raindrops coming from the ceiling cover the noises coming from their rooms. Raindrops dripping from the rooftops drench the bodies and pots of the homes.

The love for native culture is prominently shown in this poem. Though times have changed; love for native culture is still alive in the heart of its people. Life is not contaminated when people live in these moments away from the troubles of colonialism. Colonialism often erases cultural histories of the land and revisiting them is one of the ways to save the land from drowning. Also, the nostalgia of the writer with good times is shown.

Memory takes us back towards our ancestral roots. In the poem "Trees" the disillusionment of people is shown due to hybrid languages. It helps us to understand the importance of ancestral cultural values. The narrator in the poem is nostalgic about native languages. He feels sorry about the loss of them. The trees are looking after each other on their own. He metaphorically elaborates that languages are taking care of themselves:

Trees are like extinct languages

taking care of their lonely lives

wind spatters leaves curling verbosely

on ground holding archaic texts (Akhtar, 2017, p. 9)

Wind spreads the leaves of old trees which are curling around themselves. The shattered leaves have answers to so many questions but now they are of no use to us. The shattered leaves signify broken cultural heritage. The memory of these languages is getting blurred day by day. These languages take swings on barks just like sentences that are limp, just like old languages. Only a few people can understand the grammar of those languages.

### **Quest for Double Consciousness: A Vindication in Postcolonial times**

Akhtar addresses his position as a postcolonial poet and challenges poetic imaginations revealing a powerful state of mind in the cultural hybrid society. The next poem by the poet shows that hybridity in a culture not only generates a double consciousness state but also eliminates the richness of indigenous culture. The poem “Haunting” addresses the present condition and emotions of Pakistani individuals. People are trapped mentally in the name of modernity due to imposed culture. The narrator, a startled person, witnesses so many leaves on the grounds. The leaves block the way of the narrator to move forward. It symbolizes that the narrator is frozen in time and space. The scattered leaves denote the presence of various cultures. Only wind can carry these leaves well. The presence of swift wind highlights the dominant modern culture.

“Wind ruled” is symbolically used here:

wind ruled with a scattering fist

you walked frantically on one pace

legs covered one space loyally

in measured hypnosis of muscles (Akhtar, 2017, p. 10)

It shows that in modern times people move at a slow pace in the dilemma of knowing. The fear of staying behind put the minds in trouble. They do not know the right path as their minds are in a state of hypnosis. Also, their bodies are shivering in the misery in competitive times. Colonizers are constantly diminishing our culture, therefore the narrator worries about the future generation. The narrator is an “old man” who spits hatred towards modernism. He is walking in the garden to find some answers. He observes:

when the guard told me “it is time”

leaving garden

I waited standing in distance

you took away my language

I kept chasing silence. (Akhtar, 2017, p. 10)

In a state of complete forlorn, the old man is helpless and finds himself in a hybrid web. In double consciousness state, the narrator wants his future generation to be aware of their culture and also not to lag in modern times. Not only this, but the poet also targets institutional practices of the country. British had spread a web of their foreign education system in the country. This education system also puts the mind in a confused state which deforms the previous identity.

In another poem "text", the narrator's annoyance with the British educational system is shown which is incapable of the sensitivity to the colonized institutional practices. In postcolonial times, local poets are writing under colonial legacy and desire to grow “bumper

seeds" out of borrowed culture. Absorbing foreign culture entirely is harmful to them which they are not aware of. In the city, Lahore, the position of hybrid culture provides multicity of identities. The contemporary quest for giving meaning to dual identities is not a peaceful process. One can only find solace in gardens where thinking in solitary is free of cost. People are not using local languages as many of them do not even know the meanings of it. Local dictionaries are constantly adding new words providing a chance to colonizers to take full advantage in spreading their culture:

with every winnowing squeak

the entries in the local lump of dictionary

create a giggling gap.

Mind it or not. (Akhtar, 2017, p. 49)

The addition of colonizers' language is not a small sin in the eyes of the narrator. These sins are like ending notes in dictionaries. Besides knowing everything, the narrator himself is cramming English like some Holy book. The narrator shows the dilemma of what he calls "facing the dilemma like a monk" (Akhtar, 2017, p. 49). He finds himself in the center of both cultures. Schools are feeding colonizer's culture in the minds of the younger generation. It is a way to attribute later endorsements to the imperial powers guiding a Eurocentric approach to cause harm to the identities in postcolonial land. The strong grip of neo-colonial practices is shown in the poem in the form of educational institutions.

In the poem, "Voyagers," the poet continues his quest of Pakistani self in the flow of cultural hybridity. He also elaborates the continuity of the colonial education system. In the first

stanzas, the narrator tells that the mind cannot think and work properly. He tells that in mind a silly vendor comes who has a stony tongue. This tongue grinds tobacco. The vendor is saying something difficult to hear and lost in lazy yawns. It symbolizes that a mind resonates with silly thoughts enclosing harsh words. The mind is accepting all these thoughts without putting any barriers and restraints. Usually, the mind has dark desires which are difficult to get. Even thinking of them feels like "a taste of tantalizing kiss." The colonials have destroyed the beauty of achieving those precious things. They put a mind in a double conscious state of not knowing whether to think about their own culture or to go with the modern one.

In the last stanzas, the narrator is hopeful because "no morning is same." Cry and sleep come naturally in this situation. Even in these difficult times, love is still timeless. Time is only measurable in shops and on the walls in the form of clocks. It can be counted during work hours. It symbolizes that while living in a hybrid situation, one cannot stop loving their own culture and land. Metaphorically, it is just like a lover who cannot stop loving his beloved. The narrator's mind is constantly teasing him and forcing him to visit English gardens for relaxation:

Who knows, I might take you along

to English gardens for dalliance, and

then just stare you out of my passport,

there is some logic in losing people. (Akhtar, 2017, p. 208)

He looks at his passport and the chance to leave everything behind. He concludes that losing a native land is like losing a beloved soul. Thus, the narrator abandons his plans and creates an imaginative space around him. He starts thinking about cuddling of cats which gives

winter vibes. The poem ends when the narrator finds himself at different continents in his daydreaming sessions.

Establishing bonds with the native land, the narrator becomes a part of both cultures and cannot find a way to escape from it. It shows the anesthetic condition of the narrator. He falls under serious identity crises. Though colonizers provide benefits to the land, negative contributions outweigh them. The poem highlights the situation of people facing dilemmas of identities and creating a new world around them. Bhabha calls this space as “third space” where postcolonial identities are formed. In this sequence of poem, sense of being part of both cultures in present. It also highlights the issue of neo-colonial practices in Pakistan state. The dominance of the imperial powers is not shown by the force but we find it in the form of state apparatuses. The poet shows these practices in the Educational system of the country. Hegemonic neo-colonial practices result in clouding the judgments of postcolonial individuals.

#### In-Between Spaces due to Cultural Exchange: Perceived Societal Experiences

Despite the potency of the colonialism and imperialism, a state can manage to survive in postcolonial times. The exchange of culture is always a better option than to be completely under the hegemonic rule. In this way, identity becomes meaningful when created in a third space. “Way Out” is one of the poems by the poet to end the gaps that colonialism has prepared socially and culturally. It elaborates one of the survival strategies in Postcolonial times. The narrator starts by explaining that there were thousands of warriors at times who drifted themselves with the tinted loathe of the colonials but still they left gleamed and carved specks yet dripping for us to encounter and discover our roots. They swam with the tempests but harvested the ground with their blood. There are even now thousands of blessings but people are not capable to absorb



them. They just have a vision of them. They must stick to their roots nonetheless there is clearing everywhere, yet they are subsiding themselves to the unwanted fringes. The line “wet squirrel referencing this lonely script” (Akhtar, 2017, p. 6) symbolizes lonely script that they have their culture engraved with them but people are lacking it day by day. There are fewer warriors but more survivors in this generation.

The work of Akhtar can be perceived as an open gateway for colonial and colonizers cross-fertilization to create a culture with equal resources and privileges. The research not only analysis the rising agenda of cultural exchange but also show long-term scars due to colonial processes. The poems hold the history of the country to mark motive. The work struggles to rhyme with Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) that the "colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past to open the future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope" (p. 187). It is shown from the research that liberation comes from within the society, not from outside influences. Besides this, the poetry is hopeful though not entirely optimistic. It seeks a way in which Pakistani individuals can ease cultural hybrid tensions

## CONCLUSION

The work analyzed the poems by Akhtar in his book *Lahore, I am Coming* and discusses the role played by culturally hybrid situations in generating hybrid identities in Pakistani individuals. Poet's work is a site of poetic traditions and cross-cultural poetics. His poetry is diverse in ideas and reflecting the individual's behavior affected due to culturally hybrid situations. The common ground of the work remained formation of new identities of Pakistani individuals in a “third space” in postcolonial times. Pakistani society in postcolonial times depicted by the poet shows the face of society where living is not easy in hybrid situations. We come to know from the poetry that

individuals are affected due to colonialism in multiple ways. Some try to revolt against Western culture and others are accepting it and changing their identities positively. Thus, the society faces a sense of double consciousness, which leads to create hybrid identities which help people to live their lives according to the need of times.

Identity distortion has been a real issue in cultural hybrid society for their individuals. Pakistani individuals suffer from the same cause after going through a colonial phase. The cultural hybrid theme of Akhtar's poetry reflects the processes that affects identities in various ways. Further analysis shows that different factors play a vital role in image-making and present strategies to survive in postcolonial times. Cultural hybridity creates certain conditions that help in shaping new identities of postcolonial people. For the construction and reconstruction of identities Bhabha's "third space" is employed. According to him, identities are not fixed and are a negotiable topic. His postcolonial concept foregrounds the theoretical framework of this research. His ideas on hybridity draw attention to analyze the selected poetry of Akhtar. The relationship between colonizers and the colonized by Bhabha offers a suitable approach for poetry. Taking his reciprocal approach to cultural hybridity opens a way to "decolonize the minds." The research shows that the poet tries to create a new world by elaborating on the whole colonial experiences and solutions in postcolonial times. Ultimately, the role of hybridity in shaping identities in Akhtar's poems is a means of survival and adaptation in an ever-evolving cultural landscape, where identities are not fixed but are continually in the process of being formed and reformed.

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