

Dislocation and the Making of the Self: An Analysis of Rajkumar in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* from a Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

Dislocation is a perennial issue in some of Amitav Ghosh's novels. In postcolonial literature, the theme of dislocation appears as the result of the imbalanced interaction between the classes- the colonisers and the colonised. Moreover, dislocation is an inevitable experience for those who are affected by native elitism. The colonised people are dislocated geographically and psychologically. In addition, they experience geographical dislocation both internally and externally. Rajkumar is dislocated in Amitav Ghosh's The Glass Palace as the eventual outcome of his peripheral identity. He is affected socially, culturally, religiously, economically, psychologically, and above all, ideologically because of his dislocation and thus, his dislocation is multifarious. Though he is able to change his identity substantially through gain in his dislocated life, he is bound to experience uncertainty in the long run. The process of loss and gain puts him in a strange psychological state. My attempt in this essay is to analyze firstly, how Rajkumar, the protagonist in The Glass Palace, is dislocated, and secondly, what he loses and achieves in the process of dislocation and finally, what type of self he eventually forms.

Key Words: Coloniser; Colonised; Elite; Peripheral; Dislocation; Loss; Gain; Self.

1. Introduction

Dislocation is a recurrent issue in postcolonial studies as the colonised people were dislocated in different ways during the colonial period. The academic interests for the dislocated people grew enormously with the emergence of the postcolonial study. Dislocation, as commented by Ashcroft et al. (2003), is linked with "imperial occupation and the experiences associated with this event" (p. 73). In postcolonial study it is defined in multiple ways. It refers to 'go away from home' or 'native surrounding' which is described as "'unhousedness' or 'not-at-home-ness'" (Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 73). Thus, it denotes the homelessness of the colonised people. On the other hand, Nayar

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(2008) argues that “displacement” deals with those who are “out of place” and seeking a “home” (p. 89). Thus, displacement deals with the paradoxical meanings regarding their home.

The colonised people were dislocated because of their forced migration, enslavement, and willing or unwilling journeys either as indentured labourers or individuals. People could migrate from one place to another in colonial time as the system of migration was free from any modern formality, and so, in most of the cases, it took place because of the economic reasons and the oppression of the marginal people by either the colonisers or the native elites. Moreover, social, political, cultural, religious, matrimonial, and familial reasons were also responsible for their migration. Eventually, they got dislocated geographically, culturally, economically, religiously, and above all, ideologically. They were fated to be dislocated as it was not possible for them to come back to their former land anymore. In line of this thought, dislocation can be considered parallel to rootlessness which offers the affected people with “an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider” (Said, 2000, p. 181). Though they can claim root for the time being in the new land, they cannot but experience unsettlement.

The journeys for the dislocated people are not predetermined and well-planned as the colonial rule did not determine their routes. Most of the characters are rootless but their routes are not historically defined. Moreover, their movements from one place to another are sometimes accelerated by their personal choices and to some extent, these self-motivated movements replicate the larger historical events. Nayar (2016) states: “While personal histories are not necessarily reflective of institutional ones, they can sometimes be instructive for considerations of institutional shifts” (p. 316). Amitav Ghosh’s (2011) *The Glass Palace* is an authentic literary paradigm of dislocated people in which Rajkumar, the protagonist symbolises it.

The personal history of the major characters in Ghosh’s (2011) *The Glass Palace* provides the necessary information to understand the social, political, cultural, economic, and ideological factors of their dislocation from their own homes, and thus, the novel “charts the unmaking and remaking of individual and collective identity and examines the self-fashioning and self-alienation” (Mondal, 2011, p. 113). In the novel’s panoramic space covering three continents, innumerable characters are portrayed but what “unites them all is

the inescapable narrative of colonial displacement” (Khair, 2013, p. 162). So, Rajkumar is a dislocated character for whom settlement in one sense is impossible. This kind of disparate and spatial connectivity defines his personality.

2. Dislocation in Rajkumar’s Family

The Glass Palace is considered a historical novel written with the theme “that fiction is ‘unreal’ or untrue” (Mandal, 2011, p. 20) which is overtly interrogated through relentless narrativisation of fictional characters affected differently either by the colonisers or the native elites. The central character, Rajkumar, of the novel is affected by history throughout his whole life. Nithy (2016) observes Rajkumar’s dislocation:

The central protagonist Rajkumar initially comes out by being a Kalaa, a foreigner in an alien territory, then by being subjected to colonization of a more severe kind in participating in the great national upheaval that the British occupation of Burma entails, followed by another turbulent experience in imperial India and his foray into the Malayan forest resources. (p. 216)

Rajkumar moves with the history to give the readers necessary information about the colonial impacts but he is none but a dislocated entity.

Very little is described in the novel about his family. His family originally lived in Chittagong, now called Chattogram, the second largest city and the main sea-port of Bangladesh. His father was a “*dubash and a munshi*- a translator and clerk” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 12) who in disagreement with his brothers decided to leave the city forever. He headed to Akyab first, another port city in the neighbouring Burma, now called Myanmar to try his fortune. In Akyab, he spent “some dozen years, fathering three children” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 13) among whom Rajkumar was the eldest one. Not having known much about his family, he only knew that he was from Chittagong and his “family was Raha”. (Ghosh, 2001, p. 13)

His father wanted to go back to his land of birth from Akyab but “there was a fever” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 12) in epidemic form which took away his father and other brothers and sister. As the first-generation immigrant, his father might have been haunted by the memories of his own land which, however, is not much highlighted in the novel. His death tolled on his family heavily. This uncertainty is a recurrent issue always to be faced by the dislocated people.

After the death of the rest of the members of his family, his mother decided to go back to Chittagong, her husband's place of origin. Her decision to go back to her husband's old abode proves that she was not comfortable in Akyab. This discomfort with Akyab establishes her sense of dislocation. Gloria Anzadua, an American writer, describes her affiliation with her land of origin Texas saying that she always possesses the land in her consciousness, "On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas..." (Rivkin & Ryan, 2000, p. 887). Though her strong attachment with her land is absent in Rajkumar's mother, it can be argued that she possessed her former land in her consciousness.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair also says that the novel "is a narrative of colonial displacement" (162) which is proved in every action Rajkumar took in his life. To understand his sense of dislocation, many factors can be taken into consideration. First of all, his changed position after his mother's death and his job in the boat are to be highlighted. Ghosh (2001) rightly says, "he, who had been so rich in family, was alone now, with a khalasi's apprenticeship for his inheritance" (p. 14). Moreover, his failure to offer a proper cremation ceremony to his dead mother made him reluctant to go back to his father's land and this decision made him dislocated. It is epitomised in Ghosh's (2001) remarks, "But his mother was dead and what purpose would it serve to go back to a place that his father had abandoned?" (p. 14). He did not feel any sense of belonging to his parents' land and, thus, he himself accepted the idea that he was destined to be the inhabitant of no land. He clarified his state of homelessness in his conversation with Dolly:

My father was from Chittagong and he ended up in the Arakan; I ended in Rangoon; you went from Mandalay to Ratnagiri and now you're here too. Why should we expect that we're going to spend the rest of our lives here? There are people who have the luck to end their lives where they began them. But this is not something that is owed to us. (Ghosh, 2001, p. 310)

It was a deliberate decision for him to take the apprenticeship as a crew on the boat. He reversed his mother's advice of giving her only deposit, a gold bangle, to pay the owner of the boat for his journey back to Chittagong which was nothing but an imaginary land that existed only in the stories and myths his parents used to tell him. Eventually, he plotted a trick and convinced the nakhoda, the boat owner, to take him as a crew in exchange of the bangle, the only sign of memory he had of his mother. Ghosh (2001) remarks:

He had only the bangle now: his mother had wanted him to use it to pay for his passage back to Chittagong. ... No, better instead to strike a bargain with the nakhoda. Rajkumar took the old man aside and asked to join the crew, offering the bangle as a gift of apprenticeship". (p. 14)

In this way he became an apprentice and began his journey without knowing his destination. His birth was itself a dislocation for him as he developed no acquaintance in Akyab and it got inflated with the death of all of his family members. The undivided subcontinent during the British rule opened a new horizon for him and he started his journey in exchange of his mother's bangle, the last object that tied him with her memory.

3. Rajkumar as a Dislocated Person

The narrative of Rajkumar's journeys in different locations in the novel proves that he is dislocated. After his mother's death, he managed to get a job as "a helper and errand-boy" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 4) on the boat. After reaching there, the boat needed repair and Rajkumar eventually lost his job. He was asked by the boat-owner to meet a lady named Ma Cho who ran a food stall by the side of the west wall of the Mandalay fort. The owner of the boat further dictated that she might help Rajkumar to survive in the new locality. He met the lady of "mid-thirties, more Burmese than Indian in appearance" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 5) and told her the purpose of his visit. She agreed to give him a job in exchange of not "more than three meals and a place to sleep" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 6). That is how Rajkumar settled down in Mandalay for the time being. But for a dislocated person like him, no settlement was permanent who "is therefore condemned to record the exit-ential dilemma – wherein the subject is necessarily partitioned, a bewildered immigrant never quite in focus nor contained within the frame" (Khair, 2013, p. 163). With a partitioned self and non-focused personality, Rajkumar started his life in Mandalay.

His journey as a crew of the boat was a metaphorical journey to an unknown world populated by strange people and surroundings. Many unexpected things were awaiting him there. He would be in a world ruled by the English. He would experience colonisation as an eye witness. He would find root in this regime only to be cast away again. For this reason, his ties with any geographical location are very fragile. Thus, as said by Ghosh (2001), in "the Bengal of his birth those ties had been sundered... and no longer existed even as memory" (p. 47). Moreover, he suffered from the sense of loss in Mandalay. His helplessness becomes evident in his conversation with Dolly:

Miss Dolly, I have no family, no parents, no brothers, no sisters, no fabric of small memories from which to cut a large cloth. People think this sad and so it is. But it means also that I have no option but to choose my own attachments. This is not so easy, as you can see. But it is freedom of a kind, and thus not without value. (Ghosh, 2001, p. 148)

In Mandalay, Rajkumar went through some unwarranted experiences because of his dislocated identity. He did not know anyone. It was not a permanent destination for him. He shifted his job again and again later, but nowhere he was able to get rooted.

4. Dislocation and the Making of Rajkumar's Self

The dislocated people are always under the mercy of chance. They do not get any well-defined way in the exiled life and so have to possess inherited determination of knowing the unknown, discover the undiscovered, and getting the ungettable. The social, cultural, economic, and ideological displacements offered by the dislocation create different types of opportunities for them. Vanitha (2015) argues that the "sense of self may also have been destroyed by cultural denigration, the conscious and unconscious operation of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior cultural model" (p. 2). The society and the state are not ready to offer them any privilege. Thus, Rajkumar's decision of travelling in the course of less known world is itself a metamorphic one. Even in his early life, when he was in Ma Cho's custody, his curiosity for the palace-girls proved his love for impossibility. His personality was greatly guided by this kind of zeal for knowing the unknown. For this reason, though Ma Cho forbade him to show interest in the royal ladies, he was determined to see them: "no matter what Ma Cho said, he decided, he would cross the moat – before he left Mandalay, he would find a way in" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 7). It only became possible for him to materialise his dream when King Thebaw and his family members got arrested by the British in the wake of the Third Anglo-Burmese war. When they were taken outside the Mandalay fort, the natives rushed to the palace for scavenging and looting it. Rajkumar was one of them with "a few small things that he had found in the palace" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 45). But the best thing he discovered there was Dolly who was in the procession of "eighteen brightly-dressed orphan girls carrying boxes and bundles" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 44). She "looked very small" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 45) at that time. Rajkumar felt a strange sensation for the little girl and wanted to do something for her. He hurriedly went back to the nearby

sweetmeat shop and bought some for her which he could give her through much effort. Ghosh (2001) narrates: “he was, in a way, a feral creature, unaware that in certain places there exists invisible bonds linking people to one another through personifications of their commonality” (p. 47). In order to materialize this invisible bond, he waited for around twenty years for Dolly.

Rajkumar’s marriage to Dolly is accidental. After many years of their first meeting, he was able to discover her in a land where she was also dislocated. When he became a successful man, he found out the fact that she lived with the exiled royal family in Ratnagiri, India. To meet her, he found out a connection with the local collector’s wife, Uma Dey. One of her uncles lived in Rangoon and Rajkumar somehow discovered him and made him write a note about him. Thus, he got the chance of meeting the collector’s wife in Ratnagiri. To convince Uma Dey, her uncle D. P. Roy spoke about Rajkumar very highly while describing Rajkumar’s visit to a local temple:

then suddenly one morning, he had dropped down like a hailstone from the sky, right into the Durga temple on Spark Street, the gathering place of the city’s Hindu Bengalis. He had come perfectly costumed for the occasion, in a starched white dhoti and a gold-buttoned *punjabi*. To ease his entry he had taken the precaution of bringing along a substantial donation for the *purohit*. (Ghosh, 2001, p. 134)

The dislocated people naturally always try to maintain link with their own culture as King (2000) says, they “retain a conscious or subconscious attachment to traditions, customs, values, religions, and languages of the ancestral home” (p. 215). Rajkumar did the same thing. Uma’s uncle describes his business in details, and finally, his little attachment with India was informed, “but you must consider that he has lived in Burma so long that he is now more Burmese than Indian and may well be counted as a foreigner” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 135). Thus, it becomes clear from D. P. Roy’s statement that Rajkumar was a rootless dislocated person.

Rajkumar is a businessman with his extraordinary capacity of attaining whatever he wants. After going to Ratnagiri, he took Uma Dey as a catalyst to get Dolly as his wife. It must be mentioned here that he was meeting Dolly after almost two decades and it was quite impossible for him to remind her of his childhood love for her. His astonishment after seeing her is very much noticeable. Ghosh (2001) expresses it saying, “he recognized her at once, at first

glance, beyond the remotest possibility of doubt” (p. 140). Ghosh (2001) celebrates Rajkumar’s discovery in Dolly, “what he remembered was something else – an element of her expression, a kind of forlornness in her eyes. It was this that had held him that night at the Glass Palace and now it held him again” (p. 141). Thus, his dormant desire for Dolly appears again. But it is filled with his desire to have a family which Khair (2013) explores:

To my mind, Rajkumar’s symbolic as well as real orphan-hood implies that he has to invent a family where none exists; he has to build lasting bonds of trust with strangers. Structurally, that is, the unfurling of this novel is associated with the enfolding of family and friends around the central character. (Khair, 2013, p. 166)

Rajkumar was very conscious about his love for Dolly, his determination of marrying Dolly, his dream for reaching the zenith, his tactic of using Uma Dey for convincing Dolly, his interaction with Saya John etc. He did everything in a very articulate way to reach his goal. All of these indicate that a dislocated person’s consciousness is oriented by a high degree of ambition. Ranajit Guha (1999), a leading subalternist, charts out the true structure of consciousness owned and used by the marginal people. He, in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasants, Insurgency in Colonial India*, criticises Hobsbawm’s representation of the marginal people as pre-political who are considered devoid of political and rational thoughts and concentrates on the fact that this group of people, in true sense, possesses “the levels of their consciousness” (p. 21). Rajkumar, as a dislocated person, can be considered very conscious about his own life. For this reason, he picks up all the possible privileges to translate his dreams into reality. Thus, he accepts Saya John’s proposal of working under him as a supervisor of the labourers who were sent to the jungle for collecting teak wood.

Saya John was a timber merchant. He used to supply teak wood to the teak camps mostly owned by the white businessmen. He lost his wife who left him a son, Mathew. Rajkumar met Saya John on a particular morning in time of “climbing down the ladder that led to Ma Cho’s room” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 8). He was wearing a European dress but “the cast of his face was neither that of a white man nor an Indian. He looked, in fact, to be Chinese” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 8). He is prominently a displaced character in the novel who spent his early life in an orphanage from where he went to Singapore to work in a military hospital. His true identity was described by the soldiers in Singapore who called him “a *dhobi ka kutta*-a washerman’s dog- *na ghar ka na ghat ka*” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 10)

to refer to his homelessness, which again is a true observation for all the dislocated characters. Later he became a successful businessman in Rangoon who opened the door of success for Rajkumar in the world of business. He sheltered the boy in his house. It was more than a shelter to him. He got his father figure in Saya John and told so much about him to Dolly that she began to consider him “equivalent of a father-in-law in her mind” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 180). This father-son relationship is manifested through Saya John’s decision of giving his wife’s bracelet to Dolly when he came back to Rangoon with his newly married wife. Thus, the interaction between the dislocated people is made a natural phenomenon in Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace*.

Rajkumar struggled a lot to achieve his success. He wanted to be “into the timber business” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 124) and he needed a lot of money. He knew that he would get proper help from his mentor Saya John, but he wanted to earn adequate sum of money to materialise his dream. He got into manpower business with Baburao and made handsome profit. Later, he started his own business and went to India several times to recruit people for different industries. The profit led him to begin his timber business in Rangoon. Finally, he started rubber business that made him hugely successful. These engagements apart, he supplied fuel to the soldiers during the war and made money. In this way, Rajkumar left no stone unturned to reach the zenith of success. This was an exceptional case for a marginal person like him to become a great businessman from an errand boy. He did not always follow the right ways to achieve his success. To achieve the success, sometimes he got to compromise. His real self is highlighted by Uma Dey:

Rajkumar, you are in no position to offer opinions. It’s people like you who’re responsible for this tragedy. Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of the Europeans. (Ghosh, 2001, p. 247)

Though the author presents his protagonist as very successful as a dislocated person, yet he develops his character as lacking a balanced psyche. Uma’s words prove his divided psyche. Moreover, his daughter in law, after Neel’s death, condemned him for the life he was leading. During their journey back to India, she condemned him. She says,

‘Why, old man, why? she shouted at him. She called him buro in contempt; she no longer cared that he was Neel’s father and that she’d always been in awe of him:

now he was just her tormentor, who would not let her enjoy the rest that she had earned. 'Why do I have to go on? Look at you: you've gone on – and on and on and on. And what has it brought you?' (Ghosh, 2001, p. 472)

It was quite impossible for Rajkumar to come out of this affliction imposed on him by Manju. Thus, his self became confused, violable, and almost divided. In the following paragraphs, I would establish how Rajkumar failed to connect himself with all the persons and institutions around him just because of his dislocated psychology.

5. Dislocation and the Loss of Self

Rajkumar, throughout his whole life, journeyed here and there in quest of the self. With his displacement, "... the crisis of identity comes into being" (Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 8) which gives rise to the tendency of discovering the relationship between "self and place" (Ashcroft et al., 2003, p. 8). This negotiation between self and place becomes very painful for a dislocated person as he goes through tremendous ups and downs in life. The social, cultural, religious, and ideological ties lose their true meanings for him. For this reason, Rajkumar felt free from any attachment with Chittagong, his father's birth place. He considered Burma his home without any hesitation. Thus, he celebrated the journeys from known to unknown. In this way, he improvised his roots to accelerate his ways for assimilation with the new abode and thus, he was "prepared to modify and adopt the traditions and customs" (King, 2000, p. 219) of the new land with a view to settling down. What is important to explore here is that he tried to settle himself down again and again but it was quite impossible for him. Rajkumar, in this process of modification, owned a psyche which was imbalanced, and to some extent, unfixed. His self becomes fragile with his dislocation in diverse ways. In order to prove the fragility of his personality, I would examine some of the incidents of his life in which he displayed his mental deficiency.

Rajkumar's life-events range from extreme success to severe loss. He proves his greatness as a businessman. He was a proud father of two sons Neel and Dinu. Moreover, he was a loving and responsible husband. Everything was in his favour but his identity as a dislocated person leads him to uncertainty. His personal life is shattered with Dolly's mysterious withdrawal from the conjugality. Dolly's confession about it to Uma is very remarkable to understand Rajkumar's misery. She says:

... I found that something had changed in me. I couldn't go back to the life I'd led before. It wasn't that I was unhappy with Rajkumar, or that I no longer felt anything for him: it was just that the things I did no longer filled my time or occupied my mind. It was the feeling that you get when your day is empty and there's nothing to do- except that it went on, day after day. (Ghosh, 2001, p. 240)

Dolly's depression got a new shape with the change of the existing political situations of Burma. The immigrants were humiliated in different ways. She described how her youngest son Dinu was called a "zerbadi- which is a swear word, for people who're half-Indian, half-Burmese" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 240). She also shared her own experience of facing an angry mob who sang "Amyotha Kwe Ko Mayukya Pa Net..." (Ghosh, 2001, p. 240) which was sung to refer to the fact that it was not good for the Burmese women to marry a foreigner like Rajkumar. Moreover, there was "widening rift between Indians and their neighbours" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 242) which was accelerated by the riots between these two groups. All of these issues led her to become nihilistic and her husband Rajkumar was immediately affected by her nihilism. This is how a dislocated person like Rajkumar experiences. Because of this fragile self, he developed an illicit relationship with a working woman and gave birth to a boy namely Ilongo who was later helped by Saya John to enroll in a school to do an electrician's course. Rajkumar never accepted the boy or gave his name to him. If this incident is deeply analysed, a picture of a psychologically imbalanced and fragile person can easily be detected in him which is undoubtedly linked with his identity as a dislocated person. He could never be psychologically settled with his family as his psyche was bound to be partially damaged.

His economic condition was declining because of the war. By this time, he had a minor stroke. Moreover, his timber-yard was attacked by the mischievous Burmese rioters. Ghosh says, during the riot, many "Indian and Chinese owned business were attacked, among them one of Rajkumar's timberyards. Three of his workers were killed and dozens were injured" (Ghosh, 2001, p. 245). His economic depression becomes clear from the author's note:

His business, wounded by the Depression, was no longer as profitable as it once been. The teak industry had changed over the last decade, and old-fashioned timbermen like Rajkumar had become anachronisms. Rajkumar was saddled with huge debts and had been forced to sell off many of his properties. (Ghosh, 2001, p. 273)

His grip on his mind was fast deteriorating while he invested heavily with Neel in film business going against his real conditions. When “he’d suppressed hints from accountants and managers, shouted at them when they tried to give him warning. And the stark fact was that he had no one to blame but himself: he had simply lost sight of what he was doing, and why” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 308). He, as a father, became wholly broken when his eldest son Neel was brutally killed in his timber-yard whose “body was almost unrecognizable, crushed by an immense weight. But despite the terrible disfigurement Rajkumar knew that this was his son and that he was dead” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 463). Apart from this, he had to absorb the shock of Manju’s suicide. Thus, he broke down totally and journeyed back to Kolkata in a very impoverished condition. He spent almost twenty years in Kolkata under Uma’s custody. Dolly went back to Burma to do her long cherished religious activities and never came back. Rajkumar sought his psychological and physical refuge in Uma. Once both of them were discovered “naked” (Ghosh, 2001, p. 546) in the bed. A displaced person like Rajkumar was always in the terrain of seeking refuge as he is nowhere rooted. Uma was his last shelter. His end clearly offers him a distorted and imbalanced self.

6. Conclusion

Rajkumar, throughout his life, fought for achieving a balanced life but the unconscious stream of his dislocated existence led him to uncertainty. He was a born fighter and fought for winning his social, economic, and ideological identities. He was a successful man because he got his long-desired Dolly. He was a happy father with his two sons. Moreover, he got his social recognition through his financial success. But all of these achievements and identities became futile with the political extremism that had set in and undid much of what he achieved. He experienced severe loss in his personal life. He had great loss in his business. Moreover, he was compelled to migrate to India at his old age. Considering all of these issues, it can be concluded that he, as a displaced person, was destined to embrace this less than ideal reality. All of his achievements were like nothing but the shadows of time which could never strengthen his rootedness in the land which was never his own. So, displacement offered him nothing but a distorted self.

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