

Research Article

The Representation of Marginalized Communities' Lives in Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*: A Marginal Literature Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe and analyze the representation of marginalized communities' lives in Ahmad Tohari's novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*. The main issue examined is how marginality is constructed through economic, social, educational, gender, and political dimensions within the novel's narrative structure. This research employs a sociology of literature approach, focusing on marginal literature studies as the theoretical framework to reveal mechanisms of marginalization and unequal power relations. The method used is descriptive-analytical qualitative research supported by library research techniques. The findings indicate that the people of Dukuh Paruk experience multidimensional marginalization that is systematic and intergenerational. Economic marginalization is represented through structural poverty and dependence on a barren natural environment. Educational marginalization results in low critical awareness and a resigned attitude toward underdevelopment. In terms of gender, the female character Srintil experiences layered exploitation, in which her body is commodified as an economic resource and a cultural object in the name of tradition. Power relations in the novel operate subtly through the normalization of oppressive social practices, such as the *bukak-klambu* ritual. Through this representation, Ahmad Tohari delivers a social critique of structural inequality and demonstrates that marginalization is a social construction that perpetuates the oppression of vulnerable groups.

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of marginalization constitutes a complex and multidimensional social reality. In general, marginalization refers to social processes through which certain individuals or groups are systematically relegated to less empowered positions within society, experiencing limited access to resources, power, and social opportunities, and becoming excluded from the primary mechanisms of political and economic distribution. This concept is not only relevant to sociological inquiry but is also highly pertinent to literary studies, as literary works frequently depict the lived experiences and social realities of marginalized groups. In contemporary social literary studies, literature that represents the voices of marginalized communities plays a crucial role in exposing structural inequalities and enabling readers to understand the lived experiences of groups that are often underrepresented in dominant narratives of popular culture and academic discourse. Recent studies on the representation of marginalized communities in literary works emphasize that marginal narratives can "both reflect and shape social attitudes toward identities, cultures, and social systems operating outside the mainstream," while also revealing tensions between authentic representation and stereotypical portrayals that frequently emerge in narrative texts (Sen et al., 2025).

Within literary theory, the marginal literature approach constitutes a relevant framework for examining representations of social realities in literary texts. This approach focuses on the depiction of groups that are marginalized within social structures economically, socially, educationally, in terms of gender, and politically who often lack equal access to resources and power. The term "marginal" refers to positions situated at the periphery of social life, where such groups tend to be rendered invisible within dominant societal narratives and cultural stereotypes. In literary contexts, marginal representation does not merely concern the statistical presence of these groups but also addresses how their voices, experiences, and perspectives are expressed, negotiated, or even manipulated within literary texts. In line with contemporary literary research, a recent study on marginal identity

in digital fiction demonstrates that marginal narratives may employ representational strategies that interweave identity, language, and social context, even when the platform and medium are nontraditional literary forms, such as digital storytelling practices on Indonesian Wattpad that seek to foreground minority language voices within narrative spaces (Annet, 2025).

The study of marginal literature is particularly significant because it allows scholars to understand literary works not merely as aesthetic representations but also as social media that reflect and critique structural inequalities within society. Literature, in this context, does not simply mirror social reality; it also functions as a space of articulation for marginalized groups. Eagleton (2012) asserts that literature carries an ideological function, namely, exposing concealed power relations embedded within social structures through narratives and symbolic constructions crafted by authors. Consequently, literature can serve as an effective instrument of social critique, addressing issues such as poverty, gender discrimination, educational deprivation, and unequal power relations.

Numerous studies have examined representations of marginalized communities in Indonesian and global literary works, although their approaches and focal points vary considerably. Some studies emphasize cultural and traditional aspects, such as social rituals and local practices that acquire specific meanings within rural cultural contexts. For instance, Junayanti (2024) demonstrates that the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* portrays the social realities of a community shaped by diverse cultural backgrounds, customs, language, beliefs, and lifestyles of Dukuh Paruk society through a sociology-of-literature approach that highlights rural socio-cultural conditions. From the perspective of literary sociology, literary works are understood as dialectical products of social structure and authorial consciousness. Lukács (1971) argues that strong realist literature is capable of representing social totality, namely the interconnectedness between characters' individual experiences and the broader social structures that encompass them. Therefore, representations of marginalized lives in literary works cannot be interpreted partially but must be viewed as manifestations of broader social conditions. This approach enables researchers to trace how characters' experiences of marginalization in literary texts are linked to tangible social realities.

Other studies focus on issues of multiculturalism and cultural identity within the novel, illustrating how diverse cultural values interact in the everyday life of Dukuh Paruk society. Such readings provide broader cultural contextualization but do not systematically address the relationship between marginalization and social structures. Additionally, some research highlights gender injustice as a central aspect of the female protagonist's experience, particularly in relation to patriarchal subordination and exploitation suffered by the character Srintil. Afriani et al. (2020) find that the novel contains various forms of gender injustice, including exploitation and violence, which are imbued with social values reflecting hierarchical and patriarchal structures within Dukuh Paruk society.

However, these studies have not positioned marginality as a structural phenomenon interconnected with economic, social, educational, and gender inequalities within a comprehensive narrative framework. Previous research tends to limit its focus to one or two dimensions of social reality such as cultural identity, historical context, or gender—without integrating these findings into a multidimensional framework of marginalization. In fact, the representation of marginalized life in the novel clearly depicts simultaneous and interrelated forms of exclusion, not merely as narrative settings or cultural attributes, but as complex social processes reflecting structural inequalities in peripheral communities.

This gap becomes particularly salient when examining *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* by Ahmad Tohari, which powerfully represents the lives of peripheral communities and various forms of structural marginalization. The people of Dukuh Paruk do not experience poverty solely as an economic phenomenon; they also face educational limitations, gender subordination, and social power relations shaped by customs and patriarchal structures that position them on the margins of broader social life. The novel offers a holistic depiction of how marginalization operates within rural communities, making it well suited for analysis through a comprehensive marginal literature approach. Existing findings further suggest that when marginal narratives are examined systematically and linked to theories of literary social representation, such readings can reveal social structural dynamics more sharply and underscore the importance of literature as an empathetic and critical medium for reflecting social realities.

Accordingly, this study focuses on the representation of marginalized lives in Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* using a marginal literature approach. Rather than treating poverty merely as a narrative background, this study positions it as part of an overarching system of marginalization that shapes the lives of Dukuh Paruk society. The analysis emphasizes a comprehensive

representation of marginalized life, encompassing economic, social, educational, gender, and power structures that are interconnected within the novel's narrative framework.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the social reality of marginalized groups represented in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*?
2. What social meanings emerge from the representation of marginalized groups in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to: (1) describe the representation of marginalized life in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*; (2) identify forms of structural marginalization depicted in the novel; and (3) interpret the social power relations revealed through characters, settings, and narrative events.

The urgency of this research lies in its contribution to expanding academic understanding of literature's function as a complex and multidimensional social reflection, particularly in relation to marginalized communities. This study is also expected to offer a conceptual contribution to marginal literary studies as a critical approach capable of integrating multiple dimensions of marginalization within a holistic analytical framework, while simultaneously strengthening the position of Indonesian literary works within global discourses on marginal representation.

2. Methods

2.1 Type of Research

This study employs a library research method, focusing on the analysis of a literary text, namely the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* by Ahmad Tohari. The research adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design, aiming to describe and analyze the representation of marginalized communities as depicted in the novel. In addition, this study draws on theories of marginal literature, literary sociology, and representation theory to examine how the author portrays characters and events related to processes of marginalization.

2.2 Time and Study Site

The research was conducted over a specific period encompassing literature review and textual analysis of the novel. The study is not confined to a particular physical location, as it was carried out as documentary research through access to literary works, books, journal articles, and other scholarly publications available via libraries, academic journals, and relevant online databases.

2.3 Types and Sources of Data

The primary data consist of narrative excerpts, dialogues, descriptions of setting, and events in the novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* that represent the lives of marginalized groups. Secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, and scholarly works related to marginal literature, literary sociology, concepts of marginalization, and theories of representation in literary studies. These data were used to deepen the understanding of marginalized representations in the novel and to support the analysis through relevant theoretical perspectives.

2.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through a literature review using the following steps:

1. Carefully and repeatedly reading the novel to identify relevant textual excerpts.
2. Identifying and recording quotations that depict characters, settings, and events associated with marginalization.
3. Classifying the data according to the research focus, namely the representation of marginalized communities in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*.
4. Collecting theoretical references from various sources related to marginal literature and representation theory to support the analysis.

2.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted using a descriptive-analytical method through the following steps:

1. Interpreting the meanings contained in the classified textual excerpts.

2. Relating the textual data to concepts from marginal literary theory, literary sociology, and representation theory to understand how the author represents marginalized communities.
3. Analyzing characters, settings, and narrative conflicts that depict aspects of marginalization, as well as examining how these elements contribute to the overarching theme of marginalization in the novel.
4. Supporting the analysis with relevant theoretical references to ensure that the interpretations align with the perspectives of marginal literary studies.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Results

The findings indicate that the community of Dukuh Paruk experiences multidimensional marginalization encompassing economic, social, educational, cultural, and gender aspects. Poverty is portrayed as a long-standing condition that is accepted as an integral part of life, thereby limiting the community's access to education, knowledge, and social mobility. The character Srintil emerges as the primary representation of marginalized women. Her body and life are controlled by the *ronggeng* tradition, resulting in economic, symbolic, and sexual exploitation. Gender marginalization in the novel does not operate in isolation but is closely intertwined with poverty and a patriarchal social structure that positions women in subordinate roles. Power relations in the novel function through traditions and social practices that have been normalized within the community.

3.1.1 Representation of the Social Reality of Marginalized Groups in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*

The representation of social reality in Ahmad Tohari's novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* is constructed through the interrelated intrinsic elements of theme, setting, plot, and characterization. The social reality of the Dukuh Paruk community is not presented explicitly as a factual depiction; rather, it is constructed through symbolic narration that reflects the lives of marginalized communities and the social problems surrounding them. Through this narrative strategy, the author presents images of poverty, social inequality, cultural exploitation, and human marginalization within an imbalanced social structure.

The central theme of *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* revolves around the struggle to reclaim human dignity eroded by oppressive social, cultural, and political conditions. This theme is primarily articulated through the life journey of Srintil as the main character.

The setting of *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* includes Dukuh Paruk, Alaswangkal, and the prison. Dukuh Paruk, as the primary setting, is depicted as a remote hamlet with dry and barren natural conditions. Limestone soil, prolonged dry seasons, and limited population and infrastructure emphasize the image of structural poverty experienced by its inhabitants.

The plot of *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* is arranged chronologically, with several sections employing flashback techniques. The entire sequence of events centers on Srintil's life, allowing the plot to function as a means of tracing her social and psychological transformation. The narrative depicts Srintil's journey from an innocent childhood, through a phase of exploitation as a *ronggeng*, to the emergence of self-awareness following political oppression. Through this continuous plot, the author represents social realities such as poverty, cultural exploitation, and structural violence experienced by marginalized communities. Srintil's experience as a political detainee becomes a turning point that underscores how power can destroy the lives of individuals who lack bargaining power within the social structure.

Srintil is represented as a marginalized woman born into poverty, orphaned, uneducated, and raised in a remote village environment. Her status as a *ronggeng* places her at the center of public attention while simultaneously positioning her as an object of cultural and sexual exploitation. Through Srintil, the author represents the social reality of rural women who lack full control over their bodies and futures due to oppressive customs and social structures.

The character Rasus is portrayed as an individual who seeks to escape the social confinement of Dukuh Paruk. His background as an orphan and a diligent worker reflects the general condition of the village community; however, his decision to become a soldier signifies social mobility and an awareness of alternative life choices. In contrast, Kartareja and Nyai Kartareja represent figures who benefit from the *ronggeng* cultural system. They exploit tradition and communal beliefs for personal gain, revealing unequal power relations within Dukuh Paruk's social structure. Sakarya and Nyai Sakarya reflect the older generation's deep obedience to tradition. Their loyalty demonstrates how

local value systems function dually—as a source of cultural identity and as a mechanism that restricts individual freedom. Characters such as Tampi, Warta, Darsun, and other villagers complete the portrayal of a marginalized community living in solidarity yet remaining trapped in poverty and limited life choices.

3.1.1.1 Daily Life Patterns of Marginalized Communities

The daily life of the Dukuh Paruk community is depicted as highly constrained, with poverty accepted as a routine condition, including by children. Limited food supplies, simple housing, and the absence of recreational facilities reflect the lives of marginalized communities dependent on nature and tradition. From an early age, children are involved in physical labor as a survival strategy.

The activity of uprooting cassava not only reflects poverty but also shapes a survival mentality instilled from childhood. The quotations further illustrate children's limited social and cultural space. The absence of entertainment underscores the simplicity of life and emphasizes the social distance between Dukuh Paruk and the outside world. Poverty is also evident in daily dietary patterns, with *gaplek* rice as a staple food. These depictions affirm that poverty has been normalized within the lives of the Dukuh Paruk community. The novel not only represents the suffering of marginalized communities but also their resilience and adaptive capacity amid structural limitations.

3.1.1.2 Social Relations and Interactions among Community Members

Social relations among the residents of Dukuh Paruk are represented through interaction patterns among characters, particularly involving Srintil, Rasus, Warta, and Darsun. From childhood, Srintil occupies a distinct social position compared to other children, as shown in play scenes where she places herself as the center of attention and controller of the game.

Srintil's social relations with her peers are framed by the cultural role of *ronggeng*, positioning her at the center while Rasus, Warta, and Darsun serve as accompanists. This reflects a hierarchy legitimized by tradition. Inequality becomes more apparent in Srintil's relationship with Kartareja, who exercises control over her body and role, transforming her into public property and a spectacle.

The excerpt demonstrates a dominant and exploitative power relation that is socially accepted through public applause. Srintil cannot resist because the *ronggeng* is considered communal property. These interactions reflect a hierarchical and unequal structure in which the *ronggeng* role legitimizes exploitation in the name of tradition.

3.1.1.3 The Position of Marginalized Groups within the Narrative's Social Structure

In *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*, poverty represents the social position of marginalized communities not merely as economic deprivation but also as limited social and cultural access. This condition is normalized and transmitted to children, as seen in their reliance on physical labor and natural resources for survival. Poverty is further reflected in daily routines, nighttime habits, and dietary practices, emphasizing its role as a marker of economic, social, and cultural marginalization.

3.1.1.4 Forms of Marginalization Experienced by Marginalized Groups

Marginalization in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* is portrayed not as a sudden or isolated condition but as a gradual, systematic, and interconnected social process. The lives of Dukuh Paruk's residents illustrate how economic, social, educational, cultural, and gender marginalization operate simultaneously, positioning the community outside the center of social life and limiting opportunities for meaningful social change.

Economic marginalization is the most dominant form, characterized by chronic poverty, dependence on barren land, and heavy physical labor without economic security. This cycle of poverty is inherited across generations. The *ronggeng* profession is perceived as the sole means of income and social recognition, although Srintil's choice is heavily influenced by economic and cultural pressures. Economic exploitation is evident in the *bukak klambu* ritual, where Srintil is commodified for financial gain.

Social marginalization occurs through geographical and social isolation, restricting access to recognition and social facilities while reinforcing stigma. Educational marginalization further strengthens this condition, as limited access to formal education results in low critical awareness and perpetuates intergenerational marginalization.

Despite exclusion from formal education, the novel represents alternative educational values derived from lived experience and tradition, such as responsibility, discipline, and hard work. These

values are embodied by characters such as Kartareja and Rasus, illustrating both cultural commitment and the ambivalence of tradition as a source of identity and constraint.

Gender marginalization is particularly prominent, especially affecting women. The *ronggeng* is positioned as an object of entertainment and an economic resource without individual rights or protection. Gender injustice is powerfully represented through Srintil, whose body and destiny are controlled and exploited by Nyai Kartareja and legitimized by cultural rituals such as *bukak klambu*. Sexuality becomes a tool for cultural preservation at the expense of women's autonomy, including control over reproduction. Consequently, gender marginalization in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* is deeply intertwined with economic, social, and cultural marginalization, rendering women like Srintil victims of an unequal social system reinforced by tradition and patriarchy.

3.1.2 Social Meanings of the Representation of Marginalized Groups in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*

The representation of marginalized groups in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* conveys social meanings that extend beyond a mere depiction of peripheral life. Through characters, settings, and events, Ahmad Tohari offers a critical reflection on the social structures that shape and constrain the lives of marginalized communities. Social reality is not presented as objective data but as lived human experience marked by limitation and inequality.

Socially, the novel affirms the role of literature as a medium for interpreting reality. The lived experiences of Dukuh Paruk's residents are presented through narratives emphasizing human dimensions, inviting readers to empathically understand poverty, suffering, and hope. This approach underscores that marginalization is not an individual problem but the result of long-standing and complex social processes.

Another significant social meaning lies in the exposure of latent mechanisms of oppression. The novel demonstrates how poverty, tradition, and power relations intertwine to form unequal social structures. Injustice does not appear through overt coercion but is reproduced through habit, cultural legitimacy, and passive social acceptance. Marginalization is thus understood as a social construction rather than a natural condition. Through these representations, the novel also fosters critical awareness among readers, encouraging them to question the normalization of poverty, cultural exploitation, and power domination that are often accepted without resistance.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 Representation of Social Reality in *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk*

The findings of this study indicate that marginalization in Ahmad Tohari's novel *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* manifests in a multidimensional form, encompassing economic, social, educational, cultural, and gender aspects. The novel powerfully portrays the condition of structural poverty experienced by the people of Dukuh Paruk, a remote rural community characterized by limited natural resources and inadequate means of subsistence. As explained by Fotaki and Pullen (2023), poverty in literary contexts often extends beyond material deprivation to reflect restricted access to social opportunities, which in this case is caused by an unequal social system. *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* demonstrates that poverty is not a temporary condition but has become an integral part of the social structure, one that is normalized and accepted by the community itself (Fotaki & Pullen, 2023).

The character of Srintil, who occupies a central position in the narrative, represents a marginalized woman whose life is controlled by the *ronggeng* tradition. As discussed by Putri (2021), poverty in literary works often intervenes in character identity, whereby lower social class constrains individuals' ability to control their future and life choices. Although Srintil becomes the focal point of communal attention, she is trapped in economic, symbolic, and sexual exploitation, reflecting the cultural function of the *ronggeng* within Dukuh Paruk society. Limited access to education and social mobility binds Srintil within a patriarchal social structure, in which women are frequently viewed as objects to be exploited for economic and social gain (Putri, 2021).

In the novel, poverty and gender marginalization do not operate independently but are closely interconnected. Srintil, who comes from an impoverished family background, becomes a *ronggeng* profession that not only attracts attention but also represents her sole means of survival. This illustrates how social and economic constraints shape individual identity and life choices within marginalized communities. Furthermore, Srintil's emerging self-awareness following her experience of political oppression reveals a process of social and psychological transformation shaped by harsh life experiences and systemic violence (Rahmawati, 2022). This aligns with Giddens' (2005)

argument that within unequal social structures, class consciousness emerges when individuals directly confront lived experiences of inequality.

3.2.2 Poverty as a Normalized Condition

One of the most striking aspects of the novel is the depiction of poverty as a long-standing condition that is accepted as a natural part of life, even by children. As illustrated in passages describing children's early involvement in physical labor, poverty becomes a routine condition that is internalized without resistance. Sardjana (2023) argues that in many literary works portraying marginalized communities, poverty is often represented not merely as an economic condition but as a social mechanism that normalizes inequality and life limitations. When poverty becomes embedded in everyday life, it is no longer perceived as a problem requiring intervention but rather as an inevitable reality to be accepted by all members of society.

In this regard, Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk demonstrates how the social and economic constraints faced by the Dukuh Paruk community shape their patterns of living, including extremely modest diets (such as nasi gapplek), limited facilities, and minimal access to entertainment. These representations emphasize that poverty extends beyond material deprivation to restrict individuals' access to freedom, opportunities, and richer life experiences. This perspective aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of social marginalization, which posits that poverty involves not only economic scarcity but also social exclusion and the inability to access social resources necessary for personal development.

3.2.3 Social Relations and Practices of Power

Another prominent aspect of the novel is the social relations formed through tradition and power practices within Dukuh Paruk society. Srintil, as the main character, represents a marginalized woman within a deeply patriarchal social system. As discussed by Simpson (2019), representations of women in literature are often closely linked to how women are positioned within patriarchal structures that regulate their bodies and lives. In this context, Srintil is portrayed as an object of social exploitation controlled by Nyai Kartareja, who governs her body for social and cultural gain. Srintil's dependence on her status as a ronggeng illustrates how power relations legitimize exploitation in the name of tradition and social honor.

The social relations between Srintil and other characters, such as Rasus and Kartareja, reflect the operation of social hierarchies within Dukuh Paruk. As a ronggeng, Srintil occupies a highly constrained position, lacking full autonomy over her body and future life choices. The power relations between Srintil and Kartareja further expose the dominance of cultural norms and patriarchy that perpetuate the exploitation of women. In this respect, the novel functions as a critique of social norms that regulate individual lives within unjust social structures and restrict personal freedom through long-established traditions (Simpson, 2019).

3.2.4 Social Meaning in the Representation of Marginalized Communities

Through a narrative rich in symbolic meaning, Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk not only depicts the lives of marginalized communities but also invites readers to understand poverty and marginalization as complex social processes. The novel demonstrates how poverty, limited educational access, and social marginalization are not merely individual realities but social constructions that contribute to the formation of collective identity within marginalized societies. As Lukács (2021) argues, literature can function as *Spiegel der Gesellschaft*, a mirror of society that reflects broader social structures. In this sense, Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk not only reflects the realities of marginalized groups but also creates space for developing critical awareness of existing social inequalities.

Overall, the novel reveals how unequal social structures operate to oppress individuals through social practices that are normalized within tradition. As explained by Giddens (2005), social injustice is often produced through mechanisms that appear invisible and are accepted by society as part of everyday life. The novel illustrates that marginalization does not occur in isolation but is embedded within broader social structures interconnected with economic, social, educational, and gender inequalities.

4. Conclusion

This study reveals how multidimensional marginalization encompassing economic, social, educational, cultural, and gender aspects in Ahmad Tohari's *Ronggeng Dukuh Paruk* is strongly reflected in the lives of the Dukuh Paruk community, with Srintil serving as a representation of marginalized women. The findings demonstrate that poverty in Dukuh Paruk is not merely a matter of material deprivation but also restricts access to education, knowledge, and social mobility. Furthermore, gender marginalization in the novel is closely linked to patriarchal social structures that position women in subordinate roles. The exploitation of Srintil as a ronggeng illustrates how women's bodies are controlled by tradition and power structures, depriving her of autonomy over her life and future.

The main implication of this study lies in its deeper understanding of marginalization as a socially constructed condition sustained through tradition and culture rather than as an individual circumstance. The novel makes a significant contribution to marginal literary studies by highlighting how marginalization operates simultaneously across multiple social dimensions and how unequal social structures reinforce poverty and injustice.

This research contributes to the development of marginal literary studies by employing a more comprehensive approach that integrates various dimensions of marginalization into a unified analysis. Future research may further examine the role of other media in representing marginalization or develop comparative studies with other literary works that address similar themes within different socio-cultural contexts.

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