

New Wave Malayalam Cinema and the Making of a New Femininity

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Abstract

The female characters of the new wave movies have spurred a lot of discussions and debates. While some of the critics viewed them as ground-breaking, others dismissed them as the old wine in a new bottle stating that they conform to the same gender norms Malayalam movies have been preaching. The present paper tries to look at the subject by adopting a gender perspective. It has been argued in the present study that the relevance of the new wave movies is the creation of new female character types and the subversion of the role expectations assigned to women. The first part of the paper analyses how scholars of the gender viewed the theme of femininity. The second part is presents the evaluation of the new generation movies and the conclusion.

Keywords: new wave Malayalam movies, femininity, gender, gender roles

The emergence of new wave cinema in Malayalam signifies a departure from traditional modes of film production and their established conventions. These films introduced innovations in plot construction, narrative techniques, cinematography, and production methods, diverging from orthodox filmmaking practices while achieving notable success in theatres. The success of these movies cannot be reduced to their reception in theatres as they received plaudits from film critics on a global scale. They also set models for other vernacular movies in India like Tamil, Kannada, and Telugu to replicate in their regional language films.

One of the central features of the new generation Malayalam movies was the construction of a new brand of heroines and female characters. These characters offered a rift from the orthodox Malayalam movies' caricatured version of the fickle, feeble, and all enduring heroines. The female characters of new generation Malayalam movies represent a stark contrast to the heroines of 80's and 90's. However, the critics had a mixed response about the so called feminist themes these movies purportedly handled. A faction of them celebrated the new genre and called these movies "feminist" whereas a number of critics out rightly rejected the new wave movies for their allegedly deep seated antagonism against women's liberation! The present paper tries to analyse this question by adopting a gender perspective. The study argues that the characterization of the female figures in new wave movies is linked to the construction of gender and femininity as well as their shifting priorities. The paper starts with a discussion on theories of gender and construction of femininity; and proceeds to analyse these themes in the new generation Malayalam movies.

The Construction of "Femininity": the Gender Perspective

In her seminal essay titled “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis (1986),” Joan W. Scott argued that gender theorists should not limit their analysis to the description of the differences between the genders and their construction; instead, they should expose the power relations that makes such constructions necessary. To quote her from the said essay, "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power." She continues that gender “involves four interrelated elements: culturally available symbols, normative concepts, social institutions and organizations, and subjective identity (1067).” In her more popular book *Gender and the Politics of History*, Scott defines Gender as both socially perceived differences between the sexes and a mode of signifying power relations (42). All the quotes above are eloquent about gender construction and the underlying power structures that make this construction inevitable.

While analysing Scott’s contributions, Meyerowitz observes how the construction of gender led to the creation of certain male and female stereotypes that pervaded all cultural productions. To quote her, “(i)n different historical contexts, masculinity represented strength, protection, independence, camaraderie, discipline, rivalry, militarism, aggression, savagery, and brutality, and femininity represented weakness, fragility, helplessness, emotionality, passivity, domestication, nurturance, attractiveness, partnership, excess, and temptation (1351).” In this regard, the present essay will try to elaborate on how power relations are signified in the construction of gender and femininity within the context of new wave Malayalam movies. In this regard, the “subjective identities” assigned to the female roles in the new wave movies will be discussed.

The construction of femininity is part and parcel of the construction of gender in every society. No other media reflects the dynamics of this construction better than the movies. The female leads till the emergence of the new wave movies were tied to the ultra-masculine heroes that dominated the Malayalam film production. The female roles of this age often complimented and certified these ultra-masculine heroes. They were mostly passive, submissive and lacked agency. Female cast members represented the virtues of silent tolerance and romanticized submission. The cinematic conventions of Malayalam movies in the previous decades adhered to all these gendered notions sincerely. The new wave female characters must be evaluated in this context.

Malayalam movies since the second decade of the twenty first century reflect a change in the perception of female leads. This perceptual change was associated with a number of social changes like growing urbanism, and the rise in women’s higher education. In consequence, the prevalent gender dynamics was altered and the construction of new subjectivities became necessary. The new wave movies represent this societal change. While it disrupted the long standing stereotypes of the male and female characters, it also gave birth to male and female roles of a new type. An analysis of new wave movies will be unproductive without considering the backdrop of gender dynamics and its evolving priorities. In Malayalam cinema, these films signify a broader societal transformation that must be understood within its historical context. Scholars like Joan W. Scott, who examine history through a gendered lens, offer valuable insights in this regard.¹

¹ Meyerowitz also points to the huge impact of Scott’s essay by highlighting its popularity. Scott’s essay has been the most frequently referred article published by the *American Historical Review* (1346)

While acknowledging the relevance of Scott’s work and its impact on the succeeding studies on women’s history, it has to be emphasized that many scholars viewed her formulations suspiciously. The suspicion arose mainly from those who thought poststructuralists and gender theorists may undermine the efforts of feminist scholars who started writing history from a feminist stand point. Like Scott, many theorists turned to Foucault and poststructuralist theorists and placed emphasis on

The construction of male and female subjectivity has been studied by scholars in different disciplines. Psychologists, sociologists, and gender theorists were prominent among them. Their studies helped to differentiate gender, which is a social construct; from sex, which is assumed to be natural. To quote Stoller, “(g)ender is a term that has psychological or cultural rather than biological connotations. If the proper terms for sex are ‘male’ and ‘female,’ the corresponding terms for gender are ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’; these latter may be quite independent of (biological) sex (9).” According to Stoller, one becomes aware of his/ her gender with the awareness of his/ her biological sex. Subsequently, notions about the appropriate qualities for different genders will be instilled in them through family and societal mechanisms.

The Second World War served as a pivotal moment in history, revealing numerous instances that demonstrated the socially constructed nature of gender. Hirschfeld; having already articulated his arguments distinguishing between sex and gender, highlighted how socially constructed notions of gender are often disrupted during periods of war. During the Second World War, the world witnessed sexual activities which would have remained unacceptable during periods of peace. The emergence of female soldiers and female battalions were unconventional according to the existing gender taboos. The idea of a “universal feminine” has been rejected by Hirschfeld by comparing women of different cultures.²

John Money, a medical psychologist by profession who had contributed immensely to the development of gender studies,³ argued that “gender roles” play a vital role in constructing masculinity and femininity. Through his case studies, he tried to prove that masculinity and femininity have more to do with societal expectations and upbringing rather than naturally assigned sex. He stressed on the gender roles assigned to men and women by society; and argued that these roles are different from the sex roles which is directly related to one’s anatomy. He also contented that even the “sex dimorphic roles” may change with the progress made in science; and the gender roles will be reconstituted from time to time. These transformations will add new functions to the socially accepted formats of masculinity and femininity (1).

Thus, a lot of theoretical discussions on the distinction between “sex” and “gender” had already happened before the emergence of Gender Studies as a distinct discipline. Central to all these discussions was the construction of femininity and masculinity. The second wave feminism and

gender and language. However, scholars like Joan Hoff doubted the credentials of gender theorists and post-structuralists. According to Hoff, the emphasis on gender would erase “woman” from the picture and the “male defined definitions of gender-” Foucault could be a case in point here- were “insensitive” to women (Hoff 149). Linda Gordon argued that due to the influence of Gender and poststructuralist theories, many feminist scholars have narrowed their focus to “psychoanalytic or linguistic concerns (854).

Merry Wiesner-Hanks’ disagreement with the poststructuralists in general and Scott in particular was on the grounds that they often ignored real women of flesh and blood and viewed women as a social construct alone! Similarly, history was just a text to them (8). While being largely appreciative about Scott’s methodology, Linda K. Kerber observes that the said methodology is not something without any traps. The “temptation to abstraction and ascribing agency to disembodied concepts” are two of the major pitfalls Kerber finds in the poststructuralist methodology (93). Interestingly enough, Karen Offen disagrees with Scott’s reluctance to ascribe primacy to gender in her historical analysis (358).

² Hirschfeld travelled widely in Asia and studied the cultures of Asian countries. He gives a detailed account of women of the “far east,” Indonesia, India and other countries in his book *Women East and West* published in 1935. His descriptions led to the understanding that femininity is constructed differently in different cultures.

³ Many scholars have pointed out the contributions of John Money to the development of Gender Studies. Jemima Ripo, a case in point, observes that through the clinical studies by John Money and his colleagues, it was proved that “a person’s psychological sex was learned and did not necessarily arise from biological factors. This idea was encapsulated in a new concept: gender (228).”

poststructuralist thought contributed to the emergence of Gender Theory which challenged the traditional gender roles. It will be worth noting how some of those scholars challenged the patriarchal myths about women.

Simon de Beauvoir, perhaps the most famous feminist theorist of her generation, debunked the myth of the “eternal feminine” in *The Second Sex*. She stated that in practice, “man” and “woman” have never been treated equal. The term “man” represents the universal human being- the “subject,” whereas “woman” represents the “other” of it (15-16). Disciplines like Biology and Experimental Psychology have contributed to the construction of this inferior image of women. The idealized “feminine” woman is thought to be “frivolous,” “childlike,” and “submissive” which is nothing but a societal construction (22).” Her famous statement “(o)ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (273) ” emphasises the view that femininity is a societal construction and not natural. Judith Butler furthered this argument in *Gender Trouble* and contented that gender identity is “a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience (23).” She was largely influenced by Michael Foucault’s view that sexuality, is a “historical construct” and not a “natural given (105).” According to Foucault, sexuality, and consequently gender, is not unrelated to power or knowledge; but actively shaped by both (103-4).

Foucault and other gender theorists had a negative view about the nineteenth century medical discourses including psychology as they contributed to the making of genders and their roles. Gayle Rubin, on the other hand views the positive side of psychoanalysis stating that no other discourse documented the severe costs extolled from women to attain “normal” femininity than the clinical literature of the period. This could have been a radical capital for feminists to develop a theory of “gender acquisition (47).” She states that Psychoanalysis is a feminist theory *manqué* (48).”

Gender theories were well received by scholars of the film who realized their potential in the analysis of film. The gender theories contributed to film analysis in a number of ways. Many feminist film critics started deconstructing the stereotyping and objectification of female characters on the silver screen. Gender theories also influenced film making as film became a suitable medium to challenge heteronormativity and represent LGBTQ experiences. The emergence of female film makers and the analysis of how the female audience perceived movies differently were results of a gender approach to movies. The ultra-masculine and heteronormative symbols in movies were questioned by film critics.

One of the central priorities of these critics was to problematize how film as a media reinforces already existing gender relations. According to Laura Mulvey, cinema raises questions about how the “unconscious structures certain ways of seeing and pleasure in looking (7-8).” Mulvey observes satisfying the “male gaze” as the prime objective of film in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” published in 1975. She argues that women are represented as “passive objects” of the “active” “male gaze” in film culture (15).⁴ Movies reflect certain “psychical preoccupations” of the society (8). By this, Mulvey means the obsession of the west with the image of the women as representative of an absence, i.e. the absence of the phallus; and the ways in which she pays for it. As a natural outcome of the “absence,” she will have to remain passive; on the other hand, she will have to raise her kids as a penance (6-7). Movies strengthen and circulate this image of the woman fortifying the patriarchal order.

⁴ However, Mulvey had argued later that the digital technology has made it possible to re-engage with the “male gaze” providing scope for disruption in her book *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006). Apart from her contributions to feminist and gender analyses of film, she has also made contributions to a wide variety of themes related to film basically by adopting a psychoanalytic approach. *Fetishism and Curiosity* published in 1996 is a prime example.

According to many a critics, the history of feminist criticism of the film starts with Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (9)." Scholars like bell hooks have built upon and furthered Mulvey's arguments. hooks, a case in point, develops the concept of the "oppositional gaze" in her essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators." She argues that the mainstream movies are constructed for the White male gaze and they marginalize and stereotype Black characters. In consequence, the Black women audience resist these constructions by developing an oppositional gaze (122-3). Even though hooks' essay came as a criticism of Laura Mulvey, both of them agree on the point that Movies actively contributes to the construction of gender models. They also endorse the already existing gender models.

Thus, gender and film critics have repeatedly pointed out film's role in constructing and sustaining gender models. Gender analysis has been applied in Indian movies by different critics. Devapriya Sanyal in her book *Gendered Modernity and Indian Cinema: The Women in Satyajit Ray's Films* gives a detailed account of different types of female characters appearing in Ray's films such as "the receding mother figure (30)," "transgressors (44)," "moral beacons (57)," "the new woman (72)," "the amoral woman (86)," "women on the periphery (98)," etc. It is worth noting that some of these types rupture from the traditional gender moulds. If one makes an attempt to categorize the female types prior to the new wave movies and those produced by this genre, one may get a better understanding of the gender dynamics operating behind the making of these movies. The next part of the paper will delve into this.

New Wave Movies in Malayalam and the Construction of a New Femininity

A lot of discussions and debates about the new wave Malayalam movies were around the female characters of these movies. As mentioned earlier, some of the critics were appreciative of the rebellious female figures whereas many others rejected the new brand of female characters for their compliance with gender norms! The analysis here focuses on how the new wave movies reflect a change in the gender dynamics in Kerala. This will be done by examining certain female characters and how they rupture with the traditional gender norms/ roles.

Film critics often consider 2010 to mark the beginning of the new generation of movies. However, the movie *Ritu* directed by Syamaprasad which came out in 2009 exhibits the traits of this new genre and deserves to be called a new generation movie. *Ritu* is relevant here as it has a few female characters that conflict with the existing gender norms in a number of ways. The character Varsha (Rima Kallingal) is a case in point. Her character cannot be confined to the template assigned to women by patriarchal gender norms. She is a working woman and engages in relations with many men. The sexual agency that she possesses is something unparalleled in Malayalam movies. Her pre-marital relations would be treated as a blot on a woman's character as per the gender norms prevalent a decade ago.

Zerina (Jaya Menon) is another character in the movie that plainly rejects the role expectations of the society. She wants to focus on her career and doesn't want to give birth to a baby. This goes completely in opposition to the societal expectations. Malayalam movies have been celebrating the motherly image of woman characters till then. However, Zerina emphatically rejects the notion that childbirth is the defining aspect of womanhood. She is a leader in her business enterprise and commands respect from everyone. Even her husband, when he is in the office or home, listens to her opinions respectfully. Such female character types were unseen in the silver screen prior to the emergence of the new wave movies.

The year 2011 was a crucial one in the history of new wave cinema in Malayalam. Movies like *Traffic*, *Chappakurishu*, and *Beautiful* were released in that year. Curiously enough, these three movies deal with

consensual relationship outside marriage as a major theme. The movie *Chappakurishu* directed by Sameer Thahir revolves around the premarital affair between the female lead, Sonia (Remya Nambeesan), and the hero, Arjun (Fahadh Faasil). Unfortunately for Sonia, the video of their romance gets leaked and the hero gets panicked as this might ruin his life. Pre-marital affair has been naturalized in this movie and the characters involved in such an affair are not shown in a bad light. This frank depiction of female pre-marital sexuality was a taboo as per the cinematic convention prior to the new generation movies. Sexual intercourse outside the marriage was either viewed as sinful or unconventional about which women have to be careful.

Traffic directed by Rajesh Pillai follows a similar plot where the hero doubts his wife of having an extra-marital affair. In consequence he tries to kill her. Though, in the end, he realizes that his assumptions were wrong, the movie still brings the question of extra-marital affair into the discussion. Thus, the movie breaks the cinematic convention of portraying the family in a romantic light. It has to be born in mind that such romantic image of the family can survive only when the women surrenders their sexual freedom whereas the men does not necessarily have to do it. Malayalam movies for a long period advocated this double standard. However, the new generation movies, through their bold portrayal of female sexuality disrupted this (double) standard.

The movie *Beautiul* directed by V. K. Prakash presents similar ideas about female sexuality. Characters like Meera (Aparna Nair), Kanyaka (Thesni Khan), and the doctor portrayed by Praveena in Stephen Louis's (Jayasurya) storyline are prime examples. While Meera represents a modern urban girl who does not compromise on her freedom of choice, Kanyaka defies all patriarchal notions about the virtuous woman. The female characters of the movie make bold statements about their sexuality and sexual life. The doctor frankly speaks about her sexual life with her old friend which continues even after marriage. She describes her affair in a conversation with Stephen Louis. Such open depiction of female emotions and sexuality was unprecedented in Malayalam movies and the new wave movies have to be credited for that.

The extra-marital and pre-marital affairs of women were central to the plots of many of the new generation movies. The movie *Ee Adutha Kalathu* (2012) directed by Arun Kumar Aravind is a case in point where the plot progresses through an incident of extra-marital affair. The character Madhuri (Tanu Roy) engages in an extra-marital affair with another character called Rustam (Nishan). Unlike earlier Malayalam movies, this relation is not presented in a bad light; in fact, the audience can easily identify with Madhuri as the circumstances under which she opts for such an affair is justifiable.

Extra-marital and pre-marital affairs involve both men and women. However, normalizing such affairs may lead to the discussions of a new form of family. This is promising for the women's cause as the patriarchal family has only served the interests of men. Moreover, men had never been bound by the family's moral boundaries as the women. Thus, breaking the extra-marital taboo also signifies the breaking of patriarchal family's values. From this perspective, it becomes evident that new generation movies delivered a significant blow to the patriarchal value system.

The movie *Udaharanam Sujatha* (2017) directed by Phantom Praveen presents a different scenario. Here, Sujatha fights against all odds to bring up her child after the death of her husband. She proves that women do not need a family to move forward in life. She is different from the conventional widow figure Malayalam viewers acquainted with. She goes against the role expectations by deciding to bring up her child alone.

The movie *Ozhimuri* (2012) directed by Madhupal portrays the historical struggle women had to take up to get liberation from the modern marriage and family system. In Kerala, the modern patrilineal family was established in the 1930's and 40's through certain legislative measures made by the British Government. The female lead Meenakshi Pillai (Mallika) gets divorce from her husband after thirty years of marital life. She is a victim of the newly created patriarchal family where as her mother-in-law Kalipilla Ammachi (Swetha Menon) is a victim of the abolition of Matriliney. Meenakshi's son Sarath Chandran (Asif Ali) falls in love with a lawyer called Balamani (Bhavana). Thus, both these youngsters defy the family's/ parents' authority in choosing their children's partners.

Divorce and choosing one's partner according to one's will were two options presented to women before the emergence of new generation movies as well. They were not taboos in Malayalam movies. However, divorced women characters were not presented with the same respect earlier. The case of Dhvani (Honey Rose) in *Trivandrum Lodge* (2012) directed by V. K. Prakash can be illustrated in this context. She gets divorced from her chauvinistic husband and begins her life anew. Divorce is not the end of her life; in fact, it marks the beginning of another journey in her life. This idea was alien to the Malayalam movies of the previous decades. She starts understanding and exploring life only after marriage. She stays in a lodge where the inmates are all men. She tries to woo Ravisankar (Anoop Menon), a wealthy man, later. The culmination of her romantic pursuits is the relationship with Abu (Jayasurya), a miserable young man.

All these episodes are presented in an effortless manner in the movie. Her relationship with Abu is especially worth noting. In the movies of the previous decades, female sexuality was confined to the family life or in a consensual romantic relationship with the view of getting married. Women having physical affair for pleasure was against the gender norms. The relevance of the new generation movies is that they altered these role expectations. *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) directed by Madhu C. Narayanan actually constructs such a carnivalesque space where both intense physical desires and romantic love can thrive. The physical aspect of love has been depicted through the relation between Bonny (Sreenath Bhasi) and Nylah (Jasmine Metivier). The romantic bonding between Baby (Anna Ben) and Bobby (Shane Nigam) represents the "True Love" as Baby herself mentions on one occasion in the movie.

In fact, romantic love has always been a popular theme of the silver screen. However, in movies, such romantic relations will not defy the cast and religious formulas. The gender role expectations also demanded conformity to caste and religion. The new generation directors were bold enough to break this convention. Movies such as *Annayum Rasoolum* (2013) directed by Ashiq Abu make a strong statement against the religious orthodoxy prevalent in Kerala. Though, at the end of the movie, Anna pays with her life, *Annayum Rasoolum* does stand as a beacon of light.

The movie *Mayaanadhi* (2017) directed by Aashiq Abu depicts the complexities and changing dynamics of this new generation love. The hero Mathan (Tovino Thomas) who is on the run to escape from the police meets his ex-lover Aparna (Aishwarya Lakshmi) in Kochi. Unlike the romantic movies of the foregoing decades, the female lead here is an autonomous subject who wants to pursue a career of her own. She wants to be an actress which is not be an ideal profession as per the standards of the existing gender norms. In the end, Mathan dies and Aparna carries on with her career. The romance part of the movie may remind the audience about many other romantic movies/ novels/ poems. However, the climax, where the heroine moves forward without knowing the death of the hero offers a different narrative element. This is different from the tired trope of heroine committing suicide after the death of

the hero or the heroine being presented as a tragic figure crushed by grief. This altered narrative element signifies the altered role expectations.

Thus, it can be seen that the new wave movies tried to subvert the existing gender norms by presenting female character types of a new mould and characters that do not conform to the gender roles assigned to them. In consequence, new character types like the travelling woman (*Rani Padmini*), the Bohemian woman (*Trivandrum Lodge*), lady in leadership role (*Ritu*), etc. were born. The new wave movies also came up with innovative women-centric plots. However, some of the critics have charged the new wave movies of spreading anti-feministic values. Such judgements were mainly based on the evaluation of the plot. Despite delving deep into it, it can be argued that movies are more than their plots. The new character types created by the new wave movies are a reality in spite of the limitations of their plot. They subvert the existing role expectations and present new ideas of being a woman. In this way, the new generation movies in Malayalam took up an endeavour to create a new femininity which radically differed from the established notions of the same.

The discussion of the new models of femininity will be incomplete without the analysis of their male counterparts. The male roles prior to the new wave of movies in Malayalam were generally ultra-masculine and exhibited sheer authority over the female characters. This type of cult heroes are absent in the new generation movies. On the other hand, the heroines and female characters are never presented as a second fiddle to the heroes. The character Anitha (Shaun Romy) transforms the character of Krishnan (Dulquer Salman) in *Kammatipaadam* (2016) directed by Rajeesh Ravi. The depth and agency of the character Rosamma (Amalda Liz), another female role of the same movie, is unique from the earlier portrayals of female characters. Male characters like Dr. Abel Tharyan (*Traffic*), Arjun (*Chaappa Kurishu*), Sunny (*Ritu*), Azhar (*Helen*), Vishnu (*Ee Adutha Kalathu*), Rasool (*Annayum Rasoolum*), Mathan (*Mayaanadhi*), Sharathchandran (*Ozhimuri*), Giri (*Rani Padmini*), and Abdu (*Trivandrum Lodge*) are not larger-than-life alpha warriors like the heroes of the 80's, 90's and 2000's. They were, at best, ordinary individuals in extraordinary moments.

The climax of *22 Female Kottayam* may serve to be an apt metaphor for the entire new wave genre in Malayalam. In the climax scene of the said movie, the heroine Tessa (Rima Kallingal) castrates the hero Cyril (Fahadh Faasil) as a revenge for the violence he did to her. This is symbolic of what the new generation movies have done to the cinematic tradition of the former decades. Within this new genre, the hyper-masculine legends of the screen lost what they possessed in previous times. The female characters, on the other hand, were not seen as an "absence," the "other" of the grit-fueled icons of dominance, namely the heroes. Critics of the new generation movies miss this part of the story.

Certain details in the plots of new-generation movies have drawn objections from critics. The authors do not intend to prove all these objections baseless. However, it must be emphasized that some of the situations and character types introduced by new-wave films will linger in popular memory more than the overall plot. Viewed from this angle, it can be seen that the brighter side of the new genre was the creation and popularization of a new brand of femininity. The transformation the male characters underwent should be read next in line. Nonetheless, there are still some reservations left about the male characters. When new wave genre was at its peak, their heroes were in the budding stage. This was congenial for Fahadh Faasil, Dulquer Salman, Tovino Thomas, Joju, Asif Ali and the likes to present characters like Arjun, Cyril, Krishnan, Mathan, Giri, Sharathchandran, etc. Now, after one and half decades from kick-starting, they are well on the way to stardom. It has almost become impossible for them to act in similar roles. What is certain is if there are stories and directors, there will be movies with

or without stars. However, the future of new wave movies and the actors should be the subject of another study.

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