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MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF J.M COETZEE'S WORKS

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ABSTRACT

The paper explores the constructs of masculinity and violence within postcolonial literature, specifically through the works of J.M. Coetzee, with a focus on his novels *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Disgrace* (1999). The critical analysis of these texts reflects how masculinity and violence are deeply interwoven into the narratives, reflecting the socio-political tensions of both colonial and postcolonial societies. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of ambivalence and the construction of the 'other,' the paper delves into the relationship between gender, power, and violence. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) masculinity is constructed and asserted through acts of domination and control, particularly in the brutal interactions between the colonizers and the colonized. Central to this exploration is the figure of Colonel Joll, whose use of torture as a method of interrogation embodies a toxic masculinity that equates power with the ability to inflict pain. Through Joll and the Magistrate's evolving relationship with a barbarian girl, Coetzee depicts the ways in which masculinity is not only a driving force behind the violence of the Empire but also a product of the colonial system's need to assert dominance over the 'other.' In *Disgrace* (1999), David Lurie's behaviour and experiences reveal the enduring impact of colonialism on masculine identity and its connection to violence, highlighting the dehumanizing effects of colonial rule. Incorporating insights from theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Edward Said underscores how Coetzee's literature reveals the complexities of masculinity and violence, offering broader insights into the formation of postcolonial identities and the lingering legacies of imperialism.

Keywords: Masculinity, Violence, Postcolonialism, J.M. Coetzee, Colonial Legacies

Introduction

The literature on men and masculinities has established a clear and complex link between masculinity and violence. Scholarships in this area have highlighted that hegemonic masculinity often fosters systemic male violence at large which historically contributed to the persistence of such violence. Feminist anthropologist Rita L. Segato (2003) observes that men incorporate various forms of violence to their behaviour to maintain their masculine positions and identities at different stages of their lives. In the context of colonialism, violence usually involves both physical and psychological transformation. The act of violence begins physically with the colonizer's efforts to instantly reshape the land, making territorial boundaries as soon as they arrive. Soldiers and policemen, tasked with the colony's protection become the enforcers of these boundaries. As Fanon observes, "The agents of government speak the language of pure force" (Fanon 29) which represents the initial form of oppression imposed on the subjugated people. The concept of masculinity and violence plays a crucial role in postcolonial literature, often serving as lenses through which the impacts of colonialism and the legacies of imperialism are examined. J.M. Coetzee, a leading figure in postcolonial literature, adeptly addresses these ideas in his works, offering a nuanced critique of the socio-political landscapes of both colonial and postcolonial societies. Coetzee's narratives are replete with characters whose experiences and actions reflect the intricate interplay between gender and power.

Coetzee's depiction of violence serves a dual function. Firstly, it allows him to examine the human condition, highlighting the contradictory aspects of human nature. In both *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Disgrace* (1999), the dichotomy between those who commit violence and those who suffer from it is pivotal to illustrate the inherent duality in human beings. The perpetrators of violence expose their loss of humanity, while the victims of violence reveal human beings' vulnerability when subjected to violent acts such as torture or rape. Secondly, Coetzee uses violence as a lens to reflect on South Africa's history, especially focusing on the colonial era, apartheid and post-apartheid period. Through these narratives, Coetzee not only critiques the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism but also interrogates the ways in which masculinity is shaped by and perpetuates violence. His works compel readers to reflect on the complex dynamics of power, gender, and identity in postcolonial contexts. By analyzing Coetzee's depiction of masculinity and violence, this paper aims to illuminate the broader socio-political critiques embedded in his literature, contributing to the understanding of postcolonial identity formation and the lingering shadows of imperialism.

Review of Literature

In "Critical perspectives on J.M. Coetzee," Huggan and Watson provide a comprehensive analysis of Coetzee's novels, examining themes of colonialism, violence, and the postcolonial condition. The study includes a range of essays that delve into Coetzee's use of narrative techniques to address the legacy of colonialism and the complex interplay between power and violence in his works. This collection highlights the multifaceted nature of Coetzee's literary contributions and his critique of colonialist structures. (Huggan & Watson, 1996)

In their study "A Postcolonial Feminist Reading Of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting For The Barbarians*," Sam and Bonsu explore the novel through a postcolonial feminist lens. They focus on the representation of female characters, examining themes of objectification, violence, and resistance. The study reveals how Coetzee constructs violence against women through fear and torture and how silence serves as a form of resistance. The analysis underscores the impact of narrative perspective on the presentation of postcolonial and feminist issues in the text. (Sam & Bonsu, 2022)

Libin's review of "J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading" by Derek Attridge discusses the ethical dimensions in Coetzee's work, focusing on themes of otherness and representation. Attridge argues that Coetzee's fiction goes beyond the simple postcolonial binary of the colonizer and the colonized by engaging with a broader ethical responsibility towards others. This study highlights

Coetzee's use of narrative strategies to address historical and political contexts while maintaining a focus on the aesthetic and ethical aspects of literature. (Libin, 2007)

In "Shame as A Structure of Feeling: Raped and Prostituted Women In J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Futhi Ntshingila's *Shameless*," Bezan explores how shame functions as a motivating force behind acts of violence against women. The study examines the portrayal of female characters in Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), focusing on how their experiences reflect broader societal issues of gender and violence. Bezan argues that shame is both a private and public experience that drives the narrative and character interactions in the novel. (Bezan, 2012)

In "Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing: Andre Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J. M. Coetzee," Jolly analyzes the depiction of violence within the context of apartheid and colonialism. The study examines how Coetzee and his contemporaries address the patriarchal and violent nature of colonial rule through their narratives. By comparing works of different authors, Jolly highlights the shared themes of oppression and the complex ways in which violence is woven into the fabric of postcolonial literature. (Jolly, 1996)

Maus's study "Kneeling before the fathers' wand: Violence, eroticism and paternalism in Thomas Pynchon's *V.* and J.M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*" compares the treatment of colonialism and violence in Coetzee's "Dusklands" and Pynchon's "V." The study focuses on how both authors use metaphorical language to critique colonial power dynamics and the associated violence. Maus employs critical theories from Georges Bataille and Keith Booker to examine the connection between the desire for domination and the use of violence in colonial narratives. (Maus, 1999)

Castillo's "Coetzee's *Dusklands*: The Mythic Punctum" examines the implicit political critique in Coetzee's *Dusklands*. The study focuses on the masculinist and terrorist underpinnings of the concept of value in postcolonialist discourse. Castillo uses Roland Barthes's distinction between studium and punctum to analyze how Coetzee deconstructs the myths of colonialism and its associated violence. (Castillo, 1990)

In "Significance of 'Rape' in the Novel of *Disgrace* from Postcolonial Theory," Li-quan analyzes the theme of rape in Coetzee's "Disgrace" to expose the crimes of white colonialists against both white and black populations in South Africa. The study explores how Coetzee uses the theme of rape to discuss the possibility of redemption and reconciliation between different racial groups in the postcolonial context. (Li-quan, 2011)

To critically analyze the constructs of masculinity and violence in J.M. Coetzee's works, it is essential to ground the discussion within the framework of postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory provides the tools to unpack the complex legacies of colonialism, particularly how power dynamics shape identities and perpetuate systemic violence. Frantz Fanon's seminal work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), offers critical insights into the psychological effects of colonialism. Fanon describes colonialism as "violence in its natural state" (Fanon 61), emphasizing that the colonial project inherently relies on force and coercion to maintain control. This notion of violence is crucial in understanding Coetzee's portrayal of colonial and postcolonial masculinities. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), the magistrate's internal conflict and his eventual realization of the futility of violence against the so-called barbarians illustrate Fanon's assertion that decolonization must be a process of profound psychological change.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) further complements this analysis by examining how Western discourse constructs the East as the 'other' to justify imperial domination. Said asserts that "the Orient was almost a European invention" and that it serves as a "stage on which the whole East is confined" (Said 71). Coetzee critiques the erasure of indigenous voices and the imposition of Western masculinity.

The Brutality of Power: Masculinity and Violence in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Coetzee's third novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published in 1980. He described it as "a novel about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (Coetzee 1992: 363). The novel investigates the function of violence and torture in the relationship between the authority of the state and those subject to it. The novel's narrative revolves around the unnamed Magistrate, who grapples with his complicity in the violent colonial regime he serves. Through this character and his interactions with the so-called barbarians, Coetzee offers a profound critique of imperialism and the inherent brutality of colonial domination.

The novel narrates the story of an aging Magistrate living in a colonial outpost on the frontier of an unnamed Empire. This small, walled town lies on the border between the civilized Empire and the nomadic barbarian people. A clear dichotomy is established between the Empire and the barbarians. The story begins with the arrival of Colonel Joll, a ruthless officer of the Third Bureau, whose aggressive imperialism disrupts the settlement's peace following rumours of a barbarian attack. Joll and his men capture and torture barbarians to extract information about their intentions. Among the prisoners is a young barbarian girl, whom the Magistrate takes in despite her injuries and near blindness, developing a fetishist interest in her. Through his relationship with her, the Magistrate embarks on a journey of self-discovery, ultimately deciding to return her to her people, undertaking a perilous journey across the desert. During his absence, the Third Bureau occupies the outpost, and upon his return, the Magistrate is accused of collaborating with the enemy, leading to his imprisonment and torture. The novel concludes with the Third Bureau abandoning the outpost, defeated by the barbarians' cunning avoidance of direct conflict. The final image is of an almost deserted town, with a few remaining inhabitants bracing for the impending barbarian invasion.

Colonel Joll exemplifies the connection between inquisition and colonization. He arrives at the frontier as an imperial officer seeking a fundamental confrontation between the Empire and the "barbarian" other, which he believes will give true meaning to his mission. However, he is frustrated when such a confrontation is absent. The Magistrate informs him that conflict with the "barbarians" is rare and insignificant in terms of material loss for the Empire. The prisoners held at the time of Joll's arrival, according to the Magistrate, are an anomaly, as the so-called banditry against them is inconsequential. Joll dismisses this information as irrelevant because it does not align with his perception of the "barbarians" as the enemy. In response to the lack of significant conflict, he attempts to fabricate the imperialist/barbarian confrontation he desires by portraying the "barbarian" prisoners – first an old man and a sick boy, and later others – as guilty. This allows him to employ the "set procedures" of inquisition and torture. The narrative illustrates how these procedures reproduce the colonialist-native relations described by JanMohamed.

The "set procedures" of interrogation by torture, similar to the colonialist endeavour described by JanMohamed, follow a quest pattern. The colonialist seeks to prove the native's inferiority, while the inquisitor, as noted by Foucault and Breytenbach, seeks evidence of the prisoner's guilt. This is where violence occurs. For Colonel Joll, the goal is to prove the guilt of the "barbarian" prisoners, which he equates with their animosity towards the Empire. Unlike the Magistrate, who naively considers the possibility of their innocence, Colonel Joll's sole aim is to confirm their guilt, viewing it as the only "truth." This truth is established through a violent confrontation engineered by Joll, reflecting the colonial power dynamics. The proof of the "barbarians'" guilt is the prize of Joll's quest.

The violence is starkly revealed when the Magistrate uncovers the tortured body of the old man, with the bloody eye socket and the torn shroud symbolizing the brutal truth he already knows. The boy's injuries after Joll's second interrogation further exemplify the systematic torture, which becomes an obsession for the Magistrate. His fixation on the "barbarian" girl arises not from desire but from her body as the site of torture. He investigates the room where her feet were broken, her eye

blinded, and her father tortured to death. The Magistrate's fascination with the girl stems not from desire, but from his perception of her body as a testament to the violence she has endured, while Joll sees her wounds as evidence of "barbarian" guilt. For the Magistrate, however, these marks signify a truth that both he and Joll seek, but which Joll ultimately fails to grasp.

Torture, functioning as a form of punishment regardless of the prisoner's pleas, inscribes signs of guilt on the body – if the body bears the marks of punishment, how can it be innocent? As Foucault notes in his discussion of 18th-century judicial procedures, the tortured body becomes both the site of punishment and the means of extracting truth. Joll, directs his violence towards the native/barbarian not only to force her into the image he has of her but also to punish her for not fitting that image. A striking aspect of Coetzee's narrative of inquisition and torture is that, despite the interrogators' belief that their actions will uncover the truth; nothing is ultimately achieved through these procedures.

The Magistrate's authority is initially portrayed as a benign form of governance. He sees himself as a just administrator, maintaining order on the frontier of the Empire. However, his sense of control and power is disrupted by the arrival of Colonel Joll, who embodies the ruthless enforcement of imperial rule. Joll's methods of interrogation and torture reveal the underlying violence that sustains the colonial system. As Frantz Fanon asserts in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), "colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence" (Fanon 61). This perspective is evident in Joll's actions, which starkly contrast with the Magistrate's earlier, more passive approach to power.

The narrative demonstrates how masculinity is constructed through dominance, particularly in the context of imperialism, where male characters like Colonel Joll embody a hyper-masculine ideal that equates authority with the ability to inflict pain and enforce conformity. Joll's aggressive pursuit of "truth" through torture reflects a form of toxic masculinity that relies on violence to assert dominance and maintain the imperialist order. His actions reveal a deep-seated belief that strength and masculinity are proven through the subjugation and dehumanization of the "other." The tortured bodies of the prisoners become symbols of Joll's power, and their suffering serves as a perverse validation of his masculine identity. Moreover, the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl also highlights the complexities of masculinity within the narrative. His fixation of her as a site of torture rather than as a person reflects an internal struggle with his own masculine identity, torn between the imperialist masculinity embodied by Joll and a more empathetic, albeit flawed, masculinity that seeks to understand and protect rather than dominate.

The Magistrate's evolving relationship with the barbarian girl he takes into his home becomes a central narrative that explores the complexities of power and empathy. Initially, his care for her seems like an attempt to assert power through kindness rather than coercion. However, this relationship is marked by ambiguity and guilt, as his actions are also driven by a desire for redemption and a need to alleviate his sense of complicity. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), provides a useful lens which discusses how the West constructs the East as the 'other' to justify domination. The novel is set in a remote outpost, overseen by the Magistrate, located on the frontier between the Empire and the so-called barbarians. Though geographically distant from the Empire's centre, this outpost serves as the crucial site of confrontation between the Empire and the "other" it seeks to colonize, making it the nerve centre of imperial control. The Empire, like those before it, justifies its existence through a sophisticated process of "othering" the barbarians. As the novel progresses, the Magistrate's growing disillusionment with the Empire leads him to openly resist its methods. His eventual arrest and torture signify a complete reversal of his power dynamic. This physical and psychological degradation exposes the fragility of colonial masculinity when stripped of its authoritative facade.

The Empire's quest for power is depicted as an endless cycle of violence and oppression, directed not only at the barbarians but also at its own agents. The Magistrate's transformation from a

passive enforcer to a victim of the Empire's brutality underscores the dehumanizing effects of colonialism on both the colonized and the colonizers. His eventual realization that the Empire's power is sustained through fear and violence marks a critical turning point in the novel. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Coetzee thus presents a nuanced critique of the quest for power in colonial contexts. The novel illuminates the complex interplay between masculinity, authority, and violence, challenging readers to reconsider the ethical implications of power dynamics. The Magistrate's journey reflects the potential for moral awakening and resistance against oppressive systems, emphasizing the need for empathy and justice in the face of dehumanizing power structures.

The Burden of Masculinity: Exploring Violence in *Disgrace*

In J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999), the concept of masculinity and violence are intricately woven into the narrative, providing a profound commentary on the complexities of post-apartheid South Africa. The protagonist, David Lurie, embodies a form of masculinity that is deeply entwined with colonial legacies and patriarchal norms. His journey throughout the novel illustrates the destructive consequences of these constructs, both on a personal and societal level.

The focus now shifts from the examination of state violence against perceived external threats, as depicted in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), to an exploration of sexual violence, particularly rape, within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. *Disgrace* (1999) delves into the pervasive issue of sexual violence against women, drawing attention to the factors that sustain the prevalence of rape in this society. These factors include high levels of crime and violence, institutional neglect of sexual violence, patriarchal religious ideologies, media representations, and familial structures that perpetuate male dominance.

According to Buchwald, the rape culture promotes male sexual aggression and female abuse. The term emphasizes physical and psychological violence against women. In a rape culture, women fear sexual remarks, contact, and rape. Rape cultures normalize physical and emotional terrorism against women. Men and women in rape cultures accept sexual violence as inevitable as death or taxes. The pervasive nature of sexual violence in post-apartheid South Africa, as depicted in Coetzee's work, can be linked to the combination of entrenched male dominance and the surge of political violence during the 1980s, which fostered a hyper-masculine culture, particularly among young men. Human Rights Watch observes that the rise in violent crime paralleled the growth of political violence, especially in black communities, where violence became a way for men to assert their masculinity. While the direct connection between political violence and violence against women hasn't been officially established, areas most affected by political conflict report the highest rates of rape, suggesting a troubling correlation.

To understand the significance of violence in *Disgrace* (1999), it is crucial to explore rape in post-apartheid South Africa. In a male-dominated society, young men were often taught to assert power over women, making violence a means of affirming their masculinity, as depicted in the novel. This discussion highlights the severity of sexual violence against women in the 1990s, the period in which *Disgrace* (1999) was published. As South Africa emerged from apartheid and entered a new democracy, the nation grappled with contradictions but held onto hope. This backdrop sets the stage for the novel where the theme of violence, particularly rape, is central to Coetzee's narrative.

David's struggle with sexuality in *Disgrace* (1999) highlights his midlife dissatisfaction and declining sexual prowess, leading him to assert dominance through encounters with various women, most notably his student, Melanie Isaacs. Their initial sexual interaction reveals Melanie's passive resistance, suggesting discomfort and signalling the coercive nature of David's advances. This coercion culminates in a scene that constitutes rape, despite David's refusal to acknowledge it as such, interpreting Melanie's lack of overt resistance as consent. The narrative's focus on David's perspective, without explicit authorial judgment, underscores the power imbalance and brutality of his actions.

Melanie's case serves as a catalyst for David's transformation, which is further influenced by his relocation to the Eastern Cape, his relationship with his daughter Lucy, and his work at Bev's animal clinic. Through these experiences, David develops greater empathy and seeks reconciliation with his past, particularly as he identifies with the pain of being connected to a victim of violence, paralleling Melanie's father's suffering.

David Lurie's initial actions are marked by a sense of entitlement and dominance that reflect traditional patriarchal masculinity. His relationship with his student, Melanie Isaacs, is a manifestation of his abuse of power and his belief in his right to possess and control women. Lurie's actions can be seen as a reflection of the residual effects of colonialism, where power dynamics were often enforced through coercion and violence. His behaviour towards Melanie is not just an isolated incident but a symptom of a broader societal issue. As Coetzee writes, Lurie believes he is "a servant of Eros" (Coetzee 52), using this justification to rationalize his predatory behaviour. This highlights how deeply ingrained notions of masculine entitlement can lead to acts of violence and exploitation.

The violence in *Disgrace* (1999) is both physical and psychological, underscoring the pervasive impact of masculinity. Lurie's fall from grace after the scandal with Melanie leads him to retreat to his daughter Lucy's farm, where he is confronted with the harsh realities of post-apartheid South Africa. The attack on Lucy and Lurie by intruders serves as a crucial moment in the novel, reflecting the broader societal tensions and the shifting power dynamics in the country. Lucy's rape is a brutal act that symbolizes the violent struggles over land, power, and identity in the postcolonial context. Coetzee portrays Lucy's response to the assault as a form of resilience and adaptation, contrasting with Lurie's continued struggle to reconcile his sense of masculinity with the new realities around him. Lucy's rape during the attack on her farm by three black men represents a pivotal moment in the novel, highlighting the complexities of violence. Ironically, David, who was previously the perpetrator of sexual violence, now finds himself a victim, unable to protect his daughter and witnessing her fall into disgrace. This event triggers uncontrollable rage in David and symbolizes the pervasive violence in post-apartheid South Africa, as reflected in his thoughts: "It happens every day, every hour, every minute... Count yourself lucky to have escaped with your life" (Coetzee 98).

The assault on Lucy's farm has profound consequences: David is left both physically and psychologically wounded, with no will to live, while Lucy is sexually assaulted, and all her dogs, except for the bulldog Katy, are killed. Lucy's rape becomes a focal point for reflecting on the new South Africa and the evolving relationship between the protagonists. Unlike David, Lucy envisions a future where the longstanding racial divisions are replaced by interracial collaboration. She, along with Petrus, is one of the few characters who adapts to the post-apartheid reality, choosing not to seek justice or revenge, but simply to move forward with her life.

Pollux's character exemplifies David's hostility toward the Other in *Disgrace*. As one of Lucy's rapists and a member of Petrus's family, Pollux is both mentally troubled and protected by Petrus. His role in the novel highlights the persistent racial tensions in post-apartheid South Africa, where the legacy of colonialism exacerbates conflicts between whites and blacks. When David discovers Pollux spying on Lucy, his rage intensifies, driven by both his loathing of Pollux for the assault on his daughter and Pollux's resentment toward David as a white outsider in the Salem community. David's anger leads him to use demeaning, racist language, a rare occurrence for him: "Swine... Teach him a lesson, Show him his place. So this is what it is like, he thinks! This is what it is like to be a savage!" (Coetzee 206). Even the bulldog Katy joins in the attack on Pollux. However, David eventually recognizes that violence is not the solution to Pollux's wrongdoing.

As Homi Bhabha asserts in *The Location of Culture* (1994), the postcolonial space is characterized by "ambivalence," where identity is constantly negotiated and redefined (Bhabha 66). This ambivalence is particularly evident in Coetzee's portrayal of masculinity, where characters oscillate between

dominance and vulnerability, reflecting the broader societal tensions that arise in the aftermath of colonial rule. In *Disgrace* (1999), Coetzee examines the fall of David Lurie, whose initial sense of patriarchal entitlement is violently challenged in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel presents a stark commentary on the residual effects of colonialism on gender relations and societal structures. *Disgrace* (1999) thus serves as a powerful exploration of the intersections of masculinity and violence. The novel not only critiques the historical and ongoing effects of colonialism but also offers a nuanced understanding of the potential for personal and societal change. Lurie's transformation throughout the novel is marked by his increasing awareness of his own flaws and the limitations of his previous beliefs. His journey can be seen as a critique of the patriarchal and colonial systems that have shaped his identity. As Lurie begins to understand the pain and suffering caused by his actions, he moves towards a more empathetic and self-aware position. This is evident in his relationship with animals at the animal clinic where he works, which symbolizes his growing recognition of vulnerability and his departure from his earlier, domineering self.

Conclusion

Coetzee's exploration of masculinity and violence in his novels serves as a powerful critique of the enduring legacies of colonialism and the socio-political structures that perpetuate gendered power imbalances. His characters' journeys—from entitlement to humility, complicity to resistance—reflect broader societal transformations and the potential for personal and collective redemption. He masterfully dissects the complex relationship between masculinity and violence within the framework of power dynamics. Both novels portray masculinity as a force shaped by, and inextricably linked to, acts of violence—whether it is through the overt brutality of imperial control or the more personal and internal struggles for authority and identity. He presents the destructive consequences of a masculinity built on dominance, depicting how it perpetuates cycles of violence and oppression. In *Disgrace* (1999), the masculinity embodied by David Lurie is deconstructed, showcasing the pervasive effects of patriarchal and colonial legacies on personal and societal levels. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) highlights the inherent violence of imperialism through the Magistrate's evolving understanding of power and his eventual resistance against the colonial regime.

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