

## Repugnant Representation of the Repressed: Romen Basu's *Breach of Faith*

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### Abstract:

*The Indian English novel in general does not deal with lives of street-urchins or beggars. Roman Basu deals with the lives of this neglected section in his novel Breach of Faith. But, the narrative adopts normative attitude while narrativising lives of urchins or street-children like Munni and Mithu in the novel. The present research article argues that the representation of urchins is normative and so inappropriate. The narrative is firmly situated outside the world of the represented i.e. urchins. The narrative is traditional and conservative and it denies a meaningful escape to the protagonists-Mithu and Munni from their miserable and degraded lives. Their identity is represented stereotypically and negatively as Mithu's emerges as a fraud, cheater, incorrigible pimp, traitor and betrayal; and Munni's portrayal is degraded also. They are represented as villains and can never be reformed, and are incapable enough to live a meaningful and happy life. Though the narrative adopts sympathetic attitude towards the marginalised world, but actually it misrepresents their identity. The narrative firmly believes in typical Hindu notion of karmas, and denies a meaningful way out for the protagonists and thus maintains status quo about their lives. It believes and makes the protagonists also to believe in their fate and karma as they have to suffer in their present birth because of their sins in the previous birth. Therefore the narrative seems to be unconvincing and inappropriate. In this way the narrative misrepresents their lives and personality.*

**Key words:** Representation, stereotypes, street-children, urchins, downtrodden, elite, karmas, voice appropriation, caste and class.

Foucault in his seminal essay “The Order of Discourse” proposes that every society has its major narratives “which are recounted, repeated and varied”, has “formulae, texts and ritualised sets of discourse which are recited in well defined circumstances; things said once and preserved because it is suspected that behind them there is a secret or a treasure” (Foucault 1981, 56). When we survey the history of Indian English novels, we realize that the Indian English novel in general tells stories of the elite world of Anglicized, metropolitan, English educated urban upper or upper- middle class and caste people. Relatively the lives of lower caste and class, beggars and street-urchins remain unnarrated. Similarly there is a plethora of Indian English novels which deal with elite and canonical themes like Gandhism, patriotism, partition, East-West encounter, and diaspora; and real issues of India like poverty, caste, urchins, etc., remain neglected in the corpus of Indian English novel. No doubt, there are few novelists and novels that deal with lives of the downtrodden and the mundane Indian reality with themes like class and caste exploitation, but number of such novels is quite few. In this sense, the novel can be seen as an important tool in producing *knowledge* about the society through the *discourse* and *discursive practices*.

In this paper, I put arguments that the novel as an ideological apparatuses can be and is used to maintain the status quo regarding the situation and condition of the downtrodden people like street-urchins though the narrative adopts a sympathetic attitude towards them. The novel plays a significant role in formulating, constructing and representing identity of urchins systematically. The narrative while narrativising their lives constructs their identity in stereotypical ways as Stuart Hall aptly observes “We give

things meaning by how we represent them-the words we use about them –the stories we tell about them, the image of them we produce, the emotions we associate them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them” (Hall [1997] 2003, 03). Such identity is not ‘natural’ but ‘constructed’ and then it is legitimized by making statements about them and repeating them over the time. Further, the role of a writer or a narrator plays an important role while dealing with the lives of the downtrodden in case of experience, and subject matter. Therefore an attempt has been made to see whether the representation is just or unjust in case of narrativising the street-urchin in Basu’s *Breach of Faith*. Thus in Foucauldian terms, the paper aims to see how the elite upper-caste gaze<sup>1</sup> forms or constructs knowledge about street-urchins through various statements i.e. through *discursive practices*.

Romen Basu, a lesser known Indian English novelist, takes up such issues of caste, class, and tribal people in his novels.<sup>2</sup> His recent novel *Breach of Faith* deals with a theme that has been neglected many years in the corpus of Indian English novel- the lives and problems of the downtrodden i.e. street-children. Therefore, it becomes a worthwhile attempt to see how street-urchins are represented in English- a language which helps to maintain power relations in Indian society and a language of a few.

The novel focuses on love-hate relationship between two street-children of India: Mithu and Munni who make up their lives on begging and stealing on the old Delhi railway station

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<sup>1</sup> The novelist Romen Basu, is a Bengali upper caste elite who has worked in the United Nations Organization for many years. G.R. Malliga in his “Preface” to *Quest for Harmony in Romen Basu’s Novels* writes about Basu which points out the limitation in the experience on the part of the narrative: “His (Basu’s) frequent visits to India keep him informed of the current socio-political and economic affairs” (1998, 7).

<sup>2</sup> Basu deals with such themes in his earlier novels like *The Tamarind Tree* (1975), *Outcast* (1986), *The Street Corner Boys* (1992)

platforms. The narrative tells stories of upheavals in Mithu's and Munni's lives who seek shelter in cardboard boxes either on the streets or the platforms. Later on, Munni is raised as a domestic help by the Gopal Das, a Brahmin in Delhi; then, she is married off into a Brahmin family in Mumbai in a mistaken belief that she is a Brahmin. When Mithu exposes her real identity to her in-laws, that she is not a Brahmin, she is driven out of the home. Munni driven out of the secure home is forced to move in with Mithu and to drugs and degradation. Mithu's life moves from an innocent street boy to a banger seller, a drug peddler and addicted, a common thief, a pimp and incorrigible tout. At end, Mithu is caught red hand with the bag of narcotics. He is arrested and thrown into a dark cell to rot there for next fifteen to twenty years. Neither Bade Mia nor Nargis Sahib, whom is working for, comes to rescue him. When Munni hears of Muthu's arrest, she so depressed as she is dependent on him for drug supply. When she realises that Mithu cannot be released, she ends her life with an overdose of narcotics. In this way their lives end tragically without having a meaningful escape.

The novel begins with the strife between Munni and Mithu for a rupee coin thrown by "the God-fearing passenger" (Basu 2002, 10). The narrator with this sympathetic gesture opens the novel to deal with the lives of the under-privileged who are neglected and outcast in the caste ridden Indian-mainly Hindu society for many ages. The narrator uses animal imagery to highlight their degraded existence: "They fought like dogs fighting over a bone" (10). This comparison underpins the narrator's attitude towards street-urchins who are reduced to the status of the dog. The narrator, which is firmly, situated outside the realm of the represented, presents their strife more in a filmy style:

She (Munni) punched Mithu on the nose, snatched the coin and ran away. Mithu fell on the ground with exhaustion, not thinking about the rupee any more. A few minutes later,

the girl returned to the same spot and found Mithu lying on the ground. She looked him over; his hand had covered his eyes. Feeling sorry, she nudged him. Mithu opened his eyes to find the girl still standing there. (10)

The narrative throughout the novel adopts such romantic and exotic attitude towards the street-urchin and particularly women which points out many inconsistencies on the part of the narrative while narrativising their lives. The narrative adopts normative attitude while representing the girl from the lowest strata, as she represented more liberated and stronger who is able to punch Mithu on his nose, and taking initiatives to get reconciled later. The boy, two years younger to her, remains passive. This type of representation is normative and can be seen as *desired* as in the upper-caste and class elite world, where generally man is more domineering in man-woman relationship.

Further, this narrative is inconsistent and represents the world of the downtrodden more in a stereotypical way. The family structure of the downtrodden world is stereotyped depicting husbands negatively as drunkards, violent, cruel, rapists, over-sexed, irresponsible, wife-beaters and wife-killers. Munni's father has died "with an overdose of some lethal spirit" (11). Often her father is too drunk to see or to know his wife is beaten or raped by other men. Similarly when Mithu was five years, his father ran away, "killing his mother after excessive drinking" (11). Rakha's father also has killed his wife "in a rage when he was drunk and is on the run ever since then" (27). Makhan's drunken father too had killed his wife when he was a child. Nalini, a twelve year prostitute in Mumbai, was raped by her father when she was eight. Thus all fathers and husbands from the downtrodden appear negatively and villainous.

The narrative, no doubt, brings to the surface miseries and disturbances in their lives, but fails to highlight what are specific situations that drive the fathers to be drunk, insensitive, vicious, vindictive and violent. The narrative

remains loudly silent about such specificities which would have made the narrative more convincing if it had narrated such specificities. It seems that the fathers do not have any business except drinking and killing their wives in rage. This description is not only simplistic but incongruous too.

This is a stereotypical representation of the lives of street-urchins. They are represented always in negative shades in the novel. The point that I wish to make here is not to say that these people are not addicted to alcoholism, but their depiction stereotypically emerges as negative, and devoid of any positive identity. No doubt, their existence is desolate and wretched, and they face many hardships and humiliation, so they get addicted to some sort of addictions. But here the narrative adopts the normative attitude stereotyping and grossly generalising their existence as there are no fathers or husbands from the downtrodden society who work hard, are caring, not addicted and dream to come out of their miserable present lives.

The narrative presents the two worlds in binary oppositions: the elite world of upper class and caste people like the Das, the Mathurs, the Khannas, Romesh who are represented with positive identity- caring, generous, helpful, kind, protective, and supportive; and the world of the downtrodden like Mithu, Munni, Madhuri and others who lead degraded lives.<sup>3</sup> The narrative makes us to believe that though there are many avenues opened by the generous elite world, but they (the downtrodden people) themselves are irresponsible and incapable enough to come out of their miseries. Ironically the narrative blames the society for neglecting urchins in the structure of power and domination, but it itself denies a meaningful escape for them.

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<sup>3</sup> This world includes subjugated people like street-urchins, pimps, prostitutes, drug-peddlers, criminals, etc., who are outside the Indian mainstream society.

Gopas Das, a high-caste businessperson, is more concerned about Munni's betterment of life. But the narrative does not clear the point why does Gopal Das want to take more interest in a street-girl like Munni and try to "win Munni's confidence"(40) who one day happens to help Das to lift his luggage at the platform for two rupees. A reader gets baffled why a well-to do businessman like Das take much interest in her which is below to his dignity. It seems the narrative has presented Das as generous, sympathetic and kind- the author's mouthpiece who wants to educate her and wishes to get her married off in a well-to-do upper-caste family. His attitude is fatherly towards her as he takes her along with his son Kutan to the park to play, and often brings the toys. Das is soft-spoken, compassionate, and well-wisher who thinks Munni's upliftment and rehabilitation is his sole responsibility which cannot be "left to anyone else" (46) and she needs his "personal attention for some time" (46).

The narrative in other instance becomes unconvincing conspicuously, when it describes that the upper-caste couple wants to help Munni thinking "she is a Brahmin" (43). It is an impossible thing in Indian context that a Brahmin girl can be a street-child. If Das wants to help her because of her caste, then he could have directly inquired about her caste in their very first meeting itself. Rabri Devi also gets assured when Munni replies she may be a Brahmin. One wonders why the couple does not bother to probe her more and get information about her caste if they are more concerned about the caste. The narrative does not make it clear that why does Gopal Das want to rehabilitate Munni and further to marry her off when she only fifteen and thus going against the law. At one point, the narrative hints that Das has brought her his home as a domestic help, but the reason that he wants to get her married off at an early age, is quite imprecise. The claim that the narrative is realistic can be contested here taking into account many such other incidents from the novel. It points out the

limitation of the narrative to narrativise the downtrodden realistically and convincingly.

The narrative while depicting the world of the downtrodden, adopts normative attitude. When Das offers Munni an opportunity to lead a better life and asks her to come and see him at his home, she goes to seek Ibrahim's advice, and hoping to meet Mithu too. But when Ibrahim tells her that Mithu has already left him a month ago, she replies "I have been meaning to come and see Mithu for a long time. But my mother died in the meantime and I had to mourn her for a month" (42). This seems very romantic idea to mourn the parent's death for *a month*- a norm in the elite society and such indulgence is affordable to them only. Munni cannot have such an excess as she makes her living by begging or some other work on daily basis, and to refrain from life for a month. Another such incident of the normative approach can be seen when Ibrahim advises her, "You should check his (Das') antecedents and references first, if you accept his offer to work as a servant. Don't afraid to tell the employer that you have registered your employer's name with the police" (42). This seems to be a implausible imagination of the narrative to expect from a street-girl like Munni to check Das's antecedents and references, and dare to tell him that she has registered her employer's name with the police! The narrative remains silent about the ways she can find his antecedents and references, and if she checks, how one can support and help her in giving information about an upright family like Das.

Mithu's portrayal emerges negatively in the novel as he is depicted as a selfish, cold-blooded money- grabber (193), "has no feelings for anyone (195), son of pig (139), swine (200), ugly and goon (107). He is a degraded human being, an incorrigible rake, and sadist also, who takes pleasure in inflicting pain upon Munni, as he cannot bear the fact she is married off in a good family and leading happy life. He exposes Munni to her in-laws and then makes her dependent on him as she gets addicted to

narcotics, and thus drags her too in drug peddling. Mithu is portrayed in most negative shades as is corrupt, inhuman, untrustworthy, cunning, and incorrigible pimp or tout. He is an unchangeable, a *thug* (105) who himself has lost many opportunities to get reformed and come out of the degraded life-style.

The narrative presents Mithu's picture negatively depicting him as irresponsible, who himself does not want to come out of his miserable condition, does not want to get reformed and rehabilitated. As Das comes to rescue Munni, similarly Lata, an elite social reformer, turns to rescue Mithu from the juvenile detention center when he is in custody for drug-peddling. This points out there are always good people from the elite world who come to rescue the downtrodden but the downtrodden people themselves are responsible for their degradation and do not want to come out of their despondent existence and live a better life. Lata helps him to get a job in an office but he runs away from the rehabilitation center to Mumbai to get involved again in drug peddling and lead a lavish but degraded life. When Lata meets him again in Mumbai, he is very bitter towards her and tells his room-mate "This *madarchod* woman (Lata) does not understand that I don't want to be reformed. Let her try to rehabilitate someone else who has no other means of sustenance" (77-78). Before Lata, Ibrahim also gives him an opportunity to lead a better and normal life. Madhuri too wants to reform Mithu to get out of his rotten life and make a decent living suggesting to "start a bicycle repair shop or some such thing" (127). Everyone's efforts to reform Mithu go in vain and "Every time someone tried to help Mithu, he reacted nervously and sharply" (127). The parental attitude of the narrative hints people like Mithu will never be reformed and civilised as *a leopard can't change its spots*.

The narrative, no doubt, tries to give realistic and truthful picture of the marginalised world - the underground

world of all sorts of vagabonds, touts, pimps, prostitutes, drug peddlers and criminals who are neglected in the main-stream society. Often they have to depend on the elite world for survival, and are often starved. Mithu has to face chasing out of the police; Munni has to face perverted men and receives threats from “pimps and men who never missed an opportunity to attempt either to rape her or to sell her sex” (11). Her mother’s case too is not different who lives with a pimp. The pimp beats her up if she does not earn “at least one hundred rupees every night from prostitution”(15). These marginalised groups turn or are forced towards criminal acts because of environment and circumstances that they live in. But Mithu *chooses* to be so. There are many opportunities available for him to come out of the degraded existence, but he refuses to come out.

Mithu’s portrayal emerges as a fraud, cheater, traitor and betrayal. He exposes Munni to the Mathurs that she is not a Brahmin. When he realises that Munni wants to stay away from him, he becomes desperate and restless. In order to find Munni’s whereabouts, he plans to take a risk of meeting dangerous Ratnkar and does not pay any heed to even Rakha’s advice. He betrays Ibrahim who has given him his first home in Delhi. Ibrahim was planning to send him to school for the betterment of his life. But Mithu is too impatient to wait for eighteen years to complete his education and work in an office. He betrays Ibrahim Bhai and later on Bade Mia too.

Like Mithu, Munni’s depiction also emerges as degraded, devoid of positive identity. She does not emerge as a strong, capable enough to come out of her degraded life and wretched existence. Her cords of happiness lay also in the hands of the elite people.

Munni is depicted more in relationship with her body and later on, the narrative points out her rampant sexuality once she is thrown out of the Mathurs- Brahmins. The narrative presents her description more sensually: “She was

growing to be a sensuous young woman with a *voluptuous bust, curly lips and oversized hips* for a girl of her age” (79- emphasis added). She attracts street boys with her “luring glances” (79). She is average in studies: “Her school performance was below average, no matter how much attention Gopal Das paid to her homework. Those wondering eyes would always take her thoughts far away from attending to school work.” (79) She is too dumb to pass the matriculation examination even if she attends “school ten more years” (79). The Das family takes every efforts to educate her and make worthy in life, but like Mithu, she too gives an impression that she too is not worthy of getting reformed and thus not fit to live in the elite world. She is interested only in sexuality as she is “thrilled at the thought of getting married” and promises to “be good and not run around with street boys any more” (80). For her marriage seems to an anesthesia, a remedy to extinguish her sexuality.

She is not fit in the elite world as she tries to meet Mithu, and gets sexually attracted towards him though she is a married woman. She has a secret desire to cheat on Tilak, her husband. She is not happy in her conjugal relationship with Tilak which breeds “a secret desire to find it in Mithu” (91). The narrative hints that Munni is a cheater who is ready to forget *all goodness* of the elite world. She is depicted as a liar who keeps secret about her childhood from the pious Brahmins- the Mathurs. She disgraces and betrays the Mathurs, “a liar and deceiver who took advantage of the goodness of a decent Brahmin family” (147). When she driven out of the Mathurs, she becomes a whore and leads a degraded life that she *deserved*.

The narrative reiterates the traditional approach that a street- girl like Munni cannot and should not be a mistress of a high-caste and rich house-hold like the Mathurs. The method is used here to blame Mithu who wants to pull off and destroy Munni inch by inch, and thus the upper-caste people remain flawless in the process for the miserable plight and tragic end of

Munni's life. In his sole aim, there comes Ramu, a watchman at the Mathurs to help Mithu in his plan to expose Munni that she is not a Brahmin but an erstwhile street-girl. This underpins that there are no villains from the elite world. When the Mathurs don't want to keep any relations with her, there are regular and repeated callings from the Das to come back to their house in Delhi, but she avoids and does not respond for the *goodness* on their part. On the other hand, she takes Mithu's help, remains dependent upon him for drugs, becomes a whore and herself *chooses* the path of degradation. Here Mithu emerges a villainous and not the Brahmin family for driving Munni out of the safe haven.

The narrative's attitude too changes and becomes *voluptuous* towards Munni once she is thrown out of the Mathurs. It describes her body and sexuality more candidly as she is "a beautiful woman with a voluptuous bosom" (148) and craves for "a large-size penis" (167). Her sexuality, unlike earlier, is depicted with more details and vividly. The narrative becomes exotic, sensual and vibrantly vivacious while depicting Munni's sexual acts with Romesh:

Munni had not experienced the feeling of a strong hand on her body in a long time. Her head felt dizzy as Romesh squeezed her firm breasts gently. She did not know how to fight back the temptation and kept indulging her passion to rise further. With their eyes closed, he unbuttoned her blouse and laid her down on the sofa. As he came over her, she groaned, even before he had thrust deep into her. He was a strong man with a large- size penis. A pleasure she had long forgotten. She had experienced nothing like that from her husband. They rolled over by turns and she groaned even more. (167)

Henceforth such description is repeated many times.

He (Romesh) started undressing. Munni's youthful breasts were throbbing with excitement. She bit his lips furiously. He put his finger deep inside her private parts and the thrill of fondling each other standing was an ecstatic

experience for both of them. When they thought it was time for the final act, Romesh lifted Munni off her feet, placed her on the bed, then smothered her with his never-ending kisses. Finally he buried all of himself deep into her (171)... They laid in stark naked. Romesh playfully touched every part of her body, until the last part for him was to lick her toes. (195)

The narrative has neither presented Munni's body and sexuality so rampantly till she was Tilak's wife nor their sexual acts with so many details.

The narrative itself degrades her existence to an object of sex though it adopts sympathetic approach towards their life. It points out the narrative's bias towards their life and their sexuality in particular. The narrative nowhere describes so candidly and vividly sexual act between Munni and Tilak when she was enjoying a position of a wife in the upper-caste family. But her body and sexuality is more exposed when she has relations with a big-wig Romesh, as she becomes his kept woman. Further, it points out Munni's real and ultimate bliss lies in to be a whore than a wife. The narrative does not elevate her position and bring to her higher status which points out further the deep bias of normative 'gaze' towards their lives.

Munni's upper caste friend Tara is shown offering helping hand to Munni when she is thrown out of the Mathurs. Tara finds Munni's whereabouts and goes to meet her- "a fallen woman"(179). Tara is always ready to help her and very cautious about her protection and makes her husband aware so. Tara's husband assures her that he is going to "offer protection any time Munni needed help" (177). When Munni calls Rabri Devi, she asks Munni about health "with a heart full of compassion *like that of a mother*" and she "wept and wept" (177) about Munni's fall. Even it pained Gopal Das as "he felt as if their own flesh and blood was steadily degenerating (177). Even the Das family is desperate to get Munni back to Delhi. An upper caste big-wig politician Romesh is ready to marry her, and is very caring who "never tried to humiliate Munni in any

way” (194). Thus the elite upper-caste world is full of compassion offering helping hands. But Munni herself chooses the suicidal path. Thus the ultimate fault lies either in the personality of the downtrodden people or in their past *karmas*.

The narrative strongly believes in the Hindu notion of *karma* “the belief that good and bad acts lead to certain results in one life or several lives” (O’Flaherty 1983, xi) or *prarabdha karma* (fate) “which is responsible for the present birth” (Prasad [1995] 2010, 75). This points out clearly the narrative is very traditional and normative which uses the law of *karmas* or results of past deeds to appropriate the voice of the street-urchin. Throughout the narrative, the theory of *karmas permeates* everywhere. The narrative denies a meaningful way out from their present miseries for Munni and Mithu because of their past *karmas*. They have to suffer in their present birth because of their past deeds or sins, therefore they are not qualified to live in the upper caste elite world and enjoy fruits of happiness, though various avenues are available for them.

The upper-caste Gopal Das family fixes Munni’s marriage with Tilak Mathur, a Brahmin from Mumbai. The narrative suggests though she is an orphan and is brought up by the Gopal Das with “a proper religious training” (81) and gets the best choice Tilak Mathur “a non-matriculate, skinny” with prominently “crooked nose” (79), and a “good for nothing” (81) husband, till she is not fit to live in the elite world because of the law of *karmas*, therefore punishment is inevitable for her. Munni is well aware about the fact that Mithu is responsible for her fall, but the narrative makes her to believe more in her *a cruel blow of fate*. She has reached “the height of civility in a Brahmin family, then to be married into another equally prominent Brahmin family” but does not “blame Mithu any more for her fate” (171). She remembers her mother-in-law praying “God dispenses justice according to what one deserves. It is never accounted for in one life. Karma carries forward a man’s fate for good or for evil” (170). Similarly, when Romesh

puts proposal of marriage, she rejects it, and is ready for the *punishment* instead: "If God did not wish to punish me for my past Karma, He would have left me with Gopal Das" (194). The narrative very strongly believes and reiterates the theory of *karma* and makes the characters too believe in it. Munni tells Romesh "God had designed my life this way, which tells of my past Karma...I pray to God for an early death. I have not placed a flower at the feet of Lord Vishnu, Durga or any other god since I have been leading a sinful life" (180-81). She again tells Romesh "If God did not wish to punish me for my past Karma, He would have left me with Gopal Das" (194). At the end of the novel Munni's is shown totally accepting her fate that is decided by God "Her turn had come to end her life as she strongly believed that it was God's will that her life should be terminated at that point of time" (206). She reflects "Destiny is in no one's hand except that of the Creator. Bhagwan decides a fitting punishment for our past Karmas" (206). Even Tara, her close friend, blames Munni's fate for her degradation. When Mrs. Mathur asks Tara whether she blames her for Munni's situation on the phone, Tara replies "What else can I call it except her fate?" (176). Earlier Ratnakar attempts to lure Mithu in drug peddling to which Mithu replies "begging is better than going to jail." (11), But Ratnakar makes him aware that he has not many choices saying "God has made you a destitute for your past *karmas*." (11). Thus, in their search for identity, the characters become passive and accept meekly miserable lot in their life and do not struggle. They thus emerge as defeated and passive, and face punishment because of their past *karmas*.

In conclusion one can say that the narrative becomes so defensive and traditional which points out the narrator's limitations to narrativise the lives of the downtrodden people and their personality credible and convincingly. The narrative seems to have a deep bias towards the street-urchin. It is very traditional, and accepts and supports the existing caste-system. The narrative reinforces the traditionalism further introducing

a queer Hindu notion of *karma*. Thus the narrative does more harm than good to the world of the urchin by misrepresenting them with stereotypes and negatively.

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