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Green Visions: Postcolonial Ecofeminism through the Writings of Tagore and Shiva

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Abstract:

Modernity is often equated with progress, development, scientific rationality, and the West, while tradition is cast as stagnant, irrational, and underdeveloped—frequently associated with the Orient, superstition, and ecological backwardness. Within this binary, the ecofeminist critique reveals how the pursuit of modernity has empowered a masculinist, anthropocentric subject- Man, who asserts dominance over both women and nature. This paper examines postcolonial ecofeminism through the ideological lens of Rabindranath Tagore and the performative activism of Vandana Shiva to challenge this paradigm. Drawing on Tagore's essays such as "The Religion of the Forest," "Tapovan," and "Women and Home," alongside Shiva's intellectual and grassroots contributions, including her academic works such as *Staying Alive* and "Decolonizing the North," this study seeks not to dwell solely on victimhood but to foster a vision of ecological harmony and resistance. By placing Tagore's philosophical ecology in dialogue with Shiva's materialist ecofeminism, the paper presents a synthesis that is both critical and hopeful, offering a grounded framework for postcolonial ecofeminist thought in an era marked by crisis acceleration and environmental precarity.

Keywords: Ecofeminist activism, maldevelopment, environmental oppression, monoculture capitalism, postcolonial ecocriticism

Introduction: Situating Tagore and Shiva within Postcolonial Ecofeminist Lens

As a set of values, a social movement, and a practice, ecofeminism provides a political analysis that examines the connections between environmental degradation and androcentrism. Emerging in the late 20th century, ecofeminism identifies a shared dynamic of exploitation between nature and marginalized groups, particularly women, under patriarchal and capitalist structures. It highlights the parallels between the domination of women through systems of patriarchy and the exploitation of the natural world through industrialization, monoculture practices, and unchecked economic growth. At its core, ecofeminism critiques anthropocentrism (human-centred worldview) and androcentrism (male-centred worldview), proposing instead an egalitarian perspective that values biodiversity, community, and interconnectedness. Mary Mellor defines ecofeminism in this way,

> Eco-feminism brings together elements of the feminist and the green movement, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement the concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate, exploit and oppress women. (quoted in Mukhopadhyay 2016, 106-107)

Women and nature, particularly forests, share significant similarities as both are sources of life and nurturance. A woman's womb enables the creation of life, just as forests provide habitats for diverse flora and fauna. Both the womb and forests serve as spaces for the emergence, growth, and development of life. Postcolonial ecocriticism, "preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world" (Huggan and Tiffin 2009, 14). Even when postcolonial and environmental writing focuses on specific aims, such as preserving the wilderness or advocating for the rights of mistreated animals or marginalized communities, it tends to go beyond the label of 'protest literature.' Even at its most overt, it should not be seen as a straightforward record of oppression or a simplistic, propagandistic call for liberation. This paper seeks to explore postcolonial ecofeminism by drawing on the philosophical insights of Tagore and the activist interventions of Vandana Shiva. Postcolonial ecocriticism deepens the understanding of Third World women's struggles by emphasizing how gender is inherently linked to both social and ecological issues. It highlights women's central role in resisting exploitative systems of imperialism and state-led governance, often by promoting collective, community-based alternatives. The prevailing neoliberal development

paradigm perpetuates violence against both the environment and the women who rely on nature to sustain their families and communities. In this context, rural Indian women, and Third World women more broadly, emerge as key figures in grassroots movements that aim to conserve forests, land, and water, viewing nature as a vital, life-sustaining force.

Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy and literary works provide profound insights that resonate with ecofeminist principles, particularly his emphasis on the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and gender equity. Though ecofeminism as a movement emerged long after Tagore's time, his writings and ideas reflect values central to ecofeminist thought. In essays like "The Religion of the Forests" and "Tapovan," Tagore underscores the harmony between humanity and the natural world, advocating a relationship rooted in respect and interdependence. He celebrates ancient Indian traditions that revered nature, a perspective that aligns with ecofeminism's critique of exploitative relationships with the environment. Tagore's ecological and gender-sensitive ideas provide a foundational framework for understanding ecofeminism in the Indian context. By linking Tagore's vision with ecofeminist activism, we can draw deeper connections between ecological sustainability and social reform, emphasizing the shared struggles for liberation of both women and the natural world.

Vandana Shiva, a renowned Indian environmental activist and ecofeminist, has dedicated her life to challenging the destructive impacts of globalization, industrial agriculture, and environmental exploitation. Based on the reciprocity theory, Vandana Shiva's advocacy draws attention to the close connection between the exploitation of women and the destruction of the environment, both of which are harmed by patriarchal and capitalist structures. Through grassroots movements like the Chipko Movement and initiatives such as Navdanya, she advocates for planetary justice and gender equity, making her a leading voice in the global ecofeminist movement. The primary aim of this research is to explore the intersections between Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy of nature and Vandana Shiva's ecofeminist activism.

Tagore's Philosophy of Nature and Gender

In "The Religion of the Forests" and "Tapovan," Rabindranath Tagore articulates a profound advocacy for harmony with nature, grounded in the belief that humanity's well-being is intrinsically linked to the natural world. In "The Religion of the Forests," the author draws upon the teachings of the *Upanishads*, highlighting the principle of unity over dualism, where true emancipation lies in recognizing the ultimate unity of all existence, rather than pursuing

external possessions. Tagore says, "[k]now all that moves in this moving world is enveloped by God; and find enjoyment through renunciation, not through greed of possession" (Tagore). Tagore notes that this ideal of unity is rooted in the ancient Indian tradition, particularly the teachings of forest-dwellers who emphasized renunciation and spiritual connection with the universe. These sages found joy not through material acquisition, but through union with the infinite soul. The forest, as a backdrop in Indian epics and classical dramas, symbolizes this unity and the deeper connection between humans and nature. The concept of *Sacchidananda* - the three phases of Reality (*sat, chit, ananda*) -encapsulates the Indian understanding of existence, knowledge, and joy. The perspective on the world is encapsulated in the compound Sanskrit term 'Sacchidananda.' The first term, *sat*, alludes to the essential truth that binds us to everything via our common experience of life. The second part, *chit*, represents the aspect that links us to everything through knowledge. The third, *ananda*, signifies the connection we have with all things through love. Tagore concludes by saying,

> For us the highest purpose of this world is not merely living in it, knowing it and making use of it, but realizing our own selves in it through expansion of-sympathy; not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves in perfect union. (Tagore)

He believes that true realization of the world is not about domination but about expanding sympathy and comprehending the interconnectedness of all things, achieving a perfect union with the world around us. Spirituality, or *adhyatma*, does not deny the importance of the material world; rather, it offers guidance on how to transcend material attachments in order to pursue the deeper realization of the self, or *atman*, and awaken to a higher divine consciousness—placing inner growth above material accumulation or capitalist pursuits.

> Tagore explains this by bringing a girl and her doll and says that when a girl's life outgrows her doll, when she realizes that in every respect she is more than her doll is, then she throws it away. By the very act of possession we know that we are greater than the things possess. It is not rejecting the doll but going beyond the doll. Thus, man truly realizes his soul by outgrowing his possession, by moving beyond the material world. (Chaudhuri 2019, 134)

Tagore's metaphor of the girl outgrowing her doll powerfully critiques the capitalist obsession with ownership and accumulation. Just as the girl realizes she is more than her toy, man too must recognize that true fulfillment lies not in possessions, but in transcending them. Permanent happiness, then, comes not from material gain or fixed binaries of self and other,

man and nature, man and woman- but from moving beyond them toward a deeper spiritual awareness and harmony.

In "Tapovan" (Forest of Purity), Tagore extends his meditation on nature by highlighting its role as a sanctuary for personal introspection and philosophical awakening. Through his depiction of the idealized forest setting, Tagore advocates for a retreat from the frenetic pace of modern life to reconnect with the profound truths of existence. He underscores the idea that nature, in its pristine form, has the capacity to instill wisdom, cultivate empathy, and provide an antidote to the alienation fostered by contemporary society. He critiques global capitalism, driven by power, greed, and exploitation, and warns of the moral decay it fosters. This machine-like civilization, according to Tagore, sacrifices human freedom and compassion in the pursuit of profit, leading to a world marked by violence and a lack of empathy. Tagore comments,

> The culture that has arisen from the forest has been influenced by the diverse processes of renewal of life, which are always at play in the forest, varying from species to species, from season to season, in sight and sound and smell. The unifying principle of life in diversity, of democratic pluralism, thus became the principle of Indian civilization. (Mukherjee and Patnayak 2022, 177)

Although "The Religion of the Forest" and "Tapovan" do not explicitly engage with ecofeminism, they offer a critique of capitalist anthropocentrism, where man perceives himself as superior and entitled to exploit both non-human entities and marginalized genders to fulfill his desires. These texts challenge the notion that nature and women are mere passive backdrops to human activity, instead emphasizing their active role in shaping human values, spirituality, and the course of civilization.

In his "Woman and Home" he talks about the modern world's obsession with the superficial happiness. He comments, "[t]he simple comforts of home, made precious by the touch of love, are giving way to luxuries that can only have their full extension in the isolation of self-centered life. Hotels are being erected on the ruins of homes" (Tagore). Rabindranath Tagore critiques the mechanization and materialism of modern civilization, portraying it as a dehumanizing force that prioritizes the accumulation of material wealth over the deeper values of love, joy, and spiritual fulfillment. Tagore in this essay situates women at the centre of his vision for societal redemption, urging them to emerge from the confines of domesticity and social segregation. He asserts that womanhood is not a mere decorative attribute but a vital force akin to the essence of health-capable of nurturing beauty, bringing joy to the mind, and

achieving harmony in life. By embracing their innate qualities of care, compassion, and spiritual strength, women can restore the balance that a mechanized society has disrupted.

From an ecofeminist perspective, "Woman and Home" can be read as a call to recognize the parallels between the exploitation of women and the domination of nature. Tagore implicitly critiques the patriarchal structures that reduce both women and the environment to resources for consumption and control. Tagore's invocation of women as the harbingers of spiritual renewal aligns with ecofeminist ideals. He envisions women as nurturers and protectors of life, capable of fostering a symbiotic relationship with nature. Their role, as Tagore articulates, is not merely to heal the spiritual void within humanity but also to reconnect society with the earth's vitality and harmony. Thus, "Woman and Home" calls for a synthesis of feminine and ecological values, envisioning a future where humanity learns to coexist with nature and nurtures spiritual and emotional well-being over mechanized progress. His progressive views on gender emphasize the importance of recognizing women as autonomous, self-determined beings who should be free from the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures. Ecofeminism similarly critiques industrial capitalism for prioritizing profit over ecological and social well-being, emphasizing how these systems disproportionately harm marginalized groups, particularly women. Tagore challenges rigid dualisms, such as the separation between nature and culture or the physical and spiritual. Ecofeminism similarly critiques binary thinking, advocating for integrated worldviews that dissolve hierarchies between men and women, humans, and nature.

Vandana Shiva's Ecofeminist Activism

Vandana Shiva, Founder and Director of the Foundation for Science, Technology, and Natural Resource Policy, was honoured by *Time* magazine in 2003 as an 'environmental hero.' She is also a Board Member of the International Forum on Globalization and has actively supported grassroots green movements in regions such as Africa, Asia, Latin America, Ireland, Switzerland, and Austria. Vandana Shiva's most insightful book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* (1988) presents a profound critique of the patriarchal system which has historically oppressed both women and nature. In her article "Decolonizing the North," Vandana Shiva contends that India is currently experiencing a third wave of colonization. In this phase, the white man's burden is to protect the environment, particularly in the Third World. However, this form of protection entails seizing control over rights and resources, ultimately

resulting in poverty and environmental degradation in the Third World. Shiva coins the term "maldevelopment" (Shiva 1988, 4) to describe how development marginalizes women and destroys the environment masquerading as progress. She says, "[d]evelopment thus, is equivalent to maldevelopment, a development bereft of the feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle" (Shiva 1988, 4). Vandana Shiva characterizes the destruction of ecosystems and knowledge systems as a form of reductionist violence, manifesting in various interconnected ways. This includes violence against women, tribals, and peasants, who are marginalized and labelled as "non-knowers" (1988, 24) despite their expertise and daily engagement in critical areas such as forestry, food, and water systems. Their practical knowledge and responsibility in these domains are dismissed through the expert/non-expert divide. Violence is also directed at nature, where modern science disrupts its integrity by perceiving and manipulating it merely as an object of knowledge. Moreover, the primary beneficiaries of knowledge, especially women and the poor, face significant harm as modern science strips them of their livelihoods, productive capacities, and essential life-support systems, challenging the notion of universal benefit. This harm to nature inevitably rebounds on humanity. Lastly, reductionist science commits violence against knowledge itself by suppressing and distorting facts, dismissing alternative knowledge systems as irrational without rational assessment, and undermining the diversity and integrity of knowledge traditions.

Drawing from Indian philosophy, Shiva highlights the concept of "Prakriti" (1988, 38), the feminine principle of life and creativity inherent in nature. She comments, "[n]ature as Prakriti is inherently active, a powerful, productive force in the dialectic of the creation, renewal and sustenance of all life" (Shiva 1988, 38). In India, women are deeply intertwined with nature, both symbolically and practically. Nature is often envisioned as embodying the feminine principle, while women, in turn, nurture and sustain it to support life. Representing *Shakti*, the feminine and creative energy of the cosmos, nature encompasses both animate and inanimate forms. Together with the masculine principle (*Purusha*), *Prakriti* gives rise to the world. Without *Shakti*, even Shiva, the cosmic force of creation and destruction, becomes inert, emphasizing the vital role of the feminine in maintaining the balance of existence. The erosion of Prakriti through exploitative practices reflects a larger disregard for the feminine, which leads to ecological crises and societal imbalance. Deforestation, water scarcity, and soil degradation force women to work harder to secure basic resources for their families, exacerbating gender inequalities. Shiva advocates for a shift toward sustainable development

that values ecological diversity, respects women's knowledge systems, and ensures equitable resource distribution. This model recognizes the interdependence of women and nature, fostering harmony rather than victimization. In the Preface of the book *Ecofeminism* (2014), co-authored by Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, Shiva discusses the concept of ecofeminism,

> Violence against women has taken on new and more vicious forms as traditional patriarchal structures have hybridized with the structures of capitalist patriarchy. We need to examine the connections between the violence of unjust, non- sustainable economic systems and the growing frequency and brutality of violence against women. We need to see how the structures of traditional patriarchy merge with the emerging structures of capitalist patriarchy to intensify violence against women. (Shiva and Mies 2014, xiv)

Vandana Shiva, being the founder of Navdanya, established over 150 seed banks across India, empowering women farmers to conserve native seeds and resist dependency on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and patented seeds. Drawing on the lessons of diversity from the Himalayan forests, Vandana Shiva applied this knowledge to protecting biodiversity on Indian farms. She began by saving seeds from farmers' fields and soon recognized the need for a demonstration and training farm in India. This led to the establishment of Navdanya Farm in 1994 in the Doon Valley, situated in the lower Himalayan region of Uttarakhand. Today, the farm preserves and cultivates 630 rice varieties, 150 wheat varieties, and hundreds of other species. Navdanya Farm also supports farmers in transitioning from fossil fuel and chemical-dependent monocultures to biodiverse ecological systems sustained by natural resources like sunlight and soil. They have trained thousands of farmers, particularly women, in organic farming techniques to preserve biodiversity and ensure food security. Shiva led movements against Western corporations attempting to patent traditional Indian resources like neem (Azadirachta indica) and Basmati rice. Her activism highlighted how biopiracy exploits indigenous knowledge, often preserved and transmitted by women.

Women, particularly in rural and indigenous communities, rely on traditional plants for medicine and food. Biopiracy disrupts their access to these resources, exacerbating gender inequalities. Although Shiva was not a founder, she extensively documented and supported the Chipko movement where women hugged trees to prevent deforestation in Uttarakhand, India. Shiva has campaigned for soil health as a foundation for biodiversity and food security. She has promoted practices like crop rotation and organic composting to restore soil fertility, and opposed monoculture farming, which depletes soil nutrients and undermines biodiversity.

Women farmers benefit directly from regenerative practices, reducing their labour while increasing productivity and ensuring diverse food availability for their families. Shiva has consistently linked climate change to gendered vulnerabilities. She has called for climate policies that prioritize indigenous practices and gender equity. Shiva aims to empower women by enabling them to sell indigenous crops, which boosts their financial independence and strengthens local economies. Her works like *Earth Democracy* and *Soil Not Oil* emphasize the importance of grassroots movements led by women in resisting ecological crises.

Intersections Between Tagore and Shiva

While both Rabindranath Tagore and Vandana Shiva contribute meaningfully to ecological thought, their approaches reflect distinct orientations. Tagore's ecological vision is primarily ideological and spiritual, grounded in a deep reverence for nature as seen in his writings such as "The Religion of the Forest," and partially realized through his educational and rural development projects like Santiniketan and Sriniketan. However, from an ecofeminist perspective, his engagement appears less performative, as his ideas do not directly address the gendered dimensions of environmental struggle. In contrast, Vandana Shiva stands as an active and recognized figure in postcolonial ecofeminism, centering women's lived experiences, especially those of rural Indian women, in her resistance to capitalist exploitation of nature. Shiva's activism draws inspiration from Tagore's ecological writings, transforming his philosophical ideals into grounded, feminist praxis. Although Tagore did not explicitly participate in ecofeminist movements, his philosophies continue to shape and support thinkers like Shiva. Thus, the seeming gap between them may be bridged by viewing Tagore as offering the conceptual roots of a spiritual ecology that Shiva powerfully extends into material, gender-conscious activism.

In *Yes! Magazine*, Vandana Shiva highlights Rabindranath Tagore's essay "The Religion of the Forest," where Tagore reflects on the profound influence of ancient Indian forest dwellers on classical Indian literature, "Today, at a time of multiple crises intensified by globalization, we need to move away from the paradigm of nature as dead matter. We need to move to an ecological paradigm, and for this the best teacher is nature herself" (Shiva). She shares Tagore's perspective that forests are not only sources of water and biodiversity but also embody lessons in democracy. Through Tagore's writings, Shiva interprets that the forest was not only a source of knowledge and freedom but also a fountain of beauty, joy, art, aesthetics, harmony, and

perfection-a microcosm reflecting the universe itself. She believes that moving away from consumerism and accumulation marks the beginning of truly joyful living. In his writings, Tagore celebrates the unity between humans and nature, emphasizing that humanity is an integral part of the ecological web. He believed that alienation from nature leads to spiritual and moral impoverishment. In works like *Gitanjali* and *The Religion of Man*, Tagore portrays nature as a source of inspiration, wisdom, and spirituality. Shiva echoes this interconnectedness by framing ecological crises as inseparable from social injustices, particularly gender oppression. Her work asserts that the destruction of nature disrupts the symbiotic relationship between women and the environment. Tagore's philosophy enriches Shiva's activism by providing a spiritual and aesthetic dimension to the idea of ecological harmony.

Tagore critiqued the alienating impacts of industrial modernity and its focus on mechanization and exploitation. He opposed colonial systems that prioritized profit over human and ecological well-being. Shiva's critique of maldevelopment aligns closely with Tagore's concerns. She opposes monoculture farming, corporate-driven development, and biopiracy for destroying biodiversity and marginalizing traditional knowledge systems. Tagore's perspective provides a philosophical grounding for Shiva's resistance to capitalist-industrial systems, framing her activism as a continuation of a deeper humanistic tradition. Tagore's establishment of Santiniketan and Sriniketan was a testament to his belief in nurturing local knowledge and sustainable practices. Shiva's advocacy for seed sovereignty and biodiversity conservation mirrors Tagore's respect for indigenous knowledge. She champions the knowledge of rural women as vital to ecological balance. Tagore's ideals deepen the philosophical underpinning of Shiva's activism by celebrating the cultural and ecological wisdom of traditional communities.

Tagore often feminized nature, portraying it as nurturing, life-giving, and resilient. In works like *Chitrangada* and his songs, he associated the feminine with creativity, compassion, and balance. His emphasis on *Prakriti* (nature) aligns with Indian philosophical traditions that regard nature as a dynamic, feminine force. Shiva draws directly from the Indian concept of *Prakriti* in her ecofeminist activism, arguing that both women and nature have been exploited by patriarchal and colonial systems. Tagore's poetic representation of the feminine enriches Shiva's framing of women as custodians of nature, emphasizing the spiritual and cultural significance of their roles. Tagore envisioned education as a means to foster holistic understanding, emphasizing the integration of nature, arts, and human values. Shiva's

Navdanya movement incorporates education and training for farmers, especially women, to promote organic farming and biodiversity conservation.

Movements such as the Chipko movement, the Silent Valley resistance, the Narmada Bachao Andolan, the Navdanya initiative, and the Deccan Development Society reflect the diverse trajectories of ecological resistance in India, where local communities, especially women, have mobilized to protect land, forests, seeds, and rivers from capitalist and state-led exploitation. Through the lens of Vandana Shiva's postcolonial ecofeminism, these movements demonstrate how women act as custodians of biodiversity and challenge the violence of neoliberal development. Rabindranath Tagore, though removed from such direct activism, offers a philosophical and spiritual framework that complements these movements. His reverence for nature as a moral and aesthetic force, along with his efforts in Santiniketan and Sriniketan to promote self-reliant rural life rooted in ecological balance, provides an early ideological grounding for the values these movements embody.

Conclusion

Globally, there is a rising awareness that questions the sanctity of science and development, revealing them not as universal emblems of progress but as constructs rooted in modern Western patriarchy. The devastation of forests, water, and land—vital life-support systems—is taking place under the banner of development. The violence inherent in the dominant development model not only harms nature but also impacts women, who rely on natural resources to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. This intertwined violence against both nature and women stem from a shared perception rooted in the current development paradigm. Thinkers like Vandana Shiva and Rabindranath Tagore emphasize the ethic of affection as vital for human life and its interaction with the environment. The harmonious balance among the triad of God, nature, and humanity is essential, as the neglect or removal of any one disrupts this equilibrium, leading to imbalance and loss of meaning.

Rabindranath Tagore and Vandana Shiva, though separated by time, offer profound insights into achieving an eco-sustainable world and fostering gender equality. His ideas remain relevant in today's world, where rapid industrialization and climate change threaten ecological balance. Tagore's emphasis on harmony inspires a sustainable approach to coexistence, urging us to view nature as a partner rather than a resource. Vandana Shiva, on the other hand, bridges ecofeminism with grassroots activism, emphasizing the critical role women play in sustaining

ecosystems. Together, Tagore and Shiva offer a vision of an eco-sustainable earth founded on principles of care, balance, and equality. Tagore's philosophical framework complements Shiva's practical activism, creating a synergy that can guide contemporary efforts to combat environmental degradation and social inequality. In a world grappling with climate crises and gender inequities, their combined wisdom provides a roadmap for a future that is both sustainable and just.

Contemporary discussions on postcolonial ecofeminism are increasingly attentive to the limitations of mainstream ecofeminist discourse, which has often been critiqued for its essentialist and ethnocentric assumptions. As Cecile Jackson observes, the ecofeminist movement tends to be "ethnocentric, essentialist, blind to class, ethnicity and other differentiating cleavages, ahistorical and neglects the material sphere" (Sturgeon 1997, 3). Critics like Ynestra King, Karen Warren, and Carolyn Merchant attempt to move beyond this by emphasizing that women's relationship to the environment is shaped by historical and material conditions rather than inherent qualities. However, even within such frameworks, Third World women are frequently reduced to symbolic figures, romanticized as being inherently 'closer to nature'—while their specific lived realities, socio-economic locations, and choices are overlooked. Scholars such as Jackson and Bina Agarwal argue that ecofeminism is in real a synecdochic figure within the broader "women, environment, and development" discourse (Sturgeon 1997, 137), often ignoring the complex power dynamics at play. In this context, posthuman ecofeminism emerges as a promising methodological direction, as it resists binary thinking, de-centers the human subject, and attends to the entanglements of gender, species, matter, and power in more situated and less essentialist ways—offering a more nuanced and intersectional framework for future ecological feminist studies.

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