

## Theme of Identity and Displacement in Tomb of Sand

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**Abstract:** *Geetanjali Shree's Tomb of Sand* (translated by Daisy Rockwell), winner of the 2022 International Booker Prize, stands as a powerful postmodern literary exploration of identity, memory, and displacement. Centred around an 80-year-old woman who defies expectations of widowhood, passivity, and silence, the novel unravels the many layers of the self—social, gendered, national, and spiritual—through a journey that crosses not only geographic borders but also emotional and cultural ones. This paper investigates how *Tomb of Sand* intricately weaves the themes of identity and displacement using a narrative structure that resists linearity and embraces fragmentation.

By returning to Pakistan decades after surviving Partition, the protagonist disrupts patriarchal and nationalist narratives that have long marginalised female voices. Her physical displacement becomes a metaphorical act of resistance, through which she reclaims silenced histories and redefines her identity outside rigid societal roles. Moreover, her bond with characters such as Rosie, a transgender artist, challenges binary constructs of gender and reinforces the novel's emphasis on identity as fluid, relational, and self-fashioned.

The analysis draws on postcolonial and feminist literary theory, especially the works of Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler, to understand how displacement becomes a transformative experience rather than a purely traumatic one. The article further explores how the act of storytelling—across generations, languages, and perspectives—functions as a mode of survival and reconstruction in the aftermath of cultural rupture. *Tomb of Sand*, thus, not only revises how we perceive the Partition but also foregrounds how deeply displacement is embedded in the making and remaking of identity.

Through its defiant protagonist and radical narrative style, *Tomb of Sand* blurs boundaries between nations, genders, and selves, offering a compelling reflection on belonging and becoming in the contemporary South Asian context.

**Keywords:** *Tomb of Sand*; *Geetanjali Shree*; identity; displacement; Partition literature; feminist narrative; postcolonial fiction; multilingualism; transgression; South Asian literature.

### 1. Introduction

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand*, originally written in Hindi as *Ret Samadhi* and translated into English by Daisy Rockwell, made global literary history by becoming the first South Asian novel to win the International Booker Prize in 2022. Praised for its inventive language, feminist ethos, and narrative experimentation, the novel resists linear storytelling, weaving together memory, myth, and multilingualism in a deeply layered exploration of personal and political identities. At the centre of this tale is an 80-year-old woman—referred to simply as “Ma”—who, following the death of her

husband, defies all social expectations by embarking on a physical and emotional journey that leads her from Delhi to Pakistan, from widowhood to womanhood, and from silence to speech.

*Tomb of Sand* is, at its heart, a profound meditation on the themes of **identity** and **displacement**—not merely as historical or geographical events but as lived, internal, and constantly evolving experiences. **Identity**, as explored in the novel, is not a stable essence but a construct formed through gender, memory, culture, and historical trauma. The protagonist's journey dismantles fixed social roles, demonstrating how identities—especially those of older women—are often erased, reduced, or stereotyped in patriarchal societies. Her transformation into a self-naming, boundary-crossing woman highlights how identity can be reclaimed and reshaped, even in later stages of life.

**Displacement**, too, operates on multiple levels within the text. While the novel revisits the catastrophic partition of India and Pakistan in 1947—a political and geographic displacement—it also delves into more intimate forms of dislocation: the loss of a partner, generational alienation, emotional isolation, and the silencing of women's histories. Ma's decision to return to Pakistan decades after fleeing it as a child is not driven by nostalgia or reconciliation, but by an urgent need to confront the past and re-integrate a fragmented self. This reverse migration disrupts conventional narratives of exile and belonging, suggesting that displacement can, paradoxically, lead to a fuller understanding of one's own identity.

The protagonist's resistance to conforming to the role of the grieving widow is an act of rebellion against deeply entrenched patriarchal expectations. Her companionship with Rosie, a hijra (transgender) character, adds another layer to the novel's interrogation of identity—especially in terms of gender fluidity and non-conformity. In this way, Shree opens up a discursive space where socially marginalised identities—whether by age, gender, or history—can find expression and legitimacy. The narrative blurs the lines between male and female, self and other, local and foreign, thereby revealing the arbitrary nature of social boundaries.

This article investigates the central question: **How does displacement enable a transformative understanding of identity in *Tomb of Sand*?** It seeks to demonstrate how physical dislocation—across national borders—is mirrored by a psychological journey inward, as Ma confronts buried memories, reclaims lost relationships, and redefines her sense of self. Displacement is not presented solely as a site of trauma, but as a condition of becoming—where the protagonist navigates her own complexities beyond prescribed roles. Through this perspective, *Tomb of Sand* emerges not merely as a Partition novel, but as a radical rethinking of identity in postcolonial South Asia.

**Methodology:-** The methodology employed in this article is based on a **close reading** of the text through **feminist** and **postcolonial theoretical lenses**. A feminist reading will unpack how Ma's transformation challenges traditional roles imposed on women, particularly widows, and how her body and voice become mediums of resistance. The postcolonial lens will examine how borders—both literal and symbolic—are questioned, destabilised, and redefined in the context of memory, trauma, and history. This dual framework allows for a nuanced understanding of how the novel critiques hegemonic structures—whether nationalistic, patriarchal, or linguistic—and gives space to plural, fluid identities.

By placing *Tomb of Sand* within the broader tradition of Partition literature while also acknowledging its departures from convention, this study contributes to current scholarship on gender, memory, and identity in South Asian fiction. The novel not only addresses historical displacement but also articulates how identity is continually re-written in the shadow of trauma and in the face of oppressive social scripts. In doing so, Shree's novel invites readers to imagine new possibilities for selfhood—unfixed, unbordered, and unafraid.

## 2. Literature Review

The themes of identity and displacement in *Tomb of Sand* have sparked significant critical attention since the novel's English translation gained international recognition. Scholars have positioned the work within the evolving canon of Partition literature, but with distinct emphasis on its feminist re-imaginings and postmodern narrative style. While Partition narratives have traditionally focused on

trauma from a masculine or nationalist perspective, *Tomb of Sand* distinguishes itself by foregrounding the marginalised experiences of women, the elderly, and the transgender community.

Bose (2022) identifies the novel as a "disruptive feminist epic" that challenges literary and political conventions of how displacement is remembered. She argues that the novel's narrative strategy—marked by non-linear storytelling, humour, and multilingualism—subverts historical silence and restores agency to characters typically rendered voiceless in Partition discourse. In this sense, identity is not a static essence but a performance constantly negotiated through memory, space, and gender.

Another important contribution comes from Shah and Raghavan (2023), who explore the concept of "border-crossing" in both geographical and psychological terms. They read the protagonist's reverse migration not as nostalgia, but as a symbolic act of reclaiming fractured identity. They emphasise that *Tomb of Sand* complicates the binary of home and exile, showing how displacement—though often traumatic—can also be generative, enabling new ways of being. Their study also highlights how the presence of characters like Rosie blurs the lines between fixed categories of male/female and insider/outsider, which in turn reflects the fluidity of postcolonial identity.

While the novel has been compared to earlier works like Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*, scholars note that *Tomb of Sand* offers a more interior, language-driven reflection on dislocation and womanhood. This literature review situates the current article within these conversations, adding a focused analysis of memory as a tool for reclaiming identity amidst layered displacements—familial, national, and existential.

### 3. Partition and the Legacy of Displacement

The Partition of India in 1947 marks one of the most violent and traumatic ruptures in the history of the subcontinent. An event that resulted in the displacement of nearly fifteen million people and the death of over a million, it created scars that still shape cultural memory and national identities. The trauma of Partition was not merely demographic or political; it was deeply psychological, cutting across generations and gendered experiences. In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree revisits this historical rupture through a lens rarely privileged in Partition narratives—that of an elderly woman, Ma, who defies the expected narrative arc by returning to the very land from which she once fled. This act of reverse migration subverts traditional Partition tropes and offers a powerful commentary on memory, identity, and the complexity of belonging.

Ma's decision to re-enter Pakistan is neither nostalgic nor reconciliatory. Rather, it is an act of remembrance and resistance. Unlike many Partition narratives that focus on victimhood or nationalist pride, *Tomb of Sand* invites the reader into a more personal and fragmentary mode of storytelling. Through Ma's journey, Shree confronts the emotional dislocation and erasure that accompanied Partition—particularly for women whose stories were historically silenced or distorted. Ma does not seek closure or a restored homeland; instead, she moves across borders to reclaim a part of herself left behind, a self fragmented by time, trauma, and societal roles.

Displacement in the novel is not just a question of physical geography—it operates through the realms of memory, speech, and silence. Shree crafts a narrative structure that mirrors the non-linearity of trauma. Flashbacks interrupt the present, memories surface without warning, and oral storytelling blurs fact with myth. This fragmented narrative technique captures the disorienting effects of memory and embodies the discontinuities of identity brought on by forced migration. The storytelling itself becomes a political act, challenging the coherence and order typically imposed by masculine, state-authored histories of Partition.

Moreover, Ma's emotional displacement is deeply gendered. The trauma she carries is not simply about losing a homeland, but about the suppression of her desires, her voice, and her agency in a patriarchal world. The novel uncovers layers of silenced grief: the loss of love, the invisibilisation of feminine experiences, and the internalisation of shame imposed by society. These are not the kinds of grief that are memorialised in history books or nationalist epics—they are intimate,

domestic, and deeply human. Shree's novel, by centring Ma's voice and memories, defies the typical Partition novel that privileges the male experience or glorifies national sacrifice.

Ma's return to Pakistan can also be read as an act of narrative reclamation. It is a journey toward a lost narrative thread—a story she was once denied the right to tell. The physical act of crossing the border becomes symbolic of crossing over psychological boundaries: from silence to speech, from social roles to self-definition, from historical victimhood to narrative agency. In this way, displacement becomes a necessary step in reconstituting identity. It is not the end of belonging, but a condition through which new, fluid affiliations can emerge.

Importantly, Shree's treatment of memory is complex and resistant to closure. Memory is not romanticised or treated as redemptive. Instead, it is unstable, fragmented, and often unreliable. The process of remembering is portrayed as deeply emotional, unpredictable, and occasionally painful. Shree allows her protagonist to remember imperfectly, to piece together the past in nonlinear, contradictory ways. In doing so, *Tomb of Sand* captures the essence of post-memory—a term coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the intergenerational transmission of trauma, especially when the first-hand experience is inaccessible or suppressed.

By giving voice to a woman who chooses to confront, rather than forget, her past, the novel critiques the tendency within nationalist projects to erase or sanitise the complexities of Partition. Ma's reverse migration is not only a personal journey; it is a direct challenge to the idea that Partition is a closed chapter in history. Her crossing of borders—physical, cultural, emotional—is a way of keeping memory alive in its full complexity, with all its contradictions and unresolved tensions.

Furthermore, Shree situates Ma's displacement within a broader matrix of multilingualism and cultural hybridity. The narrative moves fluidly across languages—Hindi, Urdu, English, and Punjabi—and incorporates elements of folklore, mythology, and humour. This linguistic plurality mirrors the protagonist's own fluid identity and emphasises that neither language nor nationality can offer a fixed sense of belonging. The novel thus resists the homogenisation of identity and memory, insisting instead on the plurality of experiences that constitute the human response to displacement.

### **3. Rewriting the Self: Gender, Age, and Identity**

In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree presents a radically transformative journey of an elderly woman who, in the wake of her husband's death, refuses to submit to the culturally enforced role of the grieving widow. In Indian society, widowhood is often accompanied by expectations of invisibility, silence, and detachment from worldly affairs. Yet, Ma—the octogenarian protagonist—rebels against these constraints, choosing instead to reclaim her agency, mobility, and voice. This act of self-redefinition is not merely personal; it is political, feminist, and deeply subversive. The novel offers an intricate meditation on the relationship between gender, age, memory, and identity, challenging how postcolonial societies view both the aged female body and its role in collective narratives.

Ma's resistance to widowhood as a final, silencing identity initiates a broader exploration of gender as performative and unstable. By forming an intimate friendship with Rosie, a hijra (transgender) character, Ma expands her understanding of the self beyond binary constructions. Rosie is not simply a symbolic figure of “otherness”; she is a living embodiment of resistance against socially sanctioned gender norms. Through Rosie, Ma is exposed to a world where identity is chosen, performed, and continually negotiated. Their companionship becomes a space of mutual recognition and care, in which both characters affirm each other's right to exist outside the boundaries of heteronormative expectation.

This relationship destabilises the traditional structure of gender identity, illustrating that the process of self-making is not restricted to youth or to those within the gender binary. In this sense, *Tomb of Sand* advances a queer-feminist discourse that is seldom applied to older women in literature. The protagonist's body—usually cast aside by patriarchal societies as aged and irrelevant—becomes a

site of transformation. It carries memories, desires, traumas, and potentials. Shree masterfully renders Ma's aging body not as a symbol of decline but as a vessel of continuity, resistance, and renewal. In reclaiming her sexuality, choosing her attire, and crossing borders both literal and metaphorical, Ma reclaims her right to desire and redefine herself on her own terms.

Intergenerational tension further amplifies the novel's discourse on identity. Ma's daughter, Beti, is a modern, independent woman, yet their relationship is marked by friction and misrecognition. Beti represents a feminist politics that often distances itself from traditional roles, whereas Ma gradually reclaims her individuality without renouncing familial or cultural ties. Their evolving relationship underscores the tension between **gender and caste, tradition and progress, and nationalist pride versus historical trauma**. Beti is proud of her progressive values, but she cannot initially comprehend her mother's late-life rebellion or the depth of pain and memory embedded in her desire to return to Pakistan. This tension becomes a narrative device through which Shree interrogates assumptions about who holds the right to define emancipation, history, and identity.

Language, too, emerges as a key element in the reconstitution of the self. The novel's polyphonic, multilingual narrative—shifting seamlessly between Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and English—mirrors the hybridity and fluidity of identity that the protagonist embodies. Language becomes more than a medium of communication; it is a site of cultural memory, resistance, and negotiation. By using idioms, wordplay, folk wisdom, and non-standard syntax, Shree allows multiple voices to coexist, and in doing so, dismantles the hierarchy of dominant discourses. This multilingual texture resists the colonially inherited obsession with fixed identity and instead celebrates the plural, the shifting, and the inclusive.

Moreover, Ma's journey disrupts nationalist narratives that link womanhood with sacrifice, purity, and containment. Her border-crossing is not just geographical—it is symbolic of a woman moving beyond nationalist myths that have confined female bodies to allegorical roles: Mother India, the suffering victim, or the veiled widow. Shree inverts these narratives by portraying Ma not as a victim of Partition, but as a traveller who consciously returns to the wound, not to relive it but to reinterpret it through her own lens. This act transforms the landscape of trauma into a stage for feminist reclamation.

Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* illustrates that identity is never fixed, never complete—it is a continuous act of rewriting. Whether through gender, age, memory, or language, Ma's selfhood emerges not from conforming to cultural expectations but from resisting them. The novel gives literary visibility to a figure rarely seen in Indian fiction: an elderly woman who is not passive or peripheral, but dynamic, searching, and evolving. In giving voice to this protagonist, Shree offers a radical critique of how identities are shaped—and how they can be reimagined at any stage of life.

#### 4. Borders, Belonging, and the Fluid Nation

In *Tomb of Sand*, Geetanjali Shree engages with the idea of borders not merely as geopolitical divisions but as deeply embedded psychological, social, and cultural constructs. Through the journey of Ma, the protagonist, the novel interrogates how **borders—both literal and symbolic—shape and constrain identity**, belonging, and memory. The India–Pakistan divide serves as the backdrop to the narrative, yet it is the internal, emotional borders—those defined by widowhood, motherhood, and patriarchy—that Ma confronts with equal urgency.

The India–Pakistan border, created in 1947 during the Partition, remains one of the most contested and emotionally charged political boundaries in modern South Asia. While national histories often frame borders as necessary lines of sovereignty, *Tomb of Sand* reveals how these lines fracture personal lives and suppress subaltern memories. For Ma, the border is not just a site of historical trauma but also a space of erasure—of a lost love, a stolen voice, a silenced past. Her return to Pakistan is thus more than physical relocation; it is a journey into a buried history, a reclamation of the self fragmented by displacement and silence.

Importantly, the novel critiques **nationhood as a rigid, exclusionary category**. Ma's personal history—marked by love, migration, and loss—does not align with national narratives that glorify

sacrifice and forget the human cost of Partition. As she journeys back to the land she once fled, she challenges the myth of national purity and the erasure of hybrid identities. Her memories, interwoven with multiple languages, relationships, and cultural influences, defy the idea that belonging must be tied to a fixed geography or homogenous identity. Instead, she represents a **fluid nationhood**, where emotional and cultural affiliations outweigh arbitrary cartographic lines.

This is evident not only in Ma's physical journey but also in her rejection of traditional roles assigned to her as a widow and mother. Widowhood, in particular, functions as a form of social border—one that mandates passivity, invisibility, and spiritual withdrawal. Ma, however, refuses to internalise these restrictions. Her departure from home is a symbolic border-crossing—an assertion that identity is not static, even in old age. Motherhood, too, becomes a site of contention. Her daughter Beti, though a symbol of modern feminism, cannot initially comprehend Ma's journey, revealing the generational divides in how womanhood and nationalism are interpreted.

The act of crossing the international border into Pakistan becomes, therefore, **an act of radical narrative resistance**. Ma not only reclaims her right to remember but asserts the validity of memories that fall outside dominant historical accounts. She embodies the marginalised figure of the Partition woman—one often relegated to silence, or remembered only in terms of victimhood and sacrifice. But Shree gives this figure agency, desire, and movement. Ma's voice is not dictated by the state, by religion, or by family—it emerges on her own terms, through her own rhythms of remembering.

Further, the novel's structure itself resists bordered thinking. Its polyphonic, multilingual style resists the logic of linguistic nationalism, in which identity is tied to a single tongue or tradition. Instead, Shree uses language to blur distinctions: words shift fluidly across Hindi, Urdu, English, and Punjabi. This linguistic hybridity mirrors the novel's political philosophy, where **nationhood is porous**, and **belonging is more about relationships than geography**.

In addition, the presence of characters like Rosie adds another layer to this border discourse. Rosie, a hijra and a performer, inhabits spaces that are also marginalised and policed—public performance, queer identity, the “third gender.” Her friendship with Ma symbolises solidarity across boundaries—gendered, social, and national. Together, they defy rigid categories and craft a new kind of kinship that is rooted in care, shared exclusion, and mutual recognition. In this way, the border-crossing becomes not only political and personal but also deeply **feminist**—a means of reclaiming emotional and narrative autonomy.

Ultimately, *Tomb of Sand* reimagines the concept of nation beyond the limits of geography. It treats the border as both metaphor and memory—an artificial invention with devastating human consequences, but also a space that can be traversed, questioned, and rewritten. Ma's return to Pakistan is not an act of regression, but one of transformation. It is her means of telling her story, on her own terms, in a language—and across a landscape—that recognises pain, ambiguity, and multiplicity.

Through this act, the novel critiques state-sponsored histories and rigid definitions of nationhood. Instead, it advocates for a vision of identity that is intersectional, evolving, and fundamentally uncontained. In blurring the borders of the self, the state, and the family, Shree affirms the right to belong not to a nation, but to one's own story..

## 5. Narrative Form and Fragmented Identity

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* resists conventional narrative expectations by adopting a fragmented, experimental, and fluid form that mirrors the central themes of displaced and shifting identities. The novel's structure is deliberately non-linear, reflective of the disjointed nature of memory, trauma, and the postcolonial self. Through the interplay of form and content, Shree dismantles stable conceptions of identity, inviting readers to engage with a world where boundaries—of narration, gender, language, and nation—are constantly being crossed or blurred.

## 5.1 Non-Linear Narrative and Shifting Perspectives

The novel unfolds not in chronological order but through loops, digressions, and interruptions. Events are recalled in fragments, filtered through the internal reflections of the protagonist and shaped by the emotional tenor of memory rather than linear time. This non-linearity parallels Ma's internal journey—a process of recollecting a life fractured by Partition, patriarchy, and age-related social marginalisation. The shifting perspectives allow multiple voices to coexist, each contributing to the mosaic of identity. Ma is not the only subject; instead, her daughter, the narrator, side characters, and even inanimate objects at times contribute to the storytelling, reinforcing the idea that identity is plural, composite, and context-dependent (Nanda, 2022).

## 5.2 Metafiction, Humour, Folklore, and Stream-of-Consciousness

Shree employs **metafictional techniques**—self-aware narration, playful language, and direct address to the reader—to problematise the reliability of storytelling. This aligns with the theme of identity as a construct rather than a given truth. **Humour**, often ironic and absurd, functions as a literary device that relieves trauma while highlighting the surreal contradictions of modern South Asian life. **Folklore** and **stream-of-consciousness** enrich the novel's texture, offering cultural depth and psychological insight. These devices reflect the fragmented consciousness of Ma, whose thoughts jump between past and present, the real and the imagined. Her identity, like the narrative, is never singular or stable but is reconstituted through recollection, dialogue, and emotional resonance (Jha, 2023).

## 5.3 Blurring of Narrator and Character Boundaries

A distinctive formal element of the novel is its **blurring of the boundary between narrator and character**. The voice telling the story is fluid—sometimes omniscient, sometimes intimate, sometimes humorous, often meditative. This ambiguity destabilises traditional hierarchies in narrative authority and reflects how identity, too, can never be fully enclosed within a single perspective. Just as the narrator slips in and out of characters' consciousness, so does Ma's identity oscillate—between widow and lover, mother and woman, Hindu and borderless being. The porousness of voice becomes symbolic of a porous self, unconfined by social labels (Menon, 2023).

## 5.4 Translation as a Tool for Reinforcing and Reshaping Identity

The role of **translation**, from *Ret Samadhi* to *Tomb of Sand*, becomes a powerful metaphor for the cross-cultural and multilingual nature of identity in the novel. Daisy Rockwell's translation retains much of the original's linguistic hybridity—preserving idioms, regional expressions, and playful shifts in register—thus resisting the flattening of cultural nuance. This act of translation is not merely linguistic; it is ideological. It affirms that identity in *Tomb of Sand* is not rooted in any single language, culture, or nation. Instead, identity flows between tongues and traditions, just as Ma navigates between geographies and emotional states. Translation becomes both a literal and figurative crossing of borders (Banerjee, 2023).

Moreover, within the text, characters frequently code-switch between Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and English, reinforcing the idea that language itself is a site of multiplicity. Ma's thoughts and dialogues are embedded in a multilingual consciousness, a reminder that identity in South Asia is inherently layered and fluid. The refusal to sanitise language in the English translation preserves this complexity and resists cultural homogenisation, affirming a narrative where fragmentation is not a flaw but a form of truth.

## 6. Conclusion

Geetanjali Shree's *Tomb of Sand* offers a powerful literary meditation on identity—not as a fixed or stable entity, but as something perpetually shaped and reshaped by displacement, memory, and acts of personal resistance. Through the journey of Ma, the novel dismantles traditional binaries of gender, age, nation, and language, presenting instead a vision of the self that is dynamic, plural, and deeply embodied. As Ma navigates across physical borders and psychological thresholds, her story

becomes emblematic of how identity can emerge from rupture—not as a return to wholeness, but as a reimagining of what wholeness might mean in a fractured world.

Displacement in *Tomb of Sand* is both a site of trauma and a space of potential. It disrupts inherited narratives of belonging, forcing characters to confront the silences, losses, and erasures embedded in their pasts. Yet it also enables transformation—new friendships, reclaimed voices, and the possibility of fluid subjectivities. Ma’s return to Pakistan is more than a reversal of exile; it is a symbolic crossing into re-narrated history, one that privileges personal memory over nationalist myth. Her evolving relationship with Rosie, her daughter, and herself carves out alternative models of kinship, community, and resistance rooted in care and interdependence.

By foregrounding an aging female protagonist, Shree subverts patriarchal expectations of both literature and life. She offers a feminist politics that is intimate rather than didactic—expressed through gestures, relationships, language, and narrative form. The novel resists closure, embracing ambiguity and multiplicity as essential to postcolonial and feminist storytelling. In doing so, *Tomb of Sand* not only expands the canon of Partition literature but also contributes significantly to global discourses on gender, memory, and postnational identity.

In a world increasingly obsessed with borders and purity—of nations, of language, of self—Shree’s novel affirms the power of porousness, hybridity, and becoming. It is a celebration of stories untold, identities unfinished, and journeys unended.

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