

Adherigaun Narratives and Subaltern Myth Making in *Maidaro*

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Abstract

*The theory of subaltern studies, as the postcolonial way of analyzing and understanding literature and social relations, examines the context of the marginal ideologies, socio-political or literary. The basic value of subaltern philosophy, therefore, is the marginal case of social and political castration however it also includes the issues of domination, marginalization and discrimination caused by already established cultural politics of the society with social and economic diversity. The cultural politics keeps certain group of people under the marginal domain in the process of mythmaking. The society and social values do not accept these groups existing in the cultural politics, but still exploit them, their labour, work and ability in the name of their power as cultural power. Recently, such myths have been on the way to break down as the result of subaltern consciousness. With this sense of cultural politics of mythmaking, this study examines on how social and cultural narratives have raised the subaltern issues in Bhupeen's novel *Maidaro*. The aspiration of this research is to unearth the subaltern narratives of the society depicted in the novel and to find out on how these narratives have become the central factors to dominate and overshadow certain group of people in the name of culture.*

Keywords: *Cultural politics, Dalits, Socio-politics, Subaltern, subaltern narratives*

Introduction

Man/woman is born with nothing, but he/she is supposed to have a history or the past. This particular supposition of inborn history creates discrimination in the social condition, and a person becomes the victim of the social hierarchy. The history makes the division, tradition creates hierarchy, and the culture generates discrimination. This trend has long been conditioned in social structure in almost every society. So has happened in Nepalese societies that people

are hierarchized from the very birth of having a particular history, culture and tradition. As a result, society is involved in mythmaking of touchable and untouchable from the very point of the birth.

Literature, being the result of socio-historical-political-cultural changes of every nation, presents similar picture. Literature, in the subaltern mode, presents the picture of the social hierarchy in two ways: presenting the realistic and dominated condition of the subaltern or marginalized group, and the revolt of the marginalized group. Both ways intend in rethinking the social hierarchy. So, literature is the powerful means to raise the voice of the margin, and to speak the speechless. Bhupeen's fiction, *Maidaro*, as any of the social realistic literary creation, carries challenges, crisis, upheavals and certain stigma of Nepalese society as the power of subaltern hero to represent for the margin. His novel grows out of such swings and establishes itself as a branch of mainstream writing with so-called untouchable or Dalit hero. The history of Dalits is an offspring of socio-political tide in Nepal. This study attempts to analyze the novel, *Maidaro* from the point of subaltern issues and how these issues have been center-lined. The study focuses on the basic theoretical principles of subaltern study, the Dalits and the literature of and about Dalits and how the novel has focused on the picturing cultural domination on these Dalits through social narratives.

Dalits and Subaltern

A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalized or oppressed. Etymologically, from the Latin roots 'sub' means below, and 'alternus' means all others. Hence, *subaltern* is used to describe someone of a low rank as in the military or class as in a caste system. Subalterns occupy entry-level jobs or occupy a lower rung of the "corporate ladder." But the term is also used to describe someone who has no political or economic power, such as a poor person living under a dictatorship.

Conceived by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, 'subaltern' is a code word "for any class of people (but especially peasants and workers) subject to the hegemony of another more powerful class" (Buchanan 455). Adopted strongly by a group of postcolonial studies scholars, Subaltern Studies, the study on the social and cultural conditionings of the marginalized group of the people, has become a sub-discipline of postcolonial studies. Its aim "is to examine the formation of subaltern classes in a variety of settings in south East Asia, but principally India and its near neighbours, with the aim of providing a kind of counter history" (455). Subaltern

studies, as a notion of post-colonial theory, has got a drive due to the effects of globalization on the Third World Countries. Subaltern study derives its force from Marxism, post-structuralism and becomes a part of post-colonial criticism. The term 'subaltern' owes its origin to Antonio Gramsci's writings and underlines a subordinate place in terms of class, gender, caste, race and culture.

Antonio Gramsci's account of the 'subaltern' provides a key theoretical resource for understanding the conditions of poor, the lower class and peasantry in India, and this theoretical outlook equals to the poor and marginalized group of the neighbouring countries like Nepal. Among many areas of marginalization, Dalit is a central marginalization in the name of traditionally rooted untouchable domain. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak proposes the more nuanced, flexible, post-Marxist definition of the subaltern, informed situation of the industrial working class compared with other people. Arnold Gramsci focuses the situation of the rural peasantry that lacks coherence with Marx's traditional perception of the subaltern. Spivak goes one step ahead and discusses the situation of women as subaltern in the post-colonial world. From these points, though not with politically colonized experience, underprivileged Dalits existing in Nepalese societies, women, poor, working peasants group and the powerless and socially marginalized people are the real subalterns in Nepalese context. Spivak prefers to use the 'subaltern' to encompass a range of different subject positions which are not predefined by dominant political discourses. She states that this term suits as it can adjust social identities and struggles of women and colonized. According to her, the flexibility of this term is very important as it can include all types of subjects especially of neglected group to bring them into the main stream.

Dalit is a discriminatory word. It refers to the meaning as 'oppressed' or 'broken' etymologically for the name given to the members of a group who are supposed to be untouchable. Culturally and traditionally, they are supposed to have been born as the lowest caste of all four: Brahmin, Kshetriya, Vaishya and Sudra. An untouchably born man/woman can't enter a Hindu temple or be taught to read. They are banned from fetching water from village taps because their touch would taint the water for everyone else. They have to live outside village boundaries and could not walk through the neighborhoods of higher caste members. If a Brahmin or Kshatriya approached, an untouchable is expected to keep face down on the ground, to prevent even their unclean shadows from touching the higher caste.

A large population of Hindus, with the supposition of tradition as religion, still believes that people are born as touchable and untouchable. An untouchable cannot ascend to a higher

caste within that lifetime; untouchables have to marry fellow untouchables and cannot eat in the same room or drink from the same well as a caste member. This caste system and the oppression of untouchables still hold some sway in Hindu populations. Even some non-Hindu social groups observe caste separation in Hindu countries. This separation has ultimately led to these groups of people to the powerless, marginal and suppressed, hence to the subaltern domain.

The term ‘subaltern’ is a creation as the result of the British Colonial contact. In postcolonial perception, the marginalized, and outsiders from the social and political mainstream are exactly subalterns. This notion has got transferred to the oppressed domain of the population in all societies, and in Nepalese context, Dalits are castrated to this zone by the so-called upper level. The law has restricted this level of social discrimination as touchable and untouchable, but it has become the part of social and cultural practice. In other words, Dalits subalterns are subordinate or inferior.

Dalits are the de facto ‘untouchables’ of Nepal even today. Dalit refers to a group of people who are religiously, culturally, socially, economically and historically subjugated, excluded and treated as untouchables. They are not limited only in any particular geographical region, language, culture and castes. They reside almost everywhere in Nepalese societies. According to National Dalit Commission (NDC), Dalit are defined as ‘ those communities who, by virtue of atrocities of caste based discrimination and untouchability, are most backward in social, economic, educational, political and religious fields, and are deprived of human dignity and social justice’. Dalits are also known as lower caste under the stratified Hindu caste system originated some three thousand years ago. Dalit faces an estimated 205 forms of discriminatory practices in their daily life.

Spivak uses the term subaltern to identify groups of people “who have been marginalized by dominant western forms of rule, whether through the physical occupation of colonialism or through the economic and cultural imperialism” (32). Dalit groups, even further divided in different tribes as Saarki, (surnamed as Nepali) Kaami, (surnamed as B.K) Damai (surnamed as Darji) traditionally, are purely the subaltern group from economic and cultural imperialism. They are really the working class people as they are the ones who perform majority of farmland works, construction and building works, sewing works and other manual works. They are subjugated as working class people economically and also marginalized culturally and socially as untouchable group of people.

Dalits are subaltern people. They are the outsiders from the social mainstream. They are

the 'others' group, always differentiated from the 'ones'. As a result, either they have to accept varying modes of domination silently, or they have to protest against social structure. With this reference, the literature presents the issue of Dalits in two ways: presenting the realistic picture of Dalits and the picture of the domination as it is, and the modes of revolts against the domination. In both ways, Dalit literature is a literature of protest. It becomes the literature of revolt and reform. It primarily talks about injustices done to the Dalits. Hence, it is marked with resistance, the literary resistance as a social movement. It is a committed, spontaneous and resistant voice of the low-cadres of society who have suffered for ages.

Hence, Dalit literature includes two dimensions of presenting Dalit issues of social, economic and political oppression over them. Dalit writers write from their own internalization of the oppression as the part of their own experience, but there are few such voices from the voiceless group. It is the literature of Dalits. The second dimension is raising Dalit issues from non-Dalit domain, yet experiencing the problem as the eyewitnesses. This type of Dalit literature is literature about Dalits. Bhupeen's *Maidaro* centralizes the Dalit theme combining with many other social realistic issues structured in the mode of literature about Dalit.

Probing into Nadeen: A Subaltern Hero

Are all subaltern issues dominated or marginalized or the search of subaltern identity is a search of autonomy? The assertion of "subaltern autonomy belongs to the purpose of this assertion is precisely to conceptualize the domination as a relation of power" (O'Hanlon 84). Similarly, the second point is that "we should seek to understand how different forms of domination have operated in the societies" (84). Having made the statements about power and domination, rather, the categories that we must employ to understand their workings must be as multifarious and nuanced as the courses and sinews through which power runs itself. And a subaltern hero always keeps his/her eyes on the modes of domination and the power relations to overcome these two complexities. Bhupeen's Nadeen is a subaltern hero stepping to the level of ideal hero with the sense of revolt, consciousness, social aptitude and fitness and the mode of escapism, ultimately a beaten by the socio-psychology to the decision of suicide.

Bhupeen has created Nadeen, a young man born and brought up in Dalit culture and community, as a hero in his novel, *Maidaro*. The story begins mysteriously with reference to "the solo art exhibition of Late Nadeen- 2065" (Bhupeen 4). As all the paintings in the exhibition are painted in reversed manner, especially down-sided up and up sided-down, quite different from the usual, and so has happened to the image of the hero of the novel. The story

begins with the death of the hero and ends with the life. Bhupeen has experimented on the imagining and personifying the character. The novel opens with the death of Nadeen, “in general, the stories, as I have heard and read, begin from the birth and end in death. Amrit was starting the story from the last” (30), and ends with his life; still it is not his rebirth or the birth again. The flashback goes in such a strong manner so as to make the whole plot a chain of mystery. The whole novel unfolds the events in Nadeen’s life beginning from the information of death and ends with welcoming him to the new world of his life, hence, not from life to death, but from death to life.

The plot begins with the pathetic picture of Nadeen’s suicide note, “Ooh life! Forgive me. I have taken the path of suicide in life” (29). Nadeen’s brother discloses this fact to Smarana Gurung, who has spent many days in Nadeen’s village, Adheri Gaun just trying to explore the mystery of Nadeen’s disordered paintings. With the reference of the sign of Nadeen’s suicide, Amrit, his brother gets shadowed and Nadeen appears as the central narrator. This shift of narration has changed Nadeen not only as the character, but also as a powerful narrator. He has disclosed every detail of his life, experiences of social and cultural oppression, his story of being an artist with extraordinary nature, struggle of life he has undergone and the folk narratives existing in and around Adherigaun.

Is Nadeen a hero or an escapist? The novel has enough space for discourse. The concept, ‘Subaltern’ indicates to the lower social classes and the other social groups displaced to the margins of the society. He/she is a native man/woman without human agency and is defined and made identified by others or is defined not by himself/herself, but by the social status. A person may speak but he/she is not heard because he/she is a subaltern, “a person without lines of social mobility” (Spivak 28). Nadeen has tried to speak from the point where he is, but he is not heard, never heard and constantly unheard, and is neither at any line of social mobility. He is out of the central line because of his birth as a Dalit, and also because of his socio-economic condition. He has the position of subaltern, the one who has been castrated because he was born as the son of Aaite Saarki, he is identified as a Dalit and he is discriminated from the main stream as an untouchable, and he is oppressed because he is born-poor. All these conditions have made him as a subaltern.

The question is on whether he is a hero or an escapist. *Maidaro*, as a realistic novel, presents the social reality of oppression very clearly. The realistic hero should be “a representative of a social class, a race, a profession or may be a recognizable psychological type” (Scholes et. al. 130), and can be the mixture of social, cultural and psychological quality. Nadeen represents

for a particular group who is socially marginalized, untouchable and subjugated. He is from Saarki tribe but he is the representative character from all untouchables in Nepalese societies, and stands for the same domain. The hero is the central character in any dramatic and narrative work that possesses “particular moral, intellectual and emotional qualities” (Abrams 33). Nadeen has a strong moral life, no matter to the traditionally understood morality distortion of a Dalit having a love and marriage with the so-called upper class girl, that he has done nothing crime as such, he has the strength of his own value of life. Despite having low-casted blood, he has completed graduation in art/painting and works hard on his area giving a different message through his art, and he has the aptitude of social change. With all these instances, Nadeen has the quality of being a hero.

Bhupeen intends to make Nadeen an unquestionably successful hero. Nadeen, having with the question on his emotional and rational decisions, has created his iron mind logic based on his difficulties, hatred from the society and cultural rejection to him. Still he has married Kala, a girl from upper class family, and he has dared a social and cultural revolt.

Caste Subaltern in *Maidaro*: Social or Economic?

Caste tradition in Nepalese societies follows two broad tendencies. Rooted on Marxist principle, one represents ‘economic’ base because it regards castes as social groupings, including racial or ethnic, as largely determined and explained by economic structures and processes. Caste, with the colonial understanding, includes the labour people, and later the postcolonial understanding has slowly destroyed the previously set values of just economic base of the people or the group. The second, based on sociological root, and derived partly from the work of Max Weber, argues that economic explanations are insufficient for understanding the racial or caste features of social groupings. While the first approach tends to be functionalist in its understanding of race or caste, the second tends to ignore economic questions and is often descriptive rather than analytical. Both arguments include complex arguments. The former privileges class, and the latter caste in understanding social formations. The differences between them are, however, not merely theoretical but have direct consequences for political realities, and “if racial relations are largely the offshoots of economic structures, then clearly the effort should be to transform the latter; on the other hand, if this is not the case, racial oppression needs to be accorded a different political weightage and specificity” (Loomba 125). Race or caste, both, economically and socially, have long been relegated, and considered as outsider and out-castrated one from the mainstream of politics and economic growth in

Nepalese societies like the one Bhupeen has depicted and Nadeen has undergone in different circumstances; either choosing Kala as his beloved and marrying her, or establishing an art gallery in Pokhara. Kala's involvement to a revolutionary party and Nadeen's devotion to the same are active and passive struggling tendencies against both economically and socially set oppressive ideologies.

Dalits, as the race or caste similar to the caste Nadeen was born in and brought up, are the commonest of the common people in Nepalese societies, and are heavily exploited socially, economically, politically and culturally. Born as a Dalit has castrated Nadeen into the realm of economic hardship, the privation even to continue his education after SLC, the poverty of hand to mouth connection, the adversity of family affairs. The economic hardship has influenced on his mental, psychological and intellectual growth. Similarly, based on social discrimination, his Dalit identity has predisposed himself as untouchable, hence castrated away from many social, cultural and human activities. These people, either psychologically or physically, struggle in economic, social and religious spheres, and also aim at reformation in the way Nadeen has been doing through his life till the time he has chosen life-altering decision.

Are Nadeens still Mute?

Nadeen is a character in the novel in particular, but at the same time he has a character to represent for innumerable Nadeens who have been marginalized, suppressed, and castrated to socially hatred condition by the social and cultural system. Nadeen's art stands for democracy, equality, fraternity and freedom. It is the expression of emancipation of unheard voices to the silent voices of revolt, and defends human values in general.

Revolt is always a part of subaltern ideology and subaltern realization. Dalit subaltern is not only experiencing oppression, social and economic, but also a mode of revolt, either creative or destructive in an organized way. It is the revolt from within and from outside, from subaltern and from center, and from the mid and end. Nadeens are the people from subaltern domain with the note presenting problems and confusions born of their hardships, helplessness, ruin and anxiety, a loud note voicing their pain and anguish; a note desiring power, self and designation which society has deprived them of, though all are human beings. Silently tolerating all these beyond limit since ages, now this class talks about the sorrowful tale of their entire society instead of their personal problems and sorrows.

Nadeen wants to be a torchbearer of freedom. His aim is to open the doors of knowledge

and culture for the socially and economically crushed people and to mould this dominating cultural organization into a humane form through his art and creation. His involvement in political programs in the village and his distinct art tries to provide a platform for the formation of casteless and classless society. The art he makes and up-sided down and down-sided up pictures he portrays give expression to the exploitation and injustice of the world. His art is about the hatred for, injustice to and neglect of the downtrodden. But at the same time it is also about awakening human emotions and feelings.

The theme of the novel should be viewed from the sociological yardsticks, from the yardstick of Dalit. Nadeens suffer from poverty, servitude, insult, neglect, hatred, exploitation, and inter-class or intra-class problems arising out of these sufferings, and look for freedom, security, self-respect and consideration that the lower strata of society are deprived of. In many points the novel highlights the degradation of human values because of vanity and prejudice. As a result, it seeks not sympathy but empathy. It does not aim to sympathize with the sufferers but to create equinity and equanimity.

Bhupeen, being from non-Dalit birth, but having the close observation of the marginalizing chronic tradition of the community, is committed to articulating the lives and histories of such groups in an appropriate and non-exploitive way, especially through writing, a strong mode of creative voice of freedom. He has observed the social and political oppressions in his society, Adherigaun, and the surrounding area, and has combined the oral myths of that particular place, especially linked with the socio-cultural demarcations towards the people of lower social and economic strata. Nadeens, the products of Adherigaun subaltern domain, have either to accept all the social cultural suppressions as the mutes or have to choose to commit suicide resulting a mode of failure; neither the intended freedom to life nor the freedom to death.

Adherigaun Narratives: Subaltern Myth-making

Narratives are the production of social reality and the social imaginings. They are historically passing through generations whether they come in the forms of literature or not. Those, which come in the form of literature, have crossed the territory of geographical and social locations. Narratives tell about the society, culture, history, manner and priority of the lifestyle of the people who follow it and “Master narratives reproduce and legitimize dominant ideologies and social and cultural institutions, norms, and values” (Castle120). In term of postmodern condition of social narratives Lyotard has distinct view to the status of master narratives and

speculates on the viability of alternative models of narrative based on “paralogy,” a mode of narrative legitimation that is not concerned with promulgating “law as a norm,” but rather with making moves within a “pragmatics of knowledge” (Lyotard 8, 60–61). These master narratives, in post-Marxist point of view, are the reflections of the social class ideology. Maidaro consists of many narratives as the master narratives representing for the social reality of discrimination passing through generations as the process of mythmaking. The narratives, as the byproducts of the society reflect some consciousness as subaltern ones, “subaltern consciousness is the product of elite discourse, not a concrete entity in the world” (Boehmer 354). They present the conscious of the privileged group as well as the underprivileged group, but with different understanding.

Two types of narratives exist in the societies simultaneously: the state-preserved narratives and state-ignored narratives. The narratives “preserved by the state in archives and other public institutions- that is, the narratives most commonly used by historians - belong overwhelmingly to the ruling classes, and owe their existence largely to a ruling class’s need for security and control” (Pandey 282). The state-ignored narratives are the ones which exactly focus on the real image of the social priority, hence the social reality, no matter the used by historians or not. Adherigaun narrative is the second type, the ignored one, the neglected one and historically not depicted yet, but worth portraying to the understanding of subaltern reality.

The original narrative of Adherigaun has a connection to the belief of *maijharo* (*maidaro* in this novel) as a part of tradition dominating Dalit caste and showing prominence of the upper caste in the whole society. Having a love relation with a Dalit youth to the physical and spiritual level, young wife of Ramsagar Upadhyaya, a woman from Brahmin caste, has been castrated to extreme punishment and abandonment and social rejection. With the same relation, “the Dalit youth has been punished physically even to the level of cutting down the urinary/sexual organ” (Bhupeen 141). They both have chosen the mode of suicide as the result of social and cultural hatred, rejection and domination. This story of social castration of the Dalit boy and Brahmin woman has become the purview of social and cultural myth making for many generations. This couple has remained as the symbol of demolisher, killer and slayer in the whole Adherigaun in the mode of *maijharo*. They have become the means of Dalit marginalization and the symbol of wickedness, sinfulness and evil for many generations in the society. Not only in their life, but also they have been evil symbolized after the death as the monsters waiting for the *maijharo*, the death in the form of stone symbol at the side of the village. This narrative has produced many other similar subaltern stories as the local myths and

the beyond.

The narrative of Dinanath Pandit exposes the so-called superior and so-called inferior ideology of the caste system. Religiously and culturally strict Pandit supposes the Dalits as having all evil in their presence. The tradition of touchability and untouchability, and following this strict principle has become the guiding principle for his life style. Seeing the Dalit is evil, and touching Dalits becomes the hell in life. Both Nadeen and his father have harshly become the victim of this culture many times. And Dinanath Pandit has lost his life in the sparkling Adheri Khola (river) as the result of his belief on untouchability, as “Pandit saw Nadeen’s father in the bridge, he was afraid of closing to and touching with a Dalit, he tried to cross the river from water instead of going through the bridge” (90). Adheri Khola and Adherigaun have gnawed such many lives in the name of caste-based and culture-based relegation.

The greatest subaltern narrative in Adherigaun gets reflected in the twin-tap in the village. The social development of bringing water tap in the village has brought a great happiness to the villagers. But, this decision ends with the complete materialization of the social discrimination between so-called touchable and untouchable groups building a twin-water tap, the same tap with opposite water nasals, “water from one nasal to dalits and another’s to Hikmatsingh” (180) because “water touched by Dalits is not touchable to him” (180). Another example of Adherigaun narrative is the event of finding Batuli Sarkini’s Bulaki (stud nose ring) at Hikmatsingh Pradhan’s sweater. Whether Hikmatsingh has got physical relation with Batuli Dalit or not is one factor, but what matters much is the social perception, social rejection and cultural refusal on the relation between Dalit woman and Kshetri man as the Adherigaun caste ideology, “Dalit’s (Batuli’s) lips and vagina are touchable and compatible, but not her water to Hikmatsingh” (181). This subaltern ideology has long become the guiding principle for the people of Adherigaun as the narratives.

Ramsagar Upadhyaya and his family culture, Dinanath Pandit and Hikmatsingh represent for the Adherigaun subaltern mythmaking that divides the social inhabitants as higher and lower class socially and culturally. These myths are not just the past stories, but they guide the people to behave in the social affairs. People with hard work, sacred love, pure heart, and unbiased mind and action are neglected most, marginalized to the wall, destined to poverty, ordained to be victimized and castrated to the suffering in the flame of discrimination due to subaltern mythmaking.

Maidaro Narrating Subalterns

In this way, as a common practice, elders in Adherigaun narrate Majjharo and other traditional stories in social and cultural settings and even beyond. Such narratives are intended to make the youngsters and children knowledgeable regarding the social collectivity of the values, traditions and norms of the communities if not misused or misinterpreted. Narrating them is also, in a way, making them understand their role in the collectivity, but they have different effect in case of Adherigaun. On their positive reflect, the narratives of Adherigaun society help to preserve the culture and history, but at the same time, the narratives, on their cultural practices, have become the mode of creating discrimination and domination in the name of tradition and myth making. As a result, the representative characters, Nadeens have to be muted, Batulis have to be castrated, Kalas have to be destined to chose the hardship of the revolt, Dinanaths have to be flooded and Hikmatsinghs have to be protected by the socio-politics, and there characters have become the symbolic archetypes for silencing Dalits and other caste-based marginalized. The stories have been preserved as the archetypes and are passing through the culturally grown up generations. Having with the knowledge gained through the stories, these narratives speak of social, moral, ethical values besides spiritual and mystical truths. Such mystical truths, in all modes, lead to social discrimination, and ultimately social anarchy.

Hence, the event of twin water-tap, Kala's sacrifice for the social change, Nadeen's attempt to bring the change through art, Dinanath's superstition, Hikmatsingh's selfishness and opportunist politics in the village represent the social reality of Adherigaun guided by the cultural myth in particular, but they, at the same time, have been extended to the native narratives of caste-based social and cultural castration in the Nepalese societies. Ever told, but never written narrative of Majjharo, as a backbone, has germinated problems of denial, oppression, dislocation, racism, assimilation, and activism, and has dedicated to express the facets of local culture and society, which include its stories of dreaming, traditions and practices. *Maidaro*, hence, with all these existing Dalit conditions, unheard subaltern voices and narratives, has brought the issues of master realities of Adherigaun culture as the central thrust of his novel.

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