

## Biophilia and Modus Vivendi in Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island*

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### Abstract

Based on Amitav Ghosh's novel *Gun Island* (2019), this article endeavors to depict that the advancing limitless pursuit of desires, anthropocentric customs, and the concept of a "happy life" are the driving forces behind climate change and ecological degradation. It aims to delineate the disastrous consequences of changing climatic conditions, declining plant and animal life, and their escalating influence on humans and the natural environment. This paper discusses ecocritical theories such as 'biophilia' and 'modus vivendi' that emphasize the intrinsic correlation between humans and nature on the one hand and, on the other, the conflicting coexistence of humans and nature respectively. Furthermore, the paper elucidates the impact of these disastrous consequences on marginalized human existence through an analysis of Ghosh's novel. Ultimately, it aims to illustrate the significant role of human intervention in the global environmental catastrophe during the 17th century, by examining the folktale of Bonduki Sadagar that Ghosh divulges in *Gun Island*.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, biophilia, modus vivendi, migration, nature

### Introduction

Amitav Ghosh (1956- ) is one of the most-read Indian writers writing in English. He has reached a point in his career where his consciousness is completely centered on the relationship between nature and man, a viewpoint widely known as 'ecocriticism'. According to Clark (2011), it is "a study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, usually considered from out of the current global environmental crisis and its revisionist challenge to given modes of thought and practice" (p. xiii). The focus is usually on the prevailing worldwide environmental catastrophe and its impact on established patterns of thought and behaviour (p. xiii). Hence, ecocriticism deals with the inevitable connection between man and nature, which humans often see but deny or misunderstand.

Ghosh has problematized this already intricate relationship on a new level in his fiction. His writings deal with historical settings, especially those around the Indian Ocean and adjacent peripheries. Nevertheless, he only partially depends on his subjective experience and perceptions while writing fiction. He involves himself in the scientific studies of nature that are evident in his novels like *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019), where he elaborately narrates, through the form of fiction, the lifecycle, movement, breeding, and gradual extinction of the Irrawaddy Dolphin. Another noteworthy aspect of his nature writing is his vast knowledge of mythology and folktales. Mythology and folktales are imaginary stories deeply rooted in the history of the inhabitants of a specific global region. Mythological legends and folktales were directly born out of the soil and experience of a specific region. Humans compose proverbs, folktales, legends, and mythology from their experience and confrontation with nature. By focusing on the novel *Gun Island*, this essay will reveal how Ghosh has amalgamated facts, fiction, mythology, folktales, and science for an efficient and realistic presentation of the inevitable relationship and interdependence between man and nature as it ensues from the birth of our progenitors. It will further demonstrate how a species called Homo Sapiens is threatening the natural environment which is, in a roundabout way, omniscidal.

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### Literature Review

The ecological environment is vital in determining human nature; it provides a background for environment, culture, and civilization. Carson's *Silent Spring* (2012) is considered one of the classics that launched the environmental movement. She dedicated the book to Schweitzer by quoting him: "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and forestall. He will end by destroying the earth" (p. iv). The Global Risks Report (2024) from the World Economic Forum identified ecological crises and other environmental concerns as the top ten global risks expected to emerge in the next decade, putting the issue as "Extreme weather events are anticipated to become even more severe, as the top ranked risk over the next decade. Mirroring last year's results, the perceived severity of Biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse worsens the most of all risks, increasing by a full two Likert points, rising from #20 in the short-term to 3rd place". Tagore (1915) wrote in *Sadhana: The Realization of Life*: "When a man does not realize his kinship with the world, he lives in a prison house whose walls are alien to him" (p. 9). However, despite the emphasis on climate change on a universal scale and the profusion of scientific evidence available on the issue, it remains an inadequately addressed problem in different forms of literature, especially those from Southeast Asia.

Since human beings have an affinity with the natural world, this affinity is spontaneous and genetically determined in their mutual interaction. This very phenomenon could be labeled as biophilia in literary interpretations. Wilson first coined the term in his 1984 book *Biophilia*. The notion, as he defined it in the book's prologue, refers to the intrinsic inclination to direct our attention toward living beings and their life-sustaining processes, insisting that as an offspring of nature, humans naturally feel a kinship with nature. He further asserts that our very existence relies on this inclination and that our essence is intertwined with it. He also highlights that this penchant fuels our optimism toward existence as a living body on planet Earth. He posits that as we deepen our understanding of other organisms, we develop a stronger appreciation for them, as well as for ourselves (1984, pp. 1-2). This idea somewhat echoes 'bioregionalism', properly put forward by Buell (2011) in his essay "Ecocriticism: Some Emerging Trends" (p. 88). Alam (2019) in his article "Doing Environmental Criticism from Where We Are", further elaborated on bioregionalism as an organic inevitability "to promote one's attachment to the ecological region one is heir to and to have a sense of place, particularly articulated in one's literary traditions" (p. 7).

On the other end, "modus vivendi" is a term that is used in political philosophy. On a literal dimension, it means "the way of life", based on an agreement that countenances contradictory existences to cohabit. However, that is not all. The human-nature relation is no less than a political one. A political philosopher, Newey (2017) illustrated this term in his article "Modus Vivendi, Toleration, and Power". He points out that the implications of the idea are commonly felt when multiple parties reach a compromise due to a lack of sufficient strength to enforce their preferred system(s). However, according to most conventional interpretations of toleration, individuals only practice tolerance when they can act differently. Therefore, the shared accepted belief that modus vivendi insists merely another connotative take on toleration is found to be challenged. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the phenomenon is true regarding the human-nature relationship. They coexist, though in a contradictory way, as nature tolerates because humans have the power to do otherwise. In "City and Village" (1924), Tagore mourns the world invaded by consumerism where 'civilization' itself has turned "into a vast catering establishment", a demon with "an unnatural appetite" (Tagore, 1996, p. 512). We may wonder whether truly man is impulsively a menace to nature. It is as if the communities of men do not even realize that they are anti-ecological. While human

refugees need shelter, wildlife, too, needs its sanctuary, and this is a strange antinomy. As asserted by Alam (2019), Ghosh's very intention in writing this book is ultimately to convey the deeply concerning impact of human actions on our environment and ourselves, emphasizing that there is an urgent need for proactive measures to mitigate the damage and prevent apocalyptic consequences, such as an eventual extinction of the atmosphere, bodies of water, land, communities, and the environment.

To understand this codependence of man and nature or *modus vivendi*, references will be made to *Gun Island's* (2019) predecessor, *The Hungry Tide* (2004), where a group of refugees builds a habitat on an island in the bosom of the Sundarbans, the greatest mangrove forest in the world, and one of the wealthiest nucleus of flora and fauna. They are destitute and compelled to leave their homeland to seek refuge. As they settle in the forest, they cut down trees, establish farms, and grow cattle, occupying the abode of tigers. As the tigers, being hemmed in, face a food crisis, they encroach into human habitats. Then, humans who invade the tigers' habitat consider the tigers to be invaders.

### **Myths and Legends**

*Gun Island* (2019) expounds Ghosh's passion for myths, folktales, and science, and he discovers biophilia in the course. However, *modus vivendi* brings about confusion, when misunderstood. To make it clear, Ghosh puts particular emphasis on man's approach towards nature that intentionally, unintentionally, or deliberately unbalances nature. The natural food cycle has made one creature reliant on the other, creating hostility among them. Whenever humans build establishments anywhere, they cause ecocide and destroy flora and fauna, thus forcing wildlife to the edge of extinction. Violation of natural symmetry is synonymous with violating the food chain: the disappearance of one animal leads to starvation for another. When this happens, the ravenous beasts invade the human locality for food. The rule is simple: if humans violate natural life, nature violates human life. A natural retaliation sets out to work. Here, nature works like a force of 'karma'. Whatever humans throw at nature returns to them like a boomerang. However, man has a remarkable ability to invent weapons to keep themselves safe. Therefore, an eternal conflict ensues.

In the novel, the version of the legend of Chand Sadagar narrated by Deen's acquaintance addresses Chand Sadagar as "Bonduki Sadagar" or the Gun Merchant. In Bangla, Bunduk refers to a gun, and searching for the origin of the word "Bonduki Sadagar" compels Deen to set out on an inclusive expedition. He finally solves the mystery. This unanticipated iteration of the story directs Deen to visit an ancient temple cloaked in the Sundarbans. His voyage unfurls a chain of incidents revealing the current integrity of ecological crises and troublesome migration patterns of both man and animal caused by it.

Similarly, the legend of Bon Bibi shows that nature, beasts, and man must exist harmoniously for the sake of world peace and balance. If humans fail to comprehend the signs of nature, disaster is inevitable. Piya, a cetologist, hears of the existence of dolphins in the Ganges. She is seen returning to India from abroad while studying as a member of the greater Indian diaspora. While investigating the condition of dolphins in the Sundarbans, she comes across the myths and nature of her motherland, of which she has hitherto been entirely ignorant. In this relation, it can be argued that Ghosh reveals the core of Indian nature through extensive attention to her myths and folktales.

Ghosh subtly connects *Gun Island's* (2019) climax with the Gun Merchant's legend. Therefore, his main emphasis lies on the enduring relevance of traditional folktales to modern society. It is found that the Gun Merchant was seized by pirates at first. He was then transported to be sold as an enslaved person on the Island of Chains, also known as 'Shikoldwip'. The folktale recounts a remarkable event during

the Gun Merchant's journey to the Island. The avian and aquatic beings rescue him. Cinta's statement regarding the Arabic designation for Sicily as 'siqillia' bears a rather striking resemblance to the pronunciation 'shikol'. Cinta is a scholar from Venice working on the role of Venice in the medieval spice trade from India. She believes that the merchant went to Sicily when the miracle happened. The Blue Boat is then seen sailing towards the same destination as the novel approaches the climax. Similar to the legend of the Gun Merchant, an unexplainable event rescued the stranded immigrants aboard their Blue Boat. Myriad dolphins and whales from nearly all Mediterranean species appear and encircle the boat, effectively forming a barrier against the approaching warships. Millions of migratory birds contribute an additional dimension to this eerie spectacle.

Moreover, the presence of bioluminescence is seen around the boat. In almost no time, the water is filled with a glow of an unearthly green color. It is bright enough to make the outlines of the dolphins and whales clear to the vision. As narrated, "We were transfixed by this miraculous spectacle: the storm of birds circling above, like a whirling funnel, and the graceful shadows of the leviathans in the glowing green water below" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 282). This short excerpt from the novel somewhat allegorically depicts the climate-induced migration of humans and other creatures alike. Throughout the novel, Ghosh upholds this motif, particularly climate-induced ones, be it contingent upon men or wildlife. Creatures like spiders, snakes, dolphins, and even shipworms are depicted in unusual and unanticipated habitats as variations in temperature and clamminess interrupt certain migration patterns of theirs. We see an incident where a yellow-bellied snake washes up on Venice Beach's coast. It is one of the many instances of such migration depicted in the novel, again reinforcing the repercussions of destroying nature from its original state.

### **Folktales**

In his article "Wild Fiction", Ghosh (2022) stated that human beings' unique characteristics are their capacity to perceive the world through stories (p. 1). Most folk tales are human stories. In their hands, ghosts, jinns, and fairies also become humans. Nowhere in folktales and myths is race or sectarianism seen. *Gun Island* (2019) revolves around Dinanath Datta (Deen), a dealer of rare books. He is based in Brooklyn and is of Bangladeshi origin. At the novel's beginning, Deen visits Kolkata to avoid the Brooklyn winter. At a party in Kolkata, Deen comes across a distant relative who narrates an unconventional version of a folktale with which Deen is very familiar. It is a legend orally transmitted across generations as a famous Bengali folktale. The legend involves Chand Sadagar, a merchant, and Manasa Devi, the goddess of serpents. The folktale presents the battle undertaken by Manasa Devi to turn Chand Sadagar into her devotee and his adamant refusal to pay her homage. When Chand Sadagar does not agree to worship Manasa, the wrathful deity bites his son, Lakhinder. Later, when she is satisfied with the worship of Behula, Manasa brings Lakhinder back to life, but Chand Sadagar has to offer sacrifices at her altar. As a symbol of Brahmanical religion, he is forced to surrender to the regional folk deities. The goddess caused famines, droughts, and other natural disasters in response to the merchant's provocations, costing him both his family and money. The goddess follows him, even when he leaves his own country and seeks safety in other nations. Ultimately, the merchant promises to become a devotee of hers and construct a temple in her honor. Deen's relative comes to the merchant's shrine in the Sundarbans centuries later. Here, Manasa personifies nature, and the local custom of worship signifies the close bond the populace shares with nature. When nature faces injustice, it retaliates, often in an inexorable way that seems preternatural to humans. Those retaliations usually take the form of orally transmitted legends of creatures or monsters, and Manasa's is one such case. Through this example, Bangladesh is presented as a country rich in mythology and biodiversity.

Ghosh has coalesced mythology and folktales with science, two contrasting elements, to depict the actual affiliation between man and nature to show how the natural equilibrium, when intruded upon by human beings, starts to decline. The whole world is now vibrant with environmental movements, ironically indicating that nature is doubtlessly under threat. The more humans seem to approach closer the more annihilation seems inevitable. Are 'nature' and 'human nature' divergent, then? Can human beings go on with their regeneration and extend the borders of their civilization without distorting nature in the outcome? Alternatively, is it the universal rule that man is destined to feed on nature? *Gun Island* (2019) raises questions like these. Ghosh has adopted Indian, especially Bengali, mythology and folktales to set them successfully in the modern world of ecological crises. In *The Song of the Earth*, Bate (2001) writes: "Myths are necessary imaginings, exemplary stories which help our species make sense of its place in the world" (p. 25). Therefore, when man becomes an antagonist to nature, he cannot comprehend the sense of its place in the world. Ghosh's novels reveal the truth that not always does man demolish nature on purpose, as explained in the numerous scientific discussions related to climate in *Gun Island*. However, Ghosh sustains the notion throughout the novel primarily through an air of myth and folktales.

When Deen visits the temple of Manasa Devi, Tipu, a smuggler who helps people from India and Bangladesh immigrate illegally to other countries where work and money are easier to come by, is bitten by a snake. His life is saved, yet, this incident triggers a string of eerie events that starts from Tipu's vision about Rani, a stranded dolphin. Even after coming back to Brooklyn, Deen remains disconcerted and intrigued by the legend of the Gun Merchant after he returns to Brooklyn. When Cinta invites him to travel to Los Angeles, ostensibly to attend a conference, he embarks on a quest to unravel the mystery surrounding the origins of the fable.

### **Ecological Disturbances: The Sundarbans, Los Angeles and Venice**

Ghosh depicts Deen's journey from the Sundarbans to Los Angeles and later to Venice as an essential means to capture the intercontinental connection these coexisting localities share, which in other words echoes the same cohabitation principle 'modus vivendi' itself stands for. In addition, he does so through the journey of a protagonist who is on his way to unravel the mystery behind the origin of a well-known fable. Furthermore, the author takes the readers themselves on a journey where Deen develops an anxious awareness of the environmental catastrophes occurring in different locations throughout the world that he travels. As he attends a conference inaugurated in LA with a preamble by a stylish young historian about "Climate and Apocalypse in the 17th Century" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 114), he experiences an epiphany on how a shared spirit of ecological symmetry permeates all the world's geo-diverse scenarios. According to the young historian, the seventeenth century was a time of severe ecological imbalance, often labeled as the "Little Ice Age". He goes on to report how temperatures at that time worldwide had plunged sharply, probably due to the oscillation in solar commotion or an epidemic of volcanic eruptions. Famine, droughts, and pandemics had smacked many world regions in the seventeenth century. Concurrently, a series of comets bombarded the sky. The Earth had been traumatized by a terrific outburst of tectonic activity; earthquakes had devastated localities, and volcanoes had evicted countless amounts of dust and debris into the atmosphere. Millions had died in several parts of the world; the population had decreased by a third.

Later, during her delivery of the closing address at the conference, Cinta mentions Venice as a "microcosm within a larger entity" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 125), again hinting at the undercurrent of ecological imbalances the West (Venice) happens to share with the East (the subcontinent). From her speech, Deen reminisces how Rafi, a

peasant boy who knows stories about the significance of ‘the shrine’ in the legend of the Gun Merchant, pointed out the precise location where the merchant might have dwelt to escape the anger of Manasa Devi. This incident further crystalizes the congruence regarding ecological imbalance between the continents. Ghosh apprises us of the fact that the pivot of ecological imbalance converges on the same point. When Cinta directs her attention to the etymological background of the name ‘Venice’, she further explains that the name has spread widely through Arabic, reaching Persia and certain regions of India. Interestingly, in these areas, firearms are still referred to as ‘bundook’, which is essentially the same as ‘Venice’ or ‘Venetian’ (Ghosh, p. 137). However, Deen concludes abruptly that connotation-wise “Bonduki Sadagar” might stand for more than its literal English translation, which in this case, is the “Gun Merchant”. The phrase might just suggest that it is a merchant who traveled to Venice, again suggesting the seemingly detached events as a part of the overall meaning-making process under the biophilic connection between humans and the forces of nature or occurrences that affect them.

As the conference ensues till its closing ceremony, Deen confirms the same notion as he keeps recalling the many droughts, famines, storms, and plagues that followed the Gun Merchant as he ran around the world to flee the rage of Manasa Devi. Through the historian’s speech and Cinta’s closing remarks, Ghosh discreetly connects the legend of the Gun Merchant with the Little Ice Age, thus depicting the hazardous and erratic ecology of the 21st century. He applies the legend of the Gun Merchant as a connecting device to reveal equivalence between the Little Ice Age and our current circumstances in the subcontinent where famines, floods, tropical storms, forest fires, and plagues have become a part of daily life. This points out that the same environmental disasters occurring in Venice in the distant past and the Sundarbans at present reflect the shared spirit of the earth. The two situations differ only in the point that the past one was natural and the present one is anthropogenic. It is the propensity that various organisms should cohabit in a natural environment, that is ‘modus vivendi’. But at the present time, whatever ecocide is occurring in the Sundarbans is man-made. Eventually, the new information Deen gathers from the conference causes him to travel to Venice himself later where he encounters extreme climatic cataclysms, illegal immigrants’ struggles, and unprecedented animal migration, repeatedly reinforcing how climate-induced migration is gradually becoming a common transcontinental scenario across the globe. Blom (2019) writes in his book *Nature’s Mutiny*:

Then as now, there is pressure from climate change on economic and social structures, on natural resources and social cohesion—forcing countless people to leave their homes, their families, their countries and thereby disrupting social structures and practices in place for generations. Then, as now, a shift in weather patterns caused natural disasters, upending societies and creating fear, as well as exacerbating the need for change. Then as now, the world’s most successful economies operate on a system of economic growth based on increasing exploitation of human and natural resources. (p. 129)

Similar to what can be gathered from this statement, Ghosh portrays Venice as a microcosm of contemporary society by illustrating the successive occurrences of various environmental calamities. Here, an aqua alta’s initial occurrence results in flooding and elevated tides. Subsequently, on the next day, an unprecedented tempest with powerful gusts and a severe hailstorm ensued, which was then succeeded by a tornado. In the past, such repetitive disasters were exclusively depicted in varying works of fiction and deemed implausible. However, today, our climate has grown extremely disordered to the extent that it can rapidly manifest as a tangible phenomenon.

Ghosh conducted a similar writerly investigation in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) as well, where he details a freak tornado

in 1978 that he saw in Delhi. He simultaneously writes about the 2012 Hurricane Sandy that struck New York's east coast. He anticipates that we are heading towards an epoch of such climatic phenomenon that will turn out to be a 'new regular' recurrence coupled with "flash floods, hundred-year storms, persistent droughts, spells of glacial lakes" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 33). Ghosh assures the readers of one thing: these climatic disasters are not supernatural but "cumulative human actions" (p. 41). He further asks the readers to attempt and comprehend "how deeply we are mired in the Great Derangement: our lives and choices are enframed in a pattern of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but towards our self-annihilation" (Ghosh, p. 149). To recognize the novelist's lifelong dedication to the causes of environmental sustenance, one can resort to the Indian historian Chakrabarty's affirmation in his 2009 article "The Climate of History: Four Theses" that if someone thinks about the environmental disaster, s/he will comprehend that human beings have reached a point when "the climate... and the overall environment" have come to "a tipping point at which disaster seems to be looming for humans who have by now made themselves geological agents of catastrophic change" (p. 206). From the historiographer's remark and the discussion above, it can be concluded that Ghosh indicates a past-centric future in *Gun Island* in every sense of what it means by apocalyptic foretelling. The "Little Ice Age" is thus but an impending aftermath if proper steps are ignored.

### Conclusion

All in all, the narratives in *Gun Island* (2019) center on the pursuit of the human condition within an environmental framework, intertwined with mythology and folklore and the escalating catastrophe of climate change. Its narrative showcases an intricate and interwoven storyline to create that complex interconnection of opposites. The plot juxtaposes humans and animals, historical and contemporary elements, and the natural and supernatural realms. This article has sought to examine how a connection between these seeming opposites is evident in their fundamental aspects. *Gun Island* utilizes the myth of the Gun Merchant as a central connection to establish a parallel between the historical period known as the "Little Ice Age" and our current situation, in which occurrences such as starvation, floods, storms, forest fires, and pandemics have become conventional in our daily existence. Concepts like biophilia and 'modus vivendi' are, indeed, evident throughout the plot as it approaches its climax. The novel exhibits the presence of biophilia, which refers to the inherent inclination of humans towards nature. However, the notion of modus vivendi reveals that humans reject the probable inherence of affinity as 'nature' and 'human nature' are contradictory. To implement the 'modus vivendi', individuals must recognize the imperative of living in harmony with nature. It ends with the confirmation that if humans fail to realize the necessity of aligning with nature, it will lead to catastrophic outcomes for the existence of *homo sapiens* in the world.

This novel uncovers unparalleled climatic problems as the primary cause of these natural disasters. The text further highlights migrations caused by climate change toward the end of the novel, illustrating the displacement of individuals and entire ecosystems from their original locations. As climate-induced migration further brings humans and aquatic life to the same point when a vessel of illegal migrants and endangered dolphins are visible along the coast of Venice, we see the character of Piya pondering, "There's a lot we still don't know about cetaceans and their behaviour" (Ghosh, 2019, p. 275). The text equally emphasizes the significant shifts in migration patterns among various species due to climate change and rising temperatures in water bodies. While portraying a sense of prudence for impending calamity and tragedy, *Gun Island* primarily aims to instill optimism in readers for a more promising future. Simply put, the story of the novel revolves around voyages in search of the human condition in the environmental context, superimposed with myth and folktales and the amplifying climate change crisis. It presents a complex,

entwined plot. The plot affixes man and beasts, past and present, natural and the paranormal.

*Gun Island* (2019) employs the legend of the Gun Merchant as a core link to sketch equivalence between the “Little Ice Age” and our present-day scenario, where famine, floods, storms, forest fire, and pandemics have turned out to be an element of our daily lives. The literary application of biophilia and modus vivendi can be felt at every turn as the plot heads toward the climax. Biophilia, or humans’ natural affinity, is present throughout the work in conspicuous contexts. However, Ghosh’s intricate take on ‘modus vivendi’ shows us that man denies that affinity as ‘nature’ and human nature are inherently contradictory. To realize the values of the modus vivendi, humans must identify the necessity of cohabitating with nature. If humans do not acknowledge that conformation with nature is an essential precondition for their own existence on the earth, catastrophe will ensue. This novel reveals unrivaled climatic crises as the prime reason for these natural catastrophes. It becomes a loud and clear plea for essential migrations due to climatic change as the novel dexterously depicts people and entire habitats being deracinated from their native land and the radical transformations in the migration patterns among different species owing to climate change and warming waterways. Despite depicting cautionary calls of imminent disaster and catastrophe, *Gun Island* offers its readers hope for a better tomorrow. It ends on a note that suggests how nature neither loves nor hates humans. It has its unique religion. Nature is not man’s child; instead, the opposite is true; this is where man has a misconception about his place on the earth. A tree that can shade a weary wayfarer on a calm day can kill him with a single bough on a stormy night. The romantic deep blue sky can hurl a slice of thunder on a man to death. Humans have to realize this and take service from nature without distorting it, which is precisely what Ghosh and his novel are all about.

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