

## **MULTIPLE SELF-IDENTITIES ISSUE IN LLOYD FERNANDO'S *GREEN IS THE COLOUR* (1993): A POSTMODERN INTERPRETATION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper seeks to investigate the concept of multiple self-identities and its materialization within a Malay woman character in Lloyd Fernando's novel *Green is The Colour* (1993), by employing postmodern theory to support the discussion. It also intends to analyse how Malay women who are bound by their religion and cultural tenets, move away from the norm. This character does not conform to the typical, predetermined, traditional notion of Malay women's self-identity. She has instead, moved away from the traditional notion of Malay self-identity, which is based on the Malay culture and Islamic values. On the contrary, she has acquired new trends for her self-identity. This self-identity is portrayed in the postmodern condition. Sara is, borrowing a term in Rick Wade's 2002 article, "socially constructed". She is created and defined by her unsightly and unstable circumstances, which she has little or no control of at all. Her self-identity changes when her circumstances change. Her self-identity then becomes fragmented and, as a result, exists in multiplicity. This character becomes postmodernist character which does not have inner, stable self-values. This female character, although her presence in Fernando's novel is limited in comparison to the male characters, is still very important to the work. Through this character, readers get a glimpse of the silenced but not forgotten Malaysia's past. Through her presence too, readers can view the various positions of the Malay women during the turbulent period of Malaysia's history.*

**Keywords:** *multiple self-identities, fragmented*

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### **Introduction**

#### **The Issue of Multiple Self-Identities**

The interest to pursue the issue of multiple self-identities within the character of Sara, a Malay woman in Lloyd Fernando's *Green is The Colour* (1993) is sparked by the setting of the novel itself. *Green is The Colour* was set during the recent aftermath of racial and political riots of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969. This interest is due to the fact that the human self often undergoes some changes. These changes are more apparent during critical times such as the racial tension as evident in the novel. Since this study is about a Malay woman who has undergone changes because of unsightly circumstances to the point that she has multiple self-identities, the fact that there exists a Malay woman of questionable moral behavior as well as the chaotic setting of the novel made Fernando's text a good choice.

In addition to analyzing Sara's self-identity and how her self-identity has been affected by the postmodern condition, this paper also attempts to analyze how Malay women

who are known to be faithful to Islam and Malay culture, move away from the norm. They become postmodernist characters without inner, stable self-values. Postmodern criticism believes that the self exists in relation to the different contexts in life, such as the family and society. Therefore, the self is very susceptible to changes, be it social or cultural.

As a result of the self's changing nature, it becomes fragmented, has no centre (de-centred) and is always in flux. This means that a postmodernist self is constantly redefined. It always reinvents itself or is being reinvented. It is also continually changing due to the social or cultural changes. Because a postmodernist self is ever-changing in nature, it has multiple self-identities and this paper seeks to explain this issue.

## **Postmodernism Background**

Postmodernism traced its origins to the modernism thinking, an aesthetic movement that emerged as early as 19<sup>th</sup> century (Klages, 2003). According to Mary Klages, modernism is the movement in visual arts, music, literature and drama that rejected the old Victorian standards of how arts should be made, consumed and what it should mean. The ideas of modernism reject the elaborate, formal aesthetic theories in favour of minimalist and spontaneous discovery in creation (2003).

The modernist ideas, seen from the literary perspective, emphasize on fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives and stream of consciousness writing – modern narration that uses various literary devices, especially interior monologue (Kennedy & Gioia, 2002). It has a tendency towards self-consciousness (Klages, 2003). According to George Graham's abstract for an online journal article published in 2000 entitled, "Self-Consciousness, Psychopathology and Realism about Self", self-consciousness is described as "introspective awareness or consciousness of a self".

My being self-conscious, for example, is my being aware of myself. (Graham, 2000)

Thus, self-consciousness means being aware of who or what you are and starts questioning your existence. These ideas are also shared by postmodernism.

Nevertheless, postmodernism is different than modernism in its attitude toward these ideas. While modernist works depict "a fragmented view of human subjectivity" (Klages, 2003), they view fragmentation as a problem and try to provide the cause and the solution to it. It is likely to lament on the fragmentation as something tragic. Postmodernist works, on the contrary, state the problem but do not give any solution to it. They neither lament nor mourn the idea of fragmentation or instability. Instead, according to Klages, they rejoice the idea (2003).

The term "postmodernism" has various implications. One of them is that it implies to the society of late capitalism which is the society of post-1950s. The term "postmodern condition" (Peck & Coyle, 2002) is used to describe the situation that this society is in. The characteristics of this society are among others, an increasing in fragmentation, and the dominance of commercial values and technology above that of human values and actions:

In a word, the postmodern condition is that of commercial culture in which image and artifice dominate.

(Peck & Coyle, 2002)

## **The Multiple Self-Identities of a Postmodernist Self**

In the traditional society, a person's self-identity was fixed and stable. This is due to the fact that the person's social role was predetermined – he was expected to act in a certain set of behaviours that was assigned by the society. On the contrary, in the modern society, a person's role becomes more flexible and his self becomes more individualistic although it is still socially bound. Nonetheless, the modern self is stable, coherent, knowable, rational and autonomous (Klages, 2003). The rationale is in the modern society, the modernists believe that the world is governed by reason (Wade, 2002); it is the ultimate judge of what is true, and the truth will always be the same and definite. Wade stated that there can be no conflict between what is true and what is right (2002). The modernists relentlessly aim for the unity of self, for progress and perfection. Thus, they are always on alert against anything disorderly.

On the other hand, in the postmodern society, there is no truth. The self becomes fragile, more unstable and susceptible to changes. Reason and rationality, meanwhile, have taken a backseat due to the accelerated changes in the modern society, which are the increased fragmentation and the domination of commercial values and technology over human values and actions. This, according to Kellner, is contributed largely by the leveling of individuality in a rationalized, bureaucratized, mediatized, and consumerized mass society (Kellner, 1992).

Moreover, in the postmodern society, the self is not a single and consistent being. A stable, coherent, knowable and unitary self as celebrated in a modern society is at lost in the postmodern times. Rather, a postmodernist self in a postmodern society is decentred, deconstructed, ambiguous and fragmented.

Another term to describe a postmodernist self, according to Wade, is “multiple” (2002). The term represents postmodernism as a set of ideas that manipulates and questions certainties and self-identities with abstractness. Nothing is clear and certain when one is to discuss within a postmodern perimeter. It implicates that postmodernism and the postmodernist self particularly, is complex in nature.

Wade also stated that, besides being complex, a postmodernist self is socially constructed (2002). Being socially constructed means everything that a person grows up surrounded by, such as his society's values and perceptions, languages or arts define who he is. There is no “inside” or inner self; instead, a person is defined by “external forces” which he has varying levels of control: “The suspicious postmodernist sees us as having little control [...] over the forces impinging upon us” (2002). A person's self-identity then is neither fixed nor separable from his surrounding, and it does not remain the same. It keeps changing when its surrounding changes, and finally, becomes multiple. One of the external forces that a person deals with is the various relationships he has in life, be it with family, friends, relatives or even strangers. Each of these relationships is different – a person might behave with affection towards his family but is cautious among his colleagues.

The reason lies in the different sets of values and expectations the self has to encounter in these relationships; for example, diversities in beliefs. The self then struggles to maintain the stability and the continuity within its values as it is deliberately being “told” by others to do things that they believe one's self is supposed to do. Consequently, the self becomes “fractured” (2002) or fragmented and scattered to numerous different pieces. It then exists in multiplicity – meaning, it has multiple self-identities.

### **Sara's Multiple Self-Identities in *Green is The Colour***

*Green is the Colour*, Llyod Fernando's second novel was published in 1993. The novel is set in the aftermath of 13<sup>th</sup> May 1969 racial riots, when the situation within Malaysia was still in a chaotic mood. Roadblocks were everywhere, as tension is high in the air, putting the atmosphere in a very fragile state. It did not take much for new violence to erupt at any given moment. It is in this unstable ambience the stories of its characters are enacted.

Central to the novel is a Malay woman named Sara. Sara is given more attention by Fernando as compared to other female characters in his novels. This is especially apparent by the last few segments of the narrative, which are seen through Sara's consciousness. Sara is also subjected to changes within her self-identity due to the instability of her surroundings. The changes she has to undergo fragment her self-identity until it becomes multiple.

After May 1969 riots, many unpredictable things happen in Sara's life. Omar, Sara's husband who had previously been on a six-week tour with some Pakistani and Iranian students, returned home a withdrawn man. He wants them to move to Jerangau, a pioneering settlement, to be near Tuk Guru Bahaudin, a religious leader who, he claims, would guide them to the right and meaningful life during the critical time. Omar also treats Sara coldly and manipulates her for his satisfaction. Consequently, she falls for Yun Ming, a loyal civil servant to the Foreign Ministry, whom she meets at a cultural concert. He is estranged from his English wife and their only son who are in England.

However, their relationship is not smooth sailing. At one point, they are caught for being in close proximity. To add salt to Sara's wound, her beloved father, Lebai Hanafiah died. Even worse, Panglima, the Political Secretary to the Minister of Home Affairs, has improper desire towards Sara. He tricks her into coming to his house before drugging and finally, raping her. He also commands his followers to lock Yun Ming away. Sara is later rescued by Omar, who had earlier separated from her. At the end of the novel, she is reunited with Yun Ming, though unwillingly.

### **Sara's Self- Identity as Omar's Wife**

Sara's self-identity in its multiple conditions is analysed from the aspect of her self-identity as Omar's wife. This also includes the analysis of her affair with Yun Ming, her uncomfortable relationship with Panglima and her attachment to her father. In addition to analyzing the materialization of Sara's multiple self-identities from this aspect, this analysis explores as well the breaking point of the fragmentation of Sara's self-identity, which is her rape by Panglima. Sara also discovers her self-consciousness during that critical and tragic moment.

Sara, a beautiful young woman, is an intellectual, a lecturer in one of the local higher institutions in Malaysia. She is a graduate of Sociology from an American university, Temple University in New York (Fernando, 1993/2004). Sara is the only daughter to a *lebai* ("a pious man/religious teacher"), Lebai Hanafiah. She is married to Omar, whom she met at a party given by Omar's father, an attaché, to Malaysian students. Even though Sara is a married woman, she later falls in love and has an affair with Yun Ming.

From the perspective of Islam and Malay *adat*, Sara's affair with Yun Ming is immoral and wrong. In a Muslim household, a wife has heavy responsibilities. She is the bearer of children. She must look after her family well but more than that, she must maintain her modesty, sexuality and faithfulness to her husband (Omar, 2003):

*Termasuk juga kewajiban isteri terhadap suaminya, bahawa dia harus menjaga dirinya daripada semua yang menjerumuskan kepada zina.[...]. Kalau seorang isteri menjaga kehormatan dirinya, bererti merupakan penghargaan terhadap suaminya. (Ahmad Isa, 1990)*

Similarly, in the *adat*, a Malay wife is expected to be dutiful and faithful when serving her husband. She must also be a good mother to her children.

However, Sara is a postmodernist character with multiple self-identities. Her unfaithful behaviour towards her husband Omar is actually influenced by her unstable surrounding. This instability happens when Omar, who was an “external force” (Wade, 2002) in Sara’s life, “creates” (my emphasis) and defines her self-identity to be what she is until she forgoes her duty as a faithful and loving wife. Instead, she commits adultery with Yun Ming.

Sara’s relationship with Omar creates a fragmentation of her self-identity. When she first knew Omar in the States, he was a frivolous man. Nevertheless, “the frivolity that had been an engaging part of his character had disappeared” (p. 40). He used to be a man with “a serious look which seemed to hide a smile” (p. 39); that is how frivolous he was. In their first meeting “they had danced and his touch seemed like fire” (p. 39). Sara now realizes that their relationship, especially when they were in the States, has been a charade. It has never progressed beyond their first meeting. Sara is somehow disillusioned with Omar. She does not know how to regard him anymore, meaning she is at loss on how to react when he is around. He makes her feel uneasy. Subsequently, she leaves Omar (p. 104).

Omar’s cold treatment towards Sara explains everything. Since Omar’s return from a tour with some Iranian and Pakistani students, he has spoken to her less and become withdrawn. Their relationship appears to be “as if a blight had fallen” (p. 40). When Omar does speak to Sara, he speaks as if there is no other view but his (p. 40). He refuses to listen to or believes her as well. Furthermore, he slips with ease into the habit of waiting for her to attend to his wishes (p. 40).

She became aware that he did not talk with her as an equal; and he showed irritation when she tried to join in any discussion with their friends. One day as she placed a tray of glasses of syrup for them [...] and he continued talking without a flicker of recognition of her presence, she felt a vile sense of inferiority. (p. 40)

Worse, Omar calls her a *sundal* (‘loose woman’) (p. 102) and abuses her sexually as well as physically: “[...] his fist landed on her ear. [...]. He shook her limp body violently” (p. 50). He keeps suspecting her of having an affair with another man, even though he has a vague idea who the other man is:

‘Who is the man you’ve got,’ he said in a fury. ‘You’ve got someone, haven’t you?’ (p. 50)

Omar’s action of abusing Sara and calling her an unfaithful wife, and a *sundal* put her in multiphrenia (Gergen, 2007) condition. She is “saturated” (1996) by a “wondering variety of messages” (1996) coming from Omar, telling her who and what she is. She has to encounter Omar’s expectations; he often abuses her, expects her to attend to his every whims and fancies, look down on her and does not treat her as his equal. She then struggles to maintain

the stability of her inner self-values; that she is a loyal wife to Omar, a nice man that she used to know and not a cruel husband that he is today. Consequently, Sara's self-identity becomes "fractured" (Wade, 2002) as it is pulled into various directions. She fails to maintain her inner self-values. Due to fragmentation, she then has to play several roles. She loses her true, "authentic" (2002) inner self as a faithful wife to Omar. Instead, she becomes what Omar defines her; as an unfaithful wife and a *sundal*.

Likewise, Panglima also calls her a *sundal* (p. 167). A friend of Sara's father, he is a shrewd man. He is feared by the villagers of several *kampongs* surrounding Kuala Kangsar because he has acquired their confidential from the individual files compiled by the Ministry (p. 33). He often comes to Lebai Hanafiah's house, offering him advice on all matters, including Sara's education (pp. 32-33). Panglima has coveted for Sara ever since she was small. And opportunist, he often tries to entice her whenever her husband is not around. Sara often manages to elude him until he tricks her into coming to his house alone one night, with the pretext that he will help release Dahlan, Sara's friend and Yun Ming who have been caught earlier. He then drugs and rapes her. Moreover, when Sara struggles to free herself, he justifies his deed by putting the blame on her for acting as is she is a *sundal* and making herself cheap to Yun Ming:

He said, 'You're *sundal*, you make yourself cheap with a *kafir*, why were you acting like this with me.' (p. 167)

Panglima's treatment towards Sara also places her in a multiphrenia condition. He does not take the blame for the rape but places it on Sara, the victim, instead. Panglima's action of forcing the blame on Sara pulls her into various directions. Again, she has to struggle to maintain her inner self-values, that she is a loyal wife to Omar, and not a *sundal*. Yet again she fails. Instead of regretting her affair with Yun Ming, at that moment she starts recalling their first evening together in the agriculture station in Sayong (p. 167). Her action shows that she somehow agrees with what Panglima call her as. This is also a proof that Sara is losing her centre. She cannot think rationally anymore. Once a faithful wife, she is now "created" (Wade, 2002) and defined as a *sundal*, a loose woman, not only to Omar but to Panglima as well.

Alternatively, Sara's affair with Yun Ming creates her as a "protean self" (Wade, 2002). A protean self, according to Wade, is defined as having the capability to constantly change in order to suit the present circumstances (2002). Sara is capable to manoeuvre her cultural and religious orientation to suit her present circumstance – her affair with Yun Ming. Sara changes her sexual behaviour to suit Yun Ming's. As a lover of Yun Ming, she freely has intercourse with him although her action is prohibited in the Islamic teaching and the Malay *adat*. In Islam for example, *zina* is viewed as a great sin, as evident by the translation of al-Isra, 32:

*Dan janganlah kamu mendekati zina, sesungguhnya zina itu adalah suatu perbuatan yang keji, dan satu jalan yang buruk.*  
(Ahmad Isa, 1990)

Nonetheless, as a protean self, Sara is not afraid to metamorphose and she willingly changes her sexual behaviour. Sara's fearlessness to change her cultural and religious orientation is an indication that she is losing her centre, her inner self-values as a Malay Muslim woman. This

is evident when she drives past a mosque to the Rest House to meet Yun Ming, she is visited by a startling thought:

Casting a glance sideways at the handsome white mosque across the lake, she was startled as she thought: I will not go back. The words penetrated her sense of security. (p. 128)

Seeing the mosque, a symbol of Islam, Sara has a thought that she “will not go back” (p. 128), most probably, to the religion. This thought is juxtaposed with her behaviour because she does not live her life according to the guidelines set by Islam. She has an extramarital affair. Her thought “penetrated her sense of security” (p. 128), suggesting that her inner self-values are gradually shaken and losing their depth. Sara also exhibits her protean self when she changes her political belief as well. At a tumultuous time when each race suspects one another, where there is no racial integration, Sara has gone beyond the differences in skin colour to fall in love with Yun Ming.

Sara’s protean self can be viewed from two different perspectives. The first perspective is to presume that it is a process of finding Sara’s true self — what her real self-identity is; whether she is really an unfaithful wife to Omar or a lover to Yun Ming or neither. On the other hand, the second view is, it acts as a manifestation of the idea that there is no true, stable self (Wade, 2002). Sara has no true, inner stable self-identity at all. This second view probably describes her best. Sara, as a postmodernist character with multiple self-identities, is only “created” (Wade, 2002) by various external forces in her life; forces that belong to Omar, Panglima and now, Yun Ming. She does not have a rational, stable inner self-values with depth to relate to. In brief, she does not have anything; that is how fragmented she is. The fact that Sara has nothing in her life, particularly inner and stable self-values, is apparent when Yun Ming pleads her to come with him to Bangkok: “You have nothing, you must follow me, do as I do. Live as I do” (p. 130).

Besides being a protean self, Sara having multiple self-identities owes its origin to her attachment to her father, Lebai Hanafiah. It can be perceived that her strong attachment to him causes the fragmentation of her self-identity. As a young girl, Sara’s father had taught and equipped her with religious knowledge. He had always favoured her as well:

[...] she looked again the sweet tousled child I had loved. Allah forgive me, more than her brothers. It was on my knee that she learned to love numbers. From me she learned to speak Arabic [...]. When she read the Quran, all the fixtures of the material world faded and the crystal clear tone prevailed all over. (p. 105)

The abovementioned excerpt proves that before becoming a postmodernist character, Sara was once a person with good religious upbringing. She was also a filial daughter to her late father. She often visited him, although at times, without Omar’s permission (p. 23). She loved him very much and often looked up to him for guidance and advice. The bond between Sara and her father was so strong that he even hallucinated about her when he was on the deathbed:

How can I tell my beloved child there is nothing to forgive, only love to be given. I understand her grief completely. With my lips I tried to tell her so. [...]. After some hours I realised

my lips and tongue were skewered too, [...]. I understand why you have come back. I will try to understand if you decide to go with that young Chinese. (pp. 108-109)

He appeared in her dream too, encouraging her relationship with Yun Ming: “Look after each other” (p. 141). Lebai Hanafiah’s voice then is another external force in Sara’s life that creates her to be what she is now. Indirectly, he was encouraging Sara to move away from her unhappy marriage to possible happiness with Yun Ming, even though it would put Sara in the position of being an unfaithful wife to Omar. Hence, after her father died, Sara is at loss: “She had no clear idea what she was going to do next”(p. 143). This fact is reaffirmed by Omar when he rescues Sara from Panglima:

I’m going to take her from here. You have brought disgrace on us all. [...]. I know she was greatly attached to her father. Now he’s gone, she has strayed because she has lacked his guidance. (pp. 175-176)

The fragmentation of Sara’s self-identity reaches its breaking point when she is raped by Panglima. Since she is drugged, her mind “moved chaotically” (p. 170). Instead of behaving as what a rational person would do when being raped, she begins to question herself whether Panglima is the enemy she has feared all her life (p. 170). As a result, she gets in touch with her self-consciousness: “She built in her head a small room in which she and Yun Ming were safe” (p. 171). Inside her consciousness, Sara has a conversation with Gita, her friend, about three men who try to “clamp a steel band” (172) around her, who “only wish to assert their authority” (p. 172) over her. These men “do not like inquiring thoughts” (p. 172).

Who are these three men? A thorough reading of the novel suggests that these men are Vanar, Lahab and Tseto, Sara’s *penaung*. They are the three judges who decide to free her from the charge of being in close proximity with Yun Ming (p. 175). Nonetheless, another interpretation can also be made about these men. They can allude to the three men in Sara’s life – Omar, Yun Ming and Panglima. These men could be the enemies that Sara has feared all her life. They only want to impose their powers, their “steel band” (p. 172) around her. They are the external forces that create and define her life, until she exists with multiple self-identities.

Even if Sara realises that these men only want to exert power on her, in the end, she will still return to one of them, Yun Ming, although unwillingly. This is illustrated by this long excerpt:

Yun Ming came up to her.

He said, ‘Let me help you,’ placing his hand over hers holding the handlebars, and pulling the bicycle free.

[...]. She snatched her hands away in anger.

She said, ‘Keep away from me, don’t touch me. Do you think you can trap me again as you did before?’

He was crowding her, just as Panglima did. Then he was saying something absurd about needing her.

[...].

‘You think if you insist on something for long enough you’ll get it? Why are you all like that?’

She realised he was not listening. Just like that  
ape.  
[...].

It seemed he wanted her no matter what she said.  
(pp. 178-179)

Again, Sara is exhibiting her postmodernist characteristic. She begins to realize that Yun Ming behaves similarly to Panglima, yet she continues her affair with him instead of starting a brand-new peaceful life: “Everything was strange as they (Sara and Yun Ming) walked awkwardly to the jetty for the journey across” (p. 179). This exemplifies that she does not relate to her past; how these men have caused her so much pain, anguish and trouble in life. Instead of learning her lesson, she still relates her life to theirs, although she has never been purely happy with them. Yun Ming, for example, has put her in a position where she becomes the suspicion of her husband.

Sara’s condition shows that she is “historically situated” (Wade, 2002). Her yesterday is “irrelevant” (2002) as she is continuously redefined by the external force in her life at the present moment — Yun Ming. Thus, Sara’s life can only be understood in the context of the present historical moment; now (2002). However Sara’s action is not a loss to be mourned because she has chosen to write her story by allowing Yun Ming to define her life, to write her story for her. As suggested by postmodernist, a person’s life is like “a story or text” (2002). It is often “written and rewritten constantly” (2002). If the person is not happy with his story, he can devise it as he pleases. Since Sara does not devise her own story, maybe she is in a way, happy with her life. This put Sara in a situation in which she is open to interpretation. Once Sara is open to interpretation, she becomes a postmodernist character with multiple self-identities.

## **Conclusion**

Sara is a postmodernist character with multiple self-identities. She is created and defined as an unfaithful wife by an “external force” (Wade, 2002), which is her husband’s treatment towards her. Omar heartless sexual and physical abuses define her as an unfaithful wife. Besides Omar’s abuses, her father’s indirect approval of Sara’s affair with Yun Ming further defines this self-identity. Nevertheless, to her father, Sara is also an obedient daughter who always looks up to him for guidance.

Additionally, Sara’s rape by Panglima reaffirms her other self-identity, as a *sundal* or loose woman. Her rape by him opens the possibility for her to keep in touch with her self-consciousness. She questions who the enemy that she has feared all her life is. It turns out that the enemy or enemies are the men that she has had relationship with— Omar, Yun Ming and Panglima. All these relationships have somehow brought unhappiness to Sara; yet in the end, she continues her relationship with one of them — Yun Ming.

Sara’s decision to reunite with Yun Ming shows that as a postmodernist character, she does not relate to her past; the trouble that she has gone through because of him. For her, the past is “irrelevant” (Wade, 2002). This proves that Sara has lost her inner self-values, which are stable. Instead, she becomes fragmented. Sara’s future is open to interpretation. She lets Yun Ming writes her story for her when she reunites with him, even though half-heartedly. She lets her affair with Yun Ming creates her as a “protean self” (Wade, 2002). She changes not only her political belief, but her sexual orientation as well as when she freely commits *zina* with him although the act is seen as a great sin in Islam. Still, Sara’s act of letting Yun

Ming defines her life story for her is not a tragedy that should be mourned. Rather, it should be seen as a sign that perhaps, she is happy with the way her life is.

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