

**Roots and Realms: An Eco-Conscious Journey Through Childhood in  
Bibhuthibhushan Bandyopadhyay's 'Pather Panchali' and Barbara  
Kingsolver's 'Prodigal Summer'**

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**Abstract**

This paper highlights how nature can act as a 'green shield' for the child characters 'Opu' and 'Durga' in 'Pather Panchali' by Bibhuthibhushan Bandyopadhyay, protecting them from the two terrible things in the world, poverty and loneliness. It further differentiates how the child characters 'Lowell' and 'Crystal', in 'Prodigal Summer' by Barbara Kingsolver, who are not in proximity to nature but in propinquity to modern electronic gadgets, lost the shield of nature and are compelled to confront the bitter social evils of society. This paper also emphasizes that children who are raised in nature's cradle can become future stewards of the Earth.

**Keywords:** Loneliness, Poverty, Children, Proximity, Nature, electronic gadgets.

**Introduction**

Homo sapiens, the modern human species, evolved and spent nearly their entire 120,000-year existence in the savannahs and woodlands. Our ancestors' long, sorrowful separation from nature began when they were able to live in permanent settlements and increase their

population more quickly through the domestication of animals and plants (Manning 2004). However, children continued to have close contact with nature up until quite recently. The majority of children two centuries ago spent their days on or near fields, farms, or the untamed wilderness that surrounded them.

Children's lives today are very different. Today's children rarely get the chance to play freely outside or spend much time in nature. Many reasons have caused their physical boundaries to shrink. Children's safety, pollution, insect-borne diseases and most importantly, modern gadgets are prominent among them (Francis 1991, Kyttä 2004). However, research links children's reduced exposure to nature to significant trends in childhood health, such as elevated levels of depression and increased incidence of cognitive disabilities, obesity, and diabetes (Louv, 2005; Wals, 1994, Kellert, 2002, 2005).

According to many studies, humans have nature-based genetic coding and instincts as a result of our evolution in the natural world. Children are born with an innate sense of relatedness to nature, which is known as biophilia (Kellert and Wilson) or affiliation with nature, and it is important to nurture this tendency from an early age (Barrows 1995, Lewis 1996, Nelson 1993). When children have little or no interaction with the natural world, their development is thought to be a socialisation process that helps them learn to regard themselves as distinct from and not a part of the environment (Phenice and Griffore 2003, Sobel 1996).

It is the moral responsibility of the schools and parents to ensure that children spend their childhood in proximity to nature or at least in natural settings for their overall development. Most importantly, playgrounds that have been naturalised give hope that children will grow up to be future Earth stewards who protect the wonders and diversity of the natural world.

## **Literature Review**

The role of nature in childhood development has been a recurring theme in both literary and psychological studies. Richard Louv's seminal work, *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), introduced the term "nature-deficit disorder" to describe the consequences of alienating

children from natural environments. He emphasizes how overexposure to screens and underexposure to the natural world result in developmental, emotional, and behavioral issues.

In the field of ecocriticism, Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell argue that literature can play a vital role in shaping ecological consciousness by portraying human-nature interdependence. Kingsolver, through her ecofeminist lens, and Bandyopadhyay, through his humanistic realism, provide literary terrains wherein childhood flourishes amidst natural surroundings.

Studies on Pather Panchali highlight how rural life, despite its hardships, nurtures imaginative freedom and emotional bonding. Critics like Gopa Nayak suggest that Apu and Durga's bond with nature offers both escape and enlightenment, serving as a counterbalance to their material poverty.

Conversely, Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* explores modern alienation from nature, highlighting how even in rural America, technological dependence and broken family dynamics disrupt a child's development. Scholars like Susan Dever and Randy Malamud argue that children in such narratives lose their innate ecological awareness and suffer psychological consequences. This contrast between nature-connected and screen-dominated childhoods is central to understanding the emotional and moral trajectories of children in both works.

In this paper, the lifestyles of children who spend most of their time with contemporary electronic devices and children who grow up in proximity to nature are compared and contrasted. Today's children are increasingly infatuated with screens for entertainment, social networking, or gaming (Cauchon), whereas previous generations relished simple outdoor pastimes like building forts, climbing trees, and skipping stones. Despite its benefits, an over-reliance on technology can impede social interactions, physical exercise, and creative play—all of which are critical for cognitive and emotional development.

This paper emphasizes that technological devices are not the only playthings that young children can use. Even something as basic as handcrafted toys, pebbles, or tiny twigs can inspire creativity, problem-solving abilities, and a stronger bond with nature. Unstructured

play in the outdoors has been shown to improve children's focus, lower stress levels, and improve general well-being. Future generations can have happier and healthier childhoods if we promote a balance between technology and outdoor play.

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this study are:

- To analyze the psychological and emotional impact of nature on child characters in *Pather Panchali* and *Prodigal Summer*.
- To compare and contrast the portrayal of childhood in rural, nature-rich versus technologically influenced environments.
- To explore how literature can advocate for eco-conscious upbringing as a remedy to loneliness, poverty, and psychological alienation.
- To emphasize the potential of nature to act as a protective and nurturing force, especially for vulnerable children.
- To examine the long-term implications of early environmental connections on shaping future ecological stewards.

### **Discussion**

Nature appears not just as a background but also as a major character in '*Pather Panchali*' by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay and '*Prodigal Summer*' by Barbara Kingsolver, demonstrating the authors' deep reverence and affection for Mother Earth. The rural Bengali universe portrayed by Bandyopadhyay in '*Pather Panchali*' is one in which the environment is both cruel and nurturing, influencing the lives of its protagonists in personal and unavoidable ways. Nature's presence in '*Pather Panchali*' emphasizes its crucial importance in the human experience through the sounds of the wind, the seasons, and the serene beauty of the surroundings.

Similar to this, Kingsolver's '*Prodigal Summer*' crafts a complex story in which the verdant Appalachian environment not only serves as a backdrop but also as a real, breathing object that affects the protagonists' relationships and daily lives. Kingsolver portrays nature as a source of comfort, conflict, and renewal through the interdependence of human life, flora, and fauna. Despite being set in different geographical and cultural situations, both books

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examine the issue of harmony and conflict between humans and the earth, highlighting the close relationship that exists between humans and the land that supports them.

### *Pather Panchali*

Horihor Roy is a poor Brahmin who lives in Nischidpur village along with his wife Sarbojaya and children Durga and Opu. His entire family lives on the paltry amount he earns as a village priest. His village house is a small ancestral home consisting of just two rooms, a raised veranda in front, and a courtyard in the heart of the woods with numerous trees, including jackfruit, mango, and bamboo groves, as well as a cow and a calf.

*Chunks of the front veranda had fallen off. Wild cow-itch and kalmegh had taken root in the cracks and crevices of the walls and all the windows had to be held together with coconut-coir ropes, for the latches and hinges had long been broken. (Bandopadhyay 71)*

Though they belong to the upper rung of the caste hierarchy, they are not treated with respect because of their financial status. In fact, they are mistreated by the rich of the village. The family doesn't have enough money to feed all its members three times a day. The children, Opu and Durga, never wear decent clothes.

*My Opu doesn't even have a whole cloth to call his own. I've repaired so many holes in the one he wears that I've lost count. Thank goodness he doesn't care. But it breaks my heart to see my poor boy dance about happily in tattered rags. (Bandopadhyay 75)*

It is hard to expect a happy childhood for the children in such a family. But it's the cradle of nature that has ensured the children a happy childhood, proving that material things can't snatch away the happiness of childhood.

One of the greatest assets in the lives of Durga and Opu is the 'forest' near their village, 'Nischidpur'.

*For the next few minutes, the two siblings stood in peace under the jackfruit tree, relishing their summer treat. A quiet woodland peace reigned. The Roys' family home was practically in the middle of the woods, away from the bustle of the neighbourhood. (Bandopadhyay 71)*

The other asset in their childhood is a society devoid of electronic devices and unknown dangers. The novel is set in pre-independence rural Bengal, where there are no electronic devices. So, their childhood is not entangled by television or cell phones. The novel is a

testimony of how beautiful childhood would be if there were no electronic devices. Since, they reside in a danger-free society, both children have the freedom to roam around the village and in the forest near the village.

Durga, an 11-year-old girl, the eldest daughter of Horihor Roy and Sarbojaya, is the queen of the woodlands. Her entire life revolves around the village's woods and orchids. She is aware of the berries which are the sweetest, the orchids which produce the sweetest plums, and the berry bushes which ripen quickly. Even when she is treading on human paths, she keeps a close eye out for attractive insects on the sides of the path, or little treasures like the yellow nightshade, the fruit of which would make a wonderful small toy for her doll box. Whenever she finds shattered, disposable clay shards, she quickly wraps them into the ends of her sari to utilise them as hopscotch markers afterwards. Games, her doll box, and orchards near their village are the soul and centre of her life. Despite her mother's reprimands for not behaving like typical girls in the village, Durga always finds her happiness in the woods nearby.

*Look at you! No oil, no combing, loose hair flying everywhere.... who's going to say you're a brahmon's daughter? You just look like a tribal girl! Just as well, since no doubt that's who you'll end up marrying. All the other neighbourhood girls are lighting lamps and praying to Shib Thakur for good husbands... but not my daughter!.....and here she's running around jungles doing god knows what! (Bandopadhyay 90)*

Opu, Durga's younger brother's favourite thing is to stealthily enter their late neighbor Neelmoni Roy's unkempt garden behind their house and to enact both sides, with equal intensity, of the epic war 'Mahabharatha' with his arrows, choir bows, and bamboo sword, along with running commentary from his storybook. Opu proves that one need not have costly or specially designed toys to have a creative and imaginative childhood, just a dried twig is enough.

Horihor Roy and Sarbojaya always lament their destitution, their helplessness in not providing a better life for their children and the debts they have in the village.

*The eight rupees from the Roys barely see us through... and they only pay every second or third month! And then there are the loans. (Bandopadhyay 75)*

But the children of the family, Opu and Durga, are the least concerned about their poverty and are always busy crafting plans to snatch oil and salt from the kitchen, without their

mother's notice, and mix them with the raw mangoes and other berries they collect from the forest and have a delicious feast. They are the least bothered about their old clothes, lack of expensive food, or broken toys because they find an abundance of delight in the woods and gardens in their village.

*'... I need some oil and salt.' She tilted the bowl towards him to show him a heap of sliced green mangoes. 'I'm going to pickle these.'*

*'Shh! From below the Shindurkota mango tree in Potli's garden. So, can you get the salt and oil? (Bandopadhyay 70)*

*'I'll get some more mangoes in the evening. We can use the chilli then. The tree beside that little pond has more fruits this year than it can hold-it all comes tumbling down in the afternoon heat! (Bandopadhyay 70)*

Thus, poverty cannot snatch away the children's happy childhood as they are in the cradle of nature. Woodlands are their playground, their adventurous place, their happiest place on the Earth and the soul of their life.

*Opu tightened his grip on the sari once more, but this time it slipped almost immediately. "Brother and sister burst out laughing. The merriment of their youthful voices echoed and tinkled throughout the quiet woodlands and bamboo grove. (Bandopadhyay 106)*

Maybe they are poor. But, amid woodlands, their childhood is no less happy than that of any rich child on the planet. Their childhood is filled with happy moments, adventures, and secret picnics.

One of the greatest adventures in their life is to find their lost calf. They have searched for it for two days but in vain. On the third day, they started their search once again but couldn't find it. During that time, a new idea popped into their minds. It's their long-term wish to see the railroad, which is on the horizon of the village, beyond the village's known boundary. In the name of finding the lost calf, both children have begun the journey towards unknown lands.

*A big, deep breath, and then they were off again. Run, run, run! (Bandopadhyay 161)*

*That had been the first time in either of their lives that they had been beyond familiar boundaries, beyond watchful eyes and enforced limits. Exhilaration had coursed through their bodies. The joy of pure freedom, never before tasted, had made their young blood sing. (Bandopadhyay 161).*

When they have understood that they have lost their way, without losing courage, they have found their way back to their house by treading marshy water and trudging through deserted paddy fields, pulling thorns from their legs and clothes. Finally, when they reach home, in order to escape from their mother's wrath, Durga has to cook up many stories.

*When they had finally found the cobblestoned road again- after much treading of marshy water and trudging through deserted paddy fields- the golden afternoon had already sunk into the deep reds of early evening. When they reached home, his sister had to spin baskets upon baskets of lies to save both their hides from the wrath of their mother. (Bandopadhyay 162)*

In this adventure, they are no less than explorers who chart new lands. The beauty and mysteries of the woodlands fill their hearts with wonderment and joy.

Their poverty can't stop them from having secret picnics and fun. Once Opu, Durga along with their other friend Bini, without the notice of elders, managed to get dried wood, brinjal, oil and cooked the food. Though the food is simple, just white rice and brown brinjal on green leaves, even without salt, it has given them unexpected happiness.

*Cooking rice and brinjal in the middle of the woods had seemed rather fantastical (Bandopadhyay 254).*

*Salt! They hadn't even thought of bringing salt to the picnic, much less putting it in the food. Nonetheless, the three of them began to happily chew mouthfuls of the unripe yam and inadequately fried brinjals. Here they were, eating real food in the woods, sitting on piles of shrivelled custard-apple and palmyra leaves. Who would have thought? (Bandopadhyay 254).*

They have been protected from all the adversities in their life by the green shield called nature. Because of their poverty Roy's family can't afford sweets even on special occasions. On special occasions, a sweet vendor, Chinibash comes to the village to sell special sweets.

*Chinibash slowed a little when he saw the children at the doorway. Normally, he wouldn't have, for the Roys were too poor to ever buy anything from him. (Bandopadhyay 86)*

As a part of fun and out of curiosity, they simply followed the sweet vendor to Bhubon Mukhujje's, one of the richest families in the village. The mistress of the family doesn't like both children's eye on their family's food. So she has uttered all the harsh words to insult them.

*'What an unbelievable pair. The girl she's a greedy little thief if I ever saw one. If you want sweets buy and eat them in your own house! Why chase after the confectioner to other people's houses? Disgusting, I call it! And no wonder. Like mother, like daughter, I always say. That madame had probably put them up to it in the first place!'*(Bandopadhyay 87)

Another day, for just picking up a coconut that had fallen in the storm, she has cursed the little ones with all the ruthless words.

*That girl! Scarpering with a whole coconut!!! Lord, I beg you. Lord! Don't stand for this evil enmity!.....If there is power in this lamp-lighting hour, let my words come true: let those vermin never taste their stolen fruit. Let them end up under the milkwood pine before that coconut is cooked....* (Bandopadhyay 125)

The harsh words hit the little hearts hard. Again, it's the woodlands near the village that have given solace to them in their hard times. The forest is their happiest place on the earth, the soul of life. Since their family can't afford human-made sweets, they hunt in the woods for the abundant natural sweetness of fruits, from the humblest berries to the real mangoes.

Because of their poverty, they have to confront harsh words and bitter experiences from society. At a young age, all these can affect their little hearts and minds at a high intensity. They have the highest probability of falling into the ditches called 'loneliness' and 'depression'. But it's nature that shielded them from the societal evils. It's nature again that healed the wounds of the little hearts. It's the cradle of nature where their sorrows and wounds are healed and fills their world with innocent happiness. The greatest loss to Opu in his life is the death of his dearest sister Durga.

*When he spotted the first leadwort blossom of the season, his first thought was about how happy she would have been to see it. Every bird call from the forest, every new cluster of wood rose buds made him miss her more. She was his sole companion in sharing these delights, the person he ran to tell when he spotted these annual miracles. Now the land was blooming again, but she was gone.* (Bandopadhyay 380).

Had nature not been his companion Opu would have gone into depression.

Even scientific research also proves that children who are proximate to nature are less affected by life's stressful events.

*Life's stressful events appear not to cause as much psychological distress in children who live in high-nature conditions compared with children who live in low-nature conditions...and the protective impact of nearby nature is strongest for the most vulnerable children, those experiencing the highest levels of stressful life events.* (p 322) Wells and Evans (2003)

As Opu is much intertwined with nature as he has grown, he understands its importance in one's life and laments over deforestation and the destruction of nature in the name of urbanization.

### ***Prodigal Summer***

The novel '*Prodigal Summer*' is set in an American village in the 21st century. Lusa, a bugologist, is one of the protagonists of the novel. Though a city-bred girl, she has grown up amid insects, bugs and moths and dreams of marrying a farmer.

*Spent it catching butterflies and moths, looking them up in her colour-keyed book and touching all the pictures, coveting those that hid in wilder places? (Kingsolver 38)*

When she meets Cole, a farmer in Zublean Valley, she leaves her job and moves with him to the village to follow her childhood dream. The children, Crystal and Lowell, are Lusa's sister-in-law's children. Though the sister and brother duo Crystal and Lowell are born and brought up in a village in America called Zebulon, unfortunately, they are entangled in the web of electronic devices. Unlike children in rural areas, their games and lives are not intertwined with nature. Electronic devices have taken them far away from nature.

*"I don't play with marbles."  
"What do you play with?"  
"Game Boy." (Kingsolver 295).*

They have to confront harsh words from society as their father elopes with another woman, leaving behind their mother. Unlike 'Opu' and 'Durga', Crystal and Lowell don't have the green shield called 'nature'. Research asserts that children who are not proximate to nature have more chances to feel psychological distress to life's stressful events, thus Crystal and Lowell have fallen into the terrible ditch called 'loneliness'.

*'The boy's a girl and the girl's a boy'*

*"Being a little person in a big world with nobody taking you very seriously is tough."  
(Kingsolver 234)*

Durga and other kids of her age, even Lusa, as a kid know about all the trees, insects and moths in their villages. Though Lusa hails from an urban area, she has grown up amid insects and moths whereas Crystal, being brought up in a village also doesn't know how honey is collected through bee boxes.

*“People raise bees, for honey. Everybody around here used to I’m sure. You see old broken-down bee boxes everywhere.” (Kingsolver 250)*

Then Lusa understands that, though Crystal has been growing up in the rural part of the country, she has little attachment to nature.

How could rural kids grow up so ignorant of their world? Their parents gave them Game Boys and TVS that spewed out cityscapes of cops and pretty lawyers, but they couldn’t show them a katydid (Kingsolver 299)

She tries to connect Crystal with nature by encouraging her to catch the flies with nets and explaining to her about their uniqueness.

*“I’d like to catch some bugs if it’s OK by you.”*

*They were both breathing hard when they reached the hilltop. Lusa flung herself on the ground panting and Crys sat down cross-legged. (Kingsolver 298)*

It is in the lap of nature that Crys opens up her fears with Lusa and clears all the inhibitions and doubts in her little heart. Undoubtedly, it’s the cradle of nature that ensures a happy childhood.

Durga is a 20th-century village kid, when Lusa is a kid, she is an early 21st-century kid and Crystal is a late 21st-century kid. It is very much evident that as science and technology are advancing children are becoming ‘denatured’. Whether it is the 20th century or the 21st century a child is always a child. It cries when it is hungry, it feels happy when it is given toys to play with. The most crucial thing is that the toys need not be electronic devices but can be simple marbles or sticks amid nature or natural settings. Durga and Opu are testimony to a happy childhood with simple toys amidst nature. So the important thing is not toys but proximity to nature. Studies are suggesting that if proximity to nature is not possible, at least artificial nature settings are also more beneficial to children. (Fjortoft 2001)

Both Durga and Crystal hail from villages. Though they belong to different parts of the world and different time zones, the fact is that they both are children. Crystal has all the luxuries of Durga. Like Durga, even Crystal has a danger-free society, a society which is proximate to nature. The only difference is that for Durga, to play there is no option other than being proximate to nature but Crystal has many options to play. Had Crystal’s parents, like her aunt

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Lusa, would have encouraged her to be proximate to nature her childhood would also have been a happy childhood like Durga irrespective of challenges in life.

*How could rural kids grow up so ignorant of their world? Their parents gave them Game Boys and TVs' that spewed out cityscapes of cops and pretty lawyers but they couldn't show them a katydid (Kingsolver299)*

Both Opu and Lusa's childhood is interlocked with nature so, when they grow up both feel that it is their ethical responsibility to protect nature. Lusa strongly condemns using of insecticides, unnecessary killing of animals and raising tobacco though it is a profitable crop in the area.

*.....Can you believe people spray insecticide all over their fields?" (Kingsolver 302)*

When her husband dies less than a year after a marriage she finds solace only in nature's lap. Though she has the freedom to move back to the city and join in her previous job as a bugologist she prefers to work on her husband's farm.

Opu strongly condemns deforestation and urbanisation across the world and finds it suffocating to work in concrete jungles. Like Lusa, when Opu's beloved wife dies he finds solace only in nature's lap. So he quits his job as a teacher and joins as a manager to an estate which is in deep jungles. Opu enjoys every moment of his life in the jungle. He feels like he has taken re-birth again amid jungles. Both Lusa and Opu strongly feel that the complete growth of a child is possible only in the cradle of nature. So they strongly want the next generation to be raised in proximity to nature. Thus, Opu and Lusa have proved that whose lives are twined with nature at a young age, they grow up as future eco-warriors.

### **Children in *Pather Panchali* and *Prodigal Summer***

Both '*Pather Panchali*' and '*Prodigal Summer*' feature kid characters that have a close and deep bond with nature, which is essential to their emotional and mental growth. The rustic scenery of '*Pather Panchali*' is both joyful and sorrowful to the young Opu and his sister Durga. In addition to providing children with an escape from the struggles they endure at home, their imaginative exploration of the countryside—through fields, forests, and rivers—also helps them to better appreciate how fleeting life is. In its immensity and splendor, nature serves as a teacher and a companion, assisting them in understanding growth, loss, and pain.

Opu has a formative relationship with nature, which teaches him about survival and life cycles while also influencing his curiosity, fortitude, and sense of self.

Both Kingsolver and Bandyopadhyay highlight the spiritual and educational significance of nature in children's lives, presenting it as a necessary setting for emotional development. The young characters in both books gain a sense of wonder, loss, and self-awareness via their encounters with nature, which serves as the basis for their adult existence. Childhood and environment are inextricably linked in these tales, with one continuously influencing and forming the other.

## **Conclusion**

Research suggests that children's overall development is positively impacted by nature exposure, which also has benefits for the physical, mental, emotional, and cognitive development of children (Chawla, 1998; Kellert, 2002, 2005; Louv, 2005; Wals, 1994).

Nature offers a vital space for emotional healing for kids like Durga and Opu, who must deal with the dual problems of poverty and loss. Exposure to nature has been demonstrated to lower tension and anxiety, which helps children who have suffered trauma develop emotional resilience (Chawla, 1998). For example, Louv (2005) emphasizes how spending time in natural environments can greatly enhance emotional control and lessen depressive symptoms in youth.

Nature can stimulate cognitive growth in addition to promoting emotional healing. Children who engage with nature have higher concentration, more creativity, and improved problem-solving abilities, according to research by Kellert (2002). The intricacy of nature promotes exploration, which is essential for cognitive development. Additionally, research by Wells (2000) has shown that kids who live in neighborhoods with access to green areas do better academically and have longer attention spans than kids who don't. This cognitive stimulation is essential for helping kids like Opu, who have suffered severe personal loss, overcome developmental obstacles.

It's also important to consider the positive social effects of being in nature. According to Kuo (2010), spending time in nature fosters collaboration and social behavior, all of which are critical for a child's healthy social development. Nature provides Lusa, an only child, with opportunities for unstructured social play that encourages peer cooperation and communication. It has been demonstrated that having natural areas in metropolitan areas enhances social cohesiveness and lessens feelings of loneliness, especially for kids from underprivileged homes (Kuo, 2003).

According to Wals (1994), these connections in natural environments are important for social skills and also improve the general well-being of kids from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, a number of studies stress the value of nature in reducing the negative consequences of socioeconomic disadvantages. According to research by Faber Taylor et al. (2001), children from low-income families who have access to natural places perform better academically, have better mental health, and experience less stress than their counterparts who do not.

Being in Proximate with nature Durga and Opu could overcome their suffering due to poverty and harsh attitudes from society. Being intertwined with nature, both Lusa and Opu could win over their loneliness as children (Lusa is the only child to their parents and Opu loses her sister Durga at a very young age) and depression as young widows.

Many researchers suggest that, independent of a child's race or socioeconomic background, exposure to nature is critical for the cognitive, emotional, social, and educational development of young people. The one magic phrase which is a great boon during childhood is 'Proximity to nature.'

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