

Resilience as Reparation: An Exploration of Traumatic Memories in Santanu Bhattacharya's *One Small Voice*

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Abstract—Trauma is a chronic disorder brought on by a terrifying event in a human's life. The impact of trauma and responses may differ for each individual depending on their ability to cope with it. This research contributes to the field of literature by highlighting how the characters become resilient by bouncing back from trauma in the debut novel, *One Small Voice* (2023) by Santanu Bhattacharya. The concepts of Judith Herman's stages of recovery, as well as Judith Butler's symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory are utilized for analysis of trauma theory in the fiction. Further to this, the research explores how the novelist utilizes storytelling as a technique in his non-linear narration to deal with three timelines- Shubhanskar as a schoolboy, a parental aspirant and a remarkably resilient person. In recent times, the trauma theory has begun to flourish in literature and medicine to support the traumatized individuals in society. The research also touches upon the theory of remembrance, theory of forgetting, memory updating and editing, which play a major role in altering an individual's memory over time. Therefore, the study concludes with the ideology that resilience is the hidden force behind every individual's transformation in overcoming suppressed emotions and negative self-beliefs.

Index Terms—trauma, repressed memories, PTSD, depression, resilience

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma is an interdisciplinary field that is closely related to sociology, psychology and literature. The term 'trauma' is a Greek word meaning "wound," which describes psychological and emotional injuries. According to Tancred, the trauma or wound refers to "an injury inflicted on a body or wound of the mind-breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world" (Butler, 2004, p. 3). The trauma theory emerged in the 1990s and began to flourish among literary scholars. The word "trauma" is an umbrella term referring to both individual as well as collective experiences. Trauma brings physical and emotional changes to those who have experienced hazardous events, which may lead to strange experiences, nightmares, flashbacks and terrible dreams. The theorist Judith Herman not only distinguishes traumatic memories as being complex but also proposes the three stages model of recovery, focusing on remembrance, mourning and reconnection with ordinary life (Herman, 2015). Her theory demonstrates the understanding of psychological and neurological ramifications of trauma as well as how society influences its outcomes. The emergence of trauma studies has evolved to give novelists innovative means of framing ideas within the contexts of literature, history and politics. It clarifies how the characters' perspectives of the world and themselves are altered by their changing nature of memory. Many literary novels reflect trauma in different contexts, for example, the generational trauma in Anjali Enjeti's *The Parted Earth* (2021), inherited trauma, addiction and mental illness in Naheed Phiroze's *Mirror Made of Rain* (2022), Depressive Disorder in the Memoir *I've Never Been (Un) Happier* (2018) by Shaheen Bhatt and Suicidal Ideation in *Brink* (2020) by S. L. Bhyrappa. These literary books helped to grasp the fragility of human vulnerabilities, emotional weaknesses, and how traumatized individuals confront these challenges and overcome them. This has inspired the researcher to explore the novel *One Small Voice*.

As a distinguished writer of our time, Santanu Bhattacharya engages earnestly in trauma writing. He is the author of two novels, *One Small Voice* (2023) and *Deviants* (2025) as well as one short story *Juvenilia* (2024). His *One Small Voice* was chosen as an Observer Best Debut Novel for 2023. He is the winner of 1). The Desmond Elliott Prize Residency award, which is given to new literary voices, 2). the Mo Siewcharan Prize, which is given to ethnic writers from new Black, Asian and so on, 3). the Life Writing Prize for his marvellous fictions and non-fiction and finally, a London Writers' Award. There are a few review articles on the debut novel *One Small Voice* which deals with anti-Muslim violence in India, specifically among the post-1992 generation. Moreover, Naqvi et al. (2025), in their article entitled, Fanonian Neo-Colonial Insights in Bhattacharya's *One Small Voice: Exploring Economic and Religious Exploitation in Postcolonial*

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India, evaluate the concept of communalism, neo-colonialism to examine religious and economic hardships of political hegemony. To fill the gaps in the existing research, this study conducted a trauma analysis in the novel *One Small Voice* with distinct focus on the protagonist Shabby's experience of trauma using the concept of resilience as a reparation of trauma. An analysis of the novel might lead researchers to identify how trauma can be mitigated through personal resilience and coping strategies.

In *One Small Voice*, Shabby personifies the voice of dreams intertwined with silent struggles regarding current politics, social conditions and the challenges in the modern world. Bhattacharya's narratives are acclaimed for their rich character development and poetic prose, which effectively convey the intricacies of a society battling social inequality, interpersonal conflicts and the pursuit of individual identity. Judith Butler in her work addresses trauma, vulnerability and violence; she views trauma as influenced by social structures, communication and relationships rather than a psychological affliction. Therefore, utilizing Butler's views, the novel explores the communal tensions, class disparities and the quest for personal identity. Vane in her review, admires the novel *One Small Voice* for being "a powerful story about one man's trauma and recovery" (Vane, 2023) by emphasizing its dynamic portrayal of Shabby's emotional realm. Accordingly, the study helps the researcher to identify how the traumatized survive the destructive events and overcome psychological dilemmas with adversity. Therefore, the depiction of different types of traumas, such as PTSD, Grief disorder and Acute Clinical Disorder, elucidates the plurality of the lived experiences in the chosen novel.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Literature influences human beings to voice out their emotional expression through writing. It offers a space for writers to express self-reflection, flashbacks, scars of trauma, painful recollection of memories, deep wounds and sufferings through words. Radstone states that trauma theory, which developed since 1980's bridged psychology and the humanities (Radstone, 2013). Scholars like Cathy Caruth and others utilize the trauma theory in the literary field. Cathy in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), explored the concepts of trauma in literature. She defines trauma as an "intractable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language" (Caruth, 1996, p. 1).

Strange and Takarangi state that traumatic memories are malleable to distortion over time. They state that mental images are stimuli for the re-experiencing of intrusive memories and memory distortion due to intentional or unintentional remembering which leads to forgetting the original experiences (Strange & Takarangi, 2015).

The article Belief in Unconscious Repressed Memory agrees that unconscious repressed memory leads to physical and mental health issues. Herman and Schatzor state that there is no guarantee that the recovered memory will be restored because it could be modified due to memory updating or editing. The theorists and researchers have given many names as a substitute for the term repressed memories such as dissociation, dissociative amnesia, engrams and body memories (Otgaar et al., 2021).

Arden opines that resilient people do not worry about the bad circumstances that have happened rather they seek the positivity of turning those frustrating situations into opportunities. Many resilient people made their new lives by overcoming great trauma; therefore, he calls this type of optimism as emotional intelligence (Arden, 2010, pp. 168-169).

Wilson agrees with Freud and Carl that the subconscious mind has the power to rule our behavior. He suggests using affirmative inputs and focusing more on positive psychology. He focuses on steps to positive strategies rather than giving importance to the negative side of things (Wilson, 2022).

Herman states that intrusive experiences are stored in active memory and it has the possibility of repeating the images. Therefore, it could be resolved by the traumatized only through the proper understanding of what had happened in their past (Herman, 2015, p. 41).

The following Disorders PTSD, Grief disorder and Acute Clinical Depression, are analyzed through a textual analysis of extracts. PTSD includes intrusive memories and thoughts, nightmares, psychic disturbances during sleep, some changes in memory concentration and startle responses (Butler, 2004, p. 58).

In Uncomplicated Grief, one may come out of the grief of loved ones as the days pass by, gradually accepting their death, whereas in prolonged grief, intense yearning persists due to the stimulation of other memories of the loved ones. Therefore, they enter into a condition of Prolonged Grief Disorder where they are unable to accept their loved one's death (Duffy & Wild, 2023).

Acute Clinical Depression is also known as Depressive Disorder. According to the WHO, globally at present, the second most common cause of disability is depression and it is expected to overtake all other causes by 2030. It is also found that depression is associated with high rates of suicidal behavior (Karrouri et al., 2021). The following objectives will be achieved in this research:

- I. To explore the issues of trauma and its impact on shaping the experiences of psyche.
- II. To describe the emotional endurance of the characters dealing with trauma as portrayed in the texts.
- III. To identify the role of society and cultural acceptance of trauma victims as reflected by the experiences of Shabby and his friends in *One Small Voice*.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study will adopt a descriptive qualitative method and a textual analysis methodology to investigate the psychological approaches. Through a close reading of the primary texts, the views of theorists including Judith Herman, Judith Butler, and Cathy Caruth about trauma and recovery are analyzed and they are compared to the themes, symbolism, and plots of the primary text. This research will use *One Small Voice* as its primary text and secondary data will be gathered from articles, journals, books, magazines and so on.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *Traumatic Memories of Characters*

Shubhankar “Shabby” Trivedi, the protagonist, first appears as a victim of terrible mob violence at the beginning of the novel. He observes the news headline on 6th December 1992 stating, “A BLACK DAY FOR INDIAN SECULARISM. And in small letters – Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya sparks riots across country” (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 32). Due to the riot, schools, offices and markets were shut. The demolition triggered violence with damages to properties and curfews sweeping across Ayodhya. Shubhankar was 10 years old when he witnessed a brutal lynching of a man who was then burnt. Shubhankar viewed this column of fire with large terrified eyes and felt it looked like a horrifying mythical creature. This incident experienced by Shabby radically changed his life. Shabby’s reaction to this incident supports Herman’s (2015) views on trauma that, it not only defragments the self but also primary care systems that provide people with a sense of control, connection and purpose which are overtaken by the traumatic experiences. Shabby, upset about the incident and so he tried to find out about the innocent young Muslim man who was burnt alive. But he recalled only that his name began with the letter M. He is unable to share what he witnessed; therefore, it stayed as an unforgettable trauma in his subconscious mind. This PTSD altered his perspective of the world, where it poses a serious threat to his normal life. However, Shabby does not fully understand his trauma at his age, but his childhood trauma continued to haunt him even in his adulthood by repeating. As Freud in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) asserts, trauma is a “compulsion to repeat” when unresolved trauma persists and keeps coming back to haunt the mind instead of being consciously integrated. Shabby was wrapped in the name of love and care by his family and also by the invisible scars of his childhood trauma.

His pressure from his family to secure a good education, career and marriage for settling in life makes him feel like his life itself is a relentless treadmill. Therefore, he is trapped between societal expectations and personal dreams. He also has a fear of failure, financial success and social image, where these demands leave him hopeless. In the midst of all this, he suffers from loneliness because he could not share his pain, which is buried deep within him. The novel highlights Shabby’s inner conflict and his dream to get free from his trauma, redefine love, and reclaim freedom, which is his utmost pleasure. His friends Ganjeri, Shruthi and brother Chintoo also undergo trauma in their lives and try to overcome their trauma with resilience. The protagonist tries to escape from his reality to forget his childhood trauma, but is trapped with its memories even in the present. Cathy, the leading theorist in trauma studies claims that surviving trauma is often thought of as an escape, but the traumatic memories often return intrusively or compulsively. When people develop traumatic stress, they undergo nightmares, hyperarousal and dissociation, which disturbs their peaceful life and poses a serious threat to their living. As a result, Shabby could not see the positive aspects of his life and so he tries to escape from his haunting trauma of the past. Judith Herman asserts that trauma shatters the victim’s basic assumptions about identity, personal safety, self-confidence and hope (Herman, 2015, p. 51).

Another incident that shook the remembrance of his childhood trauma was when he booked his ticket from Mumbai to Lucknow to escape from loneliness and scary dreams. He thought those two weeks would help him to come out of trauma. However, an occurrence at the Railway station when he was waiting for his train worsened and caused him to experience trauma once more. A group of members attack a boy as he belongs to North India where North Indians get into railway jobs easily, which prevents Marathis from acquiring jobs. This incident shows the macroaggressions that still exist in society, including the clashes between two regions (North and South India), caste and religion. This particular incident deepened the physical and emotional wounds of Shabby. As the group hit him badly, he had physical injuries with marks on his body as well as mental wounds. At that instance, Shabby never thought that Mangesh, his Maid’s Son would turn against him and so his betrayal becomes an emotional wound in Shabby’s heart. When Mangesh revealed all the details saying, “Shabby’s full name is Shubhankar Trivedi. He is from Lucknow; he has friends who have no respect for our culture” (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 280). Hearing all this, the attackers hit Shabby badly.

Ganjeri, one of Shabby’s friends, hates society and suffers from his childhood trauma of witnessing religious riots in 2002. During the riots, “A mob broke the house, looted, took everything. They gutted the shop, the factory . . . the Hindus say Muslims kill cows, eat the meat” (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 240). Ganjeri’s emotions are not just personal; they are political because the system discriminates based on Hindu and Muslim. Ganjeri states that when a Hindu riots, they are protesters; when a Muslim riots, they are terrorists (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 290). Ganjeri’s life becomes a mirror reflecting the cruelty embedded in social structures. He observes how the Hindu wields power, respect, while the Muslim struggles for recognition and basic rights. Consequently, he feels abandoned, helpless and lacks his identity in society. The marginalization builds up a strong sense of anger and disillusionment within him.

Shruthi's parents' divorce became a life-altering trauma and also the divorce has shattered her belief in lasting relationships. As a result, she retreats into isolation, struggling silently with the memories she cannot erase. As a result, she opines that "Families are like that bridge. Shruthi's voice was soft against the roaring sea. The two ends will never meet" (Bhattacharya, 2023, pp. 167-168). When Shruthi shares her casual conversation with Shabby and Ganjeri, she says about the strange fear she carries in the society, "I'm always aware that someone can harm my body if they had the chance" (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 273). Whenever she tries to fight tears, she always recalls her mother's words that women have only two choices – to stay or to leave.

The novel portrays the psychological trauma of characters where their pain mirrors the larger collective wounds that still exist in the society including the violence, mistrust, scars and fear. Freud states that fear, anxiety and sorrows are hidden in the subconscious mind because the subconscious mind is the storehouse of all memories and emotions as it works 24/7. According to Freud, on the surface, a person may seem full of smiles and joys but within, they might possess countless wounds and losses.

B. The Psychological Journey of the Victimized

The Natural elements (Fire, Water, Earth, Air and Space) are fundamental to all cosmic formation and our body. Dr. Ashley, the planetary scientist states that the elements in human body accurately matches totally with the stars in the galaxy (Lotzof, 2018). The novelist sketched his characters' emotions by bringing the universal concept that humans are part of the universe. He metaphorically structured the narrative through natural elements like Ankur, Vaayu, Jaal, and Aakash in his Chapters to represent the characters' emotions. The Fire (Agni) symbolizes conflict, anger and intensity of Shabby's childhood trauma; in the later Chapters, the fire represents his transformation and rebuilding. The mention of Earth (Prithvi) in the Chapter metaphorically represents how the characters are nostalgic for the soil or the land. The Sapling (Ankur) represents new beginnings and the psychological growth of the characters. The desire and emotions cannot be seen as they are invisible like Winds and so the Chapter named Wind reflects the character's desire for freedom. Water (Jal) symbolizes adaptability to life's changes. Consequently, the Metal (Dhaatu) is a strong material; the Chapter named Metal represents characters becoming strong and resilient by bouncing back from challenges. The Chapter Space (Aakash) reflects psychological void and experiences. This Chapter is also a turning point for the characters to overcome grief, silence and detachment.

The major trauma disorders depicted in the fiction through natural elements are PTSD, Grief disorder and Acute Clinical Depression. Herman states that PTSD falls into three main categories such as hyperarousal, intrusion and constriction (Herman, 2015, p. 35). The characters, including Shabby, Ganjeri, and Shruthi, experience disturbing thoughts, dreams, and a fight-or-flight response. While experiencing turmoil, these characters' most profound struggle is the question of their sense of self and identity. Shabby is suspicious of everyone around him, including his friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, as he is always afraid that someone in Mumbai might find out about his past. Finally, he doubts Anisha, one of his well-wishers, thinking she could have found out about his past and spoken about this to Sid, who runs the Trust. Shabby's doubts replace his confidence and so his self-belief begins to fade. Consequently, it becomes difficult for him to trust his abilities. He became emotionally isolated as a result of his hatred and self-blame. The traumatic memories of the past disrupt emotions and often leave the traumatized with persistent recollections of intrusive flashbacks, "The moment he got back to his flat, he dragged the mirror out, into the flat... He tore apart the packaging, positioned the mirror against the wall, and pulled his clothes off. He is ashamed of what he sees, of what he has become, of what the incident has done to his body, of what he has let happen to himself" (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 214).

It is very common for the traumatized to see themselves as worthless and self-deprecating. Shabby feels very low about himself when he sees his image in the mirror. He feels uncomfortable, so he moves to Mumbai city to escape from his family pressure of getting success in life by securing a good job, getting rich and buying luxury cars. Herman states that the traumatized get isolated from the family, friends and so on. they also get detached from the community due to their question of self-identity (Herman, 2015, pp. 51-52). As the body remembers the trauma, certain sights or smells trigger the victim to his past in the present. Whenever Shabby sees fire or flames, his body responds with sudden chest tightness, shivering, and sweating. When he turns the radio on, he is anxious about the song that will play and the memories it will evoke and so he shuts it off. This shows the internal conflict of Shabby's hesitation due to his traumatic memories that stimulate the lack of self-confidence and anxiety related to avoidance behavior. Butler opines that the avoidance of intrusive traumatic memories and the repetition of flashbacks and nightmares can only be understood as the inability of the mind to avoid such events coming into consciousness as they are strengthened in the subconscious (Butler, 2004, p. 58).

When Shabby sees the injustice in society, he becomes enraged. He loses his temper when he gets to know the news of another killing where "Two Muslim boys going home by train, are accosted by a group of Hindu nationalists accused of carrying beef, dragged down to the platform" (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 362). He discusses the truth with his father about the dark side of the countries and boundaries where people freely create conflicts through borders, religion and caste. Through wars and riots they forget about peace, and global unity. Shabby points out, "Too many people have died. Too much damage has been done. No religion, no god will forgive us for this" (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 363). He also criticizes the education system in India, having experienced academic stress in his childhood to secure good marks. He also points out the rote learning system in India, where there is no place for creativity and critical thinking. Even in the case of Dwiti, she faces pressure in her studies to crack the IIT exam and has a persistent fear of failing it. As a result, she hangs herself

as it might be difficult to bear the failure in the future. Shabby in the funeral gathering saw a woman who seemed like a professor saying, “Every exam season, there are so many suicides...will we make India a technology superpower over the dead bodies of our kids? How many more lives will it take before parents acknowledge their kid’s trauma?” (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 110). This highlights the expectations of parents imposed on their children. On the other hand, his friend’s suicide and his Granny’s death had a profound impact on Shabby; it intensified his psychological distress, slipping into a Prolonged grief disorder. It took several weeks for Shabby to come out of the Prolonged grief disorder of forgetting his Granny’s funeral.

Shabby suddenly awoke from his sleep when he experienced terrifying dreams. Both dreams and nightmares reflect subconscious fears that sometimes lead to emotional exhaustion. In the nightmares, he witnessed a bomb tear his school bus and his body lying dead under it, whereas his brother Chintoo’s face was streaming with blood. When he awoke suddenly from his sleep, he felt the feverish forehead and armpits, and the sweat clinging to the bedsheets everywhere. Judith Butler states that dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses transport the traumatized back to the scene of their accident, from which they awake, frightened (Butler, 2004).

Ganjeri also undergoes intrusive memories, when he said, “Every single day I would imagine someone driving a knife through me” (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 272). This mental imagery profoundly takes him back to the moments of horror. Ganjeri remembers more trauma than he had experienced because of the reexperiencing syndrome. Because of this, he tries to suppress those mental images coming into his consciousness. Shabby helps his Maid’s Son, Mangesh, as he belongs to a low caste and undergoes ill treatment in society because of his caste. Mangesh was not allowed to enter the mall, and his experience in the mall reflects discrimination due to caste prejudice. The mall, which is meant to be a space for the public, turned into a place of humiliation for him. Mangesh here represents those who undergo silent violence by the denial of human rights. Though Shabby helped Mangesh in his studies, Mangesh failed to recognize it and ended up causing harm.

So far, the article has argued that the unconscious repressed memories of the characters lead to trauma. However, they try to overcome it through motivated forgetting. This technique helps the traumatized to cope with repressed memories so that they no longer recollect traumatic experiences. This turns out to be a defensive mechanism that involves automatic avoidance or suppression of those repressed memories coming into consciousness.

C. Transformation From Victim to Resilient

Resilience is one of the key traits that every individual needs to cultivate because everyone in society experiences pain and loss. Due to a lack of resilience, many people end up in self-annihilation. To avoid this, one must try to become resilient and resolve to overcome hardships to lead a fulfilled life. Though Shabby had faced many problems in his life, like childhood trauma, discrimination, he tries to accept and move on from the trauma and rebuild his life after reaching Mumbai. Shabby felt triumphant and experienced his transformation when he could make his decision independently. He chose to listen to his inner voice and was determined to turn his thoughts into actions. Shabby dedicated his time and energy to the voices of the unheard slum communities. He worked as an Arts Sir and taught them without fees. Shabby also helped Mangesh in tutoring, moral support and by giving free access to his books. He was awarded with Citizen Bravery Award for his service to society.

Herman states that a solution to trauma could be the talking cure. When the victim's self-identity is shattered, that sense can be rebuilt and cured through talking. However, it may be more challenging for the traumatized to rebuild even a minimal form of trust in the initial period (Herman, 2015, p. 61). The friendship between Shabby and his friends (Ganjeri and Shruthi) helped them to share their thoughts and emotions. Because of that, each of them shares their inner turmoil to know each other and support each other morally; it helped three of them to accept the pain and move on from adversity to lead a meaningful life. It paved the way to maintain a supportive social network. “Sharing the traumatic experiences with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world. In this process, the survivor seeks assistance not only from those closest to her but also from the wider community. The response of the community has a powerful influence on the ultimate resolution of the trauma” (Herman, 2015, p. 70).

Rebecca, one of the friends of Shabby, advised him to focus on the beauty of life, achievement and powerful stories of resilience. He recalls his father’s words to believe in himself and the Willpower to get back to his normal life. Also, his Nani once told, “The truer your work, the more universe will find ways to reward you” (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 307). These words changed Shabby to reshape his life and to fight his own battles. His efforts toward transformation align with Murphy's assertion that the law of mind depends on what one’s thoughts hold in their conscious mind, and accordingly, they elicit a reaction or response from the subconscious mind (Murphy, 2008, p. 20). On the other hand, Miss Lucy has found the answers for Shabby’s thirst, which had disturbed him for more than a year about the mystery of M. She reveals that Salma Begum, the community partner of Maulviganj area, found M, the man, not the body. The man's name is Mudassir (Bhattacharya, 2023, p. 369). Ganjeri also determined to overcome his trauma; he planned for his future well-being and decided to move on from his trauma by accepting it. Whenever Shabby needed support, Ganjeri stood by him and he also praised Shabby for his achievements. Chintoo, Shabby’s brother also opens up about what he had in his mind and says that he will also move to Mumbai, where he wants to become a big music producer and has an offer from a studio. Both Chintoo and Shabby fought with their parents to choose their careers.

V. CONCLUSION

This research investigates the concept of trauma and its consequences in Bhattacharya's novel *One Small Voice*. Being exposed to the harsh realities of discrimination and injustice in society altered the characters' perception of the outside world. Still, it also helped them to reshape their life with compassion, courage and resilience. Alberdi et al. (2014), in the article titled "*Epidemiology of Severe Trauma*," highlights the alarming global impact of trauma, stating that it ranks as the sixth most common cause of death and the fifth most common cause of moderate to severe disability worldwide. Through the trauma theory, the paper analysed how the characters of the novel confront challenges and emerge resilient. The article also highlights how avoidance serves as a defensive mechanism and helps characters to undergo personal transformation. Consequently, the novel ends with a hopeful conclusion by emphasizing connections with friends and family in helping each other for recovery. Finally, the research aids society in treating trauma survivors with utmost care.

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