

SEXUAL DISCOURSE, EROTICA IN TODAY'S ARABIC LITERATURE: THE CASE OF NEDJMA'S TRANSLATED ALMOND

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ABSTRACT

The current research paper is geared to deal with the question of employing sexual discourse in Arabic literature by taking Nedjma's Almond as a case in point. In other words, it addresses Arab female's construction of sexuality in Arabic fiction. It also aims at exploring the place of erotic fiction in this literature. Another purpose of this article is to show the Islamic view towards sexuality. In other terms, this research attempts to investigate how Nedjma tries to draw a real picture about female's position in the religious beliefs and cultural norms of Moroccan society in particular and Arab world in general. Hence, this piece of research is based on using ethno methodological theory to analyse the character's speech in relation to certain socio-cultural factors.

KEYWORDS: Erotica, Literary Discourse, Feminism, Arabic Literature, the Almond

INTRODUCTION

Dealing with the use of taboos in literature has recently attracted many literary men, although it is still seen as taboo to tackle such subjects because the majority of critics claim that the latter touches the religious norms of the society under investigation such as the Almond which gives a real picture about Moroccan religious traditions and women's position in these norms. In fact, most of erotic novelists, in the Arab world, try to write in other languages fearing that their words will not be published in their mother tongue Arabic as the case of Almond and Ben Jelloun's famous works "La Nuit Sacrée" and "L'Enfant de Sable"¹.

Henceforth, the central aim of this work is to investigate sexuality as one of the most sensitive tabooed topics in Islamic societies from a cultural and a sociolinguistic point of view. Secondly, it tends to shed light on the position of sexuality in Islamic religious norms. In other words, this work attempts to explain most critical views and how Nedjma tries to handle Moroccan context and the value of sexuality within its religious and cultural beliefs. By applying previous scholarly works in the field of fiction, this research paper aims at exploring the use of taboos in Arabic literature through studying Nedjma's translated Almond. Besides, it tends to analyse the main reasons that push Nedjma to tackle such a critical phenomenon "women's sexuality in the Arab world". It also attempts to study the attitudes of Almond's characters towards taboos related to sex. Thus, these objectives raise a number of research questions which are put forward as follows:

- What type of fiction does the Almond represent?
- How does Badra rebel against Moroccan social norms?

¹ "La Nuit Sacrée" is a novel which completes "L'Enfant de Sable". Both novels represent a cry against Moroccan traditions and women's illegal position in this society.

- What are the different types of sexual taboos in Almond?

Trying to answer these questions, this study is based on three hypotheses:

- The Almond can be included in erotic literature due to the hidden aims of its writer, although the majority of critics see it as a part of pornographic fiction.
- Badra, the protagonist character, has rebelled against the moral traditions of Moroccan society since they restrict female's freedom even in deciding who are going to marry and live with.
- There may be different types of taboos related to sex including adultery, masturbation, homosexuality and taboos related to female body.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Before digging deeper on this sensitive subject, one should declare that the use of sexual discourse in literature can be seen as an attack against the moral of a given society in a given period of time and this is the case of Nedjma's Almond which is "a good example of the use of sexual terms to explore and challenge both individual and societal moral conventions about sexual behaviour." (Santaemilia, 2005: 03). Hence, through this research paper we attempt to show the aims behind Nedjma's Almond and the position of sexual discourse in Arabic fiction through reviewing some important facts about literature and sexual discourse.

Pornographic Fiction

Most of Western anthropologists and psychologists regard pornography as an essential or "[...] an acceptable element" in human culture because they think that "[...] pornography serves some necessary function that it may help to ameliorate some pressing social problems." (Goldstein, Kant and Hartman, 1974: 7).

On the other hand, the majority of critics claim that there is a huge difference between what they call erotica and pornography. In this regard, Kronhausens claims that pornography can be found in most preliterate societies through erotic folktales. He also argues that there is a difference between prostitution and pornography. In fact, his main attempt is to distinguish between "[...] *pornography* from *erotically realistic art or fiction*."²

In the same wave, Kaplan maintains that Kronthausen's division of sexual language into pornography and erotica is not sufficient. He also proposes what he calls conventional obscenity which "[...] is neutral towards sex, being concerned primarily with the social evils of particular sex patterns."³ He also introduces Dionysian obscenity which regards sex as an enjoyable part of human life and Lady Chatterley's Lover⁴, in his point of view, can be seen as a part of this type of obscenity. Perverse is another type of obscenity which is also discussed by Kaplan. He argues that such type is concerned with describing sex as disgusting, dirty and fearful. He further states that pornography can be seen as a part of perverse obscenity since it describes the disgusting nature from a positive point of view. In this regard, he (idem) agrees with Lawrence on the point that in pornography "[...] sex is no more than a disgusting necessity; the perversion lies in finding pleasure in the disgust."

² As cited by Goldstein, Kant and Hartman (idem).

³ Kaplan in Rist (1975: 32).

⁴ Lady Chatterley's Lover is written by Lawrence.

Erotic Fiction

Towards the end of the last century, a great number of scholars turn their interests towards investigating erotic literature since it has become a very essential field of research. In the light of this statement, Brulotte and Phillips (2006: ix) write that:

Erotic literature is a global cultural expression represented in nearly all literary forms from the ancient world to the present. Recognizing its rich scope and cultural importance, scholars from around the world are drawn to the genre and the study of erotic literature is now a vast and emerging field.

Additionally, one should note that sexual discourse is probably as old as human race. It is the French who help in developing the branch of erotic literature. Their works are not limited to novels, but poetry, short stories and drama. In here, French erotica has taken an important part in terms of social influence.

Indeed, it is essential to mention that erotic fiction differs from pornographic one. Moreover, erotic fiction is a work in which "sexuality and/ or sexual desire has a dominant presence." (Brulotte and Philips, *ibid*: x). However, this definition has been harshly criticised since it includes even pornography because the latter represents a given type of love stories "containing sexually explicit passages." (*idem*).

Female Erotic Literature

It is also necessary to mention that the use of sexual discourse in fiction by females can be seen as a part of Post-feminist movement which takes into consideration erotica as a site of empowerment as it is highlighted by Sonnet (1999: 167) when she claims that erotica is a

[...] site of 'empowerment' and of 'liberation' for women. This located within current modalities of post-feminist identity in which sexual pleasure and commodity forms are inextricably tied to notions of 'entitlement' and consumerist 'self-determination'.

What can be understood from the above quotation is that Sonnet tends to show that the emergence of female erotica is the result of Post-modernist movement which tries to liberalise women from the cultural pressures of the society and this is the case of Almond, although Arab cultural traditions differ largely from European norms. Broadly approached, the main aim beyond female erotic fiction is to make women able to "speak" about sex in "an authentic or non-colonized fashion" (Sonnet, *ibid*: 173). In the same wave, Alleyne notes that "erotic fiction" is a "genre" which is exciting and "free area for women writers".⁵

In its general terms, erotica is a cry for female's equality in all domains of life. It is far from pornographic fiction since its goals are apparent to the reader. In other words, it does not seek for sexual pleasure, but rather for freedom and equality between men and women in all spheres. On the part of Arab female novelists, it was impossible to write erotic fiction until recently. Indeed, Nedjma veils her identity in order to help her literary person to realise her goals beyond this erotic fiction. She prefers French language for two reasons.

⁵ As cited by Sonnet (*idem*)

Firstly, she believes that her novel will never be published, if she writes in Arabic as her speech denotes “In any event, if I’d written in Arabic, it would never have been published [...] Nor will it. It’s a thousand years since Muslims have written openly about sex.” (Riding, p. E 1)⁶.

Secondly, erotic literature has flourished in France and linguistically speaking, French language has what Rao and Monsef Rao (idem) call “mythologie érotique”, they add that it is rich in “modes de codification linguistiques et culturels du fait sexuel”.

Gender and Sexual Literary Discourse

It is agreed that sexual language is the concern of sociolinguistics which associates it with men. In his point of view, Trudgill (1972) links masculinity with the use of swearwords, obscenity and insults. In the same wave, Eble (1977: 295) claims that:

Terms of hostility and abuse such as curses and obscenities are generally associated with masculinity, whereas euphemistic and superlative terms are associated with femininity’s neutral terms are associated with neither sex.

As quoted by Santaemilia (2005: 06).

As far as literary discourse is concerned, one should inform that the gender of the writer has its part in selecting the type of sexual discourse. This means that the majority of women writers prefer erotic fiction, while pornography is a part of male’s interests. Besides, some writers try even to employ some strategies to cover up with their goals. These strategies touch the narrator i.e., the sex of the narrator is sometimes unknown.

Indeed, the main aim behind the use of such techniques is “creating confusion.” (Brulotte and Philips, 2006: xi). A good example can be taken from Arabic and French literatures. In case of Arabic fiction, one can consider ‘the Almond’ which is written by an unknown Moroccan female Novelist who names herself Nedjma in order to avoid the harsh criticism of Muslim writers and religious men due to the sensitivity of her work since it touches Arab female sexuality.

A Spotlighton Almond

The Almond is an autobiographical erotic novel written by a Muslim woman from North Africa. This novel is about the sexual life of a young Moroccan female. It follows her life progress from her adolescent lesbian adventure, along with the catastrophic marriage and then escaping to Tangier, falling in love with a wealthy, European-educated man named ‘Driss’ who managed to ruin her reputation through an illegal relationship. In fact, he refused to marry her and their affairs remained hidden for ten years through which Driss thought Badra more about love and sex. When Badra escaped from her disastrous marriage to Tangier, she searched how to get her freedom.

Indeed, Nedjma tries to prove that Moroccan traditions differ from one region to another, for example, she shows Tangier as a place where a female can realise her emotional freedom. Broadly speaking, the Almond tends to shed light on a number of Muslim taboos related to female sexuality. In this regard, this novel can be considered as an auto fictional story which is similar to sexual life of Catherine. In this vein, Rao and Monsef-Roa (ibid: 263) state that:

⁶ As quoted in Rao and Monsef Roa (2007: 266).

[...] *L'amande*, présenté par la critique comme le premier récit érotique écrit par une femme musulmane, le roman de Nedjma lèverait le voile sur un certain nombre de tabous en matière de sexualité féminine (et masculine). Cette évocation de « l'éveil sexuel d'une femme musulmane » (« *The Sexual Awakening of a Muslim Woman* ») qui laisse envisager un récit autofictionnel, n'est pas sans rappeler *la vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, roman avec lequel *L'amande* a d'ailleurs été comparé.

Broadly stated, Almond reveals that female's characters tend to employ sexuality as a tool against the religious and cultural oppression. In this regard, Boone claims that Nedjma tries to open a gate on the dark side of all Arab society's traditions through the story of Badra and how she suffers. In this sense, Boone (2007: 03) writes the following:

The Almond went flying off the shelves in Europe, the readers hoping perhaps that Nedjma, the author, might open a window into a closed world, however, it appears to me that the content, especially descriptions of some of the barbaric rituals inflicted on young, African Muslim girls were written for shock value with the explicit and almost pornographic sex scenes included only to titillate.

Additionally, one might claim that Nedjma tries to give a real picture about the sufferance of Muslim women. In other words, the main aim behind the use of female sexuality is to fight the moral standards which are imposed by the society and this fact makes the novel worth not only for reading, but also for analysing academically. In this sense, she (2005: 01) writes the following:

This narrative is first of all a story of soul and flesh. Of a love states its name, often crudely, and is not burdened by any moral standards other than those of the heart [...] I raise these words as one raises a glass, to the health of Arab women, for whom recapturing the confiscated mention of the body is half the battle in the quest to healing their men.

From what precedes, one may note that the audience is aware of the fact that she is writing to defend the rights of her own gender rather than writing a novel centered on the standards of Islam. Here, she shows that she is fighting against the restrictions that Muslim societies have imposed on their members namely females. In short, Nedjma justifies her use of sexual discourse claiming that sex is a part of human nature. She also considers that talking about sex openly is a way to break down barriers that keep Arab women silent.

Almond as an Erotica

It is agreed by most critics that the Almond is an overview about the cultural norms of Moroccan society and the lives of its rural females. In other words, it tends to explain the position of sexuality in this society. In fact, this novel "appears to have been merged here with the seemingly erotic, which could why the novel has been so highly praised by some Western media." (Lebbady, 2009: 93). Although, the novel deals with Muslim female's sexuality and the subject of homosexuality, it is seen as an erotic work by most Western novelists who regard Almond as a manifestation or rather a cry against Moroccan traditions in particular and Islamic norms in general. In the light of the late statement, Lebbady (ibid: 94) highlights that "L'Amande reads like an erotic manifesto for modern women who want to break free from the

repressive bonds of cultural tradition to unashamedly demand their right to pleasure.” In the same vein, Lieck agrees on the previous statement claiming that most of Arabic erotic works are written by females who want to break the barriers of taboos that the society has imposed on Muslim women and this is apparent in Nedjma’s *Almond*. Lebbady (ibid: 93) quotes Lieck when he states that “[a] Muslim woman breaks the taboos of her culture: using a pseudonym, she publishes an erotic tale divulging the secret sexual lives and cravings of Muslim women.” It is also essential to note that the writer employs what is called pseudonym ‘Nedjma’ in order to protect herself as the following words denote:

I had to talk about the body [...] It is the last taboo, one where all the political and religious prohibitions are concentrated. It is the last taboo for democracy. I didn’t want to write politically, but I did look for something radical. It is a cry of protest.

Nedjma (2005: 66)

Additionally, one should inform that female erotica, in Arabic literature, has not found its place until the emergence of feminist movements. Indeed, Moroccan female authors are the first to take in charge this type of literature. In this sense, Benchekroun (2005: 22) highlights that “[...] nous [les femmes écrivains] n’avons pas à nous cacher ni, comme à d’autre époques, devoir mentir sur notre identité sexuelle et prendre des pseudonymes pour être éditées.”

As far as erotica in *Almond* is concerned, many critics claim that the style of the novel can be included in Eastern classics since it is rich in metaphors and imagination such as in “like a bird caught in a tornado”, “delicately, the way you loosen the fragile skin a green almond” and “my vagina discharged its joy in long translucent strands”.⁷ These scenes can be included in erotic imagination. Needless to say, one might confirm that the main aim of Nedjma’s erotic work is the importance of speaking out and this is a part of feminist literary tactics.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Materials

In analysing the structure of the novel, we have focused on ethno methodological theory since we will deal with the speech of characters. According to Davidson (2012: 26), ethno methodology is a sociological theory which is postulated by the American sociologist Garfinkel during the 1950s, although it has been harshly criticised by many critics due to the fact that most researchers focus on quantitative methods in their analysis. By the beginning of the 1960s, some scholars try to employ ethno methodology not only in analysing today’s social facts and lives of people, but also in investigating literary discourse. In this sense, Garfinkel (1967: 11)⁸ defines ethno methodology as follows:

The investigation of the rational properties in indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life

During the 1990s, Sacks develops two variants of ethno methodology including (MCA) or categorization analysis and conversation analysis (CA). Hence, we have relied on the second since we are going to analyse the speech of the novel’s characters according to their social lives.

⁷ Nedjma (2005 :63-74)

⁸ Davidson (ibid : 29)

DATA PREPARATION, ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Item One: Badra's Sexual Rebellion

Throughout our analysis, we have found that the protagonist Badra tries first to rebel against the Moroccan tradition which is based on the fact that females have no decision who are going to marry. However, she fails to overcome the tradition. Thus, she accepts her destiny since she hopes that her husband will be gentle.

Furthermore, Nedjma shows marriage traditions in a very intelligent way and how Arab girls suffer from the shock of the wedding night through the following passage that Badra's sister tells her before the arrival of her husband "close your eyes, bite your lips, and think about something else".(Nedjma, 2005: 111).

In fact, Nedjma also reveals that Arab girls are not only shocked from the wedding night, but also from their relatives who are waiting outside the door for marriage confirmation through the form of blood on a shirt. Moreover, Badra has also rebelled against the moral of Islam through falling in love with a strange man 'Driss', who manages to seduce her and ruins her reputation. Thus, the second rebellion is making an illegal relationship which is seen in Islam as "zina": adultery. Hence, Badra's rebellion results in breaking her conservative upbringing at one hand, and gaining her soul freedom at the other hand. In other words, sharing love and romantic emotions is an important step in building Badra's character as an independent woman. In this sense, Nedjma claims that sexuality is a sort of anger "[...]over the backwardness, the fanaticism, the delusion, the ignorance, and violence in the Arab world"⁹. In her point of view, it is also a window towards freedom and a protest against the misunderstanding of Islam. In this vein, Lebbady (idem) reports her speech as the following passage denotes:

Sexuality, pleasure in her own body, the separation of love and sin showed her the way to freedom. All the evils of an Islamic society that feels itself threatened by the West [...] are mirrored in the oppression of women.

Item Two: Badra's Sexual Behaviour Breaks Muslim Taboos

During her adolescence, Badra declares that Arab females are always curious to know more about the adventure and secrets of the other sex and even their own gender. In fact, she tries to show her sexual beauty in front of her male peers in order to have control over them and this is apparent in the following passages:

[...] I am the one with the most beautiful cunt on the earth, the deepest, warmest, wettest, noisiest, most fragrant and singing, the one most fond of cocks when they rise up like harpoons.

Nedjma (2005: 04)

A closer look on the previous passages reveals that the writer tries to use metaphors and literary images in purpose. Moreover, this passage also shows that the writer knows a lot about oriental classics and the methods they use in their erotic works especially in poetry.

Another image, that Nedjma tends to express it, is how females tend to free their sexual desires and express their feelings and emotions. In fact, Badra rebels against the traditions of Islam through making love in Ramadan which is seen

⁹ As cited by Lebbady, (2009: 94).

as the strongest taboo in which the person, who commits this sin, should be punished. What also appears from some this passage is that Badra's sexual desires have taken control over her religious upbringing although she knows well that "zina": 'adultery' is not only forbidden in Ramadan, but also in all Muslim's religious norms. In other words, Badra has challenged all traditions in order to succeed in her emotional life as it is apparent in the following passage:

But I made love with Dris during Ramadan, breaking my vow [...] All I could find to say to God was, 'Don't look at me now.

Nedjma (ibid: 186-7)

Item Three: Most Tabooed Topics in Almond

- **Virginity**

Virginity is the most sensitive issue in women's lives since Arab girls have to look after their virginity until their marriage ceremony and this is the case of Badra who was forced to marry an old man "Hmed". Hmed married two females before Badra, but he abandoned his wives because they did not give him children. Hence, Badra was obliged to marry Hmed without any love. Before marriage ceremony, Badra has been forced by her mother-in-law to see her virginity as any other Arab females.

Indeed, Nedjma tries to show that this stage affects deeply Arab girls and during marriage night, Hmed tries to make Badra his wife. In short, Nedjma shows for the reader all sexual scenes in purpose. Her central aim is to talk about the sufferance of Arab females from those traditions and this is apparent from the following passage:

He spread my legs, and his member against my sex [...] His sex, which fumbled between my thighs, was blind and stupid. It hurt me, so that I cramped more with each movement [...] gasping and sweating, he laid me on the sheep skin, lifted my legs, nearby dislocating me thereby, and continued his frenzy.

Nedjma (ibid: 256)

Honour and Reputation of the Family

In most Islamic societies, a woman's sexual purity is related to the honour of her family before marriage and to her husband after wedding night, whereas a man's sexual purity is related to his own honour not to that of his family or his female kin (Sadiqi, 2003: 61). In case of all Muslim societies, girls are traditionally expected to maintain virgin until their marriage. In other words, virginity is a symbol of honour for girls, their families and husbands. This fact is apparent in Almond from the wedding night of Badra until she escapes. Hence, she ruins the honour and reputation of her husband. As a result, her brother decides to kill her if she decides to return back to Imchouk.¹⁰

Item Four: The Position of Islam in the Almond

From our readings of the first pages, we can inform that Nedjma's aims are not centered on the moral of Islam, but rather on the social oppressions that Arab females suffer from and this is obvious in her speech when she (ibid: 1) writes that:

¹⁰Imchouk is the village where Badra grows up.

This narrative is first of all a story of soul and flesh. Of a love that states its name, often crudely, and is not burdened by any moral standards other than those of the heart [...] I raise these words as one raises a glass, to the health of Arab women, for whom recapturing the confiscated mention of the body is half the battle in the quest to healing their men.

As it is explained in this quotation, Nedjma has built her novel on specific goals, although many critics maintain that sexuality in this novel is exaggerated and is delivered to realise sexual and emotional entertainment. Hence, it is erotic in nature since its plot describes the real social situation of the characters and how they progress through time.

From what precedes, it is essential to note that Almond has released the aims of its writer since it shows the character's ability to use sexuality as a tool to face oppression that females have suffered from for a long time. Moreover, this sort of fiction can be seen as a gift or blessing not only to feminist literature, but also to the world of fiction in general.

As far as the Almond is concerned, Nedjma has dealt with all tabooed topics that are banned in Islamic norms including prostitution and homosexuality. Nedjma's hidden purpose is to address the cultural and religious prohibitions of Moroccan traditions in particular and Arab world in general. It tries to participate in feminist literature, although she has been accused by most Arab critics such as Nada Elia.

This criticism is based on the fact that Nedjma tries to eroticise Arab culture and Islamic norms. However, Western critics see that Almond tackles even the stereotypes surrounding Arab culture since the characters use sexuality as their battleground to gain freedom as the case of many European novels such as "The Life of a Slave Girl" and "The Color Purple".

Among the topics that Nedjma tries to treat in this novel is sexual violence. The latter is mentioned at the beginning and the end of the novel when Badra firstly escapes from her hopeless marriage to Tangier and secondly from the humiliation of her lover Driss who refuses to marry her and, thus, their relation remains illegal and secret.

Basically, the author has focused on detailed sexual scenes and, henceforth, the images are in the form of clichés centered on Badra and her sexual adventure. In this case, the characters of the novel are like players in Badra's life because they have just pushed the movement of the plot.

From the different interpretations of Almond, one may highlight that what is happening in today's world and what females suffer from, including sexual violence, oppression, inequality, racism and humiliation, have nothing to do with Islamic teachings. Besides, Nedjma tries to address the mental paralysis of most Arab societies and the dominance of males over females. For this author, the Arab world is like an old man who suffers from many mortal diseases including poverty, illiteracy, tyranny and fundamentalist's power.

In her interview with Alan Riding (2005: 2), Nedjma recognises the fact of Arab societies, stating that they do not know how to love. In the light of this view, Riding reports her speech as following:

The malaise of the Arab world is that people don't know how to love. They watch romantic soap operas on television out of frustration. They dream about love [...] They appreciate beautiful love poems, but they don't have the courage of the heart.

What can be also interpreted from Nedjma's novel is that Arab men remain attached to the social traditions of their societies, although they are educated as the case of Driss who "remains trapped by the customs of Arab men [...] he was liberated sexually but not socially." (Riding, idem)

CONCLUSIONS

Before ending this article, one should inform that investigating the use of sexual discourse in literature is a new trend in the field of sociolinguistics since it has recently gained scholarly interests, although it was deemed as a field which is not worthy of academic research. However, it is still seen as taboo for Arab researchers not only to write erotic fiction, but even to tackle topics related to such sort of literature.

Additionally, it is necessary to state that erotic fiction differs largely from pornographic literature because the former is built on certain aims or goals as the case of "The Life of a Slave Girl" through which its author tends to fight slavery and racism. Besides, many critics posit the view that female writers are in favour of eroticism, whereas males search for entertaining the reader through a series of sexual scenes.

As far as the Almond is concerned, Nedjma has challenged the morals of her society through exposing the sexual life of a Moroccan Muslim woman. She makes sexuality as her strategy to realise her aims. In other words, the Almond is a cry or a request against the wrong interpretation of Islamic norms and teachings. It is also a protest in favour of Arab females and their sufferance from sexual violence and exploitation.

To these ends, the results above proved the aims behind this piece of fiction. Throughout our analysis of the novel, we have found that it can be included in the field of erotica rather than pornography. Our examination has also revealed that Badra's rebellion is an attack towards the morals of her society in which women are just slaves of these traditions. They have no right to love and to select their partners for marriage. What also emerges from our investigation is that Nedjma has touched the most tabooed topics that are banned in Islam mainly homosexuality and prostitution.

Briefly speaking, investigating the field of erotic fiction gives us more insights about what is banned in a given society and how the characters reflect the sufferance of the members in this society. In this sense, one may posit the idea that words are more powerful than images since they are closer to the heart of the reader since it motivate his feelings and Nedjma has benefited a lot from her decision to write her novel in French language rather than Arabic because it will never gain the interest of Westerners or even Arab critics.

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