



## Caste and Hierarchy Exploration in *The God of Small Things*

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### ABSTRACT

The paper examines the repercussions of social and caste hierarchy in the novel *The God of Small Things*, a Man Booker prize awarded novel written by Arundhati Roy. It explains the story of Ayemenem, a social space where caste functions overtly, silently, shaping desires, policing bodies and structuring memory. The central character to analyze is the male protagonist named Velutha, a *Paravan*. He is a skilled labour whose political alliance and intimate relationship with Ammu disclose the limits of society which considers itself rhetoric but in real remains rigid. The study analyses that Roy projects caste as a “law of small things”. It shows dispersed in everyday system of rules and prohibitions which demonstrate inequality through gestures, silences, and ritualized violence. The research comparatively situates Roy’s novel along with Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* (1935), Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fire Balance* (1995) and Bama’s *Karukku* (Tamil: English translation in 2000) to plan in detail the continuities and divergences in literary representations of caste and religion. The small incidents at different time expose the caste and social inequality prevalent in the society. The novelist poignantly depicts the pathetic situation of the male protagonist, Velutha and female central character, Ammu, throughout the novel. The conclusion of the research paper reflects on Roy’s temporal disruption,



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child perspective and lyrical irony, which show caste visible and devastating. It will also discuss social and political reality.

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## Introduction

Arundhati Roy is a highly praised Indian author and political campaigner best known for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* that won the esteemed Booker Prize in 1997.

She was born on 24th November, 1961 in Shillong, Meghalaya, India. Her mother, Mary Roy, was a prominent women's rights campaigner and educationalist from Kerala, while her father, Rajib Roy, was a tea plantation manager. Roy spent her early years in Kerala and attended schools in Kottayam and Tamil Nadu before studying architecture at the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi.

After working in a variety of fields such as architecture, film, and television, Roy wrote *The God of Small Things*, a part-autobiographical novel inspired by her childhood in Kerala. The novel's lyrical language and nonlinear plot structure scan themes of caste, family, politics, and illicit love. The story centers on twins Estha and Rahel and how their lives are shaped by misfortune and Indian social realities. Upon publication in 1997, the novel won world wide commendation and became the biggest-selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author.

She received the Booker Prize in 1997 for *The God of Small Things*. She has since won other distinctions, including the 2024 PEN Pinter Prize for her literary and activist work.

Roy is also renowned for her activism addressing ecological, societal, and human rights issues, mostly her critiques of globalization, inequality, and state power. She has published numerous essays and books of non-fiction, including *The Algebra of Infinite Justice*, *Field Notes on Democracy*, and *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*. Her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* published in 2017, received encouraging concentration for its investigation of India's political awareness and marginalized voices. She has regularly been involved in protests and activism, sometimes facing lawful challenges for her outspoken positions on contentious issues such as the Narmada River dam project and the Citizenship Amendment.

Despite controversies, her control as a writer and activist remains noteworthy in India and abroad. Arundhati Roy is distinguished both for her fictional achievements and her severe rendezvous in political and social issues, making her a distinctive voice in contemporary world literature.



The Indian English Literature has depicted social inequality and caste division in different ways. But Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* is special in weaving the plot of the story. This novel is not only the tragic story of one family but it is the living example of deeply rooted caste system in Indian society.

The novelist exposes a great social truth with the help of small things. The novel is often read for its lyrical prose and its critique of persons of higher rank Keralian society.

The novel's tragedy - Velutha's death, Ammu's exile, the obliteration of the twin's childhood - is produced by a compactly wound mechanism of caste - prejudice that operates through criticism, bureaucratic collusion and the policing of closeness.

The research paper has been divided into four parts. Firstly, it outlines a conceptual framework to understand caste as a social force. Secondly, it analyses the novel's setting - Ayemenem - as a field in which caste works in quiet, everyday ways which are nonetheless coercive. Thirdly, it focuses on Velutha as a *Paravan*. It is clear how his skills and affective relationships both threaten the local social order and reveal the incommensurability between human value and ritual rankings.

Finally, the research offers a comparative glance at *Untouchability* by Mulk Raj Anand, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, and *Karukku* by Bama to situate Roy's treatment of caste within a broader Indian literary conversation.

### **Defining Caste Mechanism as Conceptual Frame**

The caste system in South Asia is a deeply - rooted social arrangement based on hereditary groups. To understand the caste system in India, the philosophers from India and other parts of the world have expressed their thoughts on the basis of their own minute and practical observation.

Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar approach –

“Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar described caste as the biggest curse on Indian society and said it is the opposite of the principle of humanization and equality.”

The thinker Louis Dumont opines “caste as based on the idea of ‘purity and pollution’ in his work *Homo Hierarchicus*.”

According to him, the Indian society has been organized under the principle of hierarchy where purity and impurity play a fundamental role. In his view, the caste system is not only an economic or political



structure, but a religious and ideological one based on these values. He asserted that it expresses social inequality and determines the position of individuals within the society. It plays the dual role in the Indian society. On the one side, it provides stability by regulating social behavior and establishing order. On the other side, it also prohibits personal freedom and social mobility. In this way, it is both - unifying and divisive force within the Indian society.

Bourdieu emphasized “social capital and structure, which demonstrates that caste is not merely an economic situation but also a part of cultural habits and relations.”

Foucault’s Power - Knowledge Theory says -

“Caste can also be seen as a form of ‘disciplinary power’ which controls body and behavior.”

The description of caste in literature is not just a reflection of social reality but an inspiration for the awareness of new generation under this current stream of thought.

Though caste and social inequality are the major characteristics of the Indian society, yet it was conceptualized to maintain social order and stability, but today caste and social differences have become the main sources of social inequality. As social inequality does unfair distribution of resources, opportunities and rights among different groups in society, still caste - based inequality is prevalent which hinders social unity and development.

So a just and equal society can only be built by giving equal opportunity and social harmony. It is clearly depicted in the novel that Velutha suffered a lot due to being a Paravan.

### **Ayemenem: A Place Where Caste Works Silently**

Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* is a story of a Syrian Christian family set in Ayemenem in which there is a deep - rooted caste system. It is vivid that the caste based system is deeply attached to the dignity of family. It displays how social class division and caste discrimination spoils the existence of love in the life of a person.

The family living in Ayemenem appears modern and educated from outside while from inside his mentality is obsessed with traditional caste system.

Ammu, who was a divorcee and a mother of twins – Estha and Rahul, returns her parents’ home with her children. Estha and Rahel “were nearly born on a bus. The car, in which Baba, their father, was taking Ammu, their mother, to hospital in Shilong to have them, broke down on the winding tea estate road in



Assam. They abandoned the car and flagged down a crowded State Transport bus. With ... from wobbling. That was before they were divorced and Ammu came back to live in Kerala.”(p- 3)

“It was raining when Rahel came back to Ayemenem. Slanting silver ropes slammed into loose earth, ploughing it up like gunfire. The old house on the hill wore its steep, gabled roof pulled over its ears like a low hat. The walls, streaked with moss, had grown soft, and bulged a little with dampness that seeped up from the ground. The wild, overgrown garden was full of the whisper and scurry of small lives. In the undergrowth a rat snake rubbed itself against a glistening stone. Hopefully yellow bullfrogs cruised the scummy pond for mates. A drenched mongoose flashed across the leaf-strewn driveway.

The house itself looked empty. The doors and windows were locked. The front verandah bare. Unfurnished. But the skyblue Plymouth with chrome tailfins was still parked outside, and inside, Baby Kochamma was still alive.”(pp - 1, 2)

When they came back to Ayemen, the death of Sophie Mol, a nine-year old girl and Estha and Rahel’s cousin, their uncle Chacko’s daughter, who was visiting from England to there, socked all.

“She lay in it in her yellow Crimplene bellbotoms with her hair in a ribbon and her Made-in-England go-go bag that she loved. Her face was pale and as wrinkled as a dhobi’s thumb from being in water for too long.” (p - 4)

The congregation gathered around the coffin and the yellow church swelled like a throat with the sound of sad singing.

“The priests with curly beards swung pots of frankincense on chains and never smelled at babies the way they did on usual Sundays. The long candles on the altar were bent. The short ones weren’t. An old lady masquerading as a distant relative (whom nobody recognized), but who often surfaced next to bodies at funerals (a funeral junkie? a latent necrophiliac?) put cologne on a wad of cotton wool and with a devout and gently challenging air, dabbed it on Sophie Mol’s forehead. Sophie Mol smelled of cologne and coffinwood”. (pp - 4-5)

“Margaret Kochamma, Sophie Mol’s English mother, wouldn’t let Chacko, Sophie Mol’s biological father, put his arm around her to comfort her.” (p - 5)

The whole family was under a great shock.



“The family stood huddled together. Margaret Kochamma, .... Mammachi was almost blind and always wore dark glasses when she went out of the house. Her tears trickled down .... Her own grief grieved her. His devastated her.”(p - 5)

But still the traditional ethics were followed-

“Through Ammu, Estha and Rahel were allowed to attend the funeral; they were made to stand separately, not with the rest of the family. Nobody would look at them.” (p - 5)

There was a show-off of love, affection and equality in the family; it became crystal clear when Ammu fell in love with Velutha, an untouchable labour. The love between them became a great punishment for them on behalf of their family and society.

Ammu was helpless to return to her parents’ home -

“When his (Ammu’s husband) bouts of violence began to include the children, and the war with Pakistan began, Ammu left her husband and returned, unwelcomed, to her parents in Ayemenem. To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago. Except that now she had two young children. And no more dreams.” (p - 42)

On the other hand, “Baby Kochamma disliked the twins, for she considered them doomed, fatherless waifs. Worse still, they were Half-Hindu Hybrids whom no self-respecting Syrian Christian would marry.” (p - 45)

Baby Kochamma understood the helplessness of Ammu as she had also failed in love to trap father Mulligan.

“Baby Kochamma resented Ammu, because she saw her quarrelling with a fate that she, Baby Kochamma herself, felt she had graciously accepted. The fate of the wretched Man-less woman.”(p - 45)

“She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a *divorced* daughter- according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a *divorced* daughter from a *love* marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a *divorced* daughter from an *intercommunity love* marriage - Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject.” (pp - 45, 46)

Under the family suppression of caste system and tradition, Ammu used to make understand to her children.



“Ammu told them the story of Julius Caesar and how he was stabbed by Brutus, his best friend, in the Senate. And how he fell to the floor with knives in his back and said, 'Et tu? Brute? Then fall Caesar?' ”  
(p - 83)

Ayemenem is a static village. It is a place where status reflects by doing trivial acts of taking decisions - who will sit where at the family sofa, who is entrusted any particular responsibility in the pickle factory and who can walk on certain paths.

There are the pretty things which naturalize social caste system. The story repeatedly depicts how social infringement like sitting on a sofa, touching certain objects, being at a particular place in a particular time; create moral trepidation.

### **Velutha: *Parvan*, Labourer, Lover**

Velutha is one of the most carefully crafted characters by Arundhati Roy. He is skilled, witty, affectionate and politically engaged.

“Velutha was supposed to be a carpenter. He was called Velutha - means White in Malyalam - because he was so black.”(p - 73)

His father, Velutha Pappen, was a Paravan, so was he.

“His father – a toddy tapper. He had a glass eye. He had been shaping a block of granite with a hammer when a chip flew into his left eye and sliced right through it.”(p - 73)

Velutha sometimes came with his father and saw his father facing the social and caste discrimination.

“As a young boy, Velutha .....with ...Vellya Pappen ... deliver the coconut .... Pappachi would not allow Paravan into the house. Nobody would. They were not allowed to touch anything that Touchables touched. Paravans were expected to crawl backwards with a broom sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins of Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidently stepping into a Paravan's footprint. In Mammachi's times ... were not allowed to walk on public road, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouths when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed.” (pp -73 - 74)

Having seen the condition of society towards *Paravan*, most of them converted into Christianity during British era.



“When the British came to Malabar, a number of Paravans, Pelayas and Pulayas ... converted to Christianity and joined the Anglican Church to escape the scourge of Untouchability. ... were known as the Rice-Christians. They ... separate churches, separate services, and separate priests. As a special favour ... separate Pariah Bishop.” (p - 74)

The discrimination didn't stop despite conversion. They were deprived of many facilities.

“After Independence they found they were not entitled to any Government benefits like job reservations or bank loans at low interest rates, because officially, on paper, they were Christians, and therefore casteless. It was a little like having a sweep away your footprints without a broom. Or worse, not being *allowed* to leave footprints at all.” (p - 74)

One day Velutha disappeared without any information in the village. In the mean time, his mother died of tuberculosis.

“There was no way of reaching him when his mother, Chella, died of tuberculosis. Then Kuttappen, his older brother, fell off a coconut tree and damaged his spine. He was paralyzed and unable to work, Velutha heard of the accident a whole year after it happened. “(p - 77)

The pain of casteism suffered by him was so deep that he turned deaf and dumb.

“It had been five months since he returned to Ayemenem. He never talked about where he had been, or what he had done.”(p - 77)

Velutha was again hired as the factory carpenter and put him in charge of general maintenance. There too, he had to cope with great caste discrimination.

“It caused a great deal of resentment among the other Touchable factory workers because, according to them, *Paravans* were not *meant* to be carpenters. And certainly, prodigal *Paravans* were not meant to be rehired.”(p - 77)

For keeping other employees in favour, “Mammachi paid Velutha less than she would a Touchable carpenter but more than she would a *Paravan*. Mammachi didn't encourage him to enter the house (except when she needed something mended or installed).

Despite disgusting attitude ‘she thought that he ought to be grateful that he was allowed on the factory premises at all, and allowed to touch things that Touchables touched. She said that it was a big step for a *Paravan*.” (p - 77)



Velutha's skill complicates the notion that 'untouchables' are hated for their menial work. He is appreciated privately but Mammachi believes in him due to factory work.

The children of the family used to play with him. Ammu finds in Velutha both - emotional intimacy and sexual attraction. But still admiration doesn't translate into social equality. The social texture of pollution overrules practical admiration. The rituals and the law of Ayemenem prohibit certain intimacies across caste lines. The contradiction - appreciation in the intimate sphere but unappreciation in the public, political, legal sphere - exposes caste's moral logic. The human worth can be acknowledged in action, it cannot be worth if denied in terms of social belongings.

### **Political Perception and Intimidation**

Velutha has also the connection to left wing political party as referenced in the novel. The political identification considers him to be a conservative element in the society as an untouchable. He destabilizes the caste and social system by trespassing intimacy norms and he wants to wipe out class interests. The amalgamation of caste and political activism leads Velutha to coordinated assault and he may be the target for physical elimination by police in a secretive or deceitful agreement.

### **Love across Social Order: Undermining and Chastisement**

When community unearths about the scandal linking Ammu and Velutha, their response is hasty and unsympathetic. The society swiftly accuses Velutha of murdering Sophie - a claim shaped to defend the societal order and repress disorder. This allegation opens the door for officials and the people in power to use brutality against Velutha and buttress the established rules, including the boundaries that detach people by gender and caste.

The narrative shows, both in "The God of Small Things" and in actual life, how sexuality and aspiration can be fear-provoking forces that defy social norms. Scholars often draw attention to how Velutha becomes a representation for those challenges - he's both the one who disrupts social order and, eventually, the one sacrificed so that society can restore confidence itself and come back to normal, as if striking a reset button. This sequence is described by the logician René Girard: 'society projects its fears onto a scapegoat, punishes or removes that person, then feels its sense of order restored.'

### **Narrative of Ammu and Power of Indignity**

Ammu is in a hard-hitting spot. As a separated woman who's struggling monetarily, she's already on insecure position within society. So, when she starts a liaison with a *Paravan* man, it's seen as a double



upheaval—not only is she asserting her right to manage her own body, but she's also breaking the stern, conventional rules of her society. For the well-off, influential elite in Ayemenem, this affair is an absolute humiliation that they feel they must squash to sustain their long-established standards.

This is where the narrative gets vicious: Baby Kochamma's public shaming of Ammu and the institutional fallout that followed served as a way to impose the social law. Velutha's body became the physical object for this enforcement, a cruel site where society's power was harshly asserted.

The analyst's point about Roy's writing is vital here. It's not just that the characters are punished; it's how the chastisement happens. The novelist shows us that the social forces themselves - rumor, fear, and shame - are what create the situation where penalty seems commonsensical to everyone watching.

To put it minimally: caste power isn't just about the real violence it unleashes. Its real, startling potency lies in its capability to direct the social thoughts. It's the power to make violence look like a flawlessly lucid and even indispensable act, not just to those who commit it, but to everyone else who lets it take place.

## **Roy's Caste Strategies**

### **How Arundhati Roy Makes Caste Felt: Four Powerful Strategies**

Arundhati Roy doesn't just put in writing about caste; she structures her entire novel to make you feel its special effects. Her purposeful writing choices augment the sting and perseverance of the caste system.

#### **1. Chaotic Time: Way Ordeal Works**

In lieu of following a without stopping timeline, Roy jumps back and forth between the twins' infancy memories and their grown-up lives. This isn't just a stylistic deception; it mirrors how suffering in fact works. The past doesn't hang about efficiently in the past; it continually intrudes on the present. Roy shows that the grievance of caste isn't a single, isolated event, but an unfathomable wound that keeps persistent.

#### **2. Seeing through a Child's Eyes: Where Class Begins**

By telling much of the story through Rahel and Estha's perceptions as children, Roy shows us how caste is educated and engrossed from a very young age. The children's misconceptions of the grown-up world's rules - their sometimes good-humored, sometimes painful misinterpretations - truly make the adult world's unkindness and the fundamental unfairness all the more wrenching and authoritative.



### 3. Playing with Language: Prominent and Strange

She uses language in a very matchless manner. Her playful approach, including using outstanding compound words (like "Heart of Darkness") and imaginative capitalization (like "The Small Things"), does more than just sound appealing. She takes social rules and customs - particularly those tied to hierarchy - and turns them into aesthetic objects. This forces readers to awkward moment, to look at these "small things" of daily life, and to see the inflexible constitution of social traditions that holds them in place.

### 4. Piercing Wittiness and Moral Indistinctness: Calling out Double Standards

The novel uses a noticeably sarcastic nature and is rich with penetrating humor (a kind of grim, dark wit). This doesn't assent to the reader off the hook. This satirical distance challenges the official explanations for the caste system. It serves as a powerful exclaim to the two-facedness of those who protect "tradition," forcing readers to tackle the ethical liquidation of such excuses.

These strategies are much more than uncomplicated literary stylishness. They create a novel where the booklover doesn't just read about unfairness, but experiences the personified, cyclic nature of caste as an individual realism, rather than just a monotonous sociological conception.

### Comparative Study: Roy, Anand, Mistry and Bama

So far as the comparative study of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (2002), Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), and Bama's *Karukku* (Tamil; English Translation in 2000) concerned, Anand's *Untouchable* is one of the earliest Indian English novels to centre a protagonist (a sweeper) who plays the role of untouchable. It depicts the daily outrage of caste system. His approach in the novel is pragmatic and didactic. The story in the novel depicts one day in the life of the protagonist, Bakha, a sweeper which emphasizes the routines of humiliation, the ritual aspects of pollution and acute sense of exclusion.

As Roy, Anand portrays that social norms are internalized and polished; but Anand's tone is more directly reformist which seeks moral outrage in the reader. Both the novels have the theme of structural cruelty of caste and social disparity. On the other hand, Roy's novel portrays a more complex mapping of psychological consequences and intimate transgression. The life of Bakha in *Untouchable* and Velutha in *The God of Small Things* is at the same to a great extent.



Anand has presented a pragmatic picture of Dalit life through Bakha while Roy emphasizes more on language and emotional touch.

Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) situates caste in the larger nexus of class, state power and emergency political system. The depiction of two tailors - Ishwar and Omprakash – from a Dalit/*Chammar* (Untouchable) background are foiled by violence and institutional atrocity.

Both the novels *A Fine Balance* and *The God of Small Things* display an interest in how social/administrative power (police, landlords, bureaucracy) moved social discrimination into physical loss.

So Rohinton's frame is panoramic and natural and Arundhati's focus is local and intensely affective. However both the authors insist on the ongoing material repercussions of caste and social mentality towards the untouchability.

Bama's *Karukku* which has been translated from Tamil into English has an autobiographical tone and is the foundational text of Dalit women's writing. It is the living depiction of Dalit women.

Bama portrays the situation of a Dalit Christian woman who copes with systematic humiliations and the daily practices of untouchability. *Karukku* highlights Dalit subjectivity and religious intersectionality, comparing Roy and Bama highlights a tension in representation.

Roy's emphatic description of Velutha as an outsider is influential, but a Dalit writer focuses on a different dimension that leads to insider.

Considering all the three novels, it is an arc of Indian literary engagement with caste across genres and remarkable moments.

Anand portrays religious humiliation in early-20th century pragmatism.

Mistry depicts caste's tanglement with late century political criminal expressions and urban poverty. Bama testifies to Dalit women's embodied experiences and resistance.

Roy makes aesthetic to caste's psychic within a postcolonial small town of Kerala. Her contribution is distinguishing as she links intimacy and polity. She clarifies in the novel that personal love can be public crime when seen through the mirror of caste and social norms.

### **Critical Analysis and Ethical Deliberation**



The story in the novel shows how much caste is deeply rooted in Indian society. Velutha is the living precedent of social cruelty. The love between Ammu and Velutha is defiance against social norms. This relation is not individual but a political one.

Ammu's life shows how much liberty is given to women in patriarchal society. The dignity and purity of family is above the life of a woman in family.

The story of the novel is in present time depicted in a fragmented way. The past and present exposes the pain of memory. The communist movement reflects that politics cannot secure the life of Dalits and the weaker sections of the society.

The novel clarifies that the small things like love, childhood innocence and private relations too affect greatly the structure of society. Caste and gender discrimination deprive of society from being humane.

If love and equality do not get respect, the society gives birth of only violence and suppression. The novel gives the message and coerces us to think that breaking the traditions which maintain injustice and inequality lead to social reform.

The story in the novel is not the tragedy of one family, rather the mirror of entire Indian society. The novel shows caste, gender and political system control the life of an individual person.

The love of Velutha and Ammu fails, but it comes in front of society as a symbolic resistance. This novel is such a work of Roy which is not significant from literature point of view but also it plays a great role to awaken consciousness of social justice and human right.

Velutha is caught by the police and he is beaten to death. This brutal killing is done only to maintain the caste hatred and social status.

Ammu too has to cope with insult and contempt of society. The society continues to call her criminal. Ultimately Ammu fell ill and died untimely.

The end of the story is not straight rather it ends with the past and present commemoration.

The description of secret meeting of Velutha and Ammu comes at the end of the story, which unearths the depth of love and selfless bond between them.



The story is woven with the help of fragments of time and commemoration; where past and present communicate each other continuously through the novel. The death of Velutha indicates that Indian society does not accept those who cross the social barriers.

Ammu's life shows a woman always has to live under the limitations of societal norms. The love of Ammu and Velutha is danger for society because it destabilizes the society.

Estha and Rahel's expressions indicate that small things can unearth social truth.

## Conclusion

So Roy's novel suggests a hybrid picture - leftist rhetoric which exists in Ayemenem and Velutha's political contacts. Caste remained the decisive axis around which status is policed. Scholars have accepted how gender modulates caste. Ammu's punishment is gendered and so is Velutha's body of caste violence. The importance of Roy's work lies in its insistence that social violence often takes the form of the everyday happenings. Comprehending caste in the novel thus needs attention to how social rules are taught, enforced, and embodied - how they enter into the smallest moments and thereby shape destiny.

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