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WOMEN SUPREMACY : BEGUM ROKEYA AND SULTANA'S DREAM

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Abstract : Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a social reformer, prolific writer and pioneer of feminist movement in the sub-continental India, wrote *Sultana's Dream* in English to impress her husband. It was first published in a Madras-based magazine called *Indian Ladies Magazine*, and is considered "a classic of feminist Utopian fiction". *Sultana's Dream* was first appeared in 1905. *Sultana's Dream* is a story of reversed purdah - the seclusion of women - in Ladyland, where peace-loving women overpower aggressive men through the power of their brains. *Sultana's Dream* discusses in playful, fascinating and intelligent ways the question of women's education. It is a delightful ironical and satirical work set in Ladyland, where the men are in curtain purdah and the women go out and work. It is an extraordinary novella with generous dashes of melodrama and romance, disasters and coincidences. Begum Rokeya, who lived during the last years of colonial rule in East Bengal, was a quiet and determined pioneer of Muslim feminist thought and writing, championing Muslim women's rights to education and freedom. This was her first full-length work in English. This edition of *Sultana's Dream* is a dialogue across time and cultures.

Keywords : Women Supremacy, Feminist utopia, Purdah (Seclusion)

The reputed feminist utopia is epitomized in *Sultana's Dream* by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, the first Bengali Muslim feminist thinker, writer and activist educator. *Sultana's Dream* is a charming yet sharp-tongued utopia about Indian women. *Sultana*, a woman in seclusion (purdah) in British India, had a daydream of a Ladyland, free from sin and harm, where virtues itself reign. Men are kept in confinement in that cherished lady land to safeguard society from crimes like theft, murder, arson, rape, plunder, burglary and so many other evils. The logic of a stronger physical composition of men to dominate women is overruled in that state on the principle that 'a lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race.' As men are confined to mardana (men's secluded area) in that lady land, society no longer needs lawyers in the courts and

there is also no warfare and bloodshed. Women look to the official duties and also manage the home as, naturally, better time managers. It needs a woman only two hours to finish office chores as she is seldom a habitual smoker like men (a man smokes twelve cigarettes daily and if one cigarette needs half an hour to be burnt off, he wastes six hours every day in sheer smoking).

In *Sultana's Dream*, the protagonist *Sultana* visits a faraway Ladyland (nari rajya) in her dream. She is accompanied by a lady named Sister Sara. When *Sultana* walks on the streets of the lady land, she finds no man there and the female pedestrians laugh at her. As *Sultana* wants to know why they are laughing at her, Sara replies that *Sultana* looks as 'timid and shy' as a man. Later *Sultana* comes to know from Sara that even fifty years earlier this Ladyland had been just like another male dominated society. But when the last king died and his daughter came to the throne, she took huge initiatives to educate women, establish women's schools, colleges and universities and particularly endeavored to train women in scientific knowledge. At that point the position of the commander-in-chief, all cabinet posts, indeed the power structure, were controlled by men. But, when a war broke out with a neighbouring country, the warriors of the country, all male, fought with huge courage but ultimately failed to achieve victory. A woman scientist of the state then urged the queen to keep the men at home for some days and let her look into the matter. The injured and tired men easily gave up. The lady scientist defeated the enemy army with the help of technology and then men in that lady land began to stay at home.

It is in men's nature to reproach women. But, again, it is men who cannot live without women. Thus Rokeya mocks the ever impulsive nature of men. In her fiery essays, Rokeya called upon parents to educate their daughters properly so that they can earn their livelihoods on their own and need not depend upon men. She even noted that as the Holy Scriptures are all authored by men; they have always tried to subjugate all women who have tried to raise their voices against injustices over the centuries.

Begum Rokeya's parents were progressive minded for their time. It was her eldest brother, Ibrahim, who saw her love for learning and helped her to begin her education in both English and Bangla. At the time, the preferred languages for the upper-class Muslims were Arabic and Farsi. Begum Rokeya was married at the age of 16 to an Urdu speaking magistrate. It was a love match, which was not a common thing during that period. Her husband Sayed Shakhwat Hossain also supported her quest for education. He encouraged her to write about women's issues that were not talked about. Begum Rokeya, from early on, realised that to be emancipated a woman had to be educated. So she began her life's work.

She was a lone voice fighting for the freedom and intellectual advancement of Muslim women in India. She wrote: "We constitute half of the society. If we

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remain backward can the society move forward? If somebody's legs are bound up how far can she walk? Indeed, the interest of women and men are not different. Their goal of life and ours are the same." With those powerful words Begum Rokeya set the tone for feminist movement. Because of her thinking, women are now seeking equal rights and helping in the development of our nation. She fought for the advancement of women when Muslim women in the sub-continent had to remain in purdah. At that time, the life of a Muslim woman was very restricted and repressed.

Sultana's Dream is a classic work of Bengali science fiction and one of the first examples of feminist science fiction. The word sultana here means a female sultan, i.e. a muslim ruler. In *Sultana's Dream* she creates a futuristic ideal world, a "feminist utopia," where women are out of the segregated zenana (purdah). They run everything and men are secluded in quarters called mardana. In *Sultana's Dream* Sultana wakes from a nap and finds her friend Sara inviting her to take a walk. But as they walk Sara turns into a strange woman, and it appears they are in 'Ladyland', a world where women rule and men are locked away. It turns out this world is superior in many respects to the real India (there is no crime, for instance), and Sultana and her Guide have a discussion where they compare India's gender segregation to Ladyland's:

"As a matter of fact, in your country this very thing is done! Men, who do or at least are capable of doing no end of mischief, are let loose and the innocent women, shut up in the zenana! How can you trust those untrained men out of doors?"

"We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master, he has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana."

"Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?"

"Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women."

Here, Rokeya is playing with conventional religious and cultural justifications for the seclusion of women. She's also alluding to a conundrum that all feminist utopias that have any men in the picture at all have to address: the "brute strength" problem. In *Sultana's Dream*, the Guide tells us, there was once a Zenana system, which remained in place until the kingdom was invaded. After the kingdom's (male) soldiers had been defeated, the women scientists offered a proposal, with one stipulation:

"The Lady Principal rose again and said, 'before we go out the men must enter the zenanas. I make this prayer for the sake of purdah.' 'Yes, of course,' replied Her Royal Highness. "

"On the following day the Queen called upon all men to retire into zenanas for the sake of honour and liberty."

"Wounded and tired as they were, they took that order rather for a boon! They bowed low and entered the zenanas without uttering a single word of protest. They were sure that there was no hope for this country at all. " "Then the Lady Principal with her two thousand students marched to the battle field, and arriving there directed all the rays of the concentrated sunlight and heat towards the enemy. "

"The heat and light were too much for them to bear. They all ran away panic-stricken, not knowing in their bewilderment how to counteract that scorching heat. When they fled away leaving their guns and other ammunitions of war, they were burnt down by means of the same sun heat. "

So the men went into the Zenana to protect the women's modesty! After the battle was won, the men voluntarily agreed to stay in seclusion in the 'Zenana', while women ruled the Kingdom, which came to be known as Ladyland. *Sultana's Dream* by Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is one example of an act of female literary subversion which aims to craft an alternative reality fairer to women.

Sultana's Dream transforms the feminized site of the home into the very nation itself. This is very different from the way it is constructed in the exclusionary discourse of nation-formation as the women's sphere. The home becomes the outside world and, ironically therefore, precisely where women belong. Rokeya thus rejects the characterization of the high class Hindu/Muslim woman as the female subject necessary for the survival of a patriarchal modern nation-state. She envisions the nation as Ladyland, a technologically advanced world where men are confined to the *zenana* and women guaranteed complete freedom. By rebelling against its social context *Sultana's Dream* ends up determined by the reality it was bound to, reflecting the complexity, heterogeneous dissenting voices which make up discourses.

A basis for these activities, then, was her literary praxis, particularly the tool of "fantastic utopia" used as a liberating agent for women. I define fantastic utopia as an imaginatively derived ideally perfect place, especially in its social, political, and moral aspects. Indeed, literary fantasies have appeared to be "free" from many of the conventions and restraints of more realistic texts: they have refused to observe unities of time, space and character, doing away with chronology, three-dimensionality, self and other, life and death. As Rosemary Jackson describes it, "fantasy is a story based on and controlled by an overt violation of what is generally accepted as possibility; it is the narrative result of transforming the condition contrary to fact into 'fact' itself. Such violation of dominant assumptions threatens to subvert rules and conventions taken to be normative." ²⁶ Indeed, *Sultana's Dream*, like other fantasies can be seen to be transcending reality, "escaping" the human condition and constructing superior alternate worlds.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in colonial India, gender issues had become a vital site of contestation between various Indian and British groups committed to reform in the name of both "modernity" and "tradition." Begum Rokeya broke all barriers, and struggled throughout her life for a better society for women who had no voice. She led the way to empowering and enlightening women. She founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta when Muslim girls did not go to school. She went from door to door to convince parents of the need of education for a Muslim girl. At first, only five families were persuaded and the number of students was only five. With her realisation that in order to be independent women need to be educated first. She led this one woman campaign against tradition, prejudice, laws of the land, and a whole lot more. When a woman becomes educated, she does not depend on the fathers, brothers or the husbands. Over and over she had to send this message out. Her writings were mainly based on that premise. In order to gain economic freedom she also encouraged women to revive craft industries. In that sense she also paved the way for small-scale industries for women.

Begum Rokeya's writings demonstrated a confident woman with talent and knowledge. It has been more than one hundred years since the publication of *Sultana's Dream*, yet the prospect of education for a girl in rural Bangladesh is a distant dream. With all the books that are written about gender and development, the fact remains that rural girls are still uneducated. Throughout history cultural barriers and stigma have excluded women from receiving education or earning equal pay to men. This may be viewed as "a weapon to keep the girls in a relegated state so that it is possible to establish a male-dominated society and women are consigned to domestic work only." To transform a society from centuries-old barriers takes time. In the case of Bangladesh, it is taking too much time. In recent years school enrollment of rural girls has improved, but they are forced to drop out as soon as a marriage proposal comes along. They have to enter into an early marriage.

According to a recent Unicef report, almost 50% of the rural girls are married by age 15, and 60% become mothers by age 19. When that happens, a woman cannot become a productive member of a society. Without education they cannot generate any income and become a liability in most households. Even though our religion is very clear on women's position. Many years after Begum Rokeya's fight for oppressed women, other conscientious women in Bangladesh emerged to take up the cause. One hundred years after *Sultana's Dream*, it is way past time to make an accurate analysis of whether we as a nation have achieved what Begum Rokeya set forth for our women.

The social reform of Muslim women can be best viewed from three different angles, a) ulama-led attempts to purify Muslim women and their religious practices through educating them about the true Islamic teachings, b) Modern educationist- and reformer-led movements for women's education, c)

literary solutions offered to uplift the moral psyche and provide a guidance for the modern Muslim woman's subjectivity. The underlying theme of all three strands of reform was the overall effort to come in terms with a modern Muslim identity via manipulating, re-conceptualising and appropriating the modern Muslim woman.

The most important social impact created by Begum Rokeya was their relentless effort to promote education for Muslim girls. As the social and cultural practices of purdah restricted the mobility of Muslim women to a great extent, institutionalised schooling became a very significant social debate in early 20th century Muslim reformists. In fact, since there has historically never been anything parallel to the suffrage movement in South Asia, the efforts by female icons like Begum Rokeya to initiate female education to eventually merge women into the public sphere could be understood as the inception of modern Muslim feminism in South Asia.

Begum Rokeya single-handedly ushered in Muslim women's reform in Bengal. The most important features that distinguish Rokeya from her male counterpart reformers are her sharp feminist critique of patriarchy in her writing, her emphasis on women's physical fitness and development of mental faculty, her recognition of women's education as means of economic independence, and finally, her distinction between abarodh and purdah. Whereas abarodh was understood by Rokeya as the negative and extreme application of purdah, the practice of purdah in itself was not condemned, rather welcomed as female propriety. As she dismissed abarodh as a practice where women were "shut off from public space, or any healthy participation in society", and purdah as means of female modesty with mobility and public participation, she broke down the demarcation of women into the private sphere in the name of purdah or modesty. It is this sharp analytical ability of Rokeya that echoes in her work and writing that still makes her into the only female feminist icon contemporary Bengali Muslim women look up to even today.

Rokeya's personal life was overwhelmed with tragedies with the early loss of her husband, and the loss of her two baby daughters in infancy. She suffered immensely from a wave of criticisms and various obstacles in initiating social change for women, but she worked relentlessly literally till her last breath to bring changes to women's downtrodden status. Begum Rokeya offered Bengali Muslim women books instead of kitchen utensils. She told them about the vast world outside the bundles of saris and jewellery, inspired them to break out of the patriarchal framework and taste their own individualities, and finally she called out to them with a sense of feminist sisterhood — Jago Go Bhogini or Wake Up Sisters!

Rokeya emphasised on physical education because she believed that it was important to make women physically stronger, fit and confident. Rokeya also

recognised the importance of women's economic independence. Her curriculum therefore, included vocational training in crafts and sewing. Begum Rokeya believed that men and women were created differently, but equally. In her views, the subjugated position of women was not due to Allah's will, but due to men's immorality, "there is a saying, 'Man proposed, God disposes,' but my bitter experience shows that, 'God gives, Man robs'." Rokeya believed that, "Allah has made no distinction in the general life of male and female — both are equally bound to seek food, drink, sleep and pray five times a day."

Begum Rokeya coined the term 'manoshik dashhotto' or mental slavery to describe the loss of individuality in women, and identified this psychological phenomenon as the main force behind women's subjugation. She believed that social systems like seclusion and purdah intentionally make women unfit and weak for survival in the public realm. Rokeya believed that men deliberately refuse women equal opportunities to cultivate their minds with the purpose of sustaining women's dependence on men and further perpetuating women's dependence on their own inferior status. Rokeya used examples of women who earn more than their husbands, but still submit to the men folk at home to point out that the framework of women's subjugation exceed economic parameters. In Begum Rokeya's view, manoshik dashhotto is at the core of women's subjugated position. She summoned women to overthrow the invisible bondages of our brains, to strip off the transparent patriarchal exploitation, "The seeds of higher attributes have been destroyed in the female minds. Our inside, outside, brain, heart — all have become enslaved (dashi hoyiaa poriyachee)." We are not entitled to have the freedom of our heart or perform the actions of our choice. Neither do we notice any effort to gain our freedom as women. Therefore, I want to say: Jago, Jago Go Bhogini!"

Sultana's dream was written by the author to impress her husband with her newly learnt ability in English, "to pass the time, I wrote the story" she mentions. The book is a utopian work with a lot of cleaver satire. The book ridicules Indian stereotypes and customs. In Ladyland men are part of society but shorn of power. They live in seclusion and look after the house and children. They have all the supposedly womanly qualities and carry out women's work such as cooking and raising babies. Women who walk timidly, meanwhile, are "mannish." Rokeya, then, manages to destabilize gender. Men in Ladyland are confined to purdah and objectified just as women in colonial Bengal. Women the dominant group does not consider men fit for any skilled work.

Rokeya's views on education were also very progressive. Education for her was the development of God given faculties, by regular exercise of these faculties. The ultimate goal being self realization, the fullest development of women's potential as human beings. In the first half of this century national

movements against colonial powers, lead to modernized, educated elite women coming out of purdah (seclusion) and becoming leaders against former colonies. Releasing women from seclusion was a way to show that the colonies were modernized enough to lead themselves. In the second half of the century, a revival of veiling is being lead by Muslim societies often in Western Countries. They are part of a new nationalism, a reaffirmation of national identity, a rejection of western values, alien to a nation's or a community's need. In thinking of Purdah (seclusion), its rejection and revival, there are vast differences among women who observe it. Hindu women observing purdah (seclusion) must veil their faces before their husband's elder male relatives, and all male elders in the village into which the brides come as strangers. They do not veil in their natal villages before or after marriage. Muslims practices set the family apart from the rest of society, by limiting the interactions of all women with all men who are not part of the family. Family status and family honor are tied up with women's practice of purdah (seclusion) and how it reflects on the men in their family. Respect in the community is vital to the family status. Strict purdah (seclusion) observance is a way for women to gain respect in the family and community.

Sultana's dream, and Rokeya's writing and actions stood purdah (seclusion) on its head challenging ideas by which her readers were taught to live in society and family. This took two forms, one a call for women to reconsider their self interest and a demonstration of women's competence outside the spheres of home and purdah (seclusion). Rokeya depicts the successful struggle of women in Ladyland against political, gendered and religious suppression.

Sultana's dream is considered the struggle against political suppression first. Unlike colonial Bengal, Ladyland is autonomous. Foreign armies have been long-defeated, not through military strength but through women's "brainpower" which harnessed scorching solar energy as a weapon. This is a pointed rejoinder to colonial Bengal's state of subjugation, which Rokeya suggests can be overcome; India is only colonized because of the stupidity of men. Furthermore, despite different methods of running the country, this does not mean Ladyland's women are less nationalistic. Rokeya suggests, means true patriotism insofar as the citizens are loyal to and proud of their nation, with justice being its chief virtue.

Thus Rokeya contrasts the Queen to local Indian princes who sold their loyalties to the East India Company and caused Bengal's colonization. She makes it a point to demonstrate that Ladyland does not subscribe to British colonial ideals, noting that in Ladyland, "we do not covet other people's land, we do not fight for the Kohinoor;" the Kohinoor was taken by the East India Company as part of the indemnity levied in 1849, and was subsequently presented to Queen Victoria at a sparkling levee marking the company's 250th anniversary. A subtle contrast is therefore drawn between Queen

Victoria, the “empress of India,” and Ladyland’s Queen whose generosity and morality are above any desire to steal wealth.

The second struggle in Rokeya’s utopia is, then, against gender suppression. Indeed, the issue of colonialism in Ladyland is depicted not as an occupation by a foreign power but as a gendered oppression that has been successfully overturned, with the new nation being run by female inhabitants who underline their feminist ideology to the visitor from colonial Bengal. Sultana thus describes the situation in colonial Bengal where man “has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana,” leaving them with “no hand or voice...man is lord and master” as a clear parallel to the British seizing the ‘powers and privileges’ of Indians; Bengali women have been colonized by men. However, in Ladyland the colonization of women by men has been successfully overturned. Thus women’s lives have been reformed drastically.

Rokeya’s aim is to estrange women readers from their familiar surroundings, or make the familiar uncanny and awaken in them their potential for transforming their present condition. Indeed, it is this strategy of defamiliarization which shocks Sultana into a realization of the strangeness and mutability of all that she had taken for granted. Thus she uses alienating techniques which use jarring symbols that demand an end to superimposed illusions. The aim is to make readers perceive the actual limits and possibilities of their deep personal wishes - the familiar, which through repressed ego disturbances have been made unfamiliar. In *Sultana’s Dream*, may, therefore, be a clever literary strategy of double speak. Similarly, Rokeya familiarizes her female readers with the idea of engaging in traditionally male disciplines. In Ladyland, women are scientists inventing air-cars, heating, showers and electricity for farming and cooking. This utopic state of affairs is achieved because unlike in Bengal, education is geared towards making women well-rounded citizens rather than homemakers. Thus Rokeya demonstrates the value of women’s work and intelligence compared to men’s before introducing the issue of education.

The third unheimlich trait of Rokeya’s utopia which she transforms into the Heimlich is a conception of “modernity” free of religious dictates. In Ladyland religion is “based on Love and Truth.” Anyone not respectful of these principles is “asked to leave.”⁵⁰ Rokeya’s description of religion, I contend, is vague for a reason; it is positive that Ladyland should not be governed by specific religious laws. At Rokeya’s time Muslim nationalists appealed to Islam to define roles for women, confining them to purdah and limiting their education to Quranic study. Rokeya strongly objected to such abuse of religious authority. Rokeya believed that we must not allow ourselves to bow down to the undue authority exercised by men in the name of religion. It has been seen time and time again that the stricter the religious restrictions, the more severe is the women’s victimization. Men use religion to victimize

women. . This, for Rokeya, is not a case of individual men dominating women through religion; it is an elaborate construction of men’s “regulating systems.” In *Sultana’s Dream*, the existence of only one religion, informal and organic in structure, composed of vague universal principles of goodness, means that there cannot be conflict between religions in Ladyland; divide and rule cannot work.

In *Sultana’s Dream*, sister Sara’s world is in fact opposite from the one our narrator lives in. The purdah still exists, but it is the men who are locked up and deprived of their rights. The women have invented a way of intercepting the rays of the sun and producing water from the cloud, and hence all work can be limited to a few hours a day. No one is hungry or has to be criminal. In short, the women co-exist in peace and utter merriment.

In Ladyland, as Sister Sara’s world is called, the traditional gender roles are thus retained, while turned around. One gender is strong, intelligent and rational, and the other is weak, dumb and irrational. But in Ladyland the former are the women and the latter men, and this is presented by Sister Sara as a perfectly natural condition. The point being, of course, that these characteristics are culturally produced, not biologically. After a tour of Ladyland, including a visit to the queen, our narrator is returned in an air-car (another of the women’s clever inventions), and wakes up from her dream.

Sultana’s Dream is a strong vision of a society in which much of the world as we know it is turned upside down. It suggests that a complete change, not to say revolution, is indeed possible, if only the oppressed (in these case women) stand by each other and decide that they are the strong, intelligent and rational ones. The gender roles only exist as long as we acknowledge them, and if we start questioning them, we might build not only a different, but a better world.

However, men are not taken much into consideration in *Sultana’s Dream*. They are the reason for everything bad and evil, and once they are removed, all is well. The effect of this argument can only be to dig the gulf between the sexes even deeper, and I personally doubt that to be a wise strategy. In fact, the question remaining is whether *Sultana’s Dream* taken literally is actually a nightmare. Wouldn’t most feminists of today prefer a world in which men and women live equal and side-by-side, instead of a hostile matriarchy? I think so.

But the nightmare only materializes itself if *Sultana’s Dream* is taken to be a serious manifesto, instead of a tongue-in-cheek experiment. I read the novella as the latter, a refreshing experiment with gender roles and all those aspects of society that its inhabitants invariably take for granted. I read it as a challenge to look at my own society of today and try to rid myself of those ties we are so used to, that they have become invisible. And thus, *Sultana’s Dream* is a 100 year old classic feminist utopia, but still thought-provoking and topical. *Sultana’s Dream* is an intriguing example of a feminist utopia --

an imagined world where women are socially and politically dominant over men, and that dominance is seen as natural.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain spent her life fighting the custom of seclusion (purdah). Purdah is at one point broadly defined in the book as the practice of setting women aside from society either through the use of distinctive clothing - veils to burqas- to the actual physical separation of women and men in living quarters to make sure women never come into contact with men who are not their "sacred relations". From the introduction in 1981: "Once again, women are being used as the targets of fears and resentments generated by rapid social change. Repressive regimes and powerful social movements in many parts of the world are once again trying to restrict the human rights of women as part of their attempts to bring to their societies the imagined stability of a mythic past."

Sultana's Dream, about a reverse purdah in which men are kept indoors and women interact in a scientifically advanced and peaceful world. The rest of the book is non fiction commentary on the subject of the oppression of women for political purposes masquerading as religion. In *Sultana's Dream* she creates a futuristic ideal world, a "feminist utopia," where women are out of the segregated *zenana* (purdah). They run everything and men are secluded in quarters called mardana. The paradox used here is: "If you lock up someone for their protection from yourself, shouldn't you be the one who's locked up?" The female narrator of *Sultana's Dream* wanders into a dream city that shuns war and violence. In this utopian world, women rule and men are content with their places in the kitchen. The queen of this kingdom explains how women won and kept their peace against men and their war-like ways. In "*The Sultana's Dream*" (written in English) she visualized a world where women's latent talents and knowledge were capable of mastery over nature without the help of men. Rokeya provokes the reader to reflect critically upon the conditions and limits of socialization. Her work ultimately reveals that alternative modernities produce combinations of reality that are endlessly surprising - simultaneously real and fantastic, new and familiar – not just unheimlich but also Heimlich. And just as Rokeya's utopia is unfinished, turning out to be only a dream, it demonstrates that "modernity" is incomplete and always a work in progress.

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