

Literature and Culture: David Greig's Play *Damascus* as an Example for the Clash between Western and Eastern Cultures

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Abstract: *The relations between the East and the West are very old and have been hostile at many times. There are a lot of misconceptions and misunderstandings that envelop the views each side has about the other. **Damascus** is an interesting play for David Greig which deals with these views. It presents some of these misconceptions and the vast cultural overgeneralizations that each side makes about the other. In the play, Greig explains that he is handling this issue for the sake of producing more understanding between the two cultures. Through the exposure of Paul, the Scottish author of English textbooks to be used as a syllabus for Syrian students, to the eastern culture, the gaps between the two cultures are highlighted. Nevertheless, some understanding occurs as a result. The possibilities of having a multicultural syllabus are also challenged. Moreover, the study tries to discuss to what extent Greig succeeded in presenting the two views and in reducing the misunderstanding between them. It also tries to show whether Greig was able to erase some of the misconceptions the west has about eastern culture or ironically speaking he ended up creating more provocative and negative ideas in presenting the Arab culture.*

1. Introduction

Damascus is a play written by David Greig who is one of Scotland's leading playwrights. The impulse for writing the play arose from Greig's visits as a teacher of creative writing to Palestine and Syria as he had worked extensively in the Middle East especially in Palestine and Syria (Ramallah, Beit Jala 2000-2001 & Damascus 2006 -7) developing the work of young writers by giving workshops on creative writing initiated and sponsored by the British Council. Thus, Greig puts it in his authors' note to the published version of *Damascus*, "these workshops ended up teaching me an enormous amount about the complexities of relations between the West and the Arab world. I felt very engaged with the Middle East. Everything came from an internal demand to write about my experience in the Middle East."

Damascus talks about the image of the Arab-western relations. The director of the play, Philip Howard said: "This play is clearly written for everybody everywhere." It is the discussion lacked and how it results in misunderstanding. "David Greig's play is a fascinating tragicomedy about Arab and western misunderstandings, and the gap between what we think we know about the Middle East and the everyday realities of life there." Guardian.co.uk@Guardian. It is a play that hopes to challenge received western notions about people from the Arab world. Charlotte Higgins (2009) and Mark

Fisher (2007) argue that the play hopes to challenge received Western notions about people from the Arabic world.

The play highlights the impact of pre-conceptions and stereotypes in identifying how people interact and relate to one another through Paul's character who seeks to market his new book on teaching English in Damascus and his daily interactions with the nationals, their heated discussions and his walks in this fascinating old city alleys. It presents high-cultural dialogue that is fiendishly difficult to embody within a single work -- regardless how talented, high-minded, and sensitive the artists involved. (Babelmed Editorial Team, 14/03/2009).

To give an idea about the content of the play, *Damascus* begins with a description of a hotel foyer in Damascus in the early morning while mosques are issuing the morning call for prayer. The first character we meet is Elena, She is an Ukrainian beautiful girl whom we see playing on the piano all the time. She plays the music for the hotel visitors. Elena is our omniscient narrator. She tells us what happens in the play. Her role is similar to that of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. She changes her tunes to fit the time of the day. The second person we meet is Paul Hartstone, the author of English textbooks titled "*Middleton Road*". Next, we meet Zakaria the Syrian receptionist. The next morning, we meet Muna who works at the Syrian ministry of education and who is coming with her Boss Mr. Wasim to Damascus to meet Paul. Muna meets Paul and they talk about his book "*Middleton Road*" which is a series of English language textbooks that take the students from the beginner to the advanced level. Throughout the play, we see arguments between Muna and Paul about changes that Muna wants to make in the textbooks because the books "are not suitable for the Syrian Arab and Islamic cultures." Wasim shows up. He is the Dean of the schools at the Syrian ministry of education. We see that Wasim is not taking the matter seriously besides his English is very poor. He speaks French with Paul whose French is next to zero. Muna is the one who makes all the work while Wasim is busy in his sexual hints and approaches to Muna in Arabic. The dialogue between Muna and Paul is very significant. Gradually, the relation between Paul and Muna develops into an attraction and later to a sexual relation especially as Paul's stay gets prolonged for one more day because of the delay in his flight due to an explosion at Beirut's airport. Furthermore, the relationship between Paul and Zakaria also develops. Zakaria is obsessed with the idea of having sexual relations with American and English girls. He and Paul visit the mosque and other places in Damascus and Zakaria tells him about himself, his hopes and dreams. Finally, the play ends when Paul fails to convince the Dean to accept his books. Zakaria gives Paul the story that he has written about his life to take to Hollywood to make a movie from it. Paul takes it carelessly. The last scene was totally unexpected. Zakaria tells Paul that his taxi arrived then Zakaria shoots himself suddenly and unexpectedly. Zakaria dies in Paul's arms. Elena comments. The curtain falls.

2. *Damascus* and the question of culture

David Greig's play *Damascus* which has been repeatedly performed since 2007 by the Scottish Traverse Theater in many countries all over the world and in some Arab countries in particular e.g. Syria, Palestine and Lebanon is one of the plays that trigger the old question of cultural misunderstanding and even clashing between the east and the west. As a result of these performances, a lot of debates and discussions were raised. The play attempted to create more understanding between the two cultures. Thus, this study tries to discuss the cultural issues that Greig's play raises. It attempts to explore and analyze the ways which Greig used to present these issues. It also tries to judge to what extent Greig was convincing and successful in his mission of bringing both cultures into more understanding and less clashing.

To be more specific, the main questions to be tackled in this analytical study for the play are:

- How did David Greig present the issue of western and eastern cultural interaction in his play *Damascus*?
- Was this presentation stereotypical or did he present it in a different and more objective and understanding approach?
- Were the characters which he presented from both cultures convincing and truly representative?
- Was Greig successful in changing some of the misconceptions, stereotyping and generalizations that each culture holds about the other and thus bridge the gaps of misunderstanding or did he create more misconceptions, stereotyping and generalizations?

3. The issue of cultural clashing between the east and the west and the role of literature and language learning in creating intercultural understanding

Over the ages, the issue of cultural misunderstanding and even clashing between the east and the west has been since ancient times one of concern and debate. It got very aggressive at times and caused a lot of hard feelings on both sides. Some modern philosophers even predicted the inevitability of clashing between cultures. Samuel Huntington in his famous essay *The Clash of Civilizations* (1993) believes that while the age of ideology had ended, the world had only reverted to a normal state of affairs characterized by cultural conflict. In his thesis, he argued that the primary axis of conflict in the future will be along cultural and religious lines. Edward Said issued a response to Huntington's thesis in his own essay entitled "The Clash of Ignorance" (2004). Said argues that Huntington's categorization of the world's fixed "civilizations" omits the dynamic interdependency and interaction of culture. Said also says that not only is the Clash of Civilizations thesis a "reductive and vulgar notion" but it is also an illustration "of the purest invidious racism, a sort of parody of Hitlerian science directed today against Arabs and Muslims." Furthermore, in his famous book *Orientalism* (2003) he stresses that

rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic form of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception, we need time and patient skeptical inquiry supported by faith in communities of interpretations that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction

Giandomenico Picco, Personal Representative of the Secretary-General for the UN Year of Dialogue Among Civilizations, has said: "History does not kill. Religion does not rape women, the purity of blood does not destroy buildings and institutions do not fail. Only individuals do those things" (1999). In his book *Terror and Liberalism* (2003), Berman proposes another criticism of the civilization clash hypothesis. According to him, distinct cultural boundaries do not exist in the present day. He argues there is no "Islamic civilization" nor a "Western civilization", and that the evidence for a civilization clash is not convincing. In recent years, the theory of "*Dialogue Among Civilizations*" initiated by Former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami in 2001 and adopted by UN as a response to Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" has become the center of some international attention.

Literature and language learning and teaching have long been considered as tools that at many times acted as civilized means of creating a friendly and healthy environment for cross cultural communication that opens the hearts and minds for intercultural understanding and paves passages and builds bridges for good cultural communication. It has been the ambassador of good intentions between the people of the west and those of the east. E.M. Forster in his famous novel "*A passage to India*" is a good example. Dietrich (1995) supports this idea saying "Crossing cultural borders involve conflict, but educators need to teach about these conflicts and their value in understanding diversity." She also adds "Teachers need to make classrooms lively forums of open multicultural exchange. They must select materials that encourage a cultural revision so students can both understand another culture's point of view and see their own culture from an outsider's perspective." In the same argument, Cummins (1989) says: "The literary work becomes the shared body of experience, allowing students to respond from the perspectives of their individual cultural backgrounds. The teacher uses thought-provoking questions to enhance students' connections to the literature and to establish a relationship of cultural equality between students and teacher."

Interculturalism is also essential in English language teaching and learning. According to Alptekin (2002): "It is obvious that in order to successfully function in a culturally diverse environment, our learners need to develop intercultural communicative competence." Kramsch (1993) states that culture "is always in the background right from day one in learning languages ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them." He also says "breaking down stereotypes

is not just realizing that people are not the way one thought they were or that deep down we are all the same. It is understanding that we are irreducibly unique and different and that I could have been you or you could have been me, given different circumstances"(1995). Culture is viewed as an account of how people live their lives (Holliday, 1999; Kramsch,1993). It is associated with a person's identity. Thus understanding other people involves understanding their culture. Furthermore, Gumperz (1982) explains this notion when he says:

When we consider interaction between a native and a foreign speaker, it becomes evident that a further dimension has to be added. For when people with different cultural experiences wish to communicate, they cannot assume that what they wish to say can be accommodated within the language and meanings of the native speaker of the language."

Hence, English curriculum planners and educators argue that exposure to cultural aspects whether local or international is essential for widening the scope of the students' minds about their own culture. The English curriculum should address local and national dimensions as well as international ones. Learners should be prepared for intercultural communication since English is a global language (Daniels, 1990; Crystal, 2003; McKay, 2002; Moerman,1988).

4. Western and eastern Cultural interaction in *Damascus*

The question that should be answered in this study is :How does the play allow for creating an atmosphere for cultural exposure and interaction through the various characters and what is the effect of this exposure on the characters?

Through these characters and through the plot of the story which allows for the interaction between the characters in an eastern setting, Damascus, Greig launches his cultural orientations and transformations and tries to bring both cultures into an understanding instead of a clashing. The most significant of these orientations is the pedagogical discussion that takes place between Paul and Muna. It is a discussion for what Muna who represents the opinion of the Syrian education specialists objects to in the English textbooks that Paul is bringing to sell to the Syrians to use at schools for teaching English .

The name of the English teaching series is "Middleton Road". Paul Hartstone is the Scottish writer of these textbooks. This series is as Paul says:

It is a completely integrated English language learning system which takes the student from beginner to advanced level and provides a comprehensive introduction to spoken and written English as well as working knowledge of contemporary British culture. It is a fully modular system ... but is also linked to a wider web of knowledge resources ... Well, the "Middleton Road" stories reflect a contemporary multicultural Britain. Not the old – you know- very much the UK now you know, homogeneous. It explores art ,culture.... etc. The two school boys get into settings of bangers , petty shoplifting, ring bell and run which are more or less universal.

Muna says that there are some cultural and political issues in the text that need to be changed and some adaptations to be made before buying the package.

She shows that the Syrian government wants to spring the English culture but the minister of education refused the book because of some issues the book handles which are not working for the Arab and Syrian culture. Some of these issues are related to some drawings of Linda and Jeff (characters in the book) having a conversation in bed in the evening to explore the past tense by talking about what they did during the day. Muna also objects to a picture where Sylvia and Duane (again characters in the book) kiss. She also refuses to accept it when one of the characters in the books calls his mother stupid and when schoolboys talk about their shoplifting.

On the other hand, Muna also objects to the picture where “Mrs . Mohammed is portrayed wearing a full niqab. She is covered.” Muna explains to Paul that the government is trying to promote women’s equality,

We are trying to achieve equality for women .It would be better if Mrs. Mohmmed could be portrayed as a modern woman. If a woman teacher is in the classroom using this teaching material, her position will be undermined.” She also adds: “There are plenty of communities here where women are kept down by religion and tradition.

Furthermore, Muna objects to some text mentioning something about honor killing .She says “it is linked it with fundamentalism”. Greig is bravely dealing with these very sensitive cultural and religious issues which are still debatable in the eastern society itself. He tries to show how Paul who represents the western views about the east is being convinced to adopt a more understanding view for the eastern society.

As for the political issues, a good point is raised when they discuss a picture of a Jewish named Rabbi Samuels who is living in London and is planning to immigrate to Israel especially that he is pictured in the book with a drawing for the Israeli flag on the badge of his jacket. Samuels’ dialogue is used to explore the future tense as he says “I look forward to walking along the beach in Jaffa in the sunshine with my mother .” Muna wants this to be changed . Paul objects by saying that Rabbi Samuels is a nice man and that he is in reality his own neighbor and that in the text “ he doesn’t discuss Israel, he only says he wants to go to a sunnier place.” Muna who is a Palestinian refugee from Jaffa explains bitterly why she refuses this:

The beach along which Rabbi Samuels will walk on with his mother in Jaffa will be a beach along which my mother will never walk because even though she was born in Jaffa in 1942, she was expelled by the Israelis in 1948 and she will never be allowed back in it. And I will never see the house in which she was born. May be Rabbi Samuels will live in it. That’s the truth.”

Paul had to submit to these facts. These are great shocks to him. They opened his eyes to things which he never thought of or tried to know.

Another heated political discussion takes place when Paul talks about democracy and human rights and the west as being advocates for these values . Muna gives him another bitter lesson which gives him a further dose of political disillusionment. The following discussion is a key example.

Muna: This year in Damascus your embassy hosted a conference on human rights. I attended this. Professors from the UK came here to Damascus to talk to us about human rights! Ridiculous.

Paul : Is it , why?

Muna: After Balfour- after Sykes- Picot - after Suez- after always always support for Israel- after Iraq- after Guantanamo- after all this you are coming here to lecture us about human rights.” Paul: I agree . It’s terrible. It’s terrible. Britain’s terrible.”

Thus through Paul, Greig attempts to criticize and ridicule the colonial notions for their efforts to civilize foreign lands.

Paul goes through a process of transformation as a result of these discussions. He learns a lot from his attractive Palestinian teacher. The dialogues that took place between him and Muna showed him that Europeans should not presume that their cultural mores can be generalized to other parts of the world. It also revealed to him how ignorant he was in his views about the Middle East and how his ideas of writing English teaching books that would be multicultural are not realistic or practical. Thus in these points, Greig was very successful in changing some of the misconceptions, stereotyping and generalizations that the west has about the Middle East and its culture.

There are other elements which also caused more change in Paul’s character. His fast developing relation with Muna. His visit to the mosque and the souq in the old city of Damascus with Zakaria, the snow which he did not expect to see in Damascus, the jasmine trees and the sound of the prayer. In this encounter, Paul reflects a sense of loss in a foreign land which is symbolically represented by his ‘loss of smell’. The city of Damascus has become mazelike in both physical and mental senses. As an example, Paul says after his visit to the mosque: “My feet felt warm in the rugs. A few men prayed. A few women sat on low benches. Some children ran about playing. Their voices echoing about the hall.” The mosque becomes a symbol of warmth and peace. Paul gets fascinated by Damascus. He says to his wife on the phone: “You would like it here. You should come. We should bring the kids; it’s not a war zone. It’s not the usually described.”

Paul comes to a resolution that the old city, with all its interconnections and its accretions, was in fact, a very human space: “***A very comfortable space to live in. A place of infinite possibility.***” He refers to the literary gathering that he witnessed and likens ‘writing’ to ‘an old city’, and finds relationship between ‘literature’ and ‘truth’. He emphasizes that ‘literature follows the same pattern, built of accretions and extensions, bits piled on top of each other, some parts crumbling away and others restored’ and that

Writing is like an old city, and in its centre there is not a mosque or a temple, but something like a mosque or a temple ... The truth ... The desire to tell the truth. He also says “This city has been formed by layers and layers growing slowly by time. But the center of it all is the mosque which they tell me was once a church and once even a Roman temple.”

The second person who affected Paul is Zakaria. In fact these two characters affected each other. At the beginning, the author portrayed Paul as a faithful husband who is doing his best to spend Valentine's day with his wife. "Paul complains to his bass: *Sean , it's Valentine's Day, I should be at home.*" Paul at first refused all Zakaria's temptations to make love with two American girls because he didn't want to make any sexual relation with anybody other than his wife, but after that we see that this changed. He actually went through a relation with Muna and even worse when he did not refuse the idea of a possible foursome relation with the two American girls that Zakaria told him about.

Paul also gets shocked and even offended when he hears Zakaria's bad views about Scottish girls. Zakaria holds very false images about Scottish and western women in general whom he thinks of as prostitutes. He gets angry when Zakaria talks about Scottish girls lying nude on beaches and that they agree to have a relation with a stranger right away. Paul says to Zakaria: "*look Zakaria, it's quite uncommon for Scottish girls to be naked.*" Paul had to correct the stereotyped ideas that Zakaria had about Scottish girls. He refused all Zakaria's stereotyped ideas about the girls of his country. Thus, not only do westerners make generalizations and have misconceptions about the eastern culture but sometimes the easterners do the same towards the west. To conclude, Paul, the protagonist of the play, was responsive to the lessons he learnt from his interaction with the local people. He allowed himself to think, evaluate and change. This brings to the mind the following proverb: "None are so blind as those who will not see. None are so deaf as those who will not hear."

5.The Arab characters

When discussing the Arab characters in the play, these questions should be asked:

- To what extent are the Arab characters that Greig created representative for the real characters in our society and do they represent a majority or a minority?
- Did these characters give a positive or a negative and distorted picture about our society or was it a mixed picture?

The first character to look at is Muna, the Palestinian girl belonging to a refugee family living in Syria. Muna is a university graduate, beautiful, attractive, elegant and intellectually rigorous. She is a secular girl. She is the one who negotiates with Paul over the English textbooks "*Middelton Road*" that he is attempting to sell. Through these discussions and negotiations, she appears as an intelligent character highly- committed to her work and society. In picturing her, Greig tries to change the stereotyped conservative uneducated image for the Arab girl. Yet, he shows her as very liberal. We can see how the western life has affected this Arab girl in a way that leads her to refuse essential aspects of her culture and adopt the western values and lifestyle. Thus, she finds it accepted to have a sexual relation with her lover in Moscow. They even lived together.

Muna: I had a lover in Moscow. We were students at the same university. We lived together in a shared room in an apartment. But when we came home, we had to separate. He was from a different sect.

Furthermore, she also had a relation with Wasim in the past and she is now allowing him to make sexual attempts and approaches. What is also very strange and unexpected is the fast relationship that develops between her and Paul which leads into a love relation only one day after knowing him. The question here is : Does Muna represent the image of our modern women ? What Greig has done is that he tried to modernize the stereotyped conservative image and he presented instead the new image of an educated, independent, intelligent, woman but at the same time he exaggerated in giving her too much freedom and liberal sex life . Muna is pictured as being torn between the conservatism of her society and the liberal style of life which she has taken from her exposure to the western values and lifestyle. Thus he again presented a distorted picture which is not representative of our society or at least for its majority.

The other Arab character is Zakaria, the hotel receptionist. He is yearning to go to Los Angeles and dreams of a Hollywood career. The only thoughts he always has in mind are those about sex and American girls and about immigration to USA. Zakaria is portrayed as a young Syrian man who built all his dreams and all his life on going to the West. Zakaria is not satisfied with his life .He lives far from his family and is therefore lonely . He wants to change his life.

Zakaria: I like to change my life. Only a little, but to change it, I like to meet girls from France. From Italy, from America. I like to find a Scottish girl to break up my life. To break it up.

He gives Paul his life story which he has written to take to Hollywood to make a film from it. Zakaria's story does not have anything special and is written badly. To some extent Paul's acquaintance with Zakaria causes his tragic ending. Zakaria is at other times presented differently. We feel that he is proud of his family. He talks about his father who is an artist in making mosaic for the mosques' decoration. Through Zakaria, Greig presents a negative image for young Arab men. The name Zakaria is ironically used as it refers to the name of a prophet. Zakaria commits suicide although suicide is forbidden in our religion.

The third Arab character is Wasim. He is Muna's boss, the dean of the institution. He once had ideals for which he got imprisoned and which Muna admired him for when she was his 19 year-old student. Now, he is a passive and bitter character. He always thinks about sexual relations. We understand that he had a relation with Muna in the past and he seems to be still in love with her but she refuses this love. He wasn't serious in his job. While Muna was trying to finish the deal with Paul, he always disturbed them and talked about sex in Arabic and how to spend the night. He wanted to invest his stay at the hotel with Muna to lure her into a sexual relation.

Wasim: Hotels are sexy

Muna: Contrary to what you may hear on your news media, we actually have a free education system here of a very high quality.

Paul: Right

Wasim: the endless possibilities present in every moment

Muna: That's enough

Wasim: Sorry, you're working.

Wasim writes lousy poetry and is mad that he does not get prizes in poetry competitions. He gets jealous of Paul because he notices that Muna is attracted to him. Wasim is the most negatively-drawn character in the play. The fact that he is a key personality in the ministry of education adds to the bad effect of his image. Nevertheless, the circumstances he lives in and the lack of freedom around him might probably give him some excuses.

Although Greig presented some negative sides for these characters, yet we do not feel that any of these characters is evil. In fact we sympathize with them. The Daily Star (2009) comments on this issue: "None of the characters in "Damascus" seem in the least diabolical, since all are sympathetically drawn. Even Wasim, the cynical dean of schools, cannot be utterly loathed because he once did have ideals. In fact, it is impossible to sit through a performance of "Damascus" and not emerge convinced that the entire cast and crew are probably irredeemably decent individuals."

What is annoying is that due to the small number of characters in the play, we feel that Greig depicted these characters as if they are representatives for the whole Syrian society. In fact, he presented distorted pictures which do not represent the majority or not even a minority of it. There was no variety provided in the Arab characters. They were all samples of a new kind, the westernized model. Thus, these characters were misrepresentative stereotypes. This explains why "some Arab audiences emphasized grievance at the play's attempt to give an outline of their entire culture, represented by three troubled characters (McMillan, 2009).

These characters reflected the effects of globalization on men and women especially the young ones. Kishori (1992) thinks that the west claim that their civilization is a universal civilization that is suitable for everybody, everywhere and they try to spread their views to the rest of the world and they succeeded in transmitting a vast part of their culture to the rest of the world. Muna showed a westernized secular point of view and she talked as if she speaks for the whole community. When she asked for this change, she gives the feeling that the covered woman or one who wears Hijab is a backward, old fashioned and narrow-minded woman. She wants to show that our progress in the Arab world will come only if women take off their Hijab. In this way, all our problems will come to an end and our freedom will be recovered. Elayyan (2004) also discussed this issue by explaining that at the present, "there are two conflicting cultural views in the Arab Moslem world which have different views, in life, in behavior, thinking and their views about the universe. The first one is the secular view which separates between the state and religion and which we call the

westernized view because it reflects the modern western view. The second is the Islamic view which combines religion with the state and which we call the Islamic view because its source is Islam and Islamic culture.”

The negative way in which Zakaria’s character is presented looking at the west as the asylum for his social, financial, psychological and even sexual difficulties is another distorted view. Elayyan (2004) explains this when he says: ”Some views among the Arab young people reflected their great extreme admiration for the west and its civilization. They expressed their strong desire to go there to escape from their financial and social suffering, and to look for their suppressed freedom and dignity as life in the west will provide them with social, health and educational opportunities. They will feel psychologically safe there.”

6. Conclusion

Greig’s mission in *Damascus* was not an easy one. He dealt with an issue which has always been very sensitive and extremely tricky. He succeeded in bringing the two conflicting cultures into a healthy interaction and dialogue where each side learns from the other. He has been at times unsuccessful in drawing some sides for the Arab characters. He created new negative stereotyped characters who are abandoning their culture and adopting the westernized views. Greig here is not talking about multicultural exposure, awareness and interaction on the part of the Arab character. Rather, he is creating characters who assimilated themselves with the western culture forgetting their identity, shedding their garments and putting on other people’s clothes.

To sum up, Greig’s play hits the beginning of the long road of understanding between cultures .He did a good job at times and a less successful one at others. His attempts show that there is still a huge task that waits to be completed. and as Saed (2003) said; ‘we need time and patient skeptical inquiry supported by faith in communities of interpretations’ to make understanding between cultures deeper , healthier and more productive.

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