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Flying in the Cage: Iranian Theatre Directors' Creativity in the Face of Censorship

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Censorship in Iranian theatre sometimes prevents artists from staging some of the scenes in their plays. Among these are scenes involving embracing, kissing, raping and so on, or scenes containing ideological or political themes. Occasionally, after omitting such scenes, theatre directors try to find suitable alternatives and create a similar effect. The present research, with an analytical–descriptive approach, seeks to focus on alternative solutions, as well as creative models, developed by Iranian directors to circumvent social-regulatory censorship and identify alternatives in performances. In this research, I conduct a comparative analysis of five selected theatre recordings. Using the available theatre recordings, this paper examines the original text of the plays, identifies the omissions resulting from censorship, and analyses directors' alternative solutions. This research demonstrates that artists use their creativity to express themes, analyses and aesthetic points in the face of censorship and obstacles. The paper focuses on eight creative-performance models that are executed using symbols and auditory elements instead of visual elements, and the function of narrative, stage design, stage direction, costume design, props and cross-dressing as devices to circumvent censorship.

Censorship in Iran started shortly after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 when the government of Reza Pahlavi was overthrown. This revolution also led to the replacement of the Imperial State of Iran by the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran, as the monarchical government of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi was superseded by the theocratic government of Ruhollah Khomeini, a religious cleric who had headed one of the rebel factions. The ousting of Pahlavi, the last shah of Iran, formally marked the end of Iran's historical monarchy. Of course, there were jurists before the 1979 revolution who worked under the Qom Seminary and were against non-religious activities in artistic and cultural works and wanted to remove them, but the government of Mohammad Reza Shah was strongly inclined towards Western culture and civil liberties. Therefore the conditions of society and art during his time (1941–79) were distanced from Islamic laws. Even though, during this period, jurists issued many fatwas, which could cause censorship of works of art, against the social laws of the day, the government of Mohammad Reza Shah did not pay attention to these fatwas in social and artistic activities and the artists were free to create whatever they wanted. Thus, although jurisprudence censorship and Islamic laws existed in the country's constitution before the revolution, they were not much used in society.

In 1984, a few years after the revolution, by order of Ayatollah Khomeini, an institution named the Cultural Revolution Council was established. The task of this

institution was to purge universities of anti-revolutionary professors and to adapt new laws to the ideas of the Islamic government. A council named the Monitoring and Evaluation Council was established under the supervision of this institution. The duty of this council was to supervise works of art. At that time, the exact rules and criteria for censorship were not legislated and only general rules were mentioned. Detailed rules were written in 1999 by the Monitoring and Evaluation Council, giving rise to four types of censorship agents in Iran. First was the Monitoring and Evaluation Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Censorship Department). This council is under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Guidance of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These employees supervise the content of plays, as well as visual forms of performances, before staging. They must approve the play, otherwise the play cannot be performed publicly in any (public or private) theatre. Therefore, if they feel that a play is against the rules of the council, they can prevent its public performance. Second, representatives of the Censorship Department watch every public performance of the play – from its opening to its closing. This way the director is prevented from making any changes during the play's run that are against the rules of the Censorship Department. The third type includes other government institutions that are not directly related to the Monitoring and Evaluation Council but still have great power in censoring works of art. These are agents of bodies such as the IRGC Intelligence Organization, agents of the Qom Seminary, agents of the Imam Hasan Mojtaba camp and others. Artists do not have specific information about the identity of these agents and have only learned about their existence through experience in the last few decades. These agents watch the plays as inconspicuous and normal audience member, and if they feel that a play is against the government's ideas, even though the play has a public-performance permit, they write a confidential letter to the Monitoring and Evaluation Council and, following that letter, the play will be banned. In many cases, the employees of the Monitoring and Evaluation Council have clearly admitted that the order to ban a play was issued by another body. Fourth, ordinary people also at times turn into censorship agents. If a spectator (especially a supporter of the government) watches a play and feels that the play contradicts the government's ideas, he can call 113 (the Ministry of Security and Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran) and submit a negative report about the play. The Ministry of Security and Intelligence will immediately send agents to watch the play inconspicuously, and if those agents have the same feeling as the audience member, then the play will be banned.

No public or private theatre will rent the space to a director without the permission of the Monitoring and Evaluation Council (Censorship Department). Some artists (very few) have tried to perform a play underground without the permission of the Censorship Department, but this practice has never been widespread because it has very severe consequences for the artist (such as being imprisoned, banned and so on). There is no difference in the audit process in a private or a public theatre, which is as follows. First, the play is submitted to the theatre, which then sends it to the Council of Supervision and Evaluation (Censorship Department). The important thing is that no writer or director can personally submit the play to the Censorship Department; this

must be done by theatres. After the Censorship Department reads and approves the play, the artist gets an appointment for 'review'. Review means that whatever is to be shown to the public must first be shown to Censorship Department staff. Then, a few months later, when the play is ready to be staged, Censorship officials will come to review it. If they watch the play and approve it, then a license for its public performance will be issued to the theatre.

This paper analyses the existence of censorship and the directors' creative responses to it in Iran using several different plays as examples: Chekhov's *Ivanov*, directed by Amir Reza Koohestani,[1] and the *Cherry Orchard*, directed by Mohammad Hassan Madjooni;[2] the adaptation of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* directed by Farzad Amini;[3] Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, directed by Reza Servati;[4] and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, directed by Reza Gouran.[5] These plays have been published in Persian and were available to the public; performance recordings were legally available at video stores as well. The focus is placed here on scenes of intimacy, touch and nudity. The main reason for this is that other forbidden themes (such as those concerning politics and religion) are usually censored before the public performance of the play. In other words, plays that are against the political and religious ideas of the government are rarely allowed to be performed in a theatre. Given that censorship bodies can only evaluate the playtext in advance of the performance, they are mainly focused on content and dialogue. Hence physical action such as touch and other contact cannot be censored before the public performance takes place. This means that the performance of the play must be watched in order to determine forbidden cases of physical contact. So artists try to physically show what they cannot say. Therefore the challenge between censorship agents and artists regarding prohibited visual content is much greater than when it comes to written content.

The main problem of the present research is the limited scope of the study and the small number of samples presented. This problem not only exists for this research, but is also a general challenge to Iranian theatre. Due to censorship, many theatre recordings in Iran are not published. In addition, most theatre groups are not willing to publish their theatre recordings because they hope to stage their plays again in the future. Besides, most Iranian plays are never published; thus the access to written texts is limited as well. Arguably, this lack of access and lack of documentation might also be viewed as an indirect form of academic censorship.

The dancing lights of the *Cherry Orchard*

> Reality is a term we all use. It is a coin we all spend. However, we don't really mean reality when we use this term. It is the matter of expediency. We do not actually want anyone to state the entire reality. We seek that part of reality which is currently expedient. In a variety of ways, it is effective, or promising, or dynamic, or it is committed, or it is our wishful thinking, and, ultimately, it might have nothing to do with reality … but … If kings and governors had studied history, they would have known now that suppression does not destroy anything permanently; it will transform it temporarily, but it will not destroy it completely. It will turn it into an indirect art form that is complicated and complex.[6]

This was part of the controversial statements condemning censorship in Iranian theatre made by the Iranian writer and director Bahram Beyzai, in 1977 (the early days of the formation of the Islamic government in Iran).[7] Arguably, in those days it was somewhat difficult for a censorship official to understand these words; how is it possible that, when something is censored in a play, the same thing appears in a different way in the same play? It appears that censorship officials did not grasp this concept until years later while watching the plays of some creative Iranian directors, such as Madjooni, Koohestani, Amini, Gouran and others. It is interesting to imagine that day when a censorship official watched the play *The Cherry Orchard*, directed by Hassan Madjooni. The third act of this play begins with the family members dancing.[8] This banquet and dance of the family members reflect an ancient tradition whose purpose is to maintain the integrity of the household. That is why this dance continues until the uncle and the landowner come back from the cherry orchard auction and announce the news of its sale.[9] A large part of the play is devoted to this banquet. Most of the dialogue is spoken during the dance. The news of selling the cherry orchard puts an end to the family banquet. Now, performing dance scenes is forbidden in Iranian theatre. According to Islamic jurisprudence, it is forbidden for a woman to dance in the presence of non-*mahram* men. Also, Iran's laws strictly prohibit men and women from dancing in groups. In recent years, many participants in private dance parties have been arrested in Iran. The censorship official has therefore censored this scene. On the first day of the performance, he sits confidently among the audience. The play begins. This performance uses a one-sided stage design. There is a large, old and worn-out closet with several doors at the back of the stage that covers the rear of the stage. This closet that the text of the play specifically refers to is symbolic of the identity of the household. In the performance, when the banquet starts (at the beginning of the third act), the upper part of the closet is decorated with flashing lights. These lights, which represent celebration, are on until the end of the act. Also, three musicians sit in the closet and play music. Instead of depicting dance and singing as separate elements, the director complements the dialogues with the sound of musical instruments. The director, knowing that it is not possible to dance on the Iranshahr Theater stage, omits it and tries to convey the emotion of the scene by making proper use of stage design. The lights flash – dance – at the back of the stage until the news of the sale of the orchard is announced. After Mrs Ranevsky hears the news, a deep silence prevails. Apart from the flashing lights, everything on the stage is still. This way the sense of discontinuity and the tragic end of the banquet are communicated to the audience. A few moments later, the servant shuts the doors of the closet in which the musicians are sitting and the musicians and the lights above their heads are no longer seen by the audience. This scene symbolically buries the joy not only of the household that Chekhov has depicted, but also of the nation in which this performance took place, in an old and worn-out closet containing the memories of the land in front of the astonished eyes of the censorship official. With this old wardrobe the director signified the outdated ideas of the ruling class in Iran that have deprived people of happiness.

At first, the existence of various types of censorship in Iranian theatre led to artists' inactivity and lethargy. After a while, by developing creative models, artists not only overcame censorship but also tried to express the message and the idea hidden in the plays differently. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was little need to bypass censorship because the public majority was aligned with and supportive of the government. Both had intense Islamic tendencies towards the elimination of non-religious elements in society. But since 1997, with the establishment of the reformist government, important changes have taken place at the community level. Banned books were illegally xeroxed and sold by pedlars. The new generation got to know the banned playwrights of Iran and the world, such as Bahram Beyzai and Akbar Radi, but also Bertolt Brecht and others. In the universities, it was no longer possible not to talk about these writers who were mainly on the government's blacklist. Young people's thinking gradually moved away from the government's thinking, and their level of expectation of works of art increased. These social changes were accompanied by an important event: the wave of returns of educated Iranians from Europe. Those who had gone to Europe at a young age after the beginning of the 1978 revolution now returned to Iran after two decades and brought world knowledge and culture to Iran with them. Therefore it was at the beginning of the 2000s that artists had to turn to theatrical creativity to bypass censorship in order to satisfy the young and curious audience of the new generation. This constant effort to bypass censorship over the years ultimately led to the creation of fascinating and lasting moments in Iranian modern theatre history and, of course, to the development of creative models of theatrical representaion.

Social-regulatory censorship of theatre in Iran has often been discussed orally but only occasionally in written form, so that there are few written research documents available. Such studies as *Phenomenology of Censorship* by Joel Cohen,[10] *Censorship* by Fariborz Khosrawi[11] and *The Freedom of Thought and Expression* by Nasser Katouzian are devoted to the subject of censorship.[12] However, none of these books has ever violated the censorship regulations and some of them have even praised censorship. There are many books with the same kind of content (justifying government censorship) in Iran. This is because there are many governmental publishers in Iran that use the government's money and facilities to publish dozens and maybe hundreds of books every year in line with the ideas of the Islamic regime. Two examples of famous books that praised censorship are *Freedom of Expression* written by Jamshid Masoumi and *Cinema of Censorship* written by Vahid Jalili.[13] In the book *Freedom of Expression*, the author says that from the early centuries of Islam to the present day, Islamic theologians have debated how to reconcile the will of God and the will of the people. The author claims that the subject of freedom of expression, its limitations and its boundaries can only be found in Islamic jurisprudence and in topics such as guardianship, jihad, enjoining what is good and forbidding what is bad, rather than in the Western concepts of freedom. He emphasizes that the right of censorship is reserved for the Islamic government because a religious government that is responsible for the salvation of mankind obviously cannot promote moral corruption (here the author means moral corruption

such as the voluntary hijab, the use of alcoholic beverages and so on). In the book *Cinema of Censorship*, the author argues that art should serve the government. He states that if there is a problem in Iranian society, it should not be reflected in works of art because Westerners see these works of art and increase the severity of that problem out of hostility. He suggests that artists who make films contrary to the ideas of the government should be deprived of all government facilities and, if they repeat their mistake (for example, producing an artwork without government permission, illegally or underground), they should be arrested and tried.

Censorship and the Constitution

Censorship in Iran is based on Article 24 of the Constitution, but its details depend on many factors. Article 24 of the Constitution of Iran states, 'the limits of freedom should not disturb the fundamentals of Islam and public rights, with the explanation that the details of these limits are determined by the law'.[14] As we can see, Article 24 of the Constitution is very general and very vague. Yet here the word 'law' can include many things over time. For example, it can include jurisprudence laws, social expediency and even pressures from different social groups. The Constitution of Iran contains 177 articles that were approved in the 1979 referendum. This law is fixed and was slightly modified only once in 1990 by the then leader of Iran (Ayatollah Khomeini). But jurisprudence laws are not fixed. The number of new laws and the list of activities restricted by these laws are constantly increasing. Any jurist (*marja*) can issue a new fatwa at any time according to the political atmosphere of the day. Many social phenomena have emerged in the last few decades which are not mentioned in the Constitution, yet many jurisprudence laws have been issued about them. For example, a movie called *Hussein, Who Said No*, directed by Ahmad Reza Darvish, made in 2012, was about one of the important figures in Islam, Hazrat Abul Fazl. This expensive film was banned after its release at the Fajr Film Festival because some jurists issued a fatwa that showing the faces of the prophets in cinema is *haram*. They claimed that Hazrat Abul Fazl's face should have been covered with white light or white cloth so that people do not have an ordinary, human face in front of them. This is an example of the differences between jurisprudence and Islamic laws. In other words, the jurisprudence manipulates Islamic laws to serve the mechanisms of state control according to the political atmosphere of the day. Every day, according to new circumstances, new jurisprudence may be issued. This law may complement existing laws or may even be against them.

Iran's ruling class believes that this censorship protects people's privacy.[15] It also supports religious beliefs and, most importantly, maintains national security. Thus artists who engage in political activism in Iran, according to Articles 610 and 611 of the Islamic Penal Code, face the serious accusation of 'assembly and collusion against national security'. For example, Jafar Panahi,[16] a well-known Iranian cinematographer, was sentenced to six years in prison for exactly this crime. He was barred from leaving Iran and making films and has largely been confined to his own home for the past twelve years, and this is despite the fact that he has engaged in no activities other than creating works of art.

In Iran, most plays are banned before performance and even before production. The Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has established a large department for this process called the Crime Prevention Department. This preventive censorship is the audit that is performed by the law supervisor (censorship official) before the public display of a work of art. Since the censorship agents in government institutions are mostly unidentified, it is not possible to talk to them and ask questions, and as a result the details of the censorship laws are not clear to anyone. In these years, artists have been able to discover some general points about the nature of the censorship process through experience. For example, they should never criticize (however politely) the leader of the government, they should never criticize imams and prophets, men and women should not touch each other. These are obvious cases that face censorship in all art forms. However, some cases are not so clear, and the real reason why they got censored is never found out. For example, on Iran's official television, it is permitted to hear the sound of a musical instrument, but it is not permitted to show the image of the same instrument. Hence, if a singer sings on a television show and musicians play instruments behind him, the camera depicts the face of the singer, and the sound of the instruments is heard, but the instruments are not featured. Sometimes cloth is thrown over them or the camera does not film them at all. It has been like this for years and no one knows the reason for this censorship. In the theatre, women must wear a mandatory hijab, but in some cases they are allowed to wear wigs. However, there are requirements for using the wig: onstage the wig should not look too natural; rather it should be obviously artificial and exaggerated. This means that even the audience in the last row of the hall should clearly understand that this is a wig and not the actress's real hair. If a wig looks natural, that scene will undoubtedly be censored. No one knows where this stipulation came from and why. Moreover, theatre directors have discovered from experience that they should not perform plays such as Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, Strindberg's *Miss Julie* or Strindberg's *Creditors* because they will definitely not get permission to be shown onstage. There is no definite rule in this matter, but everyone knows from experience that the censorship board does not give permission to these plays for public performance. Hence the censorship process in Iran is complicated and not at all transparent. Nonetheless, sometimes the government of Iran agrees to withdraw a censorship decree when it sees its own benefit in doing so. This is the process that we have witnessed especially over the last few months, after the Mahsa Amini uprising – the Women, Life, Freedom movement. For example, everyone knows that it is forbidden to show women's hair on a theatre stage or in a television series, and that such a scene will definitely be censored. Nonetheless, in the report prepared by Iran's national and government news (in February 2023) about the march on 22 Bahman (the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1978), they not only showed women without the hijab, but also interviewed them. Apparently, the government was willing to sacrifice one of the strictly mandated items – the hijab – for greater goals. The aim was to tell the world community that even if some Iranian women did not accept the mandatory hijab, they still supported the Islamic Revolution. At the same time as this was happening, censorship related to not

wearing the hijab intensified in the field of theatre. It has become apparent that only certain people that fit the government agenda have been permited to bypass censorship.

Iranian artists are mostly not included in this special group. The plays *Drought and Lies*, written and directed by Mohammad Yaqoubi (Tehran, 2011); *Autumn*, written and directed by Nader Borhani Marand (Tehran, 2014); Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*, translated and directed by Vahid Rahbani (Tehran, 2010); *Deputat* by Dimitris Psathas, translated by Karim Azimi and directed by Atabek Naderi (Tehran, 2018); Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, translated and directed by Maryam Kazemi (Tehran, 2018); *The Day of Hussain*, written and directed by Mohammad Rahmanian (Tehran, 2017); and *Pinocchio*, directed by Shohreh Soltani (Tehran, 2015) are among the plays that have been politically and religiously censored in Iran in recent years. Unfortunately, the directors of these plays could not escape the blade of censorship by using creative methods. Therefore all that can be done in this article is to honour these productions that have never seen the light of day by mentioning them and return to those that were creatively able to bypass censorship.

Cross-dressing for the censors

Physical contact between a man and a woman (such as a handshake or sleeping close to each other) is indecent and prohibited in Iranian religious culture. Based on these constraints, how can a play like *Macbeth* be performed without letting Macbeth and Lady Macbeth touch each other or King Duncan hold Lady Macbeth's hand at the banquet? This play was successfully performed in Iran by Reza Servati, and until the last day of its performance censorship officials failed to find any pretext to ban it. The end of Act I, sc. vi of the play, when Duncan greets Lady Macbeth, coincides with significant action. Duncan tells Lady Macbeth, 'Give me your hand and take me to my host. I love him dearly and would like to extend such courtesies to him. Permit me to give you a little kiss, my hostess.'[17] This scene has psychoanalytic connotations that Mohandespour interprets as follows: 'Since the crime has been committed using hands and Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are constantly afraid of their bloody hands, hands are one of the most significant symbols that make the criminal atmosphere of the play more horrifying.'[18] In this play, Shakespeare uses the word 'hand' forty-two times, which is here interpreted as fear of one's own body. Director Reza Servati was a student of Mohandespour's, and Mohandespour's analysis in Shakespeare's play undoubtly informed the production.

Given that in Iranian theatre it is forbidden for a man to touch a woman's hand, how can an Iranian director depict the delicate and tempting hand of Lady Macbeth touching the powerful and possessive hand of Duncan? The Iranian director of *Macbeth* has completely eliminated the character of Duncan. The presence of Duncan at Macbeth's banquet and his murder while sleeping is narrated by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The meeting of Duncan and Lady Macbeth is narrated by Lady Macbeth in a few sentences: 'The king is in his bed and is happier than ever. He bid me farewell by giving me this diamond and called you (Macbeth) the kindest host.'[19] Yet, omitting this scene, the director has not forgotten Lady Macbeth's hands.

Reza Servati's staging pays special attention to hands. The nightmare of the marital life of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and her infertility is related to bloody hands that she cannot clean.[20] A brief scene is dedicated to washing hands in a well. Another scene shows Lady Macbeth trying to clean her hands using a glass container. A container that has imprisoned a fetus. Lady Macbeth's efforts to clean her hands are useless and she shouts, 'Go away! Ominous stain!' The director uses a creative solution to show the hands of Lady Macbeth and Duncan touch each other. A scene shows Lady Macbeth caught within the threshold of an iron door. Two hands entering from the sides of the door have clasped her hands. This composition is horrifying due to the special lighting of the scene. The audience does not see the face of the person whose hands have clasped Lady Macbeth's hands, but Lady Macbeth's words show that those are Duncan's hands: 'Give me your hand! Give me your hand! The dead cannot escape the grave.' In this scene, Lady Macbeth repeats the same sentence that Duncan had uttered to her: 'Give me your hand.'[21] To avoid censorship, the director uses the hands of a person whose face is not shown to the audience. It is through the words of Lady Macbeth that the audience can figure out who that person is. The director has omitted the figure of Duncan from the scene where he meets Lady Macbeth, but he has kept his hands to stand as signifiers for the character. Censorship agents could never ban this scene, because the director hid the identity of the persons whose hands were seen in the scene and could claim that they were a woman's, although Lady Macbeth's dialogue indicates that those are Duncan's hands.

Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi emphasizes the existence of censorship in Iran and argues that censorship has created indirect and creative ways for Iranian artists to express their ideas:

> We [Iranian artists] have always had to deal with censorship. This censorship has always impacted our language. We use a method of expression that always allows us to indirectly express our ideas … An artist always comes up with creative ways to circumvent restrictions. I believe that art in the face of censorship is similar to water facing a rock. Eventually, water finds a way to pass across the rock.[22]

Again, in Macbeth, in the continuation of the play, the director uses another method to bypass censorship. He replaces Lady Macbeth with a male actor. The director uses the technique of men cross-dressing as females, which also echoes, intentionally or not, the Elizabethan theatre, where women were not allowed in the acting profession and female roles were played by men. Casting a male actor to play the role of Lady Macbeth in this production has helped the director bypass censorship, because physical contact between two men is permissible from the religious point of view. For instance, there is a scene where Macbeth and Lady Macbeth dance, a romantic dance performed by a man and a woman hand in hand. If this dance were performed by a male and a female or by two female actors, it would undoubtedly have been censored (like the dancing in the aforementioned *Cherry Orchard*). But when the dance is performed by two male actors, it can circumvent censorship. Also, the director creates a lengthy scene involving Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in bed in the latter half of the play, and throughout this scene both characters talk and roll over in bed. During the

public performance, censorship officials criticized this scene several times, but each time the director responded, 'Is a man touching another man religiously problematic?' Having no answer to this question, the censorship officials inevitably tolerated the performance until the last day of the run. Using Sigmund Freud's interpretation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as two aspects of a character in one body, the critic Ghafar Adli suggests that 'Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are two separate halves, yet they are related to each other throughout the play and constantly complement each other. Accordingly, they depict a single whole in front of the audience.'[23] Hence it might be argued that the idea of a man playing the role of Lady Macbeth further contributes to meaning-making beyond being a strategy of circumventing censorship.

Society, the cruellest censorship agent!

There is a strange yet significant form of censorship in Iran that is not imposed on artists by any governmental entity. The name of this censorship is 'social censorship': 'Social censorship consists of traditions, ideas, and taboos that can be due to both the beliefs of social and political groups and the tendency to create ideological idols and the cult of personality of segments of Iranian society',[24] and it is imposed by the audience on the artist. It is not noticeable in the work of art, but rather the author voluntarily considers this restriction prior to performing a play or even before writing it. This process leads to the artist's self-censorship. In my interview with Arash Dadgar, the popular Iranian theatre director commented in this regard,

> The Iranian artist is usually unaware of his/her self-censorship. He/she is not aware of the profound restrictions that the audience has imposed on his/her mind. This awareness is achieved when your audience is not Iranian. Performing plays at international festivals and communicating with audiences from other countries make you wonder about self-censorship. You realize how many ideas you have buried within yourself. Ideas that you have never allowed yourself to express; because you know that they are not compatible with the social and cultural taboos in the minds of the Iranian audience. For example, an Iranian director cannot depict themes such as incest, ridiculing religious beliefs or excessive use of bloody and violent scenes on the stage. Even if the upstream institutions do not have a problem with these issues, the Iranian audience cannot tolerate them. These restrictions are rooted in the educational principles of Iranian citizens. They do not like to be mocked or insulted while watching a play.[25]

The Iranian author and director Bahram Beyzai believes that social censorship in the Iranian theatre industry is applied via an invisible force, which has deeply infiltrated the community:

> You do not speak of a direct monitoring system. I do not have anything to say about that. I am speaking of invisible monitoring groups, which are everywhere and highly dangerous, given that they do not have a specific re-identifiable countenance. In regard to monitoring apparatus, you know who and what you are facing; however, in this case, you do not have a clue. This is an existent invisible force which can appear

> at any moment from wherever it wants. This is an injustice which appears in a shape and form, at any moment. At times, it is an economic threat; or a local infiltration; while at other times it is an office manager, or at times it is a spinster who supports women's piety. Anyone can obstruct your activity. Pretending that we are the representative of people and they have been hurt is commonplace to an extent that anyone, by hiding behind this mask and by expediently voicing support for people, can sabotage your activity. Place aside the showdown which you had started. This is the true manifestation and the real players are these.[26]

Unfortunately, there is no reliable evidence in Iran for this type of censorship. An artist who, even in the privacy of his/her room, when he/she starts writing a play, is afraid to say much of what he/she wants to say because he/she knows very well that even if religion and politics do not restrict him/her, the rigid prejudices of the public, his/her fellow citizens, will. However, there are artists who never talk about this self-censorship. They never admit that the taboos institutionalized in their minds have made them succumb to expediency. Many artists prefer working under censorship to staying at home. So not only do they accept this self-censorship, but they do not even have the courage to protest because they do not want to accept the consequences.

Amir Reza Koohestani, a well-known Iranian director, performed Chekhov's *Ivanov* in a unique way in the Iranian state theatre facing censorship. The director knew that in the Iranian theatre, he could not portray the moment Ivanov was embraced by his wife, the sexual touches and the debauchery at the birthday party, and, most importantly, Ivanov and Sasha making love. Therefore, before having to deal with the censorship agents, he self-censored and removed these forbidden moments from the play. Yet this self-censorship paved the way for a brilliant adaptation, as he cleverly turned to the use of 'symbols' to perform these moments of intimacy.

Iranian theatre director Arash Dadgar says, 'When a play uses symbols and conveys the theme through symbols, it can easily create equivocation; it can represent anything using another thing. This is an advantage symbolic plays have over realistic plays.'[27] In the first act, Ivanov is leaving the house to attend a party, and his wife, Anna, embraces him desperately. Ivanov leaves his wife indifferently and goes to the birthday party of Sasha, his young mistress. Part of Anna's character in the play is shaped by her desperate act of embracing Ivanov. However, this aspect, due to the existence of censorship, is omitted from Koohestani's production. In the staging, the absence of Anna's embraces becomes a means of foregrounding her loneliness as she is depicted sitting on the sofa alone in prolonged silence on the stage. Depiction of her loneliness has been presented as a symbolic substitute for the rejected embrace. Moreover, Anna's housework labour has been highlighted in the staging – despite being sick and constantly coughing, she repeatedly takes down the laundry from the clothes line. In the given context, this physical action conforms to the representations of the obedient Iranian housewife, and thus conveys symbolically the place of a woman in society. Chekhov's play, however, makes no mention of the clothes line and Anna's intensive housework. The director, who could not depict a man and a woman embracing each

other, used a familiar symbol of feminized domestic labour to convey to the Iranian audience the subservient position of a woman under the domination of her husband in Iranian society. This directorial choice enabled the Iranian audience to relate to Anna's character. By depicting an aspect of Anna as an obedient, dutiful housewife, the director has offered a female figure that conforms to societal expectation, satisfying both the censors and more conservative audience members, while by the same token allowing other, potentially more controversial, aspects of Chekhov's play to be conveyed onstage.

Also, the play *Ivanov* was subject to censorship regarding the sexual behaviours of the characters, but the director used symbols creatively to bypass censorship. The censorship concerned the events of a birthday party (Act II) and a wedding ceremony (Act IV). In Act II, the two male characters of the play repeatedly kiss a young widow named Babakina, and in the final scene of Act IV a male character touches Babakina's back and harasses her. However, in Iranian theatre, it is not possible to display any of these vulgar jokes, kisses and sexually explicit contacts. Thus the director eliminated both celebrations from the performance. Act II takes place in the room above the place where the birthday party is being held and we can infer from the conversations of the characters that the youth are dancing downstairs. The final act begins with the telephone conversation of one of Ivanov's friends, who describes the wedding ceremony. Now the question is, how has the promiscuity of the men in Chekhov's play and their explicit lewdness been conveyed? The director considered an interesting solution to compensate for these omissions. Instead of showing the physical contact between a man and a woman, the director decided to show the men's lassitude and invasion of another's privacy by placing the men in Ivanov's bedroom and sitting on his bed. The third act of the play takes place in Ivanov's study. His friends are talking to each other but Ivanov is not present. The director changed the location of the play, so that instead the third act takes place in Ivanov's bedroom. His friends are sitting on his bed and are preparing barbecue meat on skewers. They have set up a party in the couple's most private marital place. This scene vividly depicts the indecency of the characters, especially in the view of the Iranian spectator, who values marital privacy – the bed in this scene being a symbol of marital privacy and its violation.

However, Amir Reza Koohestani's brilliant technique is a trick to convert the visual elements that the Iranian audience is not allowed to see into audio elements that the audience can hear. One of the most significant scenes in the play *Ivanov* is the moment when Anna catches her husband and Sasha embracing each other – a scene that censorship rules in Iran do not allow to be depicted on the stage. At this moment, Anna is devastated and of course, Ivanov is transformed. Up to that point, Anna deceived herself and still considered her husband a faithful man, but, seeing him embracing a young girl, she was disillusioned. The director has very cleverly been able to make up for the omission of this scene. One of the effective ways to bypass censorship in theatre can be by transforming visual elements into auditory ones. In this method, instead of showing a scene, it is explained. It might seem simple, but by making proper use of this method a director can create more impact for the audience than by showing a scene. The director has added a Walkman to the play, a small

Walkman with which Sasha records all her conversations with Ivanov. She listens to the Walkman at night, and in her girlish dreams she repeatedly listens to her conversations with Ivanov. The use of a Walkman is familiar to the Iranian audience as a large number of young Iranians have had the experience of using a Walkman and listening to their beloved's voice in the middle of the night at some point in their life. Sasha unintentionally leaves the Walkman on the sofa, so that instead of the scene where Anna witnesses her husband embracing Sasha, Anna plays the Walkman and suddenly hears the sound of their romantic laughs. In the original script, while embracing Sasha, Ivanov looks his wife in the eyes. This is the moment when Ivanov feels a pang of conscience that inevitably leads to his suicide. In the play, after this scene, Ivanov turns into a nervous and violent person completely different from his former character, but in the performance, when Anna listens to the Walkman, Ivanov is not present on the stage. Thus, unlike in the play, in the performance Ivanov sustains his character. Perhaps that is why, in the performance of the play, Ivanov does not experience increasing deterioration and ultimately, instead of committing suicide, he continues to be indifferent. This means that omitting a moment of embrace has inevitably changed the fate of the main character of the play. However, the director has cleverly taken advantage of this change of fate. The fate of Ivanov in the performance is more tangible for the Iranian audience than the fate of Ivanov in the play. The indifferent, numb and lifeless character of Ivanov is a familiar character to the Iranian audience. Apart from Koohestani, no Iranian director has had the courage to approach *Ivanov*, because this play was prohibited according to Islamic laws. Koohestani broke this prohibition. Moreover, through the necessary adaptation of the play to circumvent censorship, he was able to make it topical, depicting the violent and domineering masculinites in contemporary Iranian society. This staging of *Ivanov* is considered to be one of the most successful performances in Iranian theatre history.

Censorship, a plaything in the hands of the Iranian *Hamlet*

How can *Hamlet* be performed in Iran? When no man on the stage is allowed to touch a woman, which parts of the play inevitably have to be omitted? Is it not a more reasonable choice for the Iranian director to completely give up the idea of performing this play? But apparently, some Iranian directors are too thick-skinned to give up. Reza Gouran is the director who performed *Hamlet* and he made up for every scene he inevitably had to delete with a fascinating replacement. After the revolution, Shakespeare's plays were banned for a long time. For the first time, Qotb al-Din Sadeqi rewrote *Hamlet* in 1992 and deleted many of its scenes in order to get a license for public performance. In a way, what was finally performed was not very similar to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and it was just called *Hamlet*. For the second time, Reza Gouran was able to bypass the blade of censorship with great creativity and perform *Hamlet* in 2012.

In the famous 'mousetrap' scene, Hamlet lies down in Ophelia's lap. He first asks her if he can lie in her lap. Ophelia misunderstands him. Therefore Hamlet changes his sentence and says, 'I mean, my head upon your lap.'[28] This happens after, in the previous

scene, Hamlet has humiliated Ophelia and ridiculed her virginity. Now he puts his head in her lap and watches the actors. It is not possible to perform this scene – a man lying in a woman's lap – in Iranian theatre; however, the director uses props to make up for this limitation. In Gouran's staging, there are two actors lying a few metres apart. One is Gertrude and the other is hidden under the sheet – the audience can neither see her face nor hear her voice. This scene is performed with the help of stage props in such a way that the audience imagines that the two actors are sleeping next to each other (although in reality they are several metres apart). The strange thing, however, is that the audience are sure that the person hiding under the sheet is Hamlet. But why do the audience think so? In fact, this misunderstanding only happens to the Iranian audience. The fact is that an Iranian audience member is aware of the censorship in Iranian theatre. As an Iranian audience member, I know that a female character (such as Ophelia) can easily sleep next to Gertrude (because they are both women and, according to Islamic law, two women sleeping together and touching each other is not a problem), so there is no need for a creative theatrical trick to separate the two actors. Therefore, I, as an Iranian audience member, become convinced that at this moment in the performance (where the two actors are sleeping a few metres apart against their will), the gender of the two actors is different. In other words, the reception thought process is as follows: Gouran has placed the two actors in separate locations, but with the help of stage props, he has tried to make it look as if they are sleeping next to each other. Gouran probably did not have permission to show these two actors sleeping next to each other because physical contact and the sleeping of a woman next to a man is not possible in Iranian theatre. So the one who is sleeping under the sheet is undoubtedly a man and none other than Hamlet. But the fact is that Gouran made a witty use of this bias of the Iranian audience. In fact, the one hidden under the sheet is Ophelia, and she can easily sleep next to Gertrude without being censored. Therefore the audience are surprised when the sheet is removed and Ophelia's face is revealed – in order to deceive the audience, the director has deliberately pretended that he was forced to separate a man from a woman due to censorship (when there is no man at all).

Stage directions for the 'Murder of Gonzago', the play within the play, say, 'At first, two actors playing the roles of the king and the queen enter and kiss and embrace each other passionately.'[29] In the 'mousetrap scene' the actors perform a symbolic representation of Claudius's crime and a conspiracy. To avoid the kiss between the king and the queen, the director has cut the scene with the travelling players entirely. Instead, the act of mirroring as looking at oneself in the mirror is used throughout the play to indicate reckoning with a guilty conscience. For a moment, Claudius looks into the mirror in private. It appears as if he cannot bear to see his own reflection and puts the mirror down. In another scene, Gertrude is sitting next to Claudius. The mirror is placed exactly between them. Gertrude tells Claudius, 'We both know very well what we've done in the interests of Denmark.' Claudius says, 'I guess there are things that I should remember.' In another scene, Gertrude is standing next to Ophelia. Ophelia wishes not to live long so that she does not turn into someone like Gertrude in the future. Gertrude asks, 'What's wrong with me, Ophelia?' Ophelia

holds the mirror in front of Gertrude and says, 'This is who you are. You see? What you tried your whole life to wipe away but you couldn't.' In this play, travelling actors have been eliminated due to censorship and instead, using a symbolic object, theatrical creativity has been achieved not only to avoid censorship, but to offer a subtle political commentary. In these scenes, the mirror serves to reflect the conscience and subconscious of the character, the same function that the wandering actors had in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Love of theatre, even in the time of cholera!

Love in the Time of Cholera by Gabriel García Márquez – these two names (of the novel and of the author) are enough to give up the idea of adapting this material for performance in Iran because it will definitely be impossible to pass censorship. But apparently Iranian directors do not give up easily, so Farzad Amini decide to adapt the novel for the Fajr Theater Festival. The play *Love in the Time of Cholera*, directed by Farzad Amini, was staged in Iranshahr State Theater in 2015. The director sent the play to the Censorship Department for approval. The Censorship Department approved it because there was no prohibited content in the play. There was no forbidden content in the performance of the play either, but the concepts of the novel were present in this stage adaptation in alternative creative ways.

This novel is about a love triangle, one side of which is a young girl named Fermina, and the other two sides are Florentino and Dr Urbino, who have fallen in love with this girl. Some key scenes in the novel that would be impossible to depict on the Iranian stage include the moment when the doctor examines the young girl's breasts and speaks of their beauty, when the doctor sleeps with Fermina, and a scene where Florentino kisses Fermina's lips. But how can these important scenes of the novel be depicted in the state theatre of Iran where such scenes are strictly forbidden? The director decided to use narration to depict through words what cannot be shown through stage action and imagery. The actors narrate the prohibited scenes instead of performing them. The use of narrative has been a common means for Iranian directors to avoid censorship and take the performance in a creative and engaging direction. One of the functions of the narrative is the conventional definition of a situation, and the theatre audience accepts that convention. For example, when an actress assumes the role of a father in narration and assumes another role in another scene, it is understood by the audience. In this play, in the beginning, spectators see a set design similar to *pardeh khani* (literally, 'reading off the screen/curtain'); the form is of *naghali* (a narrative style of art and a mixture of storytelling with acting and singing), or *ta'zieh* (condolence theatre or passion play inspired by a historical and religious event). There is a pit in the centre and actors walk in this pit and constantly shift roles. Also, this solution removes the barrier between the audience and the actors and creates a two-way relationship.

The question is, how has the director dealt with censorship? In the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, *eros* and *thanatos* are the key apsects, hence erotic scenes are frequent and important for the story. It is as if, in this cholera-stricken city, all romantic events

imperceptibly originate from or are expressed through sexual urges. A doctor who has travelled to this city to treat patients falls in love with a teenage girl, Fermina, and marries her. The following is Dr Urbino's first encounter with Fermina:

> Dr Juvenal Urbino asked the patient to sit on the bed. Then, he raised her dress to examine the upper part of her body. The girl's breasts became visible in the half-lit room before she covered them with her hands … Juvenal always said that while examining the girl, who later became his lifelong companion, he had no special feelings and did not get excited.[30]

At this point in the novel, the writer explicitly refers to the girl's sex appeal and the doctor's instincts, but later he exonerates the doctor from sexual intentions towards the girl. The author cleverly emphasizes that the doctor claims that he has had no sexual intentions toward his patient. Apparently the doctor does not want to question his own integrity as a physician. The idea behind this scene is the confrontation between sexual instinct and social status. Given that it is impossible to perform this scene involving the examination of the girl by the doctor in Iranian theatre, the director has shrewdly realized the idea behind this scene – an actress plays the role of the doctor, who, while examining the girl, says, 'Her turquoise dress. Her feverish eyes and her hair spread over her shoulders … The crows will pluck his eyes out. The womanizer is dead now.'

This scene clearly refers to the girl's sexual appeal and, of course, the doctor's promiscuity. Therefore at this moment the actress ceases to play the role of the doctor and returns to her real social role: 'I, Marzieh Shater Tousi, playing the role of Dr Urbino getting to know Fermina, experienced no sexual excitement! Getting to know someone who was by my side to the last day of my life.'[31] At this moment, in addition to satirizing censorship in Iranian theatre, the director also highlights the main idea in the text. The lustful gaze of a doctor at a girl has been compared to the lustful gaze of a girl at another girl. We can safely say that this has been one of the funniest ways to bypass censorship. The fact is that the actor suddenly revealed her real identity to the audience and then admitted that her sexual contact with the other actor, although with her body, has actually been with the soul of the character in the play. It is as if the actor wants to tell the censorship agents that artistic creative methods cannot be limited. You can be a woman named Marzieh Shater Tousi, but at the same time be a man named Dr Urbino.

Perhaps the most astonishing part of the play is its final scene. A significant part of the story deals with the marriage of two middle-aged characters, whose sexual relationship plays a major role. Their love, which is apparently a pure form of love, is inevitably linked to lust. The author narrates moments from their sea voyage for the reader: 'Florentino shuddered after kissing Fermina's lips: as she herself had said, she had the sour smell of old age.'[32]

The significant issue here is the desire to maintain sexual instincts at the time when the body is decaying, just like staying in love during the time of cholera. This is the author's main idea throughout the novel. A man who is getting closer and closer to death and nothingness boldly struggles to experience the old pleasures again. Fermina

realizes that Florentino does not notice her actual body. It is as if he still imagines her the way she was in her teens. Thus she openly invites him to rediscover her body:

> At last, when his caresses slid over her belly, she said, 'If we're going to do it, let's do it, but let's do it like grownups.' She took him to the bedroom … Florentino Ariza said: 'Don't look.' He asked why without taking his eyes off the ceiling. 'Because you won't like it,' she said. Then he looked at her and saw her naked to her waist, just as he had imagined her. Her shoulders were wrinkled, her breasts sagged, her ribs were covered by a flabby skin as pale and cold.[33]

Obviously, none of the above scenes can be performed on the stage in Iranian theatre. The director has inevitably omitted nudity, but he has maintained the focus on old age. Actors enter the final scene while they all put on new clothes before the audience. They all wear shrouds. The entire final scene is performed while the actors only have their heads out of the shrouds as if they were on the brink of death. Fermina touches Florentino's coffin from beneath her coffin. The moment of their lovemaking is described by a narrator on the stage as follows: 'Then Fermina moved her frozen fingers. Groping in the dark, she found the hands waiting for her. Hands with hollow bones.' Bodies touching each other beneath shrouds are not subject to censorship in Iranian theatre, but they can depict for the audience the struggle of a mortal man in his desire. The play ends and the audience claps for the actors who are not seen, because they are wrapped in their shrouds, but still wave their hands from within the shrouds – albeit awkwardly – in respect to the audience – just like life in the midst of death, like love in the time of cholera, and maybe like flying in a cage.

Conclusion

By selecting five plays and conducting an analysis of the plays and their performances, I have investigated the issue of censorship and scenes that cannot be performed in Iranian theatre. In this article, I have shown how censorship leads to artists' creativity out of necessity to find ways to keep theatre alive and relevant and audiences' capacity to read between the lines. However, the process of turning censorship into creativity does not prevent artists from condemning censorship – its critique is often in the very means of bypassing prohibition. Each of the case studies and examples of avoiding censorship shows how the original ideas and themes were conveyed using analogies in language and method, and if a scene needs to be deleted to pass the censors another scene becomes invented to replace the deleted scene to create a similar effect.

Although the initial effect of censorship prevented the emergence of Iranian artists' ideas and discouraged them from continuing their efforts, its secondary effect led to the birth of creative streaks in their work, mobilizing the artists in a serious, sustained and fascinating fight against censorship. Perhaps this is the reason why, a few years after Jafar Panahi was banned from working in Iran and left the country, Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi claimed in an interview at the Cannes Film Festival, 'Throughout these years, Jafar Panahi did not become isolated … he did not become depressed … he worked … he created several works. I have so much respect for him.'[34]

In response to this statement, Panahi wrote on his personal page,

> I must say that understanding this issue is more important than praising my artistic works. In these years, I tried to prove that it is necessary to work. I must say to my honorable colleagues that those in power want to stop us from working using any justifications. We must know that no justification or excuse for not working is acceptable. The only way for an artist to be alive is to continue creating works of art.[35]

This belief of the well-known Iranian director proves the point that many others were also making through their work in Iranian theatre – that the most effective way to fight censorship is to bypass it repeatedly with creative methods until censorship is rendered pointless.

NOTES

1 Aparat website, *Ivanov*, at www.aparat.com/v/l8903db (accessed 12 June 2024).
2 YouTube, *The Cherry Orchard*, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3spq3QaR_o (accessed 12 June 2024).
3 Filimo website, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, at www.filimo.com/m/htpcr (accessed 22 March 2019).
4 YouTube, *Macbeth*, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z1P-ooN5ySE (accessed 12 June 2024).
5 YouTube, *Hamlet*, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMbtQxUmsZM (accessed 12 June 2024).
6 Mandana Zandian, *Rereading the Ten Nights: Original Presentations and Recent Perspectives on the Evenings of Literary Readings in Iran in October 1977* (Hamburg: Publication of the Dariush Homayoun Foundation for Constitutionalism Studies, 2013), p. 206.
7 Bahram Beyzai, born in 1938, the well-known Iranian writer and filmmaker, is referred to as the father of Iranian playwrights. He currently lectures at Stanford University in the US.
8 Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard*, trans. Simin Daneshvar (Tehran: Nil Publication, 1968), p. 57.
9 Ibid., p. 74.
10 Joel Cohen, *Phenomenology of Censorship*, trans. Shahrokh Tondro Saleh (Tehran: Negah Moaser Publication, 2017).
11 Fariborz Khosrawi, *Censorship* (Tehran: Nazar Publication, 2008).
12 Nasser Katouzian, *The Freedom of Thought and Expression* (Tehran: Tehran University Publication, 2003).
13 Jamshid Masoumi, *Freedom of Expression* (Tehran: Mizan Publication, 2017); Vahid Jalili, *Cinema of Censorship* (Tehran: Ma'aref Publication, 2019).
14 Wikipedia, at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Iran#Chapter_III_[Article_19_to_42]:_Rights, last edited 9 June 2024.
15 The ruling class means all military, economic and social institutions that are managed directly under the supervision of the leader of Iran. The IRGC, the IRGC Intelligence Organization, the army, the police, the Qom Seminary, the Islamic Propaganda Organization, and others, are among this ruling class. Also, since 2021, the president of Iran and his cabinet members also belong to the ruling class.
16 Jafar Panahi, born in 1960, a well-established Iranian director, filmmaker and political prisoner. Some of his movies include *Three Faces*, *Taxi*, *Offside* and *The White Balloon*.
17 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, trans. Abdulrahim Ahmadi (Tehran: Qatreh Publication, 2011), p. 62.
18 Farhad Mohandespour, 'Symbols of Space in Macbeth', *Khaneh Ketab Journal*, 95 (2006), pp. 76–9, here p. 79.
19 YouTube, *Macbeth*, minute 35.
20 Ibid., minute 79.
21 Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, p. 62.
22 ILNA News Agency, at www.ilna.ir/fa/tiny/news-469666 (accessed 31 December 2020).

23 Ghafar Adli in *Iran Theater*, at https://theater.ir/fa/8692 (accessed 2 April 2020).
24 Cohen, *Phenomenology of Censorship*, p. 102.
25 YouTube, interview with Arash Dadgar, at https://youtu.be/i5xsawTUnjc (accessed 19 February 2019), minute 1.
26 Zandian, *Rereading the Ten Nights*, p. 206.
27 Interview with Arash Dadgar, minute 3.
28 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* trans. M. Behazin (Tehran: Dowran Publication, 1981), p. 138.
29 Ibid., p. 139.
30 Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, trans. Kiumars Parsay (Tehran: Ariaban Publication, 2010), p. 97.
31 Ibid., p. 63.
32 Ibid., p. 288.
33 Ibid., p. 291.
34 Khabar Online, interview of Asghar Farhadi in Cannes, at www.khabaronline.ir/news/775709 (accessed 8 June 2023).
35 Shayanfilm Online, Jafar Panahi's answer to Asghar Farhadi's interview, at https://shayanfilm.com/articles/5646 (accessed 8 June 2023).

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