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The Pakistani Woman as Feminised Border: Intimacy, Containment, and the Regulation of National Feeling in Contemporary Hindi Cinema

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the recurring figure of the Pakistani woman in mainstream Hindi cinema as a privileged site for the production and regulation of national feeling. It argues that these figures operate as a feminised border: not merely a metaphor for geopolitical division, but an affective threshold through which proximity is staged without political transformation. Drawing on a corpus of commercially successful, state-adjacent films from the early 2000s to the post-2019 period, the analysis traces how Pakistani female characters circulate across genres romantic melodrama, espionage thrillers, and nationalist action cinema while performing a remarkably consistent narrative function. Across this corpus, Pakistani women are rendered ethically legible and affectively transparent. They embody care, restraint, and sacrifice, enabling forms of cross-border intimacy that leave geopolitical antagonism fundamentally intact. What appears as a softening of hostility instead functions as a technology of regulation: difference is not erased but domesticated. Variations in accent, profession, and setting are permissible, yet epistemic and political differences are foreclosed. Pakistani women are granted intimacy but denied sustained anger, historical depth, or political articulation. The article contends that this patterned constraint is structural, sustained by genre conventions and the ideological horizons of contemporary commercial cinema. Against readings that frame such representations as evidence of liberalisation, it demonstrates how affect itself becomes regulatory. Sympathy operates as containment, producing a moral coherence through which the nation imagines itself as ethically self-assured even as its borders remain secure. Contemporary Hindi cinema thus recalibrates, rather than departs from, Orientalist logics.

Keywords: *Pakistani Women, Hindi Cinema, Gendered Orientalism, Feminised Border, National Feeling, Monolithic Representation, Affective Nationalism, Postcolonial Feminist Media Studies.*

1. Introduction

Mainstream Hindi cinema continues to stage Pakistan through a visual and narrative grammar saturated by security discourse territorial anxiety, military confrontation, and the anticipation of threat. However, this is not the only register at work. Running alongside these hardened imaginaries is a quieter, more intimate narrative economy in which proximity is imagined not through diplomacy or politics, but through gendered relations. Within this space, the Pakistani woman recurs with notable regularity. She is not positioned as an ideological interlocutor but as an affective presence: a figure through whom cross-border connection becomes imaginable, even desirable, without requiring political negotiation.

Across films such as *Veer-Zaara* (2004), *Gadar: Ek Prem Katha* (2001) and *Gadar 2* (2023), the *Tiger* franchise (2012–2023), and *Mission Majnu* (2023), this figure is reworked across genres

yet remains functionally stable. Her narrative role is to facilitate emotional continuity across national divisions. What is striking is not simply her recurrence. However, the narrowness of her intelligibility: she becomes knowable through care, loyalty, and moral restraint, while other modes of subjectivity recede from view. This article approaches this patterned appearance not as an incidental representation but as a constitutive feature of how contemporary cinema manages the problem of the border.

To conceptualise this, I propose the figure of the 'feminised border' as a representational mechanism through which national antagonism is displaced onto gendered embodiment. The border, in this configuration, is neither erased nor resolved; it is rendered inhabitable at the level of feeling. Such inhabitation is sustained through what I call *national feeling*: an affective orientation that allows the nation to appear ethically composed, even as its exclusions remain structurally intact. This formulation shifts attention away from overt ideological messaging toward the affective conditions that enable nationalist narratives to cohere.

Existing feminist scholarship has demonstrated how women are positioned as custodians of cultural identity within nationalist projects (see Chatterjee, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1997), while studies of Hindi cinema have shown how female characters frequently stabilise narratives organised around masculine action (see Viridi, 2003; Banerjee, 2016). Parallel work on cinematic representations of India-Pakistan relations has foregrounded militarisation and hostility as dominant frameworks (see Ganti, 2012; Mehta & Pandharipande, 2012). What remains less fully theorised, to the best of my knowledge, is the specific affective work performed by Pakistani female characters within this field: how they come to mediate contradiction not by contesting it, but by rendering it experientially tolerable.

This article situates mediation within a recalibrated Orientalist formation. As Edward W. Said (1978) observes, Orientalism operates through gradations of familiarity as much as through distance. In these films, antagonism is negated and reorganised through forms of selective proximity. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's (2014) theorisation of affect as a structuring force, I read these proximities as regulatory rather than emancipatory. Emotional recognition does not dissolve differences. It reorganises it within acceptable bounds, delimiting what can be known, felt, and expressed.

Methodologically, the analysis proceeds through close reading of a corpus of commercially successful, state-proximate films spanning the early 2000s to the post-2019 moment. The emphasis is on repetition as a diagnostic category. What emerges across these texts is a consistent delimitation of representational possibility. The Pakistani woman is (re)presented as a site through which the nation negotiates its own coherence. By tracing this recurrence, the article interrogates how affective inclusion can coexist with, and indeed sustain, geopolitical closure.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on gender and popular culture has consistently demonstrated that the nation is not only imagined through institutions or discourse, but also through narrative form and embodied figuration. Rather than treating gender as supplementary to political meaning, this scholarship locates it at the level of mediation—where ideological tensions are translated into legible, often intimate, registers. Within this field, attention has increasingly shifted from

symbolic roles to narrative function: how figures are made to carry contradiction, and how resolution is staged through affective coherence.

Feminist film theory, in particular, has foregrounded the centrality of melodrama and related genres in organising this process. Scholars have shown that popular cinema repeatedly redistributes political conflict into the domains of kinship, morality, and desire, where it can be managed without explicit confrontation (see Gledhill, 1987; Williams, 1998). In the context of Hindi cinema, this redistribution has been read through the interplay of spectacle and sentiment, where female characters often anchor narrative closure by embodying endurance, ethical clarity, or reconciliation (see Viridi, 2003; Dwyer, 2006; Banerjee, 2016). What emerges across this work is a sustained interest in how narrative economies stabilise ideological tension not by resolving it, but by relocating it.

A parallel body of scholarship has examined the consolidation of nationalist discourse in post-liberalisation Hindi cinema, particularly in relation to India–Pakistan relations. Here, the emphasis has fallen on the emergence of a securitised visual regime, marked by militarised spectacle, heightened surveillance, and the dramatisation of territorial threat (Kabir, 2009; Ganti, 2012; Mehta & Pandharipande, 2012). Pakistan, within this corpus, is frequently rendered as an abstracted site of hostility: less a social formation than a narrative function within the staging of national defence. This work has been crucial in tracing the intensification of geopolitical antagonism as a cinematic idiom.

Studies of Muslim representation complicate this picture by attending to the internalisation of national boundaries within the figure of the minority subject. Here, the focus has been on visibility, suspicion, and the burden of proof placed upon Muslim characters, whose belonging is often conditional and narratively policed (see Rajadhyaksha, 2003; Kumar, 2006). Nevertheless, this literature has tended to privilege masculinised forms of threat and surveillance, leaving less space for analysing figures that are not organised around danger or deviance.

Across these intersecting fields, the Pakistani woman remains analytically under-specified. When she appears, it is typically within broader discussions of cross-border romance or liberal reconciliation, where her presence is read as evidence of softening hostility or emergent cosmopolitanism (Kabir, 2009; Dwyer, 2006). Such readings often take affective proximity at face value, without interrogating the conditions under which it is produced or the limits it imposes. The result is a critical asymmetry: while antagonism has been extensively theorised, intimacy has not been subjected to equivalent scrutiny.

Recent work in feminist and postcolonial theory offers conceptual resources for addressing this imbalance. Ahmed's (2014) account of *affect* as an organising force foregrounds how emotions align subjects with normative structures, shaping what can be felt, expressed, and recognised. Similarly, postcolonial engagements with Orientalism have emphasised that power is not only exhausted by distance or hostility, but it also operates through calibrated proximity and selective legibility (see Said, 1978; Mohanty, 2003). These perspectives invite a reconsideration of sympathy not as a benign or progressive force, but as a modality through which *difference* is incorporated on restrictive terms.

By bringing these strands together, this article treats the recurring figure of the Pakistani woman as a site where affect, gender, and geopolitics converge. Rather than approaching her

as an exception within nationalist cinema, it reads her as a patterned effect of that cinema's narrative and ideological constraints. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from representation as content to representation as structure, asking how particular forms of feeling come to delimit the field of the political.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analytical orientation of this article approaches representation as a regulatory formation structured through recurrence, distribution, and constraint. Meaning is not treated as an intrinsic property of images or characters but as an effect of patterned repetition and narrative arrangement. What becomes intelligible within cinematic discourse is therefore understood as already delimited produced through the selective circulation of figures, affects, and narrative resolutions that stabilise particular ways of knowing. Within this orientation, representation operates less as reflection than as a field of governed possibility, where the conditions of visibility are inseparable from the limits imposed on articulation (Hall, 1997; Foucault, 1972).

Gender is mobilised here as a formal and mediating logic rather than an identity category. The analysis tracks how femininity is positioned at sites where contradiction is rerouted away from explicit political contestation and into affective and ethical registers. This involves reading gendered figures as sites of absorption, where tensions that exceed narrative resolution are reorganised into legible forms of care, restraint, and/or moral coherence. Such mediation is not thematic but structural, embedded in how narratives secure closure without reworking the antagonisms that animate them (Chatterjee, 1993; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Melodrama and its adjacent genres are treated as key narrative technologies in this process. The analysis proceeds from the premise that cinematic form displaces conflict into affective economies that can sustain resolution without structural transformation. Emotional excess, moral polarisation, and narrative restitution operate as mechanisms that redistribute political tension into domains where it can be managed rather than confronted (Gledhill, 1987; Williams, 1998). Within this configuration, gendered labour particularly the capacity to embody care, sacrifice, and/or legibility functions as a narrative device that contains contradiction (Virdi, 2003; Doane, 1987).

The framework further situates these operations within a recalibrated account of Orientalism that privileges the limits of recognition over overt misrepresentation. The analysis attends to how familiarity is structured: how figures are rendered knowable through selective legibility while remaining constrained within asymmetrical epistemic relations. Recognition, in this sense, as mentioned, is approached as a technique that incorporates difference without redistributing authority, producing subjects who are visible yet circumscribed in their capacity to signify (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2002).

Furthermore, within this configuration, sympathy is treated as a regulatory modality. The study reads affective recognition as operating through normative frames that determine which forms of subjectivity can be apprehended as intelligible, moral, or worthy of attachment. Rather than dissolving hierarchy, sympathy reorganises it, enabling proximity while maintaining the conditions that structure difference (Mahmood, 2005; Butler, 2009).

Affect is thus theorised as infrastructural to narrative and political organisation. It is approached as a circulatory force that aligns subjects, objects, and meanings within particular

orientations. Through the repeated distribution of emotions such as care, tenderness, and restraint, affect establishes the conditions under which certain relations appear natural, ethical, or inevitable. It operates as a mode of organisation that precedes and exceeds explicit ideological articulation (Ahmed, 2014; Berlant, 2011; Ngai, 2007).

Within this analytic field, the concept of *national feeling* is employed to designate the affective consolidation of the nation at the level of attachment and moral orientation. It refers to the sensory and emotional coherence through which national narratives sustain themselves, even in the presence of unresolved antagonisms. Rather than signalling belief or ideological commitment, national feeling captures the experiential conditions that render the nation inhabitable as a shared horizon (Anderson, 1983; Ahmed, 2014).

The notion of the *feminised border* emerges from the convergence of these concerns. It is deployed to analyse how geopolitical tension is relocated onto gendered figures, where it becomes traversable through intimacy without undergoing political renegotiation. The border, in this sense, is not undone but rearticulated as an affective threshold that permits proximity while preserving structural separation. This requires attending to how mobility, attachment, and care are unevenly distributed across bodies, and how such distributions sustain rather than disrupt national demarcations (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Puar, 2007; Ticktin, 2011).

Finally, the framework conceptualises monolithic representation as an effect of epistemic restriction. Variability at the level of character, setting, or narrative detail does not preclude monolithicity if the range of intelligible subject positions remains tightly bounded. The analysis, therefore, focuses on the limits of variation: what kinds of difference can appear without unsettling the coherence of nationalist common sense. Monolith, here, names the patterned foreclosure of alternative modes of political and epistemic articulation (Hall, 1997; Foucault, 1972; Butler, 2006).

All in all, this framework enables a reading practice oriented toward structure rather than surface, and toward regulation rather than representation alone. It provides the conceptual basis for analysing how affective proximity can coexist with political immobility, and how gendered figures stabilise nationalist narratives precisely by rendering contradiction emotionally manageable.

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1. Temporalization, Endurance, and the Feminisation of Political Impasse

Veer-Zaara (2004) narrates the relationship between Veer Pratap Singh, an Indian Air Force officer, and Zaara Hayaat Khan, a Pakistani woman from an elite political family. After Zaara returns to Pakistan, Veer crosses the border to protect her and is subsequently imprisoned there under a false identity for over two decades. The narrative culminates in his exoneration through legal advocacy, restoring personal justice while leaving intact the institutional conditions that produced his incarceration.

The film does not stage this incarceration as a failure warranting institutional critique. Instead, it redistributes its force across time. Carcerality is rendered as duration rather than as structure, such that waiting itself becomes the primary medium of meaning. Time accrues ethical weight: endurance gathers value, fidelity deepens, and suffering becomes inhabitable.

What might otherwise register as systemic violence is reconstituted as an experience that can be lived through and, crucially, admired.

This temporal redistribution exemplifies a broader representational logic in which political impasse is not confronted but reorganised. Conflict is neither resolved nor suspended. It is converted into a form that can be sustained affectively. Duration functions as a substitute for transformation, allowing the narrative to maintain the appearance of resolution without engaging the conditions that necessitate it.

Within this structure, the feminised border operates through the ethicalisation of waiting. Zaara's subject position aligns with what Partha Chatterjee (1993) describes as the feminised interior of the nation, a space in which contradiction is absorbed rather than articulated. Her endurance does not stand outside politics; it is the site at which politics is translated into affective terms patience, loyalty, and quiet persistence. The disarticulation of political speech is accompanied by the intensification of moral legibility.

National feeling consolidates through this translation. Ahmed's (2014) account of affective orientation clarifies how sympathy circulates here as a binding force. Feeling does not open onto critique; it directs attention toward endurance as an ethical good. The viewer is aligned with Zaara's suffering, but this alignment displaces inquiry into its causes. Difference is rendered as something to be felt and accommodated, rather than contested or transformed. Such affective alignment operates as regulation rather than expansion. Sympathy reorganises the terms of engagement, permitting proximity while neutralising the demand for structural redress. Recognition, in this configuration, substitutes for justice. The narrative produces a form of satisfaction grounded in belated acknowledgement, refiguring justice as something that arrives after harm has been absorbed and rendered meaningful.

Zaara's silence is integral to this reorganisation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) account of epistemic foreclosure underscores that silence is produced within the limits of intelligibility. Speech that would name incarceration as state violence would exceed the narrative's affective economy, disrupting its coherence. Silence, therefore, enables suffering to circulate as feeling rather than as critique, maintaining the conditions under which recognition can stand in for transformation.

The feminised border, in this instance, is not a line to be crossed but a condition to be inhabited. It unfolds as a temporal threshold through which proximity is staged without political renegotiation. Affective permeability coexists with structural rigidity: the border becomes traversable at the level of feeling even as its material and ideological contours remain intact.

4.2. Affective Governance and Ethical Exceptionality in Espionage Narratives

The *Tiger* franchise, beginning with *Ek Tha Tiger* (2012), stages the relationship between Tiger, an Indian intelligence agent, and Zoya, a Pakistani ISI operative. Zoya moves across borders, across allegiances, across spaces of surveillance and secrecy. She appears to inhabit movement itself.

Nevertheless, this movement is carefully managed. Zoya's mobility does not translate into political articulation; it translates into affective hesitation. She feels her way through contradiction through love, doubt, and divided loyalty. Her interiority is dense with emotion, but that density does not produce critique. It produces attachment.

Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of *affective governance* helps us see how this works. Governance is not only exercised through institutions; it is felt. Zoya's hesitation allows the security apparatus to appear as something that can be lived with, even cared for. Violence is made intimate, textured, and human. It becomes something one can stay with.

The feminised border here operates through exceptionality. Said's (1978) account of Orientalism as structured familiarity is instructive: Zoya is made familiar, even lovable, but only as an exception to the rule that renders Pakistan as hostile or illegible. She is the part that can be known, precisely because the rest remains unknowable.

This exception does not disrupt the structure; it secures it. Zoya's humanity allows the narrative to maintain the Pakistani state's illegitimacy while appearing generous, open, and humane. Recognition is extended, but selectively. It redistributes feeling, not legitimacy.

Stuart Hall (1997) reminds us that representation is about what can be said, not just what is shown. Zoya can feel deeply, but she cannot speak politically. She cannot name the structures that position her as an agent of a state already marked as suspect. Her hesitation becomes the limit of her articulation.

What this produces is a form of intimacy that does not threaten power. The feminised border here is not a line but a relation in which proximity is allowed, even encouraged, so long as it remains affective. Political speech would harden the border; feeling softens it. Thus, feeling is what is permitted.

4.3. Domesticity, Humanitarian Reason, and the Privatisation of Structural Violence

Mission Majnu (2023) draws the geopolitical into the domestic, following an Indian spy who marries Nasreen, a blind Pakistani woman, while conducting covert operations. The world narrows to the home, to the everyday, and to gestures of care and dependence.

Nasreen's blindness is not simply a characteristic; it is a condition that shapes how the narrative sees and does not see. It ensures that her world remains intimate, tactile, and immediate. She cannot witness the structures that surround her. She can only feel their effects. The feminised border here operates through privatisation. Violence is relocated from the geopolitical to the personal. Espionage appears as betrayal within a relationship. Harm becomes something that happens between people, not something produced by structures.

Judith Butler (2009) writes about grievability as the condition under which lives are recognised as worthy of mourning. Nasreen becomes grievable because her suffering is detached from history. She is not a political subject. She is a vulnerable body. Her pain is legible because it is not tied to causes that would demand explanation. Miriam Ticktin (2011) shows how humanitarian reason transforms suffering into an object of care rather than critique. This is precisely what happens here. The narrative invites us to care for Nasreen, to feel for her, but not to ask what makes her vulnerable. Care becomes the endpoint, not the beginning of a question.

The feminised border, then, is drawn through care. It allows proximity touch, love, and intimacy while ensuring that what lies beyond that proximity remains unexamined. Violence is felt as loss, betrayal, and sadness. It is not named as a structure.

What becomes possible is a form of national feeling that rests on compassion. What is foreclosed is the recognition that compassion might require transformation.

4.4. Reproductive Futurity and the Naturalisation of Containment

Gadar: Ek Prem Katha (2001) and *Gadar 2* (2023) trace the incorporation of Sakina, a Pakistani Muslim woman, into an Indian familial order after her marriage to Tara Singh during Partition. The first film situates this relationship within rupture; the second presents a settled continuity.

Across this movement, the border is reworked into futurity. Sakina's Pakistani identity does not disappear; it becomes background, inheritance, something that lingers without insisting. It becomes part of a past that no longer presses.

Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) helps us see how women function as reproducers of the nation, not only biologically but symbolically. Sakina's role is to carry continuity, to stabilise the future. Her silence is not a lack. It is a form of completion. There is nothing left to say because the narrative has already decided what matters. Michel Foucault (1972) reminds us that discourse does not simply include or exclude; it shapes what can be known. What disappears here is not memory, but the possibility that memory could disturb. Pakistan remains, but as something already resolved.

The feminised border is fully domesticated. It is no longer a site of tension but of inheritance. It does not demand negotiation. It affirms continuity. A sense of closure is naturalised as inevitable, even as the ongoing demands of conflict are rendered unthinkable.

4.5. Discursive Saturation, Monolith, and the Foreclosure of Anger

Across these films, Pakistani women appear in different roles, across different genres, across different narrative worlds. This variation might suggest openness. However, what it produces is a filling up of the same space with slightly different forms. Hall (1997) describes this as monolithic representation: not sameness, but limitation. The range of what can appear is narrow, even if what appears looks different.

These women are intelligible through care, sacrifice, and/or vulnerability. They are felt, recognised, and even admired. However, they are not allowed to be angry. Anger matters because it reorients. As Ahmed (2014) suggests, emotions do things: they move us, they direct us, and, importantly, they align us. Anger would redirect attention from intimacy to history, from feeling to cause. It would make the border sharp again.

Saba Mahmood (2005) complicates the idea that agency must look like resistance. Nevertheless, even within her framework, agency must be legible as a way of inhabiting the world. Here, even that is limited. The Pakistani woman cannot inhabit anger as a form of being. The absence of anger is not a gap, but a boundary. It marks the limit of what can be felt, and therefore what can be known.

4.6. Gendered Asymmetry and the Moral Economy of National Feeling

Across these narratives, a pattern emerges: Pakistani men are aligned with threat, rigidity, and violence. Pakistani women are aligned with care, vulnerability, and redemption. Jasbir K. Puar (2007) helps us understand how such distributions are not incidental. They organise how bodies are read, and how danger and innocence are assigned.

The Pakistani woman becomes the site through which national feeling is produced. Through her, the nation feels itself to be ethical, capable of care. Sympathy becomes a resource: it allows the nation to appear humane without altering its structures. To reiterate, feelings align

subjects (Ahmed, 2014). Here, sympathy aligns the viewer with a national narrative that feels right, even as it excludes. The border is softened, not undone.

The feminised border, simply put, operates as a moral interface. It allows the nation to encounter the Other in a way that confirms its own goodness. An ethical self-image is secured, while the imperative to transform the conditions that sustain its necessity is deferred.

5. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the recurring figure of the Pakistani woman in contemporary Hindi cinema is not a supplementary presence but a constitutive mechanism for producing and sustaining nationalist coherence. What appears, at the level of narrative, as intimacy, empathy, or cross-border connection is better understood as a structured mode of mediation that reorganises geopolitical antagonism without reworking its underlying terms. The Pakistani woman appears within these narratives, enabling their affective and ideological stability.

By shifting the analytic focus from representation as content to representation as condition, this study has shown that visibility operates through constraint. What becomes legible is not inclusion as such, but its regulation. Pakistani women are rendered intelligible through a tightly bound affective repertoire—care, restraint, vulnerability—while forms of subjectivity that might re-politicise the border remain foreclosed. Their presence does not expand the field of discourse. It secures its limits.

Across the corpus examined, intimacy rearticulates nationalist discourse. The border is reconfigured as an affective threshold that permits proximity without reciprocity. What is displaced is not conflict itself, but its location. Geopolitical antagonism is relocated from institutions and histories into the domain of feeling, where it can be engaged without requiring transformation. In this sense, the feminised border operates as a mechanism: it renders separation livable while preserving its structural force.

The analysis of *national feeling* is central to this operation. These films narrate the nation and organise attachments to it. They produce orientations—toward suffering, care, and recognition—that align the viewer with a moral economy in which sympathy substitutes for accountability. As Ahmed (2014) suggests, affect does not stand outside power; it is one of the ways power takes hold. Here, feeling does not soften nationalism; it sustains it.

The figure of the Pakistani woman is pivotal to this affective labour. Positioned at the intersection of intimacy and alterity, she enables recognition under conditions of asymmetry. She is close enough to be felt, yet not positioned to speak in ways that would unsettle the terms of that feeling. Her repetition across films marks saturation—a narrowing of the conditions under which difference can appear without disturbing nationalist common sense. What persists is sameness of function.

To read these representations as evidence of liberalisation or cross-border empathy is therefore to misrecognise their operation. What this analysis foregrounds is how empathy itself can function as a technology of regulation. It incorporates difference while neutralising its political force, producing proximity without redistribution. In doing so, contemporary Hindi cinema recalibrates, rather than departs from, Orientalist logics, shifting from overt hostility to managed familiarity.

This has broader implications for the study of nationalism, gender, and media. It suggests that the question is not only who appears within national narratives, but how their appearance is structured: what forms of feeling are enabled, and what forms of articulation are foreclosed. The feminised border, as this article has shown, names this structuring: a site where contradiction is not resolved but rendered affectively coherent.

To attend to these limits is to recognise that feeling is not what escapes power, but one of the ways power holds. The boundary of what cannot be said, or cannot be felt, marks the condition through which national coherence is secured.

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