

Deconstructing Tipu Sultan's Tiger Symbol in G.A. Henty's Novel *The Tiger of Mysore*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper deconstructs G.A. Henty's novel The Tiger of Mysore to show that it subverts Tipu Sultan's tiger emblem to undermine his courage, martial ingenuity, and spirit of independence. Using Derrida's concept of différance the study undertakes a close reading of tiger imagery to reveal that emblematic of Tipu's leadership the Indian tiger is variously portrayed as formidable to morbidly bloodthirsty and finally as vulnerable. This method demonstrates that Tipu's shifting interpretations conveyed through the tiger motif are influenced by the expediency of the period and circumstances prevailing then. The variations in Tipu's portrayal come down to one conclusion, i.e. to vilify Tipu and to justify expansion of the British Empire.*

Keywords: tiger emblem; Tipu's leadership; subversion; variations; British Empire

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Introduction

“...the hide of Shere Khan is under my feet. All the jungle knows that I have killed Shere Khan” (91-94).

From *The Jungle Book* by Rudyard Kipling

The tiger, symbolizing fiercely independent spirit of India¹, lays subdued underneath Mowgli, representing celebration of British superiority. The tiger motif, which mainly takes the form of a menacing tiger- a man eater and a perpetual scourge to the locals, persistently appears in colonial British writings on India particularly the figure of Tipu Sultan. An ardent use of tiger imagery not only underpins British fascination with the Indian space but also accomplishes their twin purpose, i.e. glorification of the British Empire and smearing campaign against Tipu.

This paper examines G.A. Henty’s novel, *The Tiger of Mysore*, a nineteenth century British composition concerning Tipu Sultan. This novel falls in the realm of contemporary bestsellers which tell the stories of valiant Englishman employed in the service of East India Company who triumphs over native barbarism personified in the figure of Tipu. Published in 1896 *The Tiger of Mysore* so enthralled the British audience that it was “reprinted well into the twentieth century” (Stronge 88). In fact such was the popularity of this colonial stereotype that it continued to inspire future writers. Bernard Cornwell, for example, in his 1997 novel *Sharpe’s Tiger* “set his hero Richard Sharpe against an equally two-dimensional ruler, oddly referred to as ‘The Tippoo’” (88).

Scholars and critics generally contend that the nineteenth century British texts sketch an alarming portrait of Tipu depicting him as a monstrous villain and a capricious Oriental despot². Tipu’s representation as a tyrant

¹ Don Randall in his article *Post-Mutiny Allegories of Empire in Rudyard Kipling’s Jungle Books* contends that Mowgli inhabits a world that offers “an intransigent resistance to the process of imperial domination” represented by the figure of Shere Khan (115). The tiger is lame and old, yet highly menacing—“a rogue tiger, a cattle-killer, and a manhunter” (110). Mowgli in his role as “an imperial protagonist” crushes the rebel and confirms British authority. Randall adds that “the tiger and the tiger-slayer” are central features in British imperial narratives; “The tiger hunt thus takes shape as a contest between conquerors... By his victory over the tiger, the British tiger-slayer implicitly lays claim to imperial authority, as the tiger’s successor” (111).

² The concept of oriental despotism emerged in *Esprit des Lois* by Montesquieu in 1748. This theory promoted the idea of eastern misgovernment for the purpose of affirming superiority of Europeans over Asiatic rulers who were stereotyped as incompetent and cruel.

was a part of British propaganda meant to create a rationale for the East India Company's military action against Mysore³. It is also observed that the inconsistencies inherent in the portrayal of Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan were contingent upon political considerations of the time which determined the extent of demonization of the sultans⁴. These writers, however, have overlooked the colonial use of figurative language, i.e. tiger imagery and how it articulates British animosity towards the Sultan. This paper explores this dimension by undertaking a close reading of the tiger symbol and exposing how Tipu emerges in this particular British fictional creation. Emblematic of Tipu's leadership, the Indian tiger is variously portrayed as menacing to morbidly bloodthirsty and finally as vulnerable and weak. In every manifestation, the tiger is shown as a continual threat to the safety of the Indians until the British huntsman steps in and restores order by slaying the feline. The tiger hunt episode affirms exquisite sportsmanship of the British, and on the other hand, establishes their position as the protectors and saviours of the natives. The paper analyses varying interpretations of Tipu under the lens of Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance* to show that Tipu's shifting interpretations are influenced by the expediency of the period and circumstances prevailing then. This is done by highlighting that these variations synchronize with the different phases of the Company's rule. The paper concludes that variations in the portrayal of Tipu conveyed through the tiger motif come down to one objective, i.e. imperial mission to vilify Tipu and justify expansion of the British Empire.

Derrida's concept of *différance* emphasizes the instability of meaning. *Différance* is a term that Derrida uses as neologism by merging the French words "to differ", which signifies "difference as distinction, inequality, or discernibility" and "to defer", which indicates "the interposition of delay" (Derrida 278). He argues that signifiers form complex patterns of meanings with other signifiers which implies that meaning is not stable but in a

³ See, for example, Ayusman Chakraborty's article, "*That disgrace in human form*": Tipu Sultan and the Politics of Representation in Three 19th Century English Novels.

⁴ Amal Chatterjee in his book *Representations of India, 1740-1840* points out that Hyder, during the initial stage of his military career was termed as a "worthy foe" but quickly transformed into an "evil barbarian" when his martial ingenuity thwarted British interests in the south of India (174). Chatterjee further adds that when Hyder was portrayed as "the demon", Tipu was the "honourable soldier" and when Tipu turned into "the evil tyrant", Hyder became the noble adversary. Tipu was later emphatically demonized in consequence of his stunning victories over the British armies during the second Anglo-Mysore War (174).

process of flux. Derrida says that since we “recognize a word by its differences from other words, it continues to have traces of those that it is not. A word, which is present, signals what is absent” (Dobie 160). Words, therefore, take on their meaning through the process of differentiation which means the “inequality” between things that makes differences possible, but also through deferral which implies that each signifier defers its meaning to other signifiers (Derrida 278). Meanings then begin to slide and shift and we have an infinite deferral of meaning. Derrida coined the term *différance* for this play of signification suggesting that “knowledge comes from dissimilarity and absence, making it dynamic and contextual” (Dobie 160). This method demonstrates that Tipu’s varying interpretations are determined by imperial apprehensions, fears, and elation that the East India Company experienced during different phases of its rule.

Context for British animosity towards Tipu Sultan

Tipu became the ruler of the south Indian kingdom of Mysore in 1782 till his death in 1799. A man of daring enterprise and vision, Tipu embarked on a mission to not only make further innovations in the area of military and weaponry but also to place Mysore on the forefront of industrial progress and economic prosperity. Irfan Habib in his book *Confronting Colonialism: Resistance and Modernisation under Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan* informs that where with Haider Ali modernization seldom got any further than arms and weapons, Tipu went way beyond “in his anxiety to introduce modern technology outside the area of weaponry” (xxix). With the help of French specialists, therefore, Mysore was manufacturing clocks, Chinaware, glass and mirrors. And by 1797, Tipu “was demanding from France ten cannon founders, ten ship-builders ... ten makers of ship clocks (literally wheels), and wheels (or engines) for raising water and other kinds of wheel work, and workmen versed in gold plating” (xxx). Habib adds that Tipu was mindful of the fact that “European powers had acquired their dominance by developing certain financial and commercial institutions and practices (companies and monopolies)” (xxx). Not surprisingly, in view of his ambition and foresight, Tipu took his cue building in “Mysore an immense state run trading enterprise” to the utter displeasure of the British (xxx).

Glittering and thriving Mysore based on European pattern soon became an eyesore for the East India Company who found the notion of an Indian regime “which sought to face down European power with its own weapons, exclusion of trade rivals from trade and a strong mobile army” unacceptable (Teltscher 238). In addition, Tipu’s astounding victories over

Col. Baillie at Pollilur and Col. Braithwaite at Kumbakonam during the second Anglo-Mysore War (1780-1784) intensified British prejudices against Tipu. These successes immediately established the Sultan as an adversary possessing ingenuous martial expertise and unfaltering courage and even earned him the title "Tiger of Mysore" by the British (*Tipu Sultan – Tiger of Mysore – Indian History in Rocketry*). Thwarted and burning with humiliation, the British began to skew Tipu's image through the written word. The accounts of many British prisoners of war released from the jails of Seringapatam were promoted in London by the end of eighteenth century⁵. These fabricated narratives perpetuated Tipu's image as despotic tyrant as well as inspired many subsequent writers⁶. At the same time the British invigorated efforts to defeat Tipu militarily. They were fully aware of Tipu's armed might and their incapacity to destroy him without native assistance. The English, therefore, struck alliances with regional powers including the Nizam and the Mahrattas and completely isolated Tipu. The Governor General, Lord Wellesley also initiated a conspiracy plan to buy Tipu's principal men through monetary and other offers. Mohibbul Hasan in *History of Tipu Sultan* points out that Wellesley set up a Commission composed of his brother Colonel Wellesley, Colonel Close, Colonel Agnew, Captain Malcolm, and Captain Macaulay. The objective of the Commission was "to spread disaffection among Tipu's subjects and to win them over to the English side by propaganda, offers of money or territory" (324).

Consequently, in Tipu's own dominions intrigues started to sprout against him. The British, ultimately with the strong support of the Nizam, attacked Mysore and were able to conquer Seringapatam in 1799 with the aid of the conspirators. Tipu gallantly died defending his capital with a sword in his hand. The focus of this paper is not on imperialist military intervention in Mysore, but on literary campaign which characterized Tipu as a tyrant and subverted Tipu's tiger emblem to undermine his courage, martial prowess, and spirit of independence.

The significance of tigers in pre-colonial India and Tipu's tiger emblem

The tiger and the tiger motif have so influenced the life and character of Tipu Sultan that despite the lapse of two centuries, neither the purpose of

⁵ The very first narrative of ex-prisoners of war to appear on the scene was the *Journal of an Officer in Colonel Baillie's Detachment* anonymously published in 1788.

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Tipu's life nor the eventual death can be understood by removing this stamp. It is important, therefore, to contextualize Tipu's adoption of tiger as his personal insignia. The tiger was a powerful emblem within pre-colonial India, where its terrifying strength was often associated with the power of kings. In South India, daggers and swords of the Vijayanagara empire had "lion or tiger hilts to indicate royal ownership" and a seventeenth century painting from the north of Mysore illustrates "a king wearing a jeweled crown and riding a massive tiger" (Stronge 40). The Mughal emperors used tiger hunting as a symbol of their authority and ability to rule. It was not only a display of their hunting prowess, but a metaphorical show of their talent to rule.

The tiger happens to be the most extensively used insignia of Tipu. It was depicted on every conceivable object ranging from uniforms, flags, swords to personal belongings as well as columns built in Tipu's palaces. He even had his throne fashioned in the form of a tiger. The most popular of these tigers is the spectacular wooden semi-automaton that was discovered in Tipu's palace after the fall of Seringapatam, which now sits in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. "Tipu's Tiger", as this mechanical organ later became known, "enacts an allegory of the fierce animosity Tipu's regime felt toward their British adversaries, representing the macabre scene of a tiger roaring and pouncing on a prostrate, shrieking European victim" (Sramek 660).

Kate Brittlebank in her article, *Sakti and Barkat: The Power of Tipu's Tiger. An Examination of the Tiger Emblem of Tipu Sultan of Mysore*, suggests that Tipu's adoption of the tiger symbol to establish and consolidate his authority is deeply rooted in the syncretic nature of his cultural environment. The author observes that in the Indian context, tigers are not only associated with the power of gods but this divine aspect is also seen as an attribute of kings. On the religious landscape, this fearsome power is linked with warrior divinities locally known as *ammans* and their *sakti*, i.e. "the dangerous female energy of the gods" (266). In the Muslim tradition, this power is mirrored in the "Sufi warrior *pir*" who rode tigers and shared the blood-taking quality of the Amazonian deities (265). Where *sakti* is associated with the power of martial goddesses, *barkat* is linked to the power of *pir*. This power referred to as his "charisma" carries God's blessing and protection (264). Both these attributes merge in Tipu's tiger emblem to signify that as a fighter and a sovereign he "wished to convey to both his subjects and his enemies the awesome power that was his, a power which in the mind of the south Indian was synonymous with the power of gods, the *sakti* and the *barkat* of the warrior goddess and the

martial *pir*" (268-269).

The tiger emblem also indicates Tipu Sultan's religious associations particularly his deep regard for Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law who is alternatively known as "Hyder, the lion, or as *Asad Allah*, the Lion of God" (262). Ali is revered by Muslims as an excellent warrior and regarded as the universal model for heroes in Islam. Being a member of martial society, Brittlebank insists, it is not surprising that Tipu chose Ali as "the guardian genius, or tutelary saint, of his dominions; as the object of his veneration, and as an example to imitate" (262).

Taken collectively the various meanings of the tiger symbol came to signify Tipu's extraordinary military strength, spirit of independence, and hard-headed leadership that would not allow domestic or foreign intrusion.

The Indian tiger, therefore, had considerable symbolic significance that the British could not ignore. In their eagerness to become the new rulers of India the British attempted to "emulate various Mughal emperors for whom tiger hunting was an element of kingship", on the one hand, and "to outdo various regional rulers such as Mysore's Tipu Sultan... who also employed tigers as powerful symbols of their rule", on the other hand (Sramek 659). The British, thus, not only undertook military operation to oust Tipu but also orchestrated a literary campaign, whose central feature was the subversion of Tipu's tiger emblem, to support imperialistic propaganda against the Sultan. I will now turn to a discussion of *The Tiger of Mysore* and unearth how Henty gears tiger imagery in the light of imperial prejudices and concerns.

***The Tiger of Mysore* by G.A. Henty**

The Tiger of Mysore showcases variations in the portrayal of Tipu Sultan conveyed through the use of tiger motif. In the early section of the novel, the Sultan is regarded as a formidable adversary who inspires awe and dread in his enemies. We find two characters engaged in a conversation that centres on Tipu's astounding victories against the British and their allies. We are told that Tipu has "military talent" and has always displayed "great judgment in command of his division" thereby helping his father, Hyder Ali, win battles when victories were needed by the state of Mysore for consolidation (103). This admiration, however, is grudgingly bestowed. Soon after, the author's tone grows embittered and denounces Tipu as a nefarious ruler who revels "in the acts of the most abominable cruelty" (24).

Henty vehemently declares that Tipu's reign is marked by misrule and incompetence. Majority of his thoughts are focused on war and conquest and not the welfare of his subjects. This is depicted through tiger imagery with exquisite effectiveness. We are informed that Mysorean jungles are infested with tigers that are a continual threat to the safety of the locals. Deep thick forests encircling Seringapatam are favoured habitat of the big cats where they lurk in readiness to pounce upon helpless people. As protectors to their people, the Indian rulers were expected to hunt regularly in their reserves to keep the population of tigers and other dangerous animals in check⁷. The non-existence of protection against lethal animals was in fact tantamount to ineffective kingship.

The novel accuses Tipu of not protecting his Indian subjects against tiger threat. Villages located up in the Ghauts constantly encounter tiger menace which becomes a matter of great alarm to them. A woman complains, "...it would be better if he (Tipu) were to send his armies to destroy all the tigers. If he would do that, we should not grudge the sums we have to pay, when the tax gatherers come around" (122). Another villager expresses his dejection that "Here there are many tigers. For the last twenty years, the wars have taken most of our men away... So there are but few shikarees, and the tigers multiply and are a curse to us" (121). The reason why the tiger population grows unchecked is that there are no *shikarees* (hunters) around as all worthy men are away at wars.

These remarks reveal how Tipu is seen by his subjects: an inefficient ruler who refuses to face these concerns head on and engages in unnecessary wars instead. The novel depicts Tipu as neglecting the duties of the state, thereby allowing the jungles to get thickly populated with tigers and exposing local villagers to danger.

It is noteworthy that Henty alludes to Tipu as a "human tiger" in order to concretize wild and menacing aspects of the Indian tiger in the person of Tipu (102). The wild tiger is allied with the despotic Sultan to amplify his threatening aura. Tipu is described as a "scourge to his neighbours" as his ultimate wish is to lord over entire southern India and to accomplish this through terrible attacks on neighbouring territories and striking down the powers of local rulers and chieftain and to enrich himself by stripping them of their wealth and treasures (74).

⁷ See Joseph Sramek, "*Face Him like a Briton*": *Tiger Hunting, Imperialism, and British Masculinity in Colonial India, 1800-1875*. p 668-669

Henty tells us that Tipu not only victimizes outsiders, but also his own subjects. An impoverished Hindoo merchant named Pertaub is one example. Pertaub had left his homeland, Conjeevaram, and settled at the ancient capital Mysore in the hope of finding better commercial opportunities. With the passage of time his business reached soaring heights and he became "one of the wealthiest traders in the whole city" (210). But his good fortune did not last long. When Tipu's armies raided the town, Pertaub along with thousands of others was taken away to Seringapatam and installed there as Tipu's subject. Pertaub had been able to keep his wealth tucked away in a secure place until detected by Tipu's minions. Tipu's secret service having finely tuned antennae for picking up the scent of riches, soon reaches Pertaub's doorstep and threatens him with torture if he does not produce the hidden treasure. The poor man is left with no choice but to acquiesce. The practice of official extortion explains why the shops at Seringapatam are usually in a wretched condition "for the slightest appearance of wealth sufficed to excite the cupidity of Tippoo or his agents, and the possessor would be exposed to exorbitant demands, which, if not complied with, would have entailed first torture and then death" (209). A major portion of Tipu's wealth is, therefore, gained by extortion and robbery.

Tipu maybe be tyrannical and excessively warlike but his most remarkable feature, Henty insists, is having an insatiable lust for blood for he "delights in torturing his victims, and slays his prisoners from pure love of bloodshed" (102). Tipu's animalistic impulses direct him to treat his British captives in a barbarous manner. He has them thrown into the dark dungeons of various hill fortresses including Navandroog, Sundradroog, Outradroog, Chitteldroog and Savadroog. They are often punished with flogging and other sundry inhumanities. A local reports:

Thousands of Englishmen have been massacred during the last ten years. Hundreds have died of disease and suffering. Many have been poisoned. Many officers have also been murdered...in the hill forts; for it was there they were generally sent, when their deaths were determined upon (211).

The stony desolation of these godforsaken fortresses is a brutal reminder of Tipu's oppressive rule. Tipu's malice is heightened with the assertion that his captives can never return to life of freedom for "to try to get a captive out of the claws of the Tiger of Mysore" is unthinkable (30). This has to do with the forbidding site of the fortresses. Most of them are situated high up on cliffs so steep that it is next to impossible to scale

them. Even if a prisoner does get a chance to get away he is retaken “for a watch is vigilantly kept up, at every village and every road leading on to the frontier” (222). The recaptured prisoner is immediately put to death. What is appalling is that the penalty does not end here- it also falls on the runaway’s comrades who are “flogged, ironed, and kept without rations for weeks” (222). The English captives barely attempt to break free in fear that their fellow prisoners would have to face the brunt.

The vulnerability of the British before the alleged bloodthirstiness of Tipu in fact articulates the anxieties of the British at a time when the Company’s rule in India was still unsteady. Its existence was threatened militarily by Mysore. Kate Teltscher in her book *India Inscribed: European And British Writing on India 1600-1800* reveals that Tipu and his father Hyder’s reputation for cruelty hinges at the memory of the four Anglo-Mysore wars particularly the momentous defeat of Colonel Baillie’s detachment at Pollilur at the hands of the Sultans. The outcome of the war involved the death of more than 3000 Englishmen and captivity of 200 soldiers.

The Tiger of Mysore, however, stills this fear of Tipu by figurative implication of his defeat which is later transmuted into reality. This is demonstrated in a tiger hunting incident that occurs in the courtyard of Tipu’s palace at Seringapatam. An event covering contests of wild beasts is organized in a “great square in the fort” (225). There is a series of wild encounters between raging rams and elephants. This is followed by a round of combats among professional fighting men called “ghetties”, a thrilling episode that causes ripples of excitement among spectators (225). The spree continues until a tiger is brought on the arena to battle a buffalo. This tiger is no match for the buffalo who punctures its flesh by catching it on its sharp horns and then tossing it away. The pair is taken away and a fresh one sent in. This tiger is “a much more powerful beast than its predecessor” and in the wink of an eye kills its opponent “with a single blow from its powerful forepaw” (227). More buffaloes appear on the arena and suffer the same fate. The tiger soon becomes restless and begins to roam around the arena looking for a way to escape. As it nears the Palace balcony, which is ten feet above the ground, the feline crouches and with a powerful spring flashes up the balcony and disappears inside the harem. The entire stadium, which is covered by a protective network, easily gives way under the fuming tiger.

The harem explodes in wild commotion and piercing screams as the tiger growls “savagely” and subdues one of the ladies who lies unconscious under its paw (228). But before it is able to cause fatal damage, an English soldier,

Dick Holland, accompanied by his Indian sidekick, Surajah, appear on the scene and save the day. Where the onlookers stand paralyzed with fear, Dick has the presence of mind to deploy an exceptional plan. He dashes through the stadium and follows the tiger to the harem. Once up at the balcony window, Dick fires a pistol shot at the tiger to lure it out in the open. Infuriated, the tiger leaves its victim and speeds after Dick. Before the feline gathers strength for another charge, Dick inflicts a wound in its shoulder from his matchlock. This slows down the tiger allowing Surajah to discharge "his pistol into its ear" while Dick using his rapier takes a well-aimed blow upon the tiger's neck and kills it. The Englishman's brush with a dangerous tiger and his stunning triumph invites cheers from the crowds.

The wild and chaotic forces represented by the tiger and personified in Tipu have been symbolically mastered by the Englishman. This implication is converted into reality when in the fourth Anglo-Mysore war Seringapatam, the capital of Mysore which is referred to as the "tiger's den" is fallen ensuing in the death of Tipu (209). It is significant to note that in his final confrontation with the Company, Tipu is shown to cower before the might and sophistication of British arms. Tipu's martial strength embodied in his formidable armies are now trivialized as "inferiority of his troops" (403). Tipu engages in the last battle with a meek spirit and instead of putting up fierce resistance chooses to escape the battlefield. After launching a successful military operation against Tipu the British finally anchor themselves firmly on Mysorean soil.

Tipu's cowardly depiction highlights the Company's escalating confidence in the possibility of British rule in India. The English after their defeat in 1784 became fully aware of Tipu's martial expertise and their incapacity to weaken him. They realized that to dethrone Tipu they needed to work with influential natives. It was the same cheating technique which the British employed in Bengal to bribe Mir Jaffar in order to oust Sirajddin Daula in the battle of Plassey which is aptly described by Paraxy Fernandes as not a story of "triumph of military skill" but that of "forgery and chicanery" in *The Tigers of Mysore: A Biography of Hyder Ali & Tipu Sultan* (11). Highly influential persons in the Sultan's camp conspired with the English for monetary and other gains to encompass the fall of Tipu. His bravery and military skill lost prowess in the complex web of intrigues causing Seringapatam to slip into British hands with perfect ease.

Conclusion:

The Indian tiger emblematic of Tipu's leadership forms a central component of colonial British writings. Deconstructing the tiger motif has established that the colonial authorship subverts Tipu's tiger emblem, which stood for his incredible military strength and spirit of independence, and employs it in way that the symbol becomes synonymous with wildness and barbarity. Undertaking a close study of the novel in the light of Derrida's concept of *différance* has revealed that Tipu's image flows from a formidable adversary to a belligerent tyrant. It then further shifts from a bloodthirsty ruler to a cowardly person. The paper has also shown that Tipu's shifting images are determined by imperial apprehensions, fears, and elations that the East India Company experienced during different phases of its rule. Tipu's formidable stature drowns under a vehement pronouncement of him as excessively warlike whose reign is characterized by misgovernance and incompetence. Tipu's wars are a macabre affair as they not only wipe out most promising young men but turn rich countryside into a wasteland. To cap it all, in order to cover war expenses, taxes are raised which brings additional hardships to people. This representation mirror's the Company's anxieties at a time when its imperialist interests were thwarted by Tipu's military strength. However, in Tipu's final confrontation with the British, he is shown to cower before the might of English arms. Tipu's cowardly depiction affirms their confidence to rule India after having treacherously won the support of influential men in Tipu's court.

Although there are variations in the depiction of Tipu Sultan through the tiger motif but they come down to the same conclusion: imperial mission to vilify Tipu and justify expansion of the British Empire.

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