

# The import of being Khushwant Singh

POONAM DATTA

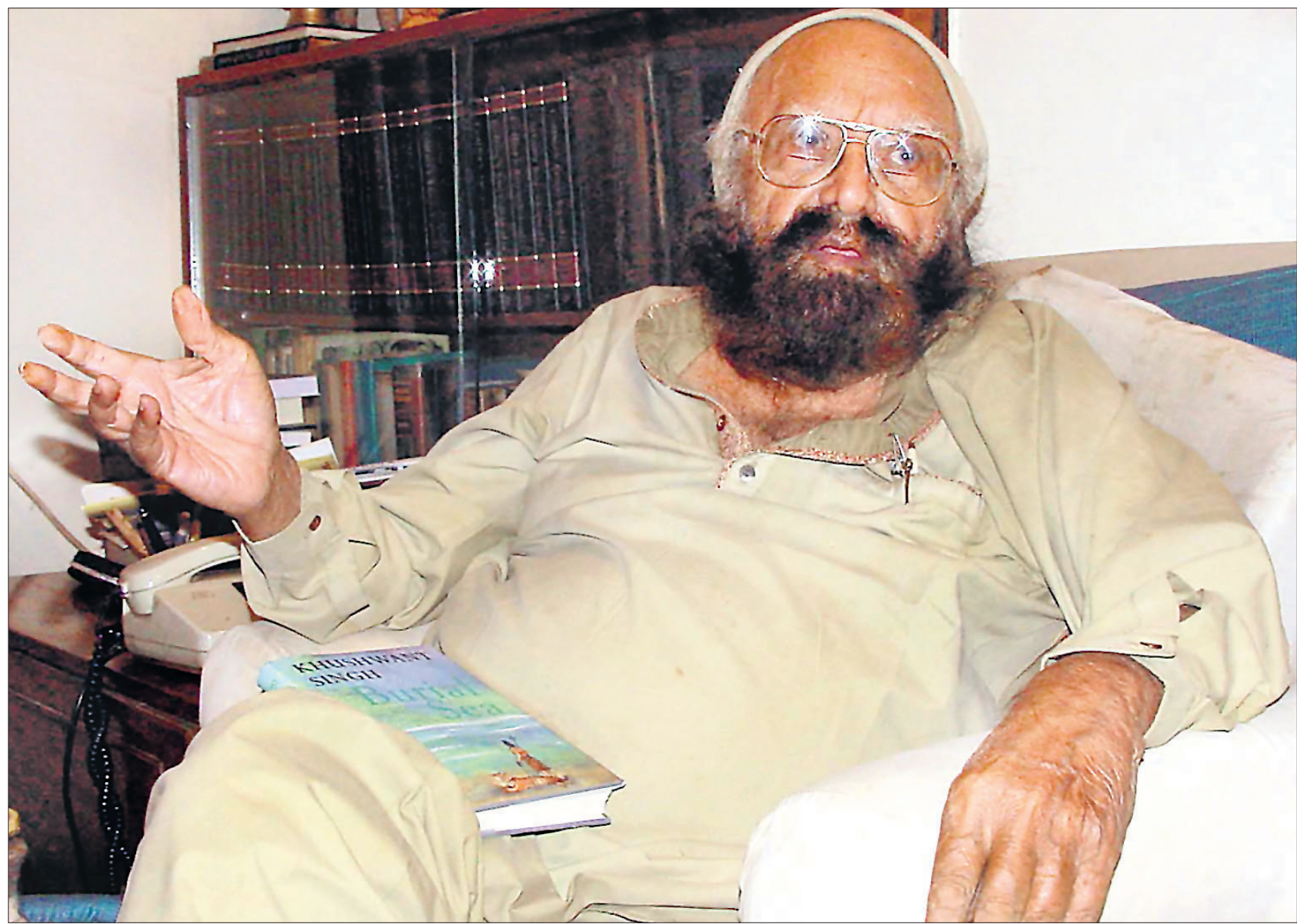
The grand old man, who defies categorisation, turned 99 on Sunday. He is a scholar, a journalist, a humourist and above all an honest voice untainted by partisan prejudice

**K**HUSHWANT Singh quotes Bhasa, the renowned Sanskrit playwright celebrating the euphoric diversity of life. Bhasa's poem reflects Singh's own philosophy of the world. Singh reconstructs a world of teeming men and women, of fertile imagination laced with alluring factual incidents for his avaricious readers. Hence, we are taken through inclusive and rich narratives, where human beings indulge in the company of flowers, trees, birds and insects and negotiate with their circumstances to unravel their selves. It would be a huge task for any reader to write about him as his life and literary output resist the parameters of the established literary canon.

We smile when the narrator is called 'a joker'. We cannot but believe him when he admits that he is 'a voyeur, a gossip', 'never been discreet and also very opinionated.' In his distinctive style, Khushwant Singh amuses us as 'a darkie with a bandage round his head and a beard around his round chin', 'drinking scotch' and being in the company of accomplished women. We chuckle to see him flailing his arms when pursued by bees 'attacking my face, neck, arms. I unwrap my turban, wrap my face and arms in its folds, and crouch on the ground.' We giggle when he mimics Indians speaking English language, 'to start with, there was the Director, who, like other South Indians, pronounced 'eight' as "yate", an 'egg' as a "yugg"', then he instructs his private secretary to get Mr M. M. Amir, Member of Parliament, on the phone. "I want Yum Yum Yumeer, Yumpee". We grin when he tells us that "the Bengalis had their own execrable accent: they added an airy 'h' whenever they could after a 'b' or a 'w' or an 's'. A 'virgin' sounded like some exotic tropical plant, the "vharjeen", and "will" as "wheel". We laugh aloud when we hear Mrs Sen's quaint Bengali accent' when she asks her husband, 'Do you want to shit inside or outside? The deener ees on the table'. And yet, Khushwant Singh believes "English works like magic in independent India."

Who else but he alone can amuse us in his story Posthumous when he 'decides to die just for the fun of it', as he is agog with curiosity to observe his own enigmatic 'posthumous glory'. But the tepid response of the people and the press let him down in the story. The caricatures drawn in his writings match the sardonic glint in his eyes. The widely read illustrious, writer, novelist, columnist, journalist as narrator in his short stories and novels represents multiple identities. In fiction Khushwant Singh's world is urban and elite. He draws characters from his own treasure of personal experiences and understanding, and his piercing gaze looks underneath the thin veneer of self-righteousness, morality and hypocrisy. His spirit is undiminished; his characters all too human with their follies, virtues and failings. It comes 'from the heart based on what I have seen with my own eyes', he says.

Singh's works show his deep engagement with history, poetry, religion and politics. At times, self-indulgent, there is a joyous celebration of life, and a



Khushwant Singh's range of themes is vast, uncomplicated and captivating. His characters unravel the complexity and irony of human existence. TRIBUNE PHOTO: MUKESH AGGARWAL

quest to snatch incredulous bliss from the beauty of every moment. They open the world of imagination, mystery and nature. His works invoke the historical and contemporary. In a highly imaginative way, he deftly organises facts which carry psychological meanings. The readers tend to empathise with an impassioned man of contemporary India who communicates to them the details of everything that he believes in. He says, "I cannot cheat my readers." An agnostic, Singh became conscious of his Sikh identity in 1984.

And yet, Singh seeks meanings in the religious texts of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and delights in poetic sensibilities of great poets, as reflected in his *A History of the Sikhs*, and in *Free thinkers Prayer book*, his political commentaries, treatises on religion, translations of Sikh religious texts and Urdu poetry.

In short stories, he is quite often the narrator and also a participant in the plot. "I/we negotiate with situations or incidents or actively participate in events to reveal the complexity of the characters. Interspersed with wit, his writings unfold the world of people, identities and contemporary issues. An admirer of Somerset Maugham, Singh's range of themes is vast, uncomplicated and captivating. His characters unravel the complexity and irony of human existence.

Singh's engagement with history is particularly fascinating. Written in 1956

his novel *Train to Pakistan* through the metaphor of 'train' focuses on the complex theme of the Partition in a small hamlet, where the daily life in a small sleepy village Mano Majra is shaped by the coming and going of trains. The reader can visualise the trains running and their sound in 'panoramic succession'. The representation of Partition becomes real in this world.

Singh's passion for Delhi is expressed via a 'sense of belonging'. It is Delhi, 'my city', the 'beloved city' which allures him but also repels him. "I return to Delhi as I return to my mistress Bhagmati when I have had my fill of whoring in foreign lands". He claims to be Delhi's 'lover' despite the ferocity, violence and insensitivity in the city. He knows each and every nook and corner of the city, and he creatively engages with the stories of 'poets and princes, saints and sultans, temptresses and traitors, emperors and eunuchs.' The city bares itself through the autobiographical narratives and the prolific consciousness of invaders, dervishes, untouchables, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, the British men and women. Singh immortalises the city through an all-embracing narrative.

Singh's novel, *Delhi*, traverses the city through time and space. The narrator reveals historical and cultural dramas that underpin the subtleties of human characters within the city. The artistic fervor lies in a dramatic interplay of facts and sensuousness. The

multi-layered novel does not follow any linear chronological order, but weaves its plot through its multidimensional historical, cultural and literary themes. Singh unfolds the city's history, culture, politics, identities, human virtues and follies that continue to shape Delhi and its citizens. In Singh's reading of Delhi, Edward Lutyens and the British 'builders' are lauded, in contrast to malevolent 'invaders' who ravaged the city. The city 'which I helped to build and which Lutyens designed for two centuries became ruined in twenty years', is Singh's powerful present-day lament. Further, "If given the choice of being born in any period of Indian history I liked, I would re-live my days as a builder-contractor under the British Raj."

The narrator in *Delhi* assumes multiple identities to interweave diverse cultural and historical stories. Hence Delhi becomes a site for various conflicting discourses spanning over centuries to narrate stories of men and women, folklores of religion and culture. Entwined with religion and politics, the narrative juxtaposes past and present events; the birds, animals and monuments eloquently tell their own parables. Previous histories are embedded in the present. Singh tells us about his father who came from Hadaliand became a 'reliable contractor'. Singh offers a moving account of 'what brought us to Delhi in the last week of August 1947?'

The present state of Delhi disturbs him as he regrets that Indians 'have no sense of the past or future.' He rejoices about the seasons in Delhi, from January to December, which bring out 'joyous celebrations of nature' when chrysanthemums, marigolds, roses, mulberry, *peepal*, *kusam*, *palash* and *jacaranda* bound. He informs us that Lutyens had ordered trees to be planted along the proposed route' but Lady Willingdon 'ruined Lutyens vision of a broad tree-lined boulevard from the Vice-Regal palace upto the Purana Qila.'

Khushwant Singh writes 'in February the winter chill loosens its grip, the sky is a clear blue, it is cool and soothing. And the signs of spring are in the air.' It is 'Delhi's floral month. All parks and roundabouts are, as the cliché goes, a riot of colour.'

As spring is about to arrive in Delhi, on February 2 Khushwant Singh completed 99 years. The unlimited power of his pen — be it in his columns, fiction and non-fiction — entertains, educates and shocks us. Singh's magical ingenuity and linguistic lucidity, his wonderful play of words, his bitter-sweet remarks continue to surprise us. His tone is optimistic, vibrant. Human beings, animals, birds, nature — all constitute his idea of the universe, which is heterogeneous, open, revelatory, sanguine and enchanting.

— The writer teaches at Institute of Law & Management Studies, Gurgaon

## Fact file

■ Khushwant Singh has written over 35 books and nine short story collections.

## Honours and awards:

- Rockefeller Grant (1966)
- Padma Bhushan (1974). (He returned the decoration in 1984, in protest against the Union government's siege of the Golden Temple, Amritsar)
- Honest Man of the Year, Sulabh International (2000)
- Punjab Rattan Award, The Government of Punjab (2006)
- Padma Vibhushan (2007)
- Sahitya Akademi fellowship (2010)
- 'All-India Minorities Forum Annual Fellowship Award' by Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister (2012)

## COURT NOTICES

<p><b>In the Court of</b> Smt. Harpreet Kaur, PCS, JMJC, Barnala. Case No. 93 Date of Instt.: 11.4.2007 Date of hearing: 18.02.2014 Chamkaur Singh s/o Sher Singh s/o Prem Singh r/o B-XIII/147, Saheed Jita Singh Nagar, Court Chowk, Barnala. Versus 1. Joginder Singh s/o Kartar Singh, 2. Charanjit Kaur w/o Joginder Singh s/o Kartar Singh, 3. Rajinder Singh Jhinger s/o Joginder Singh all r/o 50, Somerset RD, Southall Middlex UBI 2 TR, U.K. Whereas, it has been proved to the satisfaction of this Court that the respondent named above cannot be served in the ordinary manner, therefore, this publication is issued against the respondent named above to appear before this court on 18.2.14 at 10 a.m. either personally or through any authorised agent or pleader, failure which exparte proceedings shall be taken against them according to law. Given under my hand and the seal of the Court on this 27th day of Jan., 2014. Sd/- Addl. Chief Judicial Magistrate, Barnala. CN3-3968</p>	<p><b>In the Court of</b> Sh. Mahendra Singh, Civil Judge, Gurgaon. (Junior Division), Gurgaon. Publication Under Order 5, Rules 20 CPC Case No.: 273RBT/03.02.2011 Peshi: 06.02.2014 at 10:00 am State Bank of India (a Body Corporate constituted by the State Bank of India Act, 1955), having its Central Office at Madani Cama Road, Nariman Point, Mumbai and one of its Branches at Manesar, Gurgaon through its Branch Manager cum Principal Officer. ... Plaintiff Versus 1. Mr. Subhash Rathore s/o Sh. Udhav Rathore r/o Village &amp; PO Muram, Tehsil Omeng, Distt. Usmanabad, Maharashtra State Pin-413605. Second Address: R-II No. 90633776, 13 SRG (NSG) Manesar, Gurgaon-122051. 2. Mr. Prakash Singh s/o Sh. Narain Singh r/o Village Thuwamraha, PO Karan Karayat, Distt. Pithoragarh UK. ... Defendants Suit for Recovery Notice to: 1. Mr. Subhash Rathore s/o Sh. Udhav Rathore r/o Village &amp; PO Muram, Tehsil Omeng, Distt. Usmanabad, Maharashtra State Pin-413605. Second Address: R-II No. 90633776, 13 SRG (NSG) Manesar, Gurgaon-122051. 2. Mr. Prakash Singh s/o Sh. Narain Singh r/o Village Thuwamraha, PO Karan Karayat, Distt. Pithoragarh UK. Whereas, it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Court that the defendants above noted cannot be served through the ordinary way of service and hence the defendants are being informed through this publication, if they have any interest in the said petition/property they can file objections on or before 06.02.2014 at 10:00 am. Given under my hand and seal of this Court on 25th day of January, 2014. Sd/- Civil Judge (Junior Division), Gurgaon. NA3-101480</p>	<p><b>In the Court of</b> Sh. Ashish Thathai Civil Judge (Sr. Divn.) Ludhiana. Case No. MA 03 Date of Instt.: 25.8.2012 Date of hearing: 20.02.2014 S.B.O.P. Head Office, The Mall, Patiala, Branch Office, S.A.M.B. Industrial Area-A, Ludhiana. ... Plaintiff Versus Neeraj Kumar s/o Ramesh Kumar r/o B-VI-950, Street No. 5, Harbanspura near Gaushala Road, Ludhiana. Notice to Def. 1: Neeraj Kumar s/o Ramesh Kumar Def.-2: Ramesh Kumar s/o Harbans Lal r/o B-VI-950, Street No. 5, Harbanspura near Gaushala Road, Ludhiana, Def. 3: Manju w/o Anil Parmar r/o H.No. 318/11, Mohalla Amarapura, Ahmedgarh. Whereas, it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Court that the defendants above noted cannot be served in the ordinary way of service. Hence, this proclamation under Order 5 Rule 20 CPC is hereby issued against them and they should appear personally or through their counsel on 20.02.2014 at 10 a.m. failing which exparte proceedings shall be taken against him/them. Given under my hand and the seal of the Court on this 22nd day of January, 2014. Sd/- Civil Judge (Junior Division), Ludhiana. CN3-2371</p>	<p><b>In the Court of</b> Sh. K.D. Singla, PCS, Addl. Civil Judge (Sr. Divn.) Jalalabad (W). Case No. 5 Date of Instt.: 17.5.2010 Date of hearing: 31.03.2014 Parkash Kaur ... Plaintiff Versus G.P. ... Defendant Notice to: General Public Whereas, it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Court that the defendants above noted cannot be served in the ordinary way of service. Hence, this proclamation under Order 5 Rule 20 CPC is hereby issued against them and they should appear personally or through their counsel on 31.03.2014 at 10 a.m. failing which exparte proceedings shall be taken against him/them. Given under my hand and the seal of the Court on this 22nd day of Jan., 2014. Sd/- Addl. Civil Judge (Senior Division), Jalalabad (W). CN0-4104</p>	<p><b>In the Court of</b> Mrs. Jagdeep Kaur Virk, PCS, Civil Judge, (Senior Division), Rupnagar. Case No. G&amp;W-29 Date of Instt. 08.08.2013 Date of hearing 07.02.2014 Surinder Kaur aged about 47 years widow of Bahadar Singh, resident of Village Majri, Thakdara, Tehsil and District Ropar. ... Petitioner Versus 1. General Public. 2. Lakhwinder Singh aged about 25 years s/o Bahadar Singh, resident of Village Majri Thakdara, Tehsil and District Ropar (Proforma Defendant). ... Respondents Notice to: General Public. Minority and Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 for permission petition under Section 8 of the Hindu to sale the property owned and possessed by the minor Jaswinder Singh aged about 17 years son of Bahadar Singh and Kulwinder aged about 16 years son of Bahadar Singh the shape of a land bearing Khevat/Khatuani No. 1793/1997 Khasra No. 42/1/2 (2-4), 42/2 (7-9) total land is 9 kanal 18 marla, 6 sarai is situated in the area of Village Majri, Thakdara HB No. 44, Tehsil &amp; District Ropar as per Jamabandi for the year 2011-2012. Whereas, it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Court that the above noted Respondent (i.e. General Public) cannot be served in the ordinary way of service. Hence, this proclamation under Order 5 Rule 20 CPC is hereby issued against him/them and he/they should appear personally or through their Counsel on 07.02.2014 at 10 a.m. in this Court failing which exparte proceedings shall be taken against him/them. Given under my hand and the seal of this Court on 20th January 2014. Sd/- Civil Judge, (Sr. Division), Rupnagar. CN3-3980</p>	<p><b>In the Court of</b> Ms. Preeti Sukhija, PCS, Addl. Civil Judge, (Senior Division), Phillaur. Case No.: G/A-15/13 Dt. of Instt: 28.10.2013 Dt. of hearing: 05.02.2014 Ranjna Gaba w/o Dharmvir Gaba r/o Mohalla Harmilap Nagar, Phase 2, Baltana, Mohali. ... Plaintiff Versus General Public ... Defendant Notice to: (1) General Public Whereas it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Court that the defendants above noted cannot be served in the ordinary way of service. Hence this proclamation under Order 5 Rule 20 CPC is hereby issued against them and they should appear personally or through their counsel on 05.02.14 at 10 a.m. failing which exparte proceedings shall be taken against him/them. Given under my hand and the seal of the Court on this 25th day of January, 2014. Sd/- Addl. Civil Judge, (Senior Division), Phillaur. NA3-101464</p>	<p><b>In the Court of</b> Ms. Sumit Sabharwal, PCS, Civil Judge (Junior Division), Kapurthala. Suit No.: 7080/05.05.2011 Peshi: 04.02.2014 Harduman Singh s/o Raja Singh Gurjeet Singh s/o Charan Singh s/o Hazara Singh r/o Village Paisawal, Tehsil &amp; District Kapurthala. ... Plaintiff Versus Pritam Kaur w/o Kartar Singh s/o Kewal Singh r/o Village Nadala, Tehsil Bholath, District Kapurthala. ... Defendant Notice to Defendant: 3. Jagjiwanjit Singh s/o Dilbagh Singh r/o Village Nadala, Tehsil Bholath, Distt. Kapurthala. Suit for declaration and permanent injunction Whereas, it has been proved to the satisfaction of the Court that the respondents noted above cannot be served in the ordinary way of service. Hence this publication is being issued against them and they shall appear personally or through their counsel on 04.02.2014 at 10:00 a.m. failing which exparte proceedings shall be taken against them. Given under my hand and the seal of the Court on this 29th day of January, 2014. Sd/- Civil Judge (Junior Division), Kapurthala. CN3-3993</p>	<p><b>In the Court of</b> Sh. Parinder Singh, PCS, Addl. Civil Judge, Senior Division, Nihal Singh Wala. Case No.: 867A Dt. of Instt.: 18.10.12 Dt. of Hearing: 15.2.2014 Harjinder Singh s/o Gurdial Singh r/o Village Dina, Teh. N.S.Wala, Distt. Moga. ... Plaintiff Versus Santokh Singh Samra s/o Amrik Singh r/o 11943, Gilmour Crist, N. Delta, V4C-1L2, B.C. Canada. ... Defendant Notice to: 1. Santokh Singh Samra s/o Amrik Singh r/o 11943 Gilmour Crist, N-Delta, V4C-1L2, B.C. Canada. 2. Jarnail Kaur Dhaliwal w/o Santokh Singh Samra r/o 11943 Gilmour Crist, N-Delta, V4C 1L2, B.C. Canada. Petition under the provisions of Suit for Declaration. That in the above noted case pending for 15.2.2014 in this court. Through this notice general public is hereby informed that anybody having any objection in this regard may submit his plea in person or through counsel. Otherwise no objection shall be heard thereafter. Given under my hand and the seal of the court on this 16th day of 1/2014. Sd/- Civil Judge, Nihal Singh Wala. NA3-101449</p>
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