



AMITAV GHOSH SUBALTERN VIEW WITH REFERENCE TO *THE CIRCLE OF REASON*, *THE SHADOW LINES* & *AN ANTIQUE LAND*

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ABSTRACT

In this research paper author explore and analyse the connections between Ghosh's select novels *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, and *In an Antique Land*. Ghosh's main interest is in the subalterns, and in his novels he tries to excavate and recuperate their historic agency. There are several problems inherent in these attempts, but Ghosh's novels are all founded on a solid methodology. To understand this methodological foundation better, author have chosen to introduce the theme the Subaltern Studies, which attempts to analyse and deconstruct colonial sources in order to reconstruct a subaltern consciousness. Amitav Ghosh makes the subaltern speak through their silence. I will also explore how the unsolved mysteries indicate towards the science-fictional Utopian dream, the posthuman, and immortality. Ghosh shows a group of subaltern people who manipulate a scientific discovery. By placing science and counter-science together Ghosh challenges the Western scientific knowledge and the biased colonial history.

INTRODUCTION

Amitav Ghosh, a Bengali Indian Author is mostly known for his award winning novels *The Glass Palace*, *The Shadow Lines*, *Sea of Poppies*, *In An Antique Land*, and *The Hungry Tide*. The *Calcutta Chromosome* is also one of his less known but still very important novels and award winning works of science fiction. He was born to a Bengali family in Kolkata, India and he is very interested in Indian history. Ghosh is well known for his interest in the Indian colonial history and the contribution of the English language in the postcolonial world. In *The Calcutta Chromosome* he points towards an "alternative" history that makes me interested to work on this book. Ghosh's writing style is very much inspired by the other Bengali Indian writers such as Rabindranath Tagore or Phanishwar Nath Renu. His childhood was spent in Calcutta and his representation of the geographical picture of Calcutta in the novel *The Calcutta Chromosome* is also influenced by his personal experiences.

The term "subaltern" is drawn from Gramsci's essay "On the Margins of History," and is used by the *Subaltern Studies* group to identify a mode of historical practice that seeks to recover an indigenous culture which it assumes to be unaffected by colonialism. This contentious claim is most clearly made in Ranajit Guha's Introduction to the first of the *Subaltern Studies* volumes (1982):

Parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes ... This was an *autonomous* domain ... Far from being destroyed or rendered virtually ineffective ... it continued to operate vigorously ... adjusting itself to the conditions prevailing under the Raj.¹

The most searching discussion of this project to date has been Rosalind O'Hanlon's review article, in *Modern Asian Studies*, on the first four volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. O'Hanlon expresses

serious theoretical reservations about the project of recovering a subaltern consciousness, arguing that “at the very moment of this assault upon western historicism, the classic figure of western humanism—the self-originating, self-determining individual ... is readmitted through the back door in the figure of the subaltern himself.”² She warns that “recovering the experience” of those “hidden from history” involves theoretical assumptions about subjectivity and agency. The historian’s task becomes one of “‘filling up’: of making an absence into presences, of peopling a vacant space with figures.” “If this is the task,” O’Hanlon asks, how is it be carried out without recuperating the subaltern as “a conscious human subject-agent ... in the classic manner of liberal humanism?”

In her own powerful reading of the *Subaltern Studies* project, Gayatri Spivak has argued in its defence that the contributors make “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest.”³ As Robert Young puts it, Spivak “reorients subaltern history away from the retrieval of the subaltern’s consciousness and will, an activity which ‘can be no more than a theoretical fiction to entitle the project of reading,’ towards the location and reinscription of subject-positions which are instrumental in forms of control and insurgency.”⁴ For Spivak, “the historian must persist in his efforts in this awareness, that the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic.”⁵

While Spivak implies that this is largely achieved in the *Subaltern Studies* essays, O’Hanlon does not accept that the idea of a “strategic essentialism” is effectively used, or even understood, by all of the contributors.⁶ She argues that the project of retrieving a subaltern consciousness “remains the dominant trope in the series”:

The difficulty ... is that in the assertion—which is very difficult *not* to make, without having to abandon the strategy altogether—that subordinate groups have a history which is not given to them by elites, but is a history of *their own*, we arrive at a position which requires some subtlety and skill if it is to be held from slipping into an essentialist humanism ... Skill of this kind, the ability to argue for a distinctness of practice without slipping into a metaphysics of presence, is clearly very difficult to

achieve, and most of all so where our object is a recovery of presence. Some of the contributors possess this skill in greater proportion than others.⁷

Finally, O’Hanlon questions the political location and effects of the work of the *Subaltern Studies* scholars. To draw the conclusion, as Ranajit Guha does, “that our efforts can be co-terminous with the struggles of the dispossessed ... seems to me fundamentally misconceived. We may wish in all faith for their freedom from marginality and deprivation ... But if we ask ourselves why it is that we attack historiography’s dominant discourses, why we seek to find a resistant presence which has not been completely emptied or extinguished by the hegemonic, our answer must surely be that it is in order to envisage a realm of freedom in which we ourselves might speak.”

This brings us back to Spivak’s argument that the essays in *Subaltern Studies* are a form of allegorical narration, a form of strong reading of the past that brings it into a subversive relation with the present. Invoking Paul De Man’s notion of allegory, Spivak sees the articles as effecting a displacement of *contemporary* discursive systems. She notes that “all of the accounts of attempted discursive displacements provided by the group are accounts of failures.”⁸ I take Spivak’s argument to mean that, in recounting the failures of subaltern groups, the historian is using the past allegorically, reading it in a way that disturbs the established “readings” or meanings not only of the past, but also of the present. A similar argument about the allegorical function of ethnography has been advanced by James Clifford in the essay “On Ethnographic Allegory”: “Allegory ... denotes a practice in which a narrative ... continuously refers to another pattern of ideas or events.” Clifford argues that ethnographic writing is allegorical in the sense that it invites interpretation: “to the extent that they are ‘convincing’ or ‘rich’ [all cultural descriptions] are extended metaphors, patterns of associations that point to coherent (theoretical, aesthetic, moral) additional meanings.”⁹

Discussion

Amitav Ghosh is mostly known for the postcolonial plot of his novels. Among all of Amitav Ghosh’s novels, *The Shadow Lines* and *In An Antique Land* are the most famous and the postcolonial contexts of those books get the attention of most

critics. The issue of “identity politics” of these books is also an interesting matter of discussion among many critics. According to Anshuman A. Mondal, these books criticize the European idea of fixed identity and also colonialism. Several critics argue that these two books are Amitav Ghosh’s attempt to recover lost and parallel histories. Amitav Ghosh is very interested in “untold” history and Indian historiography. The Calcutta Chromosome is, however, less discussed than these other books. The scholars who talk about it are mostly interested in it as a work of science-fiction. Indian historiography and postcolonialism are two important issues in this book as well. Science-fiction is used as a weapon to make a connection between untold postcolonialism and Indian historiography¹⁰. I want to look in particular at his novel *In an Antique Land* since it deals both with a retrieval of agency to a slave of medieval times, but also because it contains a number of reflections on the author as a distorting filter which will be relevant for a discussion of the way in which the researching subject becomes a part of the researched object.

In an Antique Land is an archaeology of a great mercantile civilization that, from about the tenth century to the sixteenth century, extended from Fez and Seville in the West, through Cairo and Aden around the Red Sea, across the Indian Ocean to Calicut and the Malabar coast. As Clifford Geertz observed in his review of the book, “in this mobile, polyglot and virtually borderless region, which no one owned and no one dominated, Arabs, Jews, Iberians, Greeks, Indians, various sorts of Italians and Africans pursued trade and learning, private lives and public fortunes, bumping up against one another ... but more or less getting along, or getting by, within broad and general rules for communication, propriety and the conduct of business. It was, we might say, a sort of multicultural bazaar. Today this part of the world is divided, like the rest of the globe, into singular and separated national States.”¹¹

Ghosh's point of entry into this space is a fleeting reference to an Indian slave in a collection of letters written in Egypt in the eleventh century. The slave, whose name was “Bomma,” belonged to the Jewish merchant Abraham Ben Yiju, who traded between Aden and Mangalore on the Malabar coast. Bomma's first appearance in print was in a letter to

Ben Yiju from another merchant, Khalaf ibn Ishaq, written in Aden in 1148. Ghosh's reconstruction of Bomma's life and times is intercut by accounts of his search for textual evidence, which takes him to archives in England, North Africa and the United States, and of his field work in Egypt in 1980–81, 1988–89, and in 1990, just before the outbreak of the Gulf War.

“Bomma” is the subaltern consciousness whose recovery justifies Ghosh's allegorical reading of the destruction of a polyglot trading culture by Western influence. Unlike some contributors to *Subaltern Studies*, Ghosh develops a style of writing that is sufficiently nuanced and elusive to sustain the “theoretical fiction” of a recovery of presence without actually falling back into essentialism. This is achieved by a fluid and at times confusing deployment of the lexicons of both liberal humanism and post-structuralism, though without allowing his writing to be affiliated with either—in the hundreds of endnotes to *In an Antique Land*, there is not one that refers to a European theorist. Introducing the textual evidence of Bomma's life, Ghosh comments that “the [first] reference comes to us from a moment in time when the only people for whom we can even begin to imagine properly human, individual existences are the literate and the consequential ... the people who had the power to inscribe themselves physically upon time. But the slave of Khalaf's letter was not of that company: in his instance it was a mere accident that those barely discernible traces that ordinary people leave upon the world happen to have been preserved.”¹² Ghosh's apparently confusing juxtaposition of the words “properly human, individual existences” with the Derridean term “trace” is part of his strategic avoidance of affiliation with either humanism or post-structuralism. This theoretical duplicity enables him to continue the project of recovering the subaltern consciousness while retaining an awareness of the inevitably textual nature of that process. This self-reflexivity is supported by the image of “the stage of modern history,” upon which the slave makes his fleeting appearance from the wings (p. 13). The image suggests both the literariness of Ghosh's own writing, and also the textuality of all history, which deals with textual “traces” of the “properly human.” Ghosh's writing flickers between suggesting a metaphysics of

presence and a Derridean trace. In a theoretically elusive way he suggests that “real life” can only be grasped as a performance in the “theatre” of writing, which actually produces the presence it seems to describe.

Since the conventions of the Anglo-Indian novel were designed to reinforce the classical notion of discrete cultures, in writing *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh had to subvert what Sara Suleri has called “the Rhetoric of English India.”¹³ The opening sentence of the novel immediately unsettles this rhetoric: “In 1939, thirteen years before I was born, my father's aunt, Mayadebi, went to England with her husband and her son, Tridib.”¹⁸ Unlike the usual colonial novel, in which Westerners travel to India to observe an ancient and self-contained culture, *The Shadow Lines* begins with an Indian passage to England: the natives are the travellers. The central fact of travel in this Indian family's experience immediately demands that we modify our expectations about Indian culture and the way it is depicted in English novels about the Raj. Furthermore, these Indians are going abroad in 1939, the year Britain declared war on Germany. Classical ethnography assumes that the culture of the Western observer is a stable and coherent point from which to observe native society. Ghosh undermines this notion by depicting Britain at war with Germany, so that Partition takes place against the background of an equally unstable Europe. The parallels between England and Germany, and India and Pakistan effectively undermine any distinction between East and West, colony and metropolis, and point to similarities and continuities that cut across these differences.

Ghosh's subversion of the rhetoric of English India is reflected in the two-part structure of *The Shadow Lines*, which alludes to one of the classic texts of colonialism, Joseph Conrad's novella, *The Shadow-Line* (1917). In the preface to this story, Conrad explains that an invisible line divides youth from maturity. The protagonist, a young naval officer, is given his first command of a ship in South-East Asia with orders to return it to London. In crossing back from the Orient to the West under difficult circumstances, he successfully crosses the shadow line into maturity, which is superimposed in complex ways on to the opposition between Europe and the Orient.¹⁹ In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh

complicates this “classical” mapping of the world into East and West by dividing his novel into two parts, “Going Away” and “Going Home.” The irony is that his characters come and go in so many different directions that the narrator is obliged to pose the question, what is home, and is there such a thing as a discrete homeland separable from one's experiences elsewhere?

The second part of the novel climaxes in the narrator's return visit to the family home in Dhaka in 1964. But this homecoming abounds with ironies. His grandmother wants to bring her uncle back from Pakistan, the land of their Muslim enemies, to her home in Calcutta—but Pakistan is her real home, the goal of her ritual homecoming. She is nostalgic for the “classical” conception of cultures. She believes that her children should not be mixing with English people, and is particularly critical of the narrator's cousin Ila for living in England: “Ila has no right to live there ... It took those people a long time to build that country; ... They know they're a nation because they've drawn their borders with blood. ... That's what it takes to make a country” (p. 82). But when the grandmother looks down from the plane as they pass from India into Pakistan in 1964, she is surprised that there is no visible border on the ground, and asks, “if there aren't any trenches or anything, how are people to know? I mean, where's the difference then? And if there's no difference, both sides will be the same; it'll be just like it used to be before” (p. 154). The elderly relative in Dhaka delivers the final blow to her view of the world when he refuses to go back to Calcutta, even denying its existence in reality: “I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then?” (p. 216).

The Shadow Lines is therefore a fictional critique of classical anthropology's model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism. The “reality” is the complex web of relationships between people that cut across nations and across generations. In his critique of nationalism, Ghosh's narrator celebrates “that indivisible sanity that binds people to each other independently of their governments” (p. 231). After the trip to Pakistan, the narrator looks at Tridib's old atlas, measuring the distances between nations with a compass, and

reflects on the disjunction between memory, human experience and national boundaries. He realizes that the Euclidean space of the atlas has nothing to do with cognitive and cultural space:

I was struck with wonder that there had really been a time, not so long ago, when people, sensible people, of good intention, had thought ... that there was a special enchantment in lines ... They had drawn their borders, believing in that pattern, in the enchantment of lines, hoping perhaps that once they had etched their borders upon the map, the two bits of land would sail away from each other like the shifting tectonic plates of the prehistoric Gondwanaland. What had they felt, I wondered, when they discovered that ... there had never been a moment in the 4000-year-old history of that map when the places we know as Dhaka and Calcutta were more closely bound to each other than after they had drawn their lines.(pp. 233–4)

These ideas are summed up in the final act of the novel, the sexual union between May Price and the narrator on his last night in London, through which he is granted “the glimpse of ... a final redemptive mystery” (p. 252)—the mystery of lived human experience that transcends the artificial borders of nation and race.

Ghosh's first novel, *The Circle of Reason* (1986), concerns the picaresque adventures of Alu, a weaver from a small village near Calcutta, who leaves home to travel across the Indian Ocean to the oil town of al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf. Reviewers of the novel read it as an allegory about the destruction of traditional village life by the modernizing influx of Western culture, and the subsequent displacement of non-European peoples by imperialism. In the long opening section, set in the village of Lalpukur, Alu is apprenticed as a weaver, while his uncle, Balaram, the village schoolmaster, is obsessed with Western ideas, epitomized by his passion for phrenology and the writings of Pasteur. Balaram establishes the Pasteur School of Reason, alternatively bores and terrorizes people with his scientific notions, and eventually destroys the village by sterilizing it with carbolic acid. Anthony Burgess read the episode as a satire on Western imperialism: while Alu stands for tradition, Balaram “stands, in his demented way, for progress.”¹³ *The Circle of Reason* certainly explores the relation between culture and imperialism. But

Burgess's argument that it juxtaposes stable, traditional cultures with a diasporic, post-colonial culture is a reading made within the paradigm of classical ethnography. For Ghosh, even societies that appear to be static and traditional are always already diasporic.

Balaram's enthusiasm for Reason can certainly be read as satire on those diasporic Indian intellectuals who enthusiastically embrace the theories of the West, and it is surely significant that his greatest heroes are French. Balaram has made his mind “a dumping ground for the west.”¹⁴ But Ghosh's novel deconstructs any simple opposition between tradition and modernity, or discrete oriental and occidental cultures. His Ph.D. thesis at Oxford was a history of weaving and the cloth trade between Britain and India in the nineteenth century. In each of his subsequent texts, weaving is a synecdoche of that “intricate network of differences” in which all cultures are enmeshed with their neighbours. When Balaram decides to make the young Alu a weaver, he tells him a history of the technology of weaving that evokes cultural instability and borrowings across borders. According to Balaram, “... [the loom] has created not separate worlds but one, for it has never permitted the division of the world. The loom recognizes no continents and no countries. It has tied the world together” (p. 55). Balaram develops the idea that culture is a process of circulation that has nothing to do with national borders:

Indian cloth was found in the graves of the Pharaohs. Indian soil is strewn with cloth from China. The whole of the ancient world hummed with the cloth trade. The Silk Route from China, running through central Asia and Persia to the ports of the Mediterranean and from there to the markets of Africa and Europe, bound continents together for more centuries than we can count ... All through those centuries cloth, in its richness, and variety, bound the Mediterranean to Asia, India to Africa, the Arab world to Europe, in equal, bountiful trade.(pp. 55–6)

The history of weaving, then, has no single national root, as Burgess assumed in his review, but follows complex international routes. It is not a “traditional” craft opposed in a binary sense to Western science, but another part of a diaspora that

unravels the distinction between Orient and Occident.

Yet Ghosh's understanding of these routes is also resistant to the framework of postmodern inter-cultural studies in which James Clifford attempts to place it. Clifford's border crossings run the risk of de-contextualizing specific local instances; the passengers in his transit lounge of culture are caught up in a seemingly universal postmodern condition that is innocent of specific economic determinants. Ghosh, by contrast, understands that the routes of international trade are over-determined by economic forces; that they tell a history of imperial exploitation. Balaram continues his lecture on the history of the loom by placing it in the context of British imperial trade: "Lancashire poured out its waterfalls of cloth, and [the] once ... peaceful Englishmen ... of Calcutta ... turned their trade into a garotte to make every continent safe for the cloth of Lancashire, strangling the very weavers and techniques they had crossed oceans to discover" (p. 57). As the image of the garotte suggests, the trade routes may cut across national borders, but they are infected by blood and overdetermined by the asymmetries of economic and military power.

If Balaram's interest in Reason is part of the influx of foreign ideas into the village of Lalpukur, that village is not the symbol of an "Indian tradition" that can be placed in simple opposition to the West. Lalpukur was settled by refugees from East Pakistan after the formation of Bangladesh in 1971. The village, apparently a symbol of traditional India, is itself the product of a diaspora. The people of Lalpukur were "vomited out of their native soil years ago" and "dumped hundreds of miles away ... borders dissolved under the weight of millions of people in panic-stricken flight from an army of animals" (pp. 59–60). Lalpukur, with its mixture of technologies, its blend of Hinduism and Bruce Lee movies (p. 75), is not a site of tradition, but of hybridization: the village is "churning like cement in a grinder, and Balaram was busy chasing its shooting boundaries with buckets of carbolic acid, his hair wafting behind him, in the germ-free air" (p. 76).

When Balaram reduces the village of Lalpukur to rubble in his efforts to apply European theories to Indian life, Alu joins a tide of diasporic Indians drawn to the rich oil economies of the

Middle East. Part Two of *The Circle of Reason* is set in al-Ghazira on the Persian Gulf. Alu there resumes his craft of weaving, but is accidentally buried alive when a new concrete building in which he is working as a labourer collapses. The collapse of this building can be read as an allegory about the effect of postmodernity on the traditional societies of the Middle East. But again, Ghosh's writing is too highly nuanced for such facile binary oppositions.

The collapsed building, called The Star, is contrasted with the traditional market place, the Souq: "the old bazaar's honeycomb of passageways ... obscur[ed] every trace of the world outside ... Nor did any but the most alert in the Souq feel the soil of al-Ghazira tremble when the Star fell" (p. 194). But the Souq does not represent a discrete culture rooted in one nation. Rather, it is part of a network of trade routes, confirming Balaram's argument that weaving produces not to one world but many. Alu has begun weaving again at the loom of his Egyptian neighbour, Hajj Fahmy, who abandoned his traditional craft for the more profitable construction business. As part of his revival of weaving, Alu must now learn Arabic as he had earlier learned English. His landlady, an Egyptian brothel owner named Zindi, plans to install Alu as her manager when she buys the Durban Tailoring House from another diasporic Indian, Jeevanbhai Patel. Patel is a Gujarati Hindu from Durban in South Africa, who has come to al-Ghazira after a marriage of which his parents disapproved. His movements evoke the flow of the Indian Ocean trade: "the Indian merchants along the coast pulled [the couple] northwards like a bucket from a well. First they went to Mozambique, then Dar es Salaam, then Zanzibar, Djibouti, Perim and Aden" (p. 221). Zindi's house is full of migrant labourers whom she hopes to divert from the construction industry to the now declining cloth trade: al-Ghazira "was a merchants' paradise, right in the centre of the world, conceived and nourished by the flow of centuries of trade. Persians, Iraqis, Zanzibari Arabs, Omanis and Indians fattened upon it and grew rich" (p. 221). Like the village of Lalpukur, the Souq of al-Ghazira does not represent a stable authentic culture, but a network of trade, centuries old, that unfurls like cloth through a vast, borderless region.

When Alu is buried in the Star, Ghosh contrasts this mobile trading culture with the

modern oil economy that threatens to subsume it. Alu's friends Rakesh and Isma'il go inside the ruins to search for him. Like Fredric Jameson in the Bonaventura Hotel,¹⁵ they find themselves lost in the postmodern space of a collapsed glass and concrete dome: "It was like the handiwork of a madman—immense steel girders leaning crazily, whole sections of the glass dome scattered about like eggshells" (p. 232). The "voice" heard by the rescuers in the chapter "A Voice in the Ruins" turns out to be a transistor radio accidentally switched on during the collapse of the building, which echoes through the ruins (p. 232). The "voice" concisely evokes the aesthetics of postmodernism: the loss of affect, the de-centring of the bourgeois subject, the loss of interiority and the relentless commodification of culture. Alu, the Indian weaver, is trapped inside postmodernity like Jonah inside the whale, and when the rescuers reach him, they find him lying beneath a slab of concrete that is kept from crushing him by two antique sewing machines (p. 260). The episode is an allegory about the cultural logic of global capitalism destroying the ancient trading cultures logic of the Middle East.

Ghosh's symbolism therefore complicates Clifford's too-easy application of the label postmodern to the inhabitants of the Egyptian village, for the collapse of the Star is connected to a more specific genealogy of British colonialism in al-Ghazira. "Since the beginning of time, al-Ghazira has been home to anyone who chooses to call it such" (p. 261). But when the British discovered the oil deposits, they broke with the past by using military force to persuade the elderly Malik to sign a treaty: "al-Ghazira was just a speck of sand floating on a sea of oil. So the British ... sent a resident to al-Ghazira, to make the Malik sign a treaty which would let them dig for oil. ... The Resident arrived, in a battleship" (pp. 248–9). As Renato Rosaldo observes, "all of us inhabit an interdependent late-twentieth-century world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries," but we do not do so on equal terms. Those boundaries are "saturated with inequality, power and domination."¹⁶¹⁴

Conclusion

Amitav Ghosh's Ibis trilogy can be considered as a work with plenty of subaltern elements. It is not just the story of three ships

namely Ibis, which starts its journey from Calcutta carrying indentured servants and convicts to the Island called Mauritius. Another ship called Anahita, a vessel carrying opium to Canton, and Redruth which is on botanical expedition, also to Canton. The novel depicts lots of characters from different nations, castes, religions, poor Laskers, etc., which arise a sense of universal humanism. Ghosh raises his voice against the subjugation of the marginalized in the society. It is very clear that Ghosh's Ibis trilogy is about the history of commons, downtrodden voiceless section of the society like poor Laskers. It is a well-known fact that every great movement and accomplishments are not possible with the help of certain high-class sections like Kings, Queens and land lords. But it is possible only through the help of people from the lower strata of the society. It is this section who has to raise their voice so that there will be a great change. India got her freedom in 1947 not with the effort of a few leaders but by the continuous and deliberate efforts of millions of Indians. Ghosh in his Ibis trilogy explicitly used his narrative technique in order to create characters left with no voice with the intention of supplying them with the strength to speak out their difficulties and remain like the majority.

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