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“Salman Rushdie’s ‘Stereoscopic Vision:’ Postcolonial Environments in *Midnight’s Children*”

“To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world,” says Saleem Sinai in Salman Rushdie’s Booker Prize-winning novel *Midnight’s Children*. Born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the day of India’s independence from British rule, Saleem’s life is a microcosm of post-Independent India. In order to make meaning out of his life, Saleem must first “swallow the world:” he must understand his country’s colonial past; make sense out of its burgeoning independent present; and come to terms with his [and India’s] postcolonial identity. Rushdie, like his autobiographical protagonist Saleem, is also a product of postcolonial India. Born in Bombay in 1947 [just two months before India’s independence], Rushdie spent his youth in India and teenage years between England and his homeland. Although most infamous for his period of exile and years in hiding after being condemned to death by the Ayatollah Khomeini for the alleged blasphemy of Islam in his fourth novel *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie is considered one of today’s most important writers of world literature. His literature, although heavily Anglicized due to his migration to England at the age of twenty-seven, is dominated by themes of identity that break down colonial constructs of Western dominance over Eastern culture, hence his position as a prominent Anglo-Indian postcolonial writer.

Postcolonial discourse was born in response to the imperial expansion of Western colonial empires during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Postcolonial writers like Rushdie, therefore, emerged out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by writing in response to the authority wielded by the imperial powers, and by emphasizing their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centers. The prose of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka are all examples of postcolonial literatures. In this paper, I will outline some dominant theories behind postcolonial discourse and will analyze, from a postcolonial perspective, specific thematic elements within Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. It is my intent to prove that although influenced by his migration to England, Rushdie’s work subverts Western-colonial constructs of identity and culture through specific postcolonial literary techniques such as fragmentation, plurality, and language.

The desire to reclaim the India of his past was the driving force behind Rushdie’s decision to write *Midnight’s Children* – the novel was born when Rushdie realized how much he wanted to restore his past identity to himself. *Midnight’s Children* was his first literary attempt to recapture Bombay, India. The novel explores the ways in which history is given meaning through the retelling of individual experience. History is seen subjectively through the eyes of the protagonist Saleem Sinai, therefore the retelling of history is fragmented and, at times, erroneous. For Saleem, born at the instance of India’s independence from Britain, life becomes inextricably linked with the political, national, and religious events of his time; his life parallels that of postcolonial India. Due to the coincidental hour of his birth, Saleem is able to telepathically communicate with other gifted children born during the same hour of India’s Independence. Rushdie is relating Saleem’s generation of “midnight’s children” to the generation of Indians with whom he was born and raised. As a product of postcolonial India, Saleem must piece together the multifarious fragments of his identity, just as India must begin anew in rebuilding her identity in the wake of colonialism. His story represents the plural identities of India and the fragmented search for self through memory.

There is a wealth of criticism on Rushdie that simultaneously hails him as one of the most prominent representatives of Anglo-Indian postcolonial literature, yet which also questions his authenticity and criticizes the misrepresentation of modern India in his texts. As an Indian expatriate living in England and writing in English, Rushdie is able to view and write about his homeland with objectivity, yet distance from his subject likewise causes the fragmentation of memory and, at times, unreliable narrative techniques. For this reason, Rushdie's position as an expatriate-postcolonial writer functions as a double-edged sword; he is praised for his objectivity yet criticized for his inauthentic representations of modern India. In his introduction to *Critical Essays on Salman Rushdie*, Keith M. Booker aptly summarizes the dominant sentiments of postcolonial criticism on Rushdie. The ability of Rushdie's texts to draw on both Eastern and Western cultural traditions, as well as his cultural hybridity as a Muslim from India who has lived most of his life and done his writing in Great Britain – this is appealing to postcolonial critics. However, this is also controversial as many Indian critics have rejected his work as non-representative of Indian literature because Rushdie's work [like himself] is greatly rooted in Western literary traditions (3). This critique is inherent to any discussion on Rushdie's status as a postcolonial writer.

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In his essay on postcolonial criticism in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, Homi K. Bhabha outlines the purpose and technique behind this discourse. According to Bhabha, postcolonial criticism “bears witness to unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order” (437). Postcolonial discourse formulates “critical revisions” around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discriminations in order to reveal the antagonistic effects of colonialism rather than rationalize its occurrence. As a mode of analysis, this criticism attempts to revise nationalist pedagogies that establish the relation of Third World and First World in “binary structures of opposition,” meaning that postcolonial critics fight against the colonial representation of Self versus Other (or Us versus Them or West versus East, etc.). Postcolonial criticism rejects the biased knowledge created in colonial representations of the Other and asserts that colonized countries and peoples cannot be classified in homogenous ways. It resists colonial constructions and representations of history, language, and textuality. Furthermore, postcolonial criticism encourages, or rather demands, a radical re-imagining and reshaping of a dominant Eurocentric discourse through a questioning process that attempts to break down certain colonial certainties and grand narratives. It also reads the postcolonial text as a means to understand the effects of colonialism. Many contemporary critics suggest that it is from those who have suffered the “sentence of history” – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn the most enduring lessons for living and thinking (Bhabha 438).

One prominent postcolonial analyst, psychiatrist, and revolutionary who suffered from the sentence of history is Frantz Fanon. Considered by many to be this century's most important theorist of the African struggle for independence, Fanon's writings influenced several anti-colonial writers, including Rushdie. Himself a product of colonialism, Fanon grew up in Martinique, a French colony in the Caribbean. He was heavily involved in the Algerian movement for independence and his two books *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*, became central documents of the black liberation movement and postcolonial critique. A major proponent of the belief that language has the largest implication on the colonized, Fanon argues in *Black Skin, White Masks* that “To speak . . . means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (17). This concept of language and his treatise on national

culture from *Wretched of the Earth* are of particular interest to my analysis of Rushdie. In the chapter “On National Culture,” Fanon uses Marxist framework to explore class conflict and questions of cultural hegemony in the creation and maintenance of a postcolonial country’s national consciousness. He looks at the psychology of the postcolonial population, specifically analyzing the re-establishment of identity and the creation of a national consciousness.

Regarding national culture, Fanon focuses on the effects of the hegemonic devices used by the colonizers to obliterate the culture of the colonized and the resulting desire of the colonized to unite under a homogenous national identity and culture. He says, “Colonial domination, because it is total and tends to over-simplify, very soon manages to disrupt in spectacular fashion the cultural life of the conquered people” (236). Colonialism is not only satisfied with emptying the native’s brain of all form and content but it “distorts, disfigures and destroys” the history of the colonized people. Therefore, colonial domination’s intent is to convince the natives that colonialism came to “lighten their darkness;” the colonizers focused on convincing the colonized that if the settlers were to leave, the natives would at once fall back into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality.

Resulting from this “Orientalist” type perception is the native peoples’ desire to define a “national culture.” Fanon’s main argument is that this desire is a direct result of the process of colonialism. Colonized intellectuals often focus on their national culture, specifically their historical culture, to defy the colonial [Orientalist] ideology that the natives were uncivilized barbarians. He says,

The passionate search for a national culture, which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in the anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped. Because they realize they are in danger of losing their lives and thus becoming lost to their people, these men...renew contact once more with the oldest and most pre-colonial springs of life of their people. (212)

Furthermore, a unified Native culture is not necessarily that of the native’s country but a result of colonialism – the colonizers refusal to acknowledge their subjects’ pre-colonial past works as a catalyst. The colonized peoples, in their desire to prove them [the colonizers] wrong, push to unite in a common identity and culture. According to Fanon, “The effort of the native to rehabilitate himself and to escape from the claws of colonialism are logically inscribed from the same point of view as that of colonialism” (212). Therefore the colonized, due to their subjugation, are forced to define their national culture, meaning the homogenous projection of an African or Arab culture versus an Angolan, Nigerian, Bengali, or Punjabi culture. European colonialism is responsible for this racialization of thought; the establishment of a national African or Arab culture is in response to coercive effects of the dominant ruling power and not because there is a true identity between all sub-nations of one country.

Behind the establishment of a national culture comes the assumption and expectation that the inhabitants of the colonized country must “authentically” represent their native culture. Can an Anglo-Indian like Rushdie, for example, authentically write about or represent the Indian subcontinent? The influence of the colonial country leaves an indelible mark on the country it inhabits, specifically on its language. Furthermore, the postcolonial identity is often fragmented due to its varied cultural history. How does this further convolute authenticity and national culture? The postcolonial writer is expected to authentically represent his/her homeland, but according to Fanon’s theory, this yearning for authenticity and a national culture is directly related to the colonial experience.

In his literature, Rushdie grapples with this issue and resists being pigeonholed to one particular culture. He refers to authenticity as “the respectable child of old-fashioned exoticism” which “demands that sources, forms, style, language and symbol all derive from a supposedly homogenous and unbroken tradition” (*Imaginary* 67). Rushdie insists that his purpose is not to create “authentic” Indian literature but validates his position as a postcolonial writer by stressing the valuable qualities of having two countries to draw from. Growing up in a country that was greatly influenced by British rule, attending British schools, and migrating to England in his mid-twenties inevitably westernized Rushdie’s perspective. But instead of viewing this “double identity” as a negative spiral into the clutches of Western colonialism, Rushdie uses it to his benefit as a form of decolonization – quite possibly he is able to see the pitfalls of Fanon’s national consciousness and culture. This double perspective gives him “stereoscopic vision” which allows him to simultaneously look at two societies from both the inside and the outside. Rushdie states that postcolonial Indian writers who have migrated away from India “are capable of writing from a kind of double perspective: because they, we, are at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of ‘whole sight’” (*Imaginary* 19). Because of their multiple backgrounds and experiences, writers in Rushdie’s position are able to recreate reality in a way that is directly related to their postcolonial identities. These plural identities provide them with various angles to analyze and [re]create reality within their fictions.

Rushdie, by the very nature of his diverse background, is the product of multiple identities. One of his greatest thematic focuses is the notion of place and migration and how this creates plural identities. In a 1983 interview he said that three places had laid claim to him: India (where he was born); Pakistan (where his family lives); and England. Rather than feeling rootless due to migration from his homeland, Rushdie believes that the problem lies in “multiple rooting.” He says, “It’s not the traditional identity crisis of not knowing where you come from. The problem is that you come from too many places” (Reder ix). Multiple rooting leads to multiple identities; this parallels the multiplicity of national identities within India as well as Saleem’s issues with reconciling his own multiple identities within *Midnight’s Children*.

The Indian sub-continent has always been associated with concepts of multiplicity and plurality. Is it possible for a country as diverse as India to be defined by a homogenous and authentic national identity? Rushdie denies the need for a national culture and in doing so, disrupts the colonial effect of homogenization:

One of the most absurd aspects of this quest for national authenticity is that—as far as India is concerned, anyway—it is completely fallacious to suppose that there is such a thing as a pure, unalloyed tradition from which to draw... The rest of us understand that the very essence of Indian culture is that we possess a mixed tradition, a *mélange* of elements as disparate as ancient Mughal and contemporary Coca-Cola American. (*Imaginary* 67)

Home to more than twenty different languages and numerous dialects, India is defined by its diverse plurality. Two dominant religions—Hindu and Islam—as well as numerous other religious groups that include Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Jews, and Christians, further pluralize the identity of this nation. Rushdie eschews the concept of a homogenous Indian culture and states, “‘My’ India has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity... to my mind, the defining image of India is the crowd, and a crowd is by its very nature superabundant, heterogeneous, many things at once” (*Imaginary* 32). Jaina C. Sanga, in her extensive study, *Salman Rushdie’s Postcolonial Metaphors*, supports Rushdie’s statement and agrees that “the

notion of ‘Indian’ is itself complexly hybrid; the fact of being Indian does not imply a monolithic, unitary condition but rather presents a problematic diversity” (98). The multiplicity and plurality of India is a dominant theme within *Midnight’s Children* and is what Saleem refers to when he says that “[t]here are as many versions of India as Indians” (323). This plural national identity mirrors itself in Saleem’s life; his story becomes the story of a new nation.

Born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the day of India’s independence from British rule, Saleem’s life is a microcosm of post-Independent India. His attempt to reconcile his various multiple identities reflects India’s struggle to reunite its multiple nationhoods after colonial rule. In a passage that echoes Fanon’s theory on national identity, Saleem muses on the meaning of India’s independence and acknowledges that postcolonial India is a unified nation that didn’t before exist. In a narrative build-up to the day of India’s independence, Saleem refers to India as a

nation which had previously never existed [that] was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal will—except in a dream we all agreed to dream. (124)

The dream Saleem refers to is the existence of a unified nation that was able, due to the collective will of its people, to gain its independence from Britain. In order to break down the physical constraints of colonial rule, India needed to come together as a nation; it needed to unite its multiple national identities to form the mythic land of postcolonial India that Saleem is speaking of. Yet, this very reference to postcolonial India as a “mythical land” challenges the fallacious supposition that India can, and should be defined by a unified national identity.

Early in the novel, Saleem explains the difficulty of narrating his life story because there are multitudes of different lives within him. Like India, he must reconcile his multiple identities in order to define himself. He says,

there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors...I have been the swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well. Consumed multitudes are jostling and shoving inside me. (4)

Saleem’s struggle with self-identity parallels Rushdie’s analogy of “multiple rooting.” One example of this is the role of multiple parentages in Saleem’s life. Switched at birth by a nurse in the hospital, Saleem is raised by parents that are not biologically his own. As a baby, due to the opportunistic hour of his birth, he is coveted by all of his parent’s neighbors and assumes different roles when visiting each of them. He says, “Even a baby is faced with the problem of defining itself; and I’m bound to say that my early popularity had its problematic aspects, because I was bombarded with a confusing multiplicity of views on the subject” (147). Furthermore, when his parents discover they are not his true biological parents, they leave him for an extended period of time with his Uncle Hanif and Aunt Pia who become his surrogate parents. Saleem refers to this period of time as his “first exile” [the second being when he moves with his parents to Pakistan]. Like Rushdie, who is a product of multiple nations [India, Pakistan, England], Saleem must sort through his own multiple identities to recognize his true self. These references to multiple parentages relate to the feelings of homelessness and displacement as well to the fragmentation of identity and memory that plague Saleem throughout the novel.

Multiplicity is also metaphorically represented by the Midnight's Children Conference. At the age of nine, Saleem starts to hear voices in his head and realizes that he can telepathically communicate with all of the other children born at the midnight hour of India's independence. "I am nine years old and lost in the confusion of other people's lives which are blurring together in the heat" (194) he says about his newfound telepathic powers. Through Saleem's gift of telepathy and his ability to communicate with all of the other children born at midnight who are scattered throughout the nation, he is able to directly experience India's diverse plurality. Due to the opportune hour of their birth, each of the midnight's children is born with special "magical" powers such as telepathy, the ability to fly, miraculous healing talents, etc. The diversity of their powers and backgrounds parallels Rushdie's point that India is a nation that is much too complex and diverse to be defined by one homogenous culture.

Saleem's involvement with the Midnight's Children Conference further obfuscates his identity which like, India, is fragmented. Just as postcolonial India is focused on uniting her various fragments, or parts, to carve out a new identity, Saleem must make sense of his fragmented past to come to terms with his own. Because Rushdie, due to his expatriate identity, relies on fragmented memories to retell the story of post-Independent India, a country in which he no longer lives but still feels a deep connection to, the reader must piece together Saleem's narrative to extract meaning from it.

One of Rushdie's most prominent themes is the fragmentary effects of displacement and migration. He cites the fragmentation of memory and identity as one of the common attributes of the displaced Indian writer. In *Imaginary Homelands* he states, "When the Indian writer who writes from outside India tries to reflect that world, he is obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (10). Because expatriates experience a physical and mental displacement from their homeland, it is inevitable that their identities also become fragmented and disjointed. Sanga agrees that the notion of fragmentation is relevant as the expatriate, or postcolonial migrant's identity can be seen as a compilation of "shreds and scraps" of meanings, arranged and rearranged by the experience of migration (26). Like Rushdie, the characters in the novel must attempt to solve the puzzle of their own identities. For example, during their courtship Aadam Aziz gains familiarity with his future wife, Naseem, through a white perforated sheet whose singular hole allows him to examine her body. He becomes familiar with her body in fragments: "So gradually Doctor Aziz came to have a picture of Naseem in his mind, a badly-fitting collage of her severally-inspected parts. This phantasm of a partitioned woman began to haunt him..." (22). In this way, Aadam pieces together the puzzle of Naseem's appearance. The perforated sheet is repeatedly mentioned throughout the text and represents the fragmented identities that the novel's characters attempt to piece together. Saleem refers to it as a "ghostly essence" which doomed his mother to love his father in segments and condemned him to see his own life—its meanings, its structures—in fragments.

Just as the perforated sheet symbolizes the fragmented identities of Aadam and Naseem, Amina [Saleem's mother] trains herself to love her husband in segments. In love with the memory of another man, Amina assiduously falls in love with her husband piece by piece. To do this "she divided him mentally, into every single one of his component parts, physical as well as behavioral...in short, she fell under the spell of the perforated sheet of her own parents, because she resolved to fall in love with her husband bit by bit" (71). Her husband's identity is therefore, in her eyes, a fragmented amalgamation of his various parts. She is unable to see him as a whole person, just as the displaced postcolonial identity is often fragmented rather than a unified whole.

Rushdie also uses fragmentation and disintegration as a metaphor for the loss of identity. Rushdie describes Aadam Aziz as possessing a void or hole in his center as a result of his uncertainty of God's existence and newfound disillusion with his Kashmiri homeland. When Aadam hits his nose on the ground while attempting to pray he resolves to never again kiss the earth for any god or man. This decision, however, "made a hole in him, a vacancy in a vital inner chamber, leaving him vulnerable to women and history" (4). Aadam is described throughout the novel with reference to the image of the hole in his stomach – the disintegration of his body parallels the rapid chaotic turmoil that besets India. Concurrently Saleem, throughout his narrative, often refers to the "cracking" and disintegration of his exterior. He says, "I have begun to crack all over like an old jug...I am literally disintegrating..." (36). Saleem intersperses his narration of the past with present allusions to his rapidly disintegrating condition; a reflection of his inability to cope with his multiple fragmented identities.

Because Rushdie's childhood memories were fragmented, he realized that it was impossible to give a precise history of Bombay. Instead, he pieced together his recollections to describe his version of India; a version which is often subjective but which attempts to thematically depict the experiences of a nation and people struggling to define themselves during a turbulent era. Rushdie stresses the importance of these "fragments of the past" and compares them to "bits of archeological remains" that allow one to reconstruct history. He refers to Saleem's suspect narration and fragmentary vision as "the mistakes of a fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance" (Reder 12). Critics have identified numerous textual errors, which Rushdie admits to as both conscious and unconscious mistakes, such as inconsistencies in the reference to Hindu myths, discrepancies about the Bangladesh War, and the date of Gandhi's death. This narrative technique on Rushdie's part supports his view of displacement, memory, and fragmentation. In Saleem's attempt to reconstruct his past, his memory is distorted which charges the narrative with digressions and inconsistencies (Sanga 24). Saleem admits to his narrative errors and explains these fallacies in words that mirror Rushdie's own sentiments: "I must content myself with shreds and scraps...the trick is to fill in the gaps, guided by a few clues one is given. Most of what happens in our lives takes place in our absence" (509). Through his narrative digressions and inconsistencies, Saleem opens up history for interpretation. Because the postcolonial identity is fragmented and multifarious through its collision with other cultures, Saleem's narrative is also convoluted and unwilling to represent one homogenous interpretation of history.

The same refusal of homogeneity can be applied to Rushdie's opinion on the classification of his fiction as "Commonwealth Literature," which customarily includes literature written in English by "persons who are not themselves white Britons, or Irish, or citizens of the United States of America" (*Imaginary* 63). Rushdie resists this rigid classification of, specifically, Anglo-Indian literature and insists that the differences between "Commonwealth" writers are much more significant than the similarities. As someone who writes in English, Rushdie challenges Fanon's belief that acquiring a colonial language is akin to submitting to the hegemonic power of the colonial language. One direct impact of British imperialism is that English became an integral part of the culture of the countries Britain colonized. While there are writers such as Nguigi wa Thiong'o who believe that the colonial language still ascribes colonial values, and that English cannot adequately reflect a local reality, writers like Rushdie have accepted English as a creative medium. On his use of English, Rushdie says,

I don't think it is always necessary to take up the anti-colonial—or is it post-colonial—cudgels against English. What seems to me to be happening is that

those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it—assisted by the English language’s enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers. (*Imaginary* 64)

Rushdie is repeatedly praised for his ability to appropriate the English language and transform it into his own “Indianized” dialect. By transforming or “domesticating” colonial English, Rushdie subverts and disrupts the dominant hold that English had over its colonies. In his fiction, he subversively opens up a complex area of postcolonial resistance to both colonial cultural and political ideologies, and to the dominant ideologies constructed and perpetuated in the Indian subcontinent (Sanga 49). He is, in a sense, freeing English from its colonial past, and re-creating it into a new Indian-English language.

In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie’s writing style questions the existence of a single, correct way of using the English language. His use of English is fragmented and disjointed and he often intersperses English and Indian words into his prose: “And drinking so much, janum. . .that’s not good (106); “Amina Begum!. . .Wake up! Bad dream, Begum Sahiba! (122); and “Come, cousinji, lady is waiting!” Furthermore, the English language itself is translated into a different form through Rushdie’s use of puns, and run-on words, as well as by the insertion of Bombay slang and Urdu and Hindi words into the texts. For example, the text contains words and idioms such as *tamasha* (an entertaining scene); *goonda* (Thief, burglar, vulgar person); *dhobis* (washerman); *jungle* (uncivilized, vagabond); *baprebap* (Oh my God!). These words are sometimes followed by a literal translation in English and sometimes just mingled in with the rest of the sentence. In the case where the non-English word is untranslated, the narrator assumes that the reader will know what it means. Sanga gives an interesting explanation for this in her chapter on translation. She says that Rushdie is trying to achieve two things: first, these words fit into Rushdie’s description of Indian, and he must represent particular experiences as closely as possible; and second, by not explaining the translation, Rushdie is positing a sense of ambivalence about various terms. By not providing a translation, Rushdie is establishing a form of resistance to the dominant discourse.

Rushdie defines himself as a writer of “political fictions” and in his essay “Outside the Whale,” he encourages the need for “books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world” (*Imaginary* 87). He accomplishes this with *Midnight’s Children*, a text that recreates the postcolonial history of India. In the pages of *Midnight’s Children*, we are able to see the psychological effects of colonial domination on a nation and its people. Instead of mirroring the colonial ideologies of India’s past to retell the story of her Independence, Rushdie recreates the history of his homeland from the subjective and fragmented memory of his narrator. By paralleling Saleem’s life with the events following India’s independence, Rushdie ties the identity of the postcolonial country directly to the individuals that are products of it. The result is a text that vividly represents the plural identities of a country and its people who are seeking to define themselves in the wake of colonialism.

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