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A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST READING OF J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS* (2000)

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Abstract

Literary texts and kinds of research have reframed postcolonial experiences to capture several issues in society. On that note, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* has chalked many successes in gaining the attention of literary scholars to subject the text to interpretation using varied literary approaches, except postcolonial feminism. The postcolonial aspect of the feminist issues in the text is fundamental. The thrust of this paper is to analyse Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* using the postcolonial feminist theory. Guided by three objectives, the study uses the qualitative content analysis method to interpret the text. From the analysis, the study reported that, while objectification and 'othering' are characteristic of the representation of females in the text, violence against them is constructed through fear and torture and resisted mainly through silence. Also, the mode of narration influences the presentation of the narrative to readers. Finally, the study offers implications for further research using other literary theories or approaches.

Keywords: literary approaches, postcolonial feminist, representation, violence, waiting for the Barbarians

Introduction

Coetzee's writings are typical for uncovering historical arrangements that contribute to and account for the seeming nervousness in post-apartheid South Africa. Particularly with the publication of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2000), Coetzee tries to deconstruct falsified knowledge of African epistemologies as barbarous. While the novel has received a substantial amount of critical attention (Asempasah, 2013; May, 2001), the parallel between narrative perspective, female vulnerability and feminine barbarism are yet to be explored. Dominant literature on Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* has focused on the traitor trope functioning within the context of othered bodies, terror and resistance (Asempasah, 2013, 2019; Craps, 2007; Al-Badarneh, 2013) and the reconstitution of identities, sexual epistemologies and feminist politics (Madhok, 2016; Qassa, 2020; Boletsi, 2007; Salih & Janoory, 2019; May, 2001). While these studies are important, they do not prioritize the parallel between the narrative perspective in the novel and how it succeeds in exposing female vulnerability through a postcolonial feminist lens.

Thus, the objectives of this paper are to focus on the Magistrate and the Girl as symbolic and ethical tropes of vulnerability, and a redefinition of postcolonial barbarism. The paper also looks at how the narrative mode de-emphasizes male superiority. The paper is subdivided into four parts; the first part looks at the plot summary of the paper. The second part which is titled theoretical formulations will pay attention to the emerging postcolonial feminist theory. The development of the theory and its tenets are discussed in this portion. The third focuses on the analysis where the theory is applied to the interpretation of the text. The final part of the paper is the conclusion.

Plot summary

Waiting for the barbarians mirrors the issues of oppression and resistance in apartheid South Africa (Saunders, 2001). The protagonist of the novel is an unnamed public officer who works as a magistrate in a frontier settlement owned by an unknown empire. Readers are put in a temporal sequence where the Magistrate had been faithful a servant of the Empire, directing the affairs of a small frontier settlement, ignoring the impending war with the barbarians. However, when the interrogators (Colonel Joll and his men) arrive, he witnesses the cruelty and injustice of the prisoners of war by the Empire. Empathizing with their victims, he commits an otherworldly act of rebellion that marked him as an enemy of the Empire. The text presents a binary between an empire and the other (barbarians). With Colonel Joll and the barbarian girl as a symbolic representation of the empire and barbarians respectively, the Magistrate, as the narrator, lies between this continuum. The novel displays power dynamics in postcolonial settings through the notion of othering. Some nations, according to Gallagher (1991), “achieve strength, unity and identity by creating others to be an enemy” (p. 132). Joll, the representative of the Empire seeks to achieve the same. However, this inevitably leads to a “loss of identity” as happened in the case of the Magistrate. Loomba (1991) asserts that the creation of the other is “crucial not only for creating images of the outsider but equally essential for constructing the insider, the (usually white European male) self” (p. 104). On reflecting on Joll’s position in the Empire, the Magistrate realizes that he is “the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, [Joll], the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow” (*Waiting for the barbarians*, p. 148).

Theoretical Formulation - Postcolonial Feminism

Hooks (1984), as cited in Peterson and Rutherford (1986) asserts that feminism is a movement to nullify sexual oppression. Spanning the dusk of the 19th century, the movement has had an immense impact on the lives of women. While feminism defies a single definition, the core of the advocacy is to expose how women are subjugated, and discriminated against equality among genders, while ensuring advocacy (Dobie, 2012). Feminism has evolved in three important waves; the first wave, the second wave, and the third wave. The first wave of the feminist movement focused on women’s rights and women’s suffrage movement with an emphasis on social, political and economic reforms. The second wave focused on the frustrations of the white heterosexual demands to advocate radical de-structuring of society to make way for emerging sexualities. The concerns of the third wave feminist movement prioritise the unique experiences of third-world

women. Marrying postcolonial tendencies with feminist assumptions, postcolonial feminism is not a mere intersection between feminism and postcolonialism, but situates in the ‘third world feminism’. The postcolonial feminist framework, which is an important strand in this phase of the movement deals with injustices pertaining to race, gender and imperialism in every aspect of society.

Although Mishra (2013) finds the theory to be relatively new to the scholarship of postcolonial and feminist studies, the postcolonial feminist theory has some tenets that align with third wave feminism. Rajan and Park (2000) assert that the post-colonial feminist theory intervenes and reconfigures feminist and postcolonial explorations. That is, the configuration of homogenizing all women as one is undermined as the theory unravels the double jeopardy that the marginalized female (perhaps ‘other’) faces. This follows the idea that the theory has been perceived as a type of feminist theory or a subcategory of post-colonial studies. Postcolonial feminism looks at the myriad of oppressions that arise from racist, sexist, patriarchal and gender inequality (Neimneh, 2014). Racine (2003; 2009) adds that it is geared toward unpacking the factors concerning socio-economic and cultural ideals that model and enforce oppression in different contexts. Tyagi (2014) opines that the theory focuses on how gender differences are constructed, how women are represented, and other discourses. Peterson and Rutherford (1986) reveal that women suffer subjugation double-fold. That is, women are subjugated and oppressed under patriarchal and colonial practices. Tyagi (2014) adds that the theory, therefore, puts force on the mainstream theory of postcolonialism for a stable and continuous consideration of issues concerning gender. The study takes into consideration the racial and cultural differences that are in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The post-colonial feminist theory understands the causes of existing gender inequality and interrogates power dynamics concerning genders (Raftari & Bahrami, 2011). Gender discrimination and the exertion of patriarchy are some of the main issues that have steered the focus of feminists (Plaatje, 2014; McGlynn, 2010). While the theory exposes issues of discrimination and subjugation (Fernández & Wilding, 2003), part of its goal is to identify gender discrimination in daily experience and to inspire radicalism that can question the patriarchal systems, which avoids the diversity of voice and subjectivity (Ryan 2006; Eudey 2012). In this regard, the framework proves functional to serve the purpose of the study.

Method

The study adopts the qualitative research design, which explores the experience, attitude, and interaction (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2000). It is exploratory. It investigates “how people make sense of their lives, experiences, and their structures of the world” (Creswell, 1994, p. 145). The approach considers the processes and characters in social lives to make meaning. These relate to features and parts of documents which are socially produced (Altheide, 1996). The qualitative design looks at how social meanings are attributed to the experience of people, and how such meanings are embedded into the text, image and other semiotic things. The qualitative approach focuses on texts and images rather than statistical data. In choosing this study design, I, therefore, agree with Creswell (1994) that qualitative research is an appropriate approach for exploratory and descriptive research such as the present study.

This study particularly uses content analysis as a qualitative research method for analysis. Content analysis is used to analyse documented communications (Babbie, 2013), either visual or oral (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). According to Babbie (2013), suitable forms for content analysis include books, magazines, web pages, poems, newspapers, paintings, speeches, letters, emails, laws and constitutions, and among other collections. This research used a fictitious text. Qualitative content analysis provides the researcher with subjective interpretations of the text content by identifying topics or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Characters in Focus

The study focuses on The Girl and The Magistrate as the main characters for the analysis. This results from the Magistrate's response to life by following feminine interference. He is obsessed with echoes of women and tries to understand the barbarian girl, his unchecked desire and the abstract empire. The Magistrate is represented in the text to be fundamental to perspectives of feminism given his association and obsession with the barbarian girl. Finally, the fact that he is the narrator of the story is also significant.

The Girl is chosen because her body is explored by the Magistrate through her silence. She is the leading female character in the text. Also, her body becomes an object which suffers torture from Colonel Joll. To some extent, the Magistrate becomes represents the oppressors of women who are silent and the girl becomes oppressed. The county Magistrate's obsession with the mutilated body symbolized the authenticity of rebelling against the empire and the essence of imperialism. For instance, the Magistrate believes that a woman's "body is anything but a site of joy" (*Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 48).

Findings and Discussion

This section of the paper presents a discussion of the text by applying the assumptions of the postcolonial feminist theory to Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This is achieved under three broad themes: the construction and resistance of violence, representation of the female, and point of narration. Although the analysis and discussion revolve around the stated characters, they liaise with the research objectives in the introductory section. Excerpts of the text are extracted and interpreted through the postcolonial feminist perspective

The construction of and resistance to violence through 'silence'

The subject of violence, and its construction in different forms, has received considerable attention from literary scholars exploring Coetzee's work (Asempasah, 2013; Boletsi, 2007; Qassas, 2020). The construction of violence in the text is depicted to be gratuitous through Colonel Joll. Hence, violence, construed in the form of torture (Asempasah, 2013), is modelled to be inherent in colonial contents. Myklatun (2018) maintains that "the ethical implication of the face-to-face relation motivates a sense of resistance towards the political dimensions of violence" (p. 8). Contextually, the text is situated in a violent world. As an allegory representing the opposition between the oppressed and the oppressor, the novel presents the recurrent nature of violence rained on the natives by the Third Bureau of the Empire. Violence has been construed to be political and gratuitous. Relevant to this analysis is sexual violence which revolves around the Magistrate. He

perpetrates sexual violence through the silence of the barbarian girl. He says to himself,

“I behave in some ways like a lover - I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her - But I equally might tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate” (Waiting for The Barbarians, p. 43).

He sees himself as the embodiment of self-interest in his relationship with her. He describes his desire for the girl as “questionable desires” (Waiting for the Barbarians, p. 79). There seems to be a dual patterning in the emotions of the Magistrate which is blurry. The unsettling turmoil in him sketches such interpretations as to whether it is an act of kindness to associate with the girl or a way of finding meaning in his life. Poyner (2016), reflecting on the Magistrate’s relationship with the girl asserts that the Magistrate’s desire for the girl is based on “the lack of reciprocity, self-interest and an irrational neglect of truth justified by the Magistrate’s wavering belief in his altruistic motivations for taking her in” (p. 60). Thus, his relationship with her takes a form of oppression and exploitation of her body, instead of being a mechanism to discover the truth. This can be interpreted in the notion of rape given that the girl did not consent to such moves. The case is he does not interpret the silence of the Girl as a refusal to participate, but rather as consent to do what he perceives right for her. The Magistrate in his interest took her silence as a weakness to caress her body. While in an embrace with one of the town’s prostitutes, his thoughts revisit the barbarian girl:

“The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension ... I cannot imagine whatever drew me to the alien body ... without aperture, without entry” (Waiting for The Barbarians, p. 45).

Dovey (1988) points out that “the Magistrate’s obsessive gesture of massaging the barbarian girl’s scarred and damaged feet implies the fetishistic and guilt-ridden attachment ... to the figure of the victim” (p. 22). His strong sense of affection for the disfigured body sparks some intentions to delve deeper into unravelling what is beneath the damaged body. His unchecked, perhaps subconscious, desire creates a space to interrogate his guilty feeling. This assertion echoes the questionable desires of the Magistrate towards the Girl.

Higgins (2013) reveals that “rape and the threats of rape are a major force in the subjugation of women. In ‘rape cultures’, the danger, the frequency, and the acceptance of sexual violence all contribute to shaping behaviour and identity, in women and men alike. The nature and degree of oppression will vary with the historical moment and, within that, the permutations of racial, class, gender, and institutional relations of power” (p. 1-2). Here, the Magistrate has relative power within the jurisdiction and exercises such authority in exploring the body of the Girl. This act is considered sexual violence. This is complemented by the Magistrate’s intentions and acts concerning females. His supposedly ‘kind’ gestures are interpreted to match his womanising acts. This leads to a master-slave relationship where the slave is sexually violated through her silence. Enns et al. (1995) prevent sexually violated victims from sharing their experiences. The girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* represents a love object whom the Magistrate desires to identify within his endeavour towards the understanding of self. That is, he tries to

find meaning in the events that have transpired in space. Trying to violate the Girl's body as a site for understanding his personal desires undermines the very nature of the Girl in the text.

There are instances in the text where violence was physically enacted. Returning from the quest to find the 'traitors', Colonel Joll brought in the natives "roped together neck to neck" (p. 29). He treats them as 'objects' which to the Magistrate was difficult to evidence the physical violence. Most of the captured natives were brutally beaten to death. Specifically, the Girl is subjugated to physical violence by Colonel Joll in the text. This leads to her long silence. Colonel Joll tortures the girl in order to acquire information about the supposed upsurge of her people. He assumes his answers through the silence and resistance of the girl's body. The construction of violence is met with a resistant silence. Asempasah and Saboro (2021) envisage silence, "not only as a mechanism for containing memories of pain" (p. 4) but as a strategy to fight imperial domination which is clearly perceived in this text. The notion of resistance through silence is once again established in the case of the barbarian girl. She passively accepts the Magistrate's ritualistic bathing and oiling, thus rendering herself a resisting, unreadable text (Madhok, 2016). The girl's response to the traumatic physical violence encodes her silence. Nkealah (2008) reveals how silence is constrained within the feminine body and women's personal relationships. Given the complexity of sexuality, Nkealah (2008) diagnoses how social control coerces women into silence. This assertion directly concurs with the violence that forced the Girl into silence.

Contrary to this, Mohammad (2018) counters silence as a way of healing from traumatic events. She deconstructs the misconception of silence as powerlessness to a "meaning of strength and resistance" (p. 265), through the feminist perspective. Hence, it is deductible that the Girl instrumentalizes her silence to resist the masculine discourse from the Magistrate. Nonetheless, the Magistrate understands silence as a coping mechanism to carry on his ritualistic baths and treatments. The Magistrate, referring to his relationship with the girl, explains to the cook that torturers "thrive on stubborn silence: it confirms to them that every soul is a lock they must patiently pick" (*Waiting for The Barbarians*, p. 141). The Magistrate tries to demystify the suffering that the girl has encountered from Colonel Joll, as the epitome of colonialism. There is a resounding effort to expose difficulties and create a reconciliatory atmosphere of belonging to a community. It is evident that, through the postcolonial feminist angle, there are patriarchal tendencies, demonstrated by Colonel Joll, where the girl is oppressed and subjugated to violence.

Representation of females in the text

Representation is very important to feminist explorations. That is, how an author projects female characters in a work to justify his or her concerns about feminine issues. The Girl is represented as an 'other', an inferior being in the text, which fascinated the interest of the Magistrate. This can be aligned with the desire of the Magistrate to delve into and interrogate what constitutes the silence of the girl, through his fondness. He is unable to recall her face before the torture and all his endeavours to visualize her face go futile. He says,

"I took back my thoughts and tried to restore her previous image... I know that my eyes have moved away from her when I was with other people ... My eyes passed over her, but I don't remember that period ... She was still

unmarked that day, but I must believe that she was unmarked because I must believe that she was once a child ... Strain, as in my first image, the remains of a kneeling beggar” (Waiting for The Barbarians, p. 36).

Qassas’s (2020) assertion of construing sexuality as textuality finds root here. The Magistrate takes a stance in directing his attention to figures of his attraction and not recognizing the Girl. From a psychological perspective, his thoughts are to reconfigure the Girl as a text, he is continually hindered by his first interaction with her. “She was still unmarked that day” sets the thoughts of the Magistrate within a temporal plan while trying to visualise the girl, the object of his desire, but this effort proves futile. In his inability to imagine her face, the Magistrate, refuses to recognize her as human following her disfigurement from the torture, she was subjected to by Colonel Joll. The unnoticed reality of the Magistrate concerning the torture of the girl confirms the irrelevant association of kindness from him to the girl. Justifying this in the context of the torture she has undergone, the Magistrate reflects; “Thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us” (p. 88). Her disfigurement blurs his vision of her original face. Increased consciousness of her as a woman with subjectivity of her own enables him to imagine her as she was before she was disfigured.

The girl, carrying characteristic qualities different from the empire, is represented as an “other”. The concept of otherness creates negative attitudes and widens socio-cultural gaps through identity construction. Her ‘otherness’ reflects the tenet of postcolonial feminism where she suffers as a barbarian and as a woman in a patriarchal outskirts of an unnamed empire. The girl deconstructs the understanding the Magistrate had about her. On the journey to return the girl, the Magistrate is fascinated by the orality of the girl. He says,

“[He is] surprised by her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession..... I even catch myself in a flush of pride: she is not just the old man’s slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman!” (Waiting for The Barbarians, p. 63).

His failure to recognize the girl as a “witty, attractive young woman” until a few days before he returned her to her people re-emphasizes the theme of otherness depicted in the novel. He does not understand the identity of the girl in a different setting which presents contradictory representations. That is, he could not appreciate the distinctiveness of the girl until she was placed amongst her people, the other. Through the intersection of cultures and sexuality, the girl loses the touch herself in the eyes of the Magistrate. She does not find her voice in a land where she is represented as inferior and an object of affection. He admits to himself that he “oppressed her with gloom” with his obsessive cleaning ritual. The use of the phrase “old man’s slut” condemns the very being of a girl coming of age. A ‘slut’ means a female who has much casual sex (Farvid, Braun & Rowney, 2017). This coincides with the sexual violence the girl was subjugated to by the Magistrate. Armstrong et al. (2014) reveal that women’s participation in slut-shaming is often viewed as internalized oppression. However, even during such intimate acts, the two remained isolated from each other, one sleeping, indifferent while the other is lost in the act to enter oblivion. It can be seen as an exploitative act as his self-centred caresses offer no satisfaction or release to the barbarian girl. Minh (2020) confirms that there are covert meanings in representing women as sexual objects

which violate their being. It is only towards the end of the novel that he realizes that all his ways to recompense her pain and suffering only led to further desolation. He concedes,

“I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation: I will not deny this decent impulse, however, mixed with more questionable motives: there must always be a place for penance and reparation” (Waiting for The Barbarians, p. 152).

He denies himself the acceptance of bringing unhappiness to the girl and was filled with surprise at the girl’s refusal to return with him. This can be interpreted from how the Magistrate represented the girl through his sexual acts.

More importantly, through a torture strategy by Joll’s men, the study identifies another way of representing women. A further dehumanisation of females is presented through the dressing of the Magistrate as a woman and hanging him in the middle of the town by Colonel Joll and his men. Joll and his men humiliate the Magistrate and break his territorial power by equating him to a woman, hanging him on a tree with a woman’s clothes and making a spectacle of him in front of town people. This reflects the insignificant and treacherous nature of the Magistrate. This torture technique has importance in the way of representation of victimization of the woman in society. It depicts the passive and silenced position of the woman with no access to authority in society. Colonel Joll tells him that “you are dirty, you stink, and they can smell you a mile away” (p. 124) which directly carries a dehumanizing effect on the female character. The inactions of the Magistrate, therefore, foreground the various suppressions and lack of power concerning the representation of women.

Later, dressed only in the smock, which reaches halfway down his thighs, the Magistrate is turned into the object of the gaze of the people in the fashion of women in a patriarchal society. Through a male gaze, there is symbolic violence that witnesses commit on the object (Magistrate). Here, through the postcolonial theory, the implied effect is transferred to the females in and outside the text. There is inverse reciprocity where earlier, the Magistrate shows discomfort in evidencing torture. The representation reiterates the near-blindness of the barbarian girl who could not return the gaze of the Magistrate, while in his chamber. The uneasy bond through a gaze aligns with the concept of us and others. Feminist film critics say that in society “woman is deprived of a gaze, deprived of subjectivity and repeatedly transformed into the object of masculine scopophilia desire” (Doane & Hodges, 2013, p. 2). Drawing our attention to the postcolonial aspect of the interpretation, there is a negatively formed stereotype characteristic of a group of people who have suffered violence and debasing prejudices which affect the group’s representation. In essence, minimal or no attempt is made to embed the colonised within the imperial image, given the colonised humiliated representation.

Mode of narration as a technique in foregrounding masculinities

The story is told in the first-person mode of narration. Intertextually, Coetzee’s *Disgrace* explores the manifold of violence from a third-person narrative mood. While such a technique presents a more objective stance, the mode of narration in *Waiting for the barbarians* foregrounds a subjective account of violence and representation from the Magistrate. As the focaliser in the novel, the

Magistrate interrogates his own thoughts through an internal monologue. While he draws readers to share in the felt traumatic violent experiences of himself and the barbarian girl, he indulges in forms of violence and subjugation of the girl. This narration provides a homodiegetic account of the happenings on the empire's border where the narrator is intricately part of the plot. While this mode of narration presents several criticisms, it explores the felt experiences of the Magistrate and the girl. "One day he picked up the lantern to see what happened. After that, his life changed". Through the subsequent events and environment, he became an interrogative voice and gained personal awareness of the practices of others and himself. The narrator exercises the power of narration providing us with credible information from his point. He does not provide the name of some characters, particularly the barbarian girl. From a critical perspective, the researchers associate loss of identity with the non-names of the characters in the text (Aldrin, 2016). Interestingly, Coetzee uses this approach to foreground the masculine ideological perspectives inherent in postcolonial studies. What ensues in this narrative is that we are controlled through dialogic interactions and at the forefront of male-dominated accounts.

Maalouf (2001) explains that names make us unique. Aldrin (2016) adds that, through onomastic literature, names provide us with identity. It identifies us individually and collectively. Briefly, the narrator's strategic way of enacting the girl as a subaltern robs the girl of her identity and status. Identifying her people and returning her is not enough to provide a solid identity for the girl. This lack of identity, we believe, leads to what the narrator provides that she remains in a space or a blank whenever he tries to remember her first days in the barracks. The Girl is given little space to articulate her experience which is surmounted by silence – alluding to the power difference.

Conclusion

In all, the study has set out to conduct a feminist reading of Coetzee's *Waiting for The Barbarians*. Using the postcolonial feminist theory, the purpose of this study was to examine the construction of violence, the representation of females, and the point of narration. The comprehensiveness of the theory fleshed out the interpretation of the text. Following the analysis of the text, three major findings were identified concerning the research objectives. First, the text objectifies and 'others' the representation of women in the text. This artistry is achieved by revealing the demeaning human experiences in the text and representing them in real-life situations. Further, in the context of gender-based attacks, various suppressions lead to silence, which needs to be addressed.

While it appeared women are dormant on the issue of sexual harassment, the study implicitly pointed out that brutal existences are lurking in the shadow of humans paying attention to the female population. Their dormancy is an act of resistance through silence as portrayed by the barbarian girl. The lack of power in the context of sexual violence reflects the myriad of experience faced by women globally. Also, women are represented as inferior and their identity is, if not imposed, stolen from them through power dynamics. Through Colonel Joll, the exertion of imperial power that culturally and racially exploits a people, mostly females, is evidenced. Second, while violence against women was constructed at

different levels, it was mainly resisted through silence. Third, the mode of narration reveals some ideological perspectives which influence the narrative.

Coetzee crafts the narration not to represent a specific historical presentation of a colonial experience. He leaves the narration in an open spatial perspective to encompass other postcolonial issues. Again, the narrator, being a male character exercised much power over the female character leading to power imbalances, hence, the author should have employed a third-person narrator who is not patriarchally skewed to present the experiences and narration of the characters. The study adds to the empirical evidence in the repository of postcolonial feminist theory. The study provides implications for further studies in postcolonial feminist studies. Given the newness of this theory, the researchers propose that further studies can adopt the theory and apply it to other literary texts. This promises to expand the foundations and assumptions of the theory.

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