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Rashid Jahan: An Iconoclast

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Abstract. The name of Dr. Rashid Jahan will always be remembered as someone who happened to be a trailblazing figure. Apart from being a doctor, Jahan carved her niche as a dedicated writer. With her bold themes, her works, like her personality, are also very striking. This paper attempts to study different aspects of Jahan's works which prove her as an iconoclast, as a strongly dynamic figure who touched upon various themes in her oeuvre which are relevant even today. This paper deals with her works like *Behind the Veil* and "A Tour of Delhi" which present Jahan as a devoted feminist who foregrounds the feminist issues plaguing Muslim women in the society. Some of her works like "Iffarī" and "Şifar" bring out her Marxist ideology where she raises her voice against the class division of the existing capitalist society. Jahan was also a true patriot of India who wrote to propagate communal harmony in the society where people identified themselves as Indians, and not as Hindus or Muslims. She was a messenger of peace and brotherhood as we see in her two plays "Paṛosī" and "Hindustanī" discussed here.

Keywords. Women, patriarchy, Marxism, class division, communal harmony, peace, India

Introduction

Dr. Rashid Jahan (1905-1952) comes across as a striking figure, given the fact that she wrote and worked at a much earlier time while belonging to the already marginalized Muslim community, known for its backwardness. Rashid Jahan lived the life of an iconoclast, breaking conventions and setting new parameters for posterity. Jahan did all the things which Muslim women rarely did at that time—she studied medicine to become a gynecologist, joined the Communist Party of India in 1933 and was an avowed Communist, wrote stories and plays around themes as bold as her personality. Being a staunch

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feminist, she wrote about the suppressed lives of Muslim women behind the veil in the 'zenana' and thus, she lifted that veil to give voice to their suffering. She exposed the ills of Muslim orthodox families that indulged in outdated, conservative ideas, and the way in which Muslim men used religion for their own convenience. Vaishnavi Mahurkar in "Rashid Jahan: The Bad Girl of Urdu Literature" writes:

Though the corpus of her work is slender and her life brief, she [Rashid Jahan] left a mark through her literary output which was illustrative of the world enclosed and oppressive . . . which still continues to ring true in contemporary times.

Through the diverse range of her themes, Jahan emerges as an important Muslim reformer. Her writing is raw, courageous, and full of anger at various types of social injustice and ills.

Jahan as a Feminist:

In her writings, one finds Jahan continually engaged with the theme of the suffering of women in a patriarchal society. Jahan's one-act play *Behind the Veil* chooses bold topics such as childbirth, sexual exploitation of women, the urgent need of family planning, men using religion to benefit their desires, etc. In this play, Muhammadi Begum is the exploited woman, suffering at the hands of her insensitive and callous husband. Even in today's time, many women can relate to Muhammadi Begum who are deprived of control over their bodies.

Muhammadi Begum is the woman whose life has been reduced to just child breeding. At the age of thirty-two, she has thirteen children which is the result of annual breeding since the age of seventeen, except the two years when she did not give birth. She was married at a tender age and the excessive continuous childbirth has taken a toll on her health. She tells the female doctor her plight, "I was married at seventeen years of age and since then I have borne a child every year except that one year when my husband had gone abroad and once when he and I had had a fight" (*Behind the Veil* 200). Muhammadi Begum's whole existence is reduced to reproductive activity only. She has become a reproductive machine. This is an exploitation of her body. Discussing Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Fiona Tolan in "Feminisms" writes:

Biological differences do not provide a causal explanation for women's oppression; however, their reproductive function has placed women at a disadvantage by tying them to the domestic sphere and associating them with the body and thus with animals and nature (321).

Since de Beauvoir used the philosophy of 'Immanence' and 'Transcendence' to postulate her philosophy of feminism, Tolan further writes:

de Beauvoir believed that woman's reproductive cycle and

typically lesser physical strength have worked to entrap her within the immanent, whilst man has been free to transcend the purely biological through philosophy, art, and science, all of which differentiate him from the other animals (322).

Muhammadi Begum's plight reminds one of Jashoda of "Breast Giver" by Mahasweta Devi. In this short story, Jashoda gives birth to twenty children — some survive and some do not. She is also conceived as a reproductive machine. At the very outset of the story, the writer writes poignantly, "Jashoda doesn't remember at all when there was no child in her womb, when she didn't feel faint in the morning, when Kangali's [her husband's] body didn't *drill* her body like a geologist in a darkness lit only by an oil lamp" (34). Like Muhammadi Begum, Jashoda does not have any control over her body and suffers because of her body.

Muhammadi Begum's illness is, however, both physical and mental. It is quite understandable that excessive procreation has been quite stressful to her as a woman's body goes through a lot of hormonal changes during pregnancy. Even her younger children are sickly and emaciated because of two reasons—1) Muhammadi Begum is weak and sickly in body and this is bound to affect the children she gives birth to, and 2) Muhammadi Begum is not 'allowed' to breastfeed her children by her husband because that means she will become preoccupied with children and he will not tolerate this, given the fact that he has to quench his bodily lust all the time.

Jahan portrays a pathetic picture of a woman for whom motherhood has become a burden since there is no proper family planning. There is hardly any love between Muhammadi Begum and her husband; instead, there is only lust on the part of her husband while she is fed up of procreation, the subsequent illness because of that and, managing so many children. She has undergone surgery twice, in order to keep her lower body in shape for her husband's pleasure. Things are so pathetic with her that her husband engages in sexual intercourse with her even when she is sick. She becomes pregnant in her sickly condition and this astonishes her doctor. Not only this, her husband is a man who uses religion for his own convenience as he wants to go in for a second marriage, because his religion sanctions it. In Jahan's play "Aurat," Maulvi Atiqullah also uses religion for his own benefit and commits fraud in the name of religion. Jahan attempts to expose such ills of the Muslim society.

The short story "A Tour of Delhi" unveils the life of women behind the veil, behind the four walls of the house, in orthodox Muslim families. However, at the center of the story are the feelings and experiences of a woman of veil who is at the mercy of her insensitive husband. In Jahan's works, it is not unusual to find such husbands. The story is set in Faridabad and the protagonist Malika Begum is the cynosure of other women because she is the one who has travelled in a train to go to Delhi. So, her house is crowded by women from neighborhood to hear about her experience on the

train and in Delhi, the big city. Malika Begum has narrated her experience a thousand times already, and still women flock to her to listen to it. Her husband takes her to Delhi but instead leaves her at the station alone with the luggage as he bumps into the Station Master friend, and vanishes. Malika Begum is at her wit's end since she is a woman of purdah and suddenly, she is left alone in a big city—hungry, frightened and being harassed by men. She says, “Men are no good in any case and the minute they see a woman sitting alone they begin to circle around her. I could not even eat a paan. One of those wretched fellows would cough, another would pass comments. And I, I was nearly fainting with fright . . .” (121). Her husband returns two hours later with complete nonchalance and tells that he can get her puris if she is hungry, while he has eaten at a hotel. Malika Begum is so frustrated with the situation, and her husband's insensitivity that she begs him to take her back to Faridabad. She narrates to her enchanted and inexperienced listeners, “The train to Faridabad was ready to leave. He sat me down in it and sulked, “As you wish! If you don't wish to see the sights, don't!” (123). The callousness of her husband reaches its acme as he ‘sulks’ that she does not want to see Delhi. There is a total gap of communication between the husband and the wife. Her husband is irresponsible and negligent. It is obvious that like Muhammadi Begum, she also has to tolerate her husband's insensitivities.

The story also shows the ordeal of a female in the public space. Malika Begum is harassed by men in the public space even when she is in burqa, as she narrates, “One of them said to me, “Show us your face”” (122). While her husband has brought her out of the boundaries of her house, he leaves her untended in a new place, out in the public space for two hours. Malika Begum suffers because of both her husband and the men in the public space. As she is left alone confused amid the chaos of the lively station, she is also “. . . bumped into and pushed around a thousand times” (122).

The story also reveals the lives of the other women who come to listen to her narration. Their lives are also confined to the zenana, the secluded, cloistered space of home where they are kept away from the knowledge, experiences and activities of the larger outside world. Through this story, Jahan brings to the fore the lives of women in orthodox Muslim families. Malika Begum is also one of them but since she had sat in a train and gone to Delhi, she acts superior, even though she is not a knowledgeable person. The story makes a plea for women to be treated respectfully both in public and private space. Patriarchy exists both inside and outside the house. Women are treated as inferior and powerless both inside and outside the house. About women's inferior position constructed by patriarchy, Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* opines:

The belief that men are superior to women has been used, feminists have observed, to justify and maintain the male monopoly of positions of economic, political, and social power, in other words, to keep women powerless by denying them the

educational and occupational means of acquiring economic, political, and social power. That is, the inferior position long occupied by women in patriarchal society has been culturally, not biologically, produced (86).

Jahan as a Marxist:

Rashid Jahan was a committed worker of the Communist Party of India (CPI). She became actively engaged with the U. P. (United Provinces) wing of the CPI. Not just she, her husband Mahmuduzzafar was also a committed party worker and together they made a charismatic Communist couple. Because of her party commitments, she even experienced jail as she was imprisoned in the Central Jail in Lucknow from March to May of 1949 for taking part in the U. P. Railway Workers' strike. Considering her commitment to the Party, it is not surprising that one finds the recurrent Marxist strain in her works as she uses the platform of writing to voice her protest and concern at a society which is structured on the unabashed inequality of socioeconomic conditions. Regarding her decision to become a devoted Communist, Rakhshanda Jalil in "Comrade Rashid Jahan" comments, "Pathbreaking and unconventional as she [Rashid Jahan] was, and militantly independent-minded too, it would be facile to suggest that she joined the party under the influence of committed friends like Zaheer or Mahmud, both Communists by the time she met them" (55). Jahan was a born iconoclast and just as other aspects of her personality were unconventional for her time and community, similarly she adopting the ideologies of Communism and Marxism was also no less than a trailblazing act for a woman of that time. Among other things, she was much pained by socioeconomic differences among people which divided them between the so-called 'high' and 'low' classes, the haves and have nots, or the privileged and the unprivileged. Jahan uses a Marxist lens to look at the socioeconomic problems of the world and, according to her, the solution lies in Marxism since it strives to create a society with no class division. As Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* writes, "The aim of Marxism is to bring about a classless society, based on the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange" (150) and "... whereas other philosophies merely seek to understand the world, Marxism (as Marx famously said) seeks to change it" (150).

Jahan's short story "Ifṭārī" is strongly tinged with Marxist overtones as it presents a scathing criticism of a society infested with class division with the resultant socioeconomic discrepancy among people. The story starts with a blind beggar's cry for something to eat to break his fast as it is the holy month of Ramzan. In response, the Begum Saheba of the Deputy Saheb calls out to her maid, Nasiban and orders her to give the beggar two-days-old jalebis which the beggar, eventually, does not get to eat after his whole day's fast, as at the time of breaking his fast, he drops the jalebis from his shaking

hands. The jalebis are eaten by a dog and the blind beggar sits on the ground helplessly crying. Nasiban is an orphan who lives with Begum Saheba as her full-time maid. Apart from getting her basic human needs fulfilled, Nasiban also receives occasional beatings from her mistress. When Begum Saheba finds out that Nasiban has eaten some of the jalebis, she flies in a rage and starts beating her. While Begum Saheba belongs to the bourgeois class, the beggar and Nasiban belong to the proletariat. The beggar and Nasiban are at the mercy of the bourgeois class for their basic things while Begum Saheba thoroughly enjoys the privileged position she occupies in the social structure. She is absolutely content with the social division because according to her ideology, this is natural / normal. Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* writes:

By posing as natural ways of seeing the world, repressive ideologies prevent us from understanding the material/historical conditions in which we live because they refuse to acknowledge that those conditions have any bearing on the way we see the world. Marxism, a non-repressive ideology, acknowledges that it is an ideology. Marxism works to make us constantly aware of all the ways in which we are products of material/historical circumstances and of the repressive ideologies that serve to blind us to this fact in order to keep us subservient to the ruling power system (56-57).

Begum Saheba exerts control over their lives. So shallow is her religious piety that she 'orders' her maid to give the beggar 'stale' jalebis and goes on to beat her own maid even though her religion teaches not to indulge in such acts, particularly while fasting. On the other hand, we see the religious sentiments of the beggar who is at the margins of the socioeconomic divide but still appears satisfied with his lot and continues to fast even when he does not have any food to break his fast. Both the beggar and Nasiban are unaware of the social injustice done to them. As Tyson says, "Religion, which Karl Marx called "the opiate of the masses," is an ideology that helps to keep the faithful poor satisfied with their lot in life, or at least tolerant of it, much as a tranquilizer might do" (59).

The other part of the story introduces a character called Nasima who acts as the mouthpiece of the author since she is much disturbed by hell and heaven created in this world, thanks to the material division. She has no religious sentiments as she does not fast and gives a Marxist definition of the religious ideas of hell and heaven. She tells her son hell is where the proletariats live and about the hell fire says:

The fire of hell, my son, is the fire of hunger. Often, you don't get anything to eat in hell and when you do, it is very little and of very bad quality. One has to work very hard in hell. And the clothes that the people in hell wear are old and tattered. And their homes are small and cramped and dark, filled with lice and

bugs. What is more . . . the children in hell do not have toys to play (173-174).

While her heaven's definition is: "It is here in this large, clean house where we get to eat lots of delicious things such as butter, toast, fruits, eggs, meat, milk. Children have good clothes to wear and a motor car to play with" (174). Though Nasima belongs to the bourgeois class, she has 'declassed' herself because she does not enjoy her privileged class position; instead, her consciousness is hurt at the great economic disparity and badly desires to see equality in the society. Towards the end of the story, she entrusts her son to obliterate this hell from the face of the earth which gives the story a Marxist hope.

Another story "Şifar" (zero) presents a clash of ideology between a father (Chief Justice Sir Ataullah) and his son (Sayeed)—the former a typical bourgeois while the latter a Marxist ideologue. Sir Ataullah is a social climber who used to belong to the low position in the social hierarchy but with his hard work climbed the social ladder and altered his position in the social hierarchy of which he is very proud. Sir Ataullah fails to understand why Sayeed talks about others and their betterment whereas he should be concerned with his own privileges and position because he worked so hard to give his family a better life. Like Begum Saheba of "İftarı" Sir Ataullah too has internalised the repressive ideology which makes him accept the class divide as a natural thing, as Tyson comments, "For Marxism, an *ideology* is a belief system, and all belief systems are products of cultural conditioning" (56). Like a typical bourgeois, Sir Ataullah is at his wit's end as to how one can achieve equality among people in which his son passionately believes; he simply does not believe in sharing his hard-earned wealth with others; he believes that beating his servants is his right; and he is money-minded. Sayeed has no respect for his father's achievement because according to him, his father's achievement was self-centred and did not help the marginalised ones better their condition. Sir Ataullah is a typical classist as he believes that he rose in the socioeconomic hierarchy because he had both intelligence and courage whereas others could not, because they are illiterate and lazy (115). Sir Ataullah remains quite agitated with his son who makes him feel like a cipher, while eventually, Sayeed leaves the house for the Party office. The clash between the two remains unresolved much like the ensuing clash between the Capitalist ideology and Marxist ideology.

Jahan's such works deal with 'Socialist Realism' which, to quote the words of Raman Selden, et al in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, "was considered to be a continuation and development of bourgeois realism at a higher level" (96). Her stories "Gharibon Ka Bhagvan", "İnşaf", "Vh Jal Gaī," etc. too carry Marxist streak. In such works of Jahan, one finds the quality of *nardonost*' about which Raman Selden, et al write, "The quality of *nardonost* (popularity) is central to both the aesthetics and the politics. A work of art of any period achieves this quality by expressing a high level of

social awareness, revealing a sense of the true social conditions and feelings of a particular epoch” (95).

Jahan As a Propagator of Hindu-Muslim Harmony:

Jahan’s three-act play “Parosī” (neighbor) upholds the very important theme of Hindu-Muslim unity. The very title suggests that the play is about two people who exist next-door to each other and that instantly brings up associated ideas of closeness, friendship and love between them. Here a Hindu and a Muslim family (Indira’s and Kulsum’s respectively) are each other’s neighbors and harbor negative feelings for one another. One can feel that there is tension and hostility between Hindus and Muslims. They hold prejudices against each other; both other and demonize each other as is gathered from the conversation of the two sides. A Muslim friend of Indira’s husband comes his home whom he asks to have meal with him. He hardly discriminates against him and eats with him without any prejudice, just like his other Hindu friends. But there is much hullabaloo as his elder sister-in-law, Shanti throws away all the utensils used by him. She cannot allow the same utensils to be used by her and her family members as the Muslim man is the ‘other.’ They can eat something cooked by a Hindu untouchable but not from a Muslim because the untouchable is after all a Hindu. Even those who are at the lower rung of the socioeconomic strata other Muslims as we get to know that Durga had to leave her job at the insistence of her mother-in-law because she would not allow her to wash the dishes of the Muslims. The fact that Durga washed the dishes of the Muslims was informed to her mother-in-law by another Hindu woman who too finds it unacceptable that Durga should wash the dishes of the Muslims. Indira also supports this because then they would not have allowed her to come to her house since washing the dishes of the Muslims would have defiled her (Durga) and her religiosity.

In the play, the Hindu women discuss the impending riot. From their discussion, it becomes clear that they are the victims of the propaganda politics which has given them a lopsided view of things and filled them with manufactured hatred for the rival religious group. On the other hand, Kulsum’s opinions of Hindus are also in the same strain. She thinks that every Hindu man and woman is armed with deadly weapons to kill Muslims, while the Muslims never do any mischief.

However, the ice of mistrust and false fear between them is thawed through Indira’s initiative as she visits Kulsum after hearing about her illness. Once they start talking, they realize that both of them are very normal human beings, and not at all blood-thirsty of each other, as Kulsum, later on, says, “*Ab mujhe kya m’alum tha ki Hindu kaise hote hai?*” (“How would I know how Hindus are”; my translation; 237).

In the third act of the play, a character called Bharati Begum is introduced who teaches anti-casteism and love for the country. Her name with which she has rechristened herself—Bharati is very symbolic and means

Indian. In order to represent herself as an embodiment of Hindu-Muslim harmony, she has chosen such a name for herself in which Bharati is a Hindi word while Begum is an Urdu word. She tells people that she is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but her religion is Indian. Sylvester Tamang in “These Instances Show How Hindu-Muslims Have Always Remained United in India” writes:

India is an inclusive country where all religions try to live in harmony. There are a few instances that prove otherwise, but we still have people who continue to respect each other’s religion . . . From celebrating Diwali and Eid together to a Muslim man taking care of a Hindu temple, these heart-warming incidents set an example of communal harmony and tolerance.

When there was riot in the city, it was Bharati Begum who gathered all the Hindu and Muslim women and made them protect their area from rioters, thus giving out a strong message that rioters do not belong to any religion; they are merely mischief-makers. The message also went out that commoners of both the communities just want to live peacefully. Jahan, being her feminist self, makes women the upholders of Hindu-Muslim harmony. Bharati Begum is teaching and leading the women to come out of their veiled lives, to be confident, and spread anti-casteism and anti-communal hatred message. This is her patriotism and nationalism since Hindu Muslim unity is an important aspect of India.

In another three-act play “Hindustanī” (Indian), Jahan uses the brilliant device of parallelism to show how Hindus and Muslims are the same. Sheikh Salamuddin and Swaroop Chand are neighbors and their children are in love with each other. Also, both Sheikh Salamuddin and Swaroop Chand are politicians and aiming to win the election, by hook or by crook. Both have their respective henchmen—Hamiduddin and Tara Chand. Their conversations are also almost similar, as both talk about defeating their respective rivals, and both their henchmen are trying to buy out the voters. Both also talk about Hindu-Muslim violence to win the election. Both use the name of religion to incite innocent people against each other. Ultimately, both are successful in inciting communal violence and because of which innocent people lose their lives and get injured. But what the commoners desire is evident when post-communal violence, two people talk to each other—one is Hindu, the other a Muslim—and both regret being a part of this bloody affair and also do not understand why this face-off took place. It shows how innocent commoners end up becoming pawns at the hands of crooked politicians. They lose their lives or their loved ones, while the murderer-politicians get benefitted only. All these themes are relevant even today, and this play is as important today as it was when it was written.

In this play, sensitive issues of Hindu-Muslim violence and inter-religion marriage are under the scanner. The play is highly relevant as today also we see that to fan Hindu-Muslim hostility and to have Hindu-Muslim riot have

become the ticket to win elections. We also see the hollow religiousness of these politicians who worship no God but only power. After talking about the communal riot and after having drunk alcohol, Shiekh Salaamuddin and Hashmatullah leave to offer namaz at the mosque. Leaving for mosque also has its political (not religious) purpose as it is his hooligan henchman, Hashmatullah's advice to go to the mosque to show his Muslim supporters how pious he is, since his rival also does so. At a time when religion and politics are inter-mixed in our country like never before, people like Sheikh Salaamuddin and Swaroop Chand do not surprise us. They both use religion to attain pelf and power.

An important turn in the plot comes about when it is revealed that the son (Ashraf) and daughter (Razia) of Sheikh Salaamuddin are in love with the daughter (Sita) and son (Suresh) of Swaroop Chand respectively. Here also, the device of parallelism is used to efface any difference between Hindus and Muslims, and to make them indistinguishable. The conversation of these two couples—Suresh and Razia and Ashraf and Sita—is almost the same. Both have put themselves in trouble as they have pitted themselves against the rigid orthodox ideas according to which it is a sin to marry a person of the other religion. Both the couples are madly in love with each other, notwithstanding what it means to be in love with a Hindu or Muslim person. Both Ashraf and Suresh want to marry after converting their respective beloveds to their respective religions. Quite understandably, their inter-religion marriages are near impossible, and throughout the play, there is uncertainty whether they will unite or not.

Jahan's play "Hindustani" challenges hate narratives at their core by showing what the two inter-religious couples ultimately choose to do. The last dialogue of the play by Suresh is "*Āo hum caron Hindustani ban kar jiyen*" ("Come, let us live like Indians"; my trans.; 196). Thus, Jahan sends a strong message of nationalism and patriotism by advocating inter-religion marriage; this is her attempt to create unity and harmony between Hindus and Muslims who, to her, are only 'Indians.' About this play, Rakhshanda Jalil in "Writer and Dramatist" comments, "In *Hindustani*, she [Jahan] has Suresh marrying Razia and Ashraf marrying Sita, indicating the way to a more heterogeneous India, one that is hopefully more tolerant" (106).

Jahan's short story "Sarak" (Street) also deals with Hindu-Muslim issues. Thus, through such works Jahan shows her patriotism and nationalism by propagating communal harmony. Like a true Indian, Jahan preaches Hindu-Muslim unity because India is a country where Hindus, Muslims and other religious communities have always dwelt together and this diversity is what makes India, India. The harmonious co-existence of Hindus and Muslims in India is the characteristic trait of India; it is its beauty.

Conclusion

Having studied a few aspects of Jahan's work, we may conclude that

Jahan's works remain very pertinent even in today's time, and thus achieve universality and social relevance. She portrays the ills of the Muslim society, not to malign it but to foreground the problems, so that people start talking about it and redress those ills. Being a Muslim, she knew the problems plaguing the Muslim community more intimately. Carlo Coppola and Sajida Zubair's words are so apt in "Rashid Jahan: Urdu Literature's First 'Angry Young Woman'": "Because she was the first Urdu woman writer to address herself squarely, consistently, and forcefully to the myriad problems of the middle- and lower-middle class woman in Indian society, she can rightly be called Urdu literature's first 'angry young woman'" (166). Remaining true to her commitment to the Communist Party of India, she writes about social inequality and wishes for the acceptance of Marxist and Communist ideas by Muslims too. One strong example of this is the above-discussed story "Iftārī." By touching upon the theme of communal harmony, Jahan shows her nationalism and patriotism, since her works echo her heart-wrenching cry to rise above the communal hatred and live harmoniously, not like Hindus or Muslims, but like 'Indians.' In today's time, these works of her gain an immense amount of significance and relevance when our motherland has been poisoned with communal hatred like never before. Jahan was a woman much ahead of her time, and she will always be revered as an important voice of Muslim feminist and social reformer.

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