

MARXIST CRITIQUE OF DISINTEGRATION OF INDIGENOUS VALUE-SYSTEM UNDER BOURGEOIS HEGEMONY IN MOHSIN HAMID'S NOVELS

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Abstract

This paper presents Marxist study of Mohsin Hamid's novels to show how unrestricted capitalism is subverting indigenous value system of social empathy. Local value system, its norms, traditions and ecosystems are disintegrating under the pressure of profit motives of globalized capitalist forces resulting in social apathy. Marxism which defends indigenous cultural and economic patterns of behavior, social collectivity, self-sufficiency and restrained utilization of environment, is being maligned through the use of misconceptions and half-truths because monopolized bourgeois class, Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) stigmatizes Marxist ideology as outmoded. But, the discontent in the ranks of the working class goes on smoldering because under the much publicized façade of growth in international commerce and trade, unemployment has increased manifold resulting in social disequilibrium. Hamid's novels present a picture of the socio-economic imbalance occasioned by globalization and bourgeois mind-set active at national and international levels necessitating the temperance of unchecked capitalist immoderations with Marxist regulations.

Key Words: Marxism, neo-colonialism, globalization, hegemony, social apathy, indigenous values, ISAs

Introduction

Mohsin Hamid, a Harvard Law School graduate, is an internationally acclaimed best-selling Pakistani novelist. Hamid, who writes for post-post-colonial generation, distinguishes between Western colonialism and new economic world order of post-independence era. He does not approve of postcolonial critique of Frantz Fanon (1963) and Ania Loomba (2005) who affirm that colonialism persists even after independence of the once colonized societies in the form of institutions and ideologies and is responsible for the existing socio-economic instability in the Third World. Paul Jay (2005), in "The Post-post Colonial Condition: Globalization and Historical Allegory in Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*", points out the focus of the novel on economic globalization. The author analyzes the contemporary city of Lahore through a "post-postcolonial" perspective; and instead of contextualizing the existing social milieu of the city under the impact of colonialism, he relates cultural and economic transformations brought about to the city

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and its inhabitants with the advent of economic globalization. There is a deliberate bypass of the colonial effects of the British Raj. This historicization of the contemporary situation of the city of Lahore ignores and undermines the postcolonial perspective that colonialism persists in a very subtle way even after independence. However, Hamid shares the perspective of Kwame Nkrumah (1965) who argues that the new economic world order established by ex-colonial powers and the newly-emerged superpowers especially USA, which is sustained through international monetary bodies, multinational corporations, cartels, consortia, and educational and cultural institutions, is responsible for the existing socio-economic disequilibrium in postcolonial societies. Hamid's thesis at Princeton on the use of bio-fuels to combat global warming in developing countries evinces his sensitivity towards adverse effects of neo-colonial globalization in disintegrating ecosystems and local values. His job at McKinsey & Company further added to his awareness of exploitative designs of the capitalists. Whatever the apparent leitmotifs of his novels, a distinct perception of the excesses of corporate capitalism pervades them in one way or the other. The indigenous values are disintegrating under the crushing profit-motives of global corporations.

Dynamics of the globalized world are consistently present in the background of all the three novels of Mohsin Hamid. His debut novel *Moth Smoke* (2000) is about widening gulf between the haves and the have-nots in a society rotten to the core with the evils of globalization. His second novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) is the story of a disillusioned young Pakistani working in corporate America. The so-called 'war on terror' seems an economic enterprise tearing apart fragile social orders of the weaker nations. Similarly, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013) portrays a society in which financial corruption has not only weakened the infrastructure of the state, its religious and educational institutions, but also has become a normal social practice. The onus of this sad state of affairs cannot be shifted to anything but global capitalist forces.

Literature Review and Methodology

Keeping in view the key research issue of the study, literature review consists of critical reading of Marxism and review of sporadic attempts of the critics of Hamid to identify Marxist vein in his works. Propounded

by Karl Marx, Marxism is a set of lego-historical and economic views which are directed at social change in favour of the oppressed class. Marxism offers a materialistic interpretation of history and culture. “Marx had nothing but scorn for the idea that there was something called history which had purposes and laws of motion quite independent of human being” (Eagleton, 2007, p. 45). In its classic form, culture is considered a repository of humanistic values. Its true end is the suspension of commodification of the individual and his reintegration with the actual life processes in a society. But under capitalism, culture is entangled with economy and is contaminating cultural and economic patterns of behavior and thought of various cultural zones of the world to create a society of consumers. “Culture today is infecting everything with sameness. Film, radio and magazines form a system. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 94).

There is a renewed interest in Marxism in the wake of corporate imperialism of North with its drive for unchecked consumption of environment and resources of the world. Advocates of neo-liberalism argue that globalisation of economy under capitalistic values has established the inevitability of bourgeoisie economic and cultural parameters. Whereas Marxist critics affirm that due to its peculiar aims and objectives (profit principle), capitalism does not have the energy to manage cultural and political liberalization of human society. As bourgeoisie culture strives for an international society of consumers, it organizes leisure time of the individual in pursuing gratification of his desires which, in turn, requires more production and more consumption of goods. “The consumers are the workers and salaried employees, the farmers and petty bourgeoisie. Capitalist production hems them so tightly in body and soul that they unresistingly succumb to whatever is proffered to them” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 106).

Mohsin Hamid’s works present a sordid picture of socio-economic inequality and disparity at national and global level due to the financial hegemony of local and international bourgeoisie class. A number of critics of Mohsin Hamid have made progressive interpretations of his works. Jhumpa Lahiri (2002) and Jasmine Alibhai Brown (2014) have identified the theme of economic disparity under globalised economy in Hamid’s works. Paul Jay (2005) has pointed out the issue of economic

globalisation and its discontents in the novels of Hamid. To add to it, Arundhati Roy has identified the exploitative role of privatization under capitalist economy in the works of the author. But keeping in view the popularity and the contemporary relevance and appeal of Hamid's critique of globalized world, the above-mentioned criticism seems scanty. So, this Marxist study of subversive effect of globalization on indigenous value-system will hopefully fill the gap of Marxist critique of Hamid's works and motivate the researchers to continue with and further extend Marxist reading of the works of the author.

The present study is a qualitative study. The mode of enquiry is textual analysis of the Marxian vein in the works of Hamid. Considering the major strains of the study, the most appropriate theoretical framework is literary Marxism which advocates political readings of all literatures. Marxist theorists and critics consider various phases of globalisation ranging from 19th century Western colonialism to the recent corporate globalisation of North as purely materialistic enterprise. They do not endorse capitalistic cultural globalisation of the entire world. Marxism approves of all those economic and cultural patterns of behavior and thought of various cultures and societies provided that they manage and accommodate the principle of self-sufficiency of the individual.

Analysis and Discussion

Works of Hamid deal with the issues of socio-economic disequilibrium in the aftermath of economic imperialism of North through its multinational corporations. Corporate globalisation has not only widened the gulf between the rich and the poor but also has resulted in class stratification on the basis of materialistic possessions diluting all cultural, religious and ethnic divisions into a class conflict for monopoly over means of production. Analysis of the works of the author will focus on the issues of class stratification, corporate hegemony and financial mismanagement – the issues highlighted in *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*.

Class Stratification and Social Apathy in *Moth Smoke*

Moth Smoke on a micro level presents three social classes – the privileged class, the middle class and the laboring class through the characters of Aurangzeb (Ozi), Darashikoh (Daru) and Murad Badshah

respectively. The upper class is morally and financially corrupt, holds sources of production and power, can blatantly use RSAs to gain their ends, is insulated and lives in a controlled environment rich in all sorts of luxuries. They get all the benefits of economic globalisation. Middle class young men like Daru, restricted to their class under financial constraints, are wasting their talents. The working class represented by Murad Badshah gives vent to its anger by resorting to violence and getting sadistic pleasure in watching the rich suffering.

In *Moth Smoke*, social stratification is based on the availability of luxury items. Prof Julius Superb presents a novel idea of social stratification based on the availability of air-conditioning facility. In a Marxian vein, he states that there are two social classes in Pakistan: the first is large and sweaty and the second small but in full control of immediate environment. In the words of Prof. Julius Superb (a character in the novel), “They’re a mixed lot – Punjabis and Pathans, Sindhis and Baluchis, smugglers, mullahs, soldiers, industrialists – united by their residence in an artificially cooled world” (Hamid, 2000, p. 103). It is obvious that all racial, ethnic, religious, professional identities are melting away in the face of economic realities and commodity-fetishism. Ozi is obsessed with the idea of mastering his environment with air-conditioning and he likes to sleep under heavy blanket in the middle of the summer and naked under a single sheet in winter.

Ozi explains to his wife that he has returned to Lahore to help his father protect his ill-gotten money accumulated as a senior civil servant. His education abroad gave him expertise in money-laundering by creating little shell companies in Cayman Islands. Not only does he indulge in illicit dealings but also justifies his act as inevitable: “People are robbing the country blindly, and if the choice is between being held up at gunpoint or holding the gun, only a madman would choose to hand over his wallet rather than fill it with someone else’s cash” (Hamid, 2000, p. 184).

Pajero jeep is a symbol of power for Ozi to bully the people with small cars. For him, the foremost traffic rule is that “... bigger cars have the right of way” (Hamid, 2000, p.25). He can go scot free after crushing a boy and can even incriminate Daru, the eyewitness of the accident. In this way, the upper class can use Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) to repress the helpless lower classes. Ozi’s father is a retired bureaucrat – a

vestige of the colonial era, considering himself more of a master than a public servant. He is a contributor to the weakening of the state authority in order to protect his vested interests. He acts as a global agent who is neo-colonial in nature and identifies himself with the exploiters of the working class.

Dara Shikoh (Daru) stands for the oppressed middle class. He is the victim of oppression of the elite which are fearful of his potential. Growing up alongside Ozi, he develops a love-hate relationship with the rich. His anguish mounts when he cannot afford to fly abroad for a degree. Apparently, his aggressive temperament causes his downfall but the real factors behind this imbalance of his personality are economic hardships. He cannot pursue his Ph.D studies at the local university because he was obliged to do a job in a bank to make both ends meet. But soon he is fired for calling a spade a spade to Malik Jiwan, a corrupt feudal and member of the Provincial Assembly. The manager sides with the upper class feudal in ruthless use of RSA. After losing his job, he is unable to afford electricity for his small house which accelerates his downfall. He degenerates to the lowest when he sells hash to the kids of the rich to keep his body and soul together. With a little financial support, he himself could have been a Doctor of Philosophy in economics and an innovative microcredit banker of the country. Jhumpa Lahiri (2000) in her article "Money Talks in Pakistan" ascribes this personality imbalance of Daru to the economic disparity he faces in the society.

Craving for a luxurious life engendered in Daru by the close contact with rich and glamorous clique of the city is distorting his personality. He is ambivalently drawn to upper class and avoids his uncle Fatty Chacha's household. Partying at mansions like that of Ozi's or farm houses of big guns of the city attract him far more than simple, homey, appetizing, desi-tasting weekly family luncheons. He is not interested in simple Eastern beauties like his Tinky Phoppo's daughters but stunning, glamorous, accomplished Mumtaz who ravishes his soul. Sumptuous dinners in Ozi's circle leave him disturbed internally but dazzle his eyes all the same. Simple roti with mango slices at Chacha's, though soul satisfying yet plain, compared with multi-course elite party dinners.

The condition of the laboring class is even more pathetic. Murad Badshah develops a rationale to use violence and even resorts to the

criminal activities to effect redistribution of national wealth. He sounds more convincing and justified in his course of action when he regards the right to possess property as contingent one, and the right to live as absolute one:

When disparities become too great, a superior right, that to life, outweighs the right to property. Ergo, the very poor have the right to steal from the very rich. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that the poor have a duty to do so, for history has shown that the inaction of the working classes perpetuates their subjugation. (Hamid, 2000, p.64)

His instinct of self-preservation is so strong that he wants to wipe out yellow cab owners to save his rickshaw business: “The marauding yellow cabs had devastated the rickshaw industry, so I conducted a little redistribution of wealth on my own. Robbing yellow-cab drivers as they slept put my finances back in the black” (Hamid, 2000, p.63). He is bitterly antagonistic to the bourgeoisie, even approves of load-shedding as it also pains the rich. To him boutiques, thriving in the times when people face flour shortages, are intolerable. He is sick of subsisting on the droppings of the rich, and finds it obligatory to lighten the burden of the wealth of the rich.

It is obvious that the society is losing its bearings in the face of business interests of the global bourgeoisie. Multinational corporations have no affinity with any land and rob the countries relentlessly. They know that after manipulating natural resources of one country they can move somewhere else. Consumerism is destroying native cultures which are suitable to local conditions. Insatiable lust for money in the upper class is subverting the traditional societies. Big producers are using media for creating consumer societies. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown (2014) criticizes needless buying by the well-to-do which is not only accentuating social and economic disparity but also creating health hazards. She compares the post-World War II British social norms with those of the present day. Brown says:

The orgy was an apt metaphor for a society which has lost its bearings and self-restraint. During and after the last World War, people knew the value of things, could hold back gratification, hadn't yet come to believe the pernicious message – now embedded in our culture – that they were what they owned. (para 2)

Capitalism has monopolized markets and resources. Big corporations have marginalized the local small industries, impoverishing the proletarians. Global integration of financial markets has only increased disparity between the few ultra-rich and the poor masses.

Corporate Hegemony in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

The Reluctant Fundamentalist starts with Changez's entrance into the corporate world where he is attracted by alluring salary and luxurious life. His pursuit of corporate ideals is, in fact, the negation and rejection of his native culture in favor of bourgeois culture of which he wants to become a part. However, Changez's subsequent return to his native country after resignation from Underwood Samson (US) is, in fact, a resignation from American Values and Corporate world. The whole novel is replete with the protos constant wavering in a bid to choose between corporate hegemony and essentials of his ethical faith. The corporate world allures him for some time but later on he realizes its rottenness at the core.

Hamid has intelligently selected his hero from the corporate world in order to show the American financial hegemony over the rest of the world. In this way, it becomes easier for him to show that the modern world is ruled by corporate laws rather than ethical principles. The collapse of American Twin Towers is the reflection of collapse of modern financial hegemony and Mohsin affirms that the world cannot be ruled this way for long.

The Reluctant Fundamentalist primarily raises the issue of multiculturalism in the US after 9/11, yet it echoes Imperial hegemony shown by the USA in dealing with the threat of terrorism. The USA dealt with all *others* in the over-bearing manner of erstwhile European colonial masters. As Anna Hartnell (2010) points out that Changez works in "Underwood Samson", the initials of which match and are a symbol of power of the US. He loved a woman named Erica (AmErica), a personification of American nationalism. American economic power has over-reached itself and is self-destructive like Erica. The actual focus of the novel is American Empire rather than British or Mughal ones. Erica's grief of Chris's death is slowly killing her just as 9/11 is consuming America. Erica's beauty and innocence is still attractive but she has imploded just as The Twin Towers exploded. Underwood Samson values companies in order that they might be broken up and sold and Changez is

also becoming an expert of this art but he realizes timely that his ideals lie elsewhere. During Changez's visit to the publishing company of Chilean publisher Juan Bautista, the Chilean publisher's questions shake Changez's faith in his company's motto *focus on the fundamentals*:

“Does it trouble you,” he inquired, “to make your living by disrupting the lives of others?” He finds himself agreeing with Juan Bautista admitting: “In any case, Juan-Bautista's words plunged me into a deep bout of introspection. I spent that night considering what I had become. There really could be no doubt: I was a modern-day janissary, a servant of the American empire...” (Hamid, 2007, p.151)

Changez's awakening to his complicity in larger design of American imperialism makes him end his career in the US and return to Pakistan. He feels that he was blinded by the rhetoric employed by his officers in the company.

Changez had absorbed dictates of global capitalism which were manipulating the Third World countries including his homeland; he became reluctant 'traitor' to his native country. But when disillusionment follows, he turns into a reluctant fundamentalist. He tells the American how he recognized him by his 'bearing' not by his 'color'. He realizes that under the banner of 'American Dream' one has to pay a hard price for wealth and opportunities within America. Soon, he feels betrayed and his focus seemingly changes from financial fundamentalism of his firm to religious fundamentalism rife in Pakistan; but this change is not brought about by his religiosity. The excesses of global economic system are surfacing here and there. The hegemonic thinking of global agents is disrupting social equilibrium around the world, and its blow back may carry away everything that comes its way.

Social and Financial Disruption in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*

In this novel, Mohsin Hamid presents a society which is a hot-bed of corruption and is providing opportunities of advancement to those who are willing to shun all moral principles in pursuit of their material ambitions. With the structure of a self-help book, each chapter has a heading in the form of a piece of advice to get filthy rich in Asia. About half of these formulae are inculcating in the readers that corrupt, immoral and illegal ways are inevitable to get filthy rich. This culture is of late origin when neo-colonial approach of the big corporations superseded the old colonial approach of the Crown. In Colonial era, the imperial

masters needed strong administrative structures in their colonies to exercise RSAs and ISAs. But when independence had to be given to their colonies, they needed weak governments unable to pose any resistance to the capitalistic interests of the multinationals. Media have become the chief ISA, manipulating the public opinion on an unprecedented scale. Now, natural resources of other countries are exploited unchecked which was the prime motive of 16th century Imperialism.

The rise of the protagonist from rags to riches owes to his Machiavellian spirit and pragmatic entrepreneurial ambition. Starting his career from selling expired food-cans relabeled as non-expired ones, he moves to selling fake bottled water and expands this business by bribing the bureaucracy and establishing partnership with the artists of war. He uses violence to counter violence with the help of a religious magnate, dances with the debt, bribes income tax and customs officials. This corruption in bureaucratic and official ranks helps the multinational companies to work unhindered and plunder the Third World Countries which could not have been possible in the presence of strong corruption-free governments. The bourgeoisie has constructed relations of production for their benefit using rosy concepts like private property, free flow of capital and labor. By using print and electronic media, they create a false consciousness in the labor class to disguise their own exploitative profiteering.

Protagonist's moving to the city is actually symbolic of shift of the whole society to new set of values. In villages, agriculture was more a way of life than a source of livelihood, and being relevant to their lives it also brought them satisfaction. But the exigencies of industrialization and globalization have changed this concept of life. In cities, the labor has different modes of wage-earning and the commodification of the workers makes them free of commitment to a particular place and community. Mohsin Hamid keenly observes the changes in social patterns, individual thinking and economic position of the people taking place both in rural and urban areas. "It is an explosive transformation, the supportive, stifling, stabilizing bonds of extended relationships weakening and giving way, leaving in their wake insecurity, anxiety, productivity, and potential" (Hamid, 2013, p.15).

Michiko Kakutani (2013) fairly appreciates Mohsin Hamid's *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* as a compelling story working on two

planes: a moving tale of romance and ambition as well as a metaphorical picture of socio-economic changes in rising Asia. The enterprising “you” goes to the university and falls in with politico-religious organization for “a monthly cash stipend, food and clothing, and a bed” (para 7) but later in life money becomes his religion. In addition he is a scare to the wealthy students and administration. She praises Mohsin Hamid for giving realistic picture of bribes and corruption greasing the social system. She feels that change taking place in rising Asia is in fits and starts: “Poverty and high-tech modernity exist side by side, turning the country into a patch work of the old and new, and the ugly urban sprawl of the in-between” (para 10).

In Industrial society, consumerism is the life-line of economy which needs urbanization. Factories need cheap labor. In Industrial economy, technology is indiscriminately applied all over the globe to maximize profit. But in an agrarian set-up, harmony between man and land guarantees conservation of this prime source of sustenance. Industrialization has contempt for anything natural, small and rural, tending to abuse all resources to the core and doing irretrievable damage to the social and environmental equilibrium.

Ruthless devastation of fertile agricultural land can be seen all around in the suburbs of the metropolis:

A new terminal sits across the runway from its predecessor, in what was formerly cropland but now lies within the ambit of the ring road, surrounded by housing developments, defense installations, slum-subsumed villages, golf courses, and the occasional hotly contested field, still free of construction and sprouting fronds of mustard, wheat, or corn. (Hamid, 2013, p.150)

Indiscriminate expansion of ring-roads, motorways and airports should not leave us in scarcity of fertile agricultural land to sustain our increasing population.

Mohsin Hamid in this novel depicts a rat-race to get rich over-night subjecting oneself to exhausting routines and turning a blind eye to social, familial and personal obligations. It is causing frustration and weakening fraternal bonds. Protagonist cannot marry the ‘pretty girl’ because of her vaulting ambitions in the dazzling world of showbiz and the demands of her work do not let her bound herself in the matrimonial relations. She cherishes her economic independence and escapes familial responsibilities. Spread on large scale, this trend is disrupting the whole social fabric.

Protagonist's obsession with his work results in the break-up of his marriage that would have been an enviable success otherwise. Young, beautiful, educated, and docile wife, raised in a typical middle class household, could not bear the bedroom estrangement brought about by the fatigue caused by material pursuits of her husband. The conjugal life is steadily and stealthily slipping towards ruination: "it does not occur to you that your wife's love might be slipping from your grasp, or that, once it is gone, you will miss it" (Hamid, 2013, p.136). The protagonist has been busy as a bee collecting money and neglecting relations.

It invokes the literary accounts of corporate economy by Arundhati Roy (2014) who in *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* argues that privatization is, in reality, a corporate accumulation by dispossessing the poor. This takeover of natural resources is shown as an inevitable act in the public interest by corporate media. She even lashes Anna Hazare's movement against corruption because she sees it as an attempt to gain favor for more privatization. Weakened governmental control is strengthening different interest groups which are ultimately bound to disrupt organization of the society. The middle class is internalizing the constructs of Corporate Foundation insidiously and is gaining a control of political and intellectual life of the masses. In the name of *laissez faire*, most of the decision-making goes into the hands of the private owners who try to maximize profit. The protagonist learns to work remote from "state's imperial economic grip" and grasps the truth: "No, harnessing the state's might for personal gain is a much more sensible approach" (Hamid, 2013, p.140). In an enlightened society, non-interference of government in business matters could work but in a backward and in-cohesive society, it cannot. So, in the novel, the society looks in shambles and we meet a teacher who aspires to be a meter-reader; we see universities controlled by armed religious organizations; we are forced to deal with government officials accepting heavy bribes for both lawful and unlawful approvals. Civil and military bureaucracy is the vestige of British Imperialism. For the last two or three decades, the civil bureaucracy is facing a downfall but military bureaucracy is more or less still intact. They are symbols of RSA's but their awe in the minds of the public also serves as an ISA to tame the public into submission. Unfortunately, these institutions have degenerated to such an extent that they are a tool in the hands of the greedy capitalists. This social

disintegration needs urgent corrective measures and appropriate governmental regulations.

Conclusion

Three fictional works of Mohsin Hamid stand apart from one another with respect to their structures, backgrounds and themes, yet all share socio-economic concerns of the present day. Trade liberalization (free market economy) and its disruptive influence on indigenous value system are the conspicuous strands of these novels. Their reading helps understand the dynamics of class-struggle, the machinations of bourgeois hegemony and its subversive effect on indigenous culture of social empathy.

Mohsin Hamid does not concede postcolonial interpretation of his novels, and he himself being a member of the global world of finance by his educational background cannot be deemed as a Marxist writer, but concerns shown by him in his novels are in line with Marxist philosophy. Daru's plight occasioned by bourgeoisie, Changez's disillusionment with the corporate world, and rise of the protagonist in *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* through corrupt practices are food for Marxist thought. Mohsin Hamid's novels present a picture of shattered Pakistani society largely at the mercy of private capitalist interest groups. Hamid affirms that the state needs to be strengthened but only to uplift the downtrodden, not to oppress them. This pro-masses concern of Hamid does reflect strains of neo-Marxist approach and invokes the literary accounts of Terry Eagleton who in his *Why Marx Was Right* (2011) presents Marxism as a plausible alternative to Capitalism advocating its contemporary relevance. In the mad race for accumulation, we should not deprive our life of its peace, our land of its productivity and our environment of its livability.

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