Transnational Statelessness in Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

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Abstract

The paper attempts to examine Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* as its primary text. It utilizes Steven Vertovec's idea of "migrant transnationals" as the analytical tool. In doing so, it also uses Anna Jane Gordon's idea of "statelessness as enslavement" and Mira L. Siegelberg's definition of "statelessness." The paper specifically concentrates on how Bangladeshi refugees and (denationalized) people have been exploited /enslaved and how their transnational statelessness (neither Bangladeshi nor Indian) renders them vulnerable. As the refugees were forced to leave their state/political and legitimate home due to post-partition political turmoil and were attacked/ harmed by both the tide and Indian citizens/people in the Sundarbans and in Calcutta /Kolkata. The so-called "lower" class and "lower" caste people from Bangladesh come to the Sundarbans (tide country) where they are treated as illegitimate and invalid, politically, belonging nowhere (deterritorialized). So, these people have been enslaved in India. Ghosh wants to explore, quite faithfully and realistically, this side of inhumanity, which is prevalent in contemporary society.

Keywords: globalization, transnational Statelessness, refugees, migrant transnationalism

Introduction

The Hungry Tide, as the book's blurb notes*,* has been sold for translation in twelve foreign countries and is also a bestseller abroad. Ghosh has won France's Prix Medici Etranger, India's prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Pushcart Prize (*The Hungry Tide,* no intact pag.). *The Hungry Tide* (*HT*, hereafter) centres around Kanai Dutt and Piyali Roy (Piya), Nirmal and Kusum, Fokir, and Moyna, who happen to be in the Sundarbans. Ghosh's choice of the Sundarbans, as Kaur (2007) notes, "a vast salt-resistant mangrove forest in the Indo-Gangetic delta situated in the Bay of Bengal that lies between the borders of India and Bangladesh—as the locale of *HT* is brilliantly apt" (p. 127). Describing the Sundarbans after Ghosh, Kaur further reports, "[they] are a unique biotic space, a chain of islands that are constantly transformed by the daily ebb and flow of tides that create and decimate, at aberrant intervals, whole islands and eco-niches that struggle to adapt to the shifting levels of salinity in the water" (p. 127). "The Sundarbans' unique microculture and

ecosystem" as she further puts it, "situated across the borders of India and Bangladesh accentuates the violent history of contested national boundaries in the Indian subcontinent" (128). *HT* takes its readers beyond the narrowly conceived idea of citizens and nationalism to an ecologically cohesive world where all humans regardless of their state of origin live with compassion and mutual support.

Before examining the statelessness and its consequences in the novel, it is now necessary to have some critical engagement on the term, "statelessness" and its brief evolution, various consequences in the society.

As per Article 1.1, 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons, a stateless person is "a person who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law." By the late eighteenth century, as Siegelberg (2020) notes, "statelessness had become conceptually and rhetorically linked to the idea that individuals are the bearers of rights and duties by virtue of their status as human beings rather than as subjects of particular political communities" (p. 25). As he further notes, "statelessness did not begin with the First World War, but the war and its aftermath transformed its significance for international politics" (p. 29). This aspect of contemporary nationality law, as he further contends, "the rules legislated by governments to regulate naturalization and denaturalization—evolved in response to concerns that residents would be able claim protection from other governments, and countries developed nationality laws in response to claims made by other countries on their subjects" (p. 29).

"Nationality legislation," as Siegelberg argues, "around the world rested primarily on an individual's inherited rights to citizenship (jus sanguinis) or the legal right to membership that arose from being born in a particular territory (*jus soli*), or acquired through naturalization" (p. 29). Talking about the etymology of the term "statelessness" or "homeless" Lipovano insisted:

The appearance of new terms to describe people without legal connection to any state marked the emergence of a wholly novel legal and political concept: in Italian, apolide; in French, apatride; in English, stateless; and in German, the designation staatenlos to replace the older term heimatlos, or "homeless." The word heimatlos remained in use, as we have seen, but was largely eclipsed by a vocabulary that more precisely denoted the absence of any legal connection to a political community. (qtd. in Siegelberg p. 83).

Piya is an enlightened environmentalist who is sensitive to the material and cultural interests of the locals, and she pays respect to the intimate local knowledge of the fishermen in accomplishing her cetological project. In this regard she puts in the last part of the novel, "And for myself, I know that I don't want to do the kind of work that places the burden of conservation on those who can least afford it. If I was to take on a project here I'd want it to be

done in consultation with the fishermen who live in these parts" (397). She further wonders to know about the fate of these stateless people, "Was it possible, even, that in Morichjhapi had been planted the seeds of what might become if not a Dalit nation, then at least a safe haven, a true freedom for the country's most oppressed?" (*HT*, pp. 190-191).

Nirmal's diary, further, records the despairing musings of Kusum, Fokir's mother, and one of the leaders of the revolt, on the siege of the island:

The worst part was not the hunger or the thirst. It was to sit there helpless, listening to the policemen making their announcements, hearing them say that our lives, our existence, were worth less than dirt or dust. This island has got to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is part of a reserve forest, and it belongs to a project to save tigers, which is paid for by people from all around the world.' [...]. Who are these people, I wondered, who love animals so much that they are willing to kill us for them? Do they know what is being done in their names? Where do they live, these people, do they have children [...]? As I thought of these things it seemed to me that this whole world has become a place for animals, and our fault, our crime, was that we were just human beings, trying to live as human beings always have, from the water and soil. (*HT*, pp. 261-262)

Thus, *HT* vacillates between the point of view of Piya, an Indian-American cytologist from Seattle, on a research trip and Kanai, a prosperous owner of a translation business in New Delhi, on a travel to meet his widowed aunt Nilima, and there he reads the stories in the journal left by his late uncle, Nirmal. Reading stories, he finds his family history about a peasant's family and about the conflict between the government and the settlers of Morichjhapi. These are the inter-textual elements. Kanai becomes a translator and interpreter to Piya when Piya meets Fokir and he becomes her guide. He is illiterate. They cannot communicate with each other. At that time, Kanai becomes her translator and interpreter as he is multilingual and knows six languages.

In this regard, when migrants move from places of their origin (by force or voluntarily) to destinations (host nations), many things may happen simultaneously. In this journey, these migrants carry over the language(s), cultural/social practices, values, habits, mindsets, ideologies, belief systems and many more with them too (sometimes, shockingly) unfamiliar territories. In these new locations, they encounter almost everything new and unfamiliar, whether it is language or socio-cultural practices. After a span of time, these migrants, as Homi K. Bhabha in his *The Location of Culture* (7) and Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin in their *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (135-37) suggest, find themselves in a state in which they have to adopt the host country's linguistic and socio-cultural practices, largely, in a creolized and hybridized forms in the process of transculturation.

Although many scholars, as Tamir notes, argue that theories of nationalism,

transnationalism and diasporic identities should be de-theorized since these theories ignore the facts that the phenomena of diaspora and/or nationalism are so deeply ingrained and rooted in the particular and specific contexts that they cannot and need not be generalized or theorized (419). At the risk of oversimplification, it can be argued that despite their specific and contextual differences between home and host nations in terms of systems of economy, education, politics, and geographical locations, the major characters represented in the selected primary texts in this study undergo similar processes with many common points between their country of origin and destination. There are many common push factors that compel the migrants to leave their home countries. The main push factors include (a) economic factors (lack of employment opportunities, low wages, and poverty), (b) socio-political factors (political instability, war, insecurity, discrimination, inequality), (c) educational factor (lack of quality /skill-based education).

As Vijaya Mishra notes, "All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way. Diasporas refer to people who do not feel comfortable with their non-hyphenated identities as indicated on their passport" (1). This study aims at bringing the processes of how the diasporas or mongrelized characters experience their journey into the new land into visibility.

Research Questions

Based on the primary text selected for this study, it is argued that the migrant subjects have found few things in common. They live disputed lives in the host nations and accept multiculturalism and feel glad about it. But, at the same time, living as migrant subjects on transnational locations, they shun their own cultural specificities and differences. These mongrelized characters, away from their comfort zones undergo arduous experiences and suffer much.

So, in the context of the proposed argument, this study attempts to seek answers to the following questions:

a. What is "identity" in transnational locations?
b. What type of identity do immigrant /emigrant characters (as represented in the selected novel) gain?
c. How and why do diasporic and transnational identities suffer and get subjected to enslavement?

All the research questions framed and interrogated above help the research delve into identities because these questions answer the major problem, justify the logic behind and also explain the procedures involved in it while reaching the findings.

Research Objectives

Based on the Research Questions, the study aims at:

a. comprehending identity including its various dimensions in transnational locations as

exemplified in the selected text;

b.   identifying the types of identity that the key characters in the text gain;

c.   examining how diasporic and transnational identities succumb to suffering and enslavement.

Delimitation

As a primary text, Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* has been chosen. Vertovec's idea of "migrant transnationalism" as the theoretical and analytical tool has been adopted, and in doing so, it also uses Anna Jane Gordon's idea of "statelessness as enslavement" and Mira L. Siegelberg's definition of "statelessness."

Literature Review

Although the social network of connectivity and interdependence across societies did exist even in the prehistoric period, modern innovations in science and technology have multiplied, expanded and intensified the state of global social interconnections and exchanges. As globalization has been an all-powerful and comprehensive force since the late twentieth century, contemporary Indian writers in English do replicate some shades of cultural globalization in their works. It is relevant to study Indian narratives in English in the light of the social-global phenomenon of globalization for two main reasons. First, these novelists have global coverage due to their choice of English language as a medium. The other important reason is that, as many critics including Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Leela Gandhi appreciate their work, Indian writers in English are regarded as the harbingers of cosmopolitanism, intellectual leaders, pedagogues of modernity and their works epitomize the discourse of globalization and internationalism as a vital antidote against nativism, localism and nationalism. Many writers and critics such as Salman Rushdie, Bill Ashcroft, Leela Gandhi, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan etc. have written criticisms on Indian writers in English. Available reviews on globalization of culture relevant to the research have been mentioned in the dissertation. Some of them are given here to show the research gap and the point of departure of my research work.

Cultural globalization involves the processes of circulation and common consumption of cultures beyond their communal frontiers at a global scale. It extends and intensifies social relations by the formation of shared norms and knowledge with which people associate their individual and collective cultural identities. Global cultural connectivity and interconnectedness is inherent in today's global cultural scenario. Arjun Appadurai adopts this idea in his discussion of the evolution of widespread global interactions and the tensions between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization.

As a category of cultural production, the Indian narrative in English replicatesthe cultural dimension of globalization. It has received immense critical observation from critics and readers globally, especially after the publication of Rushdie's The Midnight Children. It is

witnessing a satisfying output from both established and emerging writers. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2003) points out that Salman Rushdie's *The Midnight Children* successor novels "ostentatiously bore the burden of the nation." Rajan asserts that this national thematic replicates in "a range of attitudes, ideologies, and postures" of these self-conscious modernizers who express their "elitism, power, authority, noblesse obliges, possessiveness and the custodianship of tradition" (203-04). For Rajan, Indian novelists in English are the intellectuals endowed with liberalism and cosmopolitanism with a global outlook to look at nation-concerned narrative material. In a similar vein, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan views that from Rushdie's Midnight's Children the Indian contemporary fiction and non-fiction prose writers are "guided by such notions as "elitism, power, authority, noblesse oblige, possessiveness, and the custodianship of tradition assumed by self-conscious modernizers," they "internalize a subtle sense of entitlement that is often accompanied, ---, by the weight of an exacerbated consciousness of responsibility. All are inescapably aware of their centrality to the nation, as intellectual leaders, prophets of modernity and pedagogues of the people. Leela Gandhi (1998) neither completely approves nor completely discards Rushdie's valorizing the Indo-Anglicans' work as a maker of "the discourses of globalisation and internationalism" and Rukun Advani's praise of elite underpinnings of their work. She notices their creativity and representation of cultural realities in the postcolonial spirit in their works. For many critics including Gandhi, the strong waves of globalization remain a powerful influence in the writings of Indian writers in English.

On the whole, Indian novelists in English have a distinct place due to the nature of their intended readership and the medium of their writing. They write about India and the Indian way of life not for the Indian general public, but for global readers or for educated Indians. Another important aspect of their writing is that, as many critics including Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Leela Gandhi appreciate their work, they are regarded as the harbingers of cosmopolitanism, intellectual leaders, pedagogues of modernity and their works epitomize the discourse of globalization and internationalism as a vital antidote against nativism, localism and nationalism.

In this context, this study attempts to step onto the uniquely combined territory with two aspects of globalization of culture: homogeneity and hybridity as replicated in Indian narratives in English. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are no researches, so far, that have scrutinized the four primary texts in the light of globalization of culture. So, this research explores how these novels reveal cultural complexity as the by-product of globalization and demonstrate how two shades of globalization of culture, i.e., cultural homogenization and cultural hybridization, exist side by side.

Methods and Materials

As stated earlier the paper uses *HT* as its primary text. It utilizes Steven Vertovec's idea of "migrant transnationals" as the analytical tool. As Vertovec contends, "migrant transnationalism – a broad category referring to a range of practices and institutions linking migrants, people and organizations in their homelands or elsewhere in a diaspora – is a subset of a broader range of transnational social formations" (p.). In doing so, it also it uses Anna Jane Gordon's idea of "statelessness as enslavement" and Mira L. Siegelberg's definition of "statelessness." Arjun Appadurai's ideas of deterritorialization and disjuncture are also quite relevant to this article. The article specifically examines the plight of Bangladeshi refugees and analyzes how these (denationalized) people have been exploited /enslaved and how their transnational statelessness (neither Bangladeshi nor Indian) renders the refugees. As a part of literary research, this paper is primarily based on qualitative and interpretive inquiry with purposive sampling. The data /texts (primary or secondary) have been selected eclectically. The author's /researcher's role is that of the facilitator and the take is that of social constructionism.

Results and Discussion

There are multiple parallel lines between the fictional world of the novel, *HT* and the spacious-temporal references and events occurring in real-time history. In this regard, Ghosh in "Author's Note" announces that this novel is based on the incidents that happened in Marichjhãpi, West Bengal, India. Regarding the real events, Ghosh puts:

Around the time of its occurrence, the Morichjhãpi incident was widely discussed in the Calcutta press, English as well as Bengali. Today the only historical treatment available in English is an article by Ross Mallick, "Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhãpi Massacre" (Journal of Asian Studies 58:1, 1999, pp. 103–125). Nilanjana Chatterjee's excellent dissertation, "Midnight's Unwanted Children: East Bengali Refugees and the Politics of Rehabilitation" (Brown University) has unfortunately never been published. Annu Jalais's article, "Dwelling on Marichjhampi," is also yet to be published. (p. 349).

As Mallick (1999) argues "while the upper-caste squatters were getting their colonies legalized and services provided, the Untouchables became exiled to other states where they faced often hostile local populations" (p.112). He further notes, "Even the affirmative action programs for which, as Untouchables, they would have been eligible in West Bengal, were not recognized in the states in which they were settled, as their castes were not native to those states. The Leftist opposition could play on these grievances to obtain a political base among both the exiled refugees and caste members resident within West Bengal' (p.). The situation was further aggravated when: The refugees were well aware of their inherent disadvantage as

Untouchables, so they emphasized the common ethnic origins and refugee experiences that they shared with many elite families.

Every day countless non-Bengalis come to this state in search of work. The Left Front government does not put them on trains and return them to their own states. Thousands of people live unlawfully on the footpaths of Calcutta and the stations of West Bengal contributing to an unhealthy atmosphere. But the government does nothing about them. Is it because we are Bengalis that there is no place in this state for the refugees of Marichjhapi? Marichjhapi is not the only squatter colony in the state. The Marichjhapi refugees did not ask for money from the government, nor did they squat on other people's property, they only wanted the government's scrub and marshy wastelands. So I ask, what harm did the Marichjhapi refugees do to the Left Front government? Caste Hindus live in the other squatter colonies, and there were only Scheduled Castes [Untouchables) at Marichjhapi. Is that why there is no space for the people of Marichjhapi in this state? (Chatterjee 1992, 356)

The following paragraph of the *HT* clearly depicts why the Bangladeshi immigrants left their home country:

Once we lived in Bangladesh, in Khulna Zilla: we're tide country people, from

the Sundarbans' edge. When the war broke out, our village was burned to ash;   we crossed the border, and there was nowhere else to go. We were met by the police and taken away; in buses, they drove us to a settlement camp. We'd never seen such a place, such a dry emptiness; the earth was so red it seemed to be stained with blood. For those who lived there, that dust was as good as gold;   they loved it just as we love our tide country mud. But no matter how we tried,   we couldn't settle there: rivers ran in our heads, and the tides were in our blood. Our fathers had once answered Hamilton's call: they had wrested the estate from the sway of the tides. What they'd done for another, couldn't we do for ourselves? There are many such islands in the Bhatirdesh. We sent some people ahead, and they found the right place; it's a large empty island called Morichjhãpi. For months we prepared, we sold everything we owned. But the police fell on us the moment we moved. (p. 123).

The novel *HT* depicts the lively fruition of the relationship between humans and the relationships between previous events and the current ones. Piya and Fokir are from different places and follow different cultures but they easily communicate and also there are not any boundaries to accepting the cultural value. In this connection, Benjamin Markovits noticed the setting of this novel as:

For him the setting suggests varied possibilities; floods continually submerge the scattered bodies of land. Whole forests lift their heads above the tides and then disappear. Fresh and salty channels cut into each other, creating diverse natural habitats. The only permanent thing is the water. Whatever is human has to pick its spots among the inconstant islands. (2)

Piya comes from Seattle in search of dolphins. She doesn't speak Bengali because of this she has a communication problem. Her guide is a monolingual, illiterate Fokir. He cannot speak English. There is communication between them by means of gesticulation. Sometimes Kanai helps Piya translate Fokir's saying. Kanai runs a translation and interpretation agency. He presents the written record of his uncle's journal to the reader. When Piya, Kanai and Fokir are travelling together, at that time Piya hears Fokir chanting of traditional song. She does not understand and asks Kanai, "Can you translate (309)?" The translation theme is repeatedly used in the novel. When Kanai and Piya are eating and talking together, at that time Kanai asks Piya "Do you know what your expedition lacks … A translator (231)." Translation and interpretation are widely used two words in *The Hungry Tide* and these terms are linguistic transfer theoretically. Interplay across the text between written and oral modes is also shown in the novel.

> The partition of India, Pakistan and East Pakistan is a memorable event which remained infamous for mass murder, revenge, and genocide/ethnic cleansing. As a result, a considerable number of Hindus migrated to West Bengal. In 1971, there was another flow of Hindu refugees to the then East Pakistan (Bangladesh) of which the migrants consisted of "low-caste" Hindu migrants. The poor Dalit refugees "squatted on public and private land for shelter and security. The article aims to study how Dalit refugees were displaced, dispossessed and persecuted in the Bengal region with a special focus on the Marichjhapi incident" (p.29).

Ghosh showcases the painful situation of the refugees in which the police imposed a terrible siege:

> The siege went on for many days and we were powerless to affect the outcome. All we heard were rumours: that despite careful rationing, food had run out and the settlers had been reduced to eating grass. The police had destroyed the tube wells and there was no potable water left; the settlers were drinking from puddles and ponds and an epidemic of cholera had broken out. (201).

Ghosh's scheme of depicting the consequences of homelessness has been beautifully examined by Saswat S. Das in his work, "Home and Homelessness in The Hungry Tide: A Discourse Unmade":

> Ghosh in The Hungry Tide flips the theoretical underpinnings of the postmodern debate. His purpose is not merely to deconstruct the binary that holds home and homelessness as counterpoints, but to unite them as parts of an integrated whole. In deconstruction, elements rarely add up into a united, comprehensive whole. Rather, an artistic creation exposed to deconstructive strategy stands as a house divided against itself. Ghosh works by a method that can be called deconstructive, but then his

ostensible objective is to create an independent discourse, where terms such as home and homelessness can have meaning only when they are seen as containing each other, not as independent entities, locked in an eternal battle to game access into recent discursive fields. (p. 179)

Talking about the value of home Das further contends:

Home is where one lives and this can be anywhere in the world. Homelessness by this token is a state of enlightenment, containing all the suppressed desires of home, a route into dialectics that feeds on a realization that it is necessary for one to have a home first, in order to lose it. The ephemeral home of the river dolphins stands as the perpetual backdrop against which. The Hungry Tide writes its mythical story. At the end of it all, The Hungry Tide swallows up both 'homes. (p.180)

Kusum articulates, forcefully and poignantly, the voice of the marginalized underclasses who ultimately bear the unjust burden of the state's environmental agenda at the cost of their very lives and livelihoods. She indicts the irrational logic of an environmental program, largely funded by the West, in which human beings living on the edge of survival, like these refugees of Morichjhapi, become the expendable species in favour of the treasured tiger. The statelessness of these people was really exhibited when they were a little shaken when they go to Kusum's thatch-roofed dwelling. It was clear that she too was under strain. She explained that in recent weeks the government had been stepping up the pressure on the settlers: policemen and officials had visited and offered inducements for them to leave. When these proved ineffective, they made threats. Although the settlers were unmoved in their resolve, a kind of nervousness had set in: no one knew what was going to happen next (p. 187).

The policemen came speeding up to them. "Who are you people?" they demanded to know. "What are you doing here?" They paid no heed to answers; they told us that with Section 144 having been declared, we could be arrested for unlawful assembly" (p. 198).

The most heart-rending part of the novel is showcased by Kusum's condition in these words: "It was terrible to see Kusum: her bones protruded from her skin, like the ribs of a drum, and she was too weak to rise from her mat. Fakir, young as he was, appeared to have weathered the siege in better health and it was he who was looking after his mother" (p. 221).

The following paragraph of *HT further* showcases their agonies*:*

> Now, at close quarters, she saw in the dancing light of the flame, that the man's spear-point was stained with blood and that there were bits of black-and-gold fur stuck between the splinters. Suddenly it was as if she could see the animal cowering inside the pen, recoiling from the bamboo spears, licking the wounds that had been gouged into its flesh. There was another roar and this was matched a moment later by the voices of the crowd, screaming, in a kind of

maddened bloodlust, Maar! Maar! ... She could hear the flames crackling in the distance and she smelled the reek of burning fur and flesh. (294-95).

Kusum fights throughout her life, her parents desert her. She lives in a confident but without harmony. She contests her rights and expires without achievement. Fokirn ever catches those rights and perishes in an attempt to save Piya. The voice of the subaltern is hidden from the public ears by some authorities in Morichjhapi, Ghosh attempts to bring that expression to the public notice. In *HT,* Ghosh tries to showcase the life and struggles of the subaltern people of Morichjhapi village who have come from Bangladesh after the partition. These refugees are affected by the caste system and political dominance. Following Appadurai, one can conclude that the refugees were forced fully pushed away from their state/nation/home and forced to settle in a politically alien land and found themselves in a state of disjuncture, uprooted, alienated and denationalized, deterritorialized *(*p. 101).

Conclusion

To conclude, the novel raises the issue of statelessness and its consequences in the context of the India-Bangladesh refugee crisis in the Tide country. Ghosh, through this novel, asserts that whether Indian or Bangladeshi, these refugees, who are made as invalid illegitimate and vulnerable, are not different from those so-called genuine citizens of India. They should be treated as human beings. His appeal is evident when Ghosh creates Nirmal as his spokesperson in which Nirmal appeals to have mercy on those human beings whose fault is that they are human beings and not animals. Had they been animals, they would not have been rendered so vulnerable. The policemen are hunting to detain them. There was nothing to eat for the refugees who are reduced to eating grass. Although they had to learn survival skills from the tide, the cyclone, flood, water, and of course, the Bengal tiger, the greatest enemy for them is not the tiger, tide, or cyclone but another human being. The worst part of their life was not the hunger or the thirst, but it was to sit there helpless and listen to the policemen making their announcements, to hear them say that their livesexistence, were worth less than dirt or dust. This island has to be saved for its trees, it has to be saved for its animals, it is a part of a reserve forest, it but not for the humans.

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