

Their Eyes Were Watching God: A Literary Progenitor Of African American Feminism And American Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

Taking its lifeline from the contemporary issues, Their Eyes were Watching God (TEWG) echoes the African American women's (AAW) suppression and racial terrorism. Through new historicist considerations, the study aligns the historical facts with the author's life, and then, the aligned matches are judged against the events in the novel. Being part of the very commune, Hurston experiences the said issues directly, which shape the key argument of TEWG. The novel teaches the discriminated African Americans (AAs) and the suppressed AAW the art of democratic fight for their rights bracing the African American Feminism (AAF), and American Civil Rights Movement (ACRM). The movement/s challenge the AAs' second class citizenship, and demand equal rights for every American irrespective of caste, color, creed, sex, etc. Proving a milestone, TEWG through AAF and ACRM achieves what the Declaration of Independence (1776) and Emancipation Proclamation (1863) promise to deliver but fail to implement. Apart from giving a novel air of strength to the emerging women's struggle in Pakistan, the study corresponds to the UN's SDGs No. 5: Gender Equality, No. 10: Reduced Inequality, and No. 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions

Keywords: African American feminism, Civil Rights Movement, racial terrorism

Introduction

The twentieth century challenged nearly all the established double-standards in America, especially the second class citizenship of AAs and their women's double-suppressed position. AAs were in chains of racial discrimination, but their women were also in shackles of masculinity. These issues started appearing on the scene more clearly; in response, the victims openly challenged them for equal treatment. In waging this crusade, Zora Neale Hurston's (1891-1960) semi-autobiographical novel, TEWG (1937),

mirrored these contemporary issues and played a greater role in the moral resurrection of AA nation.

Till the 20th century, most of the American history-writers understated the hazards of slavery and racism, depriving AAs even of their history. The Declaration of Independence¹ and The Emancipation Proclamation² did not execute what they promised to AAs. Under the Jim Crow Laws³, AAs were still forced to facilitate their white masters. Being the second class citizens in a first class nation, AAs were

treated like sub-humans. One of the results of the Great Depression⁴, the Great Migration⁵ was another blow to AAs, which largely influenced America economically, socially as well as politically. Being deprived of relief benefits, AAs were the real victims of the Great Migration. Eventually, inequality and marginalization became an instrument of ideology establishing a cultural hierarchy—the superior Whites and the inferior Blacks with distinguished roles and identities. In this hierarchy, the White men and women stood on top followed by the AA men and, then, AAW. In short, for AAW, the time was a double edged sword: suffering at the hands of White community and, their own male masters.

Zora Neale Hurston, an AA literary writer, did not lead an independent life like the emerging new women⁶ of the day. She experienced what other AAW had to face in those days. In 1925, when she migrated to Harlem, New York, for a better job opportunity and social commune, her own miseries proved a pretext for TEWG. Throughout her career, she faced gnawing economic, racial, and misogynistic issues. But things got worse when she was accused of molesting a ten-year old handicapped boy, Mamie Allan, and two of his friends. She was arrested and jailed in 1948. Although, she was found innocent, the event stained her reputation. After the false allegation and betrayal of her own community, she was unable to write at the same pace for two reasons: her writings were inadmissible to her community and she found herself mentally unstable. As a result, Hurston started working as a maid in Rivo Alto, Florida. Throughout the 1950s, Hurston struggled for economic stability but she could not find the expected/desired job. In 1959, she had a stroke, and a year later, in January, 1960, she died of a heart attack in Fort Pierce. Her economic fragility

chased her till her funeral: she was buried in an unmarked grave.

While the AA scholars of the Harlem Renaissance⁷ sought to improve AAs' social position, Hurston's focus funneled down to women's oppression, and racial marginalization. Through her first-hand experience and these semi-historical reflections, she gave birth to a novel perspective in American fiction. Owing to these qualities, she stands as an exception among other writers of Harlem Renaissance. In her novel, *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942), Hurston overtly confesses that she was "thoroughly sick" of "the race problem" (p. 171). According to Lupton (1982), "...Hurston is giving us a 'New Woman', a woman whose actions are larger, even, than heroic" (p. 53). In sum, her focus revolved around herself and-identity in a society where women were third class citizens.

Her magnum opus, TEWG portrays the contemporary racial marginalization and the plight of AAW in an entrenched patriarchy more clearly. Going through the critical phases of American history, Hurston replicates as well as critiques these experiences in the text trailblazing a path for AAF and ACRM. The later took its inspiration from the awakening of AAW like Rosa Parks, which, for the first time, highlighted the cause of AAs internationally and unmasked the real American face. Appiah et al. (2005) believe "the Great Depression, the New Deal, World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement all brought sweeping changes in the AA community structure and corresponding shifts in the organizational bases for black feminism" (p. 628).

Discussion

New Historicism (NH) theory deals literary works or any kind of genre as a product of its

time, place, and historical circumstances. It studies the political, intellectual and cultural history of a society through its literature. In this respect, a literary text is linked to an actual history instead of literary trends. Taking a literary work as an effect of real-world problems, NH provides a broader and realistic ground to the text. According to Brannigan (1998), “The new historicist critics ... describe and examine the linguistic, cultural, social and political fabric of the past in greater detail” (p. 12). NH considers that the best backdrop for interpreting literature is to place it in its historical context—coexisting issues, anxieties, and struggles—that the literary work resounds. The theory, in this way, introduces literature in a different way. Its main argument is based on four points: first, literature is not the formation of individual effort but it is the society and culture that shape the ideas and provide a context for the composition of something. Second, literature, as a human activity, cannot be separated from history; instead it is integrated in history. Third, man like literature depends on social, economic and political constructs. Finally, historians are bound by social formation and their own ideological upbringing to understand history in its original sphere. Stephen Greenblatt's (1943-) *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004) is considered one of the foundational scholarships of NH.

This study revisits TEWG through the lens of NH to review its role in replicating and critiquing the debased values of American society. TEWG broaches three main aspects of NH: race, milieu, and contemporary era, which pepper the plot with actual historical events. The analysis explores the early 20th century's American milieu with relevance to the author's personal life. After aligning the historical facts with the author's personal life, the matched details are judged against the elements in the novel. This tripartite alignment will support the core rationale of the study that how the text stimulated AAF and

ACRM and how it could boost the budding women's rights struggle in Pakistan.

African American Feminism (AAF)

The story of American women's predicament starts with the Declaration of Independence which denies them equal rights. First Lady, Abigail Adams's letter (1776) to her husband, John Adams, addresses the condition of women: “Remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could.” President Adams's reply was: “As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot help but laugh” (Hooper, 2012, p. 19). In such circumstances, where, White American women were ridiculed for their rights; the AAW's problems of inequalities were greater. Loder-Jackson (2015) testifies, “African American women in the U.S. South have been traditionally excluded from or relegated to subordinate roles within formally organized civil rights, women's rights, and labor rights groups” (p. 6). Though late, AAW vehemently entered into this fight against the repression of masculinity and racism.

Hurston is one of those brave women, who transcend their misogynistic, social, cultural, political and economic barricades. Missy Dehn Kubitschek confirms that, “Hurston's characterization of strong and courageous black women inspired future black women writers” (as cited in Nelson, 2000, p. 263). Likewise Hooper (2012) considers, “Black feminism is feminine consciousness through an African American perspective” (p. 37). Picking the same thread, Gainey (2012) asserts, “Indeed, the period Hurston lives and writes is unique particularly for African Americans. The culture that exists during the decades of Modernism in the South agrees considerably with Hurston's consistent themes concerned with tension over gender, class, race and religion” (p. 4-5). Behar and Gordon (1995) view “. . . voices of African American feminist

scholars whose commitment to discourse inflected with race and gender analysis have brought attention to works frequently overlooked. The most glaring example of such erasure is Zora Neale Hurston” (p. 149-150). In such scenario, Hurston appears to be the first name raising her voice against violence and intimidation perpetuated. Hurston (1979) explicitly declares her feminist perspective: “I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads. I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. I am merely a fragment of the Great Soul that surges within the boundaries...sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me” (p. 51).

Hurston introduces AAW's issues through her fictional characters in TEWG: for instance, subservient and meek, Nanny; dependent and socially restrained, Pheoby; the ill-educated and misinformed, Mrs Turner. However, Hurston's feminism mostly revolves around Janie's character. Janie's heartrending story commences with her mother, Leafy Crawford, who was raped by her White teacher and gave birth to Janie. This biologically crossed background turns to be one of the reasons of her beauty. Her grandmother, Nanny, wants to exchange her looks for her social protection to save her from the incumbent racism, which she herself had to face throughout her life. Nanny advises, “Janie, youse got yo' womanhood on yuh. So Ah mout ez well tell yuh whut Ah been savin' up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away...” (Hurston, 1990, p. 12). Thus, at the age of sixteen, Janie is made to marry Logan Killicks, who is thrice her age, for his social status and economic stability that every AAW aspires for. Picturing the real AAW, Nanny asserts;

“De white man is de ruler of everything as far as ah been able to find out. Maybe, it's some place

way off in de ocean where de the black man is the ruler, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down the load and tell the nigger man to pick it up he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks” (Hurston, 1990, p. 14).

Hurston reveals the contemporary marital constraints on AAW through Killicks's conversation with Janie—“You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick” (Hurston, 1990, p. 31). With the progression of the plot, Janie awakens to her own independence and starts rebuffing Nanny's ways of living. Hence, she begins her crusade during her first marriage. In liberating herself from the shackles of marriage, she frees herself from Killicks's identities—“Youse mad 'cause Ah don't fall down and wash-up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain't done me no favor by marryin' me. And if dat's what you call yo'self doin', Ah don't thank yuh for it. Youse mad 'cause Ah'm tellin' yuh whut you already knowed” (Hurston, 1990, p. 31). She gradually understands the fabric of society that never grants an individual freedom until s/he fights for it. Learning from her mistakes, Janie grows into a transforming character through whom Hurston pricks AAW's conscience.

After the forced marriage, she wants to experience the marriage of her will and walks down the aisle with Jody Stark, the mayor of the town. Her second choice of marriage depicts her new version, “Ah done lived Grandma's way, now Ah means tuh live mine” (Hurston, 1990, p. 114). Contrary to her expectations, her second husband, also turns up like Killicks, “He [Joe] wanted her submission and he'd keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (Hurston, 1990, p. 184). Stark expects her to behave nothing more, nothing less than a mayor's wife; “Jody Stark told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening. Everybody was coming sort of fixed up,

and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as bell-cow, the other women were the gang" (Hurston, 1990, p. 41). Crushing her identity, Stark usually behaves masterly: "He gits on her ever now and then when she make little mistakes round de store" (Hurston, 1990, p. 49). Fearing her individualism, Stark sets the boundaries for her, "to tie up her hair around the store. That was all. She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others" (Hurston, 1990, p. 55). He ardently repudiates Janie's individualism, "mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home" (Hurston, 1990, p. 43). While depicting male dominant culture in the novel, Stark reveals to Janie—"Uh woman by herself is uh pitiful thing, "Dey needs aid and assistance. God never meant 'em tuh try tuh stand by theirselves. You ain't been used tuh knockin' round and doin' fuh yo'self, Mis' Starks" (Hurston, 1990, p. 90). He, "forces Janie into the slavish servitude reflected by the identity-confining head rag he makes her wear" (Hurston, 1990, p. 51). Felder (2005) quotes Angela Davis, who considers a black woman a "man's eternal servant" and "guardians of a devaluated domestic life" (p. 250-251). Hence, as compared to the new woman of the day, AAW were more confined in their domestic and societal spheres.

At the age of twenty-four which makes the 7th year of her marriage, Janie embarks on her self-exploration—"... She stuck out into future, imagining her life different from what it was...She got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and was giving away what she didn't value" (Hurston, 1990, p. 76). She speaks to Stark with a new voice and vigor; "You ain't tried tuh pecify nobody but yo'self. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice . . . robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish" (Hurston, 1990, p. 75, 79). A clear distinction emerges between the former and latter—Janie, "All dis bowin' down, all dis

obedience under yo' voice—dat ain't whut Ah rushed off down de road tuh out about you" (Hurston, 1990, p. 87). Janie reminds Stark what he has forgotten: "Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it" (Hurston, 1990, p. 79). Taking a stronger stance against him, "every one of her head rags and went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (Hurston, 1990, p. 89). Instead of submission, Janie rejects the values placed on AAW: she announces her valued liberty—"Tain't dat Ah worries over Joe's death, Pheoby. Ah jus' loves dis freedom" (Hurston, 1990, p. 93). The more she liberates, the more she loathes her grandmother's ways, "She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her" (Hurston, 1990, p. 89). Jordon (1988) confirms, "Hurston has motivated her narrative, perhaps unconsciously, to act out her rage against male domination and to free Janie, a figure for herself, from all men" (p. 110).

After the marriage of force and the marriage of her will, she tastes the marriage of romance with Tea Cake—"he could be a bee to a blossom . . ." (Hurston, 1990, p. 106, 113). This episode in the novel is autobiographical. In her forties, Hurston herself fell in love with Percival McGuire Punter and started dating him. Owing to his humble origin, the society opposed the match but she married him despite all the societal resistance. By the end of the novel, Janie grows into an ideal AAW, "Janie, you'se yo' own woman..." (Hurston, 1990, p. 113), the way Hurston desires her to be—prevailing over all the constraints.

Janie begins the battle of AAW's awakening during the course of the novel. She valiantly invigorates Pheoby's morale—"Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah

friend's mouf" (Hurston, 1990, p. 6). Being inspired, Pheoby desires Janie's newly acquired freedom for herself, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from ju's listenin' tuh you, Janie. Ah aint satisfied wid mahself no mo'" (Hurston, 1990, p. 192). When Janie sees her own spirit in Pheoby, she feels a sense of accomplishment. Wolter (2001) further spotlights her success, "Janie succeeded where Nanny failed because Janie changed Nanny's "white" metaphor (the pulpit as an elevated stage for an individual to preach down to a group) into the "black" metonymy (the porch as the center of black communal life and of a culture of call-and-response interaction)" (p. 235).

Thus, Hurston explores AAW's true identity through Janie's newly explored and independent consciousness. She successfully gets her message across what she is created for. Appiah and Gates (2005) explain:

. . . The writings and teachings of early twentieth-century black feminist urged black women to forge their own self-definitions and to be independent and self-reliant. . . . They analyzed why black women had such hard lives, and they empowered black women to make changes in their daily lives. This fusion of theory and activism is characteristic of the black feminism, becoming the foundation on which subsequent black women were able to work for change" (p. 628).

Hurston's protagonist teaches that a woman's fate lies in her own hands. Janie appears a realistic character, who inspired many literary writers—Audre Lorde, Gloria Naylor, June Jordan, Nikki Giovanni, Rita Dove, Sonia Sanchez, Toni Cade Bambara and Toni Morrison—to model their protagonists on her. She also inspired the white women who were fighting for their own rights (Hooper, 2012, p. 35-36). Planting AAF, Hurston brought a revolution

in (AA) feminist writing providing it with a novel mode for representing the suppression of women.

American Civil Rights Movement (ACRM)

Until the establishment of ACRM; which under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., fought for equal rights regardless of caste, color and creed through the mid 20th century; equality had never been the part of the American society. According to Winant, "the events and ideals of the ACRM helped shape the way our country both reinforce and ignores race today..." (as cited in Peacock, 2008, p. 1). Receiving its enlightenment from TEWG, the cause of ACRM was equally supported by AA men and women. Reflecting upon the social, cultural, economic and political strains, TEWG helped in shaping ACRM, which with the help of AAF tried to implement what the Declaration of Independence and Emancipation Proclamation promised the American nation.

Hurston (1990) directs AAW to brace their men against the tyranny of the white man, "If uh man ain't got no bounds, he ain't got no place tuh stop" (p. 64). The contemporary plights of AAW provide Hurston with a perfect ground to instill the spirit of organization and non-violent protest in them. According to Simmons (2002), "Hurston hopes to provide, in her novel, an account of a "self" and a potential community that will sustain readers and provoke them to act against oppression..." (p. 191). Janie's powerful expressions prove groundbreaking for AAW's unity in fight against suppression: "Women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream turns to the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly" (Hurston, 1990, p.1). Many reviewers admire Janie's resilient voice that never shatters. Her inspired AAW later proved formidable fighters for ACRM. Schmidt (1985) states that, "Hurston's female characters [especially Janie] are positive, tough, resilient and full of humanity. They stand

for a new image of the black womanhood, an image absent in other works of Renaissance and of the period immediately after” (p. 61).

Besides AAW, TEWG mobilizes the entire AA nation against the evils of racism — “Ah was wid dem white chillum so much till Ah didn’t know Ah wuzn’t white till Ah was round six years old” (Hurston, 1990, p. 8). The novel underscores racial stratification that Janie endures—“Ah’m colored!” (p. 9). She also undergoes identity crises: “Dey [the Whites] all useter call me Alphabet ’cause so many people had done named me different names” (Hurston, 1990, p. 9). Being slaves, AAs had no names but were called with their master’s given tags. Felder (2005) finds TEWG, “... a complex, groundbreaking work combining central issues of race, gender, and class in ways that had never previously been attempted in American Literature” (p. 123).

Mrs. Turner, a minor character provides the novel with a different perspective. AAs, who had lighter skin-tone like Mrs. Turner, desired to be grouped into a people between the Whites and the Blacks. She feels proud of her white features and considers herself to be better than the darker ones—“Look at me! Ah ain't got no flat nose and liver lips. Ah'm uh featured women. Ah got white folks' features in mah face. Still and all Ah got tuh be lumped in wid all de rest. It ain't fair. Even if dey don't take us in wid de whites, dey oughta make us uh class tuh ourselves” (Hurston, 1990, p. 142). Considering themselves superior, these light-skin AAs like Mrs. Turner never became the part of any AA struggle staying in the middle of nowhere. Later, this phenomenon grew to be one of the weaknesses of ACRM. However, Hurston, through Janie, warns her community against disunity among themselves, “It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder. It was like seeing your sister turn into a ’gator. . . You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat

makes you lak a king uh something” (Hurston, 1990, p. 48, 58).

Giving Janie all the required qualities of a revolutionary leader, Hurston makes Janie a role model for the AA community. History can find no female instance akin of her caliber who could take such rebellious stance against multi-faced oppression. In her story narration to Pheoby, Janie sets an example for Pheoby and her community. The end justifies Janie's survival as a resolution in self-revelation and self-formation. Jordan (1998) notes that, “the liberation of black women from sexism and racism is to transform all black people and American society” (p. 107). Like an actual ACRM leader, Janie strives to speak against the racial terrorism from the silent pages of TEWG, “It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human” (Hurston, 1990, p. 1). At the end of the novel, Janie's revolutionary stance on enlightening her community against racial terrorism becomes even clearer—“The light in her hand was like a spark of sun-stuff washing her fate in fire. Her shadow behind fell black and headlong down the stairs. Now, in her room, the place tasted fresh again. The wind through the open windows had broomed out all the fetid feeling of absence and nothingness” (Hurston, 1990, p. 192).

TEWG plays a vital role in revisiting the AAs' history and bringing both AA male and female on the same page for ACRM. Matza (1985) writes, “In TEWG, the independent spirit triumphs because of Janie's determined, patient, and understanding nature; and it triumphs most clearly when the integration into the community of the individual with a strong identity is possible” (p. 49). Davis (1993) also admires the novel for its greater message, “The brilliance and usefulness of this novel seem linked with the

constant shimmering movement that characterizes TEWG. The text will not stand still, and neither will its imagery, characters, or meanings” (p. 456). According to Padhi (2014), the ACRM of 1960s brought “a new awareness in the society of black African people and created an atmosphere of search for their civil rights and position in their society (p. 48).

Conclusion

Hurston, as an AA literary writer and anthropologist, gained her place in the American society through her semi-autobiographical fiction that reflects her intellectual and psychological strength. Although her surroundings were not favorable towards her, she remained optimistic. She created characters like Janie, who has the potential to speak her mind and passion. During the course of the novel, Janie grows sturdily independent and retains the right to her body and soul. Even societal constructs like marriage are unable to block her ways. Like other AAW, she rejects to be Logan Killicks' mule. With her powerful speeches, she defies Stark's suppression and chauvinism. Her third husband, Tea Cake, gets shot when his senses fail to restrain his insane behavior towards her. More than Janie, no fictional character has ever voiced AAW so loudly: she has showed them how to fight; how to organize in the face of odds. Through Janie, Hurston directs the AAW into the right direction giving them a courage for raising their voice under the umbrella of AAF.

The statistics show that the ACRM started with a woman and ended with a woman. Julian Bond confirms that, “Women hold up half the world— in the case of the civil rights movement, it's probably three-quarters of the world” (as cited in Hooper, 2012, p. 27). Armstrong et al. (2002) attest in their book, that, the bus boycott was not only begun by a woman, it was also led by women, and supported by women addressing a problem that was most salient for black women (p. 179). Claudette

Colvin—a fifteen years old pregnant AAW—was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white person on a Montgomery bus. But the bus boycott did not start until December 1, 1955—“the beginnings of the civil rights movement included Rosa Parks's iconic refusal to move to the back of a Montgomery Alabama city bus, hence igniting the Montgomery bus boycott, the first significant event of the American civil rights movement” (as cited in Hooper, 2012, p. 27). Like Rosa Parks, many others—Ella Baker, Vivian Malone Jones, Septima Poinsette Clark, Gloria Richardson, and Fannie Lou Hamer—inferred Hurston's implicit message and stood for freeing themselves and their nation. Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, Diane Nash, and Jo Ann Robinson are the women, who are considered as the true heroes of ACRM (as cited in Roth, 2004, p. 81). Being the ACRM leaders' wives; Coretta Scott King, Myrlie Evers Williams, and Betty Shabazz; also became visible women in this historic struggle. Seeding AAF and ACRM, Hurston became the understood leader of the AA nation. The second wave of feminism also acknowledged the weight of her fiction (TEWG) in terms of awakening the AA nation. Though the AAW's suppression and marginalization of AAs are the essential concerns of this study, Hurston also fight on political, economic, social, and educational fronts for her race. Over the years, through TEWG her position has gained more weight in the eyes of literary and feminist critics, which is revered as a great piece of American literature for captivating the contemporary readers' attention and challenging the unjust laws of American society. With the same affection, she still appears to be voicing and guiding these issues from the pages of TEWG. Being the voice of suppressed and discriminated, the rediscovery of TEWG could influence the women's cause in Pakistan, where each ethnicity has a different patriarchal code for women. The spirit of the text can inspire both the regional and national literary writers to reflect upon women's question in their

literary pieces. In this way, the novel could prove a spark for the suppressed Pakistani women, who—like AAW— have to go through a lengthy struggle to have their personal, social, economic and political rights. In sum, TEWG's inclusion in literary curriculum can trigger a powerful call for women's voice fortifying the nascent feminist struggle in Pakistan.

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