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THE DYNAMISM OF POWER IN “WEIGHT OF WHISPERS” BY YVONNE ADHIAMBO OWUOR.



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ABSTRACT

Power is an abstract concept and the root cause of marginality, whose existence and concreteness can be seen effectively in its manifestations and outcome. Its paradox lies in its existence as weakness when deconstructed from below. According to Michel Foucault's understanding of power, it is based on knowledge and makes use of knowledge; on the other hand, power reproduces knowledge by shaping it in accordance with its anonymous intentions. This paper intends to analyse the forms of power and their repercussions in “Weight of Whispers” by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. Owuor's extended short story recounts the Rwanda post-genocide experience of a particular refugee who is the story's narrator. The paper is predicated on the hypothetical contention that power does not always

exist as a form of strength, but also as weakness when the oppressed react against their marginalization and when those in power migrate to other countries with a different culture and set up from theirs. The theoretical framework employed is the Post-colonial theory that addresses questions of power dynamics between colonial centres and margins with a focus on Abdul R. JanMohamed's notion of ‘alterity’ that places the ‘Other’ in a less privileged position as opposed to the ‘Self.’ New Historicism is also employed as a theory with close links to Post-colonialism in its flexibility to correlate the context and the text.

KEYWORDS

Power, Centre, Margin, Post-colonialism, Trans-deconstruction, Alterity.

RESEARCH PAPER

Review

Trinh T. Minh-ha in “No Master Territories” holds that there is no centre but centres because the centre is not a geographical fixed location. She argues that both the margin and the centre are all important for there is no centre without the margin and the margins function as sites for survival. For Minh-ha, she is “at times rejected by her own community, other times needfully retrieved”, such that she feels “both useless and useful” (216). She posits that “this shuttling in-between frontiers is a working out of and an appeal to another sensibility, another consciousness of the condition of marginality: that in which marginality is the condition of the centre” (216). In this regard, Minh-ha sees massive suppression as a means of recirculating the effects of domination.

Similarly, Pramod Ambadasrao Pawar in his influential text, *Trans-deconstruction: Theory on Monism* argues that “the heated debate on the text is not paramount at all the times sensing the centre within it. [Because] The methodology of reaching the centre de-centers the text and throws us in the labyrinth of uncertainties and ambiguity” (10). The central meaning of a text could therefore be said to lie within or without the text.

This paper shares some similarities with this reviewers on the notion of the dynamism of the centre and the margin with the difference that the paper focuses more on the shifts in the protagonist’s life and the concrete methods through which power is disseminated in the narrative which places the individual either in the centre or at the margin.

Introduction

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor’s extended short story presents a true picture of human life characterised by a daily rising and dying to one’s self. The story revolves around power and the character’s ability to influence the actions of others either through their possession of wealth, money, influential positions or physical strength. The physical and psychological itinerary which the main narrator and character Boniface Louis R. Kuseremane treads brings this researcher to the hypothetical assumption that there is no fixed centre as every centre has a margin and every margin a centre. Power consists of both strengths and weaknesses and the notion of ‘alterity’ as propounded by Abdul R. JanMohamed helps in the understanding and interpretation of the concepts when juxtaposed with its opposition; thus, power/powerlessness, centre/margin, self/other and so on.

Teun A. Van Dijk in an article on “The Principle of Critical Discourse Analysis” (1992) postulates that:

Power involves control, mainly by (a member of) a group over (those of) another group. Such control may pertain to action and cognition: that is, a powerful group may limit the freedom of action of others, but also influence their minds. Besides the elementary recourse to force to directly control action (as in police violence against demonstrators, or male violence against women) modern and often more effective power is mostly cognitive, and enacted by persuasion, dissimulation or manipulation among other strategic ways to change the minds of others in one’s own interest. (254)

This definition ties much with this researcher's working context of power. Power as perceived by this researcher has a close link with the binary opposition centre/margin, where being at the centre symbolises an ability to influence other people based on one's social position or acquisition of wealth, while the margin symbolises a definite lack of the stated virtues.

Discussion

The story is narrated from the first person's point of view by Boniface Louis R. Kuseremane who doubles as narrator and prince from an ethnic clan: The short story begins in suspense probably at the entry point into the City of Nairobi, where Kuseremane encounters an ugly sentry who snatches US \$50 from him and his "worked snake skin wallet" containing a picture of his mum; Agnethe-mama, Lune; his fiancée and Chi-chi; his younger sister all "elegant and unsmiling, diamonds in their ears, on their necks and wrists." (1). The act of violence and shock is shown by the narrator's instant reaction when a thin sweat-trail runs down his spine with the tingling of his knees (1). When he lifts his hand to wipe his eyes, the oppressor "sees the gold insignia ring, glinting on my index finger. The ring of the royal household. One of only three. The second belonged to my father . . . The third . . . no one has ever spoken about" (1) and when his father appears to tell his mum he was dead he was still wearing the ring. Something is, therefore, very sacred and unique about this ring as presented.

Leonard Broom and Philip Selznick in *Sociology: A Text with Adapted Readings* assert, "of all the animals man alone has culture, because only he is capable of creating symbols. Without symbols there could be social life, as there is among other animals, but it would be rudimentary" (51). For Broom and Selznick, a symbol may be broadly defined "as anything that stands for or represents something else" (51-52). The gold insignia could be seen as a distinguishing mark or sign that places Kuseremane in a position of authority and honour. The prince's worked snake skin wallet and the diamond jewellery worn by the 3 princesses symbolise affluence and royalty. When the Policeman sees the ring, he pounces. "He spits on my finger, and draws out the ring with his teeth; the ring I have worn for 18 years--from the day I was recognised by the priests as a man and a prince. It was supposed to have been passed on to the Son I do not have. The Policeman twists my hand this way and that, his tongue caught between his teeth; a study of concentrated avarice" (2). The narrator protests: "It is sacred ring . . . Please . . . please" (2) but he receives heavy pangs on his cheeks. He loses the ring, the symbol of the legitimate power conveyed on him from his clan and ancestry. One sees a tussle between physical and royal powers, with the former despising the latter. A mere guard dares molest a prince rendering him helpless by depriving him of his symbol of authority.

The narrator and victim of oppression states "Later on, much later on, I will wonder what makes it possible for one man to hit another for no reason other than the fact that he can. But now, I lower my head. The sum total of what resides in a very tall man who used to be a prince in a land eviscerated" (2). Kuseremane has no option, but to lower his head in submission to physical power meted on him as he still hopes to find a leeway to Europe following his precarious condition. The reader learns from the prince that his land is 'eviscerated' and in tumult when he states "we had heard rumor of a holocaust, of a land haemorrhaging to death. Everywhere, hoarse murmurs, eyes white and wide with an arcane fear. Is it possible that brothers would machete sisters-in-law to stew-meat chunks in front of

nephews and nieces” (2)? Nothing but fear, terror and oppression is the order of the day and the royal family is probably escaping from the war in their land. The reader begins to wonder if the prince has a hand or not in the on going genocide in his land as his thoughts turn to focus on mass killings and some secrets embedded in him. Prior to the genocide in his homeland, he had once asked the American Consul in Luxembourg during a balcony party to “suggest a book which probed the slaughter of Germans during World War II” (3) and he asserts, “Now, my world has tilted into a realm where other loaded silences lurk. And I can sense why some things must remain buried in silence, even if they resuscitate themselves at night in dreams where blood pours out of phantom mouths” (4). Stephen Greenblatt in “Towards a Poetic of Culture” holds that literary criticism has a familiar set of terms for the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to which it refers as one speaks of allusion, symbolization, allegorization, representation, and above all mimesis. Each of these terms “has a rich history and is virtually indispensable . . .” (11).

The introduction of Roger as a long time servant in Kuseremane’s family who only reappears in their house “on the evening of the fifth day after the death of the two presidents” after having “disappeared on the first day of the plane deaths” (4) makes him suspicious to the reader. In addition, he tells Kuseremane during his third engagement anniversary party “‘J’ai terminé. Tout a été nettoyé.’ It is done. All has been cleaned’ (5). He sets the royal party rushing unprepared to the airport for escape when he announces “they are coming . . . Sir” (5).

John Brannigan in “Power and its Representations: A New Historicist Reading of Richard Jefferies’ ‘Snowed up’” is quoted by Hans Ndah as stating that the one way a New Historicist reading of a text can be staged is “the depiction of a scene or piece of writing which yields a microcosmic image of what the critic seeks to elaborate in relation to the main text of discussion” (122). New Historicism, in spite of its foregrounding of the word ‘historicism’, really represents significant extension of the empire of literary studies, for it entails intensive ‘close reading’ in the literary critical manner, of non-literary texts. For Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, documents are seldom offered entire: instead an extract is made which is then subjected to intensive scrutiny. The new historicism approach is a way of ‘doing’ history which has a strong appeal for non-historians (177). From the foregoing perspective, the reference to the two Presidents killed in a plane brings to mind the assassination of the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi in 1994 in a missile attack that unleashed a chain of tragic events in Rwanda, culminating into one of the world’s most harrowing tales of genocide and ethnic violence where brothers cut sisters-in-law to death in front of their nieces and nephews and arcane fear grips the land. As Prince and President of the Banque Locale, Kuseremane “was one of three who held keys to the vault” (5). Thus, he had the world on his palms and made frequent tours with his family to Europe and beyond where he associated with foreign diplomats and other nobles. Two weeks before the demise of the presidents, the narrator had sold off his Paris apartment with the hope of expanding their bank to Zaïre. A proof of Kuseremane’s affluence is the fact that besides what they had in their bank accounts, he and his family were able to search their pockets in the party and come up with US \$ 3723 which helped them secure “the last four of the eight seats on the last flight out of [their] city” (5) which conveyed them to the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi. It was at their arrival in Nairobi; Kenya, and through Owuor’s effective use of the technique of flashback, that the reader subsequently follows Kuseremane’s narrative as over the course of a few months in which he slipped into a crisis of identity in an unwelcoming foreign land.

The royal delegation in their usual glamour and vigour, and on transit to Europe, checks into a suite of the Nairobi Hilton Hotel with the hope of spending a few days. Kuseremane, no sooner than later, realizes his country's embassy gates are locked and blocked with the feeling of a floor shifting beneath one's feet as "there is no one in authority. The ambassador is in exile. Only a guard" (7). When he tries finding out who could attend to him so that he arranges their papers to go to Europe, he gets nothing but a blank stare from the guard. He recognises the flag fluttering in the courtyard as his country's flag that "someone installed it upside down [and] it flies at half-mast" (7-9).

His ordeal in Kenya begins with the close down of his embassy and his inability to present to the American Embassy bank details, a statement and a title deed as proof of domicile in his country of origin and a letter from his employer. Surprised, and in an attempt to explain he is not a Kenyan, the lady "folds her papers, bangs them on the table and frowns as if I have wasted her time. She tosses my passport out of her little window into my hands that are outstretched, a supplication on an altar of disbelief" (11). He is advised to make all applications at his source country. Kuseremane, a prince and a diplomat, is shocked with the treatment given him and he reminds himself of the fire-streaking spectre of the guns in that embassy, which brought down two presidents leaving a mark in his soul. In spite of his influential position, title, and wealth, he meets other forces outside his area of jurisdiction which render him and his family helpless. The absence of an authority in his embassy, like the absence of a bank statement, implies he is rid of the force which can make things happen to his benefit. Power is therefore present everywhere through a coordinated network of practices.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argues that modern society is a disciplinary society, where power is largely exercised through disciplinary means in a variety of institutions such as prisons, schools, hospitals, militaries, and so on (qtd. in Habib 770). In his book, *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault posits that power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared but that which at first instance constitutes a force relationship immanent in the sphere in which it operates and which constitutes its own organization thereby forming a chain or system. He insists that power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere and it is simply the over-all effect that emerges from all these mobilities (qtd. in Habib 771). This stance of viewing power in terms of a force relation is also shared by Louis Maran in "Discourse of Power--Power of Discourse" where "force (which excludes justice) is a universal desire for domination in every aspect. In other words, justice without force cannot make justice manifest--it is impotent--whereas force without justice manifests itself as force outside its own 'proper' domain as constituted by external actions" (167).

When the Royal family is unable to pay their hotel bills, they sneak out of the hotel with the hotel bed sheets and towels to a squalor in River Road, living their suit cases as compensation for their unpaid bills. Kuseremane learns from his friend, Félicien, that his name is included on the lists of those responsible for the Rwandan Genocide: 'les genocidaires'. Kuseremane makes references to the balafon; a microcosm of home and to Joseph Kabasallé's famous music, "Independence ils l'ont obtenu . . . La table ronde' ils l'ont gaganée . . ." (16), and to Franklin Bakaka's 'Aye Afrika, o! Afrika . . . ' (37) The familiar name of places, people and events that the narrator invokes all have traces of history which contribute to the shaping of reality. Paul Ricoeur "On Interpretation", affirms that "everything that is recounted occurs in time, takes time, unfolds temporally; and what unfolds

in time can be recounted” (179). Textual traces of history such as the 1994 Rwandan Ethnic Genocide and the names of some known artists are eminent in the text, thereby situating the text in space and in time.

Kenyatta Avenue is described as a place where many of his people stand and seek news of home, or just stand and talk the language of home or hope that they will soon return home. Kuseremane is treated differently by his friends and tribe’s men and women: He states “whenever I approach Kenyatta Avenue, they, my people, disperse. Or disappear into shops. Or avert their eyes. If I open a conversation, there is always a meeting that one is late for” (17). He later recalls when “on the street a woman started wailing like an old and tired train when she saw [him]. Her fingers extended, like the tip of a sure spear, finding its mark. Kuseremane, Kusermane. Kuseremane Kuseremane. The whispers have found a human voice” (17). The rumours and hidden secrets about Kuseremane’s evil deeds become known and clear to his people who all take to their heels in order not to be associated with the sinister monster. When the prince informs George Nsibiriwa at the zoo that their family name is on the list of those responsible for the genocide, he pulls away from the fence with agility wiping the hand that the prince had shaken against his shirt. “He steps away, one step at a time, then he turns around and trots, like a donkey, shouting, looking over his shoulder at [him]” (31) and urging his wife Maria to leave with him immediately. The royal delegation does not only suffer rejection and discrimination from the Kenyans as refugees, but also from their old friends and indigenes because of the taboo associated with the name ‘Kuseremane’. For Pepertua Nkamanyang Lola and Gerald Nforbin, “various forms of exclusion, rejection, oppression, and alienation reproduced by the structures of power are considered as defining characteristics of marginality . . .” (14). The royals do not only lose their dignity, but are rejected by their countrymen in Kenyan.

Talking about the Self and the Other, Abdul R. JanMohamed in “The Economy of Manichean Allegory” states that “faced with an incomprehensible and multifaceted alterity, the European theoretically has the option of responding to the Other in terms of identity and difference. If he assumes that he and the Other are essentially identical, then he would tend to ignore the significant divergences and to judge the Other according to his own cultural values” (18) but if he assumes that the Other is irremediably different, then he would have little incentive to adopt the viewpoint of that alterity: he would again tend to turn to the security of his own cultural perspective (18). The narrator’s situation is worsened by the policemen, the local officials, and guards at the United Nations Registration Center who extorts huge sums of money from him as expatriate, because he is different from them in terms of language and ethnicity.

In the same way, Kuseremane sells a 24 carat, customized gold and Sapphire bracelet to an Indian lady at fifteen thousand Kenya Shillings which is insufficient as his friend, Celeste, knew of another jeweller who would pay a hundred thousand for the bracelet. When he returns to confront the Indian lady, she tells him to leave before he could speak. She dials the police number and the prince immediately leaves the jewellery shop “unable to speak” (9). The lady scolds the guard for letting him in: “Why you let takataka to come in nee” (9)? The prince leaves the shop trembling, and “unable to look into the eyes of those on the streets” (9). Power is omnipresent and it is manifested in a network of practices in the society. The prince is overcome with fear so much that he can barely look into any one’s eyes.

Generally, the 'Other' is anyone who is separate from one's Self. For Ashcroft et al. in *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, "the existence of Other is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world. The colonized subject is characterized as 'Other' through discourse such as primitivism and cannibalism as a means of establishing the binary separation of the colonizer and colonized and asserting the naturalness and primacy of the colonizing culture and world views" (169). Kuseremane's ignorance in terms of a foreign currency, coupled with his French background and cultural difference makes the Kenyan indigenes feel superior over him.

Kuseremane's ignorance of Swahili makes the police officers take advantage of him. His identification in the UNHCR is requested as follows: 'Toa Kitambulisho!'"(23). He responds "Sina" meaning he has no identification card. The police ordered "Aya! Toa kitu kidogo". Not understanding the code, he wondered if they needed a cigarette each in the chilly weather and on offering them some cigarettes, they are slapped out of his hands while the second policeman said "Resisting arrest". The fourth policeman steps in and adds, "Illegal alien . . . resisting arrest". This, the reader knows, is not the case and he is mishandled by the police officer. The narrator reports: "They twisted my arm behind my back and holding me by my waistband, the trouser crotch cutting into me I was frog marched across town. Some people on the street laughed loudly, pointing at the tall man with his trouser lines stuck between the cracks of his bosom" (24). When he pleads to walk quickly by himself his hand is raised and the third policeman "swipes [his] head with a club" accusing him of "attempted escape" and "a litany of crimes" (24). All the false accusation is in a bid to extort money from an immigrant, whom they consider different from them. John French and Bertram Raven refer to coercive power as the least effective, but most employed (and abused) type of power in the corporate world which often leads to fear, dissatisfaction, and resentment, while legitimate power is the power of position or role: The typical "command and control" structure that is employed by the military world. Taiwo Afuape in *Power, Resistance and Liberation in Therapy with Survivors of Trauma* succinctly describes power as "enacted in what people think, say and do" (25). To Afuape, corporal power can be experienced beyond the level of discourse that is, physical power as experienced through muscular strength or bodily powerlessness as in the experience of physical violence (28). Power is obviously complex as people across contexts may engage in contradictory actions that promote personal or collective wellness in one place, but perpetuate oppressive practice in another. There exists a link between power and distress, violence and oppression.

Besides the false accusations from the police officers, Kusermane is authentically accused of bankruptcy where he worked. In his uneasy and un-relaxed condition, he would sit for some minutes in a café and keeps watching at his non-existent watch, and frowns as if friends who do not keep to time are a source of annoyance. He uses this pretext to make his way out of the café. His accomplice, Uncle Roger, is later on accused of "Excoriating women's wombs, crushing fetal skulls following the instructions of a prince" (37). The prince, from all indication, has been involved in bloodshed such that what he now suffers could be termed 'Divine Justice'.

In relation to legitimate power accorded either by popular election through votes or the right of birth in the case of monarchies, Broom and Selznick hold that "[t]he principle of legitimacy supports the broader notion of a restraining law that stands above the rulers, to which they are responsible and by virtue of which they govern" (523). This helps check

against tyranny as “power made legitimate is the first indispensable step toward a system that permits the questions: By what right do you govern? How do you justify your decision?” (523). But when appeal is made to tradition as the bases of authority, it is difficult to make the principle an effective basis for criticising and restraining the exercise of power. This is the case with the prince, Kuseremane, who engages in atrocious deeds in his homeland, but goes unpunished before his escape. He, nevertheless, is brutally repaid as an expatriate in Kenya. Christian Wiyghansai Shaaghan Cardinal Tumi in *The Political Regimes of Ahmadou Ahidjo and Paul Biya, and Christian Tumi, (Priest.)* asserts that “every human being is delegated to exercise authority. For every authority... comes from the one who is Himself the authority per se, that is, God. God’s authority is God himself. God alone is His own authority. The people exercising an authority must know that they are neither the “terminus quo” nor the “terminus ad quem” of their powers. Their authority is from God. They have to bear in mind that the governed have inalienable rights” (141). He differentiates between authority and power in his quotation from *The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) No. 46* which states “Authority is legally exercised when it is used for the good of all” (qtd. in Tumi 141). Kuseremane does not exercise authority in his homeland and beyond, but indulges in abusive practices that make him lose respect and the honour accorded him.

Even though the entire family is pushed to the margin of the society through a network of practices, they nevertheless improve on their living conditions: Having lived in a single living room with untold discomfort, the royals start selling off their belongings, and jewellery to the extent that Agnethe’s wedding ring is sold in order for them to survive. The money is used to leave the room on River Road to a better accommodation having ‘a one roomed cottage with a separate kitchen and an outside toilet in Hurlingham which belonged to Mr Wamathi, the former Government secretary.

In his article, “The Inevitability of Marginality in the Global Context and the Permanence of Agency” Charles Ngiewih Teke affirms “every invention of marginality eventually produces or invents a mechanism that strives at undoing such marginality. Every marginal space is a centre in its own right and every centre can be marginalized, triggered by its own self-undoing portraiture . . .” (64). The movement to a house with a kitchen and toilet separated from the living room is a margin to centre movement within the same margin. Agnethe engages in gardening as a means of improving their status, while Lune engages in prostitution against her wish and that of his fiancé; Kuseremane. The plight of the royals can be traced to their craving for power and subsequent abuse through evil deeds and assassinations in their home country as well as the corrupt system of practices in Kenya that strip them of every coin and belonging that they possessed. Kuseremane loses his personality and identity and wishes he were Yves Fontaine his classmate because “[he] would not be a vagrant immigrant, a pariah. As Yves Fontaine [he] would be ‘expatriate’ and therefore desirable. As Yves Fontaine [he does] not need an identity card” (27). The prince has become a slave in a foreign land and rejects his own identity such that he no longer has an existence.

Power is an abstract concept whose effect can only be felt through the day-to-day practices in the society as manifested in what people think, do, and say which in turn has an effect on both the subject and the object. No one has a monopoly of power, as it is present everywhere in practices and institutions. Kuseremane, the prince and bank manager is soon brought to his knees and lives from hand to mouth following his own abuse of power in his homeland and the abuse of power in his host country. Power is therefore dynamic. The

control and domination of one party by another is an inherent aspect of power. Thus, the authorial voice is echoed through the narrator who asserts that “in exile we lower our heads so that we do not see in the mirror of another’s eyes, what we suspect: that our precarious existence rests entirely on the whim of another’s tolerance of our presence” (27). Thus, the citizens of some nations behave as though they were more humans than the immigrants seeking refuge on their lands. Esther Nshakira in her review of “Weight of Whispers” affirms that Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor writes in almost a monotone, trusting and leaving the reader to attach emotion to Kuseremane’s words and paints a heart-breaking, and beautiful picture of the life of a refugee that conveys the deep moral that such strives, as in the short story, is not class specific.

Results

From the experiences of Kuseremane, it was discovered that some individuals lose fame when they migrate from their home region to foreign regions and that centres and margins shifts are relevant to circumstances changed. In this connection, a wealthy prince becomes a beggar, just as well as a beggar could rise to an influential position in society. It was also discovered that there is a centre within every margin and a margin within every centre.

It was also discovered that a good reputation especially in foreign countries is lifesaving. The royal family suffers more as immigrants in Kenya because of their involvement in the Rwandan genocide. They are rejected and abandoned to themselves by their tribes’ men and friends who could have been of help to them. A prince like Kuseremane is confronted with the task of providing and satisfying his mother, sister, and fiancée considered the three most important females in a man’s life. He dies to himself in order to make them comfortable and happy. But when he loses his sister and mother, he decides to remain in Kenya where his siblings are laid to rest rather than accompany his fiancée to Europe. One’s siblings are presented as sacred and worth giving up one’s pleasure for.

Conclusion

This paper had as premise, that power is omnipresent as there is no fixed centre for power. Those at the centre of power are also pushed to the periphery as depicted in the life of the prince, Kuseremane, who becomes a beggar on exile. The paper therefore argued that there is actually no fixed centre of power as those who initially possessed and wield power in one milieu literally become paupers in another milieu. Power, as argued by this researcher becomes a common commodity which is not limited to a particular class of people in society. This paper has proven that anyone at the highest rung of the ladder began obviously from the lowest rung and both positions are interchangeable. Power is also presented not simply as an imposition of the will of one individual on another or one group on another, but as a set of relations and strategies dispersed throughout a society and enacted at every moment of interaction.

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