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ISHANOU (THE CHOSEN ONE, 1990): THE 'SPEAKING BODY'

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Abstract

In the quasi-documentary film, *Ishanou* (The Chosen One, 1990) Maharaj Kumari Binodini Devi, one of the pioneer Meetei women writers, attempts to inscribe femininity in the form of discourse by focusing on psycho-physiological experiences which are specific to Meetei women, who transform into *amaibi*, priestess. This essay investigates the relationship between language and the material dimensions of a person's being with specific reference to the film, *Ishanou*. This essay illustrates how the body or materiality of *amaibi*, which demonstrates a feminine language ungraspable to the phallogocentric discourse, is appropriated into the metrics of the phallogocentric representation system. This essay also puts into question some of the theories of 'feminine writing,' which propound for generating an alternative language to reject the subordinate subject position of women accorded by the phallogocentric discourse.

Keywords: *Amaibi* (priestess), speaking body, sexuality, experience of 'abjection', feminine language, and subjectivity.

Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir in her epochal work *The Second Sex* asserts a social constructivist notion of gender in her famous encapsulation, "one is not born a woman, one becomes one" (Beauvoir 1949, 2011: 293). She argues that individuals are transformed into gendered entities in such a manner that women are relegated to subordinate positions. Pointing to the hierarchical relationship between man and woman, Beauvoir argues that women are not considered autonomous beings, and they are defined in relation to men. She is the Other, the

inessential on the basis of which man defines his existence. On the other hand, a woman differentiates herself from a man and sees him as other but not as a lack but the One, the Absolute (Beauvoir 2011: 6). Influenced by this relational idea of Beauvoir, and in contrast to the liberal feminists who endeavour the achievement of equality between sexes, difference feminists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray sought for equity among sexes to assert specific female rights, traits and demands.¹ Difference feminists argue that the achievement of equal rights means the erasure of

¹ Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva are often clubbed together as French feminists. I use difference feminists to refer to Cixous and Irigaray in implying the essence of their thoughts. This is done

to differentiate them from Kristeva and also to avoid a geographical limitation to their thoughts and philosophical tradition.

specificity of female difference as it merely aims to emulate men, and hence, women remain trapped within the masculine models of power. If a woman is defined as the inessential as against the essential man, then masculine writing puts feminine writing in a negative position. Therefore, difference feminists put forward the need to move out of the phallogocentric representational system and develop a feminine representational system in which women are not caught up in the phallogocentric binaries of self/other and man/not man. The concept of 'other' central to Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is that women are positioned as other in relation to the concept of self, the absolute. In order to reject this subordinate subject position of women accorded by patriarchy, difference feminists have proposed an alternative representation system, feminine writing, whereby women assume the position of Otherness which is independent of the phallogocentric binary of self/other.

Helene Cixous argues that writing as the locus of suppression can also be used as a locus of subversive expression with which the repressed and silenced feminine subjectivities can be reclaimed. Cixous's *écriture féminine* as both theory and practice of writing represents feminine positions in relation to patriarchal culture. The concept of *écriture féminine* entails the inscription of the female body and female sexuality in literary discourse and textuality. It intends to write that for which no language yet exists—namely, the silenced, the marginalized and the repressed—while disavowing the principles of rationality and logic shored up by the phallogocentric Symbolic order. Cixous's feminine writing is the style of writing which defies the standards of coherence and common sense prescribed by patriarchal language (*The Newly Born Woman* 1986: 63-132). Cixous sees femininity not as the single lack (of the penis) but as the plural and multiple erogenous zones of the female body. In her preface to the collection of essays *Sexes and Genealogies* Luce Irigaray also criticizes the liberal feminists' endeavour to equal rights in the realm of the phallogocentric representation system. She argues that equal rights feminism jeopardizes women's identity into becoming pseudo-men—more or less or equal men. She asserts the need to avoid the

realm of the phallogocentric representation system and proposes a new system of representation that allows women to articulate the sexual identity of their own (Irigaray 1993). In *Democracy Begins Between Two* Irigaray expresses that woman needs to be recognized as an 'other' irreducible to masculine subjects and maintains that this will be possible only when we reject 'the model of the one' and follow 'the model of the two' where there is not a first or a second sex (Irigaray 2000: 125).

Julia Kristeva also offers an alternative signification system in her concept of 'poetic language,' focusing on the semiotic qualities of language that can pulverize phallogocentric discourse. By poetic, Kristeva does not mean the language of poetry but a language that challenges the principles of the transparent communication system founded on rigid linguistic structures. In her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" Kristeva writes that poetic language is "polyvalent and multi-determined, adheres to a logic exceeding that of codified discourse and fully comes into being only in the margins of recognized culture" (*Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* 1980: 65). Kristeva, however, moves away from theories based on sexual difference. Kristeva does not believe in the existence of categories of man and woman nor in the possibility of the concept of feminine writing that would solve the issues of sexed inequalities. Her idea of the writing system is feminine only metaphorically in so far as it challenges the patriarchal order and logic. In her article "The Speaking Subject" Kristeva puts forward the concept of *another body*, which is inexplicable by society and its discourses, and discordant with the rigid linguistic categories. The body, for Kristeva, is not simply the concept that is created in culture and language but also an excess which the phallogocentric signification system cannot capture. Her emphasis is on the individual body/speaking subject. She argues that the meaning of individual subjectivity is not fixed but 'subject in process,' always in the process of becoming. Her speaking subject has a divided status between conscious and unconscious motivations, inhabiting both nature and culture in a single body. She believes that it is through the body that a subject has constant interaction with the external world. In

other words, Kristeva's speaking subject is constituted by both body and mind, both nature and culture, and it is always in the process of becoming. Since her speaking subject is always in the process of developing, it disrupts the totalizing explanation of phallogocentric structures—linguistic, psychic and social structures (*On Signs* 1988: 210-220).

While difference feminists (Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray) necessitate the principle of sexual difference to break the hierarchical relation of men and women, Monique Wittig strongly resists that principle by transcending the very categories of masculinity and femininity. In her book *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* Monique Wittig argues that difference has been persistently used by patriarchy as a means of marginalizing women by becoming synonymous with lack and linking with multiplicity. "Everything that was 'good' belonged to the series of the One (as being). Everything that was 'many' (different) belonged to the series of the 'bad,' assimilated to nonbeing, to unrest, to everything that questions what is good" (Wittig 1992: 51). Wittig argues that the principle of sexual difference, as formulated by difference feminists, does not point to issues related to sexual deviance.

Foregrounding the above-discussed theoretical arguments, this essay observes the mechanism of Meetei patriarchy which subsumes sexual deviance into its heteronormative structure in the case of *amaibi*, priestess in Manipur. With specific reference to Binodini's quasi-documentary film named *Ishanou*, I study *amaibi*, who is refused to have sexuality on her own terms. In this essay, I intend to investigate the relationship between language and the subject's psychosexual development following the Kristevan framework. This essay also puts into question some of the theories of 'feminine writing' which propound for generating an alternative language by illustrating that even if the body of *amaibi*/materiality of *amaibi* demonstrates a feminine language ungraspable to the phallogocentric discourse, it is appropriated into the metrics of the phallogocentric representation system.

Ishanou (The Chosen One, 1990)

The film *Ishanou* (The Chosen One) is considered a quasi-documentary of *amaibi*, priestess. The scriptwriter of the film is Binodini, and its director is Aribam Syam Sharma. Doordarshan, Guwahati sponsored the making of the film, and it was released on 6 July 1990 at Usha Cinema, Manipur. Aribam Syam Sharma, the director of the film, in his book *Living Shadows* records that initially, Binodini was inspired to write about *amaibi* by her observance and the stories that she heard from her *amaibi* acquaintances, who taught *Maibi* dances in Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy (JNMDA). Sharma conveys that the characteristic experiences of *amaibi* shown in the film are adaptations of experiences of *amaibi* as informed by the *amaibis* to the scriptwriter (*Living Shadows* 2006: 57).

The film *Ishanou* earns both local and global acclamation. In the National Film Festival, 1991, *Ishanou* received the best film in a non-scheduled language of India. In the International Film Festival of India, 1991, held in Madras (Chennai), *Ishanou* was selected for the Indian panorama of the year 1991, and it was from where it caught its international attention. *Ishanou* was screened outside of India for the first time in The Singapore Film Festival, 1991, in the competition section. *Ishanou* was also selected to represent India in the 44th Cannes Film Festival, and it was screened on 14 May 1991 at Cannes. It was screened at the London Film Festival in November 1991 and in December 1991 at Hawaii International Film Festival. It has also participated in various other international film festivals, including Toronto, Fribourg, Seattle, Vancouver, and Festival des Trios Continents, to mention a few (*Manipuri Cinema: My Testimony* 2016).

The phenomenon of *amaibi* can best be understood in relation to *Lai Haraoba*. *Lai Haraoba* (meaning rejoicing with the gods) is an annual ritual festival of Meetei society. In this ritual festival, our position and place in the cosmos are reminded by enacting through performance. *Amaibi* is the priestess of this festival, the one who performs and enacts the creation-myths. No one can choose to

become an *amaibi*; one has to be chosen by divine means. It is believed that only a non-Brahmin woman is chosen to become an *amaibi*. It is said that becoming an *amaibi* begins by being chosen by one of the many deities of the Meetei belief system. An *amaibi* is believed to be the intermediate between god and mankind. An *amaibi* considers herself as her own master, having only the god (the *Lai*) as her guardian. She is considered a chosen woman, a carrier of supernatural power, and she communicates on behalf of earthly people with the divine world. Conventionally, *amaibi* is addressed 'Mother' (*Ima*), evoking respect from all (Chaki-Sircar 1984: 214).

Saroj N Arambam Parratt and John Parratt in their book *Collected Papers on the History and Culture of Manipur* record that the initial signs of becoming an *amaibi* usually include symptoms of illness and then of abnormal, even hysterical, behaviour. A senior *amaibi* then diagnoses the cause as the god (*lai*) is making known his or her will to possess the girl. She would then undergo a period of training and instruction. During this time, she is taught the sacred oral texts and the complex rituals and dance steps associated with the festival of *Lai Haraoba*. The ability to fall into a trance then becomes ritualized (Parratt and Parratt 2010: 49).

The film earns plaudits from various critics for its representation of the unique subject matter of *amaibi* in Manipur. While John Warrington, a BBC correspondent, described *Ishanou* as a 'poem on celluloid', Tony Rayns, a film critic from Vancouver, observed that it couldn't be more culturally specific in subject (*Manipuri Cinema: My Testimony* 2016: 216). Samik Bandyopadhyay, a critic of Indian art, theatre and film, in his observation on Indian cinema, "Masterpiece from Manipur" (1990), marks *Ishanou* as the year's most inspiring work from the east. Acknowledging the regional authenticity of the film, Bandyopadhyay observes that the film is "wrapped up in the rich ceremoniality of the *Lai Haraoba* and its colourful ritual songs and dances, celebrating a whole civilizational history in historical and biological terms alike, the young woman seems content till a sight of her separated daughter visiting the *Lai Haraoba* unsettles her, and the film ends in an anguished freeze" (*Business Standard* 30

December 1990). In a similar vein, critics like Amita Malik and Babu Subramanian have unanimously viewed *Ishanou* as the most unusual tale of the life of a Meetei woman whose happily married life is ruined as she is drawn to the irresistible and mysterious *amaibi* phenomenon (*Manipuri Cinema: My Testimony* 222-230).

As I have discussed above, most of the critics have observed the film's authentic depiction of culture, the mystical characteristics of a Meetei woman on becoming an *amaibi*, and the subsequent changes in her life. Completely deviating from this general observation about the film, I attempt to interpret *Ishanou* in relation to the issues of gender, sexuality, body and language. The film *Ishanou* is about the transformation of a Meetei woman Tampha who has lived as a woman in the conventional heteronormative way into a dramatic character of an *amaibi*. However, *Ishanou* does not just simply show how becoming an *amaibi* affects the life of Tampha, the female protagonist of the film. It can also be read as the scriptwriter, Binodini's attempt to inscribe femininity in the form of discourse by focusing on psycho-physiological experiences which are specific to Meetei women, who transform into *amaibis*. This essay studies the relationship between language and the material dimensions of a person's being. It also shows that the female body of *amaibi* as a 'speaking subject' defies the subject position accorded by the phallogocentric linguistic system. It should be noted that my interpretation of Tampha, the *amaibi* in *Ishanou* as a speaking subject is not representative of all *amaibis* or all speaking bodies. Different psychotic symptoms/manifestations may have different causes, not to mention a Meetei man can also become an *amaibi* which I will not be discussing here. Hence, my interpretation of Tampha as a speaking body is solely limited to Binodini's rendition of *amaibi* in *Ishanou*. It should also be noted that my interpretation of *amaibi* in *Ishanou* in no way identifies her as a lesbian.

Sexuality concurrently connotes both 'sexual desire' and 'one's sexed being', and hence, it embodies a principle of separation between the realm of the psyche (internal) and the material world (external). Therefore, sexuality "occupies a place

where sexed bodies and sexual desires intersect only to separate" (Bristow 1997: 1). Evidently, one can have sexual desire in multifarious shapes and kinds. However, the heterosexual norm of Meetei society prescribes certain forms of sexuality as normal or lawful, while any deviance from it is not acceptable. In *Ishanou*, Tampha's case shows that her sexed body and her sexual desire do not match according to the heterosexual norm of Meetei society. Tampha to introject her psychosexual condition and to sublimate the imposing heterosexual norms of Meetei society, which she finds repulsive, Tampha sickens at the sight of anything symbolical of the penis. It appears that penis symbolic objects or words which are suggestive of heterosexual norms threaten Tampha's sexual identity, and her body's reaction to those is its way of reinforcing its boundaries.

Tampha, the *amaibi* in the film, is possessed by a female deity, Panthoibi. It is believed that when a Meetei woman becomes an *amaibi* or the chosen one, she has become the wife of the deity who possesses her body. Hence, she can no longer live as the 'wife' of her earthly husband. Tampha in *Ishanou* also runs away to *Amaibi Loishang*² and chooses to live separately from her husband. This avoidance of sexual relationship with men on becoming an *amaibi* can be read as Tampha's way of escaping from the imposing heterosexual norm of womanhood. Tampha's revulsion of the heterosexual norm and her unconscious sexual orientation toward the female body or feminine object that the heterosexual norm of Meetei society has repressed find their expression in the form of a pathological change which I will discuss in the subsequent paragraphs.

Tampha's experience of 'abjection' or manifestations of becoming an *amaibi* is both somatic and symbolic. Ostensibly, in the beginning, Tampha appears to be leading a contented life with her husband and daughter. It is inexplicable why Tampha suddenly becomes disgusted by her husband's affectionate hug. She gets scared and sickens at the sight of catfish and runs away (sc. 7g). It is important to note that catfish is penis-shaped and symbolical of the phallus. When a local healer

performs a ritual to control Tampha's abnormal behaviour, Tampha sees the local healer as a horse and jumps on his back, trying to make him gallop (sc. 11c). This horse-riding scene is symbolical of sexual intercourse, which would otherwise generate a voyeuristic pleasure, is presented in such an offensively outrageous manner. This appalling sexual act of Tampha impertinently defies the traditionally coded exhibitionist role of Meetei women, where they are looked at and displayed as sexual objects. This sexual act of Tampha transgresses prescriptive corporeal borders, concomitantly dismantling the edifices of Meetei patriarchy. Tampha appears to have no control over her behaviour as she jumps, laughs and acts in the manner that a woman of decorum in her rational mind would not do and, by implication, defies the stereotypical representation of femininity. Thus, in *Ishanou*, moving away from the humanist notion of self as single subjectivity, Binodini shows that one person can have multiple subjectivities: the conscious self of the symbolic and the unruly unconscious other, both coexisting in the single self, Tampha.

While anything indicative of the penis is repugnant to her, Tampha is attracted to objects symbolical of the feminine. She plays in the water with a *sanabul*, a brass vessel having a narrow neck and bulblike body for carrying water, especially by women. She swims and chases the *sanabul* as if it was a person. She laughs abnormally, talking to the *sanabul* (sc. 7c). Tampha's attraction to *sanabul*—an object to which female sex is attributed—which is curvy and symbolical of a feminine figure can be suggestive of the desire repressed to the unconscious. Her body speaks in such a way that her sexuality is registered in its language. Thus, Tampha/*amaibi* marks the sexual diversion of a Meetei woman from the gender boundaries of masculinity and femininity.

It is evident that things or words, which are symbolically repressive to Tampha's bodily drives, trigger her process of abjection. Tampha's manifestations of abjection or psychic symptoms also evince that language flows from the body, and

² An institution where *amaibis* are trained.

it is not independent of culture and ideology. In other words, the language that Tampha's body emits, the semiotics, is expressed in relation to the Symbolic. Tampha gets angry when addressed 'Memsahib' and replies, "No! I am your goddess Panthoibi" (sc. 7d). Here, the latent connection between the social domain and Tampha's psyche can be studied. Her indignation at being addressed 'memsahib' is significant. *Memsahib* implies the wife of an officer (her husband Dhanabir), and by extension, it is indicative of the repressive structure of heterosexual norms. Tampha's characteristic behaviour cannot be levelled under the signifiers of femininity and masculinity. Identities that do not conform to the dominant heterosexual norms are automatically rendered as 'other.' While Tampha's act of identifying herself as a desexualized woman (goddess Panthoibi) can be seen in complicity with patriarchal oppression, it should also be acknowledged that there is no vocabulary for the kind of sexual deviance Tampha has in a heterosexual Meetei society. And perhaps understanding her predicament, she identifies (not in a conscious and rational mind) herself as goddess Panthoibi, 'other' to the human realm. It is not just heterosexuality as the norm in Meetei society which forces Tampha, the sexed body, to dissolve into the crippling stereotype of Meetei woman; it is also because of the lack of language.

The scene where Tampha goes in a trance at night, and her husband finds her dancing in a slow movement, is shown like a horror scene (sc. 8a). This dance scene is shown like a horror scene which is quite apt. Tampha's 'abnormal' dance is something Meetei society does not want to imagine in its women hence, appalling to her husband, the patriarchal mind. The language of psychosis—the grunts that Tampha makes and the incoherent words that she blurts out while she is in a trance—can not be paraphrased, which does not mean that this language is meaningless. However, it should also be recognized that it is not readily susceptible to the logical analysis of the Symbolic. This kind of 'poetic' language, in the Kristevan paradigm, potentially disrupts the relationship between words and concepts.

Tampha's abnormal bodily manifestations refuse pathological explanations. Tampha's manifestation of abjection begins when she feels like a blue Vanda (Ingelei) blooming on the high hill, calling her as though that flower is a person (sc. 6b). Tampha runs around a tree and plays hide and seek as though someone is with her, and she laughs abnormally (sc. 10c). This abnormal laughter or her abnormal behaviour is an expression that displays a relation between the body, the subject, and 'a material outside.' It also signifies a rupture of the prescriptive notions of order and stable identities coded by the Symbolic. This abnormal laughter lifts her inhibitions by breaking through prohibitions of the phallogocentric order concurrently liberating her latent bodily drive. Therefore, Tampha's abnormal laughter and erratic behaviour mark an emerging subjectivity. Tampha's mind fluctuates between the conscious and the unconscious, the self and the psyche. This fragmentation of Tampha's subjectivity undermines the logic of symbolic discourse. The state of delirium or abnormality as a language moves beyond the phallogocentric constraints of reason and logic; and, therefore, can be considered as a radical poetic revolution. This kind of language, in a Kristevan frame, is 'feminine language.' For Kristeva, feminine language is not the language used by women in the literal sense but the kind of language that challenges the rigid structures of the Symbolic and by implication, patriarchy (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 1984).

Knowing the fact that medical science cannot help her condition, Tampha refuses medical treatment and runs away to Mother-*amaibi-guru* in the *Amaibi Loishang*, an institution where women symptomatic of *amaibi* are trained. When her husband comes to get her, Tampha starts trembling and scurries to the room of *Amaibi Loishang*. In this scene, it seems that her husband represents a threat to Tampha's self-containedness, with a power of engulfing her subjectivity into an imposing role of (conventional) womanhood. Hence, her psychotic reaction can be read as a form of revolt to extricate the threat, her husband. On the one hand, the manifestations of abjection secure the emergence of Tampha's discreet subjectivity (the latent sexual deviance), *Amaibi Loishang*, on the other hand,

offers training of ways of controlling and channelling her bodily drives. Aribam Syam Sharma, the director, observes that Meetei society provides a space to these persons (*amaibis*), who would otherwise be branded as abnormal or schizophrenic. He continues that *amaibis* who have undergone training in *Amaibi Loishang* live normal lives without any form of medication (*Living Shadows* 2006: 57). In *Amaibi Loishang*, they (*amaibis*) were taught dance, incantations and the ritual aspects of *Lai Haraoba*. It is worth mentioning that only women live in *Amaibi Loishang*, they do not consort men, and they maintain a certain lifestyle—a different diet, norm and activity. *Amaibi Loishang* enables Tampha to deal with her predicament by channelling her erotic desire by introducing a way of life. She is advised to avoid catfish and similar kinds of fish, and certain types of firewood—things which are all penis symbolic (sc. 23). Tampha's abnormal bodily manifestation is normalized by putting it to use in *Lai Haraoba*, an annual ritual festival where incantation and other ritualistic performances are observed. Tampha is addressed 'Mother-*amaibi*,' the servant or daughter of the Divine Mother. By elevating her to the level of goddess mother, Meetei society brings a merger of Tampha's psyche and sexed body (material aspect) concurrently suffusing with the disembodied aspect of Meetei womanhood. Therefore, it can be argued that *Amaibi Loishang*, as a patriarchal institution, serves as the mediator to control the female body and also to channel sexual energy/libido that does not fit in heterosexual norms of Meetei society into ritual aspects of the society. Tampha's sexed body which functions as a speaking subject, ends up becoming a disembodied other in patriarchal Meetei society and its system of representation.

As discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the language and subjectivity of Tampha evade the patriarchal representation system, simultaneously refusing to be non-existent. Such feminine content of the film no doubt offers the viability of revolutionary ways of thinking and inscribing body to its audience. However, Binodini shows that there is no space for feminine subjectivity to thrive in her own right in Meetei society. Tampha has no other option to assuage her pain but to separate herself

from her family. After completing her training of being an *amaibi* and was ready to return home, Tampha asks for her daughter. And then, she begins trembling as though she is about to go into a trance (sc. 23). Tampha as a mother loves her daughter; at the same time, her daughter is also a living embodiment of her sexual repression. Why would the thought of her daughter affect Tampha? Is it the fear of losing her daughter or fear of seeing her daughter that has triggered her psychotic reaction? It is believed that an *amaibi's* daughter has the chance of becoming an *amaibi* herself. Hence, her husband took away their daughter, and Tampha could no longer meet them. Tampha has no objection to this decision although, she longs for her daughter. In the end, Tampha is not only separated from her daughter and her family but also rendered the 'other.' In other words, she ends up becoming a victim of the phallogocentric Meetei society. Her subjectivity, with a propensity to challenge cultural demarcation of masculinity and femininity, got succumbed to the existing patriarchal structure. There is nothing subversive about Tampha in the end. Thus, *Ishanou* points to the impracticality of 'feminine language' formulated by the French feminists (Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva) as a political agenda based on language in combatting (Meetei) women's situation.

Conclusion

Thus, *Ishanou* illustrates the totalizing mechanism of the heterosexual norm of Meetei patriarchal society. It shows heterosexuality as the norm of Meetei society channels and controls its women's sexual desire through socialization towards one type of sexuality, one mode of coitus, and Meetei women are forced into something even when they do not feel any desire. The 'revolt of being' in Tampha emanated from an exorbitant inside, which finds no definable object outside, is assimilated into the existing Meetei patriarchal structure. Foregrounding the nature of Tampha's pathological changes and her psychosexual language, *Ishanou* can be viewed as Binodini's way of inscribing femininity in the form of discourse by focusing on psycho-physiological experiences, which are specific to Meetei women, who transform into *amaibi*, priestess. It depicts the relationship

between language and the material dimensions of a person's being. The film shows that body and language are not independent of the particular social and cultural milieu in which the body is situated. The film also stirs its audience into thinking if theory and praxis can go hand in hand.

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