



**Teen Victimization, Survival, and the
Formation of Identity in Paro Anand's
*The Other: Stories of Difference***

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Abstract

Paro Anand's *The Other: Stories of Difference* (2018) underscores the present-day predicament and challenges that impinge on the lives of Indian teenagers, a theme that is approached cautiously by the author for the benefit of her young adult readers. The narratives, however, are daring in the sense that they focus sharply on the hidden or suppressed, and under-represented, crises faced by youngsters, underlining the urgency of addressing these issues in a society that is still largely ignorant or apathetic. Yet, the literary representation of social malaise, psychological trauma, emotional wretchedness, and physical harm in texts intended primarily for young readers is never an easy task as there is a risk of such texts becoming overtly didactic in their desire to inform and educate. Whether Anand steers clear of this trap – for the stories need to work as stories – is one of the concerns of this essay. Another task of the writer is to depict teenagers as not entirely independent of adults and yet also as not bereft of agency. The essay examines the stories in the collection in relation to the identity formation of the young adult characters, who have to grasp as well as grapple with the complexities – along the axes of gender, class, caste, and disability – of what it means to be growing up in India.

Keywords: Paro Anand, Indian children's literature, teenagers, victimisation, survival, identity

On a personal level, Indian childhood in Indian literature written in English is defined for me in the adventures of Swamy and his friends in Malgudi, rendered endearingly by R. K. Narayan. Its counterpart, Indian adolescence, is defined for me in Rusty and his fellow-vagrants in the valleys of Dehra, brought to life most evocatively by Ruskin Bond. My literary journey from Malgudi to Dehra belongs, however, to the bygone century even though, needless to say, I would relish *Swamy and Friends*, *Malgudi Days*, *Room on the Roof* and *Vagrants in the Valley* if I were to read them again, for they are classics of the Indian canon. Today, in the twenty-first century, I am drawn to such stories as Paro Anand's *The Other: Stories of Difference*. Reading the nine stories in the collection has made clear that it is a long and arduous journey for the youth of India toward their self-determination but that this journey has begun. To speak figuratively, if Narayan and Bond showed young adults the changing seasons, Anand warns them of climate change.

The scholar Emer O'Sullivan considers children's literature as "a body of literature that belongs simultaneously to the field of literature and the field of education" (191), a thesis which may be applied to young adult literature as well. Writing on the value of young adult literature, Jacqueline Glasgow also notes that "Young adult literature provides a context for students to become conscious of their operating world view and to examine critically alternative ways of understanding the world and social relations" (54). Yet young adult literature, while it has a role to educate, should avoid overt didacticism and how Paro Anand handles this is a matter of interest, as her characters are seen in the stories under consideration to move from being hapless victims of circumstance, cruelty, injustice, insensitivity, and apathy towards becoming capable individuals. The crises in the stories are resolved in such a way that the target readers see the importance of acting as responsible citizens. In stories such as "Learning to Love Again," "Walk the Straight Line," and "Going Off Grid," the young adult characters come to the realisation that they need the help of their parents, teachers and doctors, and the refuge of home, school, and hospital. In other stories like "She Walks between Raindrops"

and “Best Friends Forever,” the young show a greater understanding of issues, are able to exercise autonomy, and even set examples for others to follow.

In her comparative analysis of children’s literature, O’Sullivan warns us against the assumption that children, and by extension young adults, are the same everywhere and hence that children’s literature is universal:

It is a romantic vision of small beings who magically commune with their counterparts in the whole world without any of the concomitant problems of language, culture, religion, or race. This ignores the real conditions of childhood in different parts of the world as well as the possibilities of children’s communication across borders with their peers. Comparative children’s literature, by examining texts in their historical and cultural contexts and probing the modes of its (non)transfer, is a genuine antidote to such romantic notions of international children’s literature; it is also ideally positioned to address the real contemporary phenomenon of its globalization. (195)

Charting the field of Indian children’s literature in both English and regional languages in 1975, Kamal Sheoran draws attention to the grim social realities that are anything but conducive to its growth in India: “It is the unpalatable truth that in a country where thousands of children are doomed to illiteracy, the urgent need is to provide textbooks and other basic needs for rudimentary education. At this point, to speak of children’s literature as a specialized field is far-fetched and fanciful” (127). He further asserts, “Children’s literature in English is still very new, a product of the last twenty years” (135).

Writing nearly a quarter century later, Devika Rangachari holds the proscriptions of Indian culture responsible for the stunted growth of Indian children’s literature:

Strong overtones of didacticism and moralizing were welcomed as a means to keep the young reader rooted in ‘Indian’ traditions. Broken families, divorce, child abuse, friendship with the opposite sex and similar issues were proscribed themes for children’s books – a position held by writers and, more emphatically, by publishers. (19)

She cites the same reason for the “themes [that] seem rather tame” in Indian young adult literature (21). She goes on to conclude:

Young adult fiction in India has only taken baby steps so far and does not yet constitute a clearly identifiable genre. Fresh themes are being approached with caution by authors and publishers alike. However, the very fact that new waters are being tested and boundaries of themes being pushed augurs well for the future.

(25)

Until a few decades ago, child marriage was prevalent in India. Put simply, this often meant there could be no adolescence for many: no joyful high school or college, no play in the field with friends, and no love before marriage. But today we live in a post-liberal India, and Indian youth, particularly in urban India, have considerable access to the wonders of the outer world and the fantasies of the inner world. However, in general, the opportunities for these come with responsibilities as well as anxieties. Given these complexities and their effects on Indian youth, it is important to ask: Have all these aspects entered Indian young adult literature meaningfully? At this point, as far as young adult literature in India is concerned, we can assume tentatively that we have moved from a point of describing the stories as coming of age to a point where we have come close to saying that the genre itself has come of age.

In this light, Anand has made a significant contribution to the development of young adult literature in India with such works as: *No Guns at My Son's Funeral* (2005), which explores the plight of children against the backdrop of Kashmir militancy; its follow-up novel *Weed* (2008), which continues to highlight the thwarted lives and broken families of children in war-torn Kashmir; *Like Smoke* (2015), which deals with the particular dilemmas faced by teens; and her most recent work, *The Other: Stories of Difference* (2018), the focus of this essay, which takes up for examination the diverse issues that confound Indian teenagers and young adults. The stories move almost seamlessly from one aspect to another and the author is throughout conscious of her target audience, young adults, and the issues they face in contemporary, globalised Indian society. It is interesting to note that only in two of the nine stories, "Best Friends Forever" and "Learning to Love Again," do the central characters have names and in the remaining seven stories, in which the central characters are also young narrators, they are unnamed. Furthermore, the last story in the collection, "Going Off Grid," adopts the gender-neutral term "child". This is Anand's method for making her characters inclusive in a nation divided largely by caste, religion, and language. Yet even though most of the characters are unnamed, they are well defined and possess unique character traits. Young readers can also connect with and relate to the characters in *The Other* without much effort as the language is informal, often employing idiomatic teen speech to make its content more accessible to its primary audience, as in this example:

And I hated the thought of anyone or anything dictating what I did or how I did it.

But a little white pill did. It became my master. And my mistress, because I fell so in love with it that she completely blinded me to real girls out there. She seduced me to try the others that came along with her – cocaine, booze, you name it. When I was already far gone, I was willing to try anything else that would carry me higher. (“Walk the Straight Line” 143)

With her understanding of the young adult mind, and its experiences and abilities, Paro Anand makes her writing accessible and relatable to her readership through thematic concerns that often revolve around teenage crushes and obsessions. However, Anand’s text moves beyond these more superficial concerns and further focuses on more serious issues such as living with disability, surviving victimisation, and assuming a responsible role at home and in society. In the course of each of the stories a significant thing happens, which is the formation of identity. Yet, though the identity formation is that of the characters in the stories, through the association of reading, one may argue that this impacts on the formation of identity for readers themselves. Given the thematic concerns of the text, one may certainly speculate that the young adults who pick up *The Other* travel a significant intellectual distance in acquiring their identity as readers and in considering the larger social issues that face contemporary Indian youth.

The emotion of love is indeed central to the life of youngsters represented in the fiction, as they are preoccupied with it in several instances. The love of a young boy with a medical condition for the most attractive girl in his class is rendered evocatively in “She Walks between Raindrops.” The boy’s condition, which necessitates his use of a colostomy bag, is repulsive to his classmates who avoid him and negatively denote him as “special.” Consequently, when a girl looks beyond his disability and treats him as her friend, he responds by thinking in naively romantic terms: “... she would be walking between raindrops. Like the rain wouldn’t fall on her. Except a few drops that would kiss her cheeks” (1). Her proximity to him heightens these romantic feelings: “I’d never been that close to her – and she smelled so awesome – of honey and butterflies...” (9). However, his love is unreciprocated and the girl in question starts going out with someone else which, although this breaks his heart, conveys the experience of acceptance and loving kindness. In “Learning to Love Again,” Shamoli, a girl recovering from a sexual assault by a relative, returns to school after a long absence and to Akshat, a boy who loves her but doesn’t know what has happened to her: “I know that she has been away sick with something. Not sure what it is. But my heart lurches when I see her. I want to just put my arms around her and give her a hug and tell her that I’m there for her” (105-106). Shamoli, who also previously had feelings for Akshat, is no longer sure: “I can see that he doesn’t know anything about what’s happened with me. That’s good. It’s a relief. He and I, well, we were on the brink of something. Something really good. Something that I wanted” (107). However, she also re-examines her feelings: “But I don’t know if I will ever want a relationship like that again” (107). Shamoli has a close friend in Mira, another girl in her class, who

believes the tender love that has been hurt can blossom again, and intends to provide succour by telling her friend, “You’ll learn to love again” (107), though the process may be long and the victim first needs to love herself again. In another story “Best Friends Forever,” the initial focus on teenage friendships and parental interference shifts to the complex issue of gender identity. A young girl, Saudamini, and a boy from her class, Aarav, are best friends who often meet in Saudamini’s house against her mother’s wishes. The story takes a turn when a new boy joins their school. Saudamini tells Aarav about her crush for the new boy, and he is anguished by this. Saudamini learns later from Aarav that he likes the new boy in the same way that she does and Aarav tells her that he is not a boy but a girl – that he is a girl psychologically. In the face of this agonizing revelation, the crushes are pushed to the background. As Saudamini reflects on this revelation, she begins to understand and decides to stand by Aarav.

The boy-girl stories would merely be standard love stories if Paro Anand had not amplified the conflicts within the narratives through individual circumstances and details, such as in her description of disability and gender. Writing about the treatment of disability in young adult fiction, Karen Harris and Barbara Baskin observe, “Some stories contain admirable messages but are deficient in elements that define good literature: credible and interesting characters, a well developed plot, skillful and original use of language, etc. It would be well to reject books in which didactic intent overrides other considerations” (190-191). Three stories in *The Other* present disability realistically, yet with a sense of humour. These stories avoid stereotypical characterisations of disability that elicit stock responses as they delve into aspects of physical disability, genetic illnesses, and the gender identities of teenagers. As one such example, the boy who needs to wear a colostomy bag for his urinary problem in “She Walks between Raindrops” feels he has no chance of leading a normal life: “I was option-less. Like Zilch” (2). His acute self-awareness is born of his disability, a condition he compares to that of the British physicist Stephen Hawking, and through whose philosophy he finds inspiration: “Life would be tragic if it weren’t funny” (6). The author has portrayed him as an intelligent character in order to emphasise to her young readers that physical disability and intelligence are unrelated. Furthermore, the first-person narration helps readers to better understand the speaker. His tone is nonchalant but this probably arises from the fact that he has already met the girl (the story is in flashback) who has made a difference to his life and thus he is feeling less excluded and more hopeful. The message for youngsters who are disabled like him is that there is life beyond disability.

Another example of the author’s emphasis on disability and the need for social inclusion is seen in the young female narrator of “So, Cinderella” who has the genetic or medical condition of dwarfism, as does her twin sister. In contrast, the third sister in the story, a modern Cinderella, is portrayed as flippant from the narrator’s point-of-view. The scene of the action is a party at which Cinderella is adored by everyone while her dwarf sisters are ignored. The narrator, who naturally grudges her sister’s privilege, refers to her as Cin, pun intended. Cinderella, who dances but does not eat at the party, behaving as those of her nature often do,

becomes weakened and provides a sense of unexpected poetic justice for the narrator as the latter dwells on her future: “Like it or not, here I am. And some day I am going to fall in love with my own Prince Notsocharming. And he is going to be pleased to have a sturdy wife...” (61-62). With the acceptance of one’s condition, there is consolation followed by resolution, a point made with acerbic humour in this story, which is not just different but distinct, and which is not contrived but convincing.

As a further example of those individuals who are often perceived to exist outside of the social “norm”, the character Aarav finds that his personal sense of gender does not correspond with his birth sex in “Best Friends Forever.” When he shares his feelings about his gender identity – with much difficulty – with his best friend Saudamini she is nonplussed, causing a crisis in their friendship and consequently their understanding of each other. Interestingly, in making Saudamini the narrator of the story, Anand provides a perspective that depicts the narrator’s relatively mundane domestic life before providing the moment of Aarav’s disclosure as an abrupt awakening — as a reminder to readers of the complex nature of our lives and its unexpected turns. Saudamini ultimately rises to stand by her friend, yet the narratorial structure provides a blank page after the story as a space of reflection for her readers and, furthermore, the story ends, unexpectedly, with the author’s direct intervention. Taking the reader outside the conventional narrative, the author speaks directly to her readership as she confesses that she felt blank, a sense of writer’s block, in trying to achieve resolution for her story. She goes on to speak of her own encounter with a *hijra*, an intersex person. One can read the author’s intervention as a form of writer’s interview or playwright’s stage direction, and one that exemplifies her fundamental desire not only to take her literary campaign forward by creating awareness about and sensitivity towards LGBTQ people, but to also portray the sense of confusion and rupture faced by this marginalised community, specifically in terms of their social acceptance. This is a significant intervention, considering the debates on Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which criminalises sexual activities “against the order of nature”, the Supreme Court of India’s upholding the right to privacy as a fundamental right in its judgement on 24 August 2017, and its decriminalisation of homosexuality between consenting adults in its landmark 6 September 2018 ruling.

Anand displays an essential accuracy, honesty, and sophistication in portraying disability. She achieves this through the self-deprecating humour of the disabled person as evidenced in “She Walks between Raindrops,” and a number of other stories, a humour which never descends into self-pity. In the story “So, Cinderella” the disabled narrator feels envious of her pretty sister’s popularity but her envy is overshadowed by her courage and self-awareness. Similarly, there is empathy for Aarav’s traumatic condition in “Friends Forever,” but at no point does this become patronizing. Anand’s fiction inspires this empathy in its young readers by creating for them through her stories what may best be termed as a “vicarious interaction with a disabled person” (Harris and Baskin 191).

Victimisation is another major aspect of these stories of difference and occurs in various forms, including in its physical, psychological, economic, and social manifestations; at various levels extending from verbal teasing to sexual assault; and with various effects ranging from hurt to humiliation to devastation. Importantly, Anand's stories are multicultural in that they include teens from all sections of society and, as the stories deal with the dominant and violent forces of society from the victim's perspective, they provide counter narratives. Such counter-storytelling has significant advantages because, as Richard Delgado, an American specialist in civil rights and critical race theory, observes:

By telling (and hearing) counter-stories, members of marginalized groups:

- gain healing from becoming familiar with their own historic oppression and victimization;
- realize that they are not alone; that others have the same thoughts and experiences;
- stop blaming themselves for their marginal position; and
- construct additional counter-stories to challenge the dominant story. (qtd. in Hughes-Hassell 215)

The short story "Inner Circle, Outer Circle" is told through the agonised perspective of a witness of sexual assault. The witness is a young schoolgirl, the victim is a young office-going woman, and the perpetrators of the crime are a gang of young men. Although the crime in the story happens in daylight on a street, it is disturbingly reminiscent of the ghastly Delhi gangrape that took place on the night of 16 December 2012 and that shook the nation's conscience.¹ The first part of Anand's story is filtered through the narrator's imagination of what should or could have been her role in saving the girl as she is one of the witnesses who does nothing to save the victim. The young witness, coming from a poor background, is a high achiever in her studies and is, naturally, aspirational. Her parents, like most parents, want their daughter to be safe but was that, she asks herself, the reason for her inaction? She ponders her hesitation and her community's role in it:

But I have never been taught, in school, at home, to stick up for the one who is vulnerable, to step forward and right a wrong. The justice is doing the right thing. None of us has been taught that. Instead, we are taught to protect our own skins, to look out for ourselves. And we may be sick of our own impotence. But we are never going to stop them. Yes, we are sick of our blind eyes, but we don't open our eyes, we don't raise our arms up to stop that injustice. Even though she

screams out. Bachaao. And whimpers, help me, help me. We turn deaf ears.
Blind, deaf, mute. That's us. That's me. (69-70)

This holds teachers, parents, the public, and the narrator herself indirectly responsible for the crime. Is the author speaking to society, to the nation? Is she doing it at the risk of being didactic? The message is clear – not raising a voice or preventing a voice from being raised against a crime is a crime as well. From dreaming of taking the lead to save the young woman, the narrator makes a transition to actually taking the lead to convince her parents that she will never again be a mute witness to injustice. Despite its inclination towards didacticism and melodrama, the story moves from a point of powerlessness to a position of empowerment through its protagonist's ability to learn the inherent social value of proactive behaviour. Similarly, the story "Learning to Love Again" deals with the rape of a young girl by someone known to her, a maternal uncle. The loving child of a closely-knit family is assaulted, her parents and grandparents at home are devastated, and a teacher and a friend at school are worried about her. All of them stand by her as she recuperates, emphasising the need for emotional and familial support – even when the betrayal emanates from within the extended family itself. The story is a series of soliloquies from the characters – except the culprit – creating, in a sense, multiple streams of consciousness, yet with little variation in tone from one character to another. This may be interpreted as reflecting the gravity of the situation, and the need for everyone to speak in one voice, to be united against the horror of such a violation. Though its sentiments are laudable, the ending of this story, however, appears somewhat forced. The victim Shamoli meets her grandmother, who is also the mother of the culprit. The grandmother wants to meet the culprit in prison because she wants to know where she went wrong as a mother: "I am going to try and understand because only through that can I try and make some corrections" (112). She asks Shamoli's permission to which Shamoli responds: "Go, Nani. Go to him. I want you to look him in the eye and ask him why he did what he did. Why do any of these people do what they do? How could he do this? There are so many rapes. Every day. We need to know what goes on in the mind of these men. Yes, you are right, we need to ask him. Go, Nani. Get some answers" (112-113). Such a response seems slightly unreal, especially when all the sufferers – primary as well as secondary victims – appear to recover briskly in the story. Nevertheless, a story like this "should serve as a lens to help us see how violence functions in our collective imagination. If we can understand how we interpret violence, we are perhaps better equipped to resist violence in our midst" (Franzak and Noll 671). In her italicised note accompanying the story, the author shares with her readers the interactions she had with people on the subject before and while writing the story, and has this to say:

*...finding that voice of the uncle became impossible for me. The hurt is too deep.
So I asked the grandmother to try and find his voice. I don't know if she did. I*

couldn't travel that road with her. I stood with her outside the prison, but I couldn't find it in my heart, in my words, to step in and face this man. He may be fictional, but he is real and he walks amongst us" (114).

These comments are noteworthy, considering Anand spends a good deal of time interacting with the young adults about whom she writes and upon whom she bases her characters. Further illustrating this point is her meeting with young people in Kashmir, a beautiful valley torn by violence and militancy: "Their pain and their willingness and need to share their trauma with you, has resulted in my newest book—*No Guns at my Son's Funeral* (2005)" ("Kashmir: the other side of childhood" 55).

Superhero role models and standing up for oneself against bullying form the focus of the short story "Because Superman Has Better Things to Do." A little girl gets a discarded Superman poster from a place where her mother works as a housekeeper and the image of the superhero becomes the girl's companion when she is alone at home. Superman is a prop in the story, a fantasy that carries you to reality and one which remains with the girl when she attends school. She has gained admission to the school through a quota based on her social background, and for this reason we know this is a story written after the Parliament of India enacted The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act or Right to Education Act (RTE) on 4 August 2009. Like most other stories in the collection, "Because Superman Has Better Things to Do" takes place largely at school. This is primarily because the stories are about children and young adults; because school is a site where attitudes and characters are formed; and equally importantly because Paro Anand believes school education is of paramount importance in the formation of humanistic and social values, which are strongly evident in her writing. But school for this young girl becomes a harrowing experience when she is in Class 6 because of Raghu and his gang who taunt her about her caste and class and insult her by calling her Miss EWS (Economically Weaker Section) and a Dalit (oppressed people on the basis of their lowest position in the Indian caste hierarchy). She rises to the occasion and in the altercation that follows, calls Raghu a *kaaryar* (coward). Yet as he moves to strike her, she responds by knocking him down, thus completing the personal and metaphorical transition from idealised, archetypal male hero – Superman – to empowered female in a patriarchal society.

Anand widens the range of her textual depictions by dealing with another critical teenage concern, drug addiction. In reality the complex neuro-biological disease of drug addiction is not very well understood in India and is rarely discoursed in literature. *Uda Punjab* (2016), a recent Hindi feature film directed by Abhishek Chaubey, dealt boldly with the drug abuse rampant in the state of Punjab and, though it generated much interest, it is not often that such a subject is taken up in the economically-driven Indian film-industry. The topic, however, seems like a natural choice for young adult fiction and Paro Anand addresses it in "Walk the Straight Line," a story that illustrates the life of a fledgling basketball player becoming a drug addict. The

young sportsman tries drugs recreationally and, before he realises the extent of his usage, he has become an addict. Discord in his family – his parents’ messy divorce – constitutes part of the cause for his addiction, yet he believes that he will be able to keep his habit hidden. One moment changes this on the basketball court: “As the game progressed I felt the world kind of thicken and blur. Someone threw the ball at me. Someone else came at me from another direction. My mind’s wire got crossed. I ran straight into the person as the ball hit my head. I kept going till I went down. Hard” (145). After being rushed to the hospital, what follows is an honest dialogue between the youngster and the doctor. He learns that his parents have come to know about his addiction and, though no one blames him, he comes to the understanding that acknowledgement and then acceptance of responsibility provide the only path towards recovery: “And I know, I don’t want to go back there again. I hope I can stay the course. It’s a long road back. But I can try” (148).

The story “Grief (is a beast)” takes up another pertinent teenage issue, depression. The plot revolves around a young girl who has lost her loving mother and descends into depression: “The emptiness grows like a black hole eating into the light and laughter” (82). Though she contemplates death and considers seeing a psychiatrist, as in the story “Walk the Straight Line,” it is the acknowledgement of her condition and the causes for it that constitute the first step toward recovery. She reflects, “I was too busy shutting everyone up and shutting everyone out to keep count. And so, I haven’t talked to anyone” (84). The only other person in their nuclear family is her father, who is also struggling to cope with the loss of his wife. The daughter decides to talk to her father as she is concerned for his welfare, yet when she meets him, he seems to be doing better than her, a situation that fills her with hope and makes her determined to tame her own grief. As a consequence, the girl progresses in the story from being immersed in grief to being able to look at it objectively.

The last story in the collection, “Going Off Grid,” is a fitting conclusion for an author who does not seem to want to leave anything to chance because it is her responsibility to remind her young readers of their responsibility. Accordingly, this narrative depicts responsible, proactive parents encouraging their child to stick to values, come what may. The story begins with an emphasis on preventing cruelty to animals before it moves to the broader issue of protecting every living being’s rights as it references the earlier stories to place these situations in perspective. This book of disparate stories of difference, which speaks of the individual triumphs of its young characters, which refers to Superman, Stephen Hawking, the *Chipko Andolan* (a movement to save trees), the *Bell Bajao Andolan* (a movement to prevent domestic violence), and the #Me-Too campaign (a movement against sexual harassment), refers finally to Gandhi, the Father of the Nation, a man who stood for peace and nonviolence, who resisted all forms of oppression, who never hesitated to speak truth to power, and whose way of life has come to be appreciatively termed in modern times as *Gandhigiri*. Is Paro Anand advocating the values and strengths of Superman, Stephen Hawking, Mahatma Gandhi, and the various social movements as role models for the youth of India? Through this disparate collection, what is

certain is that she wants her young readers to think about people, both real and fictional, and the movements engendered by them that have made a difference.

Notes

¹ A female physiotherapy intern was raped and tortured by a group of six men in a private bus and the victim died of her injuries a few days later. All six accused, one of them a juvenile, were arrested and charged with sexual assault and murder. The horrifying incident led to several public protests across the nation, resulting in the promulgation by the President of India of the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance, 2013.

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