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Framing Atrocity: Media, Memory, Literature and the Ethics with respect to Amitav Ghosh's writings

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Abstract:
This paper examines the pervasive cultures of silence surrounding contemporary violence, exploring the complexities of representation and response in an era defined by rapid information dissemination and globalized conflict. Through an analysis of diverse case studies, including acts of terrorism, urban suicides, and the mediated portrayal of suffering, this paper investigates the ethical dilemmas faced by artists, journalists, and citizens in bearing witness to violence. Drawing upon mostly the works of Amitav Ghosh, Harold Pinter, and other critical voices, it interrogates the role of media in shaping public perception and the enduring challenges of comprehending and resisting the banality of violence.

Keywords: Violence, Representation, Ethics of art, Amitav Ghosh, Harold Pinter

Introduction:

The contemporary world is characterized by a relentless cycle of violence, often obscured or rather highlighted by a pervasive culture of silence. From acts of terrorism that indiscriminately claim lives to the quiet desperation reflected in rising suicide rates, violence manifests in diverse forms, leaving individuals and communities grappling with its incomprehensibility. This paper seeks to analyze the complex interplay between violence and representation, exploring how narratives, images, and silences shape our understanding of these events. It argues that the challenge lies not only in confronting the overt manifestations of violence but also in addressing the systemic conditions and ideological frameworks that perpetuate its cycle.

The immediacy of contemporary media often transforms acts of violence into spectacles, rapidly disseminated and consumed before fading into the background of daily life. This phenomenon, as observed by Amitav Ghosh, reflects a tendency to prioritize state narratives and geopolitical concerns over the lived experiences of those directly affected.

The faceless nature of many contemporary conflicts, driven by fundamentalist ideologies and readily available technologies, presents a sinister reflection of the modern nation-state itself. The proliferation of advanced weaponry, exemplified by the actions of individuals like Abdul Qadeer Khan, underscores the global reach of destructive capabilities and the precarious nature of contemporary security. In the face of such threats, the public often resorts to a collective silence, a pragmatic acceptance of the inevitability of violence.
(This paper is dated. It was written in 2006, and I am presenting it with its datedness as a document of memory of our times.)

The Bang Bang Club

It's not the bullet with my name on it that worries me. It's the one that says "To whom it may concern." - Anonymous Belfast resident, quoted in *London Guardian*, 1991

Even as I write this paper, the cycle of violence revolves at a dizzying speed. A few days back, on what they call Seven Eleven (July 7, 2006), there were serial blasts at various railway stations in Mumbai, leaving more than 200 dead. What is interesting is that in most cases, no one even takes responsibility. It is as if violence is an ideology of its own as if terror and violence were a pathological need.

The Delhi and London bombings, occurring in October 2005, instilled a profound sense of insecurity among civilian populations, revealing the extent to which they had become integrated into the theater of modern warfare.

Life, however, has to carry on, and within days, Sarojini Nagar market was bustling again, as was the local train network of Bombay within a week. Newspapers would write "Bindaas Bombay" or "Daring Delhi," which they inevitably did, in their standard formulaic structure. Amitav Ghosh talks about the spectacle of violence that would be reported in the media and then forgotten for "more important" issues of state politics until the next one happens.[1].

The specter of McLuhan's 'medium is the message.[2]' continues to haunt our understanding of the media's role in constructing narratives of violence. The dominant message often reinforces state supremacy, framing violent acts as either foreign plots or internal disruptions. Without adopting an essentialist position that blames the state's desire for

[1] See, for example, the discussion about the Calcutta riots of the 1960s in *The Shadow Lines.* Ghosh reiterates this position variously in many of his works.

[2] This phrase became a powerful metaphor after the publication of McLuhan's first book: McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964.

control, it is crucial to examine whether these 'faceless enemies' are manifestations of the ideological frameworks propagated by the state itself.

There has been a spate of suicides in Delhi IN 2006, from the towers of the District Centre in Janakpuri, and the place has almost become a "die-streak center." The towers have spiral stairways that face each other, and in between lies the courtyard, where the last leap ends. In the courtyard also lies a *bhairav kali* mandir. Either the Gods seek sacrifice, or they are helpless because of their human predicament. Neha Kakkar was allegedly raped, after which she flung herself (or was flung from the tower); Kartik could not take the monotony and work stress of a BPO job; someone else had low marks in an exam. A lady was found dead inside a car, apparently killed for dowry six years after her marriage. The stress and violence, overt and subtle, of modern life in a city is intriguing, to the point of being distressing. On one side of the suicide towers, a huge hoarding says, "Believe it or Not," with the name of some MNC under it in small font. The name might be anything – either a Mac or some dispossessed or annihilated tribe like Apache (like Ghosh tells in his memoir "Four Corners."[3] About the American fetish to name pets and vehicles after the annihilated aboriginal 'other'). Or for effect, we might best turn to Sub-Saharan Africa or Iraq, where a general said, "We do not do body counts."

Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for this picture of a dying child in Sudan and the "vulture of violence" waiting patiently for him to die. Carter took his own life a few months later, for the image of extreme depredation haunted him. It is also alleged that Carter did not do anything for the child - there are contesting versions of this matter. There is a very interesting movie titled *Bang Bang Club* (2010), directed by Steven Silver, regarding the rush to shoot this pornography of violence in Africa. The image generates a

[3] Amitav Ghosh. "Four Corners" in *The Imam and the Indian.* (Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002) pp18-23

cascade of critical inquiries regarding the ethical implications of its creation and distribution, the motivations driving its circulation, the potential for media-driven complacency, and the specific messages it conveys. I am acutely aware of the paradox inherent in reproducing this image, potentially contributing to the very 'pornography of violence' I critique. However, its inclusion is unavoidable. It represents a pivotal moment in my research, a tangible manifestation of the 'vultures of violence' concept explored in my MPhil dissertation titled *Vultures of Violence: Analysing the Ideology and Narrative in Amitav Ghosh's Writings.*[4]. This image, tragically, epitomizes the very subject of my study, demanding its presence within this work.

To engage with these questions, let's turn to a book written by Denise Leith titled *Bearing Witness: The Lives Of War Correspondents And Photojournalists.*[5]. Leith explains that the book was prompted by two images that haunted her. One was American photographer Eddie Adams's Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph of the South Vietnamese police chief Nguyen Ngoc Loan executing a bound Vietcong prisoner in a Saigon street in 1968. The other, also a Pulitzer Prize-winning image, is the one just discussed by Kevin Carter, of a starving child in Sudan, with a vulture looming, taken during the famine of 1993. Both photographs had an extraordinary impact on the viewers. Adams's photograph became an iconic anti-war image. Carter's picture mobilized international aid. However, both men knew another side. Adams believed that his photograph "destroyed an honorable policeman's life."

The stories behind these photographs - not the ones the world knows - illustrate both the moral complexity and the extreme nature of the work. Eddie Adams, one of Leith's interviewees, had accompanied US troops to Vietnam in over 150 operations. He admits his purpose was to get a good story, but he would contribute to disseminating the truth. He says that he did not take a picture of a young marine, paralyzed with fear, for that would circulate the image that he was a coward, though that was the truth, for "even I was paralyzed with fear."

Banality of Violence

Amitav Ghosh spends a great deal of effort in his writings and interviews to try to ruminate over the role of a writer in representing violence. Ghosh iterated that he was compelled to write *Countdown* in the middle of writing *The Glass Palace*, for he felt it was his

[4] MPhil dissertation awarded by Centre for English Studies, JNU, 2006.

[5] Denise Leith. *Bearing Witness: The Lives Of War Correspondents And Photojournalists*. (Random House, 2005)

responsibility[6]. In 'The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi,' Amitav Ghosh acknowledges a personal conflict between his inclination towards a writer's political detachment and the overwhelming need to respond to the 1984 Delhi riots. He states that the 'banality of violence' compelled him to join the anti-riot protests, suggesting that the scale of the atrocities rendered his usual stance of neutrality untenable. He tries to refrain from the pornography of violence by replacing it with silence that echoes wild, like in *The Shadow Lines*, but in *Countdown*, towards the end, he meanders into the spectacle of how Delhi would be turned to ashes if a nuclear bomb were to fall.

Amitav Ghosh's resistance to violence manifests through a multifaceted approach: constructing historical continuums, presenting counter-narratives to dominant histories, and illuminating the intricate, self-perpetuating nature of violence. This aligns with his assertion that 'history is notoriously not about the past,' underscoring its enduring relevance. Furthermore, Ghosh's formal innovations—genre-blurring and the disruption of conventional narrative teleology—serve as acts of resistance against colonial legacies and epistemic violence. However, the inherent tension between citizen and writer remains a persistent ethical challenge. The specter of Kevin Carter's dilemma—the 'vultures of violence' confronting a dying child—serves as a potent symbol of the chasm between lived reality and its representation, a chasm that confronts all artists and journalists.

While the Carter photograph demonstrably generated aid, the underlying question of its circulation warrants closer scrutiny. The interplay of journalistic intent, narrative construction, and media commercialism provides a partial explanation. However, a more profound analysis must address the potential for these images to perpetuate asymmetrical power relations. In light of Amitav Ghosh's critique of the Abu Ghraib photographs, it is pertinent to ask whether such images, disseminated by the First World, function to reinforce a narrative of dominance and dependency. Do they, in effect, insinuate a contemporary iteration of the 'white man's burden,' suggesting a need for Western intervention in the lives of the global South?

Cruelty as a lesson

In his essay titled “The Theatre of Cruelty: Reflections on the Anniversary of Abu Ghraib,”[7]Ghosh points out that this phenomenon of stripping and shooting prisoners has a pedigree. He says that the fact that the American military took charge of the prison first

[6] See Hawley 11

[7] From the website of *The Nation.* < http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050718/ghosh/2 > as viewed on 25th June, 2006.

when the museums and libraries lay unguarded is not surprising. The convicts were a vehicle of colonial expansion in imperial times in the 17th and 18th centuries. He says:

> By the latter half of the century, the British were transporting Indian prisoners to a chain of penal colonies on islands across the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean: Penang, Ramree Island near Burma, the Andaman Islands, Mauritius, and Bencoolen off the coast of Sumatra. These were the ancestors of Guantánamo Bay.

To be on sail, you needed to be in jail, he says. He quotes Dr. Johnson, "No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail." He goes on to show how the fetish for stripping the prisoners naked and taking their pictures existed in the British regime as well, with the only difference being that the jailor was not in the frame in those pictures, unlike Abu Ghraib. He says that continuity lies in the marriage of incarceration and cultural theory:

> The methods employed in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay are said to have been informed by the ideas of anthropologists like Raphael Patai, who, in his notorious 1973 work *The Arab Mind*, wrote at length about Arab conceptions of sexuality, honor, and masculinity. British prison officials in India were also careful to target what they thought were deep-rooted fears and taboos. They believed, for instance, that Indians dreaded sea voyages more than death itself: This was, in their eyes, one of the great advantages of island prisons.

Marking the deported African convicts with tattoos was a sort of emasculation for them, for tattoos were worn by women in their societies. Despite these continuities, Ghosh feels that there is something new about Abu Ghraib- the pictures' intent. He says there is a difference between torture and abuse; torture has an end in mind. The prisoners in the pictures are not being tortured, for there is no end in the minds of the perpetrators. He says:

> It is as if they were making the prisoners act out an idea of torture, not as a means but as an end in itself. It is as if the jailors were saying to the prisoners: There is no particular purpose in doing this other than to teach you who you are and what your place is in relation to us.

Ghosh says in the essay that the war on Iraq has been described in classroom language, that it is intended to teach lessons in democracy. Ghosh feels the pictures' intent is pedagogical, to teach the Third World reality of the unspoken relationship between prisons and

parliaments. He opines that the acts committed before the camera are intended to teach; and therefore they have been freely distributed, for the soldier's are convinced of their ends. Ghosh laments that this shows that the means and the ends have become the same, enacted over and over again, and that's why Richard Falk and Noam Chomsky are so important for their emphasis on scrutinizing the means as well as ends.

Drawing out continuities is of interest to Ghosh, and through them, he shows the links to the past as well as the epistemology of absurdity. Of Abu Ghraib, the popular feeling has been that the pictures leaked out, but Ghosh's observation is that they were systematically disseminated to educate the Third World of their position and place in, as Mary Shelley would say, "the chain of existence and events."[8]. Ghosh narrativizes violence through non-sensational prose that tries to probe and find the routes and roots and seeks a voice of conciliation. He is interested, also in finding the non-overt forms of violence that cut much deeper than the overt forms. The marking of the Africans with tattoos is much less sensational than their dying in hordes on ships, but the tattoos are symbolic of a culture being undermined and exterminated slowly. The counter-narrative of the perpetrator himself disseminating images of excesses also depicts how power induces huge quantities of sadism that seem justified to the perpetrator. The prototypes would be "the white man's burden" or the phrenologists bent upon proving that women's brain size is linked to hysteria. The issue is ideological violence as much as physical – the foundation of colonialism lies in that, and it is rediscovering itself in what critics would say is the neo-colonial age.

In search of a different frame

African writers have resisted the temptation to theorize too much over their condition as other postcolonial nations have done, for theory perhaps will not help in the face of a vulture waiting for a child to die. However, they have developed their own idiom in the English language, to the point of it being their very own, a movement that has no fixed markers but Amos Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard.*[9] It would be one of the originating texts from which the legitimization of African English started. Finding a new idiom in creative writing was for sure giving the wretched of the earth their own voice, and an active resistance to the loaded codes of British English. Amitav Ghosh's strategy of avoiding overt

[8] The term "chain of existence and events" is used by the monster of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelly, in several places.

[9] Amos Tutuola. *The Palm Wine Drinkard.* (Grove Press, 1953)

theoretical tools, though invoking their message through aphorisms, personal histories, and anthropological inversions, as in *In An Antique Land,* is also a remarkable experiment.

Coming back to the idea of the circulation of images in the West, a British-African author, Uche Nworah, is disgusted with the circulation of these images and refuses to criticize Tony Blair on this issue. The search for strength, he says, is needed within. He says in his article "Poverty in Africa and The Commission for Africa Report."[10] Both African rulers and Western collaborators have brought Africa to this state of misery and to become "cry babies, laughing stocks of the world." He iterates the idea of Africans being their own enemy:

> As an African living in the United Kingdom, I have lost count of the number of times my tummy has ached, and my senses insulted by the shocking images of dying children, dilapidated infrastructures, population mass, and war-torn and savaged villages in rural Africa, largely peddled in the western media, on each of these occasions, my only thoughts have been that God did not destine poverty, wars and suffering for Africans, else Africa would not have been richly blessed with abundant natural and human resources, Africans by default, willingly and unwillingly are Africa's worst enemies.

Nworah goes on to praise Tony Blair for his efforts, saying, "It is our collective failure as a people, and the failure of successive African governments to get their acts together, that has led Tony Blair and the other world leaders, to try from the West to solve the largely evident problems in Africa. On this note, praise should go to Mr Blair and his Commission for Africa team for the vision, and also for showing a willingness to back this vision with a political will."

Nworah's point is well taken in that he refuses to be a "laughing stock," and the suspicion of the images being circulated to "educate" the positions gets stronger. The call for internal strength is a war cry against destitution and for self-respect. However, the praise for Tony Blair might be in the Jamesonian paradigm of the colonized speaking the colonizers' language. On his website, Nworah has put a picture of a nude famished boy

[10] Uche Nworah. "Poverty in Africa and The Commission for Africa Report" in *The Nigerian Village Square.* May 16, 2005. On <http://www.nigeriavillagesquare1.com/Articles/Nworah/2005/05/poverty-in-africa-and-commission-for.html> as viewed on May 10, 2006.

searching for food in a cow's anal cavity and another one of a boy drinking urine as a cow is urinating. This, consciously or unconsciously, is juxtaposed with a picture of the Commission leaders sitting happily, posing for a picture.

It is interesting to compare Nworah's argument with Harold Pinter's. Pinter blames the West directly for supporting dictators and killing people in Africa in his Nobel Prize speech of 2005. He points out the low-intensity conflict formula of America:

> Direct invasion of a sovereign state has never, in fact, been America's favored method. In the main, it has preferred what it has described as 'low-intensity conflict.' Low-intensity conflict means that thousands of people die but slower than if you dropped a bomb on them in one fell swoop. It means that you infect the heart of the country, that you establish a malignant growth and watch the gangrene bloom. When the populace has been subdued - or beaten to death - the same thing - and your own friends, the military, and the great corporations sit comfortably in power, you go before the camera and say that democracy has prevailed.

The American state's capacity for precise global intervention, facilitated by sophisticated intelligence and military capabilities, contrasts sharply with the limited understanding of global interconnectedness among its citizens. As Amitav Ghosh suggests in an interview with Rahul Sagar, this gap may contribute to the growing public skepticism toward globalization, a departure from the prevailing attitudes of the 1990s. Morag Fraser in "Circle of Hell"[11] Quotes Peter Arnett, a Pulitzer prize winner and a veteran war correspondent, "Government decisions are made by an inside group of Congress, and the American public largely doesn't give a damn. When they vote, they don't vote in terms of international policies; they vote in terms of local issues." How does he explain the US myopia he diagnoses? "By looking at the news sources most Americans use: They get talkback radio, which is skewed to the right usually; they look at a bit of television and maybe some magazine shows, and that is it. They don't give a ****".

The era of soap opera

It is rather sad that the Indian media is following the example of US media with soaps and reality shows that are bent on building an ultra-consumerist worldview. The Indian media

[11] Morag Fraser. "Circle of Hell" in *Australian Book Review October 2004.* On <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~abr/Oct04/Morag.htm> as viewed on January 2, 2006.

is also an inversion, with an obsession with politics, but that only reinforces the power of the state. The results might well be positive, like in the case of the reopening of the Jessica Lal case or the very recent "Saving Prince" live telecast.[12] (July 2006). A little boy had fallen into a deep pit in Kurukshetra, and all the channels broadcast his tryst with Destiny live as army men were summoned to save the boy. The endeavor was successful to a great extent because of the sustained media coverage that put pressure on the state to send the army men. However, when the boy was saved, there were the assembly line self-congratulations by the television channels like "Exclusive only by us, we saved the boy ."All channels exclusively showed the same videos, and the videos of a nation in celebration with headlines like "Kashi mein cake" and "Mumbai mein masti" showed people bursting crackers. It is a testimony to how powerful the media is, how it can decide to convert any event to a national event, and how it demonstrates its crude strength with repetitive videos and corny titles. That Prince was saved is heartening news indeed, but the crackers that were being burst were made by young children in Sivakasi. Does the media make a national event out of that? It will not obviously sell like a rescue operation, which works as a reality thriller. This raw strength of "live and exclusive" in its inversion has the capability to incite crowds, like BBC's repeated telecast of the demolition of Babri Masjid would have done.

Internalised messages

The messages, reach, and audience of audio-visual and print media, creative writing, and theory are different, but they must be studied as inter-texts. The limitations without a detailed analysis are obvious, but I have tried to incorporate all three in my discussion to arrive at some kind of picture. The demolition of the mosque takes me back to Radhika Subramanian's ethnographic inquiry[13] Into the 1992 Bombay riots. She attended a workshop with Hindu slum children from a slum that had suffered very badly in the riots. Her account raises several concerns - that these children used to play games like "Shivaji ki aulad" versus "Aurangzeb ki Aulad":

> The boys were asked for images and ideas they associated with the words "Muslim and "Islam," the associations that spilled out seemed remarkably prosaic.

[12] This incident occurred in July 2006

[13] Radhika Subramaniam. "Culture of Suspicion: Rumour and Riots in Bombay, 1992-1993" in *Transforming Anthropology.* (Voulme 8, Nos. 1 & 2, 1999) pp97-110

> *They have four wives; they have many children and keep on multiplying; they wear long beards; they offer prayers on the street (raaste par namaaz padhte Hain); women never offer prayers; they only listen to their mullahs; they often leave their studies and their work and build masjids; they have fixed occupations, for instance, as butchers (kasai), and you never see them in other jobs; there is no progress or reform (parivartan) in their religion; they write from right to left — in fact, everything they do is upside down (Ulta); they show no mercy (unme rehem nahin hai).* (Subramaniam: 101)

The description is very similar to *The Shadow Lines*, where not slum children but children of the upper middle class are made to believe that everything is upside down on the other side of the home and of the border. Subramanian is both amused and baffled at the inversions of these received notions in reality:

> In this constellation of images, the seemingly bleak recollection of ruthless butchers without mercy rests on a par with the othering response that "they" do everything upside down, and even with the almost trivial observation that "they" wear long beards. Some of the observations, such as that about following religious leaders, link more directly to the events of 1992-1993 than others but with curious inversions. It was the call to build a temple on the site of the Babri Masjid that prompted its demolition; therefore, it was "the Hindus" who, listening to their religious leaders, left their studies and their work to go to Ayodhya for the sacred task of building the temple. To recall this only as the building of a mosque at a mythic, Hindu sacred site is to leapfrog over several centuries while one taps into the rich vein of Hindutva imagery of the plundering Muslim invader. The tussle over space also manifests itself on Bombay's streets, where religious processions and jostling for public space have had a long history from the colonial period. (Subramaniam: 101)

Despite the fact that these essentialist images of the "Other" are passed on in many families and society at large, the essential fabric of the society is secular. Both Ghosh and Subramaniam account for this solidarity between communities in the face of crises. The narrator of *The Shadow Lines* says that Muslims in East Pakistan saved many Hindus, while many Hindus saved Muslims in Calcutta in the 1964 riots (Ghosh 1988: 229-230), but that they were ordinary people soon forgotten. In "The Ghosts of Mrs. Gandhi," he describes how Hindus saved Sikhs in the anti-Sikh riots. (Ghosh 2002: 46-63).

The riot engineers spark that latent Otherness, would be a plausible theory of how the mobs become self-sustaining monsters. However, Gyanendra Pandey's question reverberates, groping for answers, he asks that no explanations and theories quite explain how "this task of poisoning the minds of people can be accomplished so quickly".[14]

That is where silence falls, the incomprehensibility of the banality of violence, which reverberates through *The Shadow Lines*. We have delved into many theories - but eventually, they lapse into silence. It is tough to find a reason or metaphor for violence. If theory can be compared to metaphor and narrative to metonymy, Ghosh perhaps chooses the path of metonymy for the lack of a metaphor. In metonymic narratives, at least we see a ray of hope somewhere, in Frank de Martini, who died saving the victims of 9/11, or the Irrawaddy dolphin of *The Hungry Tide*, which is a symbol of peace and strength for all, or in the people who proactively come to each other's rescue in times of crises, or in the chant of the Muslim women in the wake of Benaras blasts. The vultures of violence and the cultures of silence perhaps go hand in hand. Silence is out of an inability to comprehend the madness, and silence is out of coercion.

Ghosh says in the preface of his latest book, *The Incendiary Circumstances,* "Is it possible to write about situations of violence without allowing your work to become complicit with the subject?" Food for thought.

I could well have ended with Ghosh's question but as a tribute to Harold Pinter, whose Nobel prize speech is a speech of truth to power:

> When we look into a mirror, we think the image that confronts us is accurate. But move a millimetre and the image changes. We are actually looking at a never-ending range of reflections. But sometimes a writer has to smash the mirror - for it is on the other side of that mirror that the truth stares at us.

It is perhaps fitting to end with a poem by Pinter that expresses grief, bafflement over the logic of nation, war, violence, religion; and above all the vanity and finality of human destiny.

> Where was the dead body found?
> Who found the dead body?
> Was the dead body dead when found?

[14] Gyanendra Pandey. "In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-Muslim Riots in India Today" in *Representations.* (Vol 27, 1992) pp27-55

How was the dead body found?
Who was the dead body?
Who was the father-daughter or brother
Or uncle or sister or mother or son
Of the dead and abandoned body?
Was the body dead when abandoned?
Was the body abandoned?
By whom had it been abandoned?
Was the dead body naked or dressed for a journey?
What made you declare the dead body dead?
Did you declare the dead body dead?
How well did you know the dead body?
How did you know the dead body was dead?
Did you wash the dead body?
Did you close both its eyes
Did you bury the body
Did you leave it abandoned
Did you kiss the dead body?

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