

**ANIMAL SACRIFICE AND THE NONHUMAN OTHER IN INDIRA GOSWAMI'S *THE MAN FROM CHINNAMASTA***

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**Abstract**

*The Man from Chinnamasta* (2005) is a controversial novel by the Assamese writer and Jnanpith award winner, Indira Goswami, about the outdated custom of animal sacrifice practised in the Kamakhya Temple situated in the picturesque Nilachal Hills in Guwahati, Assam. Translated lucidly by Prashant Goswami, the novel delineates the ritualistic slaughter of animals in pre-independent British India, when the Independence movement and the cult of Gandhi were only beginning to gather momentum. The novel, which is inspired by Goswami's personal experiences and, especially, her revulsion at the sight of vast quantities of blood from animal sacrifices polluting the Brahmaputra on festive days, negotiates the incompatibility between nonviolence, of which Hindu scriptures are unanimous in their praise, and the savage custom of animal sacrifice, references to which were either interpolated or distorted by the tantric tradition in texts like the *Kalika Purana*. The present paper examines Goswami's reevaluation of the misguided and barbaric notion of animal sacrifice as a form of placating deities in the light of various theoretical formulations on animality by the likes of E.B Tylor, Tim Ingold, Marcel Mauss, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. It also attempts to critique the notion of human exclusivity predicated on conceiving animals as the Other by arguing in favour of a non-hierarchical ordering of life in which humans are not at the centre but shares equal status with other beings.

**Keywords:** desacralisation, nonhuman, Other, posthuman, sacrifice

**Introduction**

The slaughter of animals for ritualistic purposes is a common phenomenon across diverse cultures. While the reasons for ritualistic slaughter may vary, what remains unchanged is the fact that almost every religion has, at one time or other, advocated some form of animal sacrifice as a way of placating vengeful or inflexible deities or expiating the act of killing itself. Whereas in Abrahamic religions the ritualistic slaughter of animals has been performed down the ages mainly in tune with the belief that the meat obtained would otherwise be unfit for human consumption, in Hinduism, the focus has been more on honouring gods and spirits, and the consumption of meat, if at all it happened, had only secondary significance.

Hindu ritualistic sacrifices are usually tied to annual festivals where devotees may offer animal sacrifices to certain deities for various purposes, be it to supplicate for a change in fortune or as a gesture of gratitude. Most of these sacrificial practices are associated with the cult of the Goddess incarnated in her most ferocious form as Durga or Kali, and as a handful of parochial deities such as the Śītalā, the North-Indian goddess of smallpox also known as Māriyamman in the south. The slaughter is invariably performed by a priest after the chanting of prescribed hymns, and the efficacy of the sacrifice depends on the number of cuts it took to decapitate the animal, a single cut being the most auspicious, and the direction and the pose in which the animal's head fell. The slaughtered animal is supposed to be a stand-in for a human sacrifice, and as such, is cared for with divine veneration in the days leading up to the ceremony. As Claude Lévi-Strauss points out in *The Savage Mind*, ritual sacrifice is a phenomenon whose "fundamental principle is . . . substitution" (224).

There are numerous references to animal sacrifice in Hindu scriptures, including such minute details as the most propitious manner of performing the sacrifice, the exact number of animals to be slaughtered, and the number of days to be set aside for the ritual. It might strike one as apocryphal to suggest that for a religion that gives enormous importance to zoolatry, Hinduism, or at least certain sects

associated with it, puts a premium on the immolation of animals like cows, oxen, goats, sheep, horses, etc. *The Mahabharata* is one of the oldest texts that shed light on the Vedic performance of animal sacrifice and the spiritual value ascribed to the act in each individual instance. For example, *The Mahabharata* describes in breath-taking detail the highly elaborate and exorbitant sacrifice called “Ashvamedha”, which spans a whole year during which a powerful king seeking boundless glory sets loose a white stallion accompanied by a herd of hundred geldings and an intrepid army of Kshatriyas to trespass at will the neighbouring lands. Unless the stallion is captured and a challenge thus issued by a rival king, the lands that are encroached upon will be annexed to the invading king’s kingdom. After the return of the horse to the victorious king, it is sacrificed along with hundreds of other animals and the Ashvamedha is declared to have concluded. The *Manusmrithi* speaks of the Ashvamedha yaga in adulatory terms: “The man who offers a horse-sacrifice every day for a hundred years, and the man who does not eat meat, the two of them reap the same fruit of good deeds” (104).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The present article attempts to contribute towards a critique of how animals have always been conceived in contradistinction to human beings through an analysis of animal sacrifice in Indira Goswami’s novel *The Man from Chhinnamasta*. It delves into the practice of ritualistic animal slaughter to trace the convoluted genealogy of human-animal relations in Hinduism and to uncover the grounds on which animals have been constituted as the Other against which human beings have defined their self-professed ontological superiority. Through the character of Chhinnamasta Jatadhari, who opposes animal slaughter citing its endless savagery and gross illogicality, the paper attempts to spark off a debate on the question of animal rights, which are still circumscribed by an undue emphasis on a set of values and exemptions thought to be intrinsic to humans. It also attempts to examine the various formulations of animality provided by the likes of E.B Tylor, Tim Ingold, Marcel Mauss, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida so as to critique the assumptions on which the ‘human’, as a notion par excellence, rests.

### **Discussion**

When *The Man from Chhinnamasta* was published in 2005, it created a lot of uproar among the conservative Brahmin communities of Assam since the novel minced no words in calumniating ritualistic animal sacrifice. Several prominent thinkers ranged themselves with Goswami, who was also born in a traditional Hindu Brahmin, in decrying this rather inhuman practice and advocating nonviolent forms of worship. The novel, which asks whether toying with animal lives is justified on the basis of the popular misconception that animals are insentient in comparison to humans, draws upon Assamese history and folklore, the injustices of colonial rule, and Hindu myths to narrate a compelling story with as much literary as social relevance.

Set in pre-Independence India, the forbidding events portrayed in the novel loom against the backdrop of the Kamakhya Temple, one of the fifty-one *Shakti Pithas* in the Hindu tradition of Shaktism that focusses on the feminine aspect of divinity expressed in two forms—the benignant (*saumya*) and serenely beautiful (*sundar*) and the terrifying (*ugra*) and ghoulishly horrifying (*ghora*). The terrifying form is embodied by Goddess Kali, who is depicted as dark-complexioned, soot-stained, and with menacingly pointed teeth. She wears a necklace of severed heads and her outstretched tongue is scarlet from drinking the blood of sacrificed animals. Kali’s worship is tantric in nature and is characterized by ritualistic slaughter of buffaloes and goats to symbolize the Goddess’s slaying of Mahisha, a shape-shifting demon.

Animal sacrifice is integral to the worship of the Goddess at the Kamakhya temple. Every day devotees bring sacrificial animals like buffaloes, goats, and even birds like doves to the temple for the priests to consecrate them as an offering to the Goddess for the fulfilment of manifold desires. “Ambubachi Mela” and “Deodhani festival” are two of the important events at the heart of the novel which

highlight the inhumanity of animal sacrifice. Ambubachi Mela, which attracts thousands of devotees all over the country, is celebrated at the Kamakhya temple during the month of June when the Goddess Kamakhya is believed to be menstruating. Surprisingly, the waters of the Brahmaputra also turn rust-coloured at this time. The temple is closed for three days and *darshan* is allowed on the fourth day, when the devotees are given a piece of the red cloth that symbolises the Goddess' menstrual blood. Deodhani festival is another occasion on which the cadavers of sacrificed animals pile up obscenely in the temple premises. Dedicated to the serpent goddess, Manasa, the festival is characterized by cannabis-intoxicated *deodhas* dancing exuberantly to the rhythmic beat of drums and sacrificing several buffaloes and goats at the height of their frenzy. Since the deodhas are held to be in communion with the Goddess and therefore in possession of supernatural powers at this time, the devotees avidly seek their blessings, prostrating themselves at their feet. Goswami is vociferous in her condemnation of the superstitious beliefs associated with both these festivals. The antediluvian mindset she sets out to chastise is best exemplified by the tantriks in the novel who believe that "Sacrifice alone will lead you to heaven (3).

The novel excoriates the attitude of the tantriks and priests who cite obscure and often ambiguous passages from scriptures in support of animal sacrifice. Since some of the Vedic hymns seem to laud this reprehensible practice, the priests who are castigated by the intelligentsia for their backwardness let themselves off the hook by rhapsodising on the importance of preserving traditional values. Although there are many references to be found in the Vedas that purportedly favour animal sacrifice, their authenticity is moot given the fact that the Vedas in the main accord a sacred status to animals. There is a possibility that these Vedic hymns—since Hindu scriptures in general are notorious for their versatility in yielding conflicting meanings—were misinterpreted by intellectually myopic pundits for insidious ends. As it is only in a few states like Kerala, Karnataka, Gujarat, Orissa, Himachal Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and Andhra Pradesh that the Prevention to Cruelty of Animals Act of 1960 covers animal atrocities committed in the name of religious beliefs, such practices are still carried on with impunity in other Indian states.

If animal sacrifices have been a commonplace in various religions, it needs to be examined why a self-evidently heinous practice was not met with opposition in the place and time that engendered it. Several reasons can be adduced, though none so persuasive as the cultural anthropological views of Sir E.B. Tylor and the sacralisation/desacralisation dialectics of Hubert and Mauss. In his seminal work, *Primitive Culture* (1871), Sir E. B. Tylor offers an evolutionary perspective on the role of animal sacrifice. He marshals a wide array of ethnographic data to argue that the basic objective of all kinds of sacrifice is to offer a gift to the gods and thereby win their favour. He divides sacrifices into three broad categories based on how the deity receives the offering. The first category, which Tylor calls 'substantial transmission' is when the deity consumes the offering in a physical sense; the second, called 'essential transmission' relates to sacrifices in which only the essence of the offering is consumed; and the third called 'spiritual transmission' moves further away from the objective value of the sacrifice in that the deity consumes only the soul of the offering.

By applying Darwinian theories to social anthropology, Tylor argued that highly sophisticated human practices evolved from primitive forms of human interaction and that each stage of the evolution was an improvement upon the preceding one. He considers sacrifices as belonging to a barbaric period in the evolutionary process, one that must inevitably be transcended by more advanced and rational stages. Tylor also makes a distinction between "pre-religious savagery" in which the offering of sacrifices does not have any distinct religious colouring and "religious barbarism" in which a higher supernatural will dictates the conditions of the sacrifice. Expatiating on this distinction, he says: "It seems best to fall back at once on this essential source, and simply to claim, as a minimum definition of Religion, the belief in Spiritual Beings" (318).

The animal sacrifices mentioned in Goswami's novel do not conform to pre-religious savagery since the devotees manifestly express their belief in a supreme deity, Chhinnamasta Devi in this case.

Since Goswami gives several hints that human sacrifices were performed in the temple complex to ward off evil before animal sacrifices became the norm, Tylor's evolutionary teleology can be observed here, beginning with human sacrifice in the initial stage, followed by animal sacrifice, and later by symbolic sacrifice which does not involve any actual bloodshed. It can also be argued that there is a movement from essential to spiritual transmission in the novel, as indicated by the arduous efforts of the Chhinnamasta Jatadhari and his disciples to rally public support for ruling out animal sacrifice and making way for symbolic forms of worship.

In their "Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice" (1899), Hubert and Mauss analyse select Jewish and Hindu texts to elucidate the role of sacrifice as a means of communication between the human and the divine. Although they do not align themselves completely with Tylor's evolutionary beliefs, they recognize the importance of a supernatural entity for sacrifices to be feasible. Basing their theory of animal sacrifice on the two divergent stages involved in it, that of sacralization and desacralization, they claim that there is a movement from the sacred to the profane in the person who offers the sacrifice and a concomitant movement from the profane to the sacred in the victim who is sacrificed. For them, sacrifice essentially consists in "establishing a means of communication between the sacred and the profane worlds through the medium of a victim" (Hubert and Mauss 97), whose sacred character is not pre-given but generated in the very act of being sacrificed. The sacrificer establishes contact with the victim only through the priest. In other words, the sacred and the profane do not come into contact with each other directly. The ceremony concludes with the restoration of sacrality to the sacrificer and the sacrifice being accepted by the deity. Hubert and Mauss' idea of the dialectics between sacralisation and desacralisation can be employed to explain the animal sacrifices performed in Goswami's novel. Here too, the sacrifice acts as a bridge between two incompatible worlds, the mundane and the divine, with the victim being elevated to a sacred status at the moment it is slaughtered, so that the two worlds communicate using a mutually comprehensible sign system.

The foregoing discussion on animal sacrifice proves that it is the concept of animality that functions as the dividing line between the sacrifice and the victim and serves to rationalise the slaughter. The British anthropologist, Tim Ingold, in *What is an Animal?*, states that the concept of animality implies "a state of being otherwise known as 'natural', in which actions are impelled by innate emotional drives that are undisciplined by reason or responsibility" (5). He argues that the concept also covers "the imagined condition of human beings 'in the raw'" (*Ibid*). Following Ingold's views on animality, it can be understood that the common justification for animal sacrifice is the supposed 'rawness' or 'uncivilized' nature of animals. The paradox in this position is that it derives its sanction from a constructed opposition that will too readily fall and crumble if the concept of the human were exposed as a fabrication.

It is this constructedness of the mutually opposed notions of animality and humanity that is under the scanner in *The Man from Chhinnmasta*. While a class of tantriks and their acolytes espouse the practice wholeheartedly and even clamour for human sacrifices, the discontinuance of which they lead the people to believe has brought about misfortunes all over the land, enlightened people like the Jatadhari, his disciple, Ratnadhar, the English woman, Dorothy Brown, and students from assorted 'tols' fight tooth and nail against it. In this respect, the novel, which exudes an air of unalleviated gloom mixed with the anticipation of imminent social upheaval, has a very rudimentary plot. On the surface, it is a vehement indictment of animal sacrifice, and on a deeper level, it holds up a mirror to the colonial history of the Northeast, the omnipresent shells of bullets fired in the shooting range by British officers are the most potent symbol thereof. The novel also hints at the double-edged nature of colonialism which has both eviscerated the national character and stimulated a wave of scientific rationalism, leading to the re-evaluation of age-old beliefs.

Although Goswami has subordinated characterisation to the exigencies of the plot to articulate a clear social message, the few well-defined characters in the novel are locked in a dialectical struggle that helps the plot unravel coherently. The contrast between the pro-sacrifice camp led by the tantriks and the

anti-sacrifice camp led by the Jatadhari contributes to the evolution of a character typology based on conflicting interpretations of the nature of worship. In one part of the novel, the ugly tantric from Torsa, across whose chest Goswami writes the sacred thread flapped “like dried animal guts,” (14) recounts a vision he has had about Goddess Chhinnamasta:

Her hair was black as a moonless Amabasya night. She was soaked in blood. She commanded the hermit. Bring buffaloes for human sacrifice. Deliver human blood to the crematorium where I live. Wash my feet with the blood of a sinner. Human blood will keep me satisfied for eight months. (127)

Another priest, by the name of Haladhar Purohit, on hearing that a devotee did not want to offer a buffalo as sacrifice anymore since someone had freed it, says:

Scoundrels, you will burn for your impertinence. The sacred texts very clearly state that the blood of a deer satiates the almighty goddess for eight months. The blood of a black bull or boar appeases her for twelve years. (81)

This is in stark opposition to the views of the anti-sacrifice camp. Debunking a popular superstition, one of the unorthodox devotees says, “The Mother has never said that she would reduce the earth’s abundance to ashes if she were not offered blood. According to the holy books, flowers are equally acceptable (128). Ratnadar corroborates this idea when he opines, “Nowhere is it written that one cannot worship without spilling blood...the white gourd, melon, sugar cane, and alcohol are as dear to the goddess as goat’s blood” (105). The tantriks have tried to sway public opinion in favour of sacrifice mostly through the misinterpretation of excerpts from the *Kalika Purana* and the *Yogini Tantra*. But the *Kalika Purana* explicitly states that “the worshipper who tears the neck of an animal or bird with his bare hands commits a cardinal sin equivalent to killing a brahmin” (167). And the *Yogini Tantra*, which proclaims that “the goddess is satiated for a hundred years with the blood of a single buffalo” says elsewhere that “the status of flowers is higher than blood” and “that an offering of one karabi flower can earn the devotee the virtues of the most arduous yajna” (129).

The tantriks’ mania for human and animal sacrifice is undercut by the kind and loving nature of the Jatadhari in whose dreadlocks snakes entwine themselves and on whose brawny arms the birds perch fearlessly. The Jatadhari’s eyes burn like funeral pyres; in them glow the convictions of a truly enlightened soul that animals are our brethren. Although no one knows much about the Jatadhari’s origins, it is believed that in his youth, he was a student of History at the Benares Hindu University. After leaving college, he had lived in a mysterious cave in the Vindhyas, renouncing all kinds of sensual pleasures and training his mind. He had come to the Kamakhya temple with a group of tantriks from North Kashi a long time ago. But when a buffalo was about to be sacrificed, he saw in the desperate struggles of the beast the folly of the tantric practices that emphasised slaughter as a ticket to atonement and greater communal welfare. The buffalo’s frightened eyes tugged at his heartstrings, “just as a child would find its way to its mother’s bosom” (181), and he returned from the sacrificial altar a completely changed man. Afterwards, there was not a night when the distressing echo of its hooves did not torment his soul.

The Jatadhari’s encounter with the buffalo invites parallels with the French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s discomfiting encounter with his cat on emerging from his shower one day. Referring to this encounter in his book “The Animal that Therefore I am” (2006), based on one of the many lectures that Derrida presented at a conference on the ‘autobiographical animal,’ he argues that “The gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman...the border crossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself” (381). Derrida inculcates humans for the variety of ways in which they distinguish themselves from animals. By wilfully excluding animals from the proscription “Thou shalt not kill” (40), Derrida says humans legitimise animal slaughter. He states that until we owe moral responsibilities to animals and their killing is counted as murder, their exploitation will continue. Derrida’s view is supported by the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas which “seeks to respect the absolute

otherness of the Other' (61). In his essay "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights," Levinas too, in the manner of Derrida speaks about the ethical repercussions of his encounter with a dog, Bobby.

As someone who arbitrates between the Western-educated students from various 'tols' and the ragtag group of prostitutes, drummers, peddlers, and devotees from various parts of the country, the Jatadhari has a pivotal role in the novel. He understands the real meaning of scriptures and tries to make it accessible to the common folk without the embellishments of classical diction or complex philosophical rigmaroles. It is finally he who galvanises the malcontents into action against the zealous tantriks and spearheads the movement to collect signatures against animal sacrifice. He is full of love and compassion for the animals that are herded to the altar by the devotees. He embodies the nondualistic side of Hindu philosophy in that he does not distinguish between the subject and the object of perception but sees in everything the same animating principle. In one episode, the Jatadhari lifts a dying crane and cradles it to his chest. Then, "raising it lifeless, he murmurs a prayer (54). In another, he strokes a goat gently and says, "See how happily they play. How come they come to us when we call. They are intelligent beings" (150).

The Jatadhari's most ardent disciple, Ratnadhar, is an artist who embodies his concern for the sacrificed animals in his paintings that straddle Assamese history and mythology. He has associated himself with the Jatadhari ever since he had a psychotic episode and the Jatadhari cured him miraculously in less than a year. With a crown of thick black hair, exquisitely delicate hands, and a chiselled nose, Ratnadhar stands in contrast to the rough-hewn features of the Jatadhari. He helps the Jatadhari with collecting signatures against animal sacrifice and rallying the support of the students from Cotton College. Like the Jatadhari, he too has very little tolerance of mindless cruelty towards animals. In one episode, when a buffalo straining at its restraining rope is forced by a devotee to inch toward the sacrificial altar, Ratnadhar interposes his objection. He cries, "Stop, stop don't you see it's terrified... See how it defecates in fear. Look at its eyes. Have some mercy on the beast. It wants to live and play on Ma's earth" (90). Although he is in love with the maiden Bidhibala, whom her father, Singhadatta Sarma, wants to be married to a quadragenarian, Ratnadhar lacks the courage to make her his wife. Being a sensitive soul, he lacks the conviction to stand up to authority or challenge the rigidity of tradition on his own. When Bidhibala flies the coop to save the life of the buffalo which her father has decided to sacrifice to seek the Goddess' blessings for the marriage and dies during her sojourn with a group of prostitutes from the north, partly through his own failure to intervene at the right time, he is heartbroken and becomes more aloof.

The third character who propels the plot is Dorothy Brown, a British woman who comes to Kamakhya temple in search of peace and solitude, having severed all relations with her abusive husband, Henry Brown, the Principal of Cotton College. She forms an enigmatical and enduring bond with the Jatadhari to whom she feels strangely attracted. She says, "I shall be your shadow forever, our relationship cannot be defined. It is a very special bond" (174), in a manner that explains even her mysterious pregnancy within the supreme permissibility of that union. When she witnesses the ritual of animal sacrifice for the first time, she feels repulsed and horrified. As the pitiful cries of the sacrificed buffalo get drowned out by the devotees' thunderous applause and the frenzied chants of the 'deodhas', her eyes well up, and she stands frozen under a tree, unable to make sense of the inhumanity of the spectacle. She asks "What sort of worship is this? What sort of deliverance is this?" (3)

The novel presents Henry Brown, her husband, as belonging to the camp of the bloodthirsty tantriks through a very symbolic form of association. Although Henry Brown has nothing to do with the local customs, he too becomes a "murderer" just like the priests when he shoots Dorothy dead from the cover of the shooting range. The parallel that Goswami creates here between Dorothy's murder and animal slaughter is very enlightening; by juxtaposing a manifestly criminal act with another that is carried on with plenary impunity, she highlights the constructedness of the socio-legal system that safeguards the lives of humans but connives at atrocities directed against animals.

Tensions mount to a climax at the end of the novel which presents a classic confrontation between the Jatadhari and the tantriks. Having marched up to the head priest with the memorandum, with Ratnadhar,

the students from the Sanskrit 'tols' of both Upper and Lower Assam, and those from Cotton College following him, the Jatadhari strikes the last nail on the coffin of animal sacrifice. The affronted tantriks challenge the Jatadhari to offer his own blood as sacrifice if he should feel so offended at animals being butchered. They flee at him and taunt him, all the while asking him to remain true to his boast that he would sacrifice himself to save an animal. The head priest joins in that a human sacrifice concededly satisfies the Goddess more than anything else. He says to the Jatadhari, "You will have to cut a part of your body and offer a lotus leaf cup filled with your blood" (185). Never going back on his words for a moment, the Jatadhari cuts a piece of flesh from below his navel, and his disciples follow suit, to the sheer disbelief of the emasculated tantriks. People gaze at the gathering with an admixture of fear and wonder as the blood keeps flowing through the sacred abode of the goddess all night. When the clouds burst towards early dawn and the rain comes down, it carries away "the raw blood with all the other rubbish" and sweeps it so masterfully into the Brahmaputra that "not a single bloodstain remained" (186).

### **Conclusion**

The revolutionary note on which the novel ends heightens its significance as a contemporary defence of animal rights. The novel's examination of the ontological slipperiness of finding a tangible dividing line between the human and animal resonates with the ethical leanings of contemporary academic discourse, especially of posthumanism. With reason and subjectivity, which were once thought to be the sole prerogatives of humans, being identified in the workings of animal minds, the unbridgeable gap between the human and the animal is now beginning to be transcended. Human exceptionalism, or the belief that humans are in some way superior to animals is not only unsupported by biology but also viciously mocked by it. The juggernaut of exceptionalism works by positing an assumption of uniqueness or an innate core of values, and by making a set of comparisons whose object is to prove why this fundamental difference is worth upholding for the collective good. Humans have always sought to justify their dominance through the deployment of such one-sided narratives. However, empathetic responses to such metanarratives of the kind offered by Indira Goswami help us see that the yawning divide between humans and animals is more a matter of socio-cultural construction than a pre-given truth, and that it is the taxonomic systems created by humans to control Nature that have led to animals being granted a very lowly status. As Donna Haraway succinctly argues in *Manifesto for Cyborgs*:

[T]he boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted if not turned into amusement parks—language, tool use, social behavior, mental events, nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. (68)

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