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Deconstructing the Gender Binary: A Discourse on Quee(cu)ring in the Film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani*

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Abstract:

This study explores the depiction of a queer social space in the Malayalam films produced in the Indian state of Kerala. Malayalam cinema has historically been engaged in various debates on the representation of sexuality, gender and body which encompass a great deal of ideological contestation regarding identity as a construct. The film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* (2014) recasts the idealizations of normative male body, gender identity and sexuality in a homosocial space. The central character Thamburu's portrayal as an emotionally wounded, erotic spectacle deliberately displays queerness in the film. This paper critically looks into the film and the application of "curing" as a process to correct the "gender liminalities" of the transgender character Thamburu and incidentally the "queering" happens at the end. It also seeks to analyze the emerging trends of transgender depictions in Malayalam cinema.

Keywords: Body, Gender identity, Sexuality, Transgender, Queer Malayalam cinema.

Though the history of Malayalam Cinema spans over the last nine decades¹, the slightest reference regarding queer² depictions can be traced from late 1970s only. The industry which includes art-house productions, middle stream and mainstream films largely neglected alternative sexuality and gender, when it delved deep into the issues of family and sexual morality as a topic of discussion on screen. *Randu Penkuttikal* (1978) directed by Mohan based on the short story with the same title written by V.T. Nandakumar and *Desatanakkili Karayarilla* (1986) written and directed by Padmarajan were the two films that discussed queer relations in the middle phase of Malayalam cinema. However, they labeled and branded queerness as same sex friendship only. It is clearly visible that the films appeared in Malayalam industry before 2000s

turned a blind eye towards the issue of non-normative sexuality and gender performance, and adopted a soft diplomatic treatment of the same during the period.

In the first decade of 2000s a few films depicted characters whose sexual orientation and gender identity deviate from the patriarchal heteronormativity. Queerness was interpreted as an aberration and such characters were received as the product of “faulty upbringing” (Muraleedharan 76). The character Radhakrishnan in *Chanthupottu* (2005) was forced to undergo a “masculinizing” process as his male body and feminine behaviors did not conform to the binary expectations of gender by the society (Prabhakaran 318). With the emergence of New Generation films³ in Malayalam which have been reconstructing the industry in its form, theme and treatment the spectators started coping with the depiction of the unconventionalities which include gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender characters on screen. The dominant assumptions of gender binaries still prevailed in certain mainstream Malayalam films like *Rithu* (2009), *Sufi Paranja Katha* (2010), *Salt n’ Pepper* (2011), *English* (2012), *Mumbai Police* (2013), *Thira* (2013), *Nee-Na* (2015), *Kasaba* (2016), *Action Hero Biju* (2016) etc. However *Ardhanaari* (2012), *My Life Partner* (2014) *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* (2014), and *Ka Bodyscapes* (2016) stand out from the majority of the films already mentioned due to the experimental treatment of the body, gender and sexuality besides failing to achieve commercial success. The goal of this paper thus set to explore the queer space in contemporary Malayalam cinema with reference to the film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* which marks a shift in perspective and how the gender binary, sex and the queer body is depicted in it. Though Kerala celebrates queer pride parades⁴, the space given to non-normative gender and sexuality is of derision. The paper analyses the application of ‘curing’ as a process to correct the ‘gender liminalities’ of the transgender character Thamburu and incidentally the ‘queering’ happens at the end of the film which offers a ray of hope for the queer.

***Odum Raja Aadum Rani* : A Discourse on Quee(Cu)ring**

The film speaks about the lives of the folk dancer Thamburu and the door-to-door salesman Venkiti who happen to share homosocial space which lead to the problematization of Thamburu’s gender identity. It also looks at how the hegemonic gender codes act as contentious for Thamburu in living with the gender identity that is contradictory to the body. The film in its canvas mocks at aberrations of heterosexuality and patriarchal family system. Regarding the commercial success of the movie, though it did not get a warm reception, the political position questioned the fractured gender and sexual codes of Kerala in the post modern scenario. The narrative presents a combat between the notions of gender and sexuality and the queer character Thamburu is imposed with a curing process that in turn harasses and tortures him for being queer; a misfit to the heterosexual masculinity and femininity. In a critical sequence in the film, Thamburu showers his anger at the society that demarcates boundaries for expression of gender according to the anatomy of the body that one receives at birth. The ending of the film is

poignant when Thamburu joins the transgender community as a transwoman at the Koovagam Festival⁵.

Though gender and sexuality debates have not undergone structural changes over time a shift can be noticed in the current scenario. Malayalam cinema historically endorsed the male body that fulfills the ideals of macho masculinity. It happens to reinforce hegemonic codes of gender performances when it shows male bodies on screen. Moreover it aligns to the dialectics of the prevailing norms when it engages with gender visibility. If the aspects of pleasure arising from watching popular films are analyzed, it can be delineated that those bodies which do not conform to normative ideals are used to underpin comedy in the spectacle:

A normative male ideal is constructed- hefty and fair complexioned- to gratify the egoistical fantasies of its implicit audience. Bodies which fail to achieve or even aspire to the assumed 'masculine' normalcy are designated as abnormal and incomplete. Such representations often create affective spectacles of pleasure which in reverse endorse the 'normalcy' of *macho* figures (James 384).

One of the central character in *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* is Venkiti, the epitome of macho masculinity, a heterosexual man who does everything what a 'normal' male with a 'sound' mind would do. He shares homosocial space with friends for drinking, ogling women and chats that have sexual underpinnings. At the same time, Thamburu is different from this macho masculinity typecast and is jibed by Venkiti and his friends, for the behavioral changes in him which is in contrast to the popular expectations. Thamburu is a dance artist (the ritualistic *Aattu*⁶) by profession who loves to do all those stereotyped as womanly jobs like cleaning, cooking, washing clothes, etc. Thus the title of the film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* is justified in portraying Venkiti as the king who runs (the wandering king) and Thamburu as the dancing queen. Dance as an art form and as a profession, is stereotypically associated with femininity and at certain occasions, the film tries to break free from this notion by depicting Thamburu's dislike towards his job as a dancer. His grim past also hints to his dissatisfaction in the previous job as a ritualistic temple dancer. The film hints at Thamburu as the ritualistic *Aattu* performer from a third person view, where he was forced to conform to the heteropatriarchy, the futile marriage and his escape from his native. He exists without a proper name, gender identity, and with a tumultuous mind and body. Being a misfit according to the patriarchal codes, Thamburu qualifies to be a queer.

Venkiti's masculinity and Thamburu's de-masculinised characterization happen to be ironical to the normative concept of male bodies and masculinity as power exerting. The hyper masculinity of Venkiti makes Thamburu an abject in the homosocial context. He faces harassment for being queer and exhibiting gender visibility polemic from the normative male body. The film problematises sexuality of the two central characters Venkiti and Thamburu. Venkiti is presented as a penchant womanizer who always creates problems. He was expelled

from his previous residence where he was caught at suspicious circumstances with a married woman. At the new place, he is offered a house when he heroically wins a local match. Thamburu who is a dancer by profession happily accepts the invitation to share the same house where Venkiti stayed, as an assistant but later he himself prefers to be a domestic help for Venkiti. Thus the bonding between the two men allude to a Hollywood style of male bonding between a white and black, master-steward, and rewrites the concept of gender and sexuality.

Thamburu, who seems to be heterosexual male, progresses from demasculinised to feminized. Venkiti is presented as a village trotter who absolutely cares for nothing and leads a bohemian way of life. His body is objectified in the way that it is desired by Thamburu whose admiration towards Venkiti's body turns out to be amusement for other characters but when it evidently becomes possessiveness, a crisis sets in motion in the narrative. At a particular scene in the film when Thamburu looks at Venkiti's body in admiration, and later comments, "The truth is that only now I could see you perfectly. You look handsome..." His actions can be compared to the queer gaze of an insatiate queer mind about his body and gender performance. He states that he felt like breaking the mirror if he sees his body in the mirror. The binary idealizations of gendered bodies and the assumptions of masculinity and femininity are emphasized in Thamburu's mind when he complains about his body and on the other hand the macho body of Venkiti asserts the normative beliefs about masculinity. T. Muraleedharan (189) points out in his article "Queer Bonds: Male Friendships in Malayalam Cinema" that "the ideal masculine identity is defined alternatively as desiring and desired by another male. This desire is contrasted with the male's near total indifference to a physically alluring female". Thus a homosocial desire is inculcated in the spectacle that turns out to be crucial for deciding the gender identity of Thamburu.

A queer dynamics is preoccupied in the gender visibility of the two characters. Thamburu's sexual orientation is contentious in the film in the sense that it tends to look at him as queer due to his attraction towards Venkiti's macho male body. He never responds to the advances of the female colleague in his dance troupe and he is shown to have less interest in women. A combination scene in which the female friend consoles Thamburu who faced harassment from his troupe's master turns out to be a futile effort of love making after which the woman wakes up from bed in abhorrence due to Thamburu's inability to act in accordance to her wishes. This scene may read as the helplessness the central character experiences with his queer body and identity which do not correspond to the normative expectations of masculinity and heterosexuality. Thamburu who was known in his past as Ayyappan, was a married man and the incongruities of the gender identity and physical body made his heterosexual marriage a fiasco. The village prostitute Ambal treats Thamburu as a good friend at the same time an effeminate male. (The figure of the prostitute and the reinforcement of heterosexuality are explained further in the upcoming section.) These instances strengthen Thamburu's homosexual bonding with Venkiti and their inhabitation is enmeshed when the former gives vivid evidences of his gender

preference. Yet Thamburu's behavioral change shown in the film is critical, since the gender performance he exhibits is evolved from the misinterpretation of femininity, and his domesticated submissiveness. At this juncture, it is dubious that the film could disengage itself from the normative ideals of gender binary.

The queer body contests the ideas of effeminacy, transgenderism or homosexual orientation and the contemporary films in Malayalam tried to encompass them as a matter of concern. As the film progresses, one can discern the way how recent films "employ the spectacle of deficient queer bodies to satiate the hetero-masculinist cultural assumptions of a typical 'normal' Keralan or Malayali" (James 384). Gender identity as a social construct is reinforced at occasions where certain traits are categorized as masculine and feminine. The film offers perspectives of masculinity as a trait that exerts power over others and femininity as emotional, expressing silence and suffering. When individuals deviate from the expected path of the heteronormal society, they are treated as abnormal. Thamburu is ill treated by everyone for being weak, submissive and emotional. Drinking is customary in the homosocial spaces of the heteronormal people and in this film masculinity is associated with the habit of drinking. Ideal men in the film are depicted as drunkards. Thamburu prefers to be aloof from the social drinking and gatherings at Venkiti's house and his traits make him feminine or androgynous. In this sense the film reasserts the gay stereotype of the dominant male and the submissive male.

The film shakes the hegemony of heterosexual order in a number of ways. The presence of a prostitute insinuates the fragmented codes of sexuality and the figure is a threat to the patriarchal familial system. The prostitute in this film is desired by every 'masculine male' and she despite of the sexual aberration appears to decide the normalcy of sexuality in the film. It is she who reinforces heterosexuality as the hegemonic force. Thamburu's glance towards her is quite different from that of Venkiti and a critical scene in the film depicts the ruling out of the possible homosexual tensions. Both Thamburu and Venkiti are alone in a room when Kuyil, a friend of Venkiti comes in. He is not at all suspicious about the fact of two males being together in the closed room and their relationship in the homosocial space, but is hesitant that they were planning to have physical relation with Ambal the village prostitute secretly. The scene criticizes the notion that heterosexuality is normative even if it results in the fragmentation of the moral codes.

Venkiti introduces another female figure Mala in his household and all the villagers endorse Venkiti's masculinity and Mala's femininity and their heterosexual union: "The woman should do the job which she is destined to whether it is in kitchen or in bed". Even Thamburu scorns her existence in the house and she, being Venkiti's bedmate who does "womanly job". (Thamburu was sarcastically referring to the heteropatriarchal norm that only a woman can satisfy a male's physical desire). Thus, homosexuality is ruled out as an abnormal activity and heterosexual relationship is revered as natural. Venkiti even scolds Thamburu at a particular scene in which the latter is caught for gazing females taking bath in the village pond and says, "All my

assumptions about you have changed with today's incident. Men should be attracted towards women only". These words are understatement about the assertion that heterosexuality is normative and anything that deviates from it is transgressive. This scene acquires another critical dimension as "in Kerala bathing enclosures near ponds are traditionally associated with clandestine romantic encounters mostly heterosexual" (Muraleedharan 187).

Gender visibility plays an important role in establishing bodily identities. Thamburu desires the gender identity of a woman, but with a wrong body, he appropriates the same with make-up. At his privacy Thamburu enjoys himself being dressed up as a woman. When the gang of 'masculine friends' come in search of Venkiti at the home what they find is the sari clad Thamburu. The notion that masculinity is power is strengthened, when they put him to an act of public shaming by assuming that the gender performance Thamburu exhibits is the result of an abnormality or a disease. They had already warned Venkiti that "The love of *penpoosu*⁷ is dangerous than that of a 'real woman'(emphasis added). So be careful". Thus being a queer is transgressive and Thamburu is stripped naked in front of the gang. The ritualistic shaming or castration of Thamburu's body can be interpreted as an attempt by the normative society to tyrannize those who deviate from the norms. When certain minds do not meet the requirements of the body, public shaming is attempted. Judith Halberstam (64) in her article "Queer Studies" discusses the process of shaming and its effect on gender visibility as,

Shame is multifaceted and can be brought on by psychic traumas as brutal as physical bullying and as seemingly benign as mute indifference. But shame records a future to be powerful, legitimate, proper-it records the exposure, in psychoanalytic terms and the subject's castration, indeed in a psychoanalytic framework, one would be tempted to say that castration is central to shame and shame is central to femininity.

For Thamburu, the act of stripping results in the reinforcement of the gender identity he was building up on. The dagger of shaming makes him castrated and succumbing to submissive femininity in front of those who torment him. But Venkiti reminds those friends who advise him to keep away from Thamburu that, "A person's life is according to his will. If he loses his mind, life comes to end. How can we compel others to behave as we wish..?" However, Venkiti as a heterosexual masculine figure assumes that it is his social responsibility to bring back Thamburu to 'normalcy' according to the patriarchal ideals of masculine traits which leads him to Mala, a young woman who took up the duty to be an aid to Venkiti in his efforts. He believes that the gender performance of Thamburu does not correspond to his body so it is to be purified. In her *Purity and Danger* (1969), Mary Douglas discusses about body and its boundaries, certain taboos that constitute the bodies:

Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by

exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created (4).

From Douglas' observation, it can be assessed that culture creates a boundary and any departure from it is observed as transgressive. The boundaries of the body are the results of social hegemony. She maintains that in variety of cultures,

Pollution powers which in here in the ideas of structures of idea itself and which punishes a symbolic breaking of that which should be separate. (...)A polluting person is always in the wrong. He has developed some wrong condition or simply crossed over some line which should not have been crossed and this displacement unleashes danger for someone (37).

The 'curing process' shown in the film to bring Thamburu to normalcy turns out to be a combat between the gender ideals of masculinity to femininity. When Mala takes hold of the house things get worse as her presence infuriates Thamburu. Mala is presented as the epitome of enchantress femininity which is used as a ploy for the queer to imagine his own gendered self and transform accordingly. His identity is depicted as a case of failed masculinity at an uncertain terrain that exists between the binaries of absolute ideals of masculinity and femininity. In their "Introduction: Towards a More Nuanced Approach to Masculinity, Towards a Rich Understanding of the South Asian Men", Caroline Osella et. al (27) captures attention to gender identity contestations with respect to masculinity and femininity:

A highly charged combination of aggression and erotics appears time again as both the flavor of a male stance towards the female and as a necessary combination which gives birth to true masculinity...While the articulation of masculinity vis-à-vis femininity emerges quite clearly within an oppositional imagination of a two-gender system, one of its two key problems is the performance of masculinity as a gendered identity through exclusion and abjection of the feminine.

Evidently, the film triggers a physical appropriation of ideal femininity and Thamburu's gender performance is being mocked for fun. The female presence in the male homosocial space here is attempted as a method to cure the deficient masculinity of Thamburu. When the body becomes a barrier for Thamburu's gender performance, it is Mala who helps him to fulfill his desire to become a transgender through bodily appropriation. The spectacle shows how Venkiti amuses when both Thamburu and Mala patches up in the scene as he believes that her presence would 'cure' him.

A curious case that invites critical investigation in the film *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* is the arrangement of spaces for gender performance. Thamburu and Venkiti habituate in a homosocial space which enhances homosexual tension in the spectator. Moreover the female presence at this space is a patriarchal deterrent and at the same time the invasion is seen as the birth of a "queer

matrix” or the triangle as “an alternative family” (Muraleedharan 188). The liberating space concerning transgender visibility emerges from a religious ground of the Kottankulangara temple festival⁸ depicted in the film where Thamburu escapes from his master as a devotee to hold the lamp (*Chamayavilakku*⁸) of the Kottankulangara deity. The male homosocial space transforms to a temporal space of masquerade that offers solace. But this can be read as a transient space for the transgender as the cross dressed Thamburu breaths calm till he is harassed by his master. Koovagam temple appears as the ultimate destination for the transgender in the film where Thamburu joins to the transgender community and achieves a space for performing the gender identity according to his wish. The ‘curing’ of the transgender in the film fails to achieve its desired results and ‘queering’ occurs when the scene shifts to Koovagam from Kottankulangara. Venkiti and Mala who come in search of Thamburu find him experiencing the gender identity he always longed for and Mala stops Venkiti who was about to call Thamburu to return.

However the film clearly hints at the lack of a liberating social space in the conservative Kerala for queers, homosexuals or transgenders. Since gender identity and sexual orientation is continued to be built upon the belief in a heterosexual familial system and procreation, queer people still remain in the closet. The bonding depicted in the homosocial space is strained due to the heterosexual curing. The village house and Kottankulangara temple festival emphasize the transience of the masquerade. Koovagam makes the queer Thamburu liberated when he wakes from being submissive and showers angry words and spats at the camera, an apparatus which uses the “male gaze” (Mulvey 6-18) and the act can be seen as a protest against heteropatriarchy or as a gaze from the conservative Kerala/Malayali that constantly follows him. Moreover, the film reinforces gender ideals of masculinity and femininity as a twin when it records the appropriations happen in Thamburu’s body when he participates in the festival as a transwoman.

Conclusion

The identity of an individual can be seen as a social construct which reflects how the hegemonic ideologies are imprinted in the formation of gender and sexuality. Malayalam cinema as a cultural artifact of Kerala in its contentious circuit, endorses what is hegemonic and the bodies are depicted with the social manifestations of masculinity and femininity. Anything that deviates from the norm is seen as polluted and abnormal. The gender expectations of a heteronormal society demarcate the boundaries and whenever those bodies attempt to move away from the boundaries through their difference in gender performance and overt sexuality, are branded as abnormal and punished accordingly.

Odum Raja Aadum Rani depicts a fragmented code of the mind and body with respect to the gender visibility of the central character. This text points out the slippery terrain of the body, gender and sexuality debates. Though conceived as non-art house cinema with mainstream actors, it disrupts the hegemonic norms of gender idealizations of masculinity, femininity and

establishes a discourse that privileges to the queer character Thamburu. The film hints at how the regional imaginations on Kerala as accommodative are transitory, and the solace is found only with a shift from the native to a strange land. The difference from the traditional gendered behavior is seen as abnormal and Thamburu is an outcast in his place. He is forced to undergo a process of curing to correct the incongruities of his gender identity with respect to his body but ultimately this result in his ‘queering’ as he escapes to a space that offered him the liberty to be what he wished to be.

Cinema as a social institution provides pleasure in looking at the body of the central character. Though *Odum Raja Aadum Rani* claims to be ground breaking it did not get a popular reception and fails to disengage from the patriarchal modes of idealizations of masculinity, femininity and distinguish the transgender identity. Curing for correcting the gender liminalities results in queering, however how effective it is to banish the excess of pathologizing the gendered subjectivities remains unanswered. The curing that happens in the movie may not happen in the mind of the spectator who may tend to see the idea of trans or fluidity of gender as abnormality or aberration due to the inclination to prevailing heterosexual normativity.

Notes:

1. The first Malayalam cinema was released in 1928.
See <http://www.malayalamcinema.com/cinema-history.htm>
2. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant.
See Halperin, David M. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford University Press, 1995.
3. A discursive term from media discourse refers to a new set of Malayalam films that represent a departure from the region’s conventional style. See Gopinath, Swapna, and Sony Jalarajan Raj. “Gender construct as a narrative and text: The female protagonist in new-generation Malayalam cinema.” *South Asian Popular Culture* 13.1 (2015): 65-75.
4. See <http://queerpridekeralam.blogspot.in/>
5. Koovagam Temple at the Koovagam village in Villupuram district, Tamil Nadu is famous for its annual festival of transgender and transvestite individuals, which takes fifteen days in the Tamil month of Chitrai (April/May). The Koothandavar Temple dedicated to *Aravan* (Koothandavar), and the participants marry the Lord Koothandavar, thus reenacting an ancient myth of Lord Vishnu/Krishna who married him after taking a form of a woman called *Mohini*. The next day, they mourn the god Koothandavar's death through ritualistic dances and by breaking their bangles. An annual beauty pageant and several other competitions like singing contests are held.
6. Bhagavathi Aattu is a ritualistic temple dance practiced in the erstwhile Vettathunadu, Kerala in which an offering is done to the dead elders in the family and Gods. See Klari, Sasidharan. *Keraleeya Kala Manasam*. Olive Books, 2001.
7. A slang used in Malayalam to refer an effeminate male.

8. Kottankulangara Temple is at Kollam district of Kerala. The Kottankulangara Festival or *Chamayavilakku* is an annual Hindu festival in which thousands of men cross dress as women (Some wear Set saari, Pattu saari, half saari or even dance costumes) to seek the blessings of the Goddess Bhagavathy. During the night of *Chamayavilakku*, the 'damsels', holding traditional lamps, walk in procession to the temple to the accompaniment of traditional orchestra. Every year this festival is celebrated on the 10th and 11th day of the Malayalam Meenam Maasam.

Primary Text:

Odum Raja Aadum Rani. Directed by Viju Verma, performances by Manikandan Pattambi, Tini Tom, Wafi Group, 2014.

Secondary Texts:

Filmography:

Action Hero Biju. Directed by Abrid Shine, performances by Nivin Pauly, Anu Emmanuel, Pauly Jr Pictures, 2016.

Ardhanaari. Directed by Santhosh Souparnika, performances by Manoj K. Jayan, Thilakan, MG Sound& Frames, 2012.

Chanthupottu. Directed by Lal Jose, performances by Dileep, Gopika, Lal Releases, 2005.

Desatanakkili Karayarilla. Directed by Padmarajan, performances by Karthika, Shari, Burton Movies, 1986.

English: An Autumn in London. Directed by Shyamaprasad, performances by Jayasurya, Nivin Pauly, Navarang Screens, 2013.

Ka Bodyscapes. Directed by Jayan K. Cherian, performances by Kannan Rajesh, Jason Chacko, Inner Silence Films, 2016.

Kasaba. Directed by Nithin Renji Panicker, performances by Mammooty, Neha Saxena, Goodwill Entertainment, 2016.

Mumbai Police. Directed by Rosshan Andrrrews, performances by Pridhviraj, Jayasurya, Nisad Haneefa Productions, 2013.

My Life Partner. Directed by M.B. Padmakumar, performances by Sudev Nair, Anusree, Kirthana Movies, 2014.

Nee-Na. Directed by Lal Jose, performances by Deepti Sati, Vijay Babu, LJ Films, 2015.

Randu Penkuttikal. Directed by Mohan, performances by Shobha, Anupama, Sree Ganesh Kalamandir, 1978.

Ritu. Directed by Shyamaprasad, performances by Asif Ali, Nishan. Playhouse. 2009.

Salt n' Pepper. Directed by Aashiq Abu, performances by Asif Ali, Lal. Lucasm Creations, 2011.

Sufi Paranja Katha. Directed by Priyanandan, performances by Thampi Antony, Prakash Bare. Silicon Media, 2010.

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