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Violence, Memories, Space and the Eternal Urge to Survive: An Analysis of Arupa Patangia Kalita's *Felanee* (2003) and *Written in Tears* (2015)

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Abstract

Arupa Patangia Kalita, academican, novelist and short story writer finds in the rather tumultuous landscapes of her homeland designs for her literary endeavours. Born and having spent a larger part of her life as a professor of English literature in Assam, Patangia becomes an ardent chronicler of the socio-political transformations that have been taking place in her homeland. Assam for Patangia is a space which has been constantly reproduced as a result of the rather complex interactions between people and material realities (Lefebvre 1991). David Harvey argues that spaces do not exist independently but are to be understood as a relationship between objects and events which exist only because objects and events relate to each other (Harvey 2004: 2). As a socially produced space, Assam does not have a pleasant past to look back upon. Ruled largely by the Ahom dynasty, Assam formally became a part of colonial India in the year 1826. Assam as a space has been carved out of the rather violent socio-political uprisings and the strong urge of the inhabitants of this space to negotiate these trajectories of violence. For instance the vehement protest in the recent times against the citizenship amendment bill 2016, the rise of new revolutionary groups like the ULFA Independent, NDFB (S) and the KLO etc. emulate these trajectories of violence and turmoil. Yet, in the midst of the violence and turmoil, there is a thriving diversity of people who have been crossing the barriers of terror and extremism and upholding zealously humanitarian values. Space in Patangia's fictions is not only conditioned by what Lefebvre calls the subjects of the space but it is also the space which conditions the lives of the subjects who inhabit it. This paper, therefore, while approaching Assam as a space would explore the plight of a collective of people who are caught in the mire of violent uprisings. The paper is premised upon the notion that memories of people who are caught

in the mire of terror and conflict not only embody and diffuse the memories of terror but also bear the traditions of emancipation that are linked inextricably to the space which these subjects of violence inhabit (Harvey 2004).

Introduction

Arupa Kalita Patangia's fiction stems from personal memories of violence. The marginalization of people who do not fall in line with the diktat of society emerges as an important theme in her fiction. Patangia, herself had to bear the brunt of not going with the tide when Assam underwent tumultuous times in the late seventies and early eighties because of the Assam movement. The Assam movement which grew out of mass protest against illegal immigration according to Patangia deteriorated into ethnic cleansing and rise of several armed factions as well as the demand for sovereignty by various other ethnic groups in the state. Patangia states that she was in support of the core idea of the Assam Agitation i.e. driving out of illegal immigrants, but could not accept the jingoism and chauvinism that accompanied the movement (Biswas 2015: 215). These memories of an unsteady past have been a recurring theme in most of her fictions. As she states; "I can never forget the plight of common people during that period. Friends became enemies; secret killings ruined many families who were innocent but suffered because a family member became an absconder to join an outlawed group" (Biswas 2015: 215). The novel *Felanee* (2003) and her collection of novellas and short stories translated into English *Written in Tears* (2015) bring out the horror of the turbulent times.

Voicing the unvoiced in *Felanee* (2003, trans.2011)

Arupa Patangia Kalita's *The Story of Felanee* (2003, trans. 2011) is set in the politically charged space of Assam. Felanee, meaning "thrown away" is the protagonist of the novel. The novel carries within its folds a timeframe of several decades starting with the journey of the child widow Ratnamala. Ratnamala belongs to the aristocratic mouzadar family. However, she elopes with a mahout named Kinaram Bodo and settles in the foothills of Bhutan. She dies giving birth to Jutimala and after a while Kinaram's bullet stricken body is discovered by the villagers. Their daughter Jutimala after their death is raised by the villagers. Jutimala grows up to a beautiful girl and a shopkeeper named Khitish Ghosh marries her. Meanwhile, the socio-political trouble starts brewing up in Assam, houses are burnt, people are killed and Jutimala right after the birth of her daughter is killed as riots break out in Assam. The language movement for making Assamese the official language of Assam stirred up emotions against outsiders. The death of Jutimala and Khitish can be seen as a manifestation of those tumultuous times. The baby which was thrown away by Jutimala in the pond moments before her death is rescued by Khitish's brother Ratan. She grows up to be Felanee, the protagonist of the novel. When Felanee marries Lambodar Koch and gives birth to a boy called Moni, another trouble crops up, the agitation against illegal infiltration in Assam popularly known as the Assam movement is brewing up. Felanee and her husband are caught up in the violent effects of the

agitation. Lambodar Koch, her husband is killed and Felanee along with her son Moni escapes the violence by hiding in a garbage dump. Eventually, Felanee has to leave her space in the village and move to the camp set up by the government. The novel ardently depicts the plight of individuals whose lives are suddenly overturned by rather uncertain political uprisings. Felanee's individuality in her own homeland is transformed into a refugee. The need to carve a coherent identity keeps haunting her throughout the novel. For instance, when the doctor in the refugee camp questions her about her identity, she finds herself in a dilemma. The image of her grandparents Ratnamala and Kinaram Bodo, her parents Jutimala (an Axomiya), and Khitish Ghosh (Bengali), her husband Lambodar (a Koch) starts wavering in her mind.

"What are you anyway?" stunned at this question she kept looking at him. The boy stared back at her. Why she was taking so long to answer such a simple question, he thought. 'What are you?'

Yes, she thought, what am I?" (Patangia 2003: 32).

Felanee does not have an answer to state categorically her identity. Her consciousness revolves around her multi-ethnic identity and the only word which drops as an answer from her quaking lips is "human". Like the Urdu author Manto's Bishen Singh in the story *Toba Tek Singh*, who is unable to confront the bitter truth of his village being partitioned, thereby unable to decide whether he is an Indian or a Pakistani, Felanee too cannot find out what her identity is. But unlike Bishen Singh in Manto's story, Felanee does not succumb to the identity crisis which surrounds her. She embraces her multi-ethnic identity. But it is her identity carved out of diverse ethnic lineages, which lands her in trouble. During the Assam movement, she becomes the target of violent factions. Similarly, during the Bodo movement, Felanee is warned to embrace the customs and traditions of the Bodo tribe and wear the Dokhona. Negotiating the rather uncertain times and emerging as a survivor, Felanee is a paean to the indomitable spirit of people living on the periphery.

Identity, Memory, and Space in *Felanee* (2003)

The novel through its portrayal of the struggle of the characters depicted once again raises the rather vexed problem of the definition of insider/outsider, is space/location exclusive to the majority. Who speaks? For whom? About what? Can someone be really inside and outside, observer and participant of events unfolding in a contentious space at the same time? (Baruah 2005: VI). What emerge in diverse methods of approaching the space is a reproduction as well as the representation of that very space. The Assam movement therefore for Felanee as well as others living in the refugee camp is not a step towards fulfillment of the illusion of "golden Assam" but an exercise into self-destruction. "Golden Assam" or "Xunor Axom" is a slogan which has been raised by nationalist during socio-political movements to evoke the cultural as well as material wealth of Assam. The slogan gained prominence during the Assam movements and was subsequently borrowed by armed factions like the ULFA. ULFA defines its war against the state a step towards the construction of "Xunor Axom". The slogan is

relevant in contemporary times too. Nationalist often blame the state for plundering Assam of its resources and culture casting a dent to the image of "Golden Assam". Felanee along with other characters in the novel is caught in between the illusion of golden Assam and the instinctual zeal for survival. Felanee's consciousness inspite the death of her husband in the agitation revolves around earning a livelihood and sustaining herself as well as her son Moni. Xunor Axom as a contentious as well as a rather violent space shapes the predicament of Felanee but it is also Felanee who shapes this space for her survival. Pamela Colombo and Estela Schindel argue that violence in both its objective as well as subjective form not only destroy certain spaces but also led to the emergence and transformation of others. Violence according to Colombo and Schindel does not merely taint the physical features of the space but also ingrain the violence in the emotional longing of the inhabitant of the space and its physical features. Therefore memories of violence continue to haunt individuals who have experienced it from close quarters. Characters in the novel, therefore, are haunted by the constant fear of tumultuous events. Having witnessed the bloodshed which accompanied the Assam movement the characters carry in their consciousness forebodings of violent events. The agony of having to wake up with the dull thud of the grenade and bullets sprayed from point-blank range is steeped deep in the hearts and minds of the characters. Therefore when the Bodo movement for the creation of a separate state for the Bodo community is launched Felanee along with the other characters in the novel are taken back to the bloodshed which accompanied the Assam movement. Memories of violence, therefore, exceed the mere materiality of space and are internalized in the body and the consciousness of the subject, modifying how the subjects inhabit space but also how they imagine it in the aftermath of violence (Colombo). Felanee, therefore, must contest verbally with Bulen- the Bodo rebel when he orders her to shed her bangles and wear the dokhona; "wear your own dress or else you too will be finished. You will end up in ashes." (Patangia 2003: 180). Felanee replies " Please do not block the avenues to our earning our daily bread... You must know it doesn't even take a night to destroy a home but to build it." (Patangia 2003: 181).

The emphasis on building homes rather than destroying them emerges because memories of violence from the past intrude into the present and haunt the subjects who inhabit these spaces. Specters from an unresolved past continue to affect the present of the living, these echoes haunt the spaces of the present and transfigure familiar spaces, turning them into the uncanny environment.(Derrida 1994, Davis 2007, Schindel 2014). In the novel too, memories from the past dislocate the space of the present day, familiar spaces are reshaped by memories of the past. For instance, the jungle which once provided livelihood to the villagers is because of the traumatic events of the past transformed into a battleground between the army and the militants, blue hills begin to be associated with the underground which is creating havoc in the society. The hill as a space embodying the beauty of nature is at once marred by the association of the underground with it. Felanee's heart is lured by the beauty of the hills but she is at once confronted with the violence which has been associated with the hills;

“ Her (Felanee’s) mind was filled with the blue hills she could see in the distance. Felanee visualized the hills being cultivated and having villages and towns filled with people. There must be jungles too...And what about those boys? Where did they live?...They were riddled with leech bites and racked with dysentery and fever. These were boys from good homes, who could have steady jobs and lived in comfort. Instead, they went from hill to hill learning to use bombs and guns” (Patangia 2003:195).

For Felanee the beauty of the hill as a space is a mirage, it is what Michel Foucault calls “heterotopia”. Foucault uses the term to describe spaces which have more layers of meaning than what is conceived to be the immediate meaning. Heterotopia is a space of ‘otherness’, which is simultaneously physical and mental meaning space do not exist alone but in relation to important constructs like memory, people etc. Felanee constantly refers to the calling of the hills;

“ The hills had called her; they really called people. They had called the boys, and they had called Bulen. Today the hills had called her. She shivered as a terrible fear gripped her body and soul.” (Patangia 2003:196).

The hill as a space in the novel holds diverse connotations for those who approach it. For the rebels, the hill is a beautiful veil to hide their extremism, for Felanee too the calling of the hills is accompanied by forebodings of destruction. Felanee has seen familiar faces disappearing in the beauty of the hills and reemerging as cogs in the wheel of violence which is raging wild in both the physical as well as the emotional space which Felanee inhabits.

While the dynamic and rather fluid definition of space emerges in the novel, it also foregrounds the inability of political movements concerning identity assertion to come to a comprehensible stand. For example, in the novel, there is a constant urge on the part of the revolutionaries in creating a golden Assam free from immigrants. Similarly, during the Bodo movement, the emphasis is laid on the creation of a separate Bodoland which will be free from the so-called hegemony of “outsiders”. Ceaselessly the life of the common people is thwarted by bandhs, political killings, economic blockade. The novel questions the validity of such political movements which do not take into account the plight of the common people but conditions them to become perpetrators of the ideology of violent identity assertion. The term “boys” which is used in the novel to refer to the militants aptly brings out the conditioning of young people into dark alleys of violence and extremism. These young boys in spite of their violent association are treated with a strong sense of tolerance by the novelist. Characters like Minoti harbours the boys from the prying eyes of the Indian army, similarly, Bulen who has joined the Bodo rebel group in spite of his verbal, as well as physical violence against non-Boros, is looked upon with sympathy by Felanee. There is a passage in the novel where a group of armed young boys threatens Felanee for protecting a Bengali couple. They argue that all non-Boros must leave their land and go away and Felanee, whose grandfather was a Boro will have to bear the brunt of their anger;

“Mind you, these people will have to go from here. You will unnecessarily get a raw deal along with them.” (Patangia 2003:184).

Warned by the boys, Felanee wonders;

“ Where will the people go?... Who will live in their independent land? And who will live in Bulen’s state? What all will they divide? Could they divide the sky over their heads? Will they divide the waters in the rivers; the trees, land, the people?... Will these boys, so keen on destroying and dividing, allow the birds to fly from one state to another? ... What about the fragrance of the flowers? Would all communities be allowed to enjoy their fragrance? ... She could find no answer in her heart” (Patangia 2003:185:185).

In the political as well as armed movements carried out by various faction like the All Assam Students Union, All Bodo Students Union, as well as armed factions like ULFA, NDFB, BLT etc. for their own state/space what is subjugated are the spaces (both mental and physical) of individuals like Felanee, Bulen, Minoti, Kali Boori etc. who live in the margins of the society. Because of the movements based on a desire for a separate space for a particular community, the spaces inhabited by characters like Felanee are intruded by those belonging to the dominant group. In such movements, there is a strong tendency of occupying public spaces by dominant groups to showcase their strength. In the novel too, public spaces are occupied, mutilated and destroyed by political as well as armed faction who are both state-sponsored and anti-state. For instance, the bomb blasts carried out by militants in public spaces like the market square, a grenade hurled at educational institutes and the gory execution of militants, fake encounters carried out in public view by the state so as to arouse awe in the hearts and minds of the layman in the novel point towards a radical intrusion of the public spaces by those in power. Sanjib Baruah questions the often harsh measures adopted by the state to control conflict, by drawing on Foucault’s proposition of theories of public torture and public execution he calls it ‘concealed sovereign violence’. Baruah opines; “ Counter-insurgency operations in contemporary Assam include public execution of suspected rebels by Indian soldiers often in front of villagers and sometimes even in front of their family members...As if the audiences were made to watch the re-emergence of arcane and violent forms of sovereignty...” (Baruah 2005: xii). Lefebvre argues that social space “is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity” (Lefebvre 1991, 73). That is, space is not a “preexisting, empty or neutral space, or a space determined solely by geography, climate, [or] anthropology” (Lefebvre 1991, 77). Rather, space is an ongoing production of relations between diverse objects, both natural and social, including the networks that facilitate the exchange of such objects. The political, as well as the armed movements in the novel too, are engrossed with reproducing the public spaces for showcasing their domination as well as power. On the one hand, there are activities by insurgents and on the other, there are counter-insurgency operations carried out by the state. In the novel, the boys demand separation of their homeland from the Indian Union and the state, on the other hand, is actively engaged in thwarting such a demand. Assam as a social space is therefore produced and reproduced in diverse ways by both the factions. Sanjib Barua argues that prolonged insurgency as well as counter-insurgency operation in the region have eroded the democratic fabric of this space and have imposed authoritative legislation in the region. Baruah argues

that the result of these authoritarian practices has led to a growing “Dissonance between the idea of ethnic homeland and the actually existing political economy of the region that makes ethnic violence and internal displacement quite predictable” (Baruah 2005: 1). Barua like Patangia traces the violence in the region back to the pre-independence. He argues that faulty policies made by the colonizers with regard to Assam and the Northeast of India have been adopted by post independent without paying heed to the ground realities of the region which in turn have led to a feeling of angst in the masses. Like Patangia’s *Felanee* who is sympathetic to the boys sporting assault weapons and leading miserable lives in leech-infested jungles Baruah too links the violent transformation of the space called Northeast to faulty policies made by the state. He links to the dilemma of a collective of people facing humiliations and violations suffered by the regions common people as a result of decades of low-intensity conflict and the means through which they forge their lives so as to deal with those conflicts. Baruah poignantly points out that there is no simple anti or pro insurgency voices as the security discourse would have it but complex dilemmas with no choices. The steady carving of life amidst the ruins as portrayed by the characters in the novel is strewn with sounds of heavy boots and bullets signifying the might of the army and extortion notes, kidnapping, murders symbolic of insurgents on another hand. The only resort for these people caught in the complexities of the contact zone (Pratt 1991) is to regress to what Lefebvre calls the spaces of representation. The novels therefore despite depicting violence and its impact on the lives of common individuals ends with the image of *Felanee*, Maya, Minoti and others going out to collect reeds from the river bank so as to reconstruct their homes/space which has been destroyed in the violence. The laughter of these women who have lost not only their families but also a part of their existence which resuscitates the river bank points towards an appropriation of the physical space marred by violence with their strong zeal for survival;

The women couldn’t see each other's face which was hidden by the wet reeds. Remembering the work waiting to be done they started walking fast. The reeds had to be dried, the roofs had to be thatched. The walls had to be made and plastered. If the reeds rotted because of the wet weather, they would have to come back and cut more.” (Patangia 2003: 312).

Concealed Violence and Spaces of Belonging in *Written in Tears* (2015)

Written in Tears (2015) chronicles through its portrayal of lives of ordinary individuals a disturbing and searing history of aggression and hate that has plagued the surreally beautiful landscape of Assam. The collection ardently portrays the various ways in which Assam as a space has been shaped by those who approach it. In “ Arunima’s Motherland”. Patangia brings out the gory episodes of “secret killing” which raged the courtyards of Assam from 1998 to 2001. The story begins with the marriage of Arunima with Abinash a young boy from a respectable middle-class family. Arunima along with her in-laws are leading a rather content life in a small suburban area of Assam. Arunima is adored by her in-laws. However, their peaceful existences are intruded upon by the violence which is raging in the outer space. Arunima’s elder brother-in-law who is

academically meritorious joins the ULFA. His joining the insurgents is accompanied by the violence which intrudes the lives of his family members, the gory violence sponsored by the state make their lives miserable. The Indian Army under the garb of counter-insurgency operations tortures the Arunima's in-laws. Arunima's husband Abinash and his younger brother Rupam, how is studying in the university is tortured by the army; "Suddenly there was a commotion as ten to twelve army personnel entered the compound, They had already rampaged through the house. One of them took hold of Rupam's arms. Another snatched his suitcase and broke it open... They questioned the members of the family about the son who had left the house and dragged Rupam away. His brother, her husband, did not eat anything and, putting on a shirt, went out. Again, that routine would follow, he knew. Police, court, etcetera." (Patangia 2015:21). However, amidst bomb blasts, political killings, kidnappings, life continues, Arunima is pregnant, Rupam the twenty-one-year young boy have matured because of the circumstances and is taking care of his family members, flowers continue to adore the courtyard of Arunima's home and an extra plate is still served during the dinner expecting that their elder son would suddenly return from the jungle and ask for food. However, there are shadows lurking in the courtyards of Arunima's home. These shadows continue chasing Arunima and her in-laws; "Rupam noticed that of late he came across some unknown faces on the road, he smelt a conspiracy. Somebody was following him as if to catch him in a net. A few nights ago, when he was returning home, a Maruti van stopped near the big tank and a few men with black handkerchiefs tied over their faces got down and blocked his path." (Patngia 2015: 31). Rupam's elder brother Abinash too meets men covered with black clothes. Omi and Baby, Arunima's sisters-in-law also sees men with black faces and guns surrounding their home. Arunima too hears whispers breaking the eerie silence of the night outside her bedroom. Ominous shadows continue to haunt Arunima's in-laws. Innocent slumbers are intruded with violent footsteps of heavy boots and dull thuds at their doors at midnight. Abinash takes Arunima away from his home to her mother's home where she would be safe from the prying eyes of these shadows. Abinash's family, on the other hand, must, however, confront these dark shadows. They know that they like their pet dog Tommy would be poisoned;

'Don't think its only Tommy, they are going to poison us too,' Rupam said, his face going deathly pale.

'Who will do that, Dada? Why poison us? What have we done?' Baby asked, sounding helpless.

Meanwhile, Arunima amidst the taboo of her being married to a family whose son is a wanted insurgent gives birth to a healthy boy. In her maternal home, she is constantly worried about the shadows which continue to surround her in-laws. She after staying for a few months decides to return to her in-laws along with her baby boy. As her car enters the small town Arunima's heart leaps with the expectation of happiness that would pervade the courtyards of her home because of the arrival of her little songs. She anticipates that Rupam would be collecting honey for the young one, Baby must be working with her hoe in the flower garden, so as to welcome her nephew, and her mother-in-law must be throwing mustard seeds in

the four corners of her home so as to keep away evil spirits from her grandchild (Patangia 2015:42). However, her heart leaping with the expectation of happiness is comes to a standstill when she confronts harsh realities unfolding in a violent space. Her home which once abounded with all the happiness which she experienced had been blown away by the shadows which had been ceaselessly following her in-laws. What was left of her home were burnt cinders, a broken roof, uprooted trees and flowers soaked of all their hues. Her home had been blown away by bombs hurled by unknown figures and the bodies of her loved one had been mutilated beyond recognition.

Patangia through "Arunima's Motherland" chronicles the dark state-sponsored "secret killings" of innocent family members of individuals who have joined the ULFA. For the people who live in the space called Assam, the term secret-killing symbolizes the dark periods of its political history. The term terrorized and tormented the people of Assam for four years between 1998 and 2001. Even today, the mere mention of these two words send shivers down the spines of many, who were witness to many kidnappings and killings. Women became widows, parents lost their sons, sons their fathers and many sisters and brothers could never see their siblings again. The newspapers of Assam coined this term "Secret Killings" to describe the state-sponsored extra-judicial killings during the period. In fact, the inquiry commission report says "secret killings" mean the extra-judicial killings conducted by the state government using SULFA members and the security forces in the name of counter-insurgency operations. The victims of these killings were relatives, friends, and colleagues of ULFA militants. The most apparent justification for the whole exercise was that it was a tit-for-tat response to the ULFA-sponsored terrorism, especially the killings of their old comrades—the SULFAs. On one side, there was the terror and meaningless violence by ULFA and on the other was the state-sponsored gruesome pogrom by SULFA against the relatives of ULFA. Sandwiched between them were two crore people of Assam, watching helplessly this maddening saga of revenge. There was no accountability, some ordinary police cases, and no investigation. What was shocking was that these killings just some case numbers for the government. Those who dared to question simply vanished into the thin air. Gradually, the people of Assam started accepting it and got used to the bloodbath (Talukdar et al. : 2005: 1-16).

In 'The Cursed Fields of Golden Rice', Patangia narrates the story of Alfred and Mainao. Alfred and Mainao belong to the Bodo community. Alfred is intelligent but belongs to a poor family. Mainao, on the other hand, works as a maid in Alfred's village. Alfred has passed his matriculation with flying colours but does not have the financial set up to help him continue his studies, However, with the help of his teacher Father Jonathan, Professor Bordoloi and his beloved Mainao, he is able to complete his graduation and secure a government job in Delhi. Their story, however, is not free from the events unfolding in the space to which they belong. The Bodo movement for a separate Bodoland encapsulates their innocent lives in the rein of uncertainty. Boys belonging to the underground visit Mainao's

home and demand money and food. When the boys leave, it is the army which tortures the villagers. Alfred, therefore after securing a government job takes Mainao to Delhi. However, for Mainao who is not acquainted with ways of the city, life appears to be imprisoned in the hustle and bustle of the city. Mainao in this new space so as to survive must learn to shed her identity as a woman belonging to the Bodo community and mimic the habits of city dwellers. Alfred orders her to shed her traditional dress, the Dokhona and wear Salwaar Kameez. Similarly, Mainao finds herself imprisoned in the rather narrow apartment in which Alfred lives. Her heart longs to be in the openness of her village in Assam. She is in psychological trauma. She returns to her village in Assam only to find her the home of her dreams shattered by the insurgents who had occupied her home after she had left for Delhi.

Assam, therefore as a space does not exist outside the processes that defines it. David Harvey drawing on Leibniz argues that space is inextricably linked to the events and things which are taking place within it. The relational view of space holds there is no such thing as space outside of the processes that define it. Processes do not occur *in* space but define their own spatial frame. The concept of space is embedded in or internal to process. The view of relative space proposes that it be understood as a relationship between objects which exists only because objects exist and relate to each other. "There is another sense in which space can be viewed as relative and I choose to call this relational space - space regarded in the manner of Leibniz, as being contained in objects in the sense that an object can be said to exist only insofar as it contains and represents within itself relationships to other objects." (Harvey 2004:2-5). Terrorism, murders, secret killings, etcetera in the stories have shaped Assam as a space and it is the violence which is unfolding in the space which in turn is shaping the lives of individuals like Felanee, Arunima, Abinash etc.

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