

Space and Discourse of Violence in Salemi Nasser's "The Blue Tongues" Novel

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Abstract

The setting in a narrative text is not merely a neutral geographical construct, devoid of any semantic charges or intellectual and ideological dimensions, as expressed by Gaston Bachelard. It interacts with events, time, characters, and various aesthetics of language and description in forming the narrative text, in building its internal relationship with fictional characters, and in producing their behaviors and actions. Characters navigate within the narrative space and can only move within its confines, as the place is only perceived through its relationship with the characters and time. It is a key tool for reading and uncovering the various semantic and interpretive dimensions scattered and fragmented within the text. From this standpoint, this study aims to approach the element of space in its relation to the discourse of violence in Salemi Nasser's novel "The Blue Tongues" and the bloody events during the dark decade that Algeria went through.

Keywords: *Space; Discourse of Violence; Novel; Criticism; Interpretation.*

1. VIOLENCE CONCEPT

The concept of violence overlaps and converges with various notions, such as terrorism, ideology, and power, among others, making it a problematic concept difficult to define precisely. Therefore, comprehensively encompassing this complex and fragmented phenomenon is challenging.

From this perspective, violence is defined as an ambiguous problematic issue that transcends being a social and sociological phenomenon because violence "presents itself as a multi-dimensional concept across various human sciences, offering a psychological, philosophical, social, legal, educational, moral, and religious problematic concept. It is considered by sociology a social disease, by psychology a psychological disorder, by philosophy a philosophical phenomenon expressing a primitive, uncivilized manner, by legal studies a crime requiring punishment, and by education, morals, and religion as a rejected, evil, and forbidden behavior."¹

Thus, the multiplicity of knowledge fields in which this phenomenon is discussed, the differing viewpoints in addressing and approaching it among researchers and scholars in sociology, psychology, politics, philosophy, literature, etc., as well as the multiple types of violence, including political, terrorist, social, verbal, material, moral, educational, linguistic, religious, sexual, physical, violence against women, and cyber violence, make approaching this phenomenon difficult and challenging.

Therefore, it is not surprising that definitions of violence vary from one researcher to another. André Lalande defines it as "...an unlawful, or at least illegal, use of force. For those of us living under the yoke of civil laws, we are compelled to establish a contract, as through law we can oppose violence.²" Similarly, Ibrahim Al-Haidari views it as "the unlawful use of physical force in various ways to harm individuals and groups and destroy property, including methods of punishment, rape, various assaults, and interference in the freedoms of others."³

Al-Sharif Habila considers that: "Violence is a complex issue, exceeding the political and social dimensions, to accompany every verbal or actual act, inherently accompanying every transformative social, cultural, or discursive practice. It is an actual or verbal behavior that uses force, or threatens to use it, to inflict harm and damage to oneself, others, and to destruct properties to influence the will of the target..."

It is the act that affects the being of humans, causing material, physical, psychological, intellectual, and ideological harm to others.⁴ "Suad Al-Anzi defines it as: "Those terrorist acts issued by armed organizations belonging to extremist party Islamism, which directed its violence towards the people of all categories, from the simple citizen to the intellectual to the authority figure.

Violence did not only include killing but also encompassed linguistic and psychological violence, as well as family and social marginalization⁵." On this basis, the concept of violence is applied to certain manifestations, including:

- Everything imposed on a being, contradicting its nature.
- Everything practiced with severe force against what constitutes an obstacle to it.
- The term violence applies to sensations, temperaments, actions, and behaviors, leading to discussions on violent acts or statements.
- The term violence is also used concerning the temperaments of individuals who act violently against all resistance.
- Everything that refers to violence, for those who work for justice, work for the benefit of all, while those who are violent, work only for their self-interest, and sometimes, they end up being violent against themselves.⁶

Despite the complexities and interconnections of this problematic phenomenon, and aside from the causes leading to it, which may be political, social, ideological, and doctrinal, what draws attention is that this phenomenon has become a subject of thought and a literary theme that many Algerian writers have worked on. It has become a concern that haunts them and a phenomenon that necessitates writing and questioning.

The statement made by the novelist "Salem Nasser" to the House of Novel at the University of Mascara confirms this⁷, as he mentioned that the idea of writing the text "The Blue Tongues" coincided with the incident of the killing of female teachers in Ain Aden.

Working as a teacher in the "Wadi Taghia" area of Mascara, he felt targeted and that his fate might not differ from that of the female teachers who traveled daily to perform their educational and pedagogical duties, risking their lives and death, a mission "Nasser" himself undertook when traveling from Tighennif to Wadi Taghia, risking his life to fulfill his duty and noble mission.

Thus, the killing of the teachers was an inspiring event for him in writing this text, which was slowly developed over nearly twenty years, sufficient for its linguistic, aesthetic, and content furnishing, appearing refined and revised.

This reminds us of the poets of annals in our ancient Arabic literature, who would leave their poems for a whole year under refinement and scrutiny before presenting and announcing them. I recall this not out of affection or flattery for the author of "The Blue Tongues," but out of admiration for this elusive, resisting, and evasive text.

In an era where there's a rush towards novel writing, the pursuit of fame, and competition for the title of a novelist, my professor "Makhlouf Amer" rightly described this surge towards novel writing as the season of migration to the novel,⁸ yet "Salem Nasser" was not one of those in a rush.

2. SYMBOLIC OR MORAL VIOLENCE (RUMORS):

If physical violence is related to anything that leads to physical and organic harm to others, then symbolic or moral violence uses language, ideas, and ideologies as its tools, through insults, defamation, spreading false news and claims, and is utilized by media, religion, authority, and all cultural, educational, and social institutions in various ways. "Pierre Bourdieu" saw that any influence or any cultural and ideological practice or social behavior, whose proponents succeed in imposing a discourse, a certain authority, or establishing a specific dominance without the use of physical force and violence, is considered symbolic violence.⁹

The novel "The Blue Tongues" addresses symbolic or moral violence through its depiction of the danger of the rumor disease, and the extent of the impact of spreading malicious news and propaganda among the residents of Ain Adam, creating a social reality dominated by grudges and hatred, controlled by tribal and dynastic conflicts, ultimately leading to fighting and terrorism.

3. VIOLENCE AND SPACE:

Space is no longer just a neutral geographical construct in the narrative text, devoid of any semantic charges or intellectual, ideological, and existential dimensions, as expressed by "Gaston Bachelard" who asserts "that the place that attracts the imagination cannot remain an indifferent place, with only geometric dimensions. It is a place where humans have lived, not only objectively but with all the bias of the imagination. We are drawn to it because it intensifies existence,"¹⁰ and because it interacts with events, time, characters, and various aesthetics of language and description in forming the narrative text, in building its internal relationship with fictional characters, and in producing their behaviors and actions.

Characters navigate within the narrative space and can only move within its confines, as the place is only perceived through its relationship with the characters.

It generates the meaning of the narrative text, as the text through which a character expresses their viewpoint on a certain situation, exceeding its role as decor to signify intellectual, psychological, social, economic, and political issues, influenced by the movement practiced within it, the character inhabiting it, and the time passing through it.

It is one of the most important components of the narrative content¹¹, because it forms a semantic system and a primary source for generating meaning in the narrative text¹², as well as a key tool for reading and uncovering the various semantic and interpretive dimensions scattered and fragmented within the text.

If the concept of space is confused with another adjacent concept, that is space; our approach will be limited to studying the place (*Le lieu*), or "geographical space", in response to the study's subject, avoiding the complexity and confusion in determining the essential differences between the two concepts, and in clarifying the relationships of adjacency and difference between them¹³.

Our approach to geographical space does not study the geographical place in isolation from the world of the narrative story but in its contextual relationships that extend to the prevailing culture in an era, and to the dominant ideology in a specific temporal environment¹⁴. Perhaps the first attempts to break the association between the two terms (place/space) go back to "Gaston Bachelard" in his book "The Poetics of Space".¹⁵

And to "Gérard Genette," who surpassed the classical view of space when he linked its close relationship with language in his book *figures 1*¹⁶ and in his second book *figures 2*, which he emphasized that space is a linguistic game¹⁷, meaning that the issue will be related to "the spatiality of language,"¹⁸ when language allows space to be shaped linguistically and rhetorically, based on the laws of language, metaphorical representation, symbolism, and imagination.

It also goes back to "Julia Kristeva," who was interested in the textual space of the novel, which, from her perspective, is based on the writer's or narrator's viewpoint in the narrative discourse¹⁹, all far from the geographical formation of the place in its referential and realistic truth.

3.1. Ain Adam: A Place Sealed with Violence, Rumors, and Death

Ain Adam represents a locale sealed off with both physical (death, terrorism, tribal conflicts) and moral or verbal (rumors, pain, isolation, and sadness) forms of violence. However, its connection with verbal violence, represented by rumors, was more pronounced. It became a place where its inhabitants no longer wake up or sleep without the "cooing of rumors and the chirping of gossip."²⁰

Nothing in this village other than rumors decorates the gatherings of its people, delights their tongues, pleases their ears, and enchants their hearings. It became a place emitting only the hissing of snakes' tongues and the rustling of their skin²¹, turning it into an epidemic hotspot from which the smell of rumors emanates from every corner.

Rumors appear as a benign cloud of fragrance, passing between homes and shops, capturing eyes and hearts. However, they quickly thicken and don dreadful colors like smoke, blood, plague, and rusty knives, invading homes, occupying balconies, devouring feeble hearts, and rotten consciences before pouncing on its wounded prey like a ferocious beast."²² In this village, nothing is seen or heard but news of rumors, terrorism, tribal disputes, violence, and blood, all of which serve to sow terror and fear among its inhabitants.

It was rumored: "The wolf, yes, the wolf was here last night..."²³ "Hasn't he died? Didn't all of Ain Adam witness his funeral? Didn't his wife identify him? How then has he reappeared? Surely, it must be illusions, one of those strange matters and bizarre news that no one knows how they emerge and spread.

Isn't it necessary to verify the news before spreading it? No one does that; we are all complicit in spreading rumors...Could the wolf be alive? ²⁴And what does it mean for him to be alive?" And what means "the confusion of Ibn Al-'Ayeb, who found the name of Abdel Rahman written in the blood of Al-'Issawi Ibn Al-Nayir, slaughtered at dawn on the mosque's door, many believed that Abdel Rahman, the wolf, had returned, but some said that was not sufficient proof that the wolf was alive, let alone that he was the murderer." ²⁵And "They say Mansour Ibn Al-Makki went up to the mountain last night..." [and they say] ²⁶ "he was behind the gunshots heard a few days ago, and indeed he had gone up to the mountain, and returned last night, attacking Ahmad Ibn Al-Ghali, but he was not at home." ²⁷

Similarly, as narrated: "The news of the death of Ahmad Ibn Al-Ghali, known as Al-Ji'an, struck the people like lightning...No one doubted that Ahmad Ibn Al-Ghali was murdered, and that his murderer could only be Al-Makki Ibn Al-Nayir or one of his sons...Rumors circulated about the whereabouts of Al-Makki and his sons, but no one could pinpoint the location." ²⁸

These examples reveal a bleak picture of the situation in Ain Adam, an image of terror, fear, and anxiety that dominates the hearts of its citizens. The only topic of discussion among them is about "Abdel Rahman, the wolf," the dangerous terrorist, his crimes and massacres. Their only occupation is to follow the news, catch the rumors, and investigate them everywhere and by all means and methods, serving as lavish feasts around which they gather and part, exhilarated and pleased.

Thus, violence dominates the village of Ain Adam, sealing it off at various dramatic and discursive levels, turning the village into a stage for violence and death, a place for spreading bad and false news that has fueled divisions, scattering, and tribal disputes, and increased social and economic suffering within it.

This was a natural extension of various forms of ideological conflicts and partisan and sectarian extremism during the terrorism era, thus Ain Adam embodies a microcosm of the nation (Algeria) on both political and social levels, as what happened in Ain Adam was not different from what was happening across the nation at that time.

The extent of rumor violence reached its peak in Ain Adam, sparing none of its residents from its impact, as it did not leave any place or spot in it unoccupied and wild (the cafe, school, mosque, clinic, homes, streets, market, shop, gatherings, feasts...), turning it into a profession practiced by its promoters among the villagers, to spread false news and rumors and destabilize the stability among the residents. "

Ears catch the news from holes and closed windows, balconies fill with moaning and wailing, and Ain Adam gradually turns into a pen filled with donkeys, goats, and sheep, a forest peering out from its depths are crocodiles and snakes, and its surfaces a pack of petrified wolves." ²⁹ Even more, when rumors turn into a pathological and epidemic phenomenon, devastating souls, causing lives to be lost, and blood to be shed. "

Thus, Ain Adam was formed, but over time it became a pathological case carrying all the germs and diseases a city could suffer from. Ain Adam is not the place one dreams of, or dreams in...A backward, gloomy face, more pitiful and regrettable than any other feeling, a delicate and innocent image, compassionate and ascetic, friendly and hospitable, yet it's a false, mistaken image, a deceptive mask for an unsightly and ugly face, a miserable city with its people entrenched behind high fences, always ready to fight to defend them, and the

estrangement among the residents may reach a point where hands, daggers, and guns clash, and neighborhoods and villages confront each other." ³⁰

This is how Ain Adam is, and so was the case in most of its places and spaces, and so is the condition of the villages and their inhabitants, even though the Holy Quran has detailed the characteristics and natures of village people. However, it must be noted here that "Ain Adam village" is merely a symbol of what the nation (Algeria) experienced during that era.

We find ourselves "facing a village that is the nation itself, exposing the reality of the place through the actions of the characters as they engage in their daily activities accompanied by escalating violence and hidden in the darkness," ³¹ or in broad daylight, embodied by the behaviors of the characters as they exchange the same violent roles, whether in open places or in closed ones like the cafe, the main and pivotal hub in the novel, which this study will focus on as one of the most vibrant and active places in the narrative text, because it is the place that harbored rumors and their spreaders, and contributed in its interaction with the characters and time in creating violence in the narrative text; as it was not a geographical area separated and isolated from the narrative events.

3.2. The Cafe/Violence:

The cafe served as a place for broadcasting and promoting rumors, and a source for gathering and exchanging information, where people from all walks of life congregated, possibly serving as an important media tool to receive news during the era of terrorism that severed communication among Algerians, especially in remote and isolated areas.

The matter of frequenting the cafe is not a routine event or a matter of chance, "there's always an apparent or hidden reason that necessitates a character's presence in a certain cafe...And here, it's not about a personal or social obligation...It often happens by a person's choice, usually driven by an urgent personal desire." ³²

In the novel, its protagonists do not hesitate to frequent the cafe, nor do they delay in reserving seats and tables there, in order to get the latest information and news about the village, about terrorism, and tribal conflicts within it, with characters like Al-Sadiq, Al-Baghdadi, Adat Al-Bolis, and Hajj Jalul, the cafe owner, being the most frequent visitors and the keenest on catching news and broadcasting rumors without verification or patience.

In some passages of the novel, the great popularity of the cafe as a social space to break the routine, spread news, and exchange it, whether true or false, is confirmed. As narrated:

"The cafe was so crowded that the place was overwhelmed...They reached a point where they shared tables, jokes, and news, and perhaps some of them managed to escape paying for their drinks, while others monopolized the chairs for the whole day, leading Hajj Jalul, in a first-of-its-kind precedent in Ain Adam, to issue a law prohibiting gatherings of more than four and staying for an hour without ordering.

So, the customers would take their drinks on the hour and leave angry and dissatisfied, and Hajj Jalul soon reduced the allowable time to half an hour, then completely abolished the law." ³³ Also, from a dialogue between Adat Al-Bolis and Al-Sadiq in the cafe as narrated: "Adat saw Al-Sadiq entering, waved at him, and offered him to sit with him.

Al-Sadiq pulled a chair, sat down, and rushed to say while catching his breath:

- 'Sorry, I didn't see you.'

- Adat Al-Bolis, stretching his eyebrows and looking around, replied:

- 'Do you know the latest news?'

- 'News about Mascara? I heard...'

- Al-Sadiq said with a tone of a know-it-all, to which Adat replied with determination and insistence:

- 'But you don't know about the twenty-three soldiers that died...'

- Al-Sadiq responded with surprise:

- 'Twenty-three?!'

- 'And they say a plane was shot down.'³⁴

In another segment, the narrator says: "Rabeh Al-Boudali walks past the cafe, carrying a newspaper. Al-Sadiq notices him and his eyes fall on the newspaper, his heart flutters, and he drools like someone who has laid eyes on a great or rare loot, he goes out to call him:

'Rabeh, Rabeh, Mr. Rabeh.'

- Rabeh apologizes for not entering, but Al-Sadiq insists, swears by him, and pleads, patting his hand on the newspaper until the man relents and agrees to the request. As soon as he sits, Al-Sadiq bombards him with a flood of questions:

- 'Tell me, sir, how are you? Where are you headed? How do you spend your time?'

- 'You know, the clinic takes up all my time...'

- 'That's the way it is with jobs; you have to be patient with it.'³⁵

Reflecting on these narrative passages from the novel reveals the significant dominance of the cafe and its strong presence in the narrative, as a space that hosted many characters and events that took place in it, and perhaps the cafe was the only refuge for the characters for ventilation and leisure. It was a stage for the novel's events, a resource for exploring the village news, household secrets, terrorist crimes, and everything that happens at night or during the day in this isolated village, whose inhabitants always rush to the cafe and flock to it significantly.

The cafe played a significant media and intelligence role during the dark decade, not only because it became a channel for transmitting news and information and promoting rumors but also through its use as a means to report on strangers and suspects entering villages or cities, or even to report those belonging to terrorist groups and those stealthily infiltrating among the populace.

The novel indicates aspects of this when the narrator refers to an incident where a strange man enters the cafe to enjoy a cup of coffee, an act that triggered a state of alert and a wave of anxiety and panic among the residents, exacerbated by the rapid spread of the news and the intensity of the rumor's impact and its circulation among the citizens. "...Al-Sadiq stands with his mouth agape, looking at the Mercedes car that had just stopped in front of the cafe, and a man in his forties descends, wearing a classic black suit, a white shirt, and a thin red tie...

His shoes were shiny black with tightly tied laces...Thirty seconds were enough to judge the man and his mouth broke into a broad smile as he welcomed him...Hajj Jalul [the coffee] prepares it himself for the strange customer and sits not far from Al-Sadiq, one eye on the door, and one on the strange man...

They would keep whispering, unaware of what was happening outside, nor could they have imagined the extent of confusion that had engulfed the city, nor that the cafe had not been entered by anyone other than the strange man...Al-Sadiq, who was the first to harbor suspicion, walked towards the door, noticing the gendarmes in full armament, taking a defensive stance, realizing the cafe was surrounded, he returned and whispered the news in Hajj Jalul's ear, who froze in his place, saying nothing...

Two gendarmes entered the cafe, scanned the place, then greeted the man, asked for his identity, he showed them his ID card, they looked at it closely, then apologized for the inconvenience and left without arresting or interrogating him, astonishing both Al-Sadiq and Hajj Jalul, as they were unaware that the entire city had been on alert since the strange man entered the city, and the rumor had spread through the streets and alleys to the ears of children and women in the homes."³⁶

This clearly highlights the significant importance of the cafe, this social space fraught with much suspicion and ambiguity, which assumed many different roles during the black decade, socially, politically, and since it is a public space that welcomes its customers from all segments of society and spectra throughout the day, you never know what conversations take place among people inside, what is being concocted or planned, nor can you determine the identity of all those who visit it.

Therefore, the cafe always remains an ambiguous and complex place carrying a special significance, performing dangerous roles and functions acquired from the temporal and historical context of the country, and from the nature of this space's formation and structure itself.

Regardless of these significances and roles played by the cafe during that time, the dominant theme of this space, expressing the central idea in the novel, relates to the rumor because it was a direct cause of spreading terror and fear among the souls, and in causing harm and practicing violence and terrorism against humans in Ain Adam village.

Undoubtedly, this negative connotation carried by the cafe "is not an incidental significance that comes to disrupt the usual and the prevailing, but rather a deep-seated significance integrated into the structure of that space, making it a hub for gossiping about the world, and a station for circulating cheap rumors as a form of compensation for the tragedy of the individual self torn apart,³⁷ " and as an expression of a hidden sadism and psychological diseases harbored by rusted hearts filled with grudges and enmity, seeking to revive chauvinistic sentiments and ignite the fuse of tribal disputes that led to living under a society dominated by terrorism, dystopia, and quixotic wars.

From this standpoint, the role of the cafe transforms from just a social space frequented by people with the aim of killing routine and time, and practicing some known negative behaviors, from a space dominated by misery, marginalization, and unemployment, characterized by monotony, silence, and stereotyping, to an active and pivotal space, influential and integrated with events and characters.

This is clearly evident when the place (the cafe) reveals the features of the characters and exposes their violent behaviors and actions. For example, "Al-Sadiq Darwish" never ceases to leave the cafe, and finds no peace until he achieves his goal, which is to be supplied with news and catch rumors for the purpose of broadcasting and promoting them among people, and for him, this was like finding a precious treasure or consuming a rich meal to satisfy his appetite and pleasure for food.

On this basis, the rumor became a serious disease and a malignant epidemic that continued to corrode bodies in Ain Adam, and a chronic disability afflicted Al-Sadiq and others who frequented the cafe.

3.3. The School/Violence:

The school, as a central space in the novel, was not spared from violence; ³⁸"The jihadis threaten to burn the school and slaughter those within it." The spread of this news planted terror inside the school and among the teachers. When "Al-Sadiq hurried to Al-Baghdadi and informed him, and he came along, the female teachers were paralyzed with fear, and the principal was rolling a cigarette in his hand, searching for a lighter.

Aziza suggested they close the school, stating she would leave and not return...No one objected, as everyone agreed on evacuating the school to preserve the lives of the students and their own lives...No one doubted the jihadis' intentions, as news of schools being burned and massacres filled the pages of newspapers and news bulletins."³⁹

Thus, violence escalated to the threat of burning the school and slaughtering teachers and students, simply because these individuals risked their lives to lift ignorance off the children of this nation and because they chose a profession considered one of the noblest, "How miserable it is to have teaching as your profession in an era where values no longer hold, everyone loots, steals, bribes, kills, and you alone are tasked with defending morality, then these killers and criminals come and sentence you to death. What kind of country is this that sentences its teachers to execution? This is the harvest, a harvest of years of hatred and enmity, years of tribalism, regionalism, bribery, and nepotism, as if they weren't enough, to this is added blind terrorism..." ⁴⁰ that ruined everything beautiful in this beautiful country.

Notes and References

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- 6) See, *Philosophical Notebooks Series, Violence*, prepared and translated by, Mohammed El Hilali and Aziz Lazrak, p: 09, 10.
- 7) Through his participation in a presentation about his novelistic experience, within the activities of the study day titled: "Novel Readings" organized by "The House of Novel" at the Faculty of Arts and Languages, Mustapha Stambouli University of Mascara, on June 8, 2021, which was dedicated to discussing the novelistic experience of the writer Salem Nasser.
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- 11) Al-Sharif Habila, *the Novel and Violence*, p: 25.
- 12) See, Lounis Ben Ali, *The Narrative Space in the Algerian Novel: The Moorish Princess Novel by Mohammed Dib as a Model, Structural-Narrative Approach*, Publications of Al-Ikhtilaf, Algeria, 1st edition, 2015, p: 19.
- 13) Regarding the difference and distinction between place and space see *The Structure of the Narrative Text from the Perspective of Literary Criticism*, by Hamid Lahmadani, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Beirut, 3rd edition, 2000, p: 62.
- 14) *Ibid.*, p: 54.
- 15) It should be noted that "Galib Halasa" mistakenly translated the book's title to (*The Poetics of Space*), as he saw no difference between the concepts of place and space. This serious translation error and its unfortunate consequences on the Arabic studies of the two concepts were pointed out by researcher "Hassan Najmi," who drew our attention to this grave error and the clear confusion and mix-up in dealing with them and in defining their significations. See, Hassan Najmi, *the Poetics of Narrative Space*, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Beirut, 2000, p: 42, 43.
- 16) See: *Figures I, (Space and Language)*, ed., Seuil, Paris, 1966, p: 101.
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- 20) Salem Nasser, *the Blue Tongues*, p: 41.
- 21) *Ibid.*, p: 72.
- 22) *The novel*, p: 198.

- 23) The novel, p: 29.
- 24) The novel, p: 34.
- 25) The novel, p: 153.
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