

A Comparative Study of Ismat Chughtai's "The Quilt" and Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi"

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative examination of two seminal short stories—Lihaaf (The Quilt) by Ismat Chughtai and Draupadi by Mahasweta Devi. Both authors, representing the rich traditions of Urdu and Bengali literature respectively, are celebrated for their association with progressive literary movements and their fearless engagement with social injustice. Chughtai, a trailblazing figure in the Progressive Writers' Association, is renowned for her candid depiction of female sexuality and her resistance to patriarchal constraints in Urdu fiction. In Lihaaf, she subverts conventional gender expectations through a narrative that is at once understated and daring, exposing the suppression of women's desires within domestic spaces. Conversely, Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi operates as a searing political allegory that lays bare the ruthless subjugation of Adivasi communities and the systemic violence enacted by state forces. Through a polyphonic and dialogic narrative approach, Devi mirrors the fragmented and stratified realities of India's caste and class order. Her protagonist, Dopdi, emerges as an emblem of rebellion, confronting not only sexual violence but also deep-rooted socio-political disenfranchisement. By examining the thematic convergence of gender, resistance, and identity, alongside the distinctive narrative strategies employed by both writers, this study underscores how Lihaaf and Draupadi function as radical interventions in Indian literature. Each work dismantles entrenched structures of patriarchy, caste oppression, and state dominance, foregrounding the agency and voice of the subaltern woman.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Resistance, Marginalization, Subaltern, Gender Politics, Adivasi, State Violence

Mahasweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai, though writing from different political and cultural contexts, both use their fiction to examine the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, and resistance. Devi, through "Draupadi," and Chughtai, through "Lihaaf," highlight how women's bodies are regulated in patriarchal societies-but also how those same bodies can become sites of protest and power. Language itself functions as a site of subversion in these narratives. Devi reveals how militarized and bureaucratic discourse reduces Dopdi to an "object of operation" (Spivak 180), stripping her of subjectivity. Chughtai, conversely, illustrates how the absence of adequate sexual vocabulary silences women's desires, rendering them unspeakable. The child narrator's inability to articulate the events under the quilt demonstrates how women's sexuality remains unnameable within patriarchal cultures. Although Devi's work is framed by Marxist and postcolonial critiques of systemic oppression, and Chughtai's by explorations of the private and domestic, both reject the ideology of feminine modesty. Dopdi's refusal to cover her violated body and Begum Jan's rejection of heteronormative expectations each undermine patriarchal definitions of purity and shame. Ultimately, Draupadi and Lihaaf present distinct yet complementary visions of resistance: one articulated through corporeal defiance, the other through intimate and coded acts of desire. Together, they demonstrate that resistance to patriarchal control need not always be spoken; silence, too, can be as disruptive as speech. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty challenges Western feminist discourse for generalizing "Third World women" as uniform, voiceless subjects, detached from their distinct historical and cultural realities (Under Western Eyes 72).

Mahasweta Devi is recognized as one of India's most prominent writers, known for producing powerful literature in Bengali that has been translated into several languages.

Throughout her career, she used her work to advocate for the rights of tribal communities in states like West Bengal and Bihar. Having come from a middle-class, urban background, she used her talents in fiction-writing novels, plays, and stories-to shed light on the struggles of tribal women, often neglected by mainstream society (Biswakarma 57). Her literary focus was distinct from many of her contemporaries, as she combined political activism with storytelling. Devi's fiction, which earned her major honors such as the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Jnanpith Award, and the Ramon Magsaysay Award, often reframed sexuality as a source of agency rather than oppression. In her well-known short story "Draupadi," the protagonist Dopdi, a tribal woman subjected to violence, subverts expectations by facing her oppressors with defiance instead of shame, challenging the systems of patriarchal control (Spivak 281). Moreover, Devi also critiqued the shortcomings of modern development models like the trickle-down theory and brought visibility to "subaltern" groups-those rendered invisible by dominant narratives. Her work is often analyzed through postcolonial theory, especially by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who described Devi's characters as representing the "fourth world," or the most deeply marginalized sectors of society (Spivak 284). Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* disrupts this tendency by presenting Dopdi Meihen not as a powerless victim but as a figure of active defiance who transforms her assaulted body into a medium of resistance against both state violence and patriarchal domination. Her decision to remain unclothed after rape exemplifies what Mohanty describes as women's capacity for context-specific, embodied resistance that unsettles nationalist as well as patriarchal conceptions of honour.

In contrast, Ismat Chughtai emerged during the Progressive Writers' Movement and was celebrated for her fearless and often controversial voice in Urdu literature. A vocal advocate for women's rights, Chughtai emphasized education and social

empowerment, especially for Muslim women. Her stories addressed issues like female sexuality, class inequality, and middle-class morality, yet she chose to examine these through the lens of emotional and domestic experiences rather than broader political struggles (Biswakarma 57-58). By foregrounding women's bodily autonomy and desire, her short story "Lihaaf" destabilized patriarchal ideals of marriage and respectability. It compelled Urdu readers to recognize the emptiness of unions built on social convention rather than intimacy, while also highlighting the ways women discovered companionship and self-expression in oppressive domestic structures (Chowdhury 548-50). More than a literary scandal, the story has since become a touchstone of South Asian feminist writing, showing how Urdu literature could both contest cultural taboos and reimagine women's subjectivity as central to artistic and intellectual discourse. Chughtai's literary style was known for its humor, wit, and liveliness. She often used *begumati zubaan*, the everyday language of women in domestic spaces, to give voice to characters who were otherwise unheard. While Devi's writing centered on systemic oppression and political resistance, Chughtai's stories explored internalized gender roles and psychological tensions within families. Begum Jaan, neglected by her effeminate husband Nawab Sahib, finds solace and companionship in her maid Rabbo. "In winter when I put a quilt over myself its shadows on the wall seem to sway like an elephant" (Chughtai 15). These lines show that this intimate relationship is filtered through the innocent gaze of a young female narrator, whose childlike misunderstanding of the "shaking quilt" introduces ambiguity and shields the text from censorship (Chughtai 15).

Repression and Sexuality:

Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* exposes how repression shapes female sexuality within the *zenana*. Using Freud's framework of repression and taboo, Begum Jaan's neglected desire emerges through her intimate bond with Rabbu. The narrator describes the suffocating space

of Begum Jaan's room, where "the quilt gave a jerk as though an elephant was trying to wriggle beneath it" (Chughtai 15). The quilt thus operates as a symbolic image of hidden but insistent female yearning. Through a Lacanian lens, Begum Jaan's sexuality lies beyond the boundaries of the "law of the father," since her husband prefers the company of "young boys" over her (Chughtai 14). In this sense, Irigaray's critique of phallocentrism and Cixous's advocacy for feminine modes of desire become relevant, for Begum Jaan's embodied intimacy with Rabbu suggests what Cixous identifies as "the voice of her body in writing" (Cixous 880). In that single line, Chughtai captures how the most ordinary domestic items can bear extraordinary emotional weight. The quilt's swaying shadow becomes a narrative device that bridges memory, desire, resistance, and silence. Chughtai's use of a child narrator thus becomes a narrative strategy that both critiques and circumvents conservative taboos. Garishma Trivedi notes that the narrator's partial understanding mirrors societal discomfort with acknowledging female desire: "The partial knowledge of the child reflects the cultural refusal to acknowledge women's sexual needs" (Trivedi 49). Hence, Chughtai's treatment of lesbianism is radical because it foregrounds women's sexuality not as an appendage to male desire, but as an independent force that resists patriarchal control. By placing lesbian intimacy at the heart of her story, she unsettled literary, social, and legal norms in colonial India, making *Lihaaf* a foundational text for both feminist and queer literary studies.

Similarly, in *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir asserts, "Woman is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute she is the Other." (de Beauvoir 6) This concept finds a strong echo in *Lihaaf*, where Begum Jaan is portrayed as a marginal figure within her own marriage. She functions more as a possession or adornment than as an equal partner, devoid of agency or emotional fulfillment. In contrast,

Nawab Sahab enjoys complete freedom, reinforcing the patriarchal structure that confines women to the private, invisible realm of the home. De Beauvoir further states, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (de Beauvoir 283). And this idea of Beauvoir is reflected in Begum Jaan’s personal journey. Her gradual realization of emotional and physical deprivation, followed by her awakening of desire in her relationship with Rabbu, reveals how the identity of “woman” is not innate but shaped by experience, repression, and resistance to normative gender roles.:

“It is we sinful women

Who are not awed by the grandeur of those

Who wear gowns

Who don’t sell our lives

Who don’t bow our heads...” (Farooqui 5)

Moreover, Shagufta Naaz Farooqui uses this poetic invocation which functions as a feminist manifesto, asserting the necessity of both physical and spiritual self-fulfillment for women in patriarchal societies. She further points out how our society is filled with gender bias as she believes that from very young age we have been taught about how men and women are different. Therefore, she quotes that “Sex is natural but gender is socio cultural and manmade” (Farooqui 5). Together, these insights underscore Chughtai’s portrayal of repressed female desire not merely as an act of transgression, but as a crucial element in the broader struggle for personal identity, self-realization, and resistance to oppressive social norms.

Violence and Resistance:

In contrast, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* does not dwell on suppressed desire but rather on the body as a terrain of both violence and resistance. Arrested and raped in custody, Dopdi Mehjen confronts the officer Senanayak by refusing the role of a passive victim: "Dopdi, naked, stands with her hands on her hips. She turns to Senanayak and says: You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again?" (Devi 22). Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject clarifies this moment, as Dopdi's violated body becomes that which society attempts to deny or exclude, yet she compels its visibility, transforming abjection into defiance. In Kristeva's formulation, the abject is that which "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 4), and Dopdi embodies this disturbance. Similarly, Irigaray's emphasis on redefining the female body undermines patriarchal structures of shame and honor, since Dopdi asserts her body as an instrument of resistance rather than submission. Devi's "*Draupadi*" focuses on Dopdi Mehjen, a tribal woman from the Santhal community who is targeted, captured, and brutally assaulted by the state. Rather than being defeated, Dopdi refuses to submit or show shame. In the story's climactic moment, she boldly faces her rapist, Senanayak, naked and unashamed, declaring, "What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you silence me?" (Devi 23). This is a symbolic reversal of the Mahabharata's *vastraharan* scene, where Draupadi is disrobed but saved by divine intervention. In Devi's retelling, there is no divine savior—Dopdi saves herself, using her body not as a symbol of victimhood but as a weapon of defiance (Spivak 184). Furthermore, *Draupadi* presents resistance in a more direct and violent register. The eponymous character, Dopdi Mehjen, is a member of the Santhal tribe and an apolitical insurgent. After being captured and subjected to repeated sexual assaults by the state forces, she does not exhibit shame or helplessness. Rather, she uses her violated body as a statement of protest: "You asked them to make me up, don't you want to see how they made me?" (Devi 36). Her laughter, her bleeding lips, and her refusal to cover herself confront the institutional forces of patriarchy and state violence with a power they cannot comprehend or

neutralize. The symbolic and political weight of Dopdi's act cannot be overstated. In refusing to clothe herself, she refuses to participate in the system that objectifies and subjugates her. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", addresses the complexities of representation and voice in the postcolonial context. Draupadi seems to answer Spivak's question with a resounding yes: Dopdi speaks not with words, but with her body—a body that bears the scars of violence yet becomes the site of resistance (Spivak 308).

In *Lihaaf* (The Quilt), Ismat Chughtai presents female sexuality especially homoerotic desire as a way of resisting social norms that prioritize heterosexual marriage. Ignored by her husband, Begum Jan finds comfort and intimacy with her maid, Rabbo. Even though their relationship is shown indirectly through hints and metaphors, it still disrupts traditional domestic expectations by showing that women's desire can exist outside of male control (Chughtai 43). In contrast, Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi* depicts sexuality as openly political. Dopdi Meihen, a tribal woman who is assaulted by state forces, refuses to accept the shame that patriarchy tries to impose on her. By standing naked before her oppressors, she turns her violated body into a symbol of resistance, directly challenging their authority. Unlike Begum Jan, whose rebellion is hidden and private, Dopdi's defiance is public and explicit, showing how the female body itself can be used as a weapon of protest (Devi 23; Spivak 184).

“What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you cloth me again? Are you a man?... There isn't a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on. Kounter me – come on, Kounter me?” (Devi 23).

Dopdi's act of standing naked before her oppressors transforms what is conventionally seen as a symbol of shame into a radical gesture of defiance. Instead of accepting clothing as the marker of her honor, she rejects it, thereby refusing to conform to

the patriarchal logic that ties women's dignity to modesty and bodily concealment. Her refusal unsettles the very system that sought to discipline her through sexual violence. In confronting her captors without shame, Dopdi shifts the burden of disgrace onto them, exposing the brutality and corruption that underpin their masculinity. Her words and actions suggest that the so-called "men" who assaulted her are stripped of their moral and social authority, revealing masculinity itself as hollow when it is built on domination. By transforming her violated body into a weapon of protest, Dopdi not only reclaims agency but also unmasks the complicity of the state and its military in sustaining patriarchal oppression. What was intended as an act to silence and subjugate her becomes the very act that amplifies her resistance, converting victimhood into an unmistakable assertion of power.

Together, these stories demonstrate that female sexuality is not simply about submission but can also be a powerful form of resistance whether through Begum Jan's secret challenge to domestic patriarchy in Lihaaf or through Dopdi's bold physical defiance against state violence in Draupadi. The contrast between Begum Jan and Dopdi Mehjen is not merely one of context-urban vs. rural, upper class vs. tribal-but of the mode and magnitude of resistance. Chughtai's Begum Jan represents a quieter, internalized struggle. Her resistance is confined within the private sphere of the bedroom, shielded by the quilt. It is a resistance born of emotional starvation and sociocultural repression, leading her to forge alternative pathways to emotional and physical intimacy. However, this resistance remains ambiguous and ultimately constrained by her dependency on a male-dominated social structure.

Dopdi, enacts a public, physical, and unequivocal defiance. Her rebellion is not just against patriarchy but against the very institutions that enforce systemic violence against the marginalized. Her naked body is not an object of shame, but a site of protest. This inversion of the traditional narrative of female shame is a radical feminist statement, asserting that the

experience of sexual violence, while brutalizing, does not rob the victim of agency or voice. On the other hand Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* ("The Quilt") offers a searing critique of patriarchal norms entrenched within feudal domestic life. Begum Jan, the central figure, endures emotional and sexual neglect within a wealthy household her marriage confines her to isolation rather than intimacy. The narrative subtly but powerfully portrays her clandestine intimacy with her maid, Rabbo, suggesting a radical, coded resistance to the heteronormative and class-bound expectations of marriage (Chughtai 43). Critics also highlight how Chughtai uses the metaphor of domestic furniture most notably the quilt as a symbol of suppression. While it ostensibly conceals, it also becomes a site of subversion, enabling the quiet assertion of female desire within the supposedly private, "safe" space of the home. Through this narrative conceit, Chughtai dismantles the myth that the domestic sphere is inherently nurturing or benign, revealing it instead as a terrain of oppression that must be quietly, and courageously, dismantled from within.

In stark contrast, Mahasweta Devi casts patriarchy as an instrument of institutional and state violence in her short story *Draupadi*. The tribal protagonist, Dopdi Mejhen, is hunted by armed state forces, arrested, and subjected to sexual violence. Yet, she defies the expected victimhood by standing naked before her oppressors refusing to clothe herself and reclaiming her body as a site of political rebellion. Scholars note that her act of naked defiance is more than personal courage it symbolically disrupts the authority of the industrial-military complex. Devi masterfully subverts mythic narratives (like the Mahabharata's *Draupadi*) to critique contemporary socio-political structures that wield violence against marginalized communities. Dopdi's nakedness becomes an unignorable statement, a refusal to be silenced, and a radical assertion of selfhood in the face of systemic erasure.

Scholars such as Spivak have noted how Dopdi "writes the subaltern body in refusal" and reclaims her narrative from the state and patriarchy alike (Spivak 308). On the other hand, Chughtai's *Lihaaf* depicts the emotional and sexual abandonment of Begum Jaan within a loveless marriage, pushing her into an intimate relationship with her female servant, Rabbo. Through the veil of a child narrator, Chughtai subtly reveals Begum Jaan's sexual needs and the deeply gendered double standards of morality that surround female desire (Chughtai 14). As Shagufta Naj argues, *Lihaaf* challenges "the moral hypocrisy of middle-class society, which constructs rigid boundaries around women's sexuality while allowing men far greater freedom" (Naj 88). Furthermore, Naj points out how the use of a child's perspective allows Chughtai to bypass censorship while exposing the silencing of women's inner lives (Naj 92). The contrast between the two stories lies in their method of resistance: where Dopdi becomes a public site of protest against colonial and patriarchal violence, Begum Jaan's rebellion is inscribed in the private, domestic realm. Yet, both narratives converge in their critique of systemic gendered oppression and their articulation of female subjectivity through the body—whether through silence, sexuality, or defiance. These texts exemplify how feminist resistance can manifest both as an explosive act of defiance and as a subtle subversion of domestic roles, underscoring literature's capacity to illuminate the varied textures of women's struggles in patriarchal societies.

Through the lens of Marxism :

Mahasweta Devi and Ismat Chughtai both foreground the entanglement of class, labor, and gender, which makes their works particularly fruitful for Marxist and materialist feminist analysis. Devi's fiction lays bare the harsh realities of bonded servitude, tribal displacement, and feudal oppression. In *Draupadi*, Dopdi Meihen is not only a victim of state violence but also a figure of the rural proletariat, her body marked as the primary site where

both class exploitation and gendered subjugation converge. Similarly, Rudali portrays women from the lowest rungs of society professional mourners whose grief is commodified for elite ceremonial practices. Such narratives emphasize the inseparability of class oppression and patriarchy. Viewed through the lens of materialist feminism, Devi reveals how women's subordination must be situated within the larger structures of feudal, capitalist, and state power (Vogel 132). By contrast, Chughtai, writing from within the milieu of elite Muslim households, discloses another facet of the nexus between class and patriarchy. In *Lihaaf*, she exposes the paradox of privilege, demonstrating that Begum Jaan's wealth does not shield her from neglect or confinement within a patriarchal marriage. The presence of servants in the *zenana*, juxtaposed with Begum Jaan's unfulfilled longing for *Rabbu*, illustrates how gendered hierarchies are intertwined with class stratification. Materialist feminism, which insists upon locating women's oppression within their social and economic contexts, helps to clarify the convergence of privilege, domestic labor, and sexual repression in Chughtai's fiction (Delphy 45). Taken together, Devi and Chughtai show that women's subjugation cannot be sufficiently explained through cultural or psychological categories alone. Rather, it is structured within material relations of labor, exploitation, and class division. While Devi underscores the dispossession of tribal women as workers and insurgents against state authority, Chughtai brings into focus the contradictions between wealth and patriarchal confinement within elite households. Both affirm a central principle of Marxist feminism: women's oppression is inseparable from their material and economic conditions.

The two texts, though shaped by distinct socio-political contexts, converge in their critique of systemic violence against women and their deployment of female sexuality as a site of resistance. In *Lihaaf*, repression emerges within the bourgeois Muslim household, where social respectability demands silence around female desire. Begum Jaan's relationship

with Rabbo functions as both a coping mechanism and a transgression, revealing the hidden costs of compulsory heterosexuality and domestic servitude. Trivedi observes that such relationships manifest in "unexpected and stigmatized ways" when society denies legitimate avenues for women's self-expression (Trivedi 51). Draupadi, by contrast, situates female oppression within a broader context of tribal marginalization and state-sponsored violence. Dopdi's body, though subjected to sexual violence, becomes the ultimate site of protest, reconfiguring trauma into political power. Nandini Chandra terms this transformation a "counter-aesthetic of pain," wherein the violated female body subverts dominant narratives of victimhood and instead articulates dissent (Chandra 63).

Theoretical frameworks such as Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminism lend depth to both narratives. De Beauvoir's assertion that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (de Beauvoir 267) resonates strongly in Lihaaf, where Begum Jaan is socially constructed into a passive, ornamental wife whose personhood is defined entirely by patriarchal norms. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further illuminates how Begum Jaan's non-normative desire constitutes an act of gender disobedience-disrupting the performative scripts of heteronormativity (Butler 25). While In Draupadi, postcolonial and subaltern theory, particularly Spivak's interrogation of whether the subaltern can speak, is essential to understanding Dopdi's resistance. Her silence is not submission, but refusal; her nakedness not shame, but confrontation. This inversion of expected gender roles and narrative tropes illustrates how subaltern women reclaim agency through radical embodiment. In sum, while Draupadi enacts a visceral, political defiance and Lihaaf performs a quieter, intimate subversion, both stories resist patriarchal inscription upon the female body. They differ in method and milieu-tribal insurgency versus middle-class domesticity-but coalesce in their feminist project to redefine female agency through narrative and

embodiment. By positioning the body as both a site of control and rebellion, Devi and Chughtai illuminate the multifaceted ways in which women navigate, endure, and resist systemic oppression. Moreover, Chughtai intentionally concludes *Lihaaf* with an unresolved finale—the story stops short of revealing what really happens beneath the quilt, leaving readers hovering in interpretive ambiguity. This choice isn't accidental; it underscores the themes of concealed desire and subversive resistance, allowing the hidden to possess its own potency. In avoiding a tidy resolution, Chughtai transforms reading into an active experience one where the audience must imagine, question, and reflect rather than passively absorb. While on the contrary, Mahasweta Devi wraps up *Draupadi* with a powerful, unambiguous gesture of defiance. After enduring brutal sexual assault at the hands of state forces, Dopdi Mejhen stands naked—her body marked by violence but unashamed—before her captors. This act inverts the intended power dynamics: a body meant to symbolize her suppression becomes the ultimate instrument of resistance.

To conclude, both Ismat Chughtai and Mahasweta Devi foreground the body as a contested terrain where power, discipline, and resistance are inscribed. Michel Foucault's theorization of the body as an object of surveillance and regulation provides a useful framework: "the body is directly involved in a political field" where it becomes the site of control, subjugation, and the production of docile subjects (Foucault 25). Yet, as Judith Butler emphasizes, the very same regulatory frameworks that discipline the body also create possibilities for resistance, for "the body is not merely matter but a continual and productive re-signification of norms" (Butler 33). As In Chughtai's *Lihaaf*, the female body emerges not as an openly political site but as one marked by desire, repression, and taboo. Begum Jaan's unfulfilled sexuality, displaced into her intimacy with Rabbu, dramatizes how women's

bodies are policed within heteronormative patriarchal systems. The quilt functions symbolically as both a cover and a revelation of lesbian desire, underscoring the tension between surveillance and secrecy in the zenana. Here, the female body resists not through overt confrontation but through covert rearticulation of desire outside patriarchal sanction. On the other hand, Devi's Draupadi presents the body as the most direct instrument of political resistance. Dopdi Meihen's nakedness after custodial rape refuses the disciplinary logic of shame that the state and military apparatus attempt to impose. By standing unclothed before Senanayak, she weaponizes her violated body as a site of defiance, subverting the notion of victimhood. In Foucauldian terms, Dopdi transforms her body from an object of control into a locus of counter-power. Butler's insights on performativity further illuminate this moment: Dopdi resignifies nakedness conventionally associated with vulnerability as a radical gesture of defiance, thereby unsettling the gendered codes of humiliation. Together, Chughtai and Devi both demonstrate how the female body functions within a matrix of power that both disciplines and constrains, yet simultaneously harbors subversive potential. Whether through the clandestine expression of desire in Lihaaf or through the radical exposure of defiance in Draupadi, both texts show that women's bodies are not passive surfaces of inscription but active sites of resistance against patriarchal and state authority.

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