



Roots Torn: The Rohingya's Struggle Between Land, Identity, and Survival

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Abstract

The Rohingya community of Myanmar is considered the most persecuted community in the entire world, which is not only denied citizenship and Indigenous rights but also exiled from their ancestral home by their own government and military. One of the main reasons behind this is the religious minority of the Rohingya community. However, the geopolitical conditions of the Rakhine State and the Myanmar government's constant greed to take over the natural resources of that state so that they can continue state-led development in their ancestral lands are another important mechanism that is responsible for conducting inhuman violence against the Rohingya people. As a result, Rohingya persecution, which has been viewed as an issue of Political or human rights violation, is also an issue of ecofeminism and environmental justice, and it has remained unnoticed in academia for a long period. Against this backdrop, this paper wishes to explore how the Myanmar government, with its patriarchal, reductionist, and colonial mindset, has exploited both the ecosystem and the Rohingya community's marginalized identity so that it can diminish the social, political, cultural, and spiritual identity of the Rohingya community while extracting their land, livelihood, and identity. Using theories from Discard studies, ecofeminism, and environmental justice, this paper argues that the Myanmar government has historically set a narrative against the Rohingya community as waste, unwanted, or inhuman, so that they can grab and control their lands and identity. At the same time, this paper will critically examine how the Myanmar government has commodified land for state-led development agendas.

Keywords: *Rohingya Persecution; Ecofeminism; Environmental Justice; Geopolitical Exploitation; Marginalized Identity; Discard Studies; State-led Development*

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Exiled from home, restricted mobility, denied citizenship and Indigenous identity, forced exodus, excluded from their own environment and ecosystem - this is the lived reality of the Rohingya, a Muslim Indigenous minority group of Rakhine, Myanmar. Because of the increased persecution, almost 1.7 million Rohingya fled to Bangladesh and other neighboring countries, particularly India, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand, so that they could survive this intense violence and conflict (Milton et al., 2017). Although Rohingya people have been living in the Rakhine state of Myanmar since the 8th century, during the citizenship law of 1882, they were denied as citizens of Myanmar and as an Indigenous community simultaneously by the Myanmar government (Storai, 2017). The violence, oppression, and persecution against the Rohingya community became so intense that they had to leave their home, their livelihood, their cultural identity, and their environment. One of the main reasons behind this increased oppression has always been the religious minority of the Rohingya people in the Buddhist majority. However, along with the ethnic and religious aspects of the Rohingya conflict, the geopolitics of the Rakhine state, and the dualism and reductionist mindset of the Myanmar government have also been important contentions behind this issue. Rohingya people living in the Rakhine state were surrounded by many natural resources. The Myanmar government's fascination with occupying this geo-economics and the lands of Rakhine state has played a crucial role in continuing inhuman violence against the ethnic community (Debnath et al., 2022). However, this reductionist, colonial, and patriarchal mindset of the Myanmar government has always been unnoticed in the academic arena.

This forced exile has made the Rohingya community vulnerable in different aspects. They had to leave the place where they were born, lived most of their lives, and maintained sustainable livelihoods. As a result, for the Rohingya, displacement was not only a loss of land or their tangible space but also the separation from the environment, which forms a core part of their socio-religious and economic realities. Being one of the Indigenous communities of Myanmar, the Rohingya people were living harmoniously with their surroundings and utilizing most of their natural resources. However, geopolitical greed and the patriarchal, reductionist, and colonial mindset of the Myanmar government not only destroyed this cultural and spiritual bond with their environment but also proved how people in power can systematically dominate both nature and marginalized communities. At the same time, whenever a certain community is displaced from their land or they are denied their identity, the whole world considers it an issue of political or social injustice or the violation of human rights. However, this paper aims to depict that, whenever an Indigenous community is being uprooted from their land, it is not only a political issue but also an issue of eco-feminism and environmental justice focusing on how this exploitation of Rohingya people aligns with ecofeminism because ecofeminism as a discourse critiques both colonial and capitalist frameworks that commodify land and treat both ecosystems and marginalized communities as disposable.

1.2 Objective of This Paper

This paper examines the Rohingya refugee crisis through an ecofeminist lens, arguing that the patriarchal and colonial mindset of the Myanmar government, along with the power they hold, has produced systemic oppression against the environment and the Rohingya people. Through an examination of theories from Discard Studies, Val Plumwood's Dualism, Violence on our body, and Violence on our land, the study demonstrates how disposability politics expose the environment and underprivileged groups to exploitation. To support an integrative approach to justice that addresses social and environmental injustices, the study aims to show how patriarchal relations abuse the land and dehumanize the Rohingya as "unwanted."

1.3 Methodology

The methodology that this paper follows is descriptive analysis. Scholarly articles, newspaper articles, government and non-government organization policies, statistical data collected from reliable online sources and verified websites, and relevant books have been used as important perspectives and analytical sources for the study.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The History of the Rohingya

Although the Government of Myanmar has been consistently denying the citizenship and Indigenous rights of the Rohingya community, they have been living in the Rakhine state since 788 A.D (Sohel, 2017). According to an International Policy Digest article, —Rohingya Muslims, however, are native to the state of Rohang⁴, officially known as Rakhine or Arakan” (Sohel, 2017). The people of the Arakan state converted to Islam during the 9th to 14th centuries by the influence of the Arab traders who sailed there from Bengal (Ullah, 2011). In 1784, the then army of Burman King Bodawpaya captured Arakan and started ruling it. However, the rule of the king was so tyrannical that many Rohingya people fled to Bangladesh to save their lives. The tension between the Rohingya and Buddhist people of Myanmar became prominent during the Second World War when the Rohingya people supported the British rulers, whereas the Buddhist people supported the Japanese invaders with the hope that this would end the British colonial rule in Myanmar (Hasnat & Ahmed, 2023). Because of the historical subordination and ongoing violence, the Rohingya demanded from the British that they should be granted an independent status of the Arakan state while granting the independence of Burma. However, the British rejected this demand of the Rohingya people and declared it a province of a newly independent Myanmar in 1948 (Sohel, 2017). As a result, conflict and rivalry were always present between the Buddhist and Muslim Rohingya, where the Rohingya always acted as a rebel community and the government always wished to suppress them through violence and denying their rights.

In 1962, Myanmar was taken over by the Burma Socialist Programme Party under the leadership of General Ne Win, who immediately got rid of the country’s constitution and created a military regime. Like most other dictators, General Ne Win promoted fierce nationalism based on the country’s Buddhist identity and stigmatized the minor Muslim ethnic Rohingya as the common enemy of the country (Zarni & Cowley, 2014). As a result, in 1978, a violent, large-scale crackdown was targeted toward the Rohingya, which is known as Operation Naga Min or Operation Dragon King. After that, the Burmese government launched a campaign to arrest all the illegal migrants of the Arakan region, which led to panic among the Rohingya people. Because of the panic and increased torture, almost 200,000 people fled to Bangladesh, leaving everything behind (Leider, 2018). In 1982, when the government passed the Citizenship Act, which recognized 135 ethnic and Indigenous groups. The Rohingya, living in the Arakan state for hundreds of years and with a population of almost 1 million, were not included in that list and became stateless (Abdul, 2020). In 1991, Myanmar’s military launched another campaign named “Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation,” where more than 250,000 Rohingya refugees fled from Myanmar and arrived in Bangladesh, living in temporary camps (Grundy-Warr & Wong, 1997; Coutts, 2005). Along with the violence, killing, forceful exile, and rape, the Rohingya people were systematically excluded and denied different opportunities as well. For instance, they were denied any kind of jobs, and most of the Islamic institutes, schools, and other Islamic organizations were closed in the Rohingya villages. Most of their lands, homes, and other assets were confiscated by the Myanmar military, and they were distributed to the Buddhist people of Myanmar. Many Muslim leaders were exiled from their homes

because of their religious identity, and the Buddhists were incited to kill the Rohingya Muslims (Jacques, 2005).

Most of the attacks toward the Rohingya community were defined as safeguarding and protecting Myanmar from the Rohingya by the government, which led them to conduct another extremely inhumane campaign against the Rohingyas, which eventually led to an act of genocide and mass violence in Myanmar in 2012. In this attack, almost 200.000-300.000 Rohingyas fled from Myanmar to many neighboring countries, including Bangladesh, India, and Saudi Arabia. In the name of the “cleansing effort of terrorist agents,” the Myanmar Military conducted another brutal campaign in 2017, which led to more than 750.000 Rohingya, mostly women and children, leaving their homes so that they can survive these brutal killings, torture, and rape (Nasution, 2018). According to the Islamic Human Rights Commission (2005), the forms of torture that have been cited for the last three hundred years follow extra-judicial killings, torture, rape and sexual violence, two-child rule, political arrests, and detentions, forced eviction, forced relocation, destruction of livelihoods, and confiscations of land and resources, firing in homes and business areas, forced labor, child labor, human trafficking, herding people into fenced stockades, destruction mosques, and restriction on freedom of movement, assembly, association, expression, and religion. As a result, almost 1.7 million Rohingya people are currently living in Cox’s Bazar, which is the largest sea beach in Bangladesh, destroying the ecology and natural beauty of the area. To make room for campers and firewood, trees have been felled, reducing wildlife habitat and raising the risk of landslides and soil erosion, particularly during the monsoon season (Sadat et al., 2022). Water resources, both in terms of quantity and quality, are under extreme strain due to the camps’ huge population. Local water bodies and ecosystems have been impacted by pollution from human activity and excessive groundwater extraction (Mitu et al., 2022).

3. Discussion

3.1 Displaced and Dispossessed: The Ecofeminist Lens on Rohingya Marginalization and Myanmar’s Patriarchal Exploitation

The ethnoreligious and nationalist conflict between the Rohingya and Buddhist people of Myanmar is one of the most prominent reasons for the forced exile of the Rohingya people from their homes and surroundings. However, the geopolitics and the patriarchal mindset of the Myanmar government are other important factors that led the Myanmar government to exile the Rohingya community from their homes, and this aspect has remained unnoticeable in most cases. According to Debnath et al. (2022), the Rakhine State is the eighth most important province in Myanmar in terms of natural resources, economy, and business. At the same time, this state is equally important for conducting business in the border areas because it is the meeting point for three countries- India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. As a result, the Rakhine state is largely known as Myanmar’s “Western Gate.” However, because of the hostile relationship between the Myanmar government, military, and Rohingya community and the injustice they faced, the latter was always disinterested in letting the government peacefully do these trades. As a result, the government always wanted to occupy these lands so that they would not face any discrepancies and strengthen their relationship with foreign countries. At the same time, the natural resources of Rakhine province have always been the Myanmar government’s focus due to their strategic and economic value. In the year 2004, large gas fields were discovered in Rakhine state, where China wished to access Myanmar’s energy reserves by developing oil and gas pipelines. In the year 2013, finally, the transit route passed through those areas where the tension between the Rohingya community and the Myanmar military was quite prevalent. Because of this project, thousands of Rohingya people were forcefully exiled from their lands. At the same time, forced labor became quite common in this area, and the government bought many ancestral lands of the Rohingya community at a very cheap rate to build

the pipeline, where the Rohingya people had to sign perplexing and complicated contracts written in a non-native language (Environmental Justice Atlas, 2019). Being surrounded by many forests and mountains, the Rohingya community's livelihood is mainly dependent on the natural resources, and they have been properly utilizing these resources for a long time. However, the government always argued that the Rohingya, being the illegal immigrants to their land, do not have any right to use these natural resources, and they cannot solely use these resources as well because other ethnic and Indigenous communities have the right to use these resources as collective goods. As a result, it is illegal for the Rohingya community to use these natural resources (Debnath et al., 2022). Rohingya communities, who have been living in this province for thousands of years, do not have access to their own lands and resources.

The denial of the Myanmar government to let the Rohingya people use the natural resources and forcefully displacing them from their lands shows how the government, with the help of the military, systematically marginalized this Indigenous community. At the same time, a "masculinist" approach to resource management can be seen in the tactics of the Myanmar government, as they provided full access to their resources to China while disrupting the lives of the Rohingya community. For most of the patriarchal governments, the rights of the Indigenous communities and the protection of natural resources and environments have always been secondary to economic and political agendas. As a result, they always prioritized industrial development, resource extraction, and geopolitical strategies over ecological preservation and the safeguarding of Indigenous cultural and territorial rights. According to the Ecofeminist lens, the power and hierarchical structure that holds the patriarchy or the government often stigmatizes the marginal communities and their ecosystem. At the same time, the way the government expropriated lands through manipulative contracts is another example of how they view lands and resources from a reductionist mindset and often devalues the cultural and spiritual bonds that people share with their lands. As Vandana Shiva criticizes in *Staying Alive* (1988), patriarchal and colonial mindsets will always treat the natural resources and people's spiritual relationship as commodities that need to be commercialized so that so-called modernist development can prevail over everything. The spiritual bond and ecological knowledge that Rohingya people shared with their lands were strategically taken from them in the name of development, while denying their Indigenous identity, which shows not only the patriarchal mindset of the Myanmar government but also their intention of systematic erasure of the Rohingya's cultural and ecological identity. As Rachel Carson (2015) argues, human communities are part of, not separate from, ecological systems; excluding Rohingya people from their surroundings and natural resources is systematic violence towards nature and the community. At the same time, the argument of the Myanmar government about sharing collective goods with other Indigenous communities is equally problematic because this argument perpetuates inequality, considering other Indigenous communities of Myanmar are more important than the Rohingya, which strengthens already existing marginalization and dispossession.

3.2 The Disposability of Rohingya People by the Myanmar Government

In "Discard Studies", Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky (2022) discussed that people who hold power could systematically marginalize certain people and environments simultaneously and categorize them as "waste" to sustain their power. The Myanmar government has used this tactic by uprooting the Rohingya from their home, burning down their villages, denying their citizenship rights and Indigenous identity, and disrupting their once-thriving ecosystem. By disposing of the Rohingya people and forcefully grabbing their lands, the Myanmar government is treating them as waste, unwanted, and disposable, reinforcing religious and ethnic divisions. At the same time, denying their citizenship rights and considering them as the 'Bengali problem' or "illegal immigrants" actually proves how the Government used the waste regime tactics defined by Liboiron and Lepawsky, which are classification,

segregation, and removal, considering Rohingya as the expendable "others" to justify land grabs and resource exploitation.

Classification

The systemic exclusion of the Rohingya started when the Myanmar government classified the Rohingya as the "Bengali Problem" or "Illegal Immigrants" and denied their citizenship rights in 1982. Although they have lived in those lands for thousands of years, this institutional mechanism of classification shows that they are not considered to belong to that land. They have been marked as "disposable" by the government, whereas other Indigenous communities have received their Indigenous status. Also, the Myanmar Military considers the Rohingya villages as disposable spaces because they want to grab these lands so that they can implement those development projects. This classified disposability narrative frames Rohingya villages as unworthy of preservation, enabling their systematic erasure through arson, bulldozing, and confiscation.

Segregation:

Segregation is enacted by confining Rohingya to certain rules and regulations, for instance, they are not allowed to perform their religious activities, their movement is restricted to certain places, they are not allowed to get government jobs, restricted from using their own resources, refrained from getting education or getting married to other communities, and many other segregations based on their race and religion. The power that is being held by the Myanmar government has systematically perpetuated this segregation towards the Rohingya so that they can displace them from their lands and limit their ability to establish themselves as a community within the country. Also. Leveling them as terrorists or fundamentalists essentially helped the government segregate the Rohingya people as a "waste" that is no longer necessary for the country, although the contribution of the Rohingya people is essential for the economy of Myanmar. Along with the Military people, the Myanmar government has used both administrative and discursive power to not only identify the Rohingya people as "waste" but also systematically erase their ideology, culture, and ecological landscape.

Removal

By establishing narratives against the Rohingya community, the removal process was quite easier for the Myanmar government. Violence, killing, rape, forced eviction, forced relocation, destruction of livelihoods, and confiscation of land and resources were some forms of torture that every Rohingya child has been facing since their birth. In 1991, the campaign of the Myanmar military called "Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation" not only forced 250,000 people to flee to Bangladesh but also proved how they systemically reinforced structures of inequality by uprooting the Rohingya from their land and dumping them in Bangladesh (Storai, 2017). Even the name of this operation, "Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation," indicates the depurifying mission that the Myanmar government had rooted, the idea of "cleansing" the nation of an unwanted population. At the same time, it is alarming how people in power often can describe what is pure and what is impure according to their strategy. This process of othering or wasting, expressed through the story of purity and impurity, can be compared to historical patterns in which one group seeks to define another as a threat to national or cultural integrity to justify further genocide, ethnic cleansing, or apartheid. According to Antonio Guterres (2017), the displacement of millions of Rohingya people are being displaced from their home country is a textbook example of "Ethnic Cleansing". Along with that, their flourishing ecosystems have been stripped for extractive purposes by the government. At the same time, the voices of Rohingya elders and their important ecological knowledge about weather, geographical landmarks, and economic productivity have been disregarded and destroyed simultaneously.

3.3 Dualisms and the Erasure of Indigenous Knowledge

Discard Studies and the theory of power lead us to another ecofeminist principle, Val Plumwood's "Dualism," to understand how the power of the Myanmar government can construct the narrative of what is right or wrong and contextualize it with the state's dehumanization of the Rohingya. According to Plumwood (2002), dualistic thinking can rigidly separate and diminish groups by narrating one side as superior and the other as inferior, who is denied every right just because the world devalues their identity. For instance, the dichotomy of man versus nature positions humans as strong, wise, cultural, rational, and the masters of nature while considering nature as passive and a tool that needs to be exploited for the benefit of humans (Ingold, 1987). In the context of the Rohingya, the Myanmar government has always presented itself as the master, reasonable, or progressive while labeling the Rohingya as primitive, chaotic, or unwanted people within their land so that they can carry out this dehumanization process, which ultimately benefited their development agenda. In 1982's Citizenship Act of Myanmar, the government recognized 135 ethnic and Indigenous groups; however, they did not consider the Rohingya as an Indigenous community of Myanmar. Although the population of Rohingya was almost 1 million at that time, they became stateless because of their religious identity in a Buddhist-majority country (Haque, 2017). A study conducted by Sohel (2017) has shown how the Myanmar government and Burmese people perceive the Rohingya people, where a Rohingya boy in the Diplomat magazine 2014, named Mohammad Rafique, said that the Burmese view them simply as animals, non-humans, or aliens. Many corrupted and inflammatory politicians have been referring to the Rohingya people as a "Virus" that needs to be uprooted from their roots to maintain stability in Myanmar. At the same time, influenced by fierce nationalism, Burmese citizens also consider the Rohingya as their common enemy or Bengali problem, who should leave their homes so that the so-called actual citizens of Burma can grab these lands for their benefit. As a result, the Rohingya people, who have been living in those lands for thousands of years and their rich heritage and deep environmental knowledge—stories of fishing techniques, sacred waterways, and intergenerational farming wisdom—were devalued, disregarded, and destroyed by the so-called master Myanmar government.

The dichotomy of citizen vs non-citizen, Buddhist vs Muslim, or productive land vs disposable space helps us to understand how the "hyperseparation" is being carried out in the case of the Rohingya people. This exclusion manifests through the denial of citizenship rights, stripping the Rohingya of legal recognition and rendering them stateless despite their long-standing presence in the region. At the same time, the Myanmar government's overemphasis on erasing the cultural and religious identity of the Rohingya people and its denial of the Rohingya people's contribution to the economy show how they started the "backgrounding" of this dualism. Before widespread persecution, many Rohingya worked as agricultural laborers in Rakhine State, particularly in rice cultivation, fishing, and small-scale farming. However, the Myanmar government has always denied this dependency and devalued all the traditional knowledge that is being preserved and transmitted across generations by the Rohingya people. Moreover, in dualism, the other's only purpose in life is considered to serve the master without having any goal of their own, which can be seen in terms of the relationship between the Rohingya and the Myanmar government as well. For instance, the way the Myanmar government has used the forced labor of the Rohingya people to carry out the state-led development projects in the Rohingya people's ancestral lands shows how they devalued the enriched culture and ecology of the Rohingya community while considering only their economic benefits. Rohingya people's disposable labor, their lands, and resources are being regulated by the Myanmar government as something that belongs to them only, and they can destroy this distinct cultural and ecological agency.

3.4 Land as a Site of Violence

For the Indigenous and ethnic community, land is not just a territory; rather, it is their emotion, source of livelihood, cultural identity, and spiritual connection. However, because of the colonial and patriarchal power, their ancestral land has always been a target, so these lands can be transformed into so-called modernist development projects. In “Violence on the Land, Violence on Our Bodies,” the authors point out that most of the Indigenous communities of the world often face violence based on the systematic exploitation of their lands that devastates both communities and ecosystems, and one of the main reasons behind this is the colonial and patriarchal power structure (Mack & Na’Puti, 2021). In the Rohingya community’s case, the patriarchal mindset of the Myanmar government became so rigid that they tried to possess the Rohingya community’s land by denying their identity as an Indigenous community and by conducting state-driven ethnoreligious violence. In this case, the Rohingya community is not alone. If we consider the case of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe’s fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline, we can see how the patriarchal mindset is forcefully destroying the only water source for the Standing Rock Sioux and other communities, threatening their water supply and sacred sites so that they can transport crude oil (Penn-Roco, 2016). On the one hand, for the Standing Rock Sioux, water is sacred — ‘Mni Wiconi,’ or ‘Water is Life’, on the other hand, for the Rohingya people, their ancestral land, the mangrove forest that is situated beside their villages, forests, mountains, and fertile fields, all these things are sacred and connected to their identity and livelihood. However, their deep understanding of intergenerational environmental stewardship, sacred waterways, and sustainable agriculture is disregarded and pushed off as unrelated to Myanmar’s development goals.

3.5 Hope and Restoration

The Rohingya community’s forced displacement is connected with ecological, social, and political dimensions of marginalization. However, there is still hope to rectify the situation, which can help the Rohingya community restore their life. Everyone perceives the Rohingya people as the destroyers who are hampering the host country; however, the solution can be found only if the world considers the Rohingya people as knowledge-holders. For instance, many Rohingya women have the indigenous and traditional knowledge to sustain agriculture, manage natural resources, and preserve cultural practices. Yet these knowledges are often dismissed or overlooked within dominant development frameworks. As is evident across many cultural contexts, such indigenous knowledges are systematically marginalized, rendered invisible within dominant epistemologies that privilege Western scientific rationality over localized, experiential expertise (Riya et al., 2025). However, recognizing and integrating their ecological and cultural expertise not only validates their identity and resilience but also offers sustainable pathways for rebuilding livelihoods and fostering coexistence in host societies. At the same time, the world needs to recognize their right to return to their homeland so that the Rohingya elderly people can die in their ancestral land, the children do not need to learn about their home country through a textbook, or the Rohingya men and women can tend their familiar fields. Their traditional ecological knowledge needs to be protected so that the ecosystem of knowledge can be passed down to younger generations to uphold their identity. As Caputi in her book “Call Your” Mutha”: A Deliberately Dirty-minded Manifesto for the Earth Mother in the Anthropocene” (2020) points out the importance of reclaiming narratives to resist systems of oppression, our solution lies only if the Rohingya community fight against this systematic oppression and marginalization so that they can restore their history, identity, and relationship with the land. Moreover, in the camps of Cox’s Bazar, community-led environmental initiatives need to be introduced so that they can lead a healthier life until they can go back to their land. According to Uddin (2024), most of the Rohingya people wish to go back to their ancestral lands because, for them, land is not just territory; rather, their memory, culture, and identity are associated with their land. And that home, that land continues to call, even across oceans of displacement.

4. Conclusion

The Rohingya people's forced displacement from their lands is not a simple example of a humanitarian or political crisis. Rather, it is an example of how patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist powers often intersect with each other to commodify land, ecology, and diversity and dehumanize marginalized populations. Although they have faced this systematic violence since their birth, the Rohingya people are determined to return to their ancestral home if the Myanmar government recognizes both their citizenship and Indigenous rights (Mohajan, 2020).

The possible solution for this jeopardized situation can be giving citizenship rights to the Rohingya community as soon as possible, ensuring their return to their home country, and a commitment to not continuing this inhuman violence towards the environment and people of Rakhine state. At the same time, all the state-led development projects that are being carried out in the Rohingya people's lands need to be stopped.

They should be given back their ancestral lands so that they can resume their livelihood by using their sacred lands, transfer their Indigenous, ecological, and cultural knowledge to future generations, and restore their lives.

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