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WOMEN AND NATURE AS TWIN VICTIMS OF EXPLOITATION: AN ECOFEMINIST READING OF KAINE AGARY'S *YELLOW-YELLOW*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interconnected exploitation of women and nature in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* from an ecofeminist perspective. Set against the environmental and socio-economic realities of Nigeria's Niger Delta, the novel portrays the devastating consequences of oil exploration, including polluted rivers, destroyed farmland, declining fishing, poverty, displacement, and the loss of traditional livelihoods. The study adopts a qualitative literary analysis, drawing on ecofeminist criticism to explore how patriarchal, capitalist, and environmental structures jointly contribute to the oppression of women and the degradation of nature. Through the experiences of Zilayefa, Bibi, and other female characters, the novel reveals how environmental destruction increases women's economic dependence and exposes them to sexual exploitation, abandonment, violence, unwanted pregnancy, and emotional trauma. The analysis further shows that Agary symbolically connects the violation of the female body with the exploitation of the land and natural resources of the Niger Delta. Both women and the environment are represented as vulnerable entities controlled, used, and discarded by dominant patriarchal and economic forces. The paper concludes that *Yellow-Yellow* presents the Niger Delta crisis as both an ecological and gendered problem, thereby emphasising the need for environmental justice, female empowerment, economic inclusion, and responsible resource management.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Environmental Degradation, Female Exploitation, Patriarchy, Niger Delta, Oil Exploration, *Yellow-Yellow*.

1 INTRODUCTION

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is richly endowed with crude oil and natural gas resources, which have contributed considerably to the country's economy. However, the extraction of these resources has also produced severe environmental, social, and economic consequences for many communities in the region. Oil spills, gas flaring, polluted rivers, destroyed farmlands, declining fish populations, and the loss of traditional livelihoods have created widespread poverty and displeasure among the people. Despite the wealth generated from the region, many residents continue to live in difficult conditions, creating a painful contradiction between natural abundance and human suffering. This reality has become an important subject in Nigerian literature, especially in works that examine the effects of oil exploitation on both the natural environment and vulnerable members of society.

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* furnishes a compelling representation of these realities through the experiences of Zilayefa, a young woman whose life is defined by environmental destruction, poverty, gender inequality, and exploitation. Her

decision to leave her village for Port Harcourt is strongly influenced by the destruction of her mother's farmland through oil spillage and the increasing difficulty of surviving in a polluted environment. The novel shows that environmental degradation does not affect nature alone; it also damages the economic security, psychological well-being, and prospects of individuals and families. Women are particularly affected because many of them depend directly on farming, fishing, and other natural resources for food, income, and household survival.

Agary further creates a strong connection between the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women. Just as the land and rivers are invaded, polluted, and abandoned by powerful oil interests, the female characters are objectified, used, and discarded by men who possess economic and social power. Zilayefa, her mother Bibi, and other young women in the novel become vulnerable to sexual exploitation, abandonment, unwanted pregnancy, poverty, and emotional trauma. Their dependence on expatriates, oil workers, and wealthy men reflects the scarce economic opportunities available to women in a patriarchal society. The novel therefore presents both the environment and the female body as victims of systems that encourage domination, control, and exploitation.

An ecofeminist reading of *Yellow-Yellow* is appropriate because ecofeminism examines the relationship between the oppression of women and the destruction of nature. It argues that patriarchal and capitalist structures often treat both women and the natural environment as resources to be controlled, exploited, and discarded. In Agary's novel, women's suffering is closely linked to the environmental crisis in the Niger Delta. The destruction of farmlands and rivers increases poverty, while poverty makes women more dependent on men and more exposed to abuse.

This paper therefore examines the representation of women and nature as twin victims of exploitation in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*. It explores how environmental degradation, oil exploitation, patriarchy, poverty, sexual objectification, and economic inequality shape the experiences of the female characters. The paper argues that Agary presents the Niger Delta crisis as both an environmental and gendered problem, thereby emphasising the need for ecological justice, gender equality, and the safeguarding of vulnerable communities.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

A feminist criticism of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* was conducted by Leticia Mbaiver Nyitse to investigate the phenomena of sexual abuse and the denial of economic empowerment of women, as well as their causes in a global economy. She traced the foreign-dominated oil exploration in the Niger Delta to Western patriarchal globalization, where men exploit women. In this context, women are denied identity and excluded from means of livelihood. Nyitse's study summarized *Yellow-Yellow* as a story that "focuses on the life of a young girl of Greek and Nigerian parentage struggling to find an identity in the volatile Port Harcourt" (86). However, the background to this quest for identity is connected to the activities of oil companies, in league with Nigeria's federal government, all within a patriarchal conspiracy to dominate women by taking from them the things that matter most— their future.

For Nyitse, the exploitation of women emanating from a global structure is domesticated at the local level in such a convoluted form that the federal government and the security forces in the country act as compradors to foreign interests (86). The exploitation of natural resources, however, occurs in such an irresponsible manner that the land and water resources of the people are degraded by oil pollution, leading to the destruction of their means of livelihood.

Nyitse concluded that host communities in oil-producing areas have become uninhabitable due to environmentally unfriendly exploratory activities (90). She argued that such manifestations of exploitation, such as sexual abuse and the denial of economic empowerment, are caused by environmental degradation, citing Bibi's experience of sexual exploitation and subsequent economic displacement (90).

However, a limitation in Nyitse's argument is that she seems to overlook the fact that the degraded land and bodies of water were once useful to both men and women when these resources were in their pristine state. Since these were the only resources available to the entire community, if their degradation affected women, it also affected every member of the community. The fact that the Amanaowei and his Council of Elders participated in the exploitation of the villagers does not negate the fact that the majority of the male population in the village also suffered from the impact of resource depletion as the women did. Nyitse's scholarship, therefore, becomes limited as it seeks to raise awareness of the plight of one gender to the exclusion of the other. No solution based on such a one-sided presentation of an otherwise universal problem can be viable. This study, therefore, takes a more inclusive look at inter-gender relationships in the context of oil-induced crises.

Another feminist criticism of Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is that of Eten Dien Simon. Simon adopted a bifocal perspective to examine the unfortunate condition of women in Agary's novel and to expose the exclusion of Niger Delta women from the benefits of oil extraction. According to Simon, "Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* situates itself within the Niger Delta discourse as well as the polemics surrounding the region" (157). For him, the Niger Delta discourse involves the

narrative of deprivation of environmental and economic rights in an environment of abundance, and the suffering and resistance it generates as its consequences (157).

In explaining the predicaments of females, Simon held that women struggle with oppression in the form of sexual abuse, female circumcision, rape, prostitution, and forced marriages (158). As a product of a biracial illicit relationship, Zilayefa, the protagonist of the novel, faces racial prejudice, with biracial children being called derogatory names such as “ashawo pikin,” “born throwaway,” “father unknown,” “African profit,” and “mammy water” (Simon 159). An important aspect of Simon’s article is his discussion of the ecological problems depicted in *Yellow-Yellow*. Before the much-recited degradation of Binaebi’s farmland and surrounding areas at the opening of the novel, as Zilayefa recalls and Simon highlights, the viability of the land had been declining year after year due to seasonal yield losses. Similarly, the village gradually lost aquatic creatures due to oil spills, acid rain, and gas flares (Simon 159).

Simon also commented on Binaebi’s self-denial to ensure that Zilayefa (Yellow) accomplished what she could not, linking this gesture to Sembene Ousmane’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, where women sold their valuables to support their families (Simon 160). However, Simon did not relate this experience to any liberal model and did not explore inter-gender relationships in a positive context. These areas of scholarship fall within the scope of the present research.

Similarly, Chika Ugwu examined Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow* from environmental and religious perspectives. By exploring concepts from ecology, eco-criticism, and religion, Ugwu identified ecological degradation as a global issue, a reality vividly represented in the novels she analyzed, including Agary’s *Yellow-Yellow*. Ugwu found that the most glaring problem in *Yellow-Yellow* is the mindless abuse of land and water resources (285). She also observed that characters in *Yellow-Yellow* are forced into crimes such as abducting oil company workers for ransom, prostitution, and pimping to earn a livelihood (286). Ugwu argued that the crises and heavy losses depicted in *Yellow-Yellow* (and Isidore Okpewho’s *The Tides*) are acts of retributive justice against people who subvert the natural course (289). She concluded that so long as people engage in unethical exploitation of natural resources, such crises will persist (289). Ugwu’s argument shows that the crisis in oil-producing communities transcends resource exploitation and involves a complex web of interconnected issues (296). It is safe to conclude that Ugwu pursued her stated purpose well, but she did not include inter-gender issues in her analysis. This gap is where the present study comes in.

Another incisive examination of *Yellow-Yellow* is that of Okachukwu Onuah Wosu in his contribution to the scholarship on Agary’s novel. Wosu approached the work through the lens of African eco-critical theory and postcolonial theory to highlight issues of environmental destruction, infrastructural neglect, betrayal, and youth restiveness as depicted in *Yellow-Yellow*. He identified oil politics as a key factor in the ecological imperialism and subsequent tension portrayed in Agary’s novel (60). He detailed the depletion of resources that ultimately led to the loss of the environment and the community’s main sources of livelihood. The farms and aquatic life in Zilayefa’s community were destroyed without any compensation. The proceeds from these resources, located in the oil-rich region, were directed to the development of other areas in the country that did not produce oil (61).

Wosu further argued that the continuous abuse of the Niger Delta’s resources and environment, coupled with oil politics, bred youth restiveness as they felt marginalized. This led the boys in the novel to join militant groups, while the girls turned to prostitution with oil workers (64). Wosu also implicated the government, oil companies, and people from oil-rich communities who either worsen the problems or betray their fellow victims (65). He cited the case of the traditional ruler, Amanaowei, who had received compensation money for the villagers but shared it with his council of elders as an example of such betrayal. Additionally, Wosu highlighted infrastructural neglect as lamented by Zilayefa in the novel, noting that the skills acquisition programs organized by the government never reached Zilayefa’s village. He concluded that the environmental crises plaguing the Niger Delta are the result of the devastation meted out to the region’s landscape and its people. It is evident from this review that Wosu did not explore the novel’s potential for a liberal ecofeminist model among its female and male characters. This study aims to bridge that gap in the scholarship.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Ecofeminism

As many tenets evolved in feminism, theorists also considered connections between the treatment of the environment and the treatment of women in patriarchal societies and embedded these concerns within a frame that became ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is a term coined by the French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne highlight the connections between the injustice to women and nature facilitated by patriarchal ideologies. Ecofeminism is anchored to the dualisms instituted by patriarchal systems, which have taken root in many cultures. Thus, the human/nature, man/woman, and other dualisms subsisted as scholars tried to explore the theoretical frame. Ecofeminism identifies links between the abuse of nature and the abuse of women by patriarchal structures.

Ecofeminism is connected to ecological criticism, and the basic ideologies that underscore the theory are the linking of female exploitation to environmental abuse, and the claim that women engage in environmentally sustainable practices because their nurturing abilities make them closer to nature than men. Scholars like Alison Archambault (19), Richard Twine (35), and Lawrence Buell (25) agree that the logic of domination is central to the concern of ecofeminism. Hence, they see ecofeminism as a protest against a patriarchal system that exploits women and the environment, turning them into victims of patriarchal violence, which manifests in different forms. Chun Ling describes ecofeminism as “a feminism with inclinations to ecology” (67). In literature, ecofeminism focuses on examining the representation of women and the environment in literary texts, portraying them as victims of exploitation and violence in a male-dominated society. Some of the promoters of this movement include Rosemary Redford Ruether, Ivone Gebera, Alice Walker, Sallie McFague, Luisah Teish, Sun Ai Lee Park, Monica Sjoo, Greta Gaard, Andy Smith, Carol Adams, Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, Shamara Shantu-Riley, and Vandana Shiva.

3.2 Women and Nature as Twin Victims of Exploitation: An Ecofeminist Reading of Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

The plight of women, children and ordinary people in social circles, especially in conflict situations, has been the major concern of feminist and critical ecofeminist theorists. While some theorists and critics establish links between women and non-human nature on account of women's nurturing abilities, empathy and reproductive capacity which men cannot share, others argue that such a homogenous description of women is denigrating and capable of scuttling the clamour for social and environmental justice (Cornell, 19). According to Plumwood, “the backgrounding and instrumentalisation of nature and women run closely in parallel” (8 - 9). Okachukwu Onuah Wosu further aligns with Plumwood in his paper titled “Co-Victims of Suffering: The Exploitation of Nature and Women in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*” According to him “...the physiological functions of reproduction and nurturing which the women possess tie her to nature in a symbolic dimension. This bond connects them in a symbiotic relationship in which the abuse of nature translates into the suffering of women” (1)

In presenting the scope of the conflict and the intrigues emanating from the Niger Delta crisis, the selected novelists have portrayed the similarities between the plight of women and the treatment of the environment. This section shows how the selected novelists have shown parallels between the denigration of women and the violation of the environment as a consequence of the Niger Delta crisis.

3.3 Agary's *Yellow-Yellow*

Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* is one novel that portrayed women and nature as twin victims of injustice and gross violation. The story is centred on the experiences of a female character — Zilayefa (also known as Yellow) who left her community out of frustration exacerbated by the shades of pain that oil extraction and transportation activities brought on Niger Delta communities. She sought a better life in Port Harcourt city, but got exasperated by the machinery of exploitation that seemed to pervade the entire city.

As the novel opened, Zilayefa's mother, Bibi, had just returned from her farm which was destroyed by spilled oil from a broken crude oil pipe that ran through the village (1). Zilayefa's first-hand account revealed the scope of environmental ruination that dampened her mother's spirit. She noted that the leaked oil had found its way to people's farms and killed the life forms that came in contact with it; it continued to spread and she could not determine the extent of the ensuing destruction (4).

The implication of the oil spillage described above is far-reaching and disastrous for the environment and all forms of life. Apart from the decimation of the flora and the fauna, accidents like oil spillage facilitate the destruction of the land resources that sustain the ecosystem. Consequent upon the incidents of oil spillage and related environmental red-flags connected to the oil exploratory venture in Zilayefa's community, their land became unfit for agriculture and other purposes, denying individuals the opportunity to produce their own food. No wonder Okachukwu Onuah Wosu in his paper “Resource Exploitation as a Metaphor for Environmental Ruination in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*” avers:

The enormous deposit of hydrocarbons in the Niger Delta region and its exploitation have enriched the Nigerian nation...Paradoxically, the oil wealth being derived from the belly of the Niger Delta is not palpably felt in the region. Instead, the people of the region seem to be starving in the midst of plenty (59)

Apart from the devastation of the terrestrial, Agary further depicted the scope of impact on the aquatic environment when the narrator referred to the water that flowed with streaks of blue, purple and red, the flooding resulting from the oil exploratory and related activities on both land and water and the increasing difficulty in catching fish (39). Zilayefa compared the environmental and social conditions of her time with those of the past which her mother told her about — the period when women could fish, earn some money and contribute to the upkeep of their families; the days that Ijaw women could cook fresh soup daily because their rivers had enough fish (40). Zilayefa observed that things had

changed and that the only response that appeared tenable to her was to leave the village. Probably she was convinced that the environmental damage to her community was humongous and irreparable; hence, young people like her had no future in such a place.

The novelist's concern for the environment is further illustrated with the poor handling of petrol in Niger Delta communities. Agary noted that many houses caught fire as people stored petrol because of the scarcity of the product and subsequently lit their candles and lanterns as alternative power when there were power outages (110). Apart from the inevitable loss of lives and property in such circumstances, there are other environmental concerns like air pollution, depletion of the ozone layer, destruction of the flora and other shades of trans-generational consequences that can be described as environmental injustice. Agary also highlighted the issue of poor handling of weapons by police officers (113). The cases of accidental discharge mentioned in the novel are environmental red flags because random bullets could kill any of the members of the biotic community. The issue of accidental discharge is similar to the challenges of militarisation in the Niger Delta region which many Niger Delta novelists have represented in creative ways. In either case, both the natural environment and defenceless, vulnerable people like women and children are inexplicably violated or killed.

There are instances in Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* that likened the fate of the environment in the face of the Niger Delta crisis with the experiences of women. Okuyade described Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* as "an attempt to give a nuanced view of women entrapped in the Niger Delta turmoil with more chronological accuracy" (110). He further highlighted Agary's apt description of the pitiable plight of young people like Zilayefa who were born out of wedlock, explaining that they go through the "stigma of being labelled with so many derogatory pseudonyms: African Profit, born throw-ways, Ashawo Pikin, Oil Boom, Hit-and- Run, Father Unknown" (111). One striking portrayal in Agary's novel is the situation where women viewed marriage as an escape route from suffering and that disposition made them yield to exploitation and heart-rending degrees of abuse. Recounting her mother's ordeal in the hands of the Greek sailor that turned out to be her (Zilayefa's) father, Zilayefa noted that her mother went to the sea port, as was her usual practice to look for the Greek sailor who got her pregnant and suddenly realised that she had been left alone to raise the seed that was growing in her womb (7). Bibi became a single mother because of her desperation to use marriage as an escape route from the troubles of her time.

Like her mother, Zilayefa believed that a union with Sergio could set her free from the bleakness and hopelessness that she perceived in her village — an indication that the societal structures made females as vulnerable as the environment. Unfortunately for Zilayefa, the men that bonded with her objectified her and exploited her just like the environment. Sergio led her on, ate her food, kissed her, teased her emotions and abandoned her like a play thing (27). Zilayefa became desolate and disconsolate but the man she took to her special hideaway, the man who made her feel butterflies in her stomach, simply went about his normal business. At their re-union in Port Harcourt, Sergio casually revealed that he never placed as much value on the bond between them as Zilayefa did. He simply did not realise, after the intimacy they shared, that his sudden departure would hurt her (171). Emem's mother was also described as a victim of a similar scenario - females who threw themselves carelessly at foreigners that visited the Niger Delta region - but with a Portuguese trader (73). When Zilayefa got to Port Harcourt, she noticed that it was quite common for young ladies to see white men as their escape route from poverty. According to her, the hotel lobbies in Port Harcourt were filled with desperate girls who sought the attention of expatriate workers because of the prospects of getting monetary incentives with which they hoped to transit from acute poverty to comfortable lives (167 - 168).

The novel is replete with instances of the desperation on the part of young girls and women who cheapened themselves before foreigners, irrespective of where they came from, and workers and contractors in oil companies, and submitted to all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. The vulnerability of females, in Agary's context, is a product of social structures that do not accommodate them at the helm of affairs.

Furthermore, Agary's portrayal of the fun time activities that young boys and girls engaged in is also significant because it suggests that the acts of denigrating women and the corollary non-committal treatment of the environment are carefully embedded into the socio-cultural template of Niger Delta society by agents of patriarchy. In Agary's novel, Robert instructed girls to throw their backsides to boys who were expected to "pick them up." The girls clapped and danced as the fondling was repeated several times (15). The game, at no point, required the boys to throw any part of their bodies for the girls to pick up. Although the young females, in their naivety, seemed to be enjoying the games, older females, like Bibi, acknowledged the underlying condescension and violation of female essence associated with such games. So she chided Zilayefa, "Yellow-Yellow, so you don't have anything better to do than to gbein mo your backside like a jobless girl?" (p. 17).

The novel further portrayed the seemingly limitless economic power and influence wielded by expatriates who conducted exploratory activities in the Niger Delta as a product of a patriarchal system that enables the denigration of women. First, the expatriates are male; when they get to host communities, they engage the community leaders who are principally male and when there are employment opportunities, the slots for meaningful positions are given to males.

The outcome of this social injustice was that females became economically displaced and at the mercy of those in control of the resources. Consequently, young girls bleached their skins just to impress and attract foreigners that came to their communities for business (pp. 35 - 36), went to native doctors for love charms in order to get expatriate lovers and practically took any step that would bring them close to foreigners or oil company workers who had the economic means to meet their needs. Describing the order of city life, especially around the high-brow area where the hotel she worked was located, Zilayefa noted that a majority of the guests that came to the bar every evening to drink and ease the day's tension were expatriates either working for the oil companies or doing business in the oil sector (p. 76).

Agary traced this scenario back to the pre-colonial days when expatriates came into the country for various business concerns; the Portuguese, Syrians, Lebanese, Greeks, Chinese, Filipinos, Americans and British businessmen entered Niger Delta communities, mesmerised young women with money and foreign gifts, got them pregnant and left them to handle the arduous task of single parenting. It is this situation that accounted for the proliferation of bastards in the region at that time. The novelist categorised this group of children as *born-troways*, a term in pidgin that referred to children born but abandoned by their fathers (74). The expatriates, as depicted in Agary's novel, cashed in on the desperation of the girls and treated them with the same level of disdain that the environment has been treated generally. According to Zilayefa some of the girls had ugly experiences and encounters with the brutal foreigners who saw them as sex toys. The foreigners beat up the girls, used objects like bottles on their private parts and did despicable things to them (37 - 38).

Even the local boys with lopsided notions of power and gender would not only act as pimps for the white men but also occasionally harass the girls, beat them up and destroy their property in the process (38). While destroying the things that belonged to the girls, the boys inadvertently created environmental problems, thus treating the environment with the same disdain as the females were treated.

There are yet other illustrations of the level of disregard and ill-treatment meted out to females in Agary's novel. Lob's father, TT, with his charm, good looks and economic power, remained a bachelor for a long time so that he could have and hurt as many girls as possible before he eventually got married (57). Similarly, perhaps because of Zilayefa's vulnerability as a result of her longing for paternal affection and her naivety, Admiral deflowered her (141), exploited her innocence and discarded her like a piece of rag as soon as she became pregnant. According to Zilayefa, Admiral did not even spare a moment to consider how she felt about the whole experience - whether or not she wanted to keep the child - but simply directed her to abort the pregnancy. She wondered what her fate would be upon the realisation that Sisi would not want to train a pregnant young girl in school (162). Subsequently, Admiral stopped visiting Zilayefa and she realised that she was all by herself with a pregnancy and the risk of being sent out by her benefactresses.

In her desperation and frustration, Zilayefa decided to abort the pregnancy using plants and herbs, chewing up both leaf and bark of the plants she collected (177). Agary's portrayal of plants as abortion agents is symbolic as it represents the extent of damage done to the mutually beneficial human-nature relationship that subsisted before the chaos and evil gained momentum in many societies. Plants that should have medicinal value to save the lives of humans became killer agents that Zilayefa used to terminate the life that was growing in her womb (178). Thus, the novel shows how dysfunctional structures altered the natural order of things in many parts especially the Niger Delta region of Nigeria.

Agary has shown clearly that women are quite vulnerable in violent situations because the subsisting socio-political, economic and cultural variables are designed by agents of patriarchy to deny them the requisite opportunities for self-actualisation and independence. Hence, in societies where such lopsided frames exist, females are almost completely reliant on males and inevitably susceptible to abuse and shades of violation. Agary has also demonstrated the careless disposition of individuals and groups towards the environment especially in crisis situations or when there are violent uprisings.

4 CONCLUSION

Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* presents the exploitation of women and the degradation of nature as closely connected consequences of patriarchy, poverty, and oil exploration in the Niger Delta. Through the experiences of Zilayefa, Bibi, and other female characters, the novel shows how environmental destruction weakens traditional livelihoods and increases women's exposure to economic dependence, sexual exploitation, abandonment, and emotional suffering. From an ecofeminist perspective, both women and the environment are treated as resources to be controlled, used, and discarded by dominant social and economic forces. The novel therefore advocates for environmental justice, gender equality, female empowerment, and responsible management of the Niger Delta's natural resources.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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