

## STORYTELLING OF PALESTINIANS' EXPERIENCE IN DIASPORA: CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND IDENTITY IN NAOMI SHIHAB NYE'S POETRY

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### Abstract

Storytelling is a significant tool in the literature that is used to express opinions, feelings, preserve history, and stress identity. This study aims at discussing Naomi Shihab Nye's employment of this technique to revive the language and heritage of Arab Americans who struggle to revive their identity. Through storytelling, Nye emphasizes the idea of cultural differences and hybridity that Arab Americans experienced when they first moved to the U.S after the political instability in the Middle East. In her poetry, she wants to convey a message to the whole world to correct the stereotypical images of western people about Muslims and Arabs. The study aims to prove that Naomi uses this technique to emphasize the peaceful resistance by providing descriptive poetic stories of Arab Americans to stir the people's minds to accept the differences, and to live in peace.

Keywords: Arab American Literature, Cultural differences, Hybridity, Naomi Nye, Storytelling, and Resistance.

### 1. Introduction

Storytelling is an innovative, creative, inspirational, and irresistible tool that preserves history entertains people and teaches morals. Through storytelling, many cultures throughout the world have preserved their life experience, suffering, and their languages. For example, Arab American writers helped in maintaining their heritage,

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identity, and struggles by writing these stories. It, also, helped to deliver the Arabs' silenced voices and their dreams to the rest of the World. So, storytelling is a powerful. A tool that brings continuity of the people's voices, dreams, sufferings, experiences, and feelings.

In the twentieth century and after the Palestinian/Israeli conflicts, many Arab American women writers focus on expressing their feelings towards the political and cultural events. Through following various methods of writing, they combine their efforts to correct the stereotypical images that were widespread among the Western people. Arab American writers try to convey their notions and feelings about the conflicts through asserting —their identity with its stable and unstable existence (Bouterra, Lachouri, 54). These female writers give a voice to Muslim and Arab heritage through literature, which was influenced by their experience of the cultural differences.

Representing and correcting the Muslim images was one of the contemporary themes that many women writers assert in their writing to preserve their Islamic and Arabic backgrounds. Naomi Shihab Nye, for example, is an Arab American poet, who was born 1952 in St. Louis, Missouri. Her father, Aziz Shihab, is a Palestinian Muslim, who immigrated to American during the Palestinian/Israeli conflicts in 1948, and her mother is an American (Gomez-Vega 246). When she was fourteen-year-old, Nye and her family moved to Palestine, where she attended school and was introduced to her Arabic background (Canfield Reisman 1437). In Jerusalem, she embraced her Arab culture, and this gave her the ability to absorb stories and develop perceptions about the two different cultures, the American and the Arab cultures (Canfield Reisman 1437). Therefore, many of her poems examine people's lives, their reaction toward the war, their struggles, and their loss and pain.

She received her BA in English and World Religions from Trinity University, Texas. In addition to her well-known poetry books, she won four Pushcart Prizes, the I.B. (Castero, 224). She was called —the wandering poet because she spent her life traveling around the world and visiting different countries, which —enrich her poetry, gave her more knowledge and understanding of cultures (Canfield Reisman, 1438). This experience has affected her poetry as she started to tell stories of places and people and their struggles. Most of her poems show pictures of Arabs and their lives especially, —in refugee camps, or in self-imposed exile elsewhere," but they are wishing for homes (Bloem 8). Thus, she exposes her readers to the details of the individuals' sufferings from war.

In her poetry, Naomi Shihab Nye uses metaphors, images, and stories in order to help her readers to perceive individuals' lives. She focuses on describing the life of people, who were affected by war or any political conflicts, and Arab Americans'

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struggle of cultural differences and hybridity. In other words, she uses storytelling in —defining human lives (Canfield Reisman 1438), and this experience is reflected in her personality and her way of thinking. Hence, in her poetry, Nye uses storytelling as a postcolonial mean to expresses her life as Arab American to resist the colonizers as well as to demonstrate the effect of the Palestinian/Israeli war on the innocent people.

## 2. Post-colonialism in Nye's poetry

Naomi Shihab Nye uses postcolonial theory in most of her poetry as she describes the Palestinian/Israeli conflicts over land. Because of her Arabic background, she emphasizes the idea of having an identity and belonging to a homeland. After Nakba in 1948, she talks about her Palestinian heritage and land that were taken by the Israeli colonizer. In her poems, Nye mentions that the colonizer came and robbed them from their lands, culture, and language through imposing power on the native people themselves. The Israeli colonizers considered themselves as a superior race, who has the right to take the land and impose their authority in order to establish a —political controll (Butt 893). So, Nye shed the light on this important catastrophe that happened for the Arabs: the crisis when the Israeli people forcefully took the land and displaced the Palestinian people from their own homes and turned them to refugees.

Many critics define colonialism as a way of hegemony on people over land and this controlling method contains some violent actions toward the natives such as slavery, murder, torture, kidnapping, cruelty, separation from families, and displacement from the homeland. According to Lois Tyson in her book, *Critical Theory Today: A Users-Friendly Guide*, colonialism was —based on the colonizers' assumption of their own superiority, which they contrasted with the alleged inferiority of native (indigenous) peoples, the original inhabitants of the lands they invaded (419). In other words, postcolonial ideology shows the destructive ways that the colonizers used against the natives of the colonized countries as they considered them inferior and tried to wipe out their culture completely.

In addition, through using postcolonial theory, writers provide a critical perspective of colonial power, oppression, and domination. Domination and segregation could follow different criteria including —race, gender, nationalism, class, and ethnicities (Butt 10). So, colonialism describes all forms of domination of people's lives or land by force. However, Edward Said in his book, *Culture, and Imperialism* said that the main battle of colonialism is —over landl or territory; the colonizers think they owned and had the right to settle and work in the colonized land (xiii). In fact, they merged in the newly colonized society and imposed their own culture through erasing the natives' language, culture, and even identity. The colonizers demand of —identificationl and they started to refer to the natives as —the other to show

their power and superiority in a world based on —heterogeneity (Bhabha 45,98). In Nye's poetry, she displays the ideas of violence, war, and cruelty performed against the Arab Palestinians. The Israeli conquered the country, dominated its people, and displaced them from their land, —involving the temporary or permanent dispersion, through surrounding them with fear and violence (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 61). In short, through her writing, Shihab Nye portrays the lives of the Palestinian people and their suffering from the colonizer, who conquered their land, language, identity, and culture.

### 3. Storytelling in Nye's poetry

Storytelling technique is a way that is used by many writers to preserve history, document personal life experience, and transmit cultural beliefs to the world. It, also, considered to teach morals and to convey the voices of vulnerable people. The older generation in various cultures are the —keepers of the culture and the language, therefore, the used storytelling too to transfer their traditions, language, and beliefs (Mitty 60). Naomi Shihab Nye is a contemporary writer, who uses this method in her writing in order to express her feelings, tells her family's stories, preserves the war stories, and saves her cultural identity. Also, she uses it to make her readers all around the world sympathize and understand the position of Palestinian Arab people. She has been influenced by her father's job as a journalist, who records the wartime incidents (Elmoussa, 107). He used to tell her —folktales and stories of the war, of her ancestral land, and from his childhood (Reisman, 1437). His stories shaped her perspective about culture, war, and human nature and this is noticeable in her writing.

Arab American writers use storytelling in their writing and consider it as a powerful tool to express their thoughts and feelings toward difficult situations. They use this technique to document events and allows the readers to know the real story; especially in describing —difficult moments in [the] harsh world, (Gomez-Vega, 245). So through telling stories, Naomi Shihab Nye expresses her feelings toward cultural differences and her isolation from her ancestral land. Also, she records personal stories, which gives her a boarder understanding of the world around her. As a poet and a storyteller, Nye expresses her feelings of —a deep sense of belonging as an Arab American who grew up with both Palestinian and American culture and heritage (Gomez-Vega, 246).

Moreover, Nye tells stories about people's sufferings under the rule of the Israeli Colonial State, their struggles, their fear, and their reactions toward the war. She portrays the Palestinian people's lives after Nakba and their miseries due to the war. Nye also conveys this notion by giving voice to the silent people, who suffer from the war and did not receive that much attention from the media. She wants to open the minds of the Western people and to correct the stereotypical image of the Muslims and the Arabs with a focus on the

Palestinians which unluckily was a negative much of it is related to the “image of violence and terrorism” (Bolem,

8). Besides, she demands to fix the media misrepresentation and misunderstandings of the Arab; she tries to portray the good image by telling their daily life stories.

Most importantly, Naomi Nye used storytelling as a way of resisting colonialism and its effect on her homeland, Palestine. She tells stories about her Arabic root to preserve her identity and transmit her Arabic culture. She wants to preserve the memories of her homeland, her father's memories, and her grandmother's stories. She used poetry to “recreate experience” (Gómez-Vega 117); with storytelling, she makes the readers feel not the self, but the others. For Naomi Nye, storytelling is a self-defense tool, and so she discusses her experience of rejecting colonialism and called for peace and freedom. Her essential purpose of telling stories is to give the true image of life. It evokes people's souls and minds by telling stories of loss and fear as well as stories of surviving the pain and struggles. By using this technique, she allows the readers to sympathize and see the world from different angles and accept the differences.

#### 4. Cultural Differences of the Arab Americans' Experience in Naomi Nye's Poetry

Many people from the Arab countries decided to immigrate to America in order to escape terrorism, segregation, sufferings, and war and to search for a better future for their kids and themselves. Therefore, this experience gave them a chance to connect with people from different nationalities and backgrounds, which helped them to adapt easily to all the changes. Bouterra and Lachouri in *Arab Americans: The Example of Naomi Shihab Nye* defines the Arab American as —an immigrant or an American-born citizen with Arab ancestry, they may be Muslims or Christians; however, they all —share stories of war, exile, non-belonging, a lost language and a lost identity” (52).

America becomes a diverse place that is enriched by the presence of different ethnic, cultural and racial groups, who emigrated from their homeland seeking peace. Since culture is a source of identity, it is significant for the Arab Americans to preserve their own culture and to reestablish their own individuality, away from the American culture. Therefore, many Arab American writers decide to capture their unstable condition between the two cultures, language, and traditions. They narrate their own experience and personal stories to help their readers to visualize their situation.

In her poetry, Nye describes the cultural conflicts between her Palestinian and American backgrounds through narrating personal stories. She, also, tries to capture the two cultures in order to fix the widespread misunderstanding toward the Arabs. Her experience in Palestine and San Antonio shaped her vision in writing. She, as many Arab

American writers, feels obligated to show the whole world the true image of Arab through recording her personal stories. She wants her readers to see the Palestinian Arabs, and know how they —feel, live, think and act like any other American (Boutrra, Lachouri, 53). That is why she used writing and storytelling as tools to convey this major theme.

#### 4.1 Cultural Differences in Naomi Nye's "Catalogue Army"

In "Catalogue Army", Naomi Nye asserts that her life in America is totally different than her life if she would be living in Palestine. She narrated her story to her cousin to explain how life in America is different: “she would spend most of her time in the shopping malls as if there is an army of catalogs marching upon [her] house” (Elledge, Swartwout 213). She gave more value to the material things as they start to control her life. In contrast, her life in Palestine would not be the same; she could be —in the bosom of poverty<sup>||</sup> or even worse; by being —dead, picked apart by vultures<sup>||</sup> (*Real Things*, 213). She would be displaced from her homeland, live in fear and instability, suffers from violence and war, or even die because of the raids.

In this poem, Nye expresses the negative effect of the media on her life as an Arab American. She said,

Something has happened to my name.  
It now appears on catalogs  
for towels and hiking equipment,  
dresses spun in India,  
hand-colored prints of parrots and eggs (*Real Things*, 213).

Nye talks about the cultural conflict that she has been experienced when she started to merge in American society and culture with all the materialistic approach. She emphasizes that advertisements, posters, and magazines were controlling people's life there. She begins to find her name as a brand. This life in America makes her feels that she does not belong to either culture, the American and the Palestinian cultures. Her struggles revolve around the idea that she feels torn between a new materialistic culture and a traditional ancestral culture.

Moreover, in "The Small Vases from Hebron," Nye uses the word “vases” as a metaphor to describe the effect of war on Hebron; both were fragile and easy to break. She describes,

And what do the headlines say?  
Nothing of the smaller petal  
perfectly arranged inside the larger petal  
or the way tinted glass filters light [...]  
But the child of Hebron sleeps

with the thud of her brothers falling

and the long sorrow of the color red (*The New Anthology of American Poetry*, 448-449).

The writer tells one of the miserable tragic incidents that took place in Hebron and how the media was presenting it to the world. This life in Palestine is full of violence and tragedy where the bombs explode, and the glass shattered everywhere. However, the media only focuses on the general picture of the events; it does not give much attention to the people's sufferings and reactions toward the crisis. It also never mentions the tragic story of a child, who slept next to her/his brothers' dead bodies and covered with their blood.

In contrast, in America, people were following the materialistic possessions that they found in catalogs, and only read the headlines in the newspaper. Embracing a money-oriented approach, many Americans were prevented from seeing the complete picture of the violence against the Palestinian people of Hebron. Because of this example and many more, Shihab Nye attempts to change —the American mainstream perception of Arabs (Gómez-Vega, 110), and shows them the true image of the Palestinian's lives under the Jewish State. Through using the storytelling technique in her poetry, Shihab Nye recreates people's experiences to allow the readers to sympathize and understand their feelings and their continuous sufferings.

#### 4.2 Religious Conflict of the Arab Americans' Experience in Nye's Poetry

##### 4.2.1. Religious Metaphors and Imagery in "Words Under the *Words*"

Besides the cultural differences theme, Naomi Shihab Nye also discusses the theme of religion and Muslim imagery in some of her poems. Because of her Palestinian background, she insists on showing various Islamic rituals and explains them in detail in order to share these sacred traditions with her readers. Also, she wants to spread a positive message about Islam and Muslims, which evokes her readers' minds to accept the differences in religion and belief. She believes that it is one of her duties as an Arab American writer to correct the stereotypical image of Muslims and Islam as a way of life and a religion of peace, not violence. In fact, Nye wants to redirect her readers' perspectives to be capable of seeing Arab American and Muslims as normal individuals, who —desperately want peace, (Bloem, 9) and seek meaningful lives. Through her writing, Nye attempts to deliver Muslims' voices to help them to be proud of themselves as well as to reshape people's thinking about them.

In her poem "Different Ways to Pray" for example, Nye describes many approaches and ways that Muslims' could follow in reaching spiritual purgation of Allah, which would help them to achieve happiness and self-awareness. People who belong to different gender, age, race, pray in different but acceptable ways. For instance, those who pray in

kneeling on the —smooth stones and use religious sentences that —could somehow fuse them to the sky (*Words Under the Words*, 10). Also, there are the shepherds that suffer from pain and despair and decide to seek refuge in Allah. They stop under the olive trees and said, —Hear us! We have pain on earth! We have so much pain there is no place to store it! (*Words Under the Words*, 10). These shepherds feel helplessness in their life; however, through praying, they could restore hope and courage and gain harmony. After praying, they become happy again —in spite of the pain!; their connection to Allah was close enough to give them strength. By doing these divine movements, they are connected to Allah in a special way that allows them to have a wave of internal peace.

In addition, Nye depends on metaphor and imagery, and tells stories to represent Muslims' peaceful daily acts in order to emphasize that Islam is the religion of —peace and stability, not —violence and chaos, as many Americans believe (Gómez-Vega 58). She describes one of the important parts of Muslim's religion, which is the pilgrimage to Mecca. She explains:

Some prized the pilgrimage,  
wrapping themselves in new white linen  
to ride buses across miles of vacant sand.  
When they arrived at Mecca  
they would circle the holy places,  
on foot, many times,  
they would bend to kiss the earth  
and return their lean faces housing mystery (*Words Under the Words*, 10).

Nye in this stanza talks about how Muslims appreciate going to Mecca and explains their method for doing their rituals by wearing new white clothes and traveling long distances to perform this religious journey. When they arrived at Mecca, they would go around and circle the holy place (ka'ba) seven times and when they are done, they bow to kiss the black stone. During this journey, Muslims reach a higher level of spirituality as they have completely submitted themselves to Allah and this gave them peace and contentment.

After that, Shihab Nye discusses a contemporary notion that is embraced by young people; they spend their time following the materialistic things, without caring for religion and spirituality. In contrast to old people who dedicated their time in doing religious rituals, the young people wasted a lot of their time following material life.

She shows how the old people, who had experienced spirituality through following the Islamic tradition, insisted to introduce these traditions to the young generations to help them feel the inner peace. Therefore, they started to pray for the younger generation

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who had emigrated to America and began to embrace the American culture and forget their traditions. (*Words Under the Words*, 10). Because Islam is a major part of the immigrants' identity, the older generation prayed for Allah to help the younger generations to understand religion, revive its spiritual role, and open their hearts and minds to return to their roots.

Moreover, "The Words Under the Words" is a personal and a universal poem at the same time, where Shihab Nye narrates her grandmother's story, "Sitti Khadra." Nye provides a detailed description of Sitti Khadra's personal experience of the horror of the war. She lives in the north of Jerusalem which was the target of many political raids. Sitti Khadra deals with the chaos which had resulted from the war, normally by helping the wounded and taking care of the sick people and —the crippled baby, as she has seen worse than this. (*Words Under the Words*, 36-37). In this story, Nye's grandmother carries a message to her granddaughter because she wants her —to look for meaning in life through religion (Gomez-Vega 248). Through telling stories, Nye's portrays her grandmother with her strong faith in Allah and her belief that He is everywhere. She knows that only through religion she could reach satisfaction and peace. She also believes that talking to Allah and calling His names in praying would help her to forget the pain that was caused by the war with the dead bodies everywhere. In order to provide a realistic story, the poet quotes her grandmother's daily prayers to emphasize the healing power of praying and following the Islamic way of life, she said:

Sitti Khadra's prayers came out of her heart as she asked support from Allah; because her life is difficult and it is hard for her to live in this unbearable world, where she had no land or home and had to live under occupation. The writer's grandmother's message is a universal message that requests all religious people to seek refuge in Allah because he is the one and he is the Almighty, the only one who can help them.

#### 4.2.2. The Theme of Hybridity in Nye's Poetry

The theme of hybridity is very noticeable in most of Nye's poetry, it means living life between two cultures and not belonging to either of them, which is a very common result of living in the US while having another root. The Arab Americans are finding themselves torn between two language, two cultures, and two worlds. Therefore, they find it difficult to —define themselves [and their positions between the two cultures] so as to be understood by their fellow citizens, (Haddad, Smith, Moore 4). They want the world to understand and accept them and consider them, without focusing too much on their roots or their backgrounds. They know that they must write about themselves; otherwise, others would write about them, maybe with wrong representation (Bouttra and Lachouri, 53). That is why many Arab American writers use the theme of hybridity in their writing.

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In Shihab Nye 's situation, she was born in America, but she has a Palestinian origin. She struggles between the two cultures and feels like she could not fully belong to both. She expresses this cultural conflict by saying, "Even before I had been to the Middle East, I remember being conscious that part of me was from somewhere else entirely. It could stand back and separate itself" (qtd. in Karim, 253). She is aware of her different roots and this put her in a hard situation as she tries to fit in two different cultures, the new American culture and the traditional Palestinian culture. Because of that, she uses literature as a tool to strengthen her identity.

Shihab Nye, as many Arab American writers, understands the significant role of writing and expressing herself to the world in a way that would in confirming her identity and spreading accepting the differences. In her poetry, she tries to portray both cultures as she describes peace and war, Arab and American perceptions in order to stress the idea of —unity. She believes that these two cultures —can create a better person|| if he/she embraces the two identities and acknowledges the differences (Bouchra Boutrra and Toufik Lachouri 56). Therefore, she uses storytelling as a means to preserve her identity and to resist the Israeli's treatment to her homeland.

In "Blood", Naomi Shihab Nye remembers her Arabic background through narrating her father's story, whose name is "Shihab, which means —a shooting star" in the Arabic language. Throughout the poem, she repeats the word "a true Arab and uses the word our palms" to remind herself and her readers about her Arabic root. She wants to feel that she belongs to Palestine, especially because she feels different in America. Because of that, she poses a question wondering what flag can we wave? and this shows her struggle to maintain two identities: the American and the Palestinian" (*Words Under the Words*, 121). The flag is a symbol to identify people or their country. Here, she is having a conflict of what flags she should raise. She is confused as she refers to her feeling of hybridity by saying, "this tragedy with a terrible root/ is too big for us" (*Words Under the Words*, 121). Her poetry reflects a sense of not belonging to her homeland where her ancestor was brutally expelled because of the Colonial Israeli State, as well as to America where she lives with her family. She feels that she lives in an exile, away from her homeland, that prevents her from fitting to one culture. However, she still carries the Palestinian blood.

In addition, "Blood", is a kind of political statement or another form of storytelling in which Shihab Nye describes the lives of those who were affected by the war in Palestine, specifically about the Sabra and Shatila massacres, the occupier's massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982. During these massacres, more than 1,000 civilians were killed with cold blood (Gómez-Vega, 114). Nye compares her father to a "journalist, situation when he was unable to explain the horrible events that he heard in

the news so —neither of his two languages can reach it, or even describes his feelings” (*Words Under the Words*, 121). He was unable to report this tragedy to the news. Nye thinks that those attackers are not civilized even if they call themselves like this because civilized people use words to bring change, not guns and violence (Gómez-Vega114). Killing and violence would not solve any conflicts or any differences.

Thus, through storytelling, Shihab Nye gives voices to people who suffer in silence and nobody cares about their lives. Moreover, in "Jerusalem," Naomi Shihab Nye explains the idea of moving on with life despite the obstacles that people face in the way. She gives an example of her father, who was hit by a stone when he was a child. The boy that hit him

came and apologized by saying that he was —aiming at a birdll, and this is just an accident

(*Red Suitcase*, 21). Her father goes on and forgets about this —tender spot on his headll

(*Red Suitcase*, 21). Another example is the mother who consoled herself by taking care of the olive trees trying to forget her dead son. Through providing these realistic stories, Nye emphasizes the idea that life is hard but we all can pass by, forget the tragedies and complete our lives. Life does not stop, but we must remember our roots and never forget our identity.

Furthermore, Nye mentions the Israeli/ Palestinian conflict that leads to destruction and rivalry confrontations. She describes the horrible war that made a child draw, —a bird with wings wide enough to cover two roofs at once, to provide imaginary protection to his family and himself (*Red Suitcase*, 21). A child understands the meaning of the word —peace and knows that it is the solution for fear and violence. Regardless of the continuous war, Naomi responds that “There’s a place in my brain/ where hate won’t grow, meaning that hate won’t change anything that happened in these massacres” (*ibid*). She was sure that hatred wouldn’t solve any problems. In fact, love and acceptance would spread peace and stop this awful war. Although, she lives in America, her mind can’t erase the misery in her homeland. These double identities give her a broader understanding of her situation.

## 5. Conclusion

Naomi Shihab Nye is one of the significant poets in America as she tries to explore human nature through a storytelling tool to give a meaning of life. She discusses Muslims’ traditions and the importance of religion in such a way to portray Islam as a peaceful religion. Besides, she insists on telling personal stories and examples with beautiful descriptions to make her readers embrace her beliefs and understand her situation with the cultural differences and isolation from her homeland. Like many contemporary writers, Naomi Shihab Nye chooses the postcolonial ideology in her poetry in order to discuss the idea of dominating a land and its people and controlling their lives. Thus; through using storytelling technique with the postcolonial approach, she evokes the

readers' minds to think rationally about the cruel consequences of colonialism on those helpless people, and the brutal treatment of the colonizers toward the colonized people. She reveals the real face of the Israeli Colonial State and their monopoly and domination over the civilians.

Successfully, Nye has revealed her hybrid personality; through the technique of storytelling, she let the audience know more about way of Palestinian people who experienced wars and colonialism. She also discusses the theme of religion and focuses to show that Muslims community are one nation though they are in different places in the world. In her poems, she stresses the Islamic tradition and the holy rituals to make other people respect them. In addition, she sheds lights on the immigrants with their sufferings and their stories. Therefore, Shihab Nye's poetic storytelling successfully conveys the ideas of cultural differences among Arab Americans and their feelings of identity -loss as well as the impact of war on Palestinian people.

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