



Failed Black Patriarchy in Afro-American Society in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's Black male characters have been pushed towards periphery by deriding them of all patriarchal roles. It has been noticed that Morrison female characters emerge as dynamic on socio-economic front and male characters have been shown as failures in fulfilling their social, economic or any other responsibility. Morrison dehumanizes, demonizes or devalued the males in general and Black males in particular by making them a figure of total failure as far as their traditional roles in their family or society is concerned. Morrison depicts, how such irresponsible behavior of Black males not only traumatizes the lives of Black females and children. They become impotent or in other words deprived of their own self. Though we have number of such characters through whom Morrison showed this failed patriarchy, however, the extreme of such failure and dehumanization can be seen in the character of Cholly in Morrison's the very first novel *The Bluest Eye*. This paper analyses the failed patriarchy in African-American society.

Key Words: failure, Black patriarchy, African-American, Family, Trauma,

Undoubtedly, *The Bluest Eye* presents the pathetic story of a young girl Pecola, who through her miserable childhood went towards her disintegration or madness. Morrison demonstrates that Pecola has been victimized not only by the outer dominating White world of racism but also by her own inter-racist community especially her own family. "Internalised racism is implicated as playing a part in Pecola's undoing; however, Black society's lack of empathy for its own members is also a cause that merits further examination. The very same society that is supposed to sustain and support Pecola, upon learning of her rape and pregnancy, ultimately turns it's back on her" (Alongi 102). Marc Connor also states this aspect of Pecola's plight as "Pecola is destroyed within her very community: and that community not only fails to aid her, they have helped cause her isolation" (ibid). Besides the devastating effects of intra and inter racist community upon the life of the young girl, Pecola, Morrison artistically projected that how her family in general and her father Cholly Breedlove in particular becomes responsible for

her disintegration and madness. Instead of preventing Pecola from outside threats, her father himself proved to be the emblem of threat and insecurity to her. “The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when her own father rapes her” (Bharti and Joshi 42).

At the very first instance, we came to know about the Breedlove family, as a broken family, when Pecola comes to live with MacTeers and was introduced as “a girl who had no place to go” (11). Claudia as narrator informed that it was “but that old Dog” (ibid), Cholly Breedlove who “had burned his house” (ibid) and thus made his family members especially Pecola as “outdoors” (ibid). Thus, in the very beginning of the novel Morrison introduces Cholly, as “an old dog, a snake, ratty nigger” (12) who was responsible for the disintegration and homelessness of his family. Occasionally, it has been expected from the head of a family, father or husband, to work hard in order to provide a better and secure life to his family members. He should have a desire to raise his children in a safe and secure environment. However, in the novel Morrison presented Cholly as failed figure in fulfilling such responsibilities or more appropriately such dreams, who instead of raising his family status from rented to propertied one, “put his family outdoors.” (12).

“Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He has joined the animals; was indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail” (12). In the chapter where we have been actually introduced to the whole of Breedlove family and to their daily chores, Morrison argued, “Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed towards petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them” (29). Here, Morrison points out that actual ugliness is reflected in the behavior of father, Cholly Breedlove, who neither emotionally nor economically supported his family; wife and children. It is this uncommitted attitude of Cholly that made him ugly and Morrison seems committed to unveil that ugliness in front of her readers. However, what has been accepted as ugly as for the color of skin and other physical features are concerned, they are constructed myths and attitudes of the society towards Blacks. Morrison, thus, projected Cholly as an ugly figure in terms of his irresponsible behavior towards his family.

One cold morning when Pauline comes out of her bed “noiselessly,” but finds the stove of her kitchen coal-less or in other words heatless, she expresses her anger by various noises which becomes louder and louder. To quote extended passage from the novel:

Even from where Pecola lay, she could smell Cholly’s whiskey. The noises in the kitchen became louder and less hollow. There was direction and purpose in Mrs. Breedlove’s movements that had nothing to do with the preparation of breakfast. This evidence

supported by ample evidence from the past, made Pecola tighten her stomach muscles and ration her breath. (29)

This is how Morrison showed Cholly's incapability to fulfill the basic needs of his family. Though, particular about his whiskey but indifferent towards the responsibilities of his family, Cholly proved neither a good husband nor a good father. His indifference not only deprived his family economically but also deprived them emotionally. The couple, Cholly and Pauline, fight with each other and the fight often becomes so brutal that once Sammy shouts "kill him" when Pauline hits Cholly with "flat stove lid" (33). Such fights becomes responsible for familial disintegration to Breedlove especially the children of the family.

The relation among the family members in Breedlove family becomes strained and artificial. The familial love gets almost completely disappeared. Not only with the father, who was otherwise responsible for such alienation, but the other members too, feels alienated towards each other. As observed:

Cholly and Pauline's regular fights are far from being expressions of true love in a couple's married life. Besides that, the husband does not care about his family's well-being. He is more concerned with his alcoholic beverages and sexual intercourses than anything else. (Mendy 779)

Further, Morrison metaphorically represents the negligence of Cholly towards his family by projecting the picture of Breedlove house hold as orderless and chaotic. There was not only the dearth of necessary things but the messy distribution of whatever things were there in the house. "Disturbance is evident from the different stuff in the house; nothing could be expected to be orderly in Breedlove family. The fire stove out of heat, no coals at home" (Kuthoo 519). In comparison to this, Morrison has shown the household of Fisher family where everything was in order. The kitchen was "a large spacious room" with "white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware. Odors of meat, vegetables, and something freshly baked mixed with a scent of Fels Naptha" (83). This order, perhaps, made them deserving to love and to be loved or in other words it symbolizes the presence of happiness among the Fishers. "Pauline does not only maintain material aspects of kitchen but she also maintains love and emotions towards Fisher family which is evident from Pauline's care towards little Fisher girl" (Kuthoo 519). Claudia, the narrator, says "The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her" (84). This shows the compulsive and mechanical aspect of the relation between the family members that even daughter calls her mother by her name.

Through the course of action in the novel, readers soon realize that it was immediately after the marriage, the relationship between Cholly and Pauline becomes bitter and strained. At the very first instance, it was the economic dependence of Pauline that irritates Cholly and he took her as a burden than responsibility. Thus, Cholly's failure at economic front created a void in the husband-wife relationship. Pauline herself narrates: "Cholly commenced to getting meaner and meaner and wanted to fight me all the time. I give him as good as I got. Had to. Look like

working for that woman and fighting Cholly was all I did” (92). With time Cholly, instead of correcting his behavior becomes more weird and irresponsible. His irresponsible behavior not only made the family economically backward but also deprived it from the love and affection among the family members. Cholly often used to beat Pauline, and eventually for Pauline “it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard” (96). “Even though, Pauline and Cholly seem to share a married life of love, the reality at home is very different. Their poverty has gradually destroyed their possible infatuation for one another, to end up with a family where parents fight every day, and fail to instill in their offspring mutual love and self-appreciation,” argues Mendy and goes on to say, “It is usually assumed that when violence ‘walks’ through the door of a room, love ‘jumps’ out of the window” (774). Through the episode, when once Cholly went to Pauline’s work place to ask for some money for his drink, “He come there drunk wanting some money” (93). Morrison showed the height of Cholly’s irresponsibility and failure not only at economic front but also at moral front. He neither felt ashamed of asking money from his wife nor reluctant to embarrass her at her work place. Thus, instead of breeding love in his family, Cholly breeds poverty, violence and shame.

Projecting Cholly as a failed figure of father and husband, Morrison makes Pauline a crusade: “She took on the full responsibility and recognition of breadwinner and returned to church” (98). Thus, we find that all the expenses of the family were managed by Pauline and almost none by Cholly. Pauline finds Cholly as a figure of evil and incapability so to hold “Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (98).

Throughout the novel, we see Cholly not giving any kind of relief to his wife or children but instead proved to be a kind of trauma to them. However, it was through an act of “raping” his own daughter that Morrison has made him a total figure of failure and disgust. Through this act Morrison showed how Cholly, already a trauma in the lives of his children, instead of giving, snatched everything from his family. Incapable of acting in anyway, neither as husband nor as father, when Cholly acts, he acts disastrously. His act has brought violence and total disintegration to his family in general and to Pecola in particular. “That animalism of the father later reaches its paroxysm when he rapes his own daughter in the kitchen turning the normal fatherly love for a child into a carnal one materialized by a painful sexual intercourse for the poor little girl” (Mendy 776). When Cholly entered the kitchen of his house in drunken state, Pecola was washing dishes with her back hunched over the sink and to see her, Cholly become uncomfortable. Later, “the discomfort dissolved into pleasure” (127), and under the influence of mixed emotions of “revulsion, guilty, pity, then love” (127). Cholly pulled her down and loved her ‘an abusive love’. “For Toni Morrison people with no imagination like Cholly feed love with sex” (Mendy 780).

For readers it was very difficult to understand what made Morrison to include such a heinous and incestuous act of rape of a daughter by her own father in *The Bluest Eye*. Possibly, Morrison tried to show that though Cholly has never given anything to his family but when he

tried to give, it was but the violence and shame. Sex being the only act known to Cholly, both to express love and hate, that he offered to his own daughter, Pecola, under the mixed feeling of love and hate towards her. "Morrison establishes that Cholly has never had an example of how to parent, how to love. When he is confronted with feelings of love for his daughter, Cholly reacts in a way that feels most natural; that reaction for Cholly is sexual." Even in his relationship with Pauline, the violence that occurs between them is "paralleled only by their lovemaking" (43). Cholly is unable to express his love for his wife in any other way than sex. Likewise, when he has feelings of love towards his daughter, his reaction is unfortunately also sexual" (Guan -142).

Although upto this point Morrison has already made Cholly a total figure of failure, but connecting the Cholly's past as distinctively responsible for such a heinous act of Cholly against Pecola, it seems as if author tried to somehow empathize with him. "Cholly's rape of Pecola is not a conscious and deliberate act, according to Toni Morrison, but it is rather a culmination of the consequences of the psychological, social and personal depreciation undergone in a White dominant society that has constantly 'raped' Cholly since his childhood" (Mendy 776). Cholly was only of four days when his mother "placed him on a junk heap" (103). His father had already left him before his birth. It was Aunt Jimmy who brought him up but whose company neither delighted him nor helped him to develop as a man of responsibility. After the death of Aunt Jimmy, Cholly's first attempt to achieve his manhood was through an illicit but natural feeling of love and sex for Darlene. Morrison says about the first love experience of Cholly:

He examined her then with his fingers and she kissed his face and mouth. Cholly found her muscadine-lipped mouth distracting. Darlene released his head, shifted her body, and pulled down her pants. After some trouble with the buttons, Cholly dropped his pants down to his knees. Their bodies began to make sense to him, and it was not as difficult as he had thought it would be. (115)

However, Morrison gives an account of how his otherwise genuine and natural feelings have been turned to disaster by two White intruders. "The men had shone a flashlight right on his behind" (31). When Cholly tried to get up and correct his position, the men forced him to finish while watching him under the flashlight. "Get on wid it, nigger." "An' make it good, nigger, make it good" (116).

The incident not only dehumanizes Cholly but also made him incapable of action, according to situation. "After being abandoned by his parents, the most formatively brutalizing incident in Cholly's youth was the interruption of his first sexual encounter by armed Whites. The experience of being forced by the white hunters to continue relations with his partner constitutes a trauma not only in its humiliating intensity, but also in the impossibility of his being able to react the situation" (Mendy 777). During the incident it is also found that instead of directing his anger to white hunters, Cholly projected it at Darlene. While having sex he "looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it long, hard, and painfully, he hated her so much" (148). Chikwenye Ogunyemi presented it as, "Cholly's transference of anger onto the

helpless Darlene also illustrates his desperate clinging to the shred of manhood under the threat of racial emasculation” (Cited in Guan 533).

Therefore, the very first attempt of Cholly to become or act like a man was crushed, symbolically represented as white men “crush the pine needle under foot” (149). Thus, the incident damaged Cholly’s experience of a healthy sexual relationship; rather he learns to inflict hate and anger through sex which is otherwise exclusively an act of love. In the novel too we find “most times he’s thrashing away inside [Pauline] before she’s woke, and through when [she] is” (131). This suggested that unable to express himself in a healthy way, even to his wife, Cholly has lost the capability of differentiating between the emotions of love and anger. Also, sex being the only means to him to express whatever emotions he felt and so he expressed through it. In an interview in 1978, Morrison presented this aspect of Cholly’s personality as, he “might love [Pecola] in the worst of all positive ways because he can’t do this and he can’t do that. He can’t do it normally, healthily and so it might end up in [the rape]” (Jane Beckerman’s interview 38).

Not surprisingly, when Cholly rapes Pecola he first feels repulsive towards her but soon the feeling of tenderness came into him. Reeling under mixed emotions Cholly doesn’t feel lust for Pecola but the feeling of protectiveness and tenderness. His emotions are “not the usual desire to part tight legs with his own but a tenderness, a protectiveness”. These emotions can be attributed to his fatherly affection, but since Cholly, unaware to such feelings and sex was the only way known to him, so whatever the feelings were unfortunately they lead him to sex. However, his mixed feelings of repulsiveness and tenderness can be seen as after getting sexually satisfied, “Cholly stood and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her” (128-129).

Another attempt, presented by Morrison, on part of Cholly, to achieve his manhood was when he tried to get united with his father. However, that attempt turned into despair when his father denied to accept him or rejected him altogether. “During the process of searching for his father, Cholly believes that he is on the way towards reuniting with his father, or his manhood. However, the most frustrating aspect of his journey lies in the fact that when he meets his father, he finds his father unworthy of his respect; in other words, the moment he finds his father is also, quite ironically, the moment he lost his father, as a model of manhood, completely” (Guan 533). Abandoned by his mother, rejected by his father and upon the death of Aunt Jimmy, Cholly becomes free “dangerously free” as he has nothing more to lose now (125). “Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep” and as such he remained “alone with his perceptions and appetite, and they alone interested him” (126). It is this ironic freedom that seems responsible in the lives of African-American men like Cholly for whatever bold or more appropriately odd they do in their lives. While discussing Cholly as “free nigger” Morrison in an interview, *Intimate Things*, said:



Cholly, of course, lives a very tragic life, tragic in the sense that there was no reward, but he is the thing I keep calling a “free man,” not free in the legal sense, but free in his head. You see, this was a free man who could do a lot of things; and I think it’s a way of talking about what some people call the “bad nigger.” Not in the sense of one who is so carousing, but that adjective “bad” meaning, you know, bad and good. This is a man who is stretching, you know, he’s stretching, he’s going all the way within his own mind and within whatever his outline might be. (480-481)

However, despite the ample evidences presented by Morrison to show that whatever Cholly did, has its roots in his past, he cannot be fully absolved from the sin he committed. “Morrison does have sympathy for Cholly, she admits that she connects “Cholly’s ‘rape’ by the White men to his own of his daughter,” but he is not absolved, he dies soon after in a workhouse. And Morrison does not minimize the crime against his daughter. Pecola’s childlike “stunned silence,” “the tightness of her vagina,” the painfully gigantic thrust, “her fingers clenching,” “her shocked body” and finally her unconsciousness bear witness to Morrison’s aim in the novel to represent Pecola’s perspective, to translate her heartbreak” (Mendy 776). Instead of getting out of his past and to develop as a genuine and responsible father and husband, Cholly degraded himself to such an extent that led him to rape his own daughter. Guan argues that “Even though he is made impotent and dehumanized, he seemingly performs his manhood by oppressing the one who is inferior and more vulnerable than he” (534).

For the readers, it seems contradictory when in one hand Morrison criticizes Cholly as irresponsible and failed figure of father as well as husband and on the other hand she invited the readers’ pity while talking about Cholly’s parentless or in particular fatherless childhood. Nevertheless, this can be argued as her portrayal of African-American males as failures when projected even Cholly’s father as a failed figure of fatherhood. Instead of developing or offering what has been otherwise denied to him, Cholly himself developed as a figure of failure. What the patriarchy in the figure of his father snatched from him, he himself becomes the worst symbol of that failed patriarchy. The parental vacuum which was there in the life of Cholly, he offers the same vacuum to his own children.

Almost all the African-American men in the novel prove to be failures in delivering their duties or responsibilities both at familial as well as societal front. No doubt, Cholly as a representative figure of failure seems responsible for whatever destruction and devastation has happened to his family in general and to his daughter, Pecola, in particular, but other male characters like Sammy too failed in fulfilling their responsibilities either towards their family or society. Sammy Breedlove, like his father too failed to give any kind of relief to his family. Instead, he ran away from his home more than twenty-seven times before he was fourteen. This showed his escapist attitude towards his responsibilities. In an interview Morrison highlighted this aspect of the lives of young Black men as:

Although in sociological terms that is described as a major failing of black men—they do not stay home and take care of their children, they are not there—that has always

been to me one of the most attractive feature about black male life. I guess I'm not supposed to say that. But the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me.

Although belonged to Breedlove family, Sammy doesn't suffer as Pecola do. This indicates that the escapist approach of African-American men though saves them from sufferings but it also saves them from becoming a man of responsibility too. Like Cholly, Sammy too doesn't get an ideal world of patriarchy in the form of his father. So, what he get from his family or more suitably from his father, he is expected to forward the same or we can say more worse kind of failure and shame to the next generation as his father, Cholly, himself did. Like Cholly, Sammy too as a boy craves for manhood, but like Cholly, it is his father (Cholly himself) who thwarted his dreams and desires. Living in a quarreling family he often "cursed for a while, or left the house, or threw himself into the fray." Morrison showed that Cholly never became an ideal father to Sammy, rather, a feeling of aversion or dislike was between the two. During a fight between Cholly and Pauline, Sammy "suddenly began to hit his father about the head with both fist, shouting 'You naked fuck!' over and over and over" (33). He then "screamed, 'Kill him! Kill him!'" (33). Thus, we find that what Sammy got from his family or more suitably from his father is but the violence and hatred. However, his twenty seven times escape becomes his twenty seven times failure to build as a real and responsible man.

Unlike Sammy, Junior got frustrated by his otherwise "neat and quite" family (87). His mother, Geraldine, do not led him to grow as she "always brushed, bathed, oiled and shod" him (67). Thwarted in his desires of getting or achieving something like manly, he finds his ways to manhood in oppressing the inferior and vulnerable Pecola and the cat of his house. Through the character of Junior, Morrison presented the picture of failed patriarchy even among rich African-Americans too. Instead of directing his anger and frustration towards its source or to overcome with it, Junior directed it to helpless Pecola. When Junior invited Pecola inside his house, he finds her powerless and so tried to impose his authority over her. When Pecola asks that she would like to leave he said, "You can't get out. You're my Prisoner" thus becomes her master (70). He embarrasses her and projected his male power by throwing "a big black cat in her face" (70). But when he observes an association between Pecola and the cat, it threatened him of losing his authority over both. Junior "snatched the cat by one of its hind legs and began to swing it around his head in a circle" (71). When Pecola tried to stop him by grabbing his arm, the cat "was thrown full force against the window" and it died at the moment. This is how Junior projected his authority or one can say patriarchy by killing an innocent creature. In the height of his wickedness he blamed Pecola that "she killed the cat" (71). This is how Morrison highlighted the very important aspect of African-American men who projected their otherwise denied patriarchy by oppressing the one inferior to them or suitably more vulnerable than them.

Another dehumanizing male character we encounter in the novel is Mr. Henry. Morrison introduces him in the very beginning of the novel as "old dog" and "nasty" figure (8). In the novel we came to know that he left Della Jones as she "was just too clean for him" and "he wanted a woman to smell like a woman" (ibid). Incapable of holding any relationship of

responsibility he used to seduce vulnerable African-American women. Though, incapable of oppressing strong females, Henry makes Frieda as his target and tried to molest her. On this Frieda's father throw "an old tricycle at his head and knocked him off the porch" (77). He even took "the gun" and "shot at him" (ibid). This is how Morrison showed a picture of dehumanized African-American men, who otherwise failed at each level of social and familial responsibility, projected their patriarchy in oppressing the vulnerable and powerless African-American women. While describing Mr. Henry, Hua Guan comments as: "He fails to be a man, and thus resorts to forsaking woman and molesting girls as a way to his manhood." He then added, "Mr. Henry is nothing more than an impotent, dehumanizing man who constructs his manhood by sexually oppressing African American females" (536).

The last but the crucial character, as for as the structural need of the novel is concerned, is Soaphead Church. Morrison bestowed him with altogether different or one can say weird characteristics. "All his life he had a fondness for things- not the acquisition of wealth or beautiful objects, but a genuine love of worn objects. It was as though his disdain of human contact has converted itself into a craving for things humans had touched." In an interview Morrison acknowledged that Soaphead is the character whom she wanted or more appropriately needed in the novel. She says:

I had to have someone—her mother, of course, made her want it in the first place—who would give her the blue eyes. And there had to be somebody who could, who had the means; that kind of figure who dealt with fortune-telling, dream-telling and so on, who would also believe that she was right, that it was preferable for her to have blue eyes. And that would be a person like Soaphead. In other words, he would be wholly convinced that if Black people were more like white people they would be better off. And I tried to explain that in terms of his own West Indian background—a kind of English, colonial, Victorian thing drilled into his head which he could not escape. I needed someone to distill all of that, to say, "Yeah, you're right, you need them. Here, I'll give them to you," and really believe that he had done her a favor. Someone who would never question the request in the first place. That kind of black. It was very important in the story that the miracle happen, and she does get them, although I had to make it fairly logical in that only she can see them and that she's really flipped by that time. (483-484)

Like most of the males characters in the novel Soaphead too failed in performing the genuine role of a male but he too asserted his maleness through molesting African American females especially girls. Young girls attract him as they are "the humans whose bodies were least offensive" and "usually manageable and frequently seductive" (Morrison 132).

Incapable of holding relations, he was left by his love Velma who though married him despite "his fastidiousness and complete lack of humor" (134). But after the two months of marriage she finds him almost impossible, and "she simply left" (134). In other words Morrison showed him a figure of failure in terms of holding relations and their demands. Whenever he recalls Velma's departure he compared it as "She [Velma] left me the way people leave a hotel

room” (141). In this way, he dehumanizes himself. Incapable of performing a role of true man he became a pedophile. “He also dehumanized himself as a hotel room that is impotent to hold Velma back in his attempt to assert his ownership and manhood. Impotent and dehumanized, he turns to molesting “the little girls” even though he does not think that he is hurting them and that they feel harmed. While he is molesting little girls he feels a sense of owning the girls as things and therefore a feeling of thriving manhood” (Guan 536).

Though moved on the request of Pecola for ‘blue eyes,’ he too exploited her and in a way confirmed her madness and disintegration. “Pecola’s last encounter is with Soaphead Church, the West Indian of mixed parentage. Although Pecola’s request for blue eyes moves him tremendously, he too victimizes her by making her innocently poison a dog he detests” (Bharati and Joshi 41). Thus, Morrison made Soaphead a failed character who while doing favor to Pecola actually ruins her and put her to the culmination of madness.

Thus, throughout the novel Morrison presents African American males as impotent and dehumanizing figures of failure. Making Pecola as an emblem of victimization and Cholly as the major cause of it, Morrison made all the males, whosoever surrounds Pecola, responsible for her disintegration. However, it can be safely argued that Morrison doesn’t perpetuate hatred against the Black males but instead tried to bring their incapability of coping up with the oppressive society they live in. No doubt, through the failure of Cholly, Morrison somehow manages to present the failure of American society but rather it is a call for change in American society in general and African-American males in particular through realization and self-transformation.

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