

## Exile and the Dream of a Homeland in Susan Abulhawa's Mornings in Jenin

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### ملخص:

هذا المقال هو دراسة نقدية للأدبية الفلسطينية للاجئة سوزان أبو الهوى. هذه الرواية التاريخية التي تمزج التاريخ و التفاصيل الصحفية تصوّر تجربة الغربة و الإحساس القاسي بعدم الانتماء و الصدمة التي أحدثتها إسرائيل التي ارتكبت جرائم شنيعة ضد الفلسطينيين و ارضهم. في سردها لقصة أربع أجيال لعائلة أبو الحجة، فإن رواية صباحيات جنين التي هي قصة ملحمة حقيقية تبين تجربة الإزاحة القاسية للفلسطينيين و طردهم من أراضيهم و حلمهم بالعودة. إن الرواية هي تصوير جيد للأثار النفسية و الجسدية الوخيمة للاحتلال الإسرائيلي. بما أن الرواية الفلسطينية هي قليلة خاصة بالإنجليزية فإن هذه الرواية هي رد فعل للسرد الإسرائيلي الذي هيمن على الأدب. إن الرواية قد كتبت بالإنجليزية كي تصل إلى العالم بأكمله و تساعده على معرفة القضية الفلسطينية.

### Abstract:

This article is a critical reading of Mornings in Jenin by the Palestinian refugee author Susan Abulhawa. This historical novel, which fuses fiction, history, and journalistic details, depicts the experience of exile, the unbearable feeling of rootlessness, and the trauma inflicted by Israel who commits heinous crimes against the Palestinians and their land. By telling the story of four generations of a Palestinian family, Mornings in Jenin, which is a real epic narrative, evinces the Palestinians' harsh experience of displacement and eviction from their homeland and their dream of returning. The novel is a very good portrayal of the grave psychological and physical effects of Israel's conquest. As novels about the Palestinian cause are very few, Particularly in English, this novel is written as a reaction to the Jewish narrative that has long dominated literature. The novel is written in English in order to reach the entire world and to help it learn about the Palestinian cause.

### Résumé:

Cet article est une étude critique du roman de l'écrivaine palaténienne abritée Souzane Abou Elhawa. Ce roman historique qui mêle l'Histoire et les détails scientifiques, journalistiques représente l'expérience de l'étrangeté, aussi que le sentiment dur de la non appartenance et le choc que Izraïl a fait, celle-ci a fait beaucoup de crimes contre les palestiniens et leur terre. Dans son roman « les matinées de Janine » elle raconte l'histoire de quatre générations de la famille Abou lhija. Cette histoire est réelle qui montre l'expérience du déplacement des palestiniens et leur évacuation de leur terre et leur rêve d'y revenir. Ce roman est une représentation bien claire de des effets négatifs psychologiques et corporels de l'invasion izraïlienne. Parceque le roman est rare surtout en anglais, il est une réaction de la narration izraïlienne qui a envahi aussi la littérature. Ce roman est écrit en anglais pour avoir un écho dans le monde entier.

Poetry is the prime literary genre which depicts the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In comparison to the Arabic novel, in general, the rarity of the Palestinian novel is remarkable, especially in English. In her note at the end of Mornings in Jenin, Susan Abulhawa avows one of the motivations for writing the novel. She states: "Though I met him only once in person, and briefly so, the late Dr. Edward Said influenced the making of this book in no small way. He lamented once that the Palestinian narrative was lacking in literature, and I incorporated his disappointment into my resolve" (252) The colonizer seeks to rewrite the history of the colonized nation and to put its true and original history under erasure. In the history of colonialism, colonizing the mind and geo-political control always go hand-in-hand. According to Frantz Fanon, the colonizer aims at "emptying [...] the native's brain of form

and content”(2001: 169) The colonizers always try to efface the history of the colonized people. Edward Said states that one of the main aims of the colonizer is the “blotting out of knowledge” of the colonized, thus, turning them “into people without history” Said calls this the “moral epistemology of imperialism”(qtd in Saddik M. Gobar, “Narrating the Palestinian in Philip Roth’s Operation Shylock: A Confession” 118)

For so many years, Israel has imposed its own version of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the West. The truth of the Palestinian history has often been falsified by international media which is controlled by the US. Joe Cleary asserts the important role of literature in recording the history of Palestine. He states that “a basic aim of Palestinian writing is to offer a Palestinian counter-narrative to the more established Israeli version”( “The Meaning of Disaster” 192). In fact, nations are narrations. Thus, as a reaction to the imperial narratives, the novel is a means of resistance for people who do not have military weapons like the ones possessed by Israel. Palestinian writers write resistant narratives, a kind of talking back or writing back, that Edward Said views as a good way of resisting imperial narratives. According to Joe Cleary, “One of the abiding objectives of Palestinian narrative [...] is to challenge the suppression of the Palestinian version of events and to insert the Palestinians back into history”(193). Since the Israeli writers’ representation of Palestine and the Palestinians is oriental and stigmatizing, The duty thrust upon the Palestinian writer is to correct the Israeli narrative which hides and falsifies the truth. It tries to reveal the Palestinians’ victimization by the Jews who stole their land and commit heinous crimes against them. PhilpMetres writes: “Since Palestinian literature has emerged in the wake of suffering, exile and occupation, one of its cultural projects has been to recover (and in some sense articulate for the first time) the repressed or lost facts of Palestinian life”(“Vexing Resistance” 87).

The Arabic language has often been the language of the Palestinian narrative. And this is probably one of the reasons why it suffers from the lack of readability in the West. Considering the problem of the audience, using the English language is likely to make the Palestinian novel reach the Western world, and thus make Westerners learn about the Palestinian cause. The use of an international language is likely to convey the burden of one’s history and experience to the whole globe. In this regard and in her commentary on her novel *Mornings in Jenin*, which is written in English, Susan Abulhawafeels that her story has reached people in the West. She writes:

I think times are changing. There is a new generation of writers who have lived most of their lives in the West and we are telling our story, finally, in our own voice and in Western languages. It has been Israel’s narrative that has dominated literature until recently, which was mostly propelled by Leon Uris’ novel *Exodus*. It was natural that the first story be that of the conquerors, because they were mostly from Europe and spoke in the languages and nuances of western cultures. They also told the story that the West wanted to hear. It was easier to hear a story of a land without a people. It was a romantic happy ending. The Palestinian narrative was in Arabic. It was unappealing, and it didn’t reach the West in those early years. But our voice is coming of age in Western literature now and I think there is a real interest among readers to hear our story(qtd in Olivia Snaije, “The Many Lives and Languages”).

*Mornings in Jenin* narrates the history of Palestine from El Nakba (the catastrophe) in 1948 to 2002. It is a historical novel which covers the most important events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the Nakba (1948), the Naksa (1967), and Sabra and Shatila in 1982. Each chapter is headed by a significant date of an important event in the Palestinian-Israeli struggle.

This epic novel tells the story of four generations of Abulhija family, who live in the village of EinHod. It opens with a description of the Palestinians' lifestyle, culture, and their harmonious and peaceful life before Israel's conquest.

Before colonialism, bonds of intimacy between members of the Palestinian family and their attachment to their land were very strong. In fact, "Attachment to God, land, and family was the core of [the Palestinians'] being and that is what they defended and sought to keep"(28). Love of God, love of the land, and love of the family are the pillars of their life.

Love of the land is shown through the character Yehya, the patriarch of Abulhija family, who did not allow his son Hassan to pursue education because he was afraid it would separate him from the main obligation of farming and serving the land, which was passed down from one generation to another. Yehya says: "Books will do nothing but come between you and the land"(16). Many years later, Yehya apologized to Hasan for preventing him from achieving his academic dreams, but his behavior reveals his mad love for the land, which is in his blood. The inhabitants of EinHod are combatants who have protected their land from many conquests throughout history; they "want only to live on their land as they always had. For they had endured many masters-Romans, Byzantines, Crusades, Ottomans, British-and nationalism was inconsequential"(32)

Few days or weeks before the important historical event known as El Nakba (1948), Hassan was informed that the Jews who call Palestine "a land without a people" are "going to make it a Jewish homeland"(25). A land without a people for a people without a land, which has always been the Israelis' slogan, reveals their policy of ethnic cleansing to found a never-existing before state based on crimes and bloody murder.

By July 24, 1948, EinHod, the village of Abulhija family was bombarded .The Israelis, who have always been like nomads with no communal sense of home, forcibly and violently evicted the Abulheja family and the other inhabitants of EinHod from their land. and their guns prevented them from returning. They went to Jenin where they found many other refugees who escaped the Zionists' violent attacks. By 1948, many Palestinians, who are the rightful owners of the land, became refugees. The Nakba did not just result in an Odyssey, but it led to the violent disintegration of the society and its communal life; "The 1948 War that led to the creation of the state of Israel also resulted in the devastation of Palestinian society. At least 80 percent of the Palestinians who lived in the major part of Palestine upon which Israel was established-more than 77 percent of Palestine's territory-Became refugees"(Lila Abu Lughod and Ahmad H. Sa'di 9).

The nakba is a crucial event in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It had completely shattered and changed the entire life and the fate of Palestinians. It marks a borderline between an idyllic Palestine before the Israeli occupation and the loss of this ideal life with the foundation of the state of Israel. In her memorial book *The Object of Memory*, which tells the history of the Palestinian village EinHoud, Susan Slyamovics writes: "A Jewish Israeli artists' colony founded in 1959 has come to replace an agriculturally-based Palestinian village [EinHoud] of traditional stone houses that traces its establishment to the twelfth century"(xii).

The Nakba did not just expel the Palestinians from their land. It also shattered the unity of the families. Dalia's and Hasan's son Ismael was kidnapped by a Jewish soldier Moshe whose wife, Jolanta, does not bear children. Dalia suffered the pain and the agonies of losing her child until her death. In fact, her loss of her baby makes her almost insane. Her personality has entirely changed since this traumatic incident. The kidnapped Palestinian child, Ismael, who was given the name David, was raised in Moshe's house, and he grew up to fight his own people. His pseudo-father's imperialistic creeds are evident in Moshe's conversations with his wife. He says: "We will live to see the land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River with nothing but Jews [...] Palestine will be ours"(35). Moshe evicted Palestinians from

their land without mercy. He was motivated by the Jewish colonial myth, which he repeats like a mantra, "A land without a people, for a people without a land"(37).

Abulhawa's novel is rich in realistic details. Abulhawa inserts quotes from newspaper articles which write about the Palestinian/Israel conflict. In the period of El Nakba, Hasan in one of the newspapers he was reading to his folks, quotes the Swedish mediator, Count Folke Bernadotte, who states: "It would be an offense against the principles of elemental justice if these innocent victims of the conflict were denied the right to return to their homes, while Jewish immigrants flow into Palestine, and, indeed, at least offer the threat of permanent replacement of the Arab refugees who had been rooted in the land for centuries"(38). This Swedish mediator was soon killed by the Zionists for reporting the truth and for condemning the Israelis' crimes.

In a refugee camp in Jenin, Hasan and Dalia got a new baby, Amal, who was born in July 1955. She represents the third generation of Abulhija family. In her childhood, Amal was taught by Hassan the importance of the strong ties between people and the land. He told her: "[the land] belong to you, as you can belong to it. We come from the land, give our love and labor to her, and she nurtures us in return. When we die, we return to the land. In a way, she owns us. Palestine owns us and we belong to her"(54). The Old Lady, an olive tree who is 500 years old represents Palestine herself, the virginal land that can't be tarnished or possessed. Hasan told his daughter Amal that "no one owned Old Lady. This old girl was here before any of us, and she will be here long after we're gone"(69). In Jenin, people remain emotionally tied to their land. The poems by Imru' al-Qais which Hasan read to Amal express their intense love and belonging to Palestine and also their crying over its ruins. They also convey Palestinians' grief and mourning for the loss of their beloved homeland. These poems express the yearning for the old days. This nostalgia for the glorious past is reinforced by quoting from poets like Mahmoud Darwish.

Living as a refugee who lost his homeland because of dispossession and forced departure, Yehya, the family patriarch who could not endure the pain of being separated from the land, returned to his village, EinHod, secretly, and he stayed there for days.. In fact, the "events of the Palestinian expulsion in 1948 have rendered the old family home a place of painful memory and a symbol of what has been taken"( Lila Abu Lughod & Ahmad H. Sa'di 2). There is a spiritual connection between him and the land. He grew up on the land, loved it, and worked it. He says: "That terrain is in my blood [...] I know every tree and every bird. The soldiers do not"(40). Yehya visited his homeland for a second time, but this was the last time he saw his homeland. The death of Yehya, who represents the generation before the Israeli occupation, signals the loss of the land itself. Some people said that Yehya died because of the traumatic experience of being evicted from his land. He died carrying three olives in his hand and some figs in his pockets as a gesture to embrace his land again and to keep himself attached to it.

After El Nakba, another very crucial event in the Palestinian history occurred in 1967. It is called El Naksa. It resulted in the bloody murder of many Palestinians. Amal's mother, Dalia, died during these horrendous massacres, and her father disappeared during the Six-Day war. With the death of her parents, Amal lost the source of strength and emotional support. In 1968, Yousef, the only remaining member of Amal's family left his sister to join the resistance. Before his departure, he left a very moving letter to Amal in which he says: "I am like a caged bird here. I know you are too [...] It is unbearable to think of our future as nullified, condemned to an eternal refugee's life of subjugation and shackles. The resistance is forming and eventually we will take back what is rightfully ours. You were born a refugee, but I promise I will die, if I must, so you do not die a refugee"(99). Palestinians are deprived of their basic right of remaining in their homeland. They are evicted from their land, and they live a miserable life in very poor camps, while people who belong nowhere are flowing into their land like Gog and Magog. Yusef's decision to join the resistance is an act which is

allowed by the international law that permits the colonized people to defend themselves and liberate their land by whatever means they have.

The central protagonist Amal, who was born after El Nakba in a refugee camp, experienced the awful feeling of being homeless. She was sent to an orphanage in Jerusalem after the death of her mother Dalia, the disappearance of her father Hasan, and her brother Yusef's decision to join the resistance. Being one of the best pupils in the orphanage, Amal got a scholarship, and she travelled to the US to study. In her first months in the US, she feels buffeted by an extreme sense of cultural displacement. She feels exiled both from her land and from her culture, and she finds herself striving to adopt in this exotic culture. Amal says: "Feelings of inadequacy marked my first months in America. I floundered in that open-ended world, trying to fit in. But my foreignness showed in my brown skin and accent. Statelessness clung to me like bad perfume and the airplane hijackings of the seventies trailed my Arabic surname"(135). From a life of orphanage, Amal's suffering became stronger as she found it difficult to overcome the unbearable feeling of ElGhurba, or the state of feeling estranged. Amal felt "diminished, out of place, and eager to belong"(137).

In this xenophobic culture that makes her subject to racial oppression, Amal strives to strike roots in America, to adopt and to escape from the nightmarish past. She tries to efface her Palestinian identity and to cleanse her mind from the horrific memories of the past. Amal abandoned politics to enjoy more life, and she cuts ties with her family by not writing to them. She even changed her name to Amy; "Amal without the hope. I was a word drained of its meaning. A woman emptied of her past. The truth is that I wanted to be someone else"(142)..Amal's name carries the Palestinians' hope of regaining their homeland. But this name reminds her not just of her fate of being a refugee, but also of being a lonely person, deprived of the right to live in a family which is shattered by the ravaging crimes of Israel. "I was a woman of few words and no friends. I was Amy. A name drained of meaning. Amal, long or short vowel, emptied of hope"(192). Amal adopts the Americans' style of life. She says:

I metamorphosed into an unclassified Arab-Western hybrid, unrooted and unknown. I drank alcohol and dated several men...I spun in cultural vicissitude, wandering in and out of the American ethos until I lost my way. I fell in love with American and even felt that love reciprocated. I live in the present, keeping the past hidden away. But sometimes the blink of my eyes was a twitch of contrition that brought me face-to-face with the past(174).

Despite her endeavors to deny her previous self, Amal's deep-seated internalization of the trauma of her uprootedness makes it difficult for her to bury her memories. She realizes that the homeland exerts a strong pull. She avows that "no matter what façade I bought, I forever belonged to that Palestinian nation of the banished to no place, no man, no honor. My Arabness and Palestine's primal cries were my anchors to the world."(143). Though she is physically distant, Amal's mind and heart are always dwelling there even if she tries to push her past away. She cannot forget that she belongs to those people who were deprived of their land and forced into exile.

After getting her master degree, Amal went to Lebanon after receiving a call from her brother Yusef, who married Fatima, a woman he left few years ago in order to join the resistance. In Lebanon, Amal found a job as a teacher, and she married her brother's friend Madjid who was a doctor. Amal's dream of a better future was destroyed because of the Israeli invasion of 1982, which resulted in the massacres of Sabra and Shatila which are among the most barbaric massacres in the history of humanity. In the US, Amal heard about the bloody events that took the life of her husband Majid, her brother's wife Fatima and the latter's daughter Falasteen and another unborn baby. Her brother Yusef was in Tunisia during

the invasion. Amal was waiting the arrival of Majid to join her in the US in order to escape violence and raise their unborn baby safely. Before meeting Amal, Majid decided not to marry and to devote his life to the Palestinian cause. But the love of the family in the novel is as strong as the love of the land. Amal's profound and unspeakable sadness and shock for the loss of her husband and her relatives has changed her in almost the same way Dalia changed after the loss of her child. During the horrendous crimes of Sabra and Shatila, Yousef's children were killed, and his wife's belly was ripped. This very shocking and monstrous crime was reported in newspapers. In one of them, Amal from the US read about Fatima's death and she saw a picture showing to the world the tearing of her unborn baby from her womb; "Someone had slit open the woman's stomach, cutting sideways and then upwards, perhaps trying to kill her unborn child"(178).

Chapter thirty three, which is entitled "Pity the Nation", alludes to one of Robert Fisk's books that bears the same title. In this chapter, Susan Abulhawa quotes from Robert Fisk's book which gives accounts of Sabra and Shatila massacres. He says:

They were everywhere, in the road, the laneways, in the back yards and broken rooms, beneath crumpled masonry and across the top of garbage tips. When we had seen a hundred bodies, we stopped counting. Down every alleyway, there were corpses—women, young men, babies and grandparents—lying together in lazy and terrible profusion where they had been knifed or machine-gunned to death. Each corridor through the rubble produced more bodies. The patients at the Palestinian hospital had disappeared after gunmen ordered the doctors to leave. Everywhere, we found signs of hastily dug mass graves(176).

Sabra and Shatila turned into blood baths. The tragedy of Amal and the Palestinian people is more profound than anything that can be written or published. Robert Fisk, in his description of the massacres, adds that

there were women lying in houses with their skirts torn up to their waists and their legs wide apart, children with their throats cut, rows of young men shot in the back after being lined up at an execution wall. There were babies—blackened babies because they had been slaughtered more than 24 hours earlier and their small bodies were already in a state of decomposition—tossed into rubbish heaps alongside discarded U.S. Army ration tins, Israeli army medical equipment, and empty bottles of whisky(177).

The world was listening with an icy silence and watching with a passive gaze all the horrendous, primitive, and barbaric crimes that Israel committed against the innocent civilians who were imploring to be rescued from Israel's political dustbin. Sadly, a "week after the massacre at Sabra and Shatila, Newsweek magazine determined that the most important story of the previous seven days had been the death of Princess Grace"(181). Israel has greatly benefited from the fervid and unconditional support of the most powerful countries in the world. Her violent and heinous crimes have never been described as terroristic; "Ariel Sharon remained free to pursue the politics of violence [...]The forty-third president of the United States of America, George W. Bush, referred to him as a 'man of peace'(182).

Amal wept bitterly but silently for the death of her husband, and she felt that her soul died with him. There is nothing in the world that can help her heal her wounds, soothe heartpains and pick up the pieces of her broken soul. Despite her deep psychic wounds, Amal could survive the monstrous events Israel committed in Sabra and Shatila. Dalia's words which always ring in her ears help her regain her strength. It was as if Dalia felt the tragic fate

that was waiting Amal; thus, she wanted her to be a creature with a paralysed ability to feel pain and suffering. She used to tell her when she was a child: "Whatever you feel, keep it inside"(179). Amal, like Dalia, has grown up to endure pain and to moan in silence. Like Amal, the heinous violence of Israel has not made the Palestinians give up; they made of them strong and resistant people. After Sabra and Shatila massacres, Amal gave birth to a child she called Sara. The latter was everything for her after losing the best things in this world.

David learned from Moshe's confession, while he was dying, that he was not born a real Jew and that he was snatched violently from an Arab woman's hand when he was a child. After a long journey, David reconnects with his sister Amal, the only remaining member of his family. Amal's meeting with her brother, after three decades of separatedness, has fostered her nostalgia and ignited her burning desire to return to the homeland. So, she left her land of alienation and exile that constitutes an "unbearable rift forced between a human body and a native place, between the self and its true home"(Reflection on Exile 173). Amal returns to Jenin with David and her daughter Sara, who wanted to know about her homeland, the history of her people and their plight. The title "mornings in Jenin" carries the intense feeling of nostalgia to the childhood years when Hasan used to read poetry for Amal each morning. The appearance of her lost brother David, who new his real identity, revealed her suppressed desire to return to Jenin.

In Jenin, Sara started to learn about the history of her people and her mother's past, which Amal hid in order not to make her suffer as she herself suffered. Amal told her daughter Sara that her father was killed in an event similar to 9/11. She says: "Do you remember what it was like when the Twin Towers fell on September eleventh? [...] Your father was killed the same way. Israel bombed our apartment building the night before he was going to leave Beirut to join us."(234). The falling of the Twin Towers in 9/11 is a remarkable event in history, but the murder of Palestinians and the bombing of their houses always go unnoticed. Sabra and Shatila for Amal was her 9/11.

In Jenin, another massacre against Palestinians occurred in 2002. Israel's prime minister at that time, Ariel Sharon is one of the most criminal and racist Zionists in history. Sharon was elected on February, 2001. In the heinous crimes on 2002, Amal was shot while she was saving the life of her 16 years old daughter Sara. In the moment of dying and in her comment on the soldier who was carrying the gun to kill her, Amal says: "My eyes, soft with a mother's love and a dead woman's calm, weigh him down with his own power and I think he will cry [...] I feel sad for him. Sad for the boy bound to the killer. I am sad for the youth betrayed by their leaders for symbols and flags and war and power"(238). The quote reveals the Palestinians' intense humanity in the mid of the tragic and the savage act of murdering an innocent woman whose heart shines with love and compassion. Though she died in her birthplace, in the moment of dying "[t]he petition of memory pulled her back, and still back, to a home she had never known"(9). Amal died before fulfilling her ultimate dream of returning home. "For Palestinians, the places of the pre-Nakba past and the land of Palestine itself have an extraordinary charge. They are not simply sites of memory but symbols of all that has been lost and sites of longing to which return is barred"(Lila Abu Lughod & Ahmad H. Sa'di 13).

Sara who represents the fourth generation of Abulhija family will carry the burden of the Palestinian cause. She was overwhelmed with sadness when she heard about the death of Haj Salem, who was buried alive. This man used to tell Amal stories about Palestine. Writing to her dead mother on the death of Haj Salem, Sara writes: "To have lived so long, only to be crushed to death by a bulldozer. Is this what it means to be Palestinian?"(243). The death of Haj Salem, the Palestinian story-teller does not signal the collapse of the Palestinian narrative. The transfer of memories between generations is very important. Palestinians have the same tale of horror to tell many generations to come. They have "a single tale of dispossession, of being stripped to the bones of one's humanity, of being dumped like rubbish into refugee

camps unfit for rats. Of being left without rights, home, or nation”(66). Abulhawa wrote the novel after Jenin massacre of 2002 to expose it to the world , because it was denied by the official report of the United Nations and US media, which serve Israel’s interests.

### Conclusion

Abulhawa’s novel calls for the intervention of the international community on behalf of the Palestinians. The novel is a means of resisting Israel’s brutal occupation and its brutal narratives. It allows the Palestinian Subaltern to speak. Abulhawa’s novel attempts to impose and correct the Palestinian history, which has been misrepresented and distorted in Israeli literature and in Western literature and media. The history of Palestine has long been narrated by a monolithic voice, that of the Israeli writers who falsify history and the truth. Thus, Abulhawa writes a discourse of resistance as a counter to the Western discourse which misinterpreted the Palestinians’ resistance as a form of violence and terrorism. Though the author tries to be separate the writer from the political activist, *Mornings in Jenin* is one of the best examples of resistance literature. Its powerful message reminds us of the novels and short stories written by Ghassan Kanafani.

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