

## **ELECHI AMADI'S WOMEN: VOICES OF REASON**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article assesses Elechi Amadi's novelistic attitude to gender relations in his novels of the 60s and 70s, when traditional African society was still very strongly male-dominated, and reaches the conclusion that he saw in the woman the real force of stability and progress. Through highly successful narrative incidents he demonstrates how women succeed where men stumble, especially in conflict resolution and home management. This view brings its relevance to bear on the present-day scene where attempts are made, both within the African milieu and on the international stage, to endow women with a new role. Amadi maintains that the women have always shaped society with their positive thinking, and that therefore their importance needs greater recognition, not re-invention.

*“A stupid Arab woman, a mere woman  
has caused us irreparable damage and  
you sit here and talk of superpower.”*

The history of thought is also that of mankind. Thinking is that particular idiosyncratic strand that sets man apart from, and above, the other species. It is this evolutionary ascendancy that Descartes celebrated in his hurrah: *Je pense donc je suis!* To say man is alive is to acknowledge his thinking activity, and thinking is the motor of volition, of reason. It is for this reason that the war of the races has centred round the prerogative of thought. Each race arrogates unto itself the exclusiveness of that faculty, and views the other races in a downward relationship with itself.

The opening citation from Stanley-Pierre Ngeyi's *I see War, War; Real War Everywhere* (1993) signals the rung occupied by women on the ladder of thought. They are *thought*, precisely by men, stupid; and the derogatory intensity of the qualifier leaves one in little doubt that the masculine spite of yesteryears for the womenfolk is still entrenched. In traditional African society, more perhaps than anywhere else, this condescension continues to manifest itself with ferocious actuality, the inroads made by globalising modernism notwithstanding. This intemperate feeling of superiority by men is captured most graphically and most paradoxically by Calixte Beyala, the talented Cameroonian female novelist in *Les honneurs perdus* (1996), in which Bénérafa, the protagonist Saïda's father, breaks down when the midwife announces to him that the boy he is expecting is actually a girl (24). The expectant father would have preferred a dead boy to a life girl. (*J'aurais préféré que mon fils soit mort au lieu d'être*

transformé en fille.) (25). The idea of a girl child is so unacceptable to him, so utterly despicable, that he employs the magic powers of a local healer to reverse the sex of the child. Predictably, he fails. Similarly, in Amin Zaovi's *The Inordinate Passions of the Body* (1985), the hero Amin's father bars women from reading and writing, and sends his wife away to her family in anger each time she delivers a daughter.

The further back one goes in African fiction, the more pronounced is society's preference for male offspring and the more insignificant is the woman's presence and action in such fiction. This trend is in keeping with the return to the mainspring of traditional culture and therefore to its patriarchal beginnings.

Elechi Amadi has often been read as if he was just another spineless conformist to the patriarchal order. Naana Bangiwa Horne, for one, indicts him for providing in *The Concubine* (1966) a perspective that is male and limiting. Interestingly enough, Horne authored this critique in 1986, quite a few years after Amadi's other publications, notably *The Great Ponds* (1969), his autobiography *Sunset in Biafra* (1973), and *The Slave* (1978). All these works provide ample disclaimers to Horne's expressed views. For sure, there are men and women in Amadi's fictional universe, men and women caught in the intricate web of crises and events. But a closer reading of the different fictional situations reveals a strongly iconoclastic, even revolutionary temperament that shakes the received assumptions at their very roots.

Amadi's views on the woman, the traditional African woman in particular, are evidence that he championed the cause of female emancipation and empowerment long before the bandwagon of the late 80s and early 90s started clamouring for gender equality and female affirmative action. Amadi wrote mainly in the 60s and 70s, at a time when, according to Horne, "men writers (tended) to overplay the sexuality of their female characters, creating the impression that women (had) no identity outside their sexual roles" (120). But at that time already he produced works that qualified as feminist novels, that is to say "black male's fiction which manifests a critical awareness of women's struggle to overturn patriarchy" (Mainimo 2001: 38–39).

This paper stakes a simple claim; namely that women in Amadi's early novels are neither passive spectators of village life nor resigned victims of male domination, but characters who attract attention by their independence and sense of purpose. Such portraiture is all the more striking because it comes at a time when the dominant novelistic attitude was to present the woman as an insignificant figure in the daily politics of village life, unearthing in the process what Lloyd Brown has called "the palpable disadvantages of her day-to-day existence" (7).

Amadi's first novel, *The Concubine*, is steeped in the mythical aura of a traditional society in its pristine beginnings. The mythical feel of life in Omokachi and the adjoining villages issues from the Sea King, an anthropomorphic force who contests a woman with the villagers and visits all her human suitors with a mysterious death. We are just a step away here from

the Greek world of the *Oresteia* and *Prometheus Bound* where divine jealousy empties a fearsome anger on the human causes, real or suspected, of such anger. *The Great Ponds*, on the other hand, is a transitional novel in which myth and the supernatural are receding and human will is affirming itself more and more perceptibly. The gods in this work have shed much of their omnipotence and become for most of them only names whose importance is dwindling by every passing day. Although the dibias (traditional fortune -tellers and psychiatrists) are still a dominant feature of the social fabric, they are no longer quite as influential as they are in the world of *The Concubine*. In *The Great Ponds* men have stirred into action and causality is more ostensibly human. The basic communal strands are still alive, but their strength and relevance are beginning to be seriously undermined by rising individual interests. For example, Wago the leopard killer is noted more for his egoism than for his communal spirit. It is also through him that the disintegrative forces exercise their nefarious grip on the community. *The Slave* completes the progression towards individualism. In the universe of this third book, the gods no longer hold exclusive sway. Villagers have evolved from just acquiescent components of a group into individuals with choices and preferences. The emergence of an individualistic society also provides the appropriate framework for the analysis of character and for a more comprehensive appreciation of gender roles.

*The Concubine* portrays a society in which the woman's image conforms to the stiff dictates of tradition. Cast in a strait jacket, the woman in Omokachi village cannot venture one step outside the social path traced for her. All attempts at self-expression by women are checked by the overriding interests of the masculine guilds and ritual castes. When Ihuoma dares to harvest plantains on the disputed piece of land, she is confronted by Madume who brashly orders her to surrender her harvest. Her spirited resistance is admirable but ultimately futile as she finally relinquishes the plantains to a triumphant Madume. One can almost feel the how-dare-you sense of effrontery in Madume's attitude. Amadi himself rounds up the incident with a chauvinistic stroke: "Ihuoma put down the basket quietly, removed the plantain and began to move away. Only a very foolish woman would try to struggle with a man (68)." This is not speculation; it is a statement of insight, made by an author who says about himself: "For the first twelve years of my life I lived either in my village Aluu or in adjoining villages with the same cultural background, so I have a fairly good idea of my people's way of life." (Nyamndi 1982: 74).

Later in a conversation with Ekwueme, Ihuoma herself underscores the discrimination suffered by woman:

"I cannot speak in proverbs."

"You don't need to."

"Why not?"

"You are a woman."

"Women are unlucky. They are denied many things."

"List them."

“They are uncountable. Look, we are not allowed to climb trees, we may not eat the meat of a kite, the gizzard of a bird is also forbidden, we...” (84). The suspension marks are indicative of the unnamed deprivations endured by women.

In referring to women as unlucky, Ihuoma is establishing a euphemistic identity with what Josephine Donovan terms the Aristotelian notion of inappropriateness or valour in a woman (xv). To Aristotle, it was not appropriate for a woman to be clever or courageous; in other words, there was a *manly* behaviour not befitting of a woman. This Greco-African arrogance of man is a dominant feature of *The Concubine* and one of its strongest supports of Horne's argument that “the world (Amadi) projects ... is a male world, and the voices heard are mainly male voices” (120). This is all the more true because, as she said earlier, “the statements made by these voices and even by the authorial voice reflect not just a masculine attitude to women but a chauvinistic one” (120).

Chauvinism is in itself a sufficiently grave psychic ailment. Exacerbated by phallic tyranny, it results in total loss of reason. Female victims of such male disorders are the elected protagonists of male African fiction. In *A Grain of Wheat*, when the white man tells the Kikuyu that a powerful woman sat on the throne in his country, they laugh at this eccentric man “whose skin had been so scalded that the black outside had peeled off,” and then conclude that “the hot water must have gone into his head” (11). The collective unconscious of the patriarchal Kikuyu cannot yield to the fallacy of a woman potentate. Even reminiscences of the Kikuyu people's last rule by a woman are lost in sensual imagery. The monarch Wangu Makeri is remembered not so much for her leadership qualities as for her attractiveness as a woman (11–12). She stirs a lascivious urge in the men, an urge that is a male sentimental stereotype at variance with the staid regard for leadership. Like Ngugi's Makeri, Ngeyi's female protagonist, too, comes under the cutting edge of male arrogance. She is in actual fact a young educationist and scientist who had found out that a computer could be programmed to make a nuclear bomb in flight (122–123). Her invention is used by her country Libya to annihilate the American fleet in the Mediterranean and to move the entire world to the brink of war. But to the stunned and humiliated American President this nuclear genius is nothing but a stupid Arab woman, a mere woman. This is fiction quite all right, but as Edward Said says, “You have to step outside the novel, the play, for the larger truths” (25). And following in his wake Frederic Jameson posits:

The novel is always an attempt to reconcile the consciousness of writer and reader with the objective world at large; so it is that the judgements we make on the great novelists fall not on them, but on the moment of history which they reflect and on which their structures pass sentence.  
(42)

When we step outside the fictional world of *I see War, War, Real War Everywhere* and seek to reconcile our consciousness as readers with the

objective society at large, we are faced with the plight of women in Afghanistan under Taliban rule, in Northern Nigeria under the Sharia law, in South Africa in the apartheid days, and in several other corners of the earth where human solidarity is fractured by male greed.

Social evolution has demonstrated that human societies shed their rigidity as they progress into cultural enlightenment. Chronologically, *The Concubine* initiates a trilogy that also comprises *The Great Ponds* and *The Slave* in that order. Set in the pre-dawn twilight of Ibo cultural evolution, action in *The Concubine* is ordered by the crystalline rigour emblematic of untouched human groupings. In the case of Omokachi and the adjoining villages, that rigour translates into a patriarchal superintendence that suffocates the women out of any meaningful existence. To this extent, we are in total accord with Horne when she says:

Amadi's depiction of Ihuoma is dehumanising. She is more like a piece of land, or a horse, or some form of property that is there to be grabbed. Clearly, the only significance that women have in Amadi's novel is sexual. All exist in a man's world, to be used by the men as sexual vehicles. (123)

So far, so good. It is here, though, that Amadi's fiction parts ways with Horne, the better to quell her outrage. Outside Ihuoma, none of Amadi's female characters is fleshed out in any appreciable detail. They are for the most part minor characters expelled to the fringes of village life. However, their roles swell to greatness when looked at in terms of what effect their little actions have on the fortunes of their society. *The Great Ponds* and *The Slave* together provide a convincing picture of women in action in a time and place not very much given to recognising and promoting female strengths.

*The Great Ponds* is a novel about war, "that particular moment of hatreds and sufferings, a man's world – where gunpowder is in the air and where the combatant's weaknesses and heroism are revealed" (Stora 80). In this war-torn environment, the positive role of women is emphasised through the participation of first wives in the process of decision-making and execution. First wives are their men's right hand. It is to them that important family matters are handed for management. When Olumba's wife Oda is taken into captivity during one of Aliakoro's night raids on Chiolu, she leaves behind a son. Olumba hands the son over to his first wife Ngoma for care. This may look like one of the routine chores of the traditional wife, but the fact that the decision conforms to established hierarchy is a demonstration of the men's readiness to take the women more seriously: respect the first wife and you have respected the other wives. Eze Okehi, the chief of Chiolu, also sends his first wife to the dibia for clarification on the fate of the pregnant woman sold off into slavery by Isiali village. Even more revealingly, it is the same (unnamed) woman who pronounces the first condemnation of the war:

Why can't men take advice?" she moaned. "They think they are wise but they are foolish as a baby in arms. Look at all the sufferings of the past

month. What good will that pond do us? Who has ever grown rich from the proceeds of the cursed Pond of Wagaba? (72)

The pun on 'arms' is an incisive indictment both of bloodshed and of the childish follies of men. To paraphrase Stora, "Amid a deluge of blood, hate, and barbarism, women alone appear capable of lucid and despairing speech" (81). Like Eze Okehi's woman here. Again it is she who reveals the ominous secret about the Pond of Wagaba: it is cursed. No man before her had discovered the secret or cared to find out.

In this society old women are a lot more than just spent-out reproductive organs. They are matriarchal figures with a firmer hold on logic than the men. In *The Slave Nyege*, the fiery octogenarian, holds her own against the village's decision to expel her grandson Olumati from their midst on the (false) grounds that he is an Osu, an outcast. In *The Great Ponds*, the widow Ochoma, the oldest woman in the village, is possessed by one passion: see her grandson Okatu come to fame by killing an enemy. The raid on Chiolu by Aliakoro poachers sets the stage for this dream to be fulfilled. Okatu kills one of the marauders and at thirteen becomes the youngest villager entitled to the ritual wine with the eagle feathers. We are a far remove here from the time when women peeped in awe from their barricaded mud huts as men sunned their vanity. Ochoma has summoned youth and masculinity into the service of age and womanhood.

The neat pattern of female life in Amadi's revolutionary novels is further underscored by the relationship between mates in polygamous homes. The prototype co-wives are fractious, and the beleaguered husband is forever holding court and brokering peace. Amadi's co-wives are a different breed altogether: sedate, supportive, and compassionate. All along they display a depth of mutual love which puts to thorough shame the mayhem among men. When Eze Okehi (*The Great Ponds*) dispatches his first wife to the dibia, she obliges readily even though the object of the errand is her mate who has been sold into slavery. This is the kind of attitude to make the Judge's jealous wife in Malum Amadu's *Amadu's Bundle* (1972) shriek. Eze Okehi's errand woman actually sheds tears when the dibia reveals to her that the earth goddess is angered beyond all entreaty (71–72). In a similar show of gender solidarity, Wogari, one of Olumati's wives, also refuses to plait her hair while her mate Nyoma lies ill. Although the women in polygamous situations are bonded together by the rabid wants of men, they explore the goldmine of gender identity for new strengths and a new image.

Nowhere perhaps than in Bole Butake's *Lake God*, his dramatisation of the 1986 Lake Nyos disaster in Cameroon, do women utilise these new strengths more trenchantly. In that historical play the women position themselves in the centre of action and at the forefront of the decision-making process. As we have observed elsewhere, "The women have now become the real men. While the men burn their lives away in drink, idle talk and carnal speculations, the women, endowed with a nobler sense of mission, start and sustain the ultimate battle for survival" (*Epasa Moto* 231).

In Maria ma Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Daba, Moudou's daughter, brings home her friend Binetou. Moudou falls in love with her and finally marries her. In spite of the affront, Daba's mother stays on in the marriage, faithful to the ideal and promise of marriage. When Moudou dies, his elder brother Tamsi expresses his wish to inherit her, to which she answers: "You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand." As Amba Oduyoye observes, "it is the woman who sleeps by the fire of discrimination on the basis of sex (...) who knows how hot that fire is." This knowledge challenges the victim to positive action: "If she is prepared to articulate her vision for a more just and participatory society then maybe we can begin to reshape the attitudes of society as a whole. It is not a situation of being liberated by men for never in history has a privileged group of its own accord given up power and privilege in order to bring about equality" (10–11). We see that Tamsi, like any conservative traditionalist, forgets that his late brother's widow is a human being who reasons, feels and sees. His physiological amnesia reflects the rigid tradition in which Amadi's male villagers are enchained, just as the widow's emphatic declaration of her humanity echoes the victorious wisdom of Amadi's female vanguard.

The matron of this vanguard is undoubtedly Nyege in *The Slave*. To my mind, she is one of the most exciting female characters in African fiction. It is no accident that she appears in a novel that extols the power of individual determination. Her physical portrait emphasises her extraordinary stature:

Nyege was short. The stoop which the years lent her made her shorter still. Her skin was red and firm, her hair white, her torso bare with flapping breasts; a double navel (the larger of them had grown out after a serious illness) and a deeply wrinkled face lit by greyish-green eyes rare in her race, all gave her an unusual personality. Even elders felt uneasy in her presence. (21)

This unusual stature is reflected in her equally unusual standing in the village. Having killed her husband's assailant in the early days of her marriage, she is now one of those rare women entitled to drink the wine with the eagle feathers (22). She also speaks in proverbs (16), a privilege set aside for aged, wise male villagers.

Amadi employs an apposite narrative incident in *The Slave* to articulate his regard for women in traditional society. This incident is triggered by the secular interpretation of sacred acts. At Wakwakata's death, his son Osimini seeks refuge in the shrine of Amadioha at Isiali. By this act he forfeits his freedom and becomes an Osu, an outcast. Tradition says all children born to an outcast are themselves outcasts. Olumati is born in the shrine and in the eyes of the village he is an outcast. Everybody is agreed, but not Nyege. She mans the field of strategic possibilities offered her by this case. At Osimini's flight to the shrine his (Osimini's) wife is already three months heavy with child. Where then is the osu-status to apply? At birth irrespective of place of conception, in which case Olumati would be cursed, or at birth on condition that the child was also

conceived by Osu parents, which would make him a free child? The villagers say at birth irrespective of place of conception. Nyege heaves conception clear of the curse: a child conceived by free parents is a free child whatever the subsequent status of its parents. She stands her ground so steadfastly that the matter is referred to the god Amadioha for adjudication. The sacred judgement vindicates Nyege: Amadioha does not take what does not belong to him (27).

Nyege's victory over the elders of Aliji carries with it important overtones. *The Slave* is an extended allegorical criticism of the slave trade. The elders, in their blind conformism, tend the status quo. Only Nyege sees the thing clearly. She is alone to deliver the message of hope and human dignity. Whereas the elders think that Olumati is an outcast and should therefore leave the village since his stay in it would imperil collective safety, Nyege feels and maintains that the young man is a free villager and should therefore be allowed to live in the village and inherit his father's property. Slavery, exile and poverty are here locked in symbolic combat with freedom, roots and prosperity. Amadi hands the flag of victory to a woman, and throughs her to women.

Through Nyege we discover that Amadi's women have purpose, taste, and will; in fine, that they are human beings endowed with the same faculties as men. We discover with admiration that they are resolved to enjoy the full prerogatives of their human endowments. And so Enaa, Bekweri's beautiful daughter, proudly rejects all the suitors who approach her. She even says at one point: "Liking a man does not mean wanting to marry him" (39). This show of aesthetic independence is symptomatic of the changing times. As Nyeche, one of her dispirited suitors remarks, "These days were not like his father's days when girls were shy and easier to talk to" (72). Enaa incarnates this change: "She was not shy. She conversed easily and always had one on the defensive" (79). The changing image of the woman comes across boldly in this statement. The narrative progression in Amadi's dialectical intent reaches its summit in the following reported internal monologue by Nyeche:

Nyeche looked around the room again and compared it with his. This was a very different world. A world of camwood, chalk and yellow dye, a world of decorations, of soft mats, of edeali and indigo designs, of beads and corals and soft shiny skin. It was the mysterious world of womanhood – warm and tender, alluring and compelling. Women were the real rulers of the earth, Nyeche thought; men were merely accidents in their lives. (79)

Amadi here makes an interesting revelation – or is it a belated acknowledgement? Women are the real masters of the world, men only accidents in it. Novel after African novel, drawing their inspiration from African thought and philosophy, have presented African society from a male-dominated standpoint. In *A Grain of Wheat* Gikonyo's father sends away his wife Wangari with whom he is disgusted. On departing with little Gikonyo strapped to her back she declares: "But there is no home with a boy-child where the head of a he-goat shall not be cooked." (64). In other words, a boy-child is a sure key to

success and respect. Gikonyo vindicates his mother's proverbial wisdom by growing into a successful businessman in Thung'ai where she migrates to. The statement implicit in this praise of male children is that female children are no good and are therefore not to be wished.

Amadi's is a fresh, indeed revolutionary departure from this tradition, especially in *The Great Ponds* and *The Slave*. In these two works, women are the prime movers of action. Even when they are not presented as originators of conflict, they are nevertheless at its centre. Their attitude towards male assumptions is critical, at times even aggressively so. Amadi positions his texts against the dominant ideological context of their production: the patriarchal system of Ibo culture. It is for this reason that the practice of polygamy is challenged by the girls. Adiba the slave for one reacts very sharply when Oriji teases her with marriage. He is already married and in her opinion he should busy himself with the woman already under his roof. Both these novels are existentialist in emphasis. They have moved away from the god-will-provide-it situation of *The Concubine* to one in which you live by the sweat of your toil. The basic feature of existentialism is the exercise of free will. And we see the women doing just this. Whether in *The Slave* or in *The Great Ponds*, reason and passion, not tradition and uncritical compliance, are the hallmarks of action. Adiba can flout public opinion. Enaa can turn away suitors. Nyege can dwell on the men to let Olumati occupy his father's land because it is right for a child to inherit his father's property. The female characters in these novels make a more lasting impression than their male counterparts. They have a greater sense of purpose and show greater determination and critical judgement in whatever they do. For instance, Olumati's exaggerated concern for his enemy Aso's condition after their wrestling bout in which the latter sustains a back sprain so offends Aleru that she exclaims: "he (Aso) can develop a hunchback if he wants to" (*The Slave* 115). This reaction is more convincing especially when viewed against Aso's own impenitent arrogance. In fact he eventually develops a hunchback!

Revealingly, Enaa, the coveted diamond in *The Slave* falls in love with Wizo, the village artist. Wizo is a likeable character, a talented artist and a hardworking farmer. Above all, he is altruistic. Enaa's choice of him as partner is in many ways a recognition of those values for which he is so admired in the village.

Amadi's women definitely have a good sense of judgement and in any case good taste. Besides, they know what is good for their own well-being. For example, Olumati goes to Isiali to convince his mother Ndem to return to Aliji but she would not hear of it. The apparent reasons for the refusal have to do with lingering feuds: Kwele, Aso's father, was her suitor and when she turned him down for Osimini he took it very badly and has since then been a threat to her life. She therefore knows that Aliji is no safe haven for her. Custom demands that she remain in her husband's compound and take care of his children, but she maintains that for her to do this, the society in question must guarantee her the conditions for a peaceful and harmonious life. Aliji does not provide such prerequisites. She is not the kind to sacrifice her well-being on the altar of a

reprehensible tradition. However, all these reflections of a normative order are fuelled by a deep-seated urge for self-actualisation: she keeps a lover in Isiali whom she is too busy loving to be ruffled by accusations of child-neglect.

In traditional society children take precedence over all other pursuits. But here is Ndem telling us that if she is a mother, she is above all a woman, and if her motherhood is an impediment to her womanhood then she has to choose. And here she chooses her womanhood. Adrian Roscoe said Mother is Gold. Elechi Amadi refines the hortatory analogy further into Woman is Diamond.

The tension Oduyoye establishes between womanhood and personhood is here given full illustration. To Oduyoye, "it is mainly as a mother that a woman is indispensable to her clan" (11). But Ndem for her part vindicates her personhood not through her motherhood but in her womanhood. To Amadi, the essence, that is to say the state of being, womanhood, transcends, precedes motherhood, an ancillary function whose scope remains synecdochically limiting. This explosive arrival of woman as a totality intones a paean to Amadi's innovative temper. He is by training a mathematician, by profession a soldier and by temperament a pacesetter. His autobiographical work *Sunset in Biafra* articulates his militant avant-gardism with bold conviction:

I sometimes think that it is this lack of courage, this reluctance to break new ground, and not a lack of intellect, that has kept us far behind the developed nations in government, in technology and even in the arts. Again there is the belief that we need not, indeed dare not, exercise initiative in these things until we have caught up with the advanced nations by copying every single achievement of theirs. Well, we will never catch up that way. We too must contribute original ideas and earn the respect and gratitude of the world. (3)

Amadi's portraiture of women opens new vistas for their gender, breaks new ground, to cite him. He does not abandon his womenfolk to be tossed about by ugly traditions. He is all too aware that society cannot earn the respect and gratitude of the world in the midst of gender discrimination and exploitation. And so he takes the initiative, sets the pace, throws the prison doors open so that consciences can be freed, and through them energies, irrespective of sex. Amadi definitely questions the consensual discourse of male omniscience and omnipotence, the kind of discourse that excludes women from effective decision-making. His female characters blow open the lid of inferiorization and cause their pent-up moral insight to superannuate male tyranny. There is, in the prototype Amadian woman, a visible mutation from submissiveness to determined action. She dreams an equitable new world and projects her image on the village square of traditional contradictions.

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