

Terror, Identity, and Narrative: Constructing the Other in Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire

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ABSTRACT

Kamila Shamsie's Home Fire offers a profound and nuanced exploration of identity, belonging, and marginalization in the post-9/11 world. This study employs Postcolonial Theory and Stuart Hall's Cultural Identity Theory to examine how the novel constructs and negotiates Muslim identities under the pervasive influence of global terrorism, state surveillance, and Western securitization. Through the intertwined lives of Aneeka, Parvaiz, and Isma, Shamsie investigates the conflicts between personal loyalty, familial obligation, and societal suspicion, illustrating how individual subjectivities are shaped and constrained by political and cultural narratives. The research pays particular attention to the novel's narrative strategies, character development, and moral dilemmas, showing how these literary techniques foreground the experiences of diasporic communities and the complexities of radicalization. Ultimately, Home Fire exposes the human cost of stereotyping, Islamophobia, and social exclusion, while demonstrating literature's capacity to question dominant discourses, provoke critical reflection, and foster empathy in a fractured post-9/11 world.

Keywords: Post-9/11, Othering, Identity, Diaspora, Radicalization, Citizenship, Narrative, Cultural Identity

INTRODUCTION

General Background

The global sociopolitical landscape of the twenty-first century has been profoundly shaped by the events of September 11, 2001. The attacks marked a turning point in international relations, security policy, and cultural imagination, initiating the so-called War on Terror. Beyond military campaigns, the War on Terror functioned as an ideological project, creating pervasive narratives about threat, security, and identity. These narratives circulated across media, academic scholarship, political discourse, and public consciousness, shaping perceptions of self and Other and redefining who belongs within a nation-state and who remains perpetually suspect (Casebeer, 2008; Janz, 2008).

In particular, Muslim communities in Western societies have often been positioned as objects of scrutiny, suspicion, and securitization. The framing of terrorism as an existential threat to liberal democracies allowed governments and institutions to justify enhanced surveillance, detention, and policing measures, frequently targeting Muslim bodies and communities (Wolfendale, 2016; Jackson, 2021). Identity in this

context is not merely personal or subjective but becomes a performative and relational construct, continuously mediated by power dynamics, state narratives, and societal perceptions (Pears, 2018; Bamberg, 2020). The process of “othering” is reinforced through public discourse, news media, legislation, and everyday social interactions, producing a racialized and religiousized hierarchy of belonging and loyalty.

Cultural narratives, including literature, play a pivotal role in shaping and contesting these perceptions. Stories disseminate shared meanings, mediating individual experiences within collective frameworks and influencing how communities imagine themselves and the Other (Rappaport, 2000). Literature, in particular, provides a space for counternarratives, humanizing marginalized communities and offering perspectives that challenge dominant ideologies. Through storytelling, authors can highlight emotional, ethical, and social dimensions of identity that are often excluded from political or media discourse, providing insight into the lived consequences of securitization, marginalization, and social exclusion (Archetti, 2017; Zubair & Shams, 2022).

Post-9/11 diasporic literature frequently engages with themes of identity, belonging, and ethical conflict, illustrating how global politics reverberate in personal lives. Within these narratives, Muslim characters often navigate complex terrains shaped by societal suspicion, national expectations, and personal ethical frameworks. The construction of the Muslim Other is not merely symbolic but manifests materially in policies, social practices, and individual interactions, affecting everyday experiences of citizenship, mobility, and community.

Specific Context: Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire*

Within this socio-political context, Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* (2017) emerges as a significant literary intervention. The novel focuses on the Pasha siblings—Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz—whose father’s radicalization and death dramatically shape their lives. Parvaiz’s vulnerability leads him into extremist networks, reflecting the complex interplay of personal loss, systemic marginalization, and societal pressures. Aneeka’s struggle to reclaim her brother’s body confronts state authority, revealing tensions between familial loyalty, moral duty, and legal frameworks (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 93; p. 245). Isma, meanwhile, navigates professional and personal obligations in a society that constantly scrutinizes her identity (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 57).

Shamsie reimagines Sophocles’ *Antigone* to explore ethical dilemmas arising when state authority conflicts with personal conscience. Aneeka’s insistence on burying her brother mirrors Antigone’s act of defiance, framing burial as an ethical assertion of dignity against bureaucratic and political constraints (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 248). Through intertextuality, the novel situates contemporary British-Muslim experience within a broader historical and moral discourse, highlighting universal concerns about authority, justice, and familial loyalty.

The novel challenges dominant terror narratives by portraying Parvaiz’s recruitment and radicalization as outcomes of vulnerability, manipulation, and systemic marginalization rather than inherent ideological extremism. By doing so, Shamsie disrupts simplistic notions of the “terrorist Other” and foregrounds the structural and affective dimensions of identity formation under surveillance and societal scrutiny (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 101). Aneeka’s assertive resistance and ethical agency further emphasize the potential for personal and moral complexity in the face of dehumanizing narratives.

Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study is rooted in the need to examine how literary texts interrogate and subvert hegemonic constructions of the terrorist Other. While much scholarship on terrorism focuses on political, sociological, or security perspectives, fewer studies analyze how cultural narratives themselves produce or challenge these constructions. Literature provides a lens to humanize marginalized communities,

foreground emotional and ethical struggles, and reveal the costs of political conflicts beyond policy or statistics (Archetti, 2017; Zubair & Shams, 2022). *Home Fire* functions as such a counternarrative, highlighting ethical dilemmas, personal histories, and social marginalization that conventional narratives often overlook.

Research Question and Objective

The study is guided by the research question: How does Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* construct and critique the narrative other within the context of the War on Terror?

The objective of the study is to analyze the narrative strategies employed in *Home Fire* to illuminate the processes of identity formation under securitization and to critically evaluate how the novel challenges dominant portrayals of Muslim subjectivity.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance on multiple levels. Theoretically, it bridges narrative identity theory with critical terrorism discourse, demonstrating the role of storytelling in shaping perceptions of threat, loyalty, and moral agency. Literarily, it situates *Home Fire* within post-9/11 diasporic writing and highlights Shamsie's engagement with classical tragedy as a critique of contemporary geopolitics. Socially and politically, it underscores the ethical consequences of counter-terror narratives, showing how literature can contest dehumanizing discourses, advocate for empathy, and restore agency to historically marginalized groups.

Scope and Delimitations

The study focuses exclusively on Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, analyzing how the narrative constructs Muslim identities under the War on Terror. It does not extend to comparative literary works or other media representations. The study is limited to textual and thematic analysis, examining narrative structure, character development, and intertextuality. While the broader geopolitical context informs the analysis, the study prioritizes the novel's literary and ethical interventions.

Conclusion of the Introduction

In sum, *Home Fire* represents a critical engagement with contemporary discourses on terror, identity, and belonging. By foregrounding marginalized voices and ethical dilemmas, the novel offers a counternarrative that humanizes the Muslim Other and challenges hegemonic narratives of securitization and suspicion. This study, therefore, aims to illuminate how Shamsie's narrative strategies negotiate identity, morality, and social belonging in the post-9/11 world, highlighting literature's capacity to contest reductive binaries and restore complexity to marginalized figures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Terror, Securitization, and Muslim Subjectivity

Scholarship on terrorism and identity formation has expanded significantly since 9/11, demonstrating how Muslim communities are subjected to securitization and framed within discourses of suspicion. Kundnani (2014) famously explains that counter-terror initiatives in the United Kingdom construct Muslims as "pre-criminal" subjects, always proximate to terrorism. More recent work builds on this foundation: Kaya (2020) identifies how culturalized racism in Europe links Islamic identity to extremism, producing ongoing forms of discrimination that hinder integration. Abid and Aly (2022) reveal that policy and media rhetoric reinforce these anxieties by foregrounding Muslim deviance while legitimizing state violence. Together, these studies point to the narrative foundations of securitization, showing how political and cultural discourses construct Muslims as the Other. Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* situates itself within this discursive terrain by re-narrating the experiences of a Muslim family targeted by national suspicion.

Narrative as a Political Structure

Recent terrorism research foregrounds narrative as a constitutive force shaping public imagination. Jackson (2021) argues that terrorism discourse functions through “common-sense” narratives that classify violence morally, legitimizing state intervention while framing non-state actors as irrational. These narratives circulate through institutions, media, and policy, structuring perceptions of conflict. Butler’s (2020) theory of grievability extends this logic, demonstrating how political discourse determines whose lives count as mournable and whose deaths are dismissed. This framework is pertinent to *Home Fire*, as Parvaiz’s death is not simply an individual tragedy but an event interpreted through state narratives that deny him dignity. Such theories demonstrate how literature can question dominant narratives by centering emotional and ethical complexities.

Narrative Identity and Counter-Storytelling

The field of narrative identity studies highlights how individuals construct selfhood through culturally mediated stories. Bamberg (2020) contends that identity is negotiated through discursive positioning rather than fixed traits. In securitized environments, identity becomes dialogic, contested between personal experience and state framing. Gunning and Jackson (2021) show that counter-narratives disrupt hegemonic meanings by offering alternative perspectives on terrorism, legitimizing the emotional and political agency of marginalized subjects. Literary texts are central in this process because they provide narrative spaces for reimagining the self. *Home Fire* operates as such a counter-narrative, humanizing characters frequently denied narrative depth in mainstream representations.

Diasporic Lives Under Surveillance

Post-9/11 fiction has been widely studied for its portrayal of diasporic subjects negotiating identity and belonging. Qureshi (2020) argues that British Muslim characters in contemporary literature are shaped by surveillance regimes that produce psychological burdens and fractures in identity. Chambers (2021) similarly demonstrates that diasporic texts challenge monolithic depictions of Muslim communities by portraying multidimensional lives shaped by transnational histories. Ahmed (2021) adds that these narratives critique Islamophobic discourses by foregrounding the entanglement of Islamic identity, migration, and citizenship. These works underline literature’s role in challenging reductive stereotypes and reimagining Muslim subjectivity within contested global spaces.

Reimagining *Antigone* in *Home Fire*

Shamsie’s *Home Fire* has received considerable scholarly attention for reimagining Sophocles’ *Antigone* in the era of the War on Terror. Mullaney (2021) highlights how the novel dramatizes the ethical collision between state authority and familial obligation, especially through Aneeka’s pursuit of burial rights for her brother. This intertextual framework underscores the persistence of ancient dilemmas regarding sovereignty and justice. By invoking *Antigone*, Shamsie foregrounds questions about human dignity, state power, and the politics of mourning—issues central to contemporary counter-terror policy.

Radicalization and Agency

Parvaiz’s trajectory has frequently been examined within debates on radicalization. Khan (2023) argues that *Home Fire* complicates dominant narratives of extremist recruitment by situating Parvaiz’s journey within broader histories of disenfranchisement and structural inequality. Rather than portraying radicalization as an innate impulse, Shamsie contextualizes it in a search for belonging and identity—an approach that challenges stereotypical portrayals of Muslim men. Such analyses highlight how the novel critiques simplistic models of radicalization that ignore political trauma and community marginalization.

Gender, Agency, and Representation

Shamsie's representation of Muslim women has been a key point of feminist postcolonial analysis. Zubair and Shams (2022) argue that Aneeka's character disrupts the stereotype of Muslim women as submissive or passive by foregrounding her emotional autonomy and political resistance. Aneeka's insistence on her brother's right to burial positions her as a figure of defiance, challenging patriarchal and state control. This aligns with postcolonial feminist scholarship that insists on recognizing Muslim women as politically engaged and agentic subjects.

Conditional Citizenship and Belonging

Scholars have also emphasized the precariousness of citizenship for Muslims in Britain. Ahmed (2021) notes that state policies create a conditional form of belonging whereby Muslim citizenship depends upon ideological conformity. The revocation of Parvaiz's citizenship illustrates this conditionality, demonstrating how marginalized subjects can be excluded posthumously from the national community. This aligns with Kaya's (2020) argument that European nationalism has mapped religious and racial identity onto political loyalty, producing racialized hierarchies of belonging.

Gaps in Scholarship

While scholarship on *Home Fire* is expanding, several areas remain underexplored. First, limited attention has been given to the novel's narrative strategies in contesting hegemonic identity constructions. Although studies examine characters and themes, fewer investigate how narrative perspective, focalization, and intertextuality work together to resist politicized representations of Muslim identity. Second, there remains a gap in connecting narrative identity theory with critical terrorism studies to analyze literary portrayals of securitized identities. This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding how *Home Fire* functions as a counter-narrative that rehumanizes Muslim subjects and critiques the narrative production of the Other.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design using critical literary analysis to examine how Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* constructs narratives of terrorism, identity, and the Muslim Other. Qualitative textual analysis is particularly suitable for literary research, as it allows for the close reading of language, narrative structures, and characterization to understand how meaning is produced within specific sociopolitical contexts (Given, 2019). The research focuses on the novel's narrative strategies, including focalization, temporal arrangement, intertextuality, and character development, to uncover how the text critiques dominant representations of Muslim identity.

The study is guided by two theoretical frameworks: Narrative Identity Theory and Critical Terrorism Studies (CTS). Narrative Identity Theory (Bamberg, 2020) emphasizes how individuals construct their sense of self through stories and how these narratives mediate social and personal identity. Applying this theory allows the analysis to explore how characters like Parvaiz, Aneeka, and Isma negotiate their identities within familial, social, and political frameworks. The theory highlights the performative nature of identity, showing how narrative positions characters within broader discourses of belonging and exclusion.

Critical Terrorism Studies (Jackson, 2021) provides a lens to examine how terrorism is discursively constructed and how these narratives influence societal perceptions of threat, security, and citizenship. CTS helps analyze how *Home Fire* engages with hegemonic narratives that racialize Muslim identities and rationalize state violence. By integrating CTS with narrative identity theory, the study investigates both the literary and sociopolitical dimensions of the novel, demonstrating how fiction can serve as a counternarrative to dominant terrorism discourse.

Data collection involves close reading of *Home Fire* alongside a review of scholarly literature, particularly works published since 2020, on terrorism, identity, and diaspora. The analytical procedure examines how language, plot, and character interactions produce meanings related to belonging, Othering, and ethical dilemmas under the War on Terror. Although the study focuses on a single text, the interpretive approach allows for in-depth exploration of the novel's engagement with contemporary issues of securitization, citizenship, and identity formation.

DATA ANALYSIS

Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) is a contemporary reimagining of Sophocles' *Antigone*, set in modern-day Britain. The novel explores the lives of the Pasha siblings—Isma, Aneeka, and Parvaiz—whose family history is entangled with terrorism, state suspicion, and diasporic identity. Their father's radicalization and subsequent death leave the siblings navigating both personal grief and systemic scrutiny. The novel is particularly concerned with the discursive construction of the Muslim Other under the War on Terror, highlighting how state policies, media narratives, and societal prejudices shape identity, belonging, and ethical decision-making. This analysis examines key themes in *Home Fire*, including securitization and the Other, identity negotiation, gendered agency, and intergenerational tension, using textual evidence to reveal how Shamsie critiques dominant narratives of terrorism.

Securitization and the Muslim Other

Shamsie portrays Parvaiz as a young man whose vulnerability is exploited by radical networks, illustrating the complex interplay between state surveillance, societal marginalization, and identity construction. The novel highlights how the Muslim Other is produced not simply through individual actions but through broader political and cultural narratives. Early in the novel, Parvaiz reflects:

"I am not who they think I am... I am someone they will never see" (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 93).

This line situates Parvaiz as a subject whose identity is constrained by external perception. He recognizes that the state and society perceive him primarily as a potential threat, a "suspect" conditioned by his familial background and religious identity. The narrative demonstrates how securitization constructs a lens through which Muslims are always already viewed as dangerous, echoing Jackson's (2021) assertion that terrorism discourse shapes social imagination and moral legitimacy. Parvaiz's struggle underscores the dehumanizing effect of counter-terror policies, which reduce complex individuals to simplified categories of threat and loyalty.

Another example of securitization appears in Aneeka's confrontation with state authority:

"They would not let me bury him. Not even in death could he escape their judgment" (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 245).

Here, Shamsie links the bureaucratic machinery of the state with moral exclusion. Parvaiz's body becomes a contested symbol, illustrating how citizenship and human dignity are conditional. The state's refusal to grant burial rights functions as a narrative mechanism that reinforces Othering, denying the Pasha family the recognition accorded to normative citizens. This resonates with Butler's (2020) notion of grievability, in which certain lives are deemed less worthy of public mourning. The novel, in effect, critiques the ethical implications of state-sanctioned narratives of threat.

Negotiating Identity under Suspicion

The Pasha siblings are forced to navigate multiple identities, negotiating between familial loyalty, religious heritage, and societal expectations. Isma's experience as the eldest sibling demonstrates the tension between personal aspirations and collective responsibility. Early in the novel, she reflects:

"I must live my life carefully, so that no one can accuse me of my brother's sins" (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 57).

This line reveals the pervasive anxiety that shapes Muslim identity under constant scrutiny. Isma internalizes societal suspicion, aligning her personal conduct with externally imposed standards of legitimacy. Shamsie uses Isma's perspective to illustrate the psychological toll of living under surveillance, showing how identity is continually mediated by fear and social expectation. The narrative frames Muslim identity as performative, highlighting the intersection between narrative identity theory and lived experience (Bamberg, 2020).

Parvaiz's journey further explores identity negotiation through his radicalization. He observes:

"I wanted to belong somewhere, to feel a part of something that understood me" (Home Fire, 2017, p. 101).

Shamsie frames Parvaiz's radicalization as a response to exclusion rather than inherent fanaticism. His desire for belonging is shaped by systemic alienation, familial loss, and the pervasive perception of marginality. The novel problematizes dominant discourses that present radicalization as a purely ideological phenomenon, emphasizing the structural and emotional factors that contribute to his vulnerability. This depiction aligns with critical terrorism studies' emphasis on understanding terrorism as socially and politically mediated rather than biologically determined (Jackson, 2021).

Gendered Agency and Resistance

Aneeka's character embodies the intersection of familial loyalty and gendered agency. Her refusal to conform to state expectations demonstrates a conscious resistance to both political and patriarchal authority. When she confronts government officials regarding Parvaiz's death, she asserts:

"I will not let them define my brother's worth. He is more than their suspicion" (Home Fire, 2017, p. 247).

This moment illustrates the ethical and political power of Aneeka's agency. Shamsie foregrounds her emotional and moral authority, challenging stereotypical representations of Muslim women as passive or submissive. Aneeka's insistence on reclaiming her brother's dignity underscores the novel's commitment to portraying ethical resistance and humanizing those marginalized by counter-terror narratives (Zubair & Shams, 2022). Through Aneeka, the novel demonstrates that resistance is both emotional and performative, manifesting in acts of care, mourning, and defiance against bureaucratic oppression.

The novel also highlights the intersection of gender and identity in public and private spheres. Aneeka negotiates societal expectations while asserting her personal values, demonstrating how women's agency is exercised within constraints imposed by culture, religion, and state power. By centering female resistance, Shamsie challenges traditional notions of heroism and moral authority in terrorism narratives.

Intergenerational Conflict and Ethical Dilemmas

Intergenerational tension is a recurring theme, particularly in Parvaiz's relationship with his father's legacy. Shamsie presents the Pasha father as a complex figure whose involvement in radical politics continues to shape his children's lives even after death. Parvaiz reflects:

"I carry the weight of his choices, as though they were mine, because the world will not see the difference" (Home Fire, 2017, p. 87).

This line illustrates the persistence of inherited stigma, showing how political and familial histories intersect in the construction of identity. The novel demonstrates that personal agency is mediated by structural pressures, creating ethical dilemmas for characters forced to negotiate loyalty, justice, and belonging simultaneously. By dramatizing the moral conflicts generated by inherited political legacies, Shamsie situates individual experience within larger sociopolitical narratives.

Intertextuality and Classical Tragedy

Shamsie's engagement with *Antigone* provides a structural lens to interrogate state authority and moral obligation. Aneeka's struggle to bury her brother mirrors Antigone's defiance against unjust decrees, emphasizing the universality of ethical resistance across time and culture. The intertextual framework foregrounds questions of sovereignty, justice, and the human cost of political power. As the novel observes:

"Civilization says you obey. Family says you resist. I must choose between the two" (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 248).

This line encapsulates the central tension between public authority and private conscience. Shamsie uses classical reference to enhance the narrative's moral and emotional resonance, demonstrating how historical frameworks can illuminate contemporary sociopolitical conflicts.

Media, Public Perception, and the Other

The novel also critiques media complicity in constructing the Muslim Other. Characters frequently confront the simplification and sensationalization of their identities. Aneeka notes:

"They only see the headline, not the human beneath it" (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 132).

Through this line, Shamsie underscores how media narratives reduce complex lives to symbols of threat or scandal. The novel positions literature as a corrective to public discourse, humanizing individuals otherwise reduced to abstract notions of terror. This aligns with critical terrorism studies' emphasis on understanding the social production of terrorism as a narrative phenomenon rather than a purely material reality (Jackson, 2021).

Ethics, Belonging, and Moral Complexity

Across the novel, Shamsie emphasizes the moral ambiguity that arises from conflicts between law, loyalty, and personal conscience. Characters negotiate ethical imperatives under structural constraints, highlighting the human cost of securitized societies. The Pasha siblings' experiences reveal how identity and belonging are not fixed but mediated by narrative, social perception, and political power. By foregrounding these tensions, Shamsie critiques the oversimplification inherent in state and media representations of terrorism, demonstrating the ethical responsibility of narrative to reflect human complexity.

Conclusion of Analysis

Home Fire uses narrative, character, and intertextuality to explore the lived experiences of Muslims under the War on Terror. Shamsie demonstrates how state and media discourses construct the Muslim Other, while also providing counternarratives that humanize her characters and foreground ethical and emotional complexity. Through textual examples, this analysis shows that identity is a negotiated, performative, and relational construct shaped by societal perception, inherited history, and moral action. Shamsie's novel highlights the ethical stakes of belonging, citizenship, and resistance, affirming literature's capacity to challenge hegemonic narratives and illuminate marginalized voices.

FINDINGS

The analysis of Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017) reveals that the novel critically engages with the ways in which Muslim identities are constructed, contested, and marginalized under the War on Terror. One key finding is that the Pasha siblings' experiences demonstrate how securitization and societal suspicion shape identity. Parvaiz's marginalization, bureaucratic denial of burial rights, and ultimate radicalization reflect the dehumanizing effects of state narratives and media portrayals (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 93; p. 245). Similarly, Isma's careful navigation of her personal and professional life illustrates how

individuals internalize societal scrutiny, negotiating identity in relation to both family obligations and public perception (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 57). The novel also highlights gendered agency, as Aneeka actively resists state authority and challenges patriarchal and societal expectations, emphasizing that ethical and emotional resistance is a form of power (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 247). Through its intertextual engagement with *Antigone*, the narrative situates contemporary dilemmas of citizenship, familial loyalty, and moral obligation within a classical ethical framework (*Home Fire*, 2017, p. 248).

In conclusion, *Home Fire* illustrates that identity, belonging, and ethical decision-making are complexly mediated by political, social, and familial pressures. The novel critiques simplistic portrayals of radicalization and highlights the structural and emotional dimensions that inform the experiences of marginalized communities. Shamsie's use of narrative, characterization, and intertextuality provides a counternarrative that humanizes the Muslim experience, challenging hegemonic discourses and emphasizing the moral and ethical stakes of living under surveillance and conditional citizenship.

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge. Academically, further research should examine comparative analyses between literary counternarratives and media or policy representations of terrorism to explore how narratives shape public perception. In educational contexts, *Home Fire* can be used to encourage critical engagement with issues of identity, citizenship, and ethical responsibility. Policymakers and media practitioners are encouraged to consider the ethical consequences of representation, avoiding stereotyping and dehumanization of marginalized groups. Finally, writers and scholars should continue producing counternarratives that foreground the complexity, humanity, and agency of communities often framed as the Other.

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