



## TRAGIC RE-VISION AND WOMEN IN NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR: A STUDY OF CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

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### Abstract

**T**he Nigeria civil war is a devastating war that took place between 1967 to 1970. Despite the corpus of researches done on the war literature, one discovers that not very much detailed work have been done through the feminist lenses. It is against this backdrop that a female author under focus has provided us with an intensive narration of how women and young girls had to grapple with the attendant fallouts of the war, even more than men ever experienced. This study reveals that women are not as weak, seductive, wayward or toys to be used and dumped as observed from the stereotypical presentation of the female

folks by early male authors on the Nigerian Civil War. This study is anchored on feminism as a theoretical framework. This study

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therefore indicates that Adichie has opened a new era in which future researchers will see women as courageous and strong and had contributed immensely in fighting the war and telling its stories.

### INTRODUCTION

**L**iterature has been used as a tool by writers in different epochs to highlight and chronicle issues of different kinds in its entirety, literature is not only concerned with the study of literary texts, it also presents a backdrop for writers to explore a myriad of ideas

ranging from the historical, the socio-political, the socio-economic and to the cultural dimensions which are of utmost interest to society. Thus, it is mainly through literature that most traumatic events in history which thwart human relationships, project selfish national interests, rationalize struggle for power, both nationally and internationally, coupled with other numerous issues, are being recorded.

Through the relationship between literature and history, it becomes necessary to discuss the civil war literature. There is obviously no doubt that there exists a concrete relationship between literature and history. Seeing this relationship from the novelist's perspective, Ngugi wa Thiong'o says: The novelist is haunted by a sense of the past. His work is often an attempt to come to terms with the thing that has been; a struggle, as it were, to sensitively register his encounter with history, his people's history. (39)

Therefore, the task of chronicling the thing that has been the past historical events of his society— is the sole responsibility of a writer through literature. A writer does not write in a vacuum, neither can s/he easily overlook some of the cankerworms eating up her/his society. He is left with the choices of either being on the side of the people or fight against the forces that loom large over the people's predicaments. It is a situation in which"... a writer has no choice. Whether or not he is aware of it, his work reflects one or more aspects of the intense economic, political, cultural and ideological struggle in a society" (Ngugi, *Writers in Politics iv*). Achebe was even more forthcoming in his warning to African creative, writers who might attempt to neglect some vital issues in their writings. In his words:

*It is clear to me that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames (78).*

The necessity to deal with such a big issue as the Nigerian civil war which Achebe hints at, becomes paramount since the war has generated a lot of writing either in support of the masses who suffered severely during the war or as a castigation of individuals who piloted and

instigated the war. At this point, a look into how wars generate a lot of literature will help highlight the more the avowed purpose of the present study.

War has indeed influenced and produced a lot of literature because of its literary attraction. These moments of crisis in people's history are capable of arousing the writer's interests to create powerful literary works. It is at the backdrop of such motivation that Chinyere Nwahunanya cites Lucien Goldmann who has remarked that "periods of crisis... are particularly favourable to the birth of great work of art and of literature..." (x).

Allwell Abalogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu reiterate that "war was also the essential motivating factor for the Romances and satires in early modern Europe, with the examples of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* and Miguel de Carvante's *Don Quixote*" (74).

Of great significance are the world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These gave rise to such a great work as Henry Barbusse's *Under Fire*, based on the World War I. The same goes for Rebecca Passo's *Three Soldiers*, Laurence Stalling's *Plumes* and so on. On the other hand, the World War II brought about a harvest of such well received fictive works as A.M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*, and nearer home. Biyi Bandele's *Burma Boy*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* and a host of their novels produced by civil wars all round the world.

It is behind such a revealing background that a proper definition of the Nigerian civil war literature can be provided. In this work, we shall equally mention the literary works, especially novels (our focus in this study) which this civil war has generated and their importance in the chronicling of a people's history.

The Nigerian civil war or Biafra war literature can be said to be those literary texts written about the harrowing experiences of the war that took place in Nigeria between the years 1967 to 1970. This in essence includes those literatures written about the war period and the events that took place after the carnage. As it is important to chronicle these events from many standpoints, writers in one dimension or the other have dealt with this vital subject matter.

### **Re-Vision of the Female Predicament in *Half of a Yellow Sun***

Although Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta have actually paved the way for Adichie when they wrote *Never Again* and *Destination Biafra* respectively, it is possible to observe, like we have stated earlier, that apart from these two earlier female authors, no other has boldly taken on the Nigerian/Biafran civil war from a female perspective. Years after the entire event, Adichie came like a "fully made" author-borrowing from Chinua Achebe to audaciously write about this three-year war in her book, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, most importantly, from a female perspective.

However, beyond what Nwapa and Emecheta have done, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is more of a novel fully centered on the female experiences and predicament during the war. For Rose Acholonu had made us understand that the female predicament in her own view deals with "the male dominance over the female, which results in the interiorized image of the female characters ..." (38). It is this backdrop that prepares us to use this study to unveil as much as possible instances from the text which we can use to prove the point that Adichie more than her surrogate mothers (Nwapa and Emecheta) has indeed made some attempts to re-vision, and re-examine the female predicament by elevating and projecting womanhood in a mere positive and dignified light. We shall equally draw instances occasionally from earlier texts to highlight more on our analysis in this critical exercise.

Writing about the war as Adichie has done requires courage and commitment. It is such a commitment that Omolara Ogundipe - Leslie talks about when she observes that the female African writer should be committed in two ways: first as a writer, then as a woman. She states that:

*As a writer she has to be committed to her art, seeking to do justice to it as the highest levels of expertise. She should be committed to her vision, whatever it is, which means she has to be willing to stand or fall for that vision. She must tell her own truth (8).*

Such a commitment is what we see in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Like Ogundipe-Leslie has stated, Adichie has a vision of a different set of women from that presented in earlier male and female war novels on the Nigerian Civil War. The female characters in *Half* are all committed to prove a point that women are not mere pushovers, but are strong and can be dependent on themselves. They are no longer those found in the war novels of Nwapa and Emecheta. Rather, they are dignified and highly respectable women who are properly presented. Charles Nnolim testifies to this fact when he says the following about the women Adichie created in the novel:

*Adichie began this novel by leaving behind us the preoccupation of African women writers in the twentieth century: Feminism. The women she creates are no longer there to carry foofoo and soup to men discussing "important matters". They have been empowered by education so that at Odenigbo's parties, they hold their own among world-class intellectuals like Odenigbo, Dr Patel, Professor Ezeka, and Professor Lehman (15).*

### **Female Assertiveness in Half of a Yellow Sun**

To start with, a closer look at the novel reveals that Olanna and Kainene Ozobia are the protagonists of the novel. Olanna the twin sister of Kainene, is introduced early in the novel. Although Adichie, first of all romanticizes the experiences of a naive Ugwu who has been brought to Odenigbo from the village as a house boy, his village experiences are so far removed from what he encounters in Odenigbo's house in the town. However, we can boldly say that Ugwu, like the biblical John the Baptist, comes to prepare the way for the coming of Olanna into Odenigbo's house. Olanna, thus, becomes a female savior-figure who will eventually be with Odenigbo to weather the storms of the war. Odenigbo, himself, whom Ugwu respects so much and calls 'master' is being humbled when he prepares for his lover's first visit. He tells Ugwu: A special woman is coming for the weekend. Very special. You make sure the house is clean. I'll order the food from the staff club!(2i)

Apart from the above instance, we have been told from the eyes of the narrator about the kind of women we should be prepared to meet in the novel. Among the women is Miss Lara Adebayo whom we see as Ugwu Describes her thus: "And there was Miss Adebayo, who drank brandy like master and was nothing like Ugwu had expected a university woman to be," And a little down the page, we are given a clearer picture of the kind of women that populate Adichie's world in the novel: "But the women who visited master, the one he saw at the supermarket and on the streets, were different. , Most of them did wear wigs (a few had their hair plaited or braided with thread), but they were not delicate stalks of grass. They were loud. The loudest was Miss Adebayo"(19). .

The loudness of Miss Adebayo can be attributed to the fact that education has made her strong and never to become a push-over. We are told that in one of her visits to Odenigbo's house, she proved herself as an assertive and educated woman who knows her worth in the midst of her male counterparts:

*Then she did what startled Ugwu: she got up laughing and went over to master and pressed his lips close together. She stood there for what seemed a long time, her hand to his mouth. (21)*

The kind of woman we see in Miss Adebayo is one that sees herself as equal with her male counterpart; a woman who is entitled to express herself no matter the situation she finds herself in; the kind woman Sophia Ogwude saw when she informs us that "the novel (*Half*) bustles with bold and successful full-bodied women with no inhibitions" (120). Apart from Miss Adebayo, Olanna, the twin sister of Kainene, is another important woman character whom Adichie presents as a strong and assertive woman in the novel. Earlier in the novel, Adichie had already prepared the minds of her readers to properly understand the personality of Olanna and what she stands for. When she actually began to nurse the idea of going to Nsukka to be with Odenigbo, we are shown how assertive she can be in getting what she wants as reflected in this short conversation with her mother, Mrs. Ozobia:

*You can find here in Lagos and travel down to see him during weekends.” ‘I don’t want to work in Lagos. I want to work in the university, and I want to live with him.’*

*Her mother looked at her for a little while longer before she stood up and said,*

*‘Good night, my daughter, in a voice that was small and wounded. (35)*

The above conversation aptly shows how an assertive woman reacts. She is bold and courageous in getting what she wants. Olanna, unlike Debbie in *Destination Biafra*, tells her mother in her face that she wants to go and live with Odenigbo (her lover, not husband) without any fear. On the other hand, it is surprising that it takes Debbie a long time to inform her mother that she wants to join the army. Furthermore, the author enumerates other instances where Olanna proved her mettle as an assertive character who has come to deliver women from their former shackled position as humiliated and oppressed people. Thus, we read:

*She was used to her mother’s disapproval; it has coloured most of her major decisions, after all, when she chose two weeks suspension rather than apologize to her Heathgrove form mistress for insisting that the lessons on Pax Britannica were contradictory; when she joined the Students’ Movement for Independence at Ibadan; when she refused to marry Igwe Okagbue’s son, and later, Chief Okara’s son. (35)*

As if all these were not enough, her parents even planned for her to have an affair with Chief Okonji in exchange for a contract. The Chief had always wanted to have an affair with Olanna, yet she hesitates and is uncomfortable with the idea. She stood her grounds and only accepted whatever she wanted. Even when the Chief wanted to achieve his purpose by inviting her parents with her to dinner, we read: "Olanna felt a slight irritation, a prickly feeling on her skin"

before she would reply "I would love to come, but I won't be here this weekend". She was sure that she was not ready to have any dealings with the Chief. Rather, she said: "I have made plans to go to Kano, to see Uncle Mbaezi and the family, and Mohammed as well" (32). However, the desperate Chief did not relent, he went ahead to persuade Olanna to succumb to his wishes by going to meet her alone. "She pushed him back, finally, and felt vaguely sickened at how her hands sank into his soft chest. 'Stop it, Chief (33). Her reactions here shows her as a strong woman who knows what she wants and goes for it. She refuses to be subjected to a situation in which Orie tells us that "... women are the worst hit, they are it seems thrown into the exploitative hands of men who savor them, sexually, and discard them as would a sucked dry orange pulp" ("Environmentalism and Women..."21). Rather she prefers her relationship with Mohammed to meddling with the chief- she makes her choice.

During her visit to Kano to see her Uncle, we see another bold and assertive woman manifest in Arinze who bluntly enquires about her relationship with Odenigbo.

She asks if Olanna is going to Nsukka to marry him, and she responds: "I don't know about marriage yet. I just want to be closer to him, and I want to teach." Arinze observes the assertive attributes of this strong woman when she tells her that "it is only women that know too much book like you who can say that, Sister ..." (41). in line with the above statement, we can agree with Angela Fubara that "... women in HYS (*Half of a Yellow Sun*) have good education. They are liberated, assertive and meet the men at their own dictates" (246). As a woman who knows what she wants, she is always protective of her Own in a relationship. She even confronts Mohammed when he queries her for going to Nsukka to marry her "intellectual lover", by cunningly persuading him to tell her about his American woman - Jane. Mohammed's attempt at this juncture to pet her romantically proved abortive as Olanna withdraws into herself like a snail.

In addition, when Olanna finally gets to Odenigbo's house, she does not fail to show herself as a dignified woman, and Adichie accords her a good presentation. For instance, she discusses with Odenigbo

about where his mother will be accommodated when she visits beforehand. During this discussion, Olanna suggests that Ugwu should move to the boys quarters (though Ugwu does not like the idea) so that Mama would lodge there when she visits. Odenigbo does not hesitate a minute before accepting and adopting the suggestion. This shows that he regards Olanna's opinion with utmost respect.

Despite the respect Odenigbo has for her, Olanna is determined to do just what she feels is good for her life with this man and enjoy him sexually whenever she wants without dealing with the issue of marriage. This is the kind of woman Adichie creates, a woman who dictates what happens in her relationship with men, who cannot be forced into the institution of marriage, let alone having children for him. These women are a far cry from those we find in the works of Nwapa and Emecheta. In other words, one could observe that the new generation feminists are more assertive than their predecessors. For instance, in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, when Elizabeth, the wife of the Head of State, Saka Momoh, was due to give birth to her baby after a miscarriage, the tempo rises for the nation and Momoh himself is filled with hope. But when eventually, her baby is delivered through caesarean operation, it dies. "All Elizabeth was told when she came was that her baby had died during birth, and had been buried. Like a good wife, she knew she should not ask why she had not been able to see the body" (203). This to a large extent shows what women have to go through when they are married. Adichie, therefore suggests that women should be allowed to have knowledge of those things that pertains to their health. This is why in his comment on *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Nnolim states it that: "We have moved far from the inordinate quest for children by African women in the works of Nwapa and Emecheta in the twentieth century ("if you don't have them, the longing for them will kill you; and if you have them, the caring for them will kill you" (15). To Olanna, a woman from the educated class, marriage seems to restrict and subject women to humiliation and suffering. It places inhibitions which make her fall in line with what society and the marital institution wants from her. She would want a relationship that gives her the freedom to express herself, and tell it as it

is to her partner when he does something wrong. She wants a situation whereby, rather than being controlled by him, she becomes someone he would respect.

Therefore, when Odenigbo proposes to her, Olanna does not shift her ground, she turns down the offer of marriage, though she loves him. She argues that "they were too happy, precariously so, and she wanted to guard that bond; she feared that marriage would flatten it to a prosaic partnership" (52). Perhaps Olanna's fears are based on the fact that she is not prepared to go through the rigors of childbirth and its pains and anxieties. Besides, she and Odenigbo have never ever discussed the issue of having children, because Olanna was not really interested. In spite of her refusal, Odenigbo is determined to marry her and stay with her to the end.

When Odenigbo's mother visits him, their relationship is shaken. As we read on, we find that Odenigbo's mother takes Amala along as she visits him at Nsukka, and literally chase her(Olanna)out of his flat condemning her(Olanna) living with her son. When he (Odenigbo) finds out that marriage would not work for them, he pleads with Olanna that they should have a baby: "A little girl just like you, and we will call her Obianuju because she will complete us" (106). Without a word, Olanna would later ask her live-in lover to bring wine to her parents so they could get married.

It should be noted that Amala's visit with Odenigbo's mother is another dimension in which Adichie attempts to empower and represent the female character. In an ideal African situation, especially with regards to the Igbo, in the early days in which the novel is set, when a woman is incapable of or not ready to bear children, what is then expected is that another is brought to replace. Since, in the eyes of Odenigbo's mother, Olanna is too spoilt, too educated and sophisticated and is not ready to give her a grandchild, Amala becomes the only alternative. Thus, when Amala gives birth to a baby girl, as a result of that visit, she (the baby girl) becomes a symbol of hope for women to have a better future. Olanna's adoption of the girl gives the union the hope of a brighter future. This baby according to Odenigbo, will "complete them" throughout the war.

The above instance is neither the same with "Biafra" the male child that is born during the war in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* which does not survive nor that of the baby its mother delivers lying along the road as Kate the heroine of Nwapa's *Never Again* watches. Compared with the presentation and predicament of women that we find in the works of women in the twentieth century, Emecheta's "baby boy" symbolizes the future hope of Biafra. Unfortunately, the baby dies thus signaling the death of hope. Adichie's 'baby' girl, on the other hand, is made to live until the end of the novel.

It is interesting that, when Odenigbo's mother leaves, and he later goes to visit her, she is not happy with him. Although Odenigbo has to plead for forgiveness because of what his mother did, Olanna is angry and demands apology for what she sees as humiliation. To her, "it was her right to be upset, her right to choose not to brush her humiliation aside in the name of an overexalted intellectualism, and she would claim that right. 'Go. She gestured towards the door"(102). Even in anger, Olanna remains in control of the situation, and is equally assertive.

There is an instance where Olanna faces a tragic situation, the death of Okeoma, and she uses Odenigbo as a "sex tool" to absorb the shock. She simply asks Odenigbo to touch her breast, and when he does so, she compels Odenigbo to dance to her tune knowing full well that he would do "whatever would make her better" (160). Even after seducing Richard and sleeping with him, she is the one who confronts him while he attempts to shy away from her (169).

Furthermore, it is Olanna who demands that Odenigbo apologize to Miss Adebayo whom he had openly criticized for speaking against the secession of Biafra from Nigeria. Although Odenigbo is right in his argument, he grudgingly accepts to apologize saying 'Alright nkem, I will' (175). Despite her flaws, Olanna does not spare her father either when she learns that he is having an affair. She boldly confronts him in a manner that humiliates him, and places him at her mercy as we read: 'It's disrespectful that you have a relationship with this woman and that you have bought her a house where my mother's friends live. 'Olanna said. 'You go there from work and your driver parks outside and you don't seem to care that people see you. It's a slap, to my mother's face.' (218)

Such a bold attempt at confronting an issue of that magnitude deserves to be commended on moral grounds. Adichie has presented us with this female character who knows what is right and strives to do it. Olanna's actions attest to the fact that Adichie's women in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are not only responsible but are also highly regarded.

Judging from Chibueze Orié's stance, when he says that, "another variable that marks Adichie's *Half* is that her 'women beings' are not derogatorily effeminate. They are not weak. They are brave" ("Rebranding" 146), we can confirm that these attributes can be found in Olanna. Apart from her reaction to her father's action above, she also

saves her parent's driver from being sacked for stealing raw rice from them. Regardless of what her mother's reactions are, Olanna commands him to stand up. And when he does so, her mother is utterly helpless.

Adichie does not dig deep into the psychological make-up of the male characters reveal the tortuous impact of the war. Rather it is through the searchlight she provides us through her female characters that we see these horrors. In line with this, we see in Olanna a character that worries a lot over how the war has devastated the human person. As a result, she ruminates:

*She worried about other things: how her periods were sparse and no longer red but a muddy-brown, how baby's hair was falling out, how hunger was stealing the memories of the children. (389)*

Few pages earlier, she had been disturbed over Ugwu's assumed death of. She is so worried that we learn from the narrator: 'she told herself that he was not dead; he might be close to dead but lie was not dead. She willed a message to come to her about his whereabouts' (383). Thus, it is important to note that the male characters we see in the novel are always preoccupied with the thought of their lovers. Ugwu, worried about Nnesinachi, Richard overwhelmed by Kainene, with Odenigbo being only concerned with having Olanna by his side. Thus, it is through female characters like Olanna that we find a true account of the war.

It is this strong woman (Olanna) who later agrees to marry Odenigbo towards the end of the war. It is but unfortunate that, as we hear from One, they experienced "... a stillborn wedding as the war catches up with them and their guests at the moment the couple has a knife in the cake" ("Rebranding" 140). Yet, for all that, it is remarkable that Olanna remains a dynamic, strong and respectable character.

Kainene, her twin sister, is equally strong and knows her rights and privileges. A woman of many parts, she is very much talented, skillful and creative. This is why Onukaogu and Onyerionwu, while describing her, state: "Kainene's strength radiates through the story, underlining her reputation as a vibrant, emotionally strong, courageous, determined and enterprising young woman" (205). Thus, when we begin to reflect on her actions and relationship with other characters in the novel, we begin to have no doubt that what we hear about her is true. For instance, when we are introduced to the family, we notice how assertive she is while dealing with men. During Chief Okonji's visit to the family, and there is a discussion on what had happened to Kainene father's (Chief Ozobia) business at Port Harcourt, she displays this assertive spirit thus, ignoring the chief who had assumed that being a woman Kainene was incapable of handling such matters. We hear that Kainene looks Chief Okonji right in the eyes, "with that stare that is so expressionless, so blank that it is almost hostile". Even further down we find: 'What about me, indeed?' She raised her eyebrows. I too, will be putting my newly acquired degree to good use. I'm moving to Port Harcourt to manage Daddy's business there.' (31) Besides this example of Kainene's enterprising spirit, it is revealing that Chief Ozobia, Kainene's father, believes so much in this daughter of his, thus aligning with Adichie in her effort to re-vision the role of women. Her father says of her, 'She'll oversee everything in the east, the factories and our new oil interests. She has always had an excellent eye for business.' Here is a woman, rather than a man, being asked to take care of her father's business empire. A few lines later her father states it more succinctly: 'Kainene is not just like a son, she is like two ...' (31). Thus, Adichie succeeds in shattering the African tendency of arrogating the roles of caring for family business to the male children.

Before we go further to reflect on Kainene's emotional straight, it will be expedient to take a look at another strong woman, Susan, whom Adichie also uses in achieving her purpose, of revising the female predicament in the novel. By creating a character like her, Adichie succeeds in putting the males at a disadvantage. The image of the male character, which had been hitherto elevated in earlier African and Nigerian literature by male writers, is reduced to nothingness, and placed in a situation where the woman controls him and he does whatever pleases her. Thus, when we see Susan controlling Richard; the white man; the way she does, we are hardly surprised. He is so humiliated that when Susan sees him having a chat with another woman, and she breaks a glass in anger:

*But when they got back to her house she picked up a glass from the cabinet and threw it against the wall 'that horrible little woman, Richard, and right in my face, too. It's so awful!' She sat on the sofa and buried her face in her hands until he said he was very sorry, although he was not quite sure what he was apologizing for (54).*

It should be noted that Susan accommodates Richard in her house. That is, she keeps him as a live-in lover, and makes him a sex toy, for satisfying her sexual desires. Richard has even come to believe that without Susan's admiration and belief in him, he would not succeed in his writing career. The narrator elucidates this fact: 'it is as if her believing in his writing made it real, and he showed his gratitude by attending the parties he disliked'. As if this is not enough, Richard continues to devise strategies that he would apply while attending parties with her, like being a little humorous when introduced so that "more importantly, it would please Susan" (56). It is interesting that an expatriate, ordinarily expected to hold his head high, has become a tool so easily manipulated by a woman.

Similarly, when we reflect on Kainene's emotional strength regarding her relationship with Richard, we find a recurring situation reminiscent of that of Susan. In, the hands of Kainene, Richard is unable to perform his 'manly' responsibility. Although they have had a

time out together, with Kainene expecting him to consummate their relationship sexually, Richard fails to perform this duty: "He explored the angles of her collarbones and her lips, all the time willing his body and his mind to work better together, willing his desire to bypass his anxiety. But he did not become hard"(63).

When he fails in this responsibility, he has no choice but apologize to her and even regretting for doing so in the first place.

### Conclusion

We have been preoccupied with discussing the topic: "women and tragic re-vision on the Nigeria civil war. A study of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*". We find that the female author examined from her own perspective the predicaments of females during the war as well as their contributions.

Prior to Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, writers (both male and female) have written about the civil war from their different perspectives and non have ever assigned meaningful roles to women. They (women) have always been on the relegatory zone, pitiable situations and their voices not heard. Only Adichie has boldly presented women during the Nigerian Civil War as courageous and determined folks who know what they want and go for it to the extent of using men as sex toys.

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