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## Storytelling and Healing Pedagogy in Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master*

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### Abstract

Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* examines education, memory, care, and moral responsibility by placing a retired teacher before a child who resists ordinary instruction. Vasu Master has spent forty years at P.G. Boys School. After his retirement, he is left with an empty house, memories of his dead wife Mangala, distant sons, and an uncertain sense of identity. This private crisis gets an educational form when Mani arrives in Vasu's life. Mani's silence, fear, and resistance show the failure of the established educational system: lessons, discipline, textbooks, and classroom authority. Vasu gradually avoids the usual norms of formal schooling and turns to stories, fables, memory, and patient attention. Storytelling helps as a means of reaching Mani and also of self-renewal for Vasu. The novel connects teaching with healing by recalling the practice of Vasu's Ayurvedic father. Hariharan questions the education system driven by routine, pressure, and institutional decline. This paper studies Hariharan's portrayal of education as a caring bond between teacher and learner. She stresses that real learning begins with listening and mutual trust.

**Keywords:** Education, Storytelling, Healing, Pedagogy.

### Introduction:

Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* is a novel about teaching, aging, memory, and the difficult search for human contact. Vasu Master is a retired schoolteacher who has spent 40 years at P.G. Boys School in Chennai. His whole life had been structured around lessons, timetables, students, school discipline, and the public respect given to a mild and patient teacher. After retirement, this structure disappears. His wife Mangala is dead. His sons live away from him. The school that had filled his days remains only in memory. The end of his career becomes a crisis of identity. The arrival of Mani changes the course of Vasu Master's retired life. Mani resists ordinary instruction. He has already suffered by the formal school system. His silence unsettles Vasu since he cannot handle it by his usual teaching methods.

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Mani makes Vasu to ask himself what teaching means when the learner does not respond as expected.

Hariharan questions the mechanical nature of the education system through the Vasu and Mani. She asks whether a teacher considers the emotional condition of a learner before expecting performance from him or her. Vasu's memories of his Ayurvedic father help him rethink teaching in terms of healing. As a healer must observe, diagnose, wait, and earn trust, Vasu also handles Mani with patience avoiding authority. Storytelling plays a major role in this process. The stories help develop a bond that was not possible by textbooks. The stories allow Mani to listen without fear. They also help Vasu confront his own loneliness, regret, and emotional incompleteness. Slowly, for Vasu too, teaching Mani becomes a kind of shared recovery.

This paper studies *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* as a critique of formal education and as an exploration of healing pedagogy. The first section discusses the crisis of Vasu Master after retirement. The second examines Mani and the failure of conventional schooling. The third studies storytelling as an alternative method of teaching. The fourth analyses the teacher-healer connection in the novel. The final section considers Hariharan's treatment of tradition and modernity in Indian education.

### **1. Vasu Master and the Crisis of Teacher Identity**

Vasu Master's crisis begins when his formal career ends. For forty years, he has lived as a teacher at P.G. Boys School. The opening description of him as a "patient, mild, soft-spoken" teacher gives him a public identity built on restraint and respectability (3). These qualities once gave him social dignity. After retirement, however, they begin to sound uncertain. They belong to the language of institutional praise, yet they cannot answer his deeper questions about usefulness, intimacy, and selfhood.

The classroom schedule had given Vasu a routine for his life. His days were filled with lessons, students, rules, examinations, and daily duties. After the retirement, he is in an empty house and his mind is packed with memories. His wife Mangala is dead. His sons are living in a distant place and their letters reveal emotional separation. They want him to live with them. Vasu refuses, partly because he wants independence, and partly because his professional habits has made him unable to imagine himself outside the role of guide, guardian, and moral presence. This condition is ironical. Vasu cannot return fully to his professional past, but it is also difficult for him to accept a life without work. His teaching has given him public meaning. But, it has narrowed his sense of private self. His retirement makes him question if he has lived fully or only performed the role of an ideal teacher. This crisis is portrayed quietly. Vasu's loneliness is domestic and inward. It is visible in rooms, letters, memories, and silences.

Vasu's memory of Mangala deepens this crisis. Vasu recalls her with affection, but also with unease. She had lived within the household, almost outside the public world that defined him. He remembers her as "a cloudy memory" and admits that he knew her more as an absence than as a living person (41). This recollection shows the cost of a life ruled by duty and habit. Vasu had fulfilled his roles of teacher, husband, and father. Yet the memory of his wife remains incomplete. Mangala returns to him like a ghost because his life contains emotional absences that professional respect could never heal.

The title of the novel gains force here. The "ghosts" around Vasu are memories that expect recognition. The memories of Mangala, his father, his students, his old school, and his younger self return to Vasu in fragments. These memories disturb the calmness of his retirement. They make him reconsider the life that he had accepted for many years without sufficient inward questioning. Though Vasu's retirement gives him time, that time is heavy. It opens the past and exposes the fragile foundation of his identity. Vasu's personal crisis to portray the change in the social position of the teacher. Vasu belongs to an older moral world in which the teacher was expected to be patient, disciplined, restrained, and selfless. Such qualities were synonymous with dignity. Yet they also required sacrifice. After retirement,

Vasu begins to wonder whether these virtues can survive in a society filled with competition and moral decline. The school, which once gave an orderly schedule to his life, has become associated with strikes, bribes, corruption, and institutional decay. Now, the dignity of the teacher has lost its old security.

Vasu's memories of P.G. Boys School are mixed. The school filled his days with a definite purpose. Yet, it also absorbed his life. The values that sustained him in the past have become weaker in the present. Venkatesan's harsher view of teaching portrays this conflict. Venkatesan believes that too much patience will make the students unprepared for a cruel world. Vasu cannot accept such hardness, yet he cannot easily defend his own ideals either. He stands where the two educational worlds overlap: an older ideal of humane teaching and a newer world of pressure, competition, and suspicion. Mani's arrival occurs in this uncertain scenario. Vasu's crisis has already started and Mani's arrival intensifies that crisis. Vasu could depend on his routine, authority, and common expectations. With Mani, everything changes. Vasu could see the limits of his profession in Mani's silence. If teaching means more than just the delivery of lessons, Vasu must discover other ways to teach. His retired life becomes meaningful again only when he moves beyond the role of instructor and becomes a listener, storyteller, and healer.

## **2. Mani and the Failure of Conventional Schooling**

Mani changes Vasu Master's retirement from private reflection into active responsibility. Until Mani's arrival, Vasu's crisis remains mainly inward. He thinks about his profession, family, father, wife, and loss of purpose. Mani brings the crisis into the field of education. He is a child who cannot be managed by classroom habits. In presenting Mani, Hariharan exposes the limits of formal schooling and mechanical instruction.

Mani is introduced as a child whose condition remains unclear to the adults around him. His family cannot understand what has happened to him. He had grown like other children at first, but later his silence, physical difference, and withdrawal caused anxiety. This silence becomes the main barrier between Mani and the educational world. Formal schooling demands response, repetition, obedience, and visible progress. Mani offers none of these in predictable form.

The society usually reduces difference to abnormality. The description of Mani's body exemplifies this. He is seen before he is understood. His body becomes an object of ridicule. His school experience worsens this. Other children mock him, and teachers too play their part in the humiliation. The school should have been a place of protection for him, but it becomes a place of fear. The school lacks the ethical and emotional capacity to respond to difference. Mani's violence must be understood within this context. He attacks those who approach him, but this action may also be read as defense. Mani has no language to explain his pain. He has no institutional support and no teacher who can reach him. Violence becomes the expression of a child pushed beyond the limits of fear, shame, and isolation. Hariharan suggests that the so-called difficult child may be the product of an insensitive system.

Mani's experience in school poses a serious question about the educational practice. A school is supposed to educate all children, but often it does so only those who fit in its expected pattern. Mani cannot fit into that pattern. He resists the classroom, textbook, lesson, and command. This shows the narrowness of an education system that values order more than understanding. The system which can classify him, punish him, and remove him, cannot listen to him.

When Mani comes to Vasu, the retired teacher first tries to understand him by using familiar categories. He wonders whether the child is mentally disabled, mad, or something else. This uncertainty shows Vasu's limitation at the beginning. He too sees Mani by means of available social and educational labels. Yet this uncertainty also creates a possibility. Since Mani cannot be understood by ordinary categories, Vasu must move beyond them. The child forces the teacher to abandon ready-made explanations.

Vasu relies on the conventional materials at first. He places books and pencils before Mani and expects response and progress. But Mani rejects them completely. Once, when Vasu tries to teach him the image of a raven, he points to the picture, compares the bird to a crow, imitates its cry, and raises his voice in desperation. But, instead of creating interest, the lesson becomes a failure. Mani just watches him without any kind of response. This scene reverses the usual authority of the teacher. Vasu has been in the teaching field for forty years, but still, before Mani he loses control over the simplest act of instruction. The child's silence becomes stronger than the teacher's voice. The ruler, once a sign of classroom discipline, does not give Vasu any power or authority. The textbook also fails. The picture of the bird, meant to connect word and world, does not produce any learning. Hariharan uses this moment to show that method alone cannot create education. A method becomes useless when it has no relation to the inner condition of the learner.

Vasu's emotional response to failure is important. He feels frustrated, ashamed, and close to tears. Mani's silence makes him feel powerless. Yet this powerlessness becomes the beginning of change. Vasu realizes that the assumptions of his teaching career have little value in this new situation. He begins to wonder whether Mani needs a teacher in the usual sense, or someone who can patiently break the silence around him. Teaching now begins to move away from instruction and toward healing.

Mani's story also reveals the violence behind common expectations in the educational system. Usually, a child who cannot answer is treated as stubborn, slow, or useless. The teacher feels insulted as his teaching fails. The family feels embarrassed because the child cannot perform. The institution tries to remove him because he disturbs order. In all these scenarios, the child's inner life is unconsidered. Hariharan stresses to look beyond the label of 'failed student'. The very system that is meant to educate him injures the child. By presenting Mani in this way, Hariharan criticises the notion that all children can be taught by the same method. Formal schooling often assumes uniform speed, uniform response, and uniform intelligence forgetting the heterogeneous nature of the students. Mani breaks this assumption. He needs a different pedagogy: slower, more personal, more imaginative, and more compassionate. He compels Vasu to leave behind the comfort of routine and to find ways to teach without the authority of the classroom.

### **3. Storytelling and the Search for an Alternative Pedagogy**

Storytelling acts as the turning point in Vasu Master's relationship with Mani. The ordinary tools of schooling have failed because they demand the very response Mani cannot give. A textbook lesson expects recognition and answer. A story first creates attention. It allows the learner to enter a world without the stress of immediate performance. Mani, who refuses the textbook, begins to respond to stories. Vasu observes that stories soothe him (76). This moment is important because learning originates here with emotional safety.

Hariharan gives a detailed description of Mani's response while he listens to the stories. His face changes, his eyes focus on Vasu, and his body becomes still in a new way. Vasu recognizes this as Mani's response to stories. He thinks that, from a child locked in silence, getting the attention itself means participation. This realisation changes Vasu's attitude too. He does not speak like a teacher demanding obedience, but like a narrator inviting trust. In the first crow lesson, he was desperate. His voice was commanding. It bred failure. When he tells stories, his voice softens and becomes more expressive. He looks for pictures, animals, and situations to catch Mani's attention. His teaching becomes a practice of imaginative adjustment. He learns to watch Mani very carefully. He begins to measure success by the signs of response.

The stories are largely fables involving crows, mice, spiders, fireflies, and wasps. They enter Mani's world. These figures are significant because they bring knowledge close to lived experience. Instead of abstract lessons, Mani receives images of movement, danger, cleverness, fear, and survival. The fables carry moral and practical wisdom and a child can feel before he can explain it. The fables are a flexible educational form here as they teach without harsh

directness.

Hariharan's use of fables reminds us the older Indian traditions like the Panchatantra. The Panchatantra stories teach worldly wisdom by indirect narration. Hariharan uses this older mode of learning as an alternative to the modern classroom. The classroom had failed to reach Mani because it demanded uniformity. The fables reach him because they allow indirect learning. They give him the free space to listen, imagine, and respond at his own pace. Also, storytelling does not have any firm structure. The formal lessons move according to the structured syllabus, timetable, and examination. Mani cannot follow that pattern as his progress is uneven and uncertain. On the contrary, the stories allow such uncertainty. They are flexible to the pace of the listener. Vasu's storytelling considers Mani's condition unlike any formal lesson.

The human bond between teacher and pupil is restored by this method. In the modern educational world criticized in the novel, teacher and child often stand in opposition. Vasu later reflects that curiosity and involvement often have to be found outside school premises (209). Mani's experience confirms this failure. School had become a hostile space for him. Stories repair this damaged relation. They allow the teacher to sit beside the child rather than stand above him.

The healing quality of storytelling comes from its emotional connection. Mani is soothed by stories because fear decreases. He does not need to answer questions. Hence, the threat of ridicule disappears. Vasu's voice does not show any command. Mani has perceived school as humiliation. For him, this difference is vital as the story allows him to remain silent and yet participate. Vasu's own life also enters his stories. His memories, anxieties, and reflections become part of his teaching. The stories he tells Mani are linked with his father's healing practice, his childhood, his dead wife, and his experience as a teacher. Here storytelling is double-sided. It helps Mani move out of isolation, and it helps Vasu understand his own hidden wounds. Here, narration is a shared form of recovery. Hariharan's treatment of storytelling questions the views of formal education. A student's learning is often measured by examination, promotion, and a certificate. In Mani's learning, the case is different. His first progress begins with attention, trust, and relation. It is not an easy task to measure these, yet they are essential. Vasu's success begins when he stops asking what Mani can produce and starts observing what Mani can receive.

The fables also keep Mani away from direct pressure. A story can speak about the characteristics of Mani without naming him directly. Mani can listen to the story of an animal and slowly relate it to his own life. Hariharan critiques mechanical pedagogy by making storytelling as the basis of Mani's education. She does not reject knowledge, discipline, or learning but questions the system that forgets the learner. Vasu's movement from lesson to story shows that any method must be framed based on the child's need. Teaching cannot be a fixed routine. It must allow modifications to learner's requirement.

#### **4. Teacher as Healer: Memory, Care, and Pedagogy**

The idea of the teacher as healer gives *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* its deepest educational meaning. Vasu's encounter with Mani begins as a teaching problem, but it slowly becomes a healing relationship. Mani's silence, fear, resistance, and anger require attention of another kind. Vasu has to move beyond the role of instructor and become someone who can recognize pain before offering knowledge. Hariharan uses this change to connect education with care.

Vasu's memory of his father plays an important role in this transformation. His father was an Ayurvedic healer whose work depended on close observation, patience, and faith. He treated the body, but his idea of illness included mind and spirit too. Food, digestion, temperament, mental balance, and moral life were connected in his thought. Vasu remembers his father's belief that life is a continuous balancing process (21). This idea later becomes important in Vasu's approach to Mani.

The healing tradition represented by Vasu's father differs from the mechanical structure

of modern schooling. A healer must first understand the condition of the patient. The same medicine cannot be used for everyone without attention to the cause of suffering. In a similar way, a teacher must understand the learner before choosing a method of instruction. Mani teaches Vasu this lesson. The child's difficulty cannot be solved by punishment, repetition, or force. Vasu has to understand the wall of silence around him before he can teach him anything.

This comparison also shifts the meaning of pedagogy in the novel. Pedagogy is more than lesson transmission. It is a practice of being attentive. Vasu's early failure with Mani shows that a teacher relying only on books and authority might remain blind to the real need of the child. It is a sign that he is injured. The school had laughed at him, his family had given up hope, and the world had made his difference something to be ashamed of. Vasu sees that Mani needs emotional healing before he can make intellectual progress.

The healer-teacher connection also changes the meaning of authority. In the classroom, the teacher often stands above the student. The student must listen, answer, and obey. In a healing relation, authority works differently. The healer may possess knowledge, but the patient must trust him. Without trust, cure becomes impossible. Vasu raises this question when he reflects on whether a patient can be cured without faith in the healer (152–153). The same question applies to teaching. A child who fears the teacher cannot truly learn from him.

Vasu's teaching slowly builds this trust for Mani. He does not succeed immediately. First, he feels irritation, helplessness, and wounded pride. Mani's denial makes him realize his limitations. But this failure eliminates the false confidence of the experienced teacher. Vasu has taught for forty years, but Mani makes him realize that experience does not mean understanding. The real teaching starts when the teacher accepts his inability and looks for some other ways. Stories become the healing medicine for Vasu. They pacify Mani by not attacking his silence directly. They create a space where Mani can listen fearlessly. The story does not ask him to prove himself. It does not place him under examination. It gives him a world of animals, danger, humour, wisdom. Thus, Vasu gets to the child indirectly. This indirect approach is close to healing because it respects the wound instead of exposing it roughly.

The act of storytelling also heals Vasu. His retired life is full of emptiness, memory, and self-doubt. He has lost the daily structure of school, the companionship of Mangala, and the closeness of his sons. Mani's presence gives him a new purpose. More importantly, it forces him to re-examine his past. While teaching Mani, Vasu remembers his father's room, Ayurvedic medicines, old ideas of balance, and the intimate relation between body and mind. These memories help him recover parts of himself that his formal teaching career had pushed aside.

Vasu's father had believed in healing as a social duty. His work was linked with the health of the individual and the health of the nation. He saw weakness in the body as connected with weakness in society. Hariharan uses this idea carefully. The novel suggests that damage in education is also a social illness. Schools have become places of pressure, ridicule, corruption, and mechanical instruction. Children like Mani suffer because the system has lost its capacity to care. The teacher-healer becomes an answer to this condition.

In the novel, care is not just sentimental softness Vasu has to watch Mani closely, keep his own impatience in check, and change his method repeatedly. He has to take small signs of response as progress. This kind of care demands discipline but it is not the discipline of punishment. It is the practice of patience and moral accountability.

The idea of a healer-teacher also helps Hariharan to question the modern notion of success. Mani's progress cannot be measured by the marks obtained in examinations or certificates earned. The first reason for his success is that he is ready to listen. His reaction to stories is a sign of inner movement. This may seem too small to count for a formal school. It becomes very meaningful for Vasu. This novel asks readers to think again about what counts as learning. A child beginning to trust, attend and respond has already come a long way.

Vasu's transformation is also equally important. He starts as a retired teacher who still holds on to the habits of the classroom. Mani compels him to become a healer of silence. This change gives a new identity to Vasu after his retirement. He is not just a retired master living

in his memories. He becomes a self-renewable person. His relationship with Mani allows him to see that teaching occurs wherever one person helps another person move toward speech, trust, and awareness.

Hariharan's use of healing also adds to the depth of the novel's title. The ghosts that haunt Vasu are memories to be embraced. His mind is occupied by the absence of Mangala, the influence of his father, the distance of his sons, his professional doubts and the silence of Mani. Teaching Mani gives Vasu an opportunity to live more honestly with these ghosts. He can't destroy them, but he can learn from them. The healing in the novel is a slow realization, not an instant cure.

## **5. Tradition and Modernity in the Indian Education System**

Hariharan places Vasu Master between two educational worlds. One belongs to older ideals of learning, where teacher and pupil share a close moral relation. The other belongs to the modern institution, where education has become mechanical, competitive, and increasingly corrupt. Vasu's reflections move between these worlds. His memories of the past give him a model of intimate teaching, while his experience of the present reveals institutional decline.

The older idea of education in the novel is linked with the gurukula tradition. Vasu remembers a time when the teacher was regarded as necessary to the path of knowledge. The pupil sought the teacher with reverence and lived with him in a relation of trust. Vasu describes this older system as an intimate relation between teacher and pupil in a home of silence and solitude (199). This passage gives the novel one of its clearest statements on education. Learning is presented as life itself, not a brief stay inside an institution.

This memory of the gurukula is important because it not like the modern school. In the older model, education is based on closeness, discipline, humility and a life shared. The pupil learns from the teacher's presence, habits, mind, and moral example. Knowledge is transmitted by relation as much as by lesson. Such a model gives value to patience and inward growth. For Vasu, this older ideal remains powerful because it preserves the human bond at the heart of learning.

The modern school has moved far away from this ideal. P.G. Boys School, where Vasu worked for forty years, no longer represents pure learning in his later reflections. It becomes associated with strikes, bribes, donations, favouritism, suspended teachers, and disorder. Vasu is disturbed when he hears about the strike at P.G. He had felt sadness and anger during his own service, but he had never imagined teachers, parents, and pupils joining in protest over bribes and donations (183). The school that once gave order to his life becomes a sign of moral collapse.

Hariharan uses this decline to criticize the commercialization of education. The school no longer serves only the needs of students. It becomes part of a larger system of money, influence, and pressure. Gopu's anger reveals this condition clearly. He speaks of teachers selling examination papers, teachers allowing cheating, and teachers who no longer teach. His severe judgment suggests that social titles remain even after their ethical meaning has weakened (102-103). The word "empty" is important in this context. Titles such as teacher, doctor, school, and education still exist, but their moral content has faded.

This criticism is linked with the loss of trust between teacher and student. In Vasu's reflections, the child begins to see school as a place where adults deceive him and force him to learn things unrelated to the world inside his head. Curiosity, involvement, speculation, and interest often survive outside formal schooling rather than within it (209). This remark shows the depth of educational failure. Instead of developing curiosity, the school suppresses it. Instead of connecting the child with the world, it separates the child from his own experience.

The contrast between tradition and modernity also appears in Vasu's conflict with Venkatesan. Vasu believes in patience, kindness, and humane instruction. Venkatesan believes that excessive patience weakens children. He tells Vasu that children must learn early that the world outside has very little kindness or patience. According to him, making students used to

hardship is a form of kindness (207). This argument represents a harsh modern view of education. It treats the school as a training ground for struggle rather than a place of care.

Vasu finds it hard to fully agree with Venkatesan's view. At the same time, he finds it difficult to justify his own principles. This inner conflict adds complexity to his personality. He has always believed in values like being patient, gentle and self-controlled. However, the way the world is changing makes him doubt if these values are still effective. Are these virtues signs of moral power, or have they become signs of weakness in a competitive age? Hariharan keeps this question alive in the novel. Vasu's uncertainty embodies the condition of teachers who belong to older ideals but must live within modern systems.

At the same time, the novel avoids simply glorifying the past. The older world too had its own limitations. Vasu's father was a healer and teacher in his way, but Vasu remembers his household being quiet and strict with people not really talking about their feelings. Mangala's life depicts the restrictions placed on women within traditional domestic structure. She remains in Vasu's memory as an absence, almost as a ghost. For this reason, Hariharan treats tradition with care. Though the past offers valuable models of intimacy and care, it also necessitates criticism.

Hariharan does not entirely reject the modern world either. Mani comes to Vasu after the failure of institutional schooling, but the solution is not a complete return to the past. Vasu creates a new method from fragments of many traditions: the patience of the old teacher, the diagnostic care of the healer, the imaginative wisdom of fables, and the practical need to respond to a particular child. His teaching of Mani becomes valuable because it adapts. It learns from tradition without being trapped by it. This balance gives strength to Hariharan's educational vision. The novel criticizes modern schooling because it has lost human contact, but it also questions any tradition that refuses self-examination. The task is to recover the ethical meaning of education. This recovery demands a teacher who can listen, change, and care. Vasu's movement from classroom authority to storytelling and healing offers such a possibility.

## Conclusion

Githa Hariharan's *The Ghosts of Vasu Master* portrays education as a humane and relational practice. Vasu Master's retirement is apparently the end of a professional life. But later, it becomes the phase of self-examination. He begins to question his identity as a teacher, a husband, a father, and an individual. Mani's arrival gives a new direction to this questioning. His silence shows the limitations of the conventional school system and forces Vasu to rethink the purpose of teaching. The novel shows that education cannot be based solely on books, discipline, repetition, and classroom authority. Students like Mani need trust, patience, and emotional safety before they could respond. The teacher, like the healer, must first understand the condition of the learner before offering guidance. Teaching is a practice of attention, patience, diagnosis, and care. The teacher has to recognize silence as pain, resistance as defence, and small responses as meaningful progress. The novel also criticizes the modern education system by presenting institutional decline, corruption, mechanical instruction, and loss of care. Yet it avoids a simple return to the past. Traditional models offer intimacy, patience, and moral relation, but they also carry silence and exclusion. Hariharan suggests that meaningful education begins with building relationship. She reminds readers that the deepest purpose of education lies in listening, imagination, care, and the patient recovery of voice.

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