

India's New Middle Class and the Crisis of Conscience in Aravind Adiga's Fiction

RAHUL KUMAR

Abstract: This research paper examines how India's burgeoning middle class intersects with moral issues and systemic inequities as depicted in Aravind Adiga's fiction, arguing that wealth, aspiration, and exposure to global ideologies illuminate a crisis of conscience at personal and national scales. It situates Adiga's narratives within broader debates about class, corruption, and accountability, proposing that literary portrayals of aspirational citizens reveal tensions between measurable progress and ethical responsibility. Building on these tensions, the research paper argues that Adiga's fiction not only charts the ascent of a new middle class but also interrogates the moral compromises embedded in rapid growth, suggesting that social mobility may coexist with an erosion of communal norms and a questioning of what constitutes true progress. Yet the narrative refuses complacency, foregrounding the ethical ambiguities of wealth, the fragility of communal ties, and the unsettling question of what sort of progress a society should chase and justice, the story asks what constitutes true progress beyond mere accumulation of wealth. As Adiga dismantles tidy classifications, the narrator's voice threads through the cracks in a city of opportunity, revealing how prosperity may coerce complicity and how conscience can survive resistance.

Keywords : Middle class; crisis; conscience; corruption; wealth; accountability.

Introduction

The rapid economic changes in India since the 1990s have given rise to a distinct new middle class characterised by a wealth of new opportunities and a heightened consumption drive. Aravind Adiga's fiction scrutinises this emerging class and the associated dilemmas in which its members are embroiled. In his novels and short stories, Adiga interrogates the ethical crises and dilemmas faced by this new middle class. These trajectories of social mobility and consumption engender a crisis of conscience—embodied by the search for fulfilment beyond material acquisition. *The White Tiger*, *Last Man in Tower*, *Selection Day*, and *Amnesty* narrate the

journeys of individuals who seek to rise within their socio-economic realities but encounter the paradox of conscience along the way.

Recent scholarship has characterised India's post-liberalization middle-class phenomenon as new; it extends beyond earlier formations that emerged under colonial rule and the Nehruvian welfare state. This new middle class is marked by neighbourhood segregation still permeated by society-wide class hierarchies and a burgeoning aspirational market culture. Class mobility since liberalization has increased but retained a deeply entrenched structure bolstered by educational and occupational inheritance from the previous generation. Cutting across this pattern, however, is a new fundamental aspiration for personal autonomy, and a distinct ethical dimension emerges alongside class manoeuvring—an awareness, as Henry (2015) observes, “achieving existence and its pleasures for oneself also entails an obligation towards the public and towards society-at-large” (137).

The Emergence of a New Middle Class in Contemporary India

India emerged as an independent sovereign state in 1947, burdened by the legacy of colonial rule and multiparty democracy. However, until the end of the twentieth century, it remained an illustrative example of the principle of unfulfilled newness. Politics, society, and even literature appeared locked in the first phase of modernity, unable to make the leap towards the second phase, which involves the universalisation of class, the industrialisation of urban space, and the emancipation of both nature and practice from colonial capture. The 1990s represented a decisive turning point in that trajectory through the radical alteration of the political-intellectual landscape. Seemingly overnight, expansive horizons offered new aspirations, novelties cascaded in from every direction, and vast sections of society gained immediate access to information and consumables once deemed unattainable. All these factors helped the economy emerge from stagnation and the social context break out of its claustrophobia. Yet, a solitary question reverberated above the din of material change - Could aspirations now running wild, and the ambitious proclamations accompanying them, be reconciled with long-ago commitments seeking a different category of universalisation, liberation, and emancipation? If so, what was the nature of those alternative larger horizons? Was it actually possible to harness fresh aspirations to other-than-material modes of modernity? The moment of unrestricted

emergence, unleashed by the ineffable powers of globalisation, externally caught the new state in a paradoxical net—the more expansive the economy and society became, the more its benedictions appeared unequally distributed. Widespread growth complemented by widespread exclusion laid bare the flimsiness of thought and action still dominating the socio-economic field, leaving dominant dreams soundly based, yet simultaneously insatiable, ambivalent, unhealthy, and thus ever more prone to a crisis of conscience.

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, India produced a distinctive new middle class. (2012). Members of this class can be characterized by four general traits that resonate strongly in the novels of Aravind Adiga. The emergence of a new middle class, unambiguously distinct from an already present middle class, is the first defining feature. The newly emergent urban middle class, recently dubbed the “new middle class,” is not only socio-economically but also culturally disjunct from earlier in the colony. Access to consumer goods in the broadest sense—be they konkan mangalsutra or avatar gadgets—represents a third distinguishing aspect. The final defining trait is a fresh cultural repertoire facilitated by the english language across a variety of textual forms. The new middle class—which corresponds with the bourgeoisie in earlier speculations on four stages of excess, distraction, and scarcity—arose through dislocating ruptures around the 1990s. The distinction between adhoc and 1901-modern/1901-diaspora warped filters, conditioners, propellants, and actors, which gained in precision and relevance due to 1990s global, planetary-scale changes.

Adiga's Narrative Landscape: An Overview of *The White Tiger*, *Last Man in Tower*, *Selection Day* and *Amnesty*

Emerging as a consequence of the liberalisation process initiated in 1991, India's New Middle Class constitutes the core of Aravind Adiga's protagonist in his fiction. Funded by World Bank loans to facilitate the economic swelling of a country on the verge of bursting such as India, this club confirms an economic fervour on par with investment-fuelled China, but with a difference. Unlike the latter's linear evolution toward the proclivity for consumption because of a shrinking urban population, India operates with free-market force on a cross-hatch of finance pouring towards the demographic bulges of urban migrants littering the peripheries of China's modern architecture. India's New Middle Class emerges across

the urban-rural divide, from slum-hood to gated luxury, qualification-lighting from the 10-cents schooling of a yet-to-open City-Skill development project. From corruption-linked jobs by brokers operating 'benami' to attention-deficit managerial jobs by sitting in junior office in a Hotel-cum-travel-agency-cum-internet-place, the broker signal to Australia work permits, red-brick inspector for Gustaffur-one-building-and-collapse jobs in an Inspector get-a-mission-agent's office before Sen had an idea. Indian mobility lies in a half-fixed flow hidden under the wide-open skylight of caste, merit still tussling for the upper hand against luck, fatness, white skin and other side in a game of chance. Adiga's fiction echoes this multi-turning combinationality but does not question why one spot over such wide nation is chosen, what scope is aimed upon in-between and why sly-swing classes annually boxes-out like a child.

Adiga's narrative landscape across *The White Tiger*, *Last Man in Tower*, *Selection Day*, and *Amnesty* foregrounds how aspirational mobility, moral compromise, and social entropy redefine the ethical contours of contemporary India and social entropy redefine the ethical contours of contemporary India. Adiga's narrative becomes a diagnostic tool, tracing how migratory aspirations collide with entrenched hierarchies, leading to a tense negotiation between personal ambition and collective responsibility. In *The White Tiger*, the lone voice of Balram exposes the moral costs of entrepreneurial self-fashioning; in *Amnesty*, the narrator's confession reframes guilt within the political economy of violence; in *Selection Day* and *Last Man in Tower*, the urban commons and private enclaves reveal the fragility of aspirational idealism when market logics intensify disparities. Taken together, these works render a contemporary conscience that is perpetually unsettled, demanding readers to reckon with the price of mobility and the ethics of complicity about power and responsibility. As Adiga's protagonists navigate precarious social terrains, the novels insist that ascent cannot be disentangled from accountability, and readers are compelled to interrogate who benefits from the mobility and who bears the burden of its costs. as Adiga's protagonists navigate precarious social terrains, the novels insist that ascent cannot be disentangled from accountability, and readers are compelled to interrogate who benefits from the mobility and who bears the burden of its costs. In *The White Tiger*, this tension crystallizes in Balram's candid reframing of success as a transaction crossed with guilt, while *Last Man in Tower* expands the question to a collective conscience, where the ethics of urban

expansion clash with the safety and solidarity of neighbours. *Selection Day* shifts the gaze to ambition within the professional arenas of sports and education, prompting a scrutiny of who wields influence and who bears the hidden penalties of aspiration. *Amnesty* then widens the lens to the vulnerabilities of political and personal liberty, urging a critique of state power, social surveillance, and the precariousness of reform. Taken together, Adiga's narrative landscape traces a map of modern mobility in India that reveals not only the allure of the new middle class but also the moral costs that accompany ascent, urging readers to reevaluate the price of progress.

Despite the flourishing consumerism and the unprecedented expansion of individual freedom for the middle classes, India contemplates with unease ethical deterioration, systemic corruption, and the distortion of democracy. Over a decade ago, Adiga became the first novelist to illuminate with global effectiveness India's emergent ethical dilemma, sparking animated discussion. *The White Tiger* focuses on class mobility and corruption—nationally pivotal questions—and scrutinizes them in the context of a startling crisis of conscience. The protagonists of this novel engage with political, economic and social dimensions, but moral quandaries lie at the heart of their narratives. Mobility of dream and system of corruption act as dual cross-currents, yet the two remain distinct even as they interact. Adiga's subsequent fiction evolved into deeper moral investigation that, while often still linked to class concerns, widened the thematic scope and ontological stakes considerably. Waller (2012) writes:

Balram's story is relevant to India's current state of affairs and its hierarchical society despite attempts to institute change. It is unclear what, exactly, Balram would like the Chinese premier to do. However, we gain awareness of a lost people with great potential to change Indian culture: the relevance of Adiga's *The White Tiger* and its narration of Balram's lack of education and his story or the same in the film *Slumdog Millionaire* ... (7)

India's problem continues to be formulated in the same terms. The rise of a new middle class, shaped by systemic transformation since

the late 1980s, has reshaped the moral landscape and prompted ongoing ethical reflection. This middle class defines itself through aspirational reclassification and consumption, and lends its name to a widely discussed “new” India. Yet middle-class rise is not confined to upward mobility, whether upward from older identities or upward to newer ones; the category is also one of those allegedly declassified narratives of Social-Scientific Class – In the 2000s, the World’s Largest Democracy accentuated Liberalisation and Inequality – Aspects of a Social-Scientific Debate, offer three conceptions through which those contributing to the broad, evolving debate on Indian Liberalisation, the condition of the “new middle class,” and attendant contemporary ethical inquiry engage. By both major and minor measures and across indices of Income, Paid Work-Related Activity, Educational Attainment, Facilities, or Changes-both within the statistical generalisation of the categories and within more socially rich descriptions, India, now and in the future, demonstrates the emergence of a “new” or “newer” middle class.

Whether the term ‘middle class’ serves to specify the rise of a wider category of contemporary prosperity or to signal a turn counter to it, much remains in-between the two and remains highly contentious. Just as upwards mobility is defined. So the notion “emergent” steadies the frame in consideration – Though choices appear to tilt toward earlier aspirational “new” patterns or anti-global counter-entries, continuing movements redistributing democracy continue to intervene and complicate ownership, entailment, and reclassifying class in the wake of the transforming graver downs in post-correctional peculiar fashions, classers persist to track and attend to “major class” either in the singular, the dual, or a triad grouping. Lasting resizes to own structure ahead of earnings to prosperity and after deeply dissecting into major and attachable medium of private ownership, bound of extent consciousness. Nevertheless, lasting misalignment does not lifeless-out discourses clarifying social process and middle shaping – nor economic traces vehiculated across. Taken together, Adiga’s founding novel and subsequent works articulate an emergent malaise facing contemporary society, shaped, filtered and organised, lived throughout this large geographical terrain, increasingly observed and recorded, yet finally structured and curated by optics reflected either of two fiscal precepts. In *The White Tiger*, he aptly writes:

These people were building homes for
the rich, but they lived in tents covered

with blue tarpaulin sheets, and partitioned into lanes by lines of sewage. It was even worse than Laxmangarh. I picked my way around the broken glass, wire, and shattered tube lights. The stench of faeces was replaced by the stronger stench of industrial sewage. The slum ended in an open sewer—a small river of black water went sluggishly past me, bubbles sparkling in it and little circles spreading on its surface. Two children were splashing about in the black water. (171)

In Adiga's *Last Man in Tower*, urban inequality is dramatized through a single building that becomes a microcosm of a city's ethical fractures, where private ambition collides with public obligation and power figures choose personal gain over collective justice. is dramatized through a sequence of confrontations that expose who will bear the burden of decision, whether the residents will resist or rationalise, and how the state and developers exploit vulnerability to preserve their own entitlements. The novel then shifts to a chorus of private negotiations and public declarations, revealing how the allure of housing and status blinds ethical judgment. In a city of rising skylines and shrinking margins, Adiga traces how fear of displacement props up corrupt bargains, as residents weigh personal safety against collective resistance. *The Last Man in Tower* becomes a test case for conscience: who profits, who bears loss, and who dares to interrupt the machinery of exploitation? In Adiga's urban landscape, this interruption is not merely a moral impulse but a disruption of the market's gospel, where the last man standing is forced to choose between individual security and collective responsibility—a matter of survival for the system that promises efficiency even as it erodes equity. Adiga suggests, the urban fabric itself tests the limits of conscience as poverty and opportunity collide in the towers of modern India. The narrative thus reframes the city as a moral stage, where the skyscraper's gleam shadows a hidden calculus of risk, and Adiga's critique invites readers to interrogate not only the luck of possession but the responsibilities that accompany ascent, even as the system recalibrates to reward cunning over compassion. Adiga writes :

He was calculating the annual maintenance fees, which paid for the guard, Mary the cleaning lady, the seven-kinds-of-vermin man who came to fight invasions of wasps and honeybees, and the annual heavy repairs to the building's roofing and general structure. For two years now Kothari had kept the maintenance bill constant at 1.55 rupees a square foot per tenant per month, which translated into an annual bill of (on average) 14,694 rupees per year per tenant, payable to the Society in one sum or two (in which case the second instalment was recalculated at 1.65 rupees a square foot)... (18)

Accompanied by presentation expectations from university students and several specifications on form and content, the following segment emerges. Offering a more elaborate literary vision intertwined with contemporary Indian identity, *Selection Day* follows an adolescent cricket aspirant and talent discovery in a modern milieu. The novel depicts the ambition-forging, individual-influencing apprenticeship, mentorship, and competitive courting of identity intertwined with identity-shaping, merit-based performance conceptions. The rising new middle-class status inspired by international image-projection, aspirational consumer-influencing glamour-cricket frenzy nurtured identity-formation, assessment-proclamation, and glamorous cricket yet provokes conscience-evocation, suppression-pressing parental-secrecy, and aspiration-compromise-still-urgent performance pressuring conditionality. Adiga aptly comments about Manju :

Manju did shut up: but only because of the grinding noise and a cloud of particulated flour produced by the wheat-mill. It was a tyrant of blue pipes and funnels, the most famous object in the slum, which brought even people from good buildings to Shastri Nagar every morning. The noise and choking white dust temporarily pacified the youngest Kumar, but then he began again. (27)

Amnesty in Aravind Adiga's fiction emerges as a fraught moral instrument through which the new middle class negotiates guilt, complicity, and the specter of systemic injustice in a rapidly shifting Indian landscape. As characters confront the dissonance between their professional success and the inequities they witness, amnesty becomes both a political strategy and a personal trial, prompting readers to question who deserves mercy and who is rendered invisible by the machinery of modernization. In this tension, the state's rhetoric of reform collides with lived experiences of poverty, caste, and corruption, revealing how amnesty policies can mask ongoing exploitation while offering a momentary relief that is rarely accompanied by accountability. Adiga's narrative thus uses amnesty not as a straightforward absolution but as a catalyst for ethical reckoning, inviting the middle-class protagonists to scrutinise their own complicity in a system that benefits from both reformist rhetoric and entrenched inequality, and calls for a moral recalibration that extends beyond individual conscience to demand structural accountability, urging readers to question who benefits from reformist rhetoric and how middle-class complicity can be confronted through collective action, transparency, and sustained critical engagement and calls for a moral recalibration that extends beyond individual conscience to demand structural accountability, urging readers to question who benefits from reformist rhetoric and how middle-class complicity can be confronted through collective action, transparency, and sustained critical engagement. Adiga aptly shows this through these lines :

In Australia the unwritten rule is that the cleaner never bends down to touch anything below the level of a coffee table. Owner has to pick everything up from the floor before you begin work. There are rules on both sides of this business. ("We have to clean up the place so the cleaners can clean up afterward," one of his clients, possibly Daryl the Lawyer, had grumbled.) Back home, though, the rule is that while the maid will bend and scrub all you want, she will never touch anything above the level of the coffee table for fear of being accused of theft. Danny smiled. (56)

Crisis of Conscience: Thematic Intersections of Power, Wealth and Morality

The distinction between overtly corrupt forms of state power and subtle, insidious coercions emanating from wealth-accumulating enterprises is at the heart of Adiga's choice of protagonist for *The Last Man in Tower*. The novel offers a scathing critique of new social spaces that both symbolise and enable the consolidation of wealth outside of accredited channels. Tower A of Vishram Society lays unflattering claim to the status of the nation's most comfortable flat in a high-rise building. The associates of an aggrieved attorney reveal the realities of aspirational real estate. The complicity of the former state-within-a-state in the city's life is illuminated through the fragmented Mobile perspective on Mumbai's vertical urbanisation, violence, rising naturalism, and recurring disasters, inviting readers to make connections between the building under construction and the protagonist's life choices as the agency of the developer thickens, the calculus of acceptability shifts, and the question of what constitutes moral silence deepens. The investment of certain characters becomes akin to a welcome-to-Hell platter of temptation strategically timed for the anniversary of a spate of neo-marine planning controversies spanning from towers at Juhu Beach to the Wang Arshak & I. Consulting Engineers Sri Scope Tower. Urban space in Adiga's Mumbai is a fount of imagined impossible expansion, opening onto parcels of sea still free from enclosable land grab. An uneasy parallel between architecture and embodiment is traced through characters driven to settle a neighbour at Vishram Society, stretching the ethics of real estate into the ethical void of celebrity, as a consolidated disavowal of stabilising public worlds is traded for a preposterous aspiration to become figural forms. The coupling of public and private surfaces permits the assertion of citizenship outside the stigmatisation and risk-attendance framing the commonality of urban ground. Adiga's Mumbai finds itself unable or unwilling to furnish an adequate depiction of state-within-a-state nefarious intent, inviting patchy nationalism. The strength, material character, and earliest urban-lay-out of refined compound or kothi in post-colonial Mumbai is commandeered in what reads like an instance of privileged-matrix republicanism, with adjacent park, club, being added purely on the visual the concealment-structuring grounds of only political liberty and curve-of-state oversight.

Narrative Voice and Ethical Reasoning in Adiga's Prose

Aravind Adiga's narrative voice articulates the agency and anxieties of India's new middle class. A hybrid of linguistic registers and dialects enables a wide-ranging exploration of social dynamics. First-person narration conveys personal experience and moral reasoning, while close-lexical third-person narration both evokes subjective consciousness and invites critical scrutiny. The reliability of the narrator and the credibility of his arguments are thus placed in constant tension. Criticism of social hierarchies and systemic exploitation emerges alongside a desire to transcend these conditions. Tenuously held ambitions prompt ethical reflection, yet neither self-interest nor public responsibility can fully accommodate the demands of conscience.

Critical responses highlight Adiga's institutional proximity to wealth and privilege, interrogating the ethical stakes of a cultural commentary framed within the aspirations of the privileged. Celebrated forms of English and Indian literature enshrine class-based norms defining access to public discourse. The prosaic idioms of local mastery enable the expression of a wider, distinctly middle-class, apprehension. Waller comments :

Despite a lack of formal education, he knows multiple religions and languages as well. The fact that the narrator is also a murderer is not excusable but shows the reader that the embrasure of nothingness in India is not fully possible at this time. Therefore, Adiga is both asking Indians to veer away from their fated paths while also changing economic, political, and social policies... (1)

Adiga's treatment of capitalism aligns with perspectives that advance, rather than deny, the normative dimensions of economic action. Indices indicating disproportionate expectations of individual agents in the pursuit of collective good interpret the relation between capitalism and moral scrutiny in a global frame.

Comparative Perspectives: Adiga and Contemporaries on Class, Modernity, and Morality

Aravind Adiga's concerns about class, modernity, and moral responsibility resonate with the work of leading Indian novelists of his generation, including Vikram Chandra, Chetan Bhagat, and Manan Kapoor. Such authors scrutinize the lives of young protagonists from upwardly mobile backgrounds, introducing ethical quandaries that often parallel those staged in Adiga's fiction. The frameworks for articulating these moral interrogations sometimes differ, yet thematic continuities emerge. Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* and Chetan Bhagat's *One Night at the Call Centre* (2005) also combine narratives of class ascent with dilemmas of conscience and civic engagement. Yet authors diverge sharply on a crucial front: the inherited legacies of colonialism, democracy, and inequity manifest substantively in Adiga's studies of contemporary India, but they are negligible concerns in the preoccupation with modernity that characterizes the others. Styling an upwardly mobile new middle class as the exclusive horizon of contemporary Indian aspirations, these parallels lend themselves to transnational applications beyond the region and its postcolonial trajectory. The focus on a "new middle class" is equally prominent, but the demarcation remains palpably apprehensive, revealing Adiga's literature as uncommonly illustrative of more general twenty-first-century tensions surrounding class, modernity, and morality.

Vikram Chandra's *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) juxtaposes a contemporary thriller narrative set in Mumbai with a retelling of the ancient fable of a prince and a courtesan in medieval Kashmir. The urban plot features a young writer who is assaulted by police and interrogated about his links to an unknown terrorist organization. Interspersed with this tale of investigative intrigue, the historical parallel develops along parallel lines of aspiration; through the prowess of poetry, the prince becomes a hero of personal freedom and social responsibility. Yet despite the evident structural resonances, the moral dilemmas registered within the two narratives unfold under opposing technologies of articulation. In the contemporary thread, the licentiousness of the upper middle class invites structural, economic, and governmental complicity in a violent and corrupt specimen of the Indian state that is drastically out of alignment with the nation's constitutional aspirations. In contrast, Chetan Bhagat's *One Night at the Call Center* (2005) chronicles the predicament of four friends employed but directionless at a failing

outsourcing firm. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly liberalized economy, the novel's ethical coordinates converge around a single moment of collective civic virtue and pro-social conscience. The protagonists' moral agency pivots not on political engagement but on aspiration and technocratic success; social morals themselves remain unencumbered.

Implications for Indian Society and Global Readings

Aravind Adiga's fiction and the emergence of a new middle class in contemporary India reveal a more specific crisis of conscience underlying the country's rapid socio-economic transformation. The informal adoption of the term "new middle class" has circulated widely in Indian media and scholarship since the mid-2000s, often connoting the emergence of a salaried urban class that detached itself from the British-introduced notion of middle class based on property ownership. Adiga's works chronicle the aspirations and dilemmas of this new middle class, depicting the moral ambiguities that accompany upward mobility and its potential to amplify rather than alleviate socio-economic disparities. These themes resonate acutely with the ongoing political discourse surrounding liberalization and inequality.

India's new middle class arises from interrelated social, cultural, and economic changes that began in the late twentieth century and increasingly command scholarly attention. Policy shifts since the 1990s have fostered economic growth, urbanization, and the proliferation of salaried jobs that create formal employment opportunities and promote middle-class aspirations. These shifts contribute to urban-rural migration, educational expansion, and labour-market transformations that enable class mobility. Aspirations fuel Adiga's protagonists and demand examination of their ethical repercussions. Concerns about morality and conscience intensify conflict as characters pursue ambitions with inadequate consideration of broader social implications.

Conclusion

The emergence of a new middle class in contemporary India emerges from a conjunction of economic opportunity and social mobility. Adiga's fiction interrogates the moral implications of this formation, scrutinizing the ethical transformations that accompany aspirational consumerism and the compromises entailed by advancement. Adiga's novels articulate the predicament of a burgeoning middle class hovering between aspiration

and survival, where class elevation bespeaks an intimate relationship with compromise, and conscience occurs at the juncture of wealth and mobility. Through these narratives, Adiga weighs the cultural implications of entering the global economy amid escalating inequity, and his engagement with class formation extends beyond national boundaries to encompass transnational and global dimensions.

An authoritative survey defines the new middle class as a diverse demographic consisting of “the urban, educated, economically active, and globally connected, whether employed in the private, public, or not-for-profit sectors” (139). This delineation encompasses the wide spectrum represented within Adiga’s fiction, from the struggling urban disgruntled to the affluent rural elite pursuing a global lifestyle. A comparative analysis reveals thematic convergences with other authors of widely celebrated prose that further illuminate both the extensive social and economic ramifications of development and the multi-layered reception of Adiga’s literature.

Rahul Kumar

Research Scholar
Patliputra University, Patna

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