

RE-CONSTRUCTING STEREOTYPICAL IMAGE OF MUSLIM WOMEN: A CASE STUDY OF MEMOIR; DREAMS OF TRESPASS: TALES OF A HAREM GIRLHOOD BY FATIMA MERNISSI

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Abstract:

The purpose of this research paper is to show how Muslim female writers are re-constructing their stereotypical images in their autobiographies. For this purpose this research work critically analyzes a memoir of Fatima Mernissi; Dreams of Trespass: Tales of Harem Girlhood. Autobiographical writing is an open invitation to the readers to enter into author's world of expressions. Women, who are traditionally bound to remain in the private places, can make themselves visible to the outer world by self writings only. Autobiographical writings are the main source for the resisting silence, making one's story visible and entering into the public view. In outside world, readers are introduced with the stereotypical suppressed image of Muslim women. In this paper, Fatima Mernissi's memoir is analysed by using the six categories of Reading Autobiographies discussed by Siodine Smith and Julia Watson in their book ; Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives . This analysis will help to reconstruct the stereotypical image of Muslim women.

KeyWords: Stereotypical Muslim Women, Memory, Authenticity, Voice, Agency, Embodiment, Scriptotherapy

Introduction:

Feminists not only raise voice for the rights of women but also for the rights of women's writings. They try to find out the relation of voice, silence, place and power. One can has power through place and voice can be emerged through power only (Yoder & Kahn, 1992; Rosser & Miller, 2000; Fivush, 2000; Braham, 1995). To be a part of a particular gender, class and race decides access to some aspects of experiences or not (Alcoff et al., 1993). Our place determines our experiences and also whether we can communicate our experiences to others or not (Fivush & Marin, 2007). Roles in society are very important in determining power that allowed shaping the socially accepted narratives.

According to Milani(1992) the norms and values that have control over women's physical camouflage applied equally to their literary expressions. The main purposes of women's writing from the private places is to make them heard in the patriarchal dominant discourse and having freedom of writing from the influence of womanhood .

In his revolutionary book, *Orientalism* (1979), Said elucidated the dilemma of the "East" as a compounded result of years of justification for colonization and the West's superiority. Muslim women tend to be represented as victims of patriarchal and cultural control. When the oppression is described in the narration, a reader can easily understand it. Autobiography and memoir are two ways of narrating autobiographies of writers. An autobiography is a written document of a person's life by that person. In other words, it is the story that a person writes about his/her own life. Autobiography has its roots in antiquity. Autobiography is particularly based on narrator's memory.

On the other hand, in a memoir, narrator also tells about the point of view and lives of other persons. Memoir can be published in many backgrounds; domestic memoir, secular memoir, political memoir etc (Smith & Watson, 2010). Now a day, both terms; Autobiography and memoir are replaceable terms but there are a little bit changes in both kinds of life writing. Quinby (1992) elaborates this difference as follows,

“[W]hereas autobiography promotes an ‘I’ that share with confessional discourse an assumed interiority and proceedings of others. The ‘I’ or subjectivity. . . dialogical.” (p.299)

Memoir is a postmodern term and there are not any specific boundaries among public, private, objective and subjective (Miller, 1991). The autobiography has its origin in the West, but the tradition of writing autobiographies has its roots in Greeks and Romans. Autobiographies present a link between society and individual. Roman and Greek autobiographies were in oral form. For a long period, autobiographies remained mainly a ‘masculine genre’. It was purely associated with Western White male and he had a status of unique individual instead of a member of society (Watson & Smith, 1992). In the reaction, to get central position in the patriarchal world and to give voice to their own experiences, women had to narrate their stories. They tried to present their subjectivity and objectivity through autobiographies & memoir. According to the feminist scholars, the concept of objectivity is also questionable and andocentric because in the case of women mostly a biased perspective is presented by male authors. On the other hand, life histories written by women present unbiased point of view rather than “ungendered point-of-viewlessness” (MacKinnon, 1983, pp. 638, 639).

There have been many misunderstandings about the Muslim women. Western Feminists portrayed Arab Muslim women as passive, oppressed and weak. But Arab women presented themselves differently. They presented their inner feelings and their habits in their life stories (Sarhan & Mahmoud, 2011). The issues discussed by Arab women in their autobiographies are different, because they live in different cultural settings (Shaaban, 1988). Nawal el-Saadawi, a famous Muslim feminist, wrote about her different experiences in her autobiographies: *My Travels around the World* (1991), *A Daughter of Isis* (2002) and *Walking through Fire: a Life of Nawal El Saadawi* (2003). *My Travel around the World*, presents her experiences of travellings.

On the other hand, *A Daughter of Isis* (2002) and *Walking through Fire: a Life of Nawal El Saadawi* (2003) is the two parts of her autobiography. In *A daughter of Isis*, she presented life

history of her childhood while in *Walking through Fire*, she presented later years of her life. In her autobiography, she presented the plight of women, which they had to face due to their culture. She presented religious and cultural life of her country.

Some female writers wrote their autobiographies in the memories of childhood and harem life i.e. Huda Shaarawi, Fadwa Tuqan and Leila Abouzeid. Huda Shaarawi, in her memoir, *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879-1924)* presented her experiences of private world of a harem in Egypt. She recalled her early childhood, her early marriage, separation from her husband and opportunity to get higher education. She took part in Egypt's nationalist struggle and publically unveiled her in Cairo railroad station. Margot Badran did translation of her memoir in English.

Fadwa Tuqan, *A mountainous journey: an autobiography (1990)*, also discussed the life of a girl who restricted in her home till age of 13. She got education from her brother. After fall of Palestine, she got opportunity to meet males and females and traveling. Her life history presented her journey from isolation to be a most famous literary figure of Arabic literature.

Leila Abouzeid also wrote a memoir in 1993, *Return to Childhood: The Memoir of a Modern Moroccan Woman*. In this memoir, she revealed her personal experiences during the struggle of independence from French colonial rule. She discussed that how Moroccan women took part in war courageously, but after taking independence, they had been restricted to private places. In her autobiography, we also found voice of her illiterate mother. Her mother brought food to her father in prison and also her realization to admit her daughters in modern school.

Some Arab feminists presented the autobiographies of the Arab women, which were not literate and have not any access to public their stories such as Nawal El Saadawi wrote, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* in 1986. She had been imprisoned for her refusal to accept gender and class oppression. She got first hand experiences of prisoner's women who resisted against violence of state. She explored the politics in prison also, that how a political prisoner could get better conditions in their cells.

The same type of study was done by Nayra Atiya in *Khul-Khaal, five Egyptian women tell their stories*. She presented stories of five Egyptian women: *Om Gad, Wife of Garagekeeper; Alice, The Charity Worker; Suda, The Housekeeper; Dunya and Om Naeema, The Fisherwoman*. These women were from twenties to middle ages and from mid to lower socio-economic classes. This book is an account of their families, dreams, struggles, customs, fears, disappointments etc. It shows the struggle of women for their livelihood. Some Eastern feminists interviewed women from Arab countries and presented their autobiographies such as Fatima Mernissi, *Doing daily battle: Interviews with Moroccan women* and Bouthaina Shaaban, *Both Right and Left Handed: Arab Women Talk about Their Lives (1988)*.

Fatima Mernissi, in her book conducted interviews from several women from Morocco. These were from different classes and generations. These autobiographies deal with details of food preparation, birth control, spiritual beliefs and such trivial details which were not mentioned in history books. On the other hand, Syrian feminist activist Bouthaina Shaaban in her book presented the interviews of Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and Algerian women. These Arab

women from different socio-economic Arab cultural settings discussed the institutions which shaped their lives such as: effect of war, misinterpretation of Islamic laws, Arab patriarchal society and role of Arab women in binding of family, lesbian relationship and premarital sexual relations.

In this paper, I will discuss the memoir of Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* in detail to describe that how female writers are trying to re-construct their stereotypical image of suppressed women. She was a sociologist and one of the famous founders of the Islamic feminism. Her main concerns were sexual politics and Islamic scripts. Her memoir was based on her childhood memories of Harem (Margalit, 2015). Her famous English-language books include: "*Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*," that was published in 1975 "*Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*" (1992, translated by Mary Jo Lakeland); and "*Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*" (1994), with photographs by Ruth V. Ward. That book was described as memoir by many reviewers but some consider it a novel. It is also considered as a hybrid genera. In her memoir, she presented the experiences of Harem life in Morocco. Harem is described as a frontier and she presents the voices of many women including her mother also against biased laws of men. Her memoir reveals the impacts of her early life on her later life and writing. As a Muslim feminist, Mernissi is appeared to be an insightful observer of the complexities of social and political realities of Islamic culture.

According to "The Guardian, the British newspaper (1992), 'Muslim Women are now producing the most exciting feminist writings being published anywhere' and they consider Fatima Mernissi, as the highly regarded among them'.

Methodology:

For the analysis of Fatima Mernissi's memoir, I will take help from Sidoine Smith and Julia Watson's book "*Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*" (2010). She has presented twenty aspects of reading autobiography. But I have taken the following aspects: memory, authority and authenticity, trauma and scriptotherapy, identity, agency and embodiment. All these aspects are helpful to highlight the marginal women's subjectivity.

Memory, trauma and scriptotherapy

Memory is a basic source and authenticator to study autobiography. To write autobiography, the writer has to have entrée to the memories to tell the story of past and place the present within that experimental history (Smith and Watson, 2010). Schacter (1996) suggests that "[m]emories are records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves" (p. 6). He also explains further, "we construct our autobiographies from fragments of experience that change over time" (p. 9). Autobiographical memory is based on the time and context of writing and contexts are charged politically (Smith and Watson, 2010). Memory is influenced by politics, "What is remembered and what is forgotten.....both personally and collectively" (Smith and Watson, 2010, p.18). On the other hand, memory is not only a personal activity but also a cultural phenomenon. Every culture has its own rituals, traditions, systems of remembering. Another important aspect of memory is that it is always associated in materiality. This material can be any sound, fragrance, smell, stone, text, garment, taste and touch. People

who suffer sexual abuse, holocaust, slavery or any other kind of bad crises have traumatic memory. For these kinds of traumatic memories, autobiography plays a role of Scriptotherapy (Henke, 2000). It can also be referred as “psychic act” of the narrator (Sidoiné and Watson, 2010, p. 49). To analyze given autobiographies, it will be noticed that whether it is a memoir, autobiography etc. Whether the traumatic memories or scriptotherapy are personal or political and how they resolved in any way.

1.1.1 Authority and Authenticity

Smith and Watson discuss experiences as, “We have it. It is ours. The intimacy and immediacy and palpability of our memories tell us so” (2010, p. 24). Experience is the explanation of past on the other hand our places are present culturally and historically. Scott (1991) defines “experience” as “a process... by which subjectivity is constructed” (p. 27). He further explains it as “[a] process through which a person becomes a certain kind of subjectand inters psychic relations” (p. 27). It can also be referred as “temporal act” of the narrator (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 49). Experiences are rooted in the used languages and the knowledge produced at everyday situations. In autobiographies, narrator of the autobiography becomes the reader of his/her experiences. It is primary evidence and the autobiographical narrator claims the “authority of experience” (p. 27). These experiences can be explicit and implicit. Implicit can be asserted as the name of autobiographer on the front page of the autobiography. This implicit authority occurs in the case of celebrities (Smith and Watson, 2010). On the other hand, explicit authority can be asserted as the authority of a person outside the dominant culture, marginalized or unknown person etc. For example, only a slave girl can represent true picture of brutal slavery faced by a girl. By considering authority and authenticity, I will try to find out how a narrator declares, or involve, or endorse the authority to tell her story.

1.1.2 Identity

Identity is a relative term. One can be a woman instead of a man, one can be black in relation to white, and one can be a disable person in relation to able ones. “[G]ender, generation, nationality, race, sexuality, ethnicity, class, family genealogy, and political and religious ideologies” are categories of identity (Smith and Watson, 2010, p. 32). Identity implies not only differences but likeness also. Identities are provisional because of the instability of social and symbolic interactions. We have a lot of identities spontaneously, for example, identities are related to citizenship, ethnicity, sexuality, class location, generational location, gender. Due to this instabilities of identities, these are considered to be contested, contextual and contingent (Scott et al., 1992, p. 36). Identities are not born, they are constructed. There is no universal identity of a man or a woman; it is historically and culturally located (Smith and Watson, 2010). To elaborate the identity of autobiographer, we have to study characteristics of the narrator which are included or excluded. Is narrator showing any resistance to the limited given identity to her as a gendered subject, racialized subjects, or an ethnic subject and how this resistance is being shown in the text? Does the narrator have multiple identities? Its mean political and mutual

integrity shaped by identity. Through autobiography, voiceless narrators: slaves, non literate, females, and colonized found their way to speak publically.

1.1.3 Voice

There can be more than one voice in the autobiography. Text can be monovocal or polyvocal. In monovocal text, only writer narrates the whole story and presents other voices in his/her own perspective, on the other hand in polyvocal text there can be more than one voices present in the story. In case of polyvocal text, it has been noticed that when these voices emerge or disappear.

1.1.4 Embodiment

In the autobiographical subjectivity, body is a vital place of autobiographical knowledge. Memory is lived in the body of autobiographer. Our lives and our bodies construct our sense of identities (Eakin, 1999). It is due to a body, which internalizes the sensation, experiences, and images of the outer world and recovers memories (Smith & Watson, 2010). It is impossible to be subjective, without the recognition of location of material body (Damasio, 1994). Our cultural discourses decide which aspect of the body is meaningful and visible to people. These discourses decide when a body is going to be visible and what is the significance of the body (Smith and Watson, 2010). On the other hand imaginary anatomy is social and familial beliefs about the body rather than its organic nature (Grosz, 1994). Life narrators engage, challenge, and modify cultural traditions.

Agency

All human beings are actors in their lives. So the autobiographical narratives are the proofs of human agency, free actions and expression of their true selves (Smith & Watson, 2010). Previously, autobiography had been studied as the narrative of agency but its representation by the author is complicated. According to Butler (1993) through identity, we can say ourselves as “a heterosexual man” or “a woman”. It is “performativity” of subjectivity (p.145). Agency is the ability to play the games of culture with wit and intelligence (Ortner, 1996). It is ‘transformative act’ of autobiography (Smith & Watson, 2010, p.49).

Analysis

Consistent with the aim of this research, now I am presenting the analysis of Mernissi’s memoir under six categories mentioned in the section of research methodology.

Memory, Trauma and Scriptotherapy

Dreams of Trespass: Tales from a Harem's Girlhood is a memoir. It has been written in Mernissi's childhood from age of 5 to 10 years. She lived in a harem with her extended family. There are memories of childhood, gender issues in harem and how female 'voices' were not permitted to be public due to the traditions of harem. Mernissi (1995) mentions the point of view of Yasmina about harem as follows:

"The word "harem," she said, was a slight variation of the word haram, the forbidden, and the proscribed That idea of an invisible harem, a law tattooed in the mind, was frightfully unsettling to me". (pp. 61-62)

There were many discriminatory traditions of harem such as celebration rituals for male child, illiteracy of women, early marriages, going to hammam(public bath) and harda(possessive dance).

In her childhood memories, there is a great influence of frontier and she presented the desires of many women of harem to trespass the frontier. The women of Harem used to quarrel with Ahmad (gatekeeper) for not letting them go out. Her cousin dreamed of going outside the Harem and had fun with her loved one. She exclaimed,

"Asmahan wanted to go to chic restaurants, dance like the French, and hold her Prince in her arms..... The lady was no criminal; she meant no harm." (p. 110)

There are some evidences of scriptotherapy. Mernissi's aunt Habiba considered voice of women cathartic. She exclaimed that dreams can change their lives and if women can imagine change they can translate it into words (p. 113). She was too much inspired with Habiba's story telling skill. Her mother also insisted her to raise her voice.

Authority and Authenticity

It has been discussed in chapter no 4 that a person who has firsthand experience of situation, has authority to tell the story of that situation. According to John Scott (1991), for readers the evidence of experiences is,

"When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject The evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference". (p.777)

So, Mernissi has experiences of living in harem from birth to adolescence, therefore, she has the authority to tell her experiences of harem. The indigenous speaker can better present the picture (Lazreg, 2000) and being a girl of harem it becomes more authentic. There is also an implicit kind of authority, Mernissi is a well known Moroccan feminist writer and her name on the title page give authenticity to the memoir.

Ruth V. Ward took some pictures for Mernissi's memoir. These pictures present authority and authenticity of Mernissi's memoir. Cover page of the book shows three assumed harem's women are walking away from the lens of the camera. This photo presents the hope and fluidity of women's life (Abdo, 2010, p.179). According to Washington Post Book World the cover

picture vividly portray the image which is hard to interpret by Westerners. The first photograph in the memoir depicts a girl facing away from us, inclined to a closed door, it seems as she is pushing against it. This photograph is followed by ‘an image of a locked and bolted exterior door which begins the first chapter, ‘My Harem Frontiers’ (Abdo, 2010, p. 185). The symbolic significance of both photographs within the framework of memoir depicts that the girl is Mernissi and trying to trespass the harem’s gate while bolted door shows the frontiers of harem. In another chapter named, “The French Harem”, a picture describes some women looking at a man from an iron bolted gate (p. 20). The symbolic representation of the photograph shows that these are the harem women, negotiating with Ahmad (gate keeper) to open the gate. It also conveys the message of women’s struggle and negotiation with patriarchy.

In the chapter named, “Co-Wife” (p. 28), we can see a photograph of two women, standing with each other in front of a large open iron-grille gate. This photograph represents that whether a woman is a first wife or second, she has to face the same patriarchal oppression and they should maintain solidarity against that oppression.

There is another photograph in chapter ‘The Harem Goes to the Movies’ (p. 112), in which two women have been shown getting prepared and they are helping one another in front of a mirror. This image shows positive activity. All these photographs help to enhance the impression of harem women and their efforts to trespass the boundaries.

Identity

This is third category of analysis mentioned in chapter no 4. There is stereotypical image of oppressed Muslim Women in the eyes of West. But in her memoir Mernissi tries to break this stereotypical image. She presents many strong women in her autobiography i.e. Yasmina (her maternal grandmother), Lalla Mani (her Paternal grandmother), her own mother, Chama (her cousin) and Habiba (her Aunt). They all had different techniques and responses to the controlled life of harem. In Mernissi’s memoir, there are many incidents and activities, which violate the stereotypical image of Harem Muslim Women: going to movie, going to hammam, taking part in theatre etc.

There was the tradition of celebration on the birth of baby boy, but Mernissi’s mother celebrated the birth of Mernissi in same way as celebrated for Sameer (Mernissi’s male cousin). Her mother considers this discrimination as an injustice and against Islamic laws. In her memoir, she presented how her cousin Chama and aunt Habiba took part in theatre arranged by them on the terrace and sometimes some male members of the family accompanied them.

All these messages and theatre activity negate the voiceless Muslim woman. There were some dance possessions i.e. hadra also arranged by women in Harem. Many slave girls used to dance in this possession. She gave example of Mani,

“Once I asked Mina why she danced so smoothly while most of the other women made abrupt..... The worst of prisons is a self-created one” (p.162)

These harem women, by all means try to explore their identities as Muslim Women. There are also multiple identities. Mernissi presented not only the Muslim Women identity but also Moroccan Identity. She mentioned in her text that Colonizers had divided their identities

between two halves as mentioned by Mernissi (1994). Another concept of Eastern identity mentioned by Mernissi is that many women in harem used to think that West idealized frontier and made harem to protect their power,

“Christians, just like Muslims..... Then, when neither was able to exterminate the other, they decided to cut Morocco in half”. (p. 2)

Some male members of Mernissi’s family thought that the modernization of women is a continuous threat to their Muslim as well as Moroccan identities, as her father said, ‘our [culture] will be dead’ (p.181). In this way, Mernissi tried to re-construct her identity as a Muslim, a Harem woman and a Moroccan national by presenting different anti stereotypical images of women.

Voice

In this memoir, many voices of the women can be noticed such as: Yasmina, Habiba, Her mother, Chama, Lalla Mani, etc. In the memoir, there are voices of rebellion women, which were against the traditions and institution of harem such as Yasmina, Mother of Mernissi, Habiba, and Chama. She presented the voices of women against the polygamy rule of Muslim world; she quoted words of Yasmina as harem is misfortune because a woman has to share her husband with other ones (p. 34). Her mother had a dream that she could live with her husband and children alone in one house. She presented the whole situation as follows; ‘It is not natural to live in a large group, unless your objective is to make people feel miserable’ (p. 77).

On the other hand, she also presented the voices of women who liked the traditions of Harem and also compelled other women to abide by Hudud (Lalla Mani, Lalla Thor). Lalla Mani did not like theatre and considered it a sinful activity. It is a polyvocal text. The voices of women had been presented in the whole text. All these voices emerged to strengthen Mernissi’s Standpoint.

The thematic aspects of voice and silence are also presented in the memoir. Mother of Mernissi enhanced the importance of voice by saying that she has to learn to scream and protest (p. 9). Mernissi asked many questions in the memoir to break silence and to question patriarchal oppression but many times she remained unanswered.

Embodiment

It is another important category to analyze women’s autobiography. Mernissi presented many incidents which come under this category. She presented her physical reaction against frontier as she explains it as anxiety eats her (p. 3). She wanted to be adult and a good story teller. These expressions of identity and freedom seeking are against the stereotypical images which are related to women’s body of harem. She wanted to be a woman with voice. She was too much inspired with Habiba and tried to speak like her. Mernissi is presenting a new kind of embodiment. She wanted to be a grown up woman.

The sexual desires of body have also been mentioned by Mernissi, her grandmother, Yasmina did not like polygamy and her mother also wanted to be a single wife of her husband,

she said, ‘whoever heard of ten birds living together squashed into a single nest’ (p. 77). She presented bodily hunger and shared that in Harem there was restriction on the opening of refrigerator at time of hunger. All member of the family would eat at the same time and everyone had to follow the rules instead of hunger.

Their desire to live and enjoy alone with their own family is represented by Mernissi. It is a desire of enough and private place for physical body. The physical walls and boundaries of harem were also sometimes mentioned by Mernissi; otherwise, these were conceptual also, as Mernissi mentioned words of Yasmina, ‘inscribed under your forehead and under your skin’ (p. 61). So, frontiers can be within body of human beings also.

Agency

As mentioned in earlier, agency is reproduction of any cultural scripts of identity. In this memoir, Mernissi is not only presenting the cultural picture of harem but also how women are responding to that culture. In her memoir, many revolutionary thoughts of women can be notices i.e. women’s confronting with Ahmad (gate keeper) to open the gate. This act of confronting to unbolt the gate is presentation of agency of women.

Yasmina’s comparison of harem with Mecca and her desire to get free from harem walls made Mernissi think about harem again. In Mernissi’s point of view, Yasmina was enjoying more freedom than others. She claimed,

“Yasmina’s situation poses a very perplexing question to young Mernissi. To Mernissi, Yasmina seems to enjoy much freedom..... then what did hurriya, or freedom, mean?” (p. 63)

When Mernissi entered into teen ages, elders’ women forbade her to go out to play with Sameer. At that moment, she thought to get free from the physical or abstract walls of the harem. She wanted to go out with her cousin and wanted to watch the outer world.

Conclusion

The analysis of Fatima Mernissi’s memoir shows that Mernissi’s memories are full of Hudud, or frontiers. Mernissi with many other women had to live under four walls of the Harem. But all those women struggle to leave Harem at any cost. Women show their hatred for the discriminatory laws for men and women and are against polygamy. To make her memoir more authentic, Mernissi presents some pictures and footnotes in her autobiography. This is a polyvocal text. There are voices of many women from the Harem i.e. Yasmina, Habiba, Mernissi’s mother, Chama, Asmahan, Lalla Mani etc. Mernissi tries to present her multiple identities such as: A Muslim Woman, A Harem Girl, and A Moroccan National. She discusses physical agony of Harem women for their husbands. She does not only present image of physical Harem but conceptual one also. Mernissi with many other Harem women present their dream of trespass all visible and non visible frontiers and their urge to make them visible to outer world. So in this, she is trying to reconstruct the stereotypical image of Muslim women by resisting the silence.

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