



LITERATURE AND MARRIAGE: PATRIARCHAL ISSUES IN *BUCHIEMECHETA'S THE JOY OF MOTHERHOOD*

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore some of the issues raised in Buchi Emecheta's "The Joys of Motherhood". The novel defines motherhood as an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by the birth of a baby. It is an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture. Female folk is imprisoned by the culture that requires women should bring forth many children preferably males, in order to be deemed successful in the society. This is symbolic when Emecheta projects in the novel that, Nnu Ego sacrifices all that she has including meeting the needs of her family thus; making herself prisoner in her own household. This paper also buttresses in detail the Nigeria women oppression in the marriage system of patriarchy society. Emecheta criticizes the patriarchy for dismissing, oppressing this disempowered women character in her novel. She reveals how the native patriarchy society in Ibuza who is 'superior', is to be determined by 'gender'. Thus, she criticizes the way patriarchy system defines the word 'motherhood'. Therefore, the treatment of patriarchy in the Joys of Motherhood is approached using Biological Determinism and Feminism Theoretical perspectives. The findings show that, the novel delves into the socio-cultural and economic problems facing the Nigeria women in the rural and urban setting. It also shows graphical representation of the ordeal of women and women-related issues as it obtains in a patriarchal society. Conclusion and recommendations were made on the basis that, patriarchy ideology influences the system of marriage in Nigeria. And the questions are; are children truly the joys of motherhood? Can these children truly make one a fulfilled mother? There are more to these questions if you continue to ponder on it.

Keywords: Literature, Marriage, Patriarchy and Motherhood.

Introduction

African literature has to a large extent, reflected the patriarchal nature of the African society. It has been labeled as being patriarchal, as the male characters overwhelm the female characters who typically either play subservient, tangential roles or are portrayed in negative light as prostitutes, sex objects, indolent, pleasure seekers. Ogunyemi (2008), describes Nigerian literature, and by extension, African literature as: “dominated by male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters males concerns naturally, and aimed at predominantly male audience.” The image of the African woman painted in the works of the pioneer writers, according to Agbasiere (2016) “is that of the subordinate, subservient and decorative, second rate character dominated by society’s patriarchy. The Webster’s New World Colligate Dictionary (2006:712), gives a comprehensive definition of patriarchy as a ‘Social system in which the father or eldest male is the head of the household, having authority over women and children. It also refers to a system of government by males, and to the dominance of men in social or cultural systems. It may also include title being raced through male mine’.

For centuries, it has been tremendous misrepresentation of women right from the level of the family down to the larger society. The Nigerian society is patriarchal in nature, which is the major feature of a traditional society. But, the subordination of women is more pronounced in the developing African countries which Nigeria is not an exception (Singh, 2018). Kazi (2015) asserts that, “rural women are discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities, access to social and productive resources, education, and health status and family decisions, among others”. Olawoye (2014) maintained that “the woman is the nutritional bedrock of human society who feed and nurtures mankind and at the same time manages the home”. Despite these realizations, the Nigerian women have continued to suffer subordination and the ability to fully realize their potentials are greatly hampered. According to George (2016), “Patriarch is defined as a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and

economic institutions” Nigerian society no doubt, has been experiencing certain conditions that are common with their counterparts in other African nations. The issues concerning women in Nigerian patriarchy setting in this present time is the focus of this paper. Nigerian writers like Nakzodia and Okebukola (2012), assert that, “as long as patriarchy is prevalent in Nigerian society, gender equality may be far-fetched and our workforce may also continue to lack the necessary ingredients for growth and productivity, especially the female, which shows that half of its population is undermined and disadvantaged”. Patriarchy as a way of doing things has been so deeply entrenched in Nigerian setting – in our norms, values and customs.

Okpe (2015) maintains that, “patriarchy is a broad network or system of hierarchical organization that cuts across political, economic, social, religion, cultural, industrial and financial spheres under which the overwhelming number of upper positions in society are either occupied or controlled and dominated by men”. This explanation shows that, any system that operates under that, accords men undue advantage over women is considered patriarchal. Supporting this view, Salam (2013), maintains that, “patriarchy justifies the marginalization of women in education, economy, labour market, politics, business, family, domestic matters and inheritance”. This shows that patriarchy is a very strong determinant of male dominance over female and as a result, men will sit back in the family to keep the family name and lineage growing while women will be married out.

Okpe (2015), bserves that women are considered inferior to men in every known culture. To substantiate this claim, she points out the following;

- 1) Element of cultural ideology and informants’ states that explicitly devalue women, according to them, their roles, tasks, products and their social milieu, less prestige than are accorded to men and the male correlates.
- 2) Symbolic device, such as the attribution of defilement which may be interpreted as implicitly making a statement of inferior valuation.

- β) Socio-cultural arrangements that exclude women from participation in or contact with some realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside. From the above illustrations, it is important to note that, despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality; women in Nigeria are highly marginalized and are poorly represented in political activities.

Theoretical Framework

This paper examines the treatment of patriarchy in Buchi Emecheta's novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* using Biological Determinism and Feminism theoretical perspectives. These two theories demonstrate how the novel unabashedly exposes the patriarchy proclivity of the African women. And the feminist zeal, which sometimes beclouds their sense of judgment as the male characters are often bestialized (Ogunyemi, 2018).

Biological Determinism Theory

Biological determinism as a social theory of gender relations by G. Emooore (1873-1953), emphasized the physiological differences in the make-up of males and females, and how the differences have shaped social relationship between the sexes (Ekong, 2010). The biological determinist position holds that, biology is destiny, that nature and society are dictated largely or entirely by demand of human physiology, and there is an essential unchanging difference between the masculine and feminine, (George, 2016). This theory is predicated on the male domination and assumed superiority of the male sex over the female in most human societies.

Feminism Theory

The feminist theory is the extension of feminism into theoretical, fictional or philosophical discourse (Agbasiere, 2016). The scholar further states that; several trends within feminism had addressed variable issues related to women's status in the family and society, female awareness, male treatment of women, and their oppression.

Gabnelle (1693) writes naturally, "women

are born free, but certain man-made social norms chained them". This article shares common ideology with these following feminist group;

Socialist feminists

- i . On oppressive relations between the sexes
- ii . Interested on the labour done by women in the household
- iii . It sought to synthesize feminist analysis of gender inequality, social reproduction and economic reproduction.

Radical feminist

- i . They call for a radical re-ordering of society in which male supremacy will be eliminated in all social and economic contexts.
- ii . They recognize that women experiences are also affected by other social divisions such as in race, class, and sexual orientation.
- iii . That the solution to women oppression is the elimination of traditional family from women's lives.

Plot (Summary)

In the *Joys of motherhood*, Nnu Ego, the protagonist has to suffer as a wife both in the tribal environment in which she was born and the urban community in which she is compelled to live the rest of her life. Nnu Ego has to face these realities because, these two environments have different cultures. She falls a victim of the tension of the collision of these two conflicting cultures. This collision occurs between the institutions of the traditional Igbo society and the institution of Western culture. The hardships that Nnu Ego experienced are as a result of the clash between Igbo traditions, values and priorities. Nnu Ego is victimized because of what the village (Ibuza) demands her to do, and what the rules of European political regime require her to be. She finds herself in a predicament as she has to assume different roles in accordance with the values of the surrounding communities in which she has to live. She escapes from Ibuza because; she is not accepted as a wife who cannot produce children. She flees to the distant city of Lagos to start a new life with another husband, with the hope of fulfilling her dream of carrying children. This dream is rooted in the cultural values of the Igbo society where motherhood is the primary source

of female self-esteem and public status. In Lagos, Nnu Ego fulfills her dreams of motherhood and begets a lot of children but, the pleasures associated with motherhood are negated by the difficult economic conditions of her new urban community and its norms and values. She has to work day in and day out as a street-side peddler to sustain her children because, her husband is away working for the colonizers most of the time. Nnu Ego has to adapt to the system that is deviating, to maintain her role as a traditional wife and mother regardless of the fact that this system works against the success of that role and ends up with contributing to her subjugation.

Marriage in Nigerian Patriarchy Setting

In Nigeria, the issue of marriage is such that is embedded in patriarchal ideology. This is probably because, marriage in Africa presents a unique perspective that sets the tone for a highly resourceful idea about an ideal situation (Derrickson, 2012). Of course, the ideal situation is that, a marriage should be mutually beneficial to both the husband and the wife. But in Nigerian setting; marriage means social approval; it means long term servitude and sacrifice.

In Nigeria, precisely in Igbo land, an infertile woman is often mocked, molested and abandoned (Noromele, 2002). In short, having children (even in poverty) is an achievement and approval of a social standard. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, it is this Nnu Ego's experience demonstrates how women are imprisoned by the culture that require them to give birth to many children. Had it been she did not care much about what people would say and how scornful she would look in the eyes of the people if she has just one child, she could have subscribed to the idea of family planning and probably could have escaped the poverty that they swim in. But due to societal judgment on her, she sees herself as a failure when she loses Ngozi, her first male child, and therefore attempts to commit suicide. Even much more interesting is the co modification of childbearing. To an average Nigeria, the more children you have, the richer you will be. This is why to Nnaife, his male children, Oshia and Adim are investments he is waiting to cash on when the time is ripe. Isn't that the reason he gets mad at Oshia, when the later

decides to further his education rather than stop at standard six to take over the financial responsibilities in the house? Not to mention his impatience to marry of the twins – Taiwo and Kehinde – so that at least he could reap the fruit of his labour through their bride price.

In the *Joys of Motherhood*, the theme of marriage is presented as an institution where childbearing is the ultimate achievement of the wife whether she is happy or not. In all, Buchi Emecheta's treatment of some of Nigeria's prominent issues in the *Joys of Motherhood* is not only artistically powerful but also, didactically relevant.

Women and Gender Roles

According to Singh (2018), the distinction between males and females in the light of biological, physical and genetic variances is marked through sex and gender. Gender roles are established by social conventions and norms. According to Ekong (2010), there are other political, economic and cultural factors besides social factors that determine the roles of gender. Therefore, sex is a natural concept whereas, gender is a cultural concept. And this is to say that, gender determines how human beings are socially constructed to behave and parade themselves as 'males' or 'females'. Chime (2018), asserts that in patriarchal institution, men are prior to women. Chime's view concerning the situations and nature of treating females are radical.

A dominant belief that permeates the novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* is the sex-role distinctions. The various roles, duties and expectations from male and female are implicit in the novel. Nigerian women are depicted as people whose permanent place is the kitchen hence, the popular quote; "female education ends in kitchen". Consequently, men and women are socialized at birth to perform different roles: boys go out to play whereas girls do household chores. This novel, presents a scene where Adaku beckons Oshia, a male child and Dumbi, a female child to go and fetch water from the tap for the evening's meals and what comes out of Oshia's mouth:

I am not going! I am a boy why should I help in the cooking? That's a woman's Job (P.128).

Oshia declines to play with his friends but Nnaife adds and stop listening to female gossip (p. 128).

The traditional domestic roles of the women include house chores, taking care of the babies or children and satisfying the man's sexual desire. All these are depicted in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. There is also the belief of 'striving' or 'trying to be a better wife' and 'the best wife'; Nnu Ego did all her best to please her husband. This is shown when she said:

Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky own us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pay (P.217).

This suggests that a woman typically learns how to 'please' the man and is the one who is expected to make the relationship or marriage work. Another traditional belief is that the man demands sex and dictates 'sex time'. Nnu Ego lamented about her first sex with Nnaife, how he didn't allow her to rest after her journey from Ibusa to Lagos. From these facts, it is obvious that these traditional roles are rampant and that is what leads to the subordination of women.

Women self-advancement has been curtailed by the burden of reproduction, high birth rate as well as the cultural role associated with women, that of child bearing, child raising and home making. Nigerian women face a lot of discrimination that limit their opportunities to develop their full potential on the basis of equality with men. They are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market due to their domestic burden, low level of educational attainment, poverty, biases against women and deniaemployment and discriminatory salary practices.

According to Akujiobi (2011), the recent development in the nation polity accord women the opportunity to develop their individual talent and contribute more meaningfully to societal development, helping subvert cultural practices as well as the societal norms which have been of disadvantage to the women folk.

Self Image: The Female Consciousness

According to Mitchell (2017), consciousness plays an important role in self-realization and leads to identification of the female self. Singh (2018), maintains that female-self refers to

woman who has become conscious of her own identity, space in society, space in the family, and space in her own life. The scholar further buttresses what females suffered in the past have made their psyche stronger. But childbearing has weakened them as it has led to make them dependent. According to Beauvoir (2018) the reality and obligation of gaining a considerable degree of perfection and getting rid of impression upon the future has resulted from education which has led to the expansion of the female's ideas and mental power.

It is important to note that human beings ultimately aim to obtain self-realization in order to achieve a perpetual joy, through independence, and deliverance from slavery. According to Nnoromele (2012), the real joy results from self-realization. Self realization means the fulfillment of the individuals own latent abilities. Awareness of the individual's powers, capabilities, and self-respect result in self-realization. Gjerde (2007), asserts that, literary works that are concerned with females during the past modern period, try to attain self-realization and own identity. Thus, it is motivating to tackle how various authors plan for their female protagonists in an attempt to clarify how females do their best for achieving self-realization.

The lives of Igbo women as Emecheta portrays in her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* are carefully regulated by traditional laws and are enslaved to their traditions, which subjugate them to certain customs. That situation stems mainly from the nature of Nigerian society which are mostly patriarchal. In the *Joys of Motherhood*, Nigerian women are presented as second-class citizens and as a result, there is preference for boys to girls. In this text, the gender issue created is that, it is better to give birth to a male child than a female one. Consequently, premium is placed on the male child to the extent that when Nnaife's two wives, Adaku and Nnu Ego, become pregnant and Nnu Ego gives birth to a set of twins which are girls, Adaku is not sure about how Nnaife will receive the news. Nnu Ego and Adaku begin to imagine their husband's reaction in this conversation:

Your first set of girls, senior wife, 'Adaku said by way of congratulation. Hm, I know, but I doubt

if our husband will like them very much, one can hardly afford to have one girl in a town like this to say nothing of two (p. 126).

To show how much premium is placed on the male child, Nnaife comes home from his outing only to be furious that Nnu Ego has given birth to a set of twins who are girls. This is revealed by the narrator thus:

When Nnaife returned home in the evening and was told that his wife, Nnu Ego had two girls at the same time, he laughed loudly as he would always do when faced with an impossible situation. Nnu Ego, what are these? Could you not have done better? (p. 127).

In the above statement, it shows how partial the patriarchal Igbo society sees women. In contrast, weeks later, Nnaife's second wife, Adaku gives birth to a male child, unfortunately this male child dies some days after and this is greeted with sorrow and depression. And in her lamentation, Adaku says she prefers one of Nnu Ego's set of twins had died instead of hers:

O God, why did you not take on the girls and leave me with my male child (p. 128).

The importance of male-child is very paramount that it even creates jealousy and unhealthy rivalry between Adaku and Nnu Ego.

Also when Nnu Ego quarrels with Adaku, instead of the elders to tell Nnu Ego that she has erred, she is declared innocent because she gave birth to male child. In the settlement of this dispute, Nwakusor retorts:

Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you Adaku ... have committed unforgiveable sin! Our life starts from immortality and ends in immortality. If Nnaife had been married to only you, you would have ended his life on this round of his visiting earth. I know you have children, but they are girls... The only woman who is immortalizing your husband you make unhappy with your fine cloths and lucrative business (P. 166).

Nnu Ego herself believes that female children are to work so as to fend for the male children. She says:

But you are girls! They are boys. You are to sell to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family ... (P.176).

Also, when Nnu Ego loses her child, she is not

really sad because the dead child is a girl whom is not really cherished in Nigerian society. The narrator buttresses this"

...She crawled to the dead child to check what sex it was? That it was a girl had lessened her sense of loss... (P.194-195).

All these, prompted the African feminist to advocate equality between male and female children. Buchi like other African feminists therefore, took it up to fight for such equal societies rather than hoping that men will someday give them what they want by creating a better equality prospect for future generations.

Thematic Exploration; The raising issues

1. Motherhood

The qualities and experiences of motherhood is the main theme of the novel, and it is explored in several ways – through action, through narrative and through dialogue. First, the novels' central line of action or plot is repeatedly and consistently, defined by the ways in which the characters view and engage with the experience of being a mother. The most notable example is connected with the journey of transformation made by the protagonist Nnu Ego, whose choices and actions seem to be defined by her experiences of being a mother. In the novel, breast milk symbolizes the experience of motherhood, that Nnu Ego and other women are expected to have and also embrace. And when the milk is unreleased, it symbolizes the pain that comes when the experience of motherhood for whatever reason, is unfilled. This is metaphoric because, it shows the suffering Nnu Ego and other female characters experience as a result of motherhood.

In the Joys of Motherhood, motherhood is seen as the source of greatest joy and also a source of greatest defeat. As a girl, Nnu Ego was taught that her sole functions are to bear and raise children. Her initial struggle to conceive and her utter self-defeat when she believes in this uniquely female destiny that her culture has prescribed. The idea of motherhood informs her fantasies and her dreams. When Nnu Ego actually becomes a mother and struggles to raise her growing family, her idealism begins to change. Nnu Ego ultimately regrets having so many children and investing so much of her life in them

since they seem to have little concern for her well-being. She forces herself to accept a vision of motherhood that has been radically modified from the ideas she once cherished. Instead she becomes a sacrificial lamb, one who gave to her family selflessly but, received little, if not nothing in return. Then one is forced to ask;

- i . Does pervasive image of the children truly represent the destiny of a woman?
- ii . How justifiable is it to say that children represent a complement to a woman's identity, and her life is viewed incomplete without them?

2. Women Education

Education is said to be a vehicle that breaks the shackle of poverty, thereby leading to transformation, development and progress (Ikoni, 2009). In the *Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi offers her critique on the Nigerian society which offers the education only for man. Emecheta depicts her critical views through her character Adaku who represents the liberal woman. She knows that the education is a way to woman's freedom, so she tries to educate her daughters. Buchi Emecheta tries to encourage Nigerian women to be educated in order to acquire "a room of their own" by example of this character Adaku. This shows that education gives women the opportunity to be less dependent on men and to have more control over their sexual and reproductive health, often resulting in fewer births and a greater spacing between births, which is both healthier for mother and child. Where women lack education and information about family planning and have a low social status, there is a higher prevalence of unintended pregnancies; the biggest risk factor associated with this condition.

Looking critically at the current economic situation of Nigeria, there is no doubt saying that poverty level and men's attitude towards women have over the years, posed a serious threat to women education. George (2016) posits that the prevailing patriarchal ideology that promotes the value of submission, sacrifices, obedience and silent suffering has often undermined every attempt by the women to assert themselves for sharing of resources and rights. Therefore, George (2016), submits that women education

requires a careful analysis of woman's subordination and formulation of alternative source of arrangement to drive lesson home. This can only be made possible by removing all institutionalized forms of discrimination both at the political, economic, and social levels. In support, Molyneau (2018), says that women education requires transformation of structures of subordination using changes in law, property rights, and indeed every structure that militates against the education of women. To Bathwala (2010), the three approaches to women education includes; integrated development, economic empowerment and consciousness rising.

It is a well-known fact that women generally are the first known teachers of children at home. This is the reason why women education is considered a key to national development and so, educated woman is an asset to their family, her immediate environment, the nation and the world at large. Bokuva (2016), argues that investing on women's education carries very high returns. It improves livelihood, leads to better child and material health which favours the girls. Furthermore, education gives women a voice in their families, political life and on the world stage. It is a first step towards personal freedom. This is exactly what Buchi Emecheta is advocating in her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood*.

The questions are:

- i . As a woman, have you a room of your own?
- ii . How true is it to say the only way to women freedom is education?

3. Men and masculinity

The word man (boy) in traditional Igbo society is a privileged position. As a man, you have the right to several wives and you own your wives' labour, through which you may enrich yourself. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, men dictate or rule over the women, and as a result, the women have no option than to succumb to the dictates of the men. Coupled with the cultural practices, the women are remote-controlled and as such, they do not have any choice that leads to their fulfillment. Women in this novel are presented as commodities and for that matter men can grab as many as they can. The more children a man has,

the more he has achieved. This is another important feminist issue in the novel, the hierarchical relationship between man and woman. To clarify this, Nnu Ego reflects on herself and assert that:

God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? ... After all, I was born alone and I shall die alone. What have I gained from this? Yes I have many children ... I am a prisoner of my own flesh and blood. Is it such an enviable position? Men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by males in my life, my father and my husband and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our law more than anyone until we change all this, it is still a man's world which women will always help to build (p. 186–187)

Currently, this has been the issue in many families, the desires of our men to have many concubines (mistresses) around them, have resulted to infidelity. Many women have been affected psychologically by this act.

- i . Is this act worth taking?
- ii . Who made this law?
- iii . Can't it be changed?

4. Women and Femininity

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the woman's role in traditional Igbo society is to produce children, and on particular, to produce male children. Her value as a woman is dependent on her fertility. If she is infertile, she is a "failure" woman. If she has only girls, she isn't a failed woman, but she lacks honour. Nnu ego has absorbed these values, and her life's greatest wish is to be honoured woman. She has child, but ultimately, realizes that the rules of the game were made by men, and that her children have become a chain around her neck. Bitter truth!

According to Okebukola (2008), the marriage system in Nigeria has continued to be unfair to many women. For, the societal perception of what it takes to be a good wife/mother have subjected many women to different forms of slavery because, they (women) have to work hard to take care of their children, home and even the men folk who enslave them. A lot of women hardly had time to think better for themselves. Many have in this way suffered stress, depression and other health related problems. As far as this patriarch system is concerned in Nigeria, women are only seen as satiable desirable commodities that can easily be dispensed with, when they are no longer useful. And this ugly act from our men folk has eaten deeply into our marriage institutions. Already, many women have started telling the tale of their suffering, agonies, subjugation and hardships with a lot of bitterness.

- i . Can this be the plight of many women?
- ii . What exactly do women want?

Recommendations

It is important to note that the social barriers of tradition and culture are gradually giving way to new ideas, new values and practices. Today, women are making giant strides and striving high in almost every field of human endeavour, including those occupations and professions that were once considered exclusive for men. Some forces of change made by western civilization, urbanization and globalization, indeed call for total revolution. Based on this, the following recommendations are made;

- 1 . Education is seen in this novel as the only tool that can facilitate and enhance women's social status. Therefore, there is need for women to be equipped with new skills and knowledge.
- 2 . Family and entire society should accept the fact that, we are now in a globalized world thus; women should be allowed to consolidate on their new-found roles and actualize their potentials.
- 3 . There is need to create more awareness among the general populace on the inevitable changing roles of women in this digital era.
- 4 . Globally, there has been a steady progress, though slow in the roles played by women in

politics, there is need to encourage women to participate fully and actively in Nigerian politics.

Conclusion

Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* has shown that the prevalence of male dominance in Nigeria patriarchy setting is virtually affecting sectors and organizations. And this has continued to engender inequality which perpetuates, among other things, living fewer opportunity for women, unequal participation. It is important to note that, “in the developing country like Nigeria, where the unsettled patriarchal system persists, the girl-child and indeed the women are subjugated to play subordinate roles that often impede their access to equal opportunities for development. It is worthy of note that, a detailed overview of the status of the world’s women issued by the United Nations (2010), notes that women and men live in different world that differ in access to education and world opportunities and in health, personal security and human rights”. The emotional admission of the plight of women in a patriarchal society underscores the fact that women in Nigerian society have no means of rejecting the choices and preferences of men which sometimes, bring pain to them as it has brought to Nnu Ego. It is on the bases of this, that African feminists are seeking space for women that will make them free to make their own choice and not live on the whims and caprices of men

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