



Women as a Site of Resistance in Mahasweta Devi's Draupadi and Toni Morrison's Beloved

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to explore the theme of women as powerful sites of resistance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Mahasweta Devi's *Draupadi*. The analysis focuses on how Sethe in *Beloved* and Dopdi in *Draupadi* navigate through oppressive racial injustices, patriarchal structures and societal expectations. Through the lens of intersectionality, the article investigates how these women redefine power dynamics and challenge the oppressive forces that seek to subjugate and control them. The article also aims to explore the similarities between the racial and patriarchal structures in America and India and the perspectives of two women authors from different cultural backgrounds. Despite the geographical and cultural differences, the narratives of these two women authors converge in dealing with resilient women characters who resist and redefine their roles within a broader socio-political context. The article strives to show how both these women authors represent similar resistance of subaltern women to violent and oppressive forces.

Keywords: Women; Resistance; Intersectionality; Toni Morrison; Mahasweta Devi.

INTRODUCTION

The literary works of the authors Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi provide poignant narratives that shed light on the agency and resilience of women in the face of systematic oppression. Devi deals with the struggles of tribal women in India, with the protagonist, Dopdi, coming up as a symbol of resistance. Similarly, Toni Morrison delves into the harrowing experiences of Sethe, an African-American woman who transcends the gruesome realities of slavery through acts of resistance. The oppression of marginalised women is a deeply ingrained and pervasive issue that spans across societies and cultures as Waghmare stated "Marginality with all its aspects is indeed a major problem to be reckoned with in the world" (Waghmare, 2001, p. 16). The sufferings of marginalised women have long been ignored, deeming them the usual consequences of everyday life. These women often find themselves at the intersection of various marginalised identities like gender, race, class and caste, which makes their struggle multifaceted.

Discrimination and marginalisation based on gender are not only rampant in Indian society, but it is prevalent in the Western world as well. Simon De Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, talks about Western Society being patriarchal, with the female being subordinate to the male, being a nonexistent spectator to most of the institutions of society. Therefore, De Beauvoir asks, "what is a woman?" (De Beauvoir, 2016). She, however, insists that the answer must not be humanity as "humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being" (De Beauvoir, 2016). The works of both Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi provide profound insights into the marginalisation of women, delving into the struggles of the women residing at the intersections of different forms of marginalisation.

Research has been done on African-American and Indian writers separately, but there is a scarcity of work done on a unified thematic analysis of the writings of both Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi. A common thread that unites these writers is a belief that: What each of their literature has in common beyond their special and

distinctive regional characters is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonisation and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasising their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2003).

The theme of oppression and resistance is one of the few common themes that these two worlds share. Separated by culture, Black and tribal women are united by their subaltern position. These subaltern women are oppressed at the hands of their colonisers and equally harassed by their male counterparts. Separated by thousands of miles, the language of oppression and resistance remains the same. Women have come a long way in defying their gender and societal roles, resisting their oppressors, in creating a niche of their own. Through the lens of intersectionality, the paper attempts to analyse the female characters of Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi, redefine power dynamics, and challenge oppressive forces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Disremembered and the Unaccounted for

The oppression of black women has an allied and parallel existence with sexism and racism. As Gloria Wade Gayles explains this phenomenon as the 'imagery of circles': There were three major circles in American society, which reflect degrees of power and powerlessness. There is a large circle in which white people, most of them men, experience influence and power. Far away from it, there is a smaller circle, a narrow space, in which black people, regardless of sex, experience uncertainty, exploitation and powerlessness. Hidden in this second circle is a third, a small, dark enclosure in which black women experience pain, isolation and vulnerability. These are the distinguishing marks of black womanhood in white America (Gayles, 1984).

Racism, sexism and its accompanying horrors not only were imprinted on the bodies of these subaltern women but had a larger impact on their psyche. "To be black and female" was to be in "double jeopardy" (Beal, 1970). The various oppressive constructs of society emotionally and physically scar the women in Toni Morrison's novels. Being sexually abused and racially discriminated against, these women continue to strive in society with their scars. Morrison's women are portrayed as strong women who often resort to violence to avoid further victimisation. In this way, violence can be seen as a tool of rebellion in resisting oppression. The female characters in her novels range from children to adolescents to women who are all victims of patriarchal society and the white patriarchal society. They are excluded from society, their voices go unheard. Rejecting the racialised gender identity, they wreak havoc to create a new idea of Black women in society. Due to their exclusion from mainstream culture and historical marginalisation and silence, African-American women's voices go unheard, and their experiences are disregarded. The combination of racism and sexism is at the core of this exclusion, which reinforces a racialised gender identity that limits their autonomy and feeds negative stereotypes. But traditionally, African-American women have rebelled against cultural conventions and expectations, not conforming to this forced identity. They have fearlessly questioned the current quo, disrupting oppressive institutions and fighting for their rights. Through their acts of resistance, they have attempted to reshape society's ideas of Black femininity through art, literature, civil rights activism, or simple acts of rebellion. Instead of conforming to preconceived notions, they have affirmed their humanity, agency, and complexity to create a new and empowered narrative of Black women in society. As mentioned by Putnam, this resistive nature emerges in the early childhood of black women when they start to realise that their self-worth and their value are in question: "This pattern of violence emerges in some during early childhood. Realising their own worth is in question, young black girls attempt to upset white oppression by redefining the limits of their power and powerlessness" (Putnam, 2011, p. 26). One such novel by Morrison is *Beloved*, which gives voice to those whom the epilogue of the novel calls "the disremembered and unaccounted for" (Morrison, 2004, p. 323) as it chronicles the life of the central character Sethe. The novel is based on the real-life story of Margaret Garner, who came into the limelight with her unimaginable act of killing her child. While the incident garnered all kinds of negative attention, Morrison took inspiration from the incident to portray an alternate reality of enslaved Black women and present an alternate response to the incident.

Sethe, as a female slave, has gone through an unexplainable ordeal right from the time when she was brought to the Sweet Home Plantation. There was nothing sweet or homely about the plantation, and the slaves were treated as mere cattle. Personal relationships were turned arbitrary in the slavery system. However, Sethe was fortunate enough that she got to marry the person of her choice, Halle, "who had fathered every one of her children. A blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted" (Morrison, 2004, p. 23). After she escaped from the plantation, she had twenty-eight days to experience the life of a free woman, "twenty-eight days—the travel of one whole moon - of unslaved life" (Morrison, 2004, p. 95). During these twenty-eight days, Sethe starts to develop as a real person, and she is so enthralled by the life of freedom that she does the unspeakable when her

master returns to recapture her and her children. The act of infanticide shows the extent to which a black woman and, especially, a black mother would go to protect her family. "By choosing death for their children, these mothers claim their motherhood in ways that are challenging to understand — yet, in doing so, these female characters achieve astonishingly powerful personas" (Putnam, 2011, p. 27). By killing her child, Sethe is not able to free the world of evil but she saved one soul from the entrapment of slavery. As Christopher Peterson states that Sethe must "kill her own daughter ... to claim that daughter as her own over and above the master's claim" (Peterson, 2006, p. 554). The trauma and the memory of her life on the Sweet Home plantation are all too vivid for Sethe. She laments how she had no choice when the nephews of the Schoolteacher abused her: "Two boys with mossy teeth, ... sucked on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" (Morrison, 2004, p. 70). The women in Morrison's novels behave according to what they believe to be the best. Sethe's escape from slavery to freedom and her choices after that had a lasting impact on her life. The price she pays in resisting oppression is the death of her child: "When she saw them coming and recognised Schoolteacher's hat ... Sethe collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them" (Morrison, 2004, p. 163). However, her actions are not without repercussions. She is alienated from society, and her indifference towards people is due to a lack of choice: "That she lived in 124 in helpless, apologetic resignation because she had no choice; that minus husband, sons, mother-in-law, she and her slow-witted daughter had to live there all alone making do" (Morrison, 2004, p. 164). Yet she defended her act years later when she says to Paul D, "I did it. I got us all out. I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under Schoolteacher" (Morrison, 2004, pp. 162–63).

Through a series of flashbacks, Morrison tells her story. Her narration grapples with the recorded history as well as what was unrecorded. Sethe's memory is "loaded with the past" (Morrison, 2004, p. 70), and every mention of "her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (Morrison, 2004, p. 58). Sethe remembers how the now haunted house was once a "cheerful house, buzzing house where Baby Suggs holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed" (Morrison, 2004, pp. 86–87). "Baby Suggs long-distance love was equal to any skin-close love she had known" (Morrison, 2004, p. 95). Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, served as a breeding slave, giving birth to eight children but was only near one of her children, Halle, who later bought her freedom. She is the one who nursed Sethe back into life and who, upon seeing the scar on the back of Sethe's back, "frowned and looks at her daughter-in-law bending toward the baby. Roses of blood blossomed in the blanket covering Sethe's shoulders. Baby Suggs hid her mouth with her hand ... Wordlessly the older woman greased the flowering back" (Morrison, 2004, p. 93). Baby Suggs is the only legally formerly enslaved person in the novel who acts as a preacher and keeper of oral tradition and, more importantly, keeper of body. While Baby Suggs denounces the choice that Sethe makes in the shed, she relates to her loss: Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognise anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. Did Patty lose her lisp? What color did Famous' skin finally take? Was that a cleft in Johnny's chin or just a dimple that would disappear soon's his jawbone changed? Four girls, and the last time she saw them there was no hair under their arms. Does Ardelia still love the burned bottom of bread? All seven were gone or dead. What would be the point of looking too hard at that youngest one (Morrison, 2004, p. 139)?

The violence committed by these women sometimes affects the community in which they reside. However, their actions are the outcome of the racialised and sexualised violence perpetrated around the world. In other words, the violent resort taken by Morrison's women can be harmful to the individual's psyche, but it is ultimately the reprojected oppression that has been etched into their souls. By redirecting the violence forced on them, these women become the site of resistance to oppressive powers.

Morrison's depiction of black women as strong, independent individuals is a reflection of their continuous fight against institutionalised oppression. Their sense of value and self-worth is challenged by the physical and mental abuse they endured, leaving them with long-lasting psychological scars. Despite these hardships, Morrison's characters, such as Sethe, exhibit a spirit of resistance and defiance against the oppressors. The novel uses the supernatural motif to explore the lingering effects of the past. The ghost of Sethe's deceased daughter is a cruel reminder of slavery and its impact on the present. The tension between isolation and community is also explored in *Beloved*, especially within the African-American context. While community acts as a pillar of strength and solidarity, characters like Sethe also face isolation due to their traumatic past. These themes intersect throughout the novel, manifesting the experiences of the marginalised women in *Beloved*. Sethe's journey from slavery to freedom serves as an illustration of the trauma inflicted upon black people. Similarly, Mahasweta Devi's portrayal of tribal women in the text *Draupadi* reflects on the plight of marginalised communities grappling with the intersecting forms of oppression. Dopdi's defiance against her oppressors resonates with Sethe's resistance, both serving as powerful agencies of resilience against injustice. Through their narratives, both Morrison and Devi

challenge the dominant notion of society.

METHODOLOGY

Intersectionality in the Narratives

The article looks into intersectionality as a theoretical framework to understand the interconnectedness between the nature of oppression faced by Sethe and Dopdi. The paper examines how their experiences of being a woman intersected with other facets of their identity, race, class and caste, influencing their modes of resistance. Toni Morrison and Mahasweta Devi navigate through the complexities of intersectionality, presenting the characters as embodying multiple layers of marginalisation. Both authors contribute to the larger discourse of intersectionality, revealing that the marginalisation of women is not bound to a specific cultural and geographical context. In her short story, *Draupadi*, Mahasweta Devi provides a complex exploration of intersectionality unfolding within the tribal communities of India. The protagonist, Dopdi, grapples with the intersecting oppression of class, caste and gender. As a tribal woman, Dopdi faces oppression not only because of her gender but because of her caste identity as well. The tribal women's exploitation of labour and bodies reveals the interconnectedness of gender and caste-based oppression. Beloved by Toni Morrison delves into the post-emancipation experiences of black women, especially Sethe.

RESULTS

Voice for the Voiceless: Dopdi in *Draupadi*

Waghmare, in his *Literature of Marginality*, says, "American blacks, as well as Indian Dalits, were the sons and daughters of darkness journeying through untold sorrows and sufferings" (Waghmare, 2001, p. 20). Although the Indian tribals are not Dalits, the ordeal that they have to face is quite similar to that of theirs. Both Indian tribal women and African-American women are still under the sweep and sway of injustice. "With changing times, with educational opportunities afforded to them, their conditions are improving but still they face the question of regaining their identity" (Aston, 2001, p. 10). These marginalised women are away from the power centres, groping in the dark for survival, striving to be empowered. Mahasweta Devi's works of fiction are a powerful representation of subaltern marginalia, highlighting the unimaginable situation of the triply marginalised tribal women, who are not only victims of race and class but also gender. Her short story, *Draupadi*, is one of the finest examples of antagonism that heavily affects and influences the lives of tribal women. This short story is a part of the breast trilogy *Breast Stories*. "The breast is not a symbol in these stories. In '*Draupadi*', what is represented is an erotic object transformed into an object of torture and revenge where the line between (hetero)sexuality and gender violence begins to waver" (Spivak, 1997, p. viii). The short story revolves around the protagonist *Draupadi* who is caught "between two uniforms and two versions of her name" (Devi, 2019, p. 4). Although her name, *Draupadi*, reminds us of the mythological character from *Mahabharata*, her name, *Dopdi*, is its tribalised form. Her Brahmin mistress gave her the name in a moment of benevolence. In an interview with Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, which is featured in *Imaginary Maps*, Devi says, "Remember, *Draupadi* in *Mahabharata* is a black woman, she must have been tribal" (Devi, 2019, p. 1). However, the irony of the situation is that the name *Draupadi* is not appropriate for a tribal woman, and thus, her identity is in question as she neither belongs to the world of bondage nor that of her ancestry.

When *Dopdi* is first introduced, "she is thinking about washing her hair. She loves her husband and keeps political faith as an act of faith toward him. She adores her forefathers because they protected their women's honours" (Spivak, 2019, p. 11). She is one of the most powerful protagonists and is representative of the revolutionaries of her community. Her fight is for survival, and thus, her actions are justified. The feudal society refuses to acknowledge tribals as fellow humans, viewing them as dark-skinned, untouchable beings deprived of the basic right to access clean water. After *Dopdi*'s capture, *Senanayak* orders his soldier to "Make her" (Devi, 2019, p. 34) and disappears. Even after being brutally raped and tortured, she denies bowing down to her oppressors. "She turns her eyes and sees something white. Her own cloth. Nothing else. Suddenly she hopes against hope. Perhaps they have abandoned her. For the foxes to devour" (Devi, 2019, p. 31). The ordeal does not subdue her as she is a woman born to be exploited by society. De Beauvoir states, "For a woman to accomplish her femininity, she is required to be object and prey" (De Beauvoir, 1989, p. 815). She refuses to drink water and to be clothed when summoned by *Senanayak*: "the pluralist aesthetes of the First World" (Spivak, 1997, p. 6) who "must destroy the enemy, the menacing other" (Spivak, 1997, p. 2). *Dopdi* appeared in front of him naked, with her battered body and mangled breasts, but her head held high. She challenges *Senanayak* to see the consequences of his orders: "Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. *Draupadi* wipes the blood on her palm and says in a

voice that is terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, what's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?" (Devi, 2019, p. 36). Dopdi, who is tortured and oppressed at night, becomes a force of resistance and unconquerable during the day. Her action of refusing to be reclothed challenges the phallogocentric society, and with her indomitable spirit and decisive actions, she tries to put an end to the sheer atrocity of the patriarchal society that tends to control subaltern women with their evil schemes and violent measures. "She refuses to confine herself to her role as female because she does not want to mutilate herself, but it would also be a mutilation to repudiate her sex" (Beauvoir, 2016). Unlike her mythological counterpart, Draupadi, Dopdi does not rely on male intervention but challenges the patriarchal construct of sexual honour and transforms her position of victimhood. Overcoming shame, guilt and fear that is associated with rape or other sexual oppression, Dopdi subverts the discourse of violence perpetrated on women and primarily upon tribal women and presents a woman who, despite being exploited and oppressed, transgresses conventional societal and sexual standards. Dopdi's character perfectly represents the subaltern woman who defies societal and cultural norms, reclaiming agency through resistance.

Dopdi's defiance of her oppressors extends beyond the individual act of resistance as it also serves as a powerful commentary on the systematic oppression of the tribal communities of India. The representation of Dopdi's struggle shows the broader reality of the tribal women grappling with the intersecting forces of casteism, colonialism and patriarchy. Moreover, the inherent symbolism in Dopdi's name reflects the dichotomy between her tribal identity and the societal expectations imposed upon her. As she navigates through the complexities of her name, she emerges as the symbol of the resistance against the erasure of tribal heritage and culture. Her rejection of the role imposed on her by her Brahmin mistress and the feudal society reveals her unwavering commitment to maintaining her individuality. Despite the blatant portrayal of violence and oppression, Draupadi celebrates the survival instinct and resilience of the marginalised tribal communities. The text portrays the marginalised communities not as passive victims of their circumstances but agents of their freedom, challenging the dominant concept of victimhood.

The difference between Devi's writings and mainstream Indian writers is in her lifelong dedication to the cause of tribal people and her zeal to improve their lives. In this regard, Mahasweta Devi is quite similar to the African-American writer Toni Morrison. In parallel to Morrison's advocacy for the oppressed African-American women, Devi's lifelong struggle to amplify the voices of the tribal people underscores the potential of literature as a tool of social justice.

DISCUSSION

Resistance across Borders

The article highlights the convergence of themes in *Beloved* and *Draupadi*, portraying how the narratives set in two different cultural contexts share common grounds in showcasing women as sites of resistance. The literature of both these authors has given expression to the injustices and discrimination faced by subaltern women. The realities of tribal women and African-American women are oppression, poverty, ignorance and ultimately marginalisation and alienation. Aggression, resistance, protest, anger and discord are the outer expressions of the inner reality. While Toni Morrison is an African-American woman examining gender and race, Mahasweta Devi is Indian, writing in Bengali about tribal independence and the horrible condition of tribal women. Both these writers have portrayed women who are indomitable in their spirits. Both Sethe and Dopdi's characters embody courageous women fighting all their lives to attain their fundamental rights, even at a significant cost. Their sacrifices remind us of what De Beauvoir states: "she must renounce her claims as a sovereign subject. This is the conflict that singularly characterises the situation of the emancipated woman" (Beauvoir, 2016). They are the true voices of liberation, breaking all limitations. Despite being oppressed and dominated, the women in both the selected literary works transgress conventional societal and sexual standards.

Devi's works identify with the oppressed and have affinities toward left fervour. One of the main concerns of her works is the upliftment of tribal women and self-possession. In the short story *Draupadi*, she reinterprets the mythological character, Draupadi, in the form of tribal Dopdi. While in the mythology, Draupadi's honour is protected by Lord Krishna, by clothing her, Dopdi is easily stripped: The men easily succeed in stripping Dopdi - in the narrative, it is the culmination of her political punishment by the representatives of the law. She remains publicly naked at her own insistence. Rather than save her modesty through the implicit intervention of a benign and divine (in this case it would have been godlike) comrade, the story insists that this is the place where male leadership stops (Spivak, 1997, p. 11).

Dopdi continued to exercise her agency by refusing to be the victim, leaving the representatives of patriarchal society 'terribly afraid'. Dopdi, represented by Devi, encapsulates what Spivak calls the 'gendered subaltern'. By

dislocating the mythological Hindu princess Draupadi to the tribal rebel Dopdi, Devi disrupts the hegemonic status quo prevalent in the society.

Similarly, *Beloved* is a reinterpretation of the actual incident of Margaret Garner, who killed her daughter to save her from slavery. The novel elucidates the oppressed history of slavery and how the central character takes her destiny into her own hands by resisting white patriarchal oppression. Her bold act of killing her daughter is symbolic of the trauma that has been etched on her soul. This action can be seen as the reprojected of the age-old oppression that has been perpetrated on women slaves. She refuses to give up her daughter to slavery, which, according to her, is worse than death: "I couldn't let all that go back to where it was and I couldn't let her nor any of them live under school teacher. That was out" (Morrison, 2004, p. 163).

The works also delve into the trauma of the two female characters against the backdrop of the historical atrocities. In *Draupadi*, Dopdi challenges the atrocities inflicted upon her community by the state's oppressive machinery. The narrative is set against the backdrop of tribal uprisings and governmental breakdowns, presenting the severe impacts of oppression on marginalised communities. Similarly, *Beloved* unfolds in the aftermath of slavery, with the protagonist, Sethe, traumatised by her escape from slavery and the infanticide committed by her to protect her children. Both narratives underscore the impact of the long-lasting oppression on the psyche of the characters, revealing trauma as the central reason for shaping their actions and identities. The women who are marginalised, oppressed based on gender, class division, and suppressed by racial absurdities and patriarchal norms understand their hegemonic position in society and try to overcome their destinies by resisting oppressive forces. "Racially exploited, sexually violated, and often emotionally humiliated for years or decades, these women often learn to coexist with their visible and invisible scars by making choices that are not easily understood" (Putnam, 2011, p. 25).

CONCLUSION

Women writers of the twentieth century have often delved deep into the psyche of patriarchal orthodoxy. The main thrust of the feminist subaltern studies is to reject the hegemonic power structure of society overtly. In many women's fiction, a utopian reality is presented where women are portrayed as victorious, but in post-feminist fiction, women achieve their liberty at a significant cost. This paper presents similar thoughts of Mahasweta Devi and Toni Morrison about their representation of the resistance of subaltern women to violent and oppressive forces. Simultaneously, it focuses on the dissimilarities in handling this particular theme.

A vivid description of the works of these two writers reveals their dedication and honesty towards presenting the authentic voice of the subjugated women. It is fascinating and surprising to see such similarities in their writings as they hail from different backgrounds. Despite having cultural and traditional differences, Devi and Morrison make the voices of the doubly marginalised women heard. The state of being subaltern connects Devi's women to that of Morrison's, who often take recourse to their bodies as well as violence as a source of resistance. Instead of becoming the stereotypical victims subjugated by the powerful structures, these women assert their individuality and resist the oppressive forces. Analysing the two selected works of these two writers, it is visible that not only have they succeeded in representing the subaltern women in their writings, but they have skillfully used the art of literature to let these characters speak for themselves. Tribal and African-American literature converge in portraying subaltern women resisting their oppressors to find their voice.

Further research can be done to analyse the implications of achieving freedom and liberty at a significant cost in post-feminist women's fiction and its reflection on societal attitudes towards women's empowerment. Moreover, work can be done on the cross-cultural comparisons between African-American and tribal literature in their representation of women's experiences. Work can also be done on how different literary traditions diverge and intersect in their portrayal of resistance and empowerment. By pursuing these future directions, scholars can present a better understanding of the representation of subaltern women's resistance in literature and its broader implications for feminist discourse and social change.

ENDNOTES

Ululation is a vocal expression that can be recognised by a high-pitched, erratic sound that is frequently made while exhaling by quickly moving the tongue or throat muscles. It is frequently connected to certain cultural customs, rituals, and celebrations worldwide, including Africa, the Middle East, and several regions of Asia. Ululation can vary in intensity and manner depending on the cultural setting and is frequently used to show excitement, celebration, or mourning.

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

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