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## **Re(de)construction of Identity through Social Constructionism in Selected Novels by Podder, Beti, and James**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Identity is an extremely complex and subjective theme to discuss – especially when it comes to setting a fixed definition. This article examines the construction of identity through the lens of social constructionism and draws in several working definitions from various sociologists to purport the core of this article. The sociological concept will be applied on three different texts: *Escape from Harem* by Tanushree Podder (2013); *The Poor Christ of Bomba* by Mongo Beti (1971); and *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James (2009). Focusing only on the protagonist from each text, we attempt to carry out the analysis of this paper by looking at the flux of identity within them. We argue that identity is not a fixed and permanent state of a character; instead it is constructed by social, political, economic, and personal experience. All the three protagonists, Zeenat, Denis, and Lilith experience specific identity fluctuation in their lives. As such, we will be looking at the psychological growth and changes in each character and determine whether or not his/her sense of self is reconstructed or deconstructed at the end of their journey to self-discovery.

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Identity, Reconstruction, Self, Social constructionism, Sociology, Tanushree Podder, Marlon James, Mongo Beti

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As denoted in the title of this paper, we have chosen three different texts from three completely different writers from various backgrounds namely; *Escape from Harem* by Tanushree Podder (2013), *The Poor Christ of Bomba* by Mongo Beti (1971), and *The Book of Night Women* by Marlon James (2009). For the methodology, we attempt to carry out the analysis of this paper by looking at the flux of identity within the main characters of each novel through the lens of social constructionism. We argue that identity is not a fixed and permanent state of a character; instead it is constructed by all social, political, economic, and personal experience. As such, we will be tracing these external forces imposed on the characters and observe the consequence of the effects. That said, it is clear that we champion the stance on constructionism instead of the notion of essentialism in terms of construction of identity.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. IDENTITY AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Identity is an extremely complex and subjective theme to discuss as there has been a lot arguments, definitions and researches done on it – all providing respective findings which differ from one another. What is identity? Who ascribes identity to each and every one of us? Is it constructed by external factors or is it somewhat psychologically innate? According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, identity is defined as “the recognition of one’s potential and qualities as an individual, especially in relation to social context.”(352) In other words, one understands himself by acknowledging his strengths and weaknesses in relation to the social context, which is prescribed by the daily nuances of society. Similarly for fellow sociologists, they define identity as “the subjective concept of oneself as a person” (Vignoles et al. 309). In relation to the dictionary definition, the “subjective” concept as proposed by the sociologists ties back to how identity is constructed according to social context. In addition to the prior two definitions, an academic philosopher also agrees and points out in the same manner; “identities are historical-political actualities and, thus, are fluid and always in an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation” (Serequeberhan 44). The individual identity is shaped out of the ashes of cultural identity.

According to Gergen, “social constructionism may be defined as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences” (266). This definition is evidently contended by factors which are innate and biological because those are elements which are impossible for humans to construct. However, it is noteworthy that social constructionism does not entirely ignore and forsake the fundamental elements of life itself; instead it chooses to investigate social effects on communal and individual lives. Social constructionism considers individuals as one, together with everything that is happening at the exact temporal space and time, molding and shaping their personal and psychological experience to that of cultural contexts (Owen 161). In sociology, constructionists gestate gender as a sort of communicative achievement, an identity in a constant changing continuum via linguistic reciprocation and social conduct (Cerulo 387). Sociologists focused mainly on the construction of the “me,” searching the modes in which interpersonal communications shape one’s sense of self (Cerulo 385).

Henceforth, it is within our interest to take all the definitions mentioned prior in previous studies and expand on the scholarship of social constructionism in terms of identity. We propose, in this article, that a positive growth in a character will be termed as 'reconstruction', and vice versa for 'deconstruction'. In other words, we will be comparing the stark differences in each character's identity at the initial and final stage of respective texts, as well as some of quintessential moments during the constant shifting of self to support the study. Note that the words, 'construction' and 'formation', of identity carry the same meaning and will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. To benefit readers who are not familiar with the selected texts, a brief summary of each story focusing on the protagonist's journey will be provided in the first paragraph of each section of analysis.

### **3. IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION IN *ESCAPE FROM HAREM***

Thrown into a quagmire of intrinsic complication of harem during the ruling of Jahangir and Shahjahan, Zeenat, at fifteen, goes through a life-changing journey ever since. Raped by Jahangir, she loses her identity and feels morbidly disgusted with herself. Her road to self-discovery and contentment intertwines with some of the novel's most intimate and intense moments, such as aiding Begum Bahar in her plan to elope with Zafar Khan, marrying Salamat, having a miscarriage for her first pregnancy, and witnessing Salamat's death. This perilous path that Zeenat treads is not an easy one; however she blooms beautifully at the end of the story, constructing an identity which she calls her own.

In this section of the paper, we will focus on the protagonist of the novel which is Zeenat. We wish to argue that her journey throughout the text has helped reconstruct and rediscover herself at the end of the novel. Aside, the term 'reconstruction' here connotes a more positive inclination towards the formation of identity. To begin with, Zeenat is a spritely young girl who just turned fifteen at the beginning of the novel and she is blessed with a great personality and natural bodily coordination.

The girl's talents were many; she could mimic the queens and concubines to perfection sending her audience into peals of laughter. (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 3)

Based on the excerpt, we know that she is a girl filled with joy and innocence, who enjoys nothing more than to entertain people around her. However, her mother's position in the harem as one of the servants requires her to stay within the vicinity of the restricted area as well. This then lead to the many complications and miseries which will be explored as we go on. One night, Zeenat thought:

Maybe the prince wants to meet me. It could be a clandestine meeting arranged by him. He must have chosen this hour so that people don't notice us. (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 5)

Little did she know, Emperor Jahangir had summoned her to his room as he had taken interest in her. At this point, her innocence remains intact in her wonderfully shaped bubble of optimism. Her optimism soon gone south when she realized Jahangir's intention and that was when she lost her only redeeming quality – innocence.

Her mind blocked out the face above her. The shock numbed her senses and she closed her eyes as he entered her brutally. Silent tears streamed down her cheeks (...). (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 9)

The excerpt above clearly paints a tainted mental image of a young girl whose innocence and identity was robbed of. After the incident, Zeenat becomes a recluse and shuns everything and everybody in the harem. No longer the clown she used to be, Zeenat torments herself by suffering in silence. She feels as though she no longer deserves anybody's love or respect when she is already "tainted." However, things took a turn in event when Zeenat absolved herself from the guilt of sin which she did not ask for. She mustered all courage and faith inside of her and decided to move on with life. She says, "I have seen the unpleasant side of life, but the future doesn't have to be gloomy. Why should I allow my past to dictate my life?" (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 22).

As such, one thing lead to another, and Zeenat somehow managed to secure a position as a personal maid to Begum Bahar, one of the many concubines Jahangir had victimized. After years of serving Begum Bahar, both seemed to develop a sense of sisterhood, despite the difference in their social strata. It comes to a point where Zeenat actually encourages the Begum to run away and elope with Zafar Khan, who too, seems to have taken a romantic interest in Begum. Zeenat laments

'What is the purpose of living a life bereft of dreams and romance? Why should a concubine be destined to perish silently within these walls? If I find love, I'll give my life for it,' said the girl. (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 61)

Here, Zeenat has established herself as a hopeless romantic – an individual who would die in the name of love. That is her identity at present state and she would risk her life by assisting her Mistress to attain her personal happiness. Fast forward the plot, Zeenat finally got what she deserved and married the man she calls 'husband'. Not too long after, Salamat jumped for joy as Zeenat confirmed her four months pregnancy to him. Misfortune befell the couple and they lost the baby while in carriage; and it was all because of a silly rumor which was spread by Abdul, their adopted son. Shamed, Abdul ran away from home because he could not bear the guilt of "killing" the baby. Much to his surprise, "Zeenat was delighted to see them bringing the disheveled boy home. She clung to Abdul with relief" (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 122).

At this point, Zeenat shows a character which is stable and rational in her thinking. Despite the loss of her first pregnancy, which she could very easily blame on Abdul, she did not. Almost too immediately, she accepts the situation and is grateful that Abdul was not hurt in his attempt of fleeing from the house. Her maternal identity is forged even before she had the baby. Further, it was not too long until Salamat died while fighting for his Highness, Shah Jahan, leaving Zeenat a widow to the cruel world.

For Zeenat, it was the end of her dreams. She could not believe the person she loved the most in this world had left her. (...) She stared at the horizon. (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 139)

Even with the tragedy of her beloved, Zeenat carries herself with calmness and absolute control. She did not burst into wallowing tears and exert extreme emotions. All she did was “stare at the horizon”, as though she had somehow foreseen the circumstance and was ready for it. After Salamat, Zeenat never entertained another thought of finding another man to fill the void. She has Abdul and that is all she needs in her life at the moment to carry on. Alas, we can observe the ups and downs in Zeenat’s life which have constructed her identity at the end of the novel.

From the foolish and incredibly beautiful girl, she had matured into a charming woman with streaks of grey in her hair. Age had also brought with it certain dignity and wisdom to her. Indeed, her life had taught her many lessons. (T. Podder, *Escape from Harem* 176)

#### **4. IDENTITY DEFORMATION IN *THE POOR CHRIST OF BOMBA***

Set in the early 1930s against the Cameroonian background during the era of French colonization, the story follows the life of a young boy named Denis. Denis was an extremely confident young African boy who was taken in by Father Drumont to learn the right ways to live as a true disciple of Christ. As hinted in the title of the novel, Denis has to follow Father Drumont when making religious tour around the Bomba mission, which covers quite a few villages. His absolute confidence and self-assurance starts to crack and fall to shambles after having experienced some of the “true” nature of the believers and non-believers during the mission. Being exposed to the miscellaneous hypocritical deeds by his colleagues such as Raphael and Zacharia, Denis finds himself lost and confused as his initial pillar of faith is now in question. Upon the failure of the mission, he regresses and gives in into the normative way of life of his fellow Cameroonians.

In this section of the paper, we will be looking at Denis, who is the main character and also the narrator of the text. Similarly and contrastively to the previous section, we argue that Denis’s identity as a young Christianized African boy will be compromised at the end of the story. In other words, his initial self-assurance and confidence are stripped down by the many social deconstructions throughout the novel.

Denis, in words of Father Drumont himself in the novel, is a greenhorn. He is ‘[s]omeone who never doubts his mission’ (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 36). This is because his father had urged him to follow and study under the apprenticeship of Father Drumont since young. Naturally, Denis was raised in an environment where white supremacy is held high and of utmost importance in the society of Cameroon. Even as a native black, he has always regarded himself a special mix to the white circle for he was given the opportunity to serve within their direct vicinity. Therefore, his identity as a black has been compromised of that to his social surrounding which renders him blinds to his own shortcomings and flaws. In addition, fellow black Cameroonians who do not accept Christianity are coerced in force labour; yet Denis does not see the wrong in that. He asserts, “Ah, if only they’ll build that road, if they’ll beat and persecute these people, then perhaps they’ll all return to God...” (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 38).

However, it is interesting to note that even though Denis proclaims to be a “good Christian”, he is still flawed to a fault. Serving alongside him is a guy named Zacharia, and he is the symbol of someone who accepts Christianity for the sake of the worldly benefits, such

as not having to toil under harsh labour. Denis detests him to the core for being such a hypocrite – an angel in front of Father Drumont but a devil behind him. Our point is, Denis is flawed with extreme jealousy even though he is not supposed to harbor such negative feeling for his comrade, especially when Zacharia did not do anything malicious to Denis: “Zacharia has no idea how I hate him. He couldn’t possibly have taken my remark amiss” (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 50).

The following excerpt also consolidates the extreme over-thinking on Denis’s part concerning his negative feeling. He constantly justifies his own action, putting himself on an imaginary pedestal where he can feel superior amongst the rest, even though it may not be the case in reality.

After all, work is certainly more noble than Zacharia’s and I’m sure people, the girls especially, admire me more than they do him. But I don’t want to boast about it, like Zacharia.... (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 64)

Denis’s moment of epiphany concerning his unwavering religious faith happened during the tour around Bomba mission. He has been a fan and idolizes Father Drumont for as long as he could remember because he was the one responsible in instilling the gospel in his life. Therefore, Denis has a certain expectation of ‘straightforwardness’ from Father when it comes to delinquent native black people who refuse to accept the teachings of Christ. He questions.

All the same, it’s funny how he has behaved since we started this tour – almost as if he was afraid of people. He lets them talk about rubbish about God and religion, and he actually listens to them. (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 78)

Here, his identity is conflicted because now, he feels more strongly about the gospel than Father himself. The fact that Father was willing to reason with the villagers aggravates him; it puts him in a restless state. To further complicate, Denis had a sexual encounter with a girl named Catherine, who follows the tour group in Bomba secretly as well. She was supposed to be Zacharia’s personal “consort” only but she took advantage of Denis’s overt innocence and with that, his virginity.

Oh God, what shall I do? I’m so unhappy. And all because of that cursed girl, Catherine. Ah! She is Satan herself (...) I should have watched out (...) But how could I have done? How could I suspect that she wanted to make me do that? (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 81)

Denis is extremely conflicted at this point because he finds himself trapped in the situation where he sees no way out. Repressing the issue would make him a “bad” Christian; revealing the truth might cost him everything – even his position to serve Father Drumont. And so, he oscillates back and forth, about the decision he should make regarding the matter. Most of the time, he was justifying to himself that Father is a reasonable man – if he can listen to the corrupted people of Bomba, he surely can pardon his sins. All the same, he contradicts:

I wanted to terribly to do that thing again, not in the night this time, but by day, so that I could see her naked body (...) Oh, I would have given up anything to lift up Catherine's dress! (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 91)

Things got worse for him as he discovered the devious plan between Zacharia and Raphael, the guardian of the sixa girls. Raphael, whom Denis has never suspected anything of, proves to be one of the culprit in demeaning the girls, making them sex slaves to whoever that can benefit him. He finds out that the only reason why Catherine was able to escape the sixa is because of certain 'off-table' agreement between Zacharia and Raphael. This new piece of information sets him off, turning him into a paranoid. He thinks, "[s]ee what bad thoughts I have now! Having been duped so long, I'm beginning to suspect everyone and everything" (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 120). Upon returning home from the Bomba mission, Denis does not feel too right about his current state of mind. He questions:

[W]hat has happened to me? I am scarcely myself anymore. It's almost as if a stranger had penetrated me, slowly taking over and inhabiting my being, to such a point that I scarcely recognize myself. (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 147)

As indicated in the excerpt above, Denis has now lost all his prior known identity. From a highly confident and conceited young follower, Denis is now crumbled to a state of confusion, barely recognizing what is left of him. He started out with a strong sense of self, who he is, and what he stands for in the Cameroonian society. However, all is shackled after witnessing much retaliation from the mission – internally and externally. Non-believers claim that Father Drumont and Christianity are just like any other white people or "Greek merchants" because they only seek profits and riches of the land. On the other hand, there is an unfathomable amount of corruption and hypocrisy within the religious circle as well; such as Zacharia and Raphael. In the end, Denis ponders if:

it would be useful to go regularly to school and improve my French. For instance, I would have understood better all the discussions between M. Vidal and the Reverend Father. (...) My God, it's all too complicated for me! (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 164)

Ultimately, the Bomba mission failed and Father Drumont decided to go back to France. In the midst of somber and hopeless final scene, Denis musters whatever courage and faith he has left to move on. He notes,

I'm remembering the advice which Anatole gave me one evening! To go to the town and get a small boy's job with one of the Greek merchants... (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 219)

In the end, Denis mentions the thought of taking up a job with one of the Greek merchants. This part marks a significant change in his identity. The job was mentioned recursively throughout the novel in a negative light – a profession which reeks of dishonesty, artifice, and fraudulence. Therefore, for Denis to even consider taking up a job like that reflects the loss of faith in Christianity. He concludes:

I'm beginning to wonder myself whether the Christian religion really suits us, whether it's really made to the measure of the black I used to believe firmly... (M. Beti, *The Poor Christ of Bomba* 189)

## 5. IDENTITY CONFUSION IN *THE BOOK OF NIGHT WOMEN*

As indicated in the title of the novel, the story literally revolves around the lives of seven, strong Jamaican house slaves, centering on one: Lilith. A biological product of a coerced physical molestation, Lilith is discontented with her status as being a mulatto. She feels excluded from all circles – excluded and dismissed from higher class white people and refusing to accept her fellow black companions. Her identity has always been wavering and shackling under pressure but all the same, holding a strong personality and acts impulsively according to her feelings. Her unpredictability has caused several deaths such as the likes of a field nigger, Paris, and also the entire household of the Roget family, with the exception of Isabel Roget. At the final rampaging scenes of massive slave revolution massacre, planned by the night women, Lilith finds herself rescuing the man who had shunned and rejected her from his life, Jack Wilkins, her biological father. The story ends with an uppity failure of the revolution with all of the night women dead, slaughtered amidst the crossfire.

To recap, we have explicated two texts in the prior sections. In *Escape from Harem*, we traced the identity reformation of the protagonist Zeenat in her arduous and relentless journey to attain her identity which she succeeded at the end of the story. All the same, we studied the identity deformation of Denis in *The Poor Christ of Bomba*. All the blunders and collisions which he witnessed during the Bomba mission has rendered him spiritually weak and lost even though he was very sure of his identity at the beginning of the story. Thereupon, it is within our interest now to look at the third and final selected text for this paper, *The Book a Night Women* by Marlon James and observe the flux in the protagonist's identity. Here, we argue that Lilith is a strong female character which projects a steadfast resilience in all she does throughout the novel. However, all the incidents do not seem to have an impact in her identity, leaving her the same at the end as she first started in the beginning.

She swing the club, clap the ball clear 'cross the field and make one run to all four base and beat the boys but couldn't understand when the wet nurse slap her and say that a good girl was supposed to make manchild win. (M. James, *The Book of Night Women* 4)

As observed in the excerpt above, Lilith is a character which challenges the gender stereotypes of a woman. She is fiercely competitive, highly argumentative, and physically tenacious, especially in a society where females are supposed to be silent. However, it is noteworthy she is also contradictory in herself – she is a green-eyed mulatto. Different in a sense that, she is still considered as a black person in the Montpelier Estate but she somewhat possesses a slightly higher status than the other black civilians. The identity conflict comes in when she does not feel belonged to any groups of people. She detests to be labeled as a black girl, yet she secretly desire to be grouped together with the likes of Massa Humphrey and Robert Quinn. She soon found out that there is a circle of women besides her who suffer the same fate of being the sexual product of raping. Despite the lending hand from the night

women, she outwardly rejects their help claiming that they are jealous of her being the ‘new girl’. She vexes,

You hate me, you hate me just ‘cause me soon be mistress favourite, Lilith say. –  
The mistress think me better to show off than you, so me no want to turn into you  
is if that you offering. Me hear you piss through you ears now that way down there  
shrivel up. (M. James, *The Book of Night Women* 72)

Lilith journeyed through the text not agreeing with the sisterhood but she also submits to her status as a slave and because of this. She is simultaneously excited by this demonic energy within her (Akbar, “The Book of Night Women, by Marlon James”). For example, she killed a Johnny-jumper named Paris early in the novel when he tried to make an advance towards her.

That was the first time she feel the darkness. True darkness and true womanness that make man scream. She shudder and she feel ‘fraid and proud and wicked and she feel good. (M. James, *The Book of Night Women* 16)

Amongst all characters in the novel, her identity constantly undergoes shifting, based on the kind of situation she is in at the moment. Halfway through the novel, her service in Montpelier Estate got transferred to Coulibre Estate, under the command of the Rogets. She experienced a change in her nature when her working environment changed as well. Here she met Dulcimena, the existing servant and both of them bonded fast. Misfortune befell them as Dulcimena got killed by the Rogets after the sixth week of Lilith’s arrival.

Lilith try to help her, but Dulcimena didn’t want to help herself no more. In days she swell and swell with so much pus and water that she just burst and dead. (M. James, *The Book of Night Women* 200)

Instead of her usual harshness, here she demonstrates a more gentle side of her. This is to say, her identity does not revolve around being hard and self-protecting all the time. However, it did not last long as she subconsciously murders the Massa Rogets and his households, and set the house on fire. She realizes

True darkness and true womanness that make a man scream. Now she know what the woman in the dark want. (M. James, *The Book of Night Women* 223)

Instantly, she also came to her sense that

Nobody deserve to be dead more than Massa Roget, except that now the man really dead. (...) Blood don’t taste like wine, Lilith learning. (M. James, *The Book of Night Women* 236)

Alas, the Atlas uprising and rebellion took place at the end of the novel as planned by the night women. Havoc wreaked everywhere and people were overturning their masters and

burned down everything they could lay eyes on. Amidst the process, Lilith bumps into her biological father and

(...) look at Jack Wilkins and try to think of him as anything but a devil. She think to leave him to either the fire of the negroes, but then he look at her again and she see a weak old man in the bed. Just a weak old man who can't hurt or promise. She look at him eyes and try to see herself. (M. James, *The Book of Night Women* 396)

To sum, Lilith could not bring herself to kill Jack Wilkins due to the persisting inner struggle. She has always adored white people; all the same they have been utilizing her, torture her, and subjugate her to inhumane treatments and doings. Further, she is even a part of the upheaval in support of her fellow black people. Trapped in her own ambivalence of self, she rescues the man who shunned her initially but rallied on with the rebellion, which concluded with utter abysmal failure. As such, her inability to leave Wilkins alone to die in the fire marks her confusion in identity. Ultimately, Lilith remains a slave who will not be a victim, a mulatto who will not be tragic; for this she is brutally beaten, becoming known as “the woman with the quilt on her back” (Glover, “Womanchild in Oppressive Land”).

## **6. CONCLUSION**

In a nutshell, we have managed to trace the re(de)formation of the respective identities in the selected novels. In similar order, we were able to chart the growth of: one, Zeenat became content and accepted herself in the end despite her childhood being robbed from her; two, Denis's pillar of faith in Christianity fell to shambles upon witnessing the many contradictory things during the Bomba mission; and three, Lilith's stagnant stance in her identity due to frustrating oscillation between her skin colour and how she sees herself. Indeed, there is a pattern which links these three characters together – the fluctuation of identity based on external factors. Wherefore, to say something that it is socially constructed is to emphasize its dependence on contingent aspects of our social selves. It is to say: this thing could not have existed had we not built it; and we need not have built it at all, at least not in its present form (Boghossian, “What is Social Constructionism?”).

To conclude, social construction hypothesizes that all aspects of humanity are shaped, sustained, and destructed in the present through interactions with others. Because of this continuum of creation and destruction of moments, identity will constantly go through an endless series of flux. It emphasizes that socialization and conditioning of culture influence people on how they interact with one another (Owen, Wan Yahya *et. al*, Mohd Muzhafar, Ruzy Suliza, & Raihanah).

### **Notes**

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**Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya** is Associate Professor of English Literature in the Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages & Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her research interests span several areas within English literature, World literatures in English, and literature in the ESL contexts. Much of her research and publications focuses on gender, cultural identity, and the teaching and learning of literature in the second language. She is also interested in reading literature through existential and absurdist philosophy as well as through eco-critical lens. She is also interested in various aspects of literatures written in English of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship of human with nature in literature, and depiction of the grotesque in horror prose.

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