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## **Womanism; The Birth of a New Hope and a Voice for Black Women**

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### **Abstract**

Within the U.S racist community, black women were faced with different forms of oppressions that restricted freedom and defined their roles. For many long years, black women were victimized by whites as well as black males. The whites used to deal with black females as commodities whose desires and needs were treated with humiliation. Several brutal acts were committed against them and they were deprived of practicing social and political rights. Their roles were defined and they were seen as mummies, matriarchs, welfare mothers and jezebels. On the other hand, black males did not appreciate black women's bodies, but rather they were sexually exploited.

So, they attempted to fight against marginalization and ask for equal political and social rights. They participated in protests and political movements that were formed to achieve liberation such as Civil Rights Movement and Women's Movement. During both movements, black women were faced with racial discrimination and sexual assault. In response to black women's degradation and victimization, Walker's Womanism has emerged as an attempt to resist white supremacy, male dominance and negative stereotypes against black women, in addition to celebrating black culture, history and identity.

The main target of the research is to demonstrate the mistreatment of black women within the U.S community during slavery and the creation of controlling images that restricted their freedom. Black women were doubly marginalized to the extent that they found it impossible to build solidarity with white women or to build their own independent personality within the patriarchy of black community. In addition, the critical method of this research will depend on analyzing "Womanism" which was created by Alice Walker in her book *In search of our Mothers Garden: Womanist prose* which was published in 1983.

This term gives a chance for the women of color to identify and appreciate themselves. It is seen as an ideology that celebrates the achievements and the role of black women in society. To reflect such achievements, poetry is chosen as the political protest against all kinds of oppression. However, Womanism will be depicted through revealing its ideas as well as various views of critics and theorists.

Globally, feminism is a widespread political, cultural and economic movement designed to establish equal rights and protection for women. It embodies several political and sociological ideologies and philosophies that support women's role within the society. Feminist activists have campaigned for women's legal rights of abortion, parental care and reproduction, as well as prevention of domestic sexual violence and rape. The term "Feminism" first emerged in France in the 1880s. It appeared later in Great Britain during the 1890s, and finally invaded the United States in 1910. According to the feminist writers Rebecca Walker and Maggie Humm, Feminism is mainly divided into three waves. The first feminist wave started in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United States and the United Kingdom, the second was in the 1960s and 1970s, and the third has extended from the 1990s to the present.

Originally, first-wave Feminism concentrated on the reinforcement of property rights for women. By the end of the nineteenth century, the focus was mainly on obtaining political power, especially the right of women's suffrage. In Britain, suffragists organized several campaigns to gain the right to vote. The Representation of the People Act was passed in 1918, giving the vote to women over the age of thirty, and in 1928, the right of vote was extended to all women over twenty-one. However, in the United States, the leaders of the first-wave Feminism involving Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony campaigned to eliminate slavery. American first-wave Feminism came to an end when the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution (1919) was declared, granting women the right to vote all over the States. Consequently, second-wave Feminism came to light, heralding a newer phase of Feminism.

Second-wave Feminism called for social change through the emancipation of women and the prevention of marginalization. In her book

*The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan criticized the idea that women can fulfill their identity only through raising children, serving husbands and being sexually passive. But actually, this wave of Feminism is "white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression". (McCann and Kim). In 1964, the Women's Movement was established in the United States to fulfill the social and political right for white women, excluding women of color. Thus, black women started to organize their own movements in order to oppose sexual and racial oppression.

"In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is as American as apple pie have always had to be watchers, to become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, even sometimes adopting them for some illusion of protection." (Lorde, 114). This "Watching" has generated multiple ways of survival for black women who were victimized and marginalized. Thus, many movements and theories have emerged to give voice to the silenced and grant them "protection". Many black female activists appealed to Afrocentric epistemology, based on the experiences of ordinary black women who faced different kinds of oppression. From here, Africana Studies theories emerged, and their principal purpose was to explain multiple dimensions of black people's lives, especially black women's.

The field of African Studies started in the nineteenth century, based on the writings of black revolutionists and activists Casely Hayford, Benjamin Brawley, Francis Harper, Martin Delaney and Edward Wilmont Blyden. The concept "Africana" refers to "the philosophy of the African continuum and African consociation" (Aldridge and Young, 62). Besides, the term "Africana" did not only relate to continental Africans, but it expanded to include Africans worldwide. According to Conyers, the study of black women within the discipline of Africana studies should be:

"to facilitate and provide the necessary  
groundwork for the development of  
more complete, and integrated narratives of  
black history and culture that  
will yield more comprehensive, in depth, and  
holistic interpretation and body of  
information about our past, representing both  
genders without prejudice". (407)

So, during the twentieth century, many Africana studies departments were established at major universities with the aim of encompassing the African diaspora. The main objective of those departments was to encourage students to broaden their knowledge of human experiences, specifically black experiences which were overlooked by the educational institutions. From the viewpoint of Robert Harris Jr, a history professor at the Africana Studies Research Center, the development of Africana studies passed

through four stages. The first stage started from 1890s until the Second World War. Through that stage, numerous organizations were established to analyze the history and culture of African people. The second stage focused on the religious, political and social lives of African Americans. In the third stage, a set of newly established academic programs was created, such as Black studies. Black studies resulted from the massive rebellions of black college students who were searching for a scholarship of change. The fourth and last stage was named "Africana Studies", involving a minute theoretical exposition of Black studies. Moreover, Africana studies demonstrated the institutionalization of Black studies in accordance with its coherence with the academic curriculum. Away from Black studies, many theories emanated from Africana studies such as Black Feminism and Womanism. Those devoted themselves to the study of black women's experiences as well as their social position within the U.S community.

Black Feminism theory is defined by the black theorist and activist Pearl Cleage as "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities- intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic" (qtd in Phillips, 62). Using the term "black Feminism" helps African American women comprehend that the economic, social and educational issues affecting them in the United States are part of the global women's emancipation struggles. The roots of Black Feminism were established through the publication of *An Argument for Black Women's Liberation as a Revolutionary Force* in 1969, authored by Mary Ann Weathers. Weathers pointed out that black women suffered from sexual and racial oppression, and insisted that white women should build connections with them, thereby building a new sense of revolution. Thus, the black feminist movement emanated in response to the Civil Rights Movement (1960) and the Women's Movement (1964).

The black women who participated in both movements were discriminated against sexually and racially. Black women were at the forefront of struggle to fight racism and sexism and to gain identity and equal rights. Black males assumed that racism was more offensive to them than it was to black women, because the chief objective of racism was the destruction of their manhood. Although the purpose of the Civil Rights Movement was to free the black race, it was in words and deeds to free black males only. The most prominent achievements of the African American Civil Rights Movement were the post-Civil War constitutional amendments that abrogated slavery and granted citizenship to blacks. In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, ending segregation in public places and preventing employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex or religion. Moreover, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Right Act in 1965, which aimed at enabling black people to exercise their political rights, particularly the right to vote.

Despite those privileges, black women lacked the sense of belonging, as black men focused on controlling their sexuality, and they equated freedom with manhood. They also exploited the matriarchy issue to force black women into maintaining exclusive commitments to racial interests and narrowing black women's roles and images in ways fitting a more traditional Western view of women. Unfortunately, both black and white men created certain stereotypes and dominant images for black women, and they made use of these images. According to Patricia Hill Collins, there were four main recurrent images that formed an oppressive matrix of domination. Black women were only seen as mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers and jezebels.

Collins demonstrates that "these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life" (69). The image of the mammy was created to shape the role of African American women in white houses. She was pictured as a loyal domestic servant, devoted to her housework. In contrast to the image of white women who were presented as good mothers, paying attention to developing the morality of their offspring, black women were seen as sexual slaves restricted to transmitting their role to their own children. But, because of the failure of the mammy image to control black women, the second image emerged. The image of African American women as black matriarchs aimed at defining black women's place within black houses. They were symbolized as bad aggressive mothers who failed to fulfill their duties, especially towards their children. Thus, this image was regarded by many intellectuals as cruel because it omitted the traumas and difficulties that black women experienced in order to support their families.

For certain political and economic purposes, black women were seen as welfare mothers. Because it was claimed that black women were able to breed children as easy as animals, slave-owners wanted them to give birth to children as much as they could in order to help in building a prosperous economy for the United States. In addition, the image of jezebels was used to describe black women as sexually promiscuous. This image claimed that black women could not be rape victims, as they usually wanted sex. Thus, the images of jezebels as well as mammies, matriarchs and welfare mothers were the strong justification for controlling and exploiting African American women. Later, black women found hope in the Women's Movement, which was established to achieve equality for all women.

Black women who joined the Women's Movement underwent a harsh phase of racism imposed upon them by white women. This movement took the form of exclusion, as black women were not summoned to participate in conferences and they were seen as third world women. A great part of the frustration that black women suffered from was due to white women's

unwillingness to admit their racism. On the contrary, they promoted the racist ideology and became oppressors themselves.

Many Black Scholars blame the black culture and its traditions for taking part in oppressing black women. Black culture fosters a firm trend towards early motherhood for young girls, leaving education behind. This leads of course to superiority of white women as well as black men, who think of black women as mere sexual objects. The mission of black feminist organizations was to draw the attention of black women towards self-definition as well as to mobilize them for action. They used several means to achieve their goal such as marches and the press.

The black women's stance towards liberation arose from the constant argument about their roles within the black community in the 1960s and early 1970s. Black men limited black women's role to reproducing children for the sake of the revolution. When black women resisted these kinds of stereotypes and aimed towards birth control, black men denied them, as they desired to brag about the number of children they have fathered. Black women were greatly aware that they had other significant roles to play in the revolution more than their fertility. They also rejected the idea that a black man was the exclusive economic provider for the black family, and asserted that they economically and emotionally upheld their families. Patricia Hill Collins points out that "African-American women's experiences as mothers have been shaped by the dominant group's efforts to harness Black women's sexuality and fertility to a system of capitalist exploitation" (Collins 50).

The main objective of controlling reproduction was that black women were fully aware that giving birth to more children would effectively assist in constructing the economic future for the U.S community. Once those children were old enough, they would be constrained to help their mothers, either in farming the lands or within the masters' houses. Black women were also cognizant of the fact that children who were born to enslaved mothers would be slaves as well. They had a considerable ambition towards erasing the passive image imposed upon women of color, as well as their children. The rebuff of black mothers to bear children can be depicted as an act of resistance.

Sexual violence was pictured as a system of oppression that dominated and humiliated black women. According to Patricia Hill Collins, sexuality can be conceived as "conceptual glue that binds intersecting oppressions together" (135). Under the capitalist system of the United States, black women's bodies were handled as commodities that were sold through open markets and auctions. Their sexuality and bodies were publicized by Law as public property with no privacy to be taken into consideration by the whites. Professor and activist Barbara Omolade remarks:

White men used their power in the public  
sphere to construct a private sphere

that would meet their needs and their desire  
for black women, which if  
publicly admitted would have undermined the  
false construct of race they  
needed to maintain public power. Therefore,  
the history of black women in America reflects the  
juncture where the private and public  
spheres and personal and political oppression  
meet

(qtd in Collins 134).

Since the 1970s, literacy began to pervade among African-Americans and gradually started to form a new kind of resistance. Many black women writers formed a community to motivate other women to challenge the controlling stereotypes associated with them. Most women of color lacked the ability to hold positions of power because of the racial solidarity. Respect was the pivot theme of those writers who aspired to deliver a firm message to the society. The concept of respect was extended to include not only the writings, but the blues singers as well. Aretha Franklin's song "Respect" was one of the most popular songs during that era. She sings to her man: "All I'm asking for is a little respect when you come home". Although the words seem to be normal and can be used in daily life, she aimed at a deeper meaning. The song is a symbol and illustration of the harsh conditions of black women within a society.

Black women were greatly conscious of the inevitable social problems such as poverty, poor living, violence and racism. They started to question themselves if they did not appreciate their blackness, why should anyone appreciate it? Domination was present in every realm of their lives. It was there in schools, housing, employment and government. Black women refused to bury their minds and talents within iron kettles and pots. Black feminists endeavored to analyze the intersecting oppressions, how they worked and influenced women of color within the United States. They also used every possible means such as music, literature and daily conversations to fortify black women's consciousness. By asserting African-American women's identity, black feminist thinkers manifested the importance of knowledge for empowerment.

Thus, black women activists stressed that empowerment did not only require changing the consciousness of black women, but required modifying the despotic social institutions they confronted through their lives. As long as they were stuck at the bottom of the hierarchy, black women found it necessary to resist oppressions and change their positions within the community. Patricia Hill Collins declares that the first steps towards freedom should start with education. She states:

When my mother taught me to read, took me  
to the public library when I was

five, and told me that if I learned to read, I  
 could experience a form of freedom,  
 neither she nor I saw the magnitude of that  
 one action in my life and the lives  
 that my work has subsequently touched. As  
 people push against, step away  
 from, and shift the terms of their participation  
 in power relations, the shape of  
 power relations changes for everyone. Like  
 individual subjectivity, resistance  
 strategies and power are always multiple and  
 in constant states of change.

(275)

Until recently, the double marginalization of African American women has led to great indifference to their voices, needs and achievements within the American community. In her speech "Ain't I a Woman" which was delivered in Ohio, 1851, Sojourner Truth examines the complex relationship between race and gender. She questions whether black women have undergone the same sexism as white women. She comments that black women were marginalized due to their race and gender; where-as white women were treated as virgins and goddesses. She focuses on the equal rights of black women to white women, as well as black men's appreciation and respect for them. She repeatedly uses the question "Ain't I a Woman?" to assert that a black woman's needs, desires and personalities must be respected. She points out:

That man over there says that women need to  
 be helped into carriages, and  
 lifted over ditches, and to have the best place  
 everywhere. Nobody ever helps  
 me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or  
 gives me any best place! And ain't I  
 a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I  
 have ploughed and planted, and  
 gathered into barns, and no man could head  
 me! And ain't I a woman? I could  
 work as much and eat as much as a man -  
 when I could get it - and bear the lash  
 as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne  
 thirteen children, and seen most all  
 sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with  
 my mother's grief, none but Jesus  
 heard me! And ain't I a woman? (np1851).

In her book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Michele Wallace states: "Whiteness, more than any other racial designation, is an invention of American ideology; a way of combating the fear of the other within, or the dread of polysemous and polyvocal selves through various social policies"(xxv). Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the National Association of Colored Women wrote, "Not only are colored women with ambition and aspiration handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race." (1898). Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw conceived the term "intersectionality" in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" which was published in 1989. This concept indicates a description of the way through which numerous oppressions are experienced. She argues that the experience of a black woman cannot be described in terms of being black only or in being a woman only, but a combination of both. Crenshaw points out that, black women are discriminated against in many ways that do not suit the legal categories of racism and sexism, but as a collection of both racism and sexism. Crenshaw argues that a main characteristic of intersectionality lies in its admission that miscellaneous oppressions are not experienced separately, but rather as a mounted experience.

Criticizing the United States legal legislations which are supposed to criminalize discrimination, Crenshaw absolves three discrimination suits raised against corporate employers by black women plaintiffs, and she concludes that antidiscrimination laws protect black women only to the extent that their experiences of discrimination are synchronous with those of black men or with those of white women. Crenshaw says:

I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men. Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination - the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women-not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.

(44).

Crenshaw continues to deconstruct the abhorrent phenomenon of race and sex intersection. She criticizes the hardship of self-presentation for black women in both the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement. She summons the society to head for anti-discrimination of both sexism and racism, as the whole community approaches only one aspect of discrimination leaving those who face double marginalization at loss.

Although Black Feminism varied in its forms and ideologies, it was depicted as a compatible inspection of interlocking oppression and devoted to agendas that attached the solutions of gender oppression with other forms of oppression. What obviously differentiates Black Feminism from the mainstream of American Feminism is its concentration on the synchronism of oppressions that affect Black and other women of color, especially racism, sexism, class oppression, and homophobia. Black Feminism intends to eliminate the stereotypes of black women who are considered as the other. A black woman is either the servant of her family or the sexual object. It was argued by many thinkers that Black Feminism is only female-centered theory, so Womanism appeared as a revolution against theories devoted to the study of black women, omitting their relationship with other human beings.

Womanism was coined by the African-American writer Alice Walker who experienced multiple oppressions as a black woman in her book *In Search of Our Mothers Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983). Her construction of the term "Womanism" was an attempt to situate black women within culture and history, as well as to suspend the negative stereotypes chasing them. She encourages black women to celebrate their identity and blackness in a way that Feminism does not. In her book, Walker manifests that a black woman is a thinker who is always in pursuit of knowledge, "wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered good for one". (xi). Then, she goes on to highlight a black woman's strength, devotion and independence, as she points out that the black woman is:

A woman who loves other women, sexually  
and/or nonsexually. Appreciates  
and prefers women's culture, women's  
emotional flexibility (values tears as  
natural counterbalance of laughter), and  
women's strength. Sometimes loves  
individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually.  
Committed to survival and  
wholeness of entire people, male *and* female.  
Not a separatist, except  
periodically, for health. (xi)

From Walker's viewpoint, the ideology of Womanism strives to abolish the beliefs of Black Nationalist traditions. These beliefs are based on

the assumption that white and black people cannot participate in the same social and political institutions, as whites are eager to create white supremacy. So, it will be hard for black people to adhere to a system predicated on black subjugation. Black Nationalist traditions also uphold black moral superiority over whites due to black oppression and suffering. Walker's Womanism promises a reconciliation of these philosophies, in addition to raising the issue of gender roles within the community.

Womanism invokes a critical issue central to white feminists, which is fostering an interracial cooperation among all women. African-American women who believe in the philosophies of Black Nationalist studies find little interest in building relationships with white women, who are actually part of their problem. In addition, Walker attempts through her theory to provide an avenue of trust between black men and black women. Critic Harold Bloom manifests that Womanism "should not be understood as a type of man-hating; it is not synonymous with male-bashing but rather with the affirmation of a community". (58).

Another major element that helps in the construction of Womanism is pluralism of black empowerment. Originally, pluralism conceives society as one integrated unit, embracing several ethnic groups competing for a living. Equity will be achieved when equal rights, opportunities and respect are maintained for each group. So, pluralism supplies a modified system of racial cooperation founded on group assimilation and coherence, regardless of race, sex or gender. Many black theorists and activists were fascinated by the ideologies of pluralism and racial integration, especially in their relation to Walker's Womanism. In her book *Black Womanist Ethics* (1988), Katie G. Cannon praises the visionary content of Womanism as an ethical system. She explains that it is not a fixed system related to only one particular group, but it stimulates a massive sense of coalition, rejecting all kinds of segregation and oppression. Thus, there are many activists and writers who have been affected by Womanism. Some of them encourage the idea of coalition between races, while others take a separatist attitude.

Professor Layli Phillips supports Womanism as an ideology designed for the good of all people. In her introduction to *The Womanist Reader* (2006), she contends that the black woman is not just the main focus of Womanism, but she is also the principal element for originating Womanism. Phillips views Womanism as a polarizing movement for all women, and it manages to extend beyond black communities and encompass other communities, particularly whites. In addition, Phillips asserts that Womanism can be described in accordance with five fundamental characteristics. She hints that "it is antioppressionist, it is vernacular, it is nonideological, it is communitarian and it is spiritualized" (xxiv).

Antioppressionist suggests that Womanism resists all kinds of oppression and encourages the liberation of humanity from any imposed stereotypes. Vernacular "identifies Womanism with everyday people and

everyday life" (xxiv). It supports the use of everyday language as a catalyst for harmonizing people of all races. Being nonideological, Womanism abominates any strict planning, but it strives to build structural relationships among people, and depends on dialogue in order to establish these relations. The fourth element that shapes Womanism lies in the importance of correlation and coherence for the community. This community consists of a series of tiers starting with black women followed by the black community and any communities of color, then those who are faced with oppression and finally all humanity. The final characteristic of Womanism is spiritual, aiming at creating an actual transcendental zone in which human life, livelihood and business are entangled.

In her article "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" (1985), the Nigerian literary critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi presents her vision of Womanism. She explains that Womanism seeks an equal power-sharing among races and sexes, but she takes a separatist stance. Ogunyemi dismisses the idea of the reconciliation between blacks and whites due to the racial nature of whites who despise and humiliate blacks on the basis of their color. Unlike Ogunyemi, professors and activists Dimpal Jain and Caroline Turner illustrate their experiences enhancing Walker's phrase "Womanist is to feminist as Purple is to Lavender" (xi). Being non-white professors, Jain and Turner faced a great deal of segregation and humiliation. That is why they stand for Womanism more than any other theory. Jain elucidates that Feminism is a scratchy, uncomfortable movement, working only for the interests and benefits of white women. Turner also explicates that she cannot identify herself with Feminism, which offers a massive discrimination between races. From the perspective of other theorists, Black Feminism is just a derivative of Feminism and it is somehow different from Womanism.

It should be noted that Black Feminism is not less important than Womanism. Actually, there are many factors in Black Feminism which are regarded as parts of Womanist values. It is pre-occupied with the recognition of African roots as well as the struggles of African American women against racism and sexism within the United States. But, it is still female-centered, focusing only on black women. On the contrary, Womanism fights for black women's rights not only with the U.S community, but around the whole world. It is also centered on the family, everyday life issues and the relationship of black women with all races, encompassing white women and black men. Womanism also stimulates black authors to separate themselves from Feminism and devote their works to maintain black women's identity and pride.

## الملخص

### الأنثوية. ولادة أمل جديد وصوت للنساء السود

رويدا عبد المحسن حسنين

واجهت السيدات السود العديد من أشكال القمع داخل المجتمع الأمريكي والتي بدورها حددت حريتهم وأدوارهم. وعلى مدار العديد من السنين، كانت هؤلاء السيدات ضحايا للبيض والسود على حد سواء حيث تعامل البيض معهم باعتبارهم بضائع بلا رغبات أو احتياجات بل كانت تقابل احتياجاتهم بالإذلال. وقد تم ارتكاب العديد من الجرائم الوحشية ضدهم ، كما تم حرمانهم من ممارسة حقوقهم السياسية والاجتماعية وتحديد دورهم في المجتمع. من ناحية أخرى لم يحترم الرجال السود أجساد نسائهم بل قاموا باستغلالها. نتيجة لذلك ، حاولت هؤلاء السيدات محاربة التهميش والمطالبة بالمساواة في الحقوق السياسية والاجتماعية ، بل وشاركوا في العديد من الحركات السياسية كحركة الحقوق المدنية والحركة النسائية. تعرضت السيدات خلال الحركتين إلى التفرقة العنصرية والاعتداء الجنسي واستجابة للتمييز ضد السيدات السود وتحقيرهم ، ظهرت النظرية النسوية التي أسستها أليس ووكر في محاولة لمقاومة هيمنة البيض وسيطرة الرجال والصور السلبية للسيدات السود بالإضافة إلى تجميد الثقافة والتاريخ والهوية السوداء.

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