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## Environmental Crisis, Climate Change And Nature-Culture Dichotomy In Amitav Ghosh's *Gun Island* And *The Nutmeg's Curse*

Name: Anita Pal

Designation: Research Scholar

Department: English

Institution: Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, UP, India

We live in the era of Anthropocene and etymologically the word Anthropoceneconsists of two different words which are originally Greek. They are "Anthropos" and "Cene" which means human' and 'new' respectively. Anthropocene indicates the impact seen in the function or structure of the ecosystem of the earth caused by human activity (Gibson & Venkateswar, p.5). Human dominance on the ecology of the earth can be seen in various ways like "...climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion: Interference with the global phosphorus and nitrogen cycle; global freshwater use; land system change; loss of biodiversity; chemical pollution; and aerosol loading in the atmosphere" (Franchini, Viola & Barros-Platiau, p.181). As the consequences of changes happening in the ecological system of the earth, the environment has been converted to a new epoch and humans have been converted to new "geophysical agents" (Reno, p.2).

According to Nobelprize winner Paul Crutzen, the Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the onset of the era of Anthropocene since it is the main reason behind the increase in the use of fossil fuels and the heightened level of carbon dioxide and methane in the atmosphere of the earth. Planetary environmentalism is an umbrella term that focuses on environmental justice demanded not only for humans but also for nonhumans in the same way while addressing the issues of climate change and planetary crisis. In *Gun Island*, Amitav Ghosh draws a parallel between the migration between animals and humans owing to climate change. This novel not only foregrounds the question of justice for multispecies but also advocates the subject of justice for marginalised humans, especially those belonging to the global south. When we can distinguish the novel's characteristics of planetary environmentalism in the final scene we see the climax of it. The plot of the novel unfolds onvarious continents and environmental issues. It moves from one city to another and from one corner of the world to the other. Starting from Kolkata it moves to Sundarban, Brooklyn, Los Angeles, Venice and at last to the Mediterranean Sea.

The climate crisis in the novel has transformed into a planetary crisis and the narrator's observation is the biggest proof of that as he says "...it was as the very rotation of the planet had accelerated, moving all living things at unstoppable velocities, so that the outward appearance of a place might stay the same while its core was whisked away to some other time and location" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 181). Dinanath Dutta, also known as Deen, is an Indian-American who is "...dealer in rare books and Asian antiquities" (*Gun Island*3). While his business is

primarily located in Brooklyn, his visit to his ancestral home inKolkata for both professional and personal reasonsled his journey towards the Sundarban which is situated at the shores of the Bay of Bengal and borders of Bangladesh and is known as the largest mangrove forest. Dinanath's visit to the forest of Sundarbans helps him find the different aspects of precarity in climate change. In Ghosh's previous work, The Hungry Tide, we can see that the Bengal Delta of Sundarban has become the centre of exploitation for Gun Islandconcerning climate change. Deen visits Sundarban to see a shrine built by BandukiSadagar or the 'Gun Merchant'. It is known that the shrine was built to appease the wrath of Manasa Devi, the goddess of snakes as depicted in Bengali folklore. According to the myth, she is the goddess "...who rules over snakes and all other poisonous creatures" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 6). The puzzle of Gun Merchant is solved at the destination of the journey in Italy and through the whole journey different scales of planetary crisis caused by climate change are identified. Ghosh has shown the importance of folklore by connecting the roots of climate change between ancient times and modern times. The war between nature and profit is analyzed by the legend that is perfectly convenient for the predicament of the modern world.

Nilima Bose who visited Sundarban for the works of her trust opines about the shrine of Manasa Devi. The Gun Merchant was said to have been a rich trader who had angered Manasa Devi by refusing to become her devotee. Plagued by snakes and pursued by droughts, famines, storms and other calamities, he had fled overseas to escape the goddess's wrath, finally taking refuge in a land where there were no serpents, a place called "Gun Island" Bonduk–Dwip (Ghosh, *Gun Island*,17).

The 'Bonduk-dwip' turns out to be Venice in Arabic language and Deen comes to know about it much later. So the Gun Merchant becomes the derivation of "The Merchant of Venice" and thus, the puzzle is solved at last in Italy. According to Nilima's information, the merchant was chased by venomous snakes and creatures until he accepted the power of the goddess and built the shrine to show his devotion and submission. Deen visits the situation by encountering a king cobra exposing the narration to the element of the supernatural. The protagonist Deen initially fails to connect the dots between human and nonhuman agency but later when the king cobra's bite transcends Tipu to the mystical visions he realizes the contribution of supernaturality in it. In the observation of Kuhelika Ghosh, in the scene of *Midnight's Children* where Saleem Sinai takes refuge in the jungle of Sundarban among the nonhumans, it is perceived that "unlike human subjects, the nonhuman subject cannot speak in the linguistic sense, but as multispecies scholarship reveals the nonhuman environment constantly responds to environmental stimuli in agential ways to survive" (Ghosh, *GunIsland*, P.10). Similarly, when Deen encounters withnonhuman agency and it turns out to be supernatural he rationally and emotionally responds to the enmeshed relationship between both human and nonhuman beings. As he says:

I had an uncanny feeling that I too had lost myself in the dreams, it wasn't so much that I was dreaming but that I was being dreamt by creatures whose very existence was fascinated to me-Spider, Cobra, Sea–Snakes and yet they and I had somehow become a part of each other's dream (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, p. 227).

There is a reason behind exploring the myth of Manasa Devi in the novel as it highlights the nature of humans to dominate the nonhumans and suggests the issue of justice for multispecies as the lack of communication between the humans and nonhumans has led the situation to climate crisis. The narrator realizes,

[s]he [the Manasa Devi] was in effect a negotiator, a translator [...] between two species that had no language in common and no shared means of communication. Without her meditation there could be no relationship between animal and human except hatred and aggression. (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 167)

On the other hand, the goddess Manasa takes the responsibility as the representative of the nonhuman world to make humans understand the consciousness of wrong actions in the nonhuman world. To focus on the scientific aspect of climate crisis Ghosh has represented the perspective of Piya, a marine biologist of Bengali–American origin. As Nalini's friend she often stays in Kolkata with her friend while she visits Sundarban for the inspection of her research project. Deen meets Piya before he starts his journey to Sundarbans at Nilima's place. While Piya explains the scientific aspect of climate change Cinta an Italian Scholar of the history of Venice foregrounds the cultural and historical analysis of the climate crisis. Focusing on both situations Deen can relate how the lands of Sundarban and the water of the forest are being harmed and affected by the changes in climate and the ecosystem of that area is disrupted by that process. As Nilima affirms, "...the islands of the Sundarbans are constantly being

swallowed up by the sea" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 19). Deen, from his visit to the Sundarbans, comes to know that the Cyclone Aila of 2009 that hit the Sundarban has resulted in a big loss and "...long-term consequences" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 52) for both humans and other species from the experience of Moyna who lives in Sundarbans we come to know about the problems and frustrations of the dwellers of Sundarbans. She says, "...sometimes [...] it seemed as though both land and water were turning against those who lived in the Sundarbans (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 53). The struggle of the people due to climate change is captured through her comprehensive portrayal,

...when people tried to dig wells, an arsenic-laced brew gushed out of the soil; when they tried to shore up embankments the tides rose higher and pulled them down again. Even fishermen could barely get by; where once their boats would come back loaded with catch, now they counted themselves lucky if they netted a handful of fry. (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 53)

According to her, "...making a life in the Sundarbans had become so hard that the exodus of the young was accelerating every year: boys and girls were borrowing and stealing to navy agents to find them work elsewhere" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 53). Tipu, the son of Moyna introduces Deen to the dark realities of life due to climate change. Human trafficking, migration and the journey of refugees to the west of the country are very common phenomena of the climate crisis. Tipu offers a detailed picture of human trafficking like her mother Moyna:

...now the fish catch is down, the land's turning salty and you can't go into the jungle without bribing the forest guards on top of that every year you get hit by a storm that blows everything to pieces. So what are people supposed to do? What would anyone do? If you're got any sense you'll move and to do what you need someone who can help you find a way out (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 65).

Tipu's view throws light on how the climate crisis has contributed to the migration practice of both humans and nonhumans. The pictures circulated in the world of virtuality have given them false hope of a better life in the Western world and based on that they are not even thinking a bit about risking their lives. But the Deen properly understands the gruesome reality of the lives of these unwelcomed migrators by encountering those people in Venice. Their life is full of struggles and sufferings as they constantly face various challenges regarding cultural, racial and political exploitation. These migrators frequently experience abuse and discrimination and their unity against the opponent participants in the planetary environmentalism of the novel. The effect of the climate changes in the Sundarbans affects the whole environmental and socio-economic predicament in the Bengal Delta encompassing Bangladesh and West Bengal situated in India. At first, Deen was surprised by discovering the no of migrant workers from Bangladesh but slowly he realised the insecurity and unsustainability of life in that region. Even Ghosh in his work *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for aPlanet in Crisis* clarifies "Bangladesh and the Bengal Delta more generally is exceptionally vulnerable to climate change [...]. Much of the country lies less than one meter above the sea level, and it has already lost a good deal of land to the rising waters" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 155).

Piya, the marine biologist is concerned about the marine species that are in the state of extinction. Global warming and environmental pollution have contributed immensely to that imbalance in the ecosystem. Piya shares details with Deen as she has been researching on Rani (officially RNI) and also maintaining a close tab on her calves that Rani's "...tracks had begun to vary becoming increasingly erratic..." and in her view the "...changes in the composition of the waters of the Sundarbans (Ghosh,101). That's why she "...had filled Rani with a GPS-enable tracker that provided real-time information on her whereabouts and general condition..." (Ghosh, Gun Island,102). She also explains that the rise in the level of seawater has made "...certain stretches [of the Sundarbans] too saline for the dolphins (Gun Island, p.102). It is a coincidence or a miracle we don't know but Tipu gets a supernatural vision after the cobra bites him and he sees Rani's danger in the vision. On the other hand, Piya's GPS tracker alerts her about the whereabouts of Rani while she is in Bhubaneswar, attending a conference. Deen informs Piya about Tipu's condition and when Piya returns to Kolkata to Visit Sundarban for her investigation on the Dolphins. She arranges some antivenin from her herpetologist friend who has been present at the same conference and saves Tipu's life. While going to Sundarbans along with Piya and her local assistants Deen comes to know about the consequences of the water pollution around Sundarbans and all over the world as it is contaminated by various chemicals and the habitats of the aquatic areas have become dangerous

for the living beings. Thus this novel has shown concern about the lives of the marine species and their migration by introducing the topic of "oceanic dead zones". Piya explains that these are,

Vast stretches of water that have a very low oxygen content... too low for fish to survive. Those zones have been growing at a phenomenal pace, mostly because of residues for chemical fertilizers [...] only a few, highly specialized organisms can survive in those conditions— everything else dies which is why those patches of water are known as "dead zones" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 104).

Piya is not sure about the existence of the "Oceanic dead zones" in the Sundarbans the Rani's situation she suspects, "...the culprit [...] is a refinery that started up a couple of years ago" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 105) that has been "dumping effluents into the rivers" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 106). Protests have been raised against the refinery by Piya and her trust but they could not be stopped as many powerful people are backing up the refinery contributingto endangering the lives of the species and climate crisis. Piya shares the vulnerable condition of the water species and becomes sad as they face a forced migration because of the changing environment. She is very sad about the predicament of Rani and her calves. She says that the change of habitats is "...a huge source of stress for them..." (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, P.106) and asks Deen "wouldn't you be stressed if you had to abandon all the places that you know and were forced to start all over again" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 106). Piya also adds to the pathetic condition of Rani saying, "Rani must have felt that everything she knew, everything she was familiar with –the water, the currents, the earth itself— was rising up against her" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 106). The conditions remind us of Donna Haraway's words "...right now the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge" (Harway160).

While Deen takes a flight for LA from New York he comes to know that "...massive wildfires had been raging around Los Angeles for several days. Thousands of acres of land had been incinerated and tons and thousands of people have been moved to a safety" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 126). Deen at first is not bothered about the wildfires and how it is affecting the environment and human and nonhuman beings rather he enjoys the comfort of his businessclass ticket in flight. The indifference of Deen portrays how people react to the problem of climate change when they are not affected by it directly. Gradually Deen faces the horrors of this event and witnesses the helplessness of all the species amid such an urgent situation. The incident of the wildfire awakens the narrator's consciousness regarding planetarity and on the other hand, it also represents the climate crisis and the vulnerability of the city of Los Angeles. Mike Devis in his study called "Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster" describes how capitalist modernity has caused the present climate crisis. He says, "...for a decade [...] at least one thousand citrus trees were bulldozed and burned everyweek, between 1939 and 1970, agricultural acreage in Los Angeles Country South of the San Gabriel Mountains [...] fell from 300,000 or less than 10,1000acres. One of the nation's most emblematic landscapes [...] was systematically eradicated" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 79). He also adds that "...the automobile also devoured extortion quantities of prime land. By 1970 more than one-third of the surface area of the Los Angeles region was dedicated to the car: freeways, streets, parking lots and driveways" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 80). Deen's journey to Los Angeles helps him to connect the bond between past and present discovering the theoretical insight behind the legend of Gun Merchant regarding climate crisis. The lecture of a historian called "Climate and Apocalypse in the Seventeenth Century" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 135) offers Deen some information about the merchant as he was too a seventeenth-century man. The speaker also mentions the "Little Ice Age" and the "...temperature across the globe had dropped sharply..." with the influence of "...famine, droughts and epidemics..." (Ghosh, Gun Island, 135). The narrator discusses the seventeenth century as the beginning of the climate crisis because it was the starting point of the industrial age. "It was then that Londoners began to use coral on a large scale, for heating, which was how dependence on fossil fuels started" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 137).

The ominous signs regarding the climate crisis come to light when Deen and Cinta visit Gisa who is a documentary film-maker and also the daughter of Cinta's cousin. Gisa lives with her two adopted children and girlfriend in Los Angeles. When Deen and Cinta reach their home Gisa goes out with their dog Leola on Venice Beach and the dog puts something in her mouth while playing with the children on the beach and it turns out to be a yellow-bellied venomous snake. Piya describes that the snakes "...in Southern California had become increasingly common: their distribution was changing with the warning of the oceans and they were migrating northwards" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, 147). Later the dog dies out of the poison. During Deen and Cinta's

conversation, Cinta proposes a hypothesis regarding the Gun Merchant. She says that affected by the consequences of the 'Little Ice Age' the merchant leaves his homeland Bengal is forced to escape to different lands due to the hostile environment. He travels to various parts of the world including Egypt, Turkey and finally reaches his destination Venice. The boatman Horen Naskar who was the companion to Deen and Tipu's journey to the Shrine in the Sundarban, "...remembered vividly for example the disaster that had forced the Gun Merchant to flee to his homeland: a drought so terrible that the streams, rivers and ponds had dried up and the stretch of rotting fish and dead livestock had hung heavy in the air (Ghosh, Gun Island, 60). Deen is introduced to a world full of plight after he meets with the illegal migrant workers who are forced to take a journey towards the Western world. Deen has seen their condition and says "...in their eyes I could see an anxiety that bespoke an existence of entire precariousness" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 169). Most of these migrants are from Bangladesh and Bilal one of them explains, "...we are like slaves" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 211). Lubna, a woman from Bangladesh and also an activist who works for the welfare of the migrants is introduced to Deen by Rafi. She also owns a business in Venice. Through her speech, we come to know that in Venice"...right now things carry out planned attacks on migrants" (Ghosh, Gun Island, 207).

The blue boat in the novel that is full of the migrators from the part of the world we call the Global South is represented as the symbol of the precarity of the refugees seeking help in the West: Palash, a Bangladeshi migrant says to Deen, across the planet everyone's eyes are on the Blue Boat now: it has become a symbol of everything that is going wrong with the world inequality, climate change, capitalism, corruption, the arms trade, the oil industry. There's a lot of hope that this will be a historic moment. Maybe now, while there's still time to make changes, people will wake up and see what's going on (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, p.218). Palash and Lubna arranged for a ship called Lucania with the help of the other activists to help the migrants on the blue boat that is restricted from entering the country by the government of Italy and its neighbouring countries while for nonhuman migrants crossing the border is very easy though their condition is as precarious as humans. Rafi and Tipu's journey to Venice is parallel to the journey of Gun Merchant and Captain Ilyas to Italy. Tipu got separated from Rafi through his journey to Italy though they started together and Rafi is in his quest to arrange money for Tipu for reaching back to Venice.

Nutmeg's Curse with its publication in 2021 introduces to us the history of the Anthropocene and the incisive template of the colonization. The book was published when the whole world was devastated by the effects of COVID-19. The influence of the Pandemic exposed us not only to the ill-preparedness to handle a virus but also the vulnerability of the nonhuman species. According to Ghosh the effect of the Pandemic has impacted poor people more than the rich because of the "inaction" (Ghosh 2021:62). Colonialism, capitalism, and racism all play an important role in creating the imbalance. Ghosh reveals the connection between the Anthropocene, colonialism, racism and capitalism by delving deep into the history of species under the monopoly of European powers. Nutmeg was the one special spice among them which was abundant on the island of Banda Island but because of its medicinal properties, it was coveted in Europe. The Title of the book suggests how nature's gift turns out to be a curse for the inhabitants of the archipelago in the middle of the Indian Ocean. The volcanic eruption of "Gunning Api" has made the tree of nutmeg endemic to the islands. The spice Nutmeg has travelled to many places all over the world but before monopolised by the Dutch VOC, they created an atmosphere of terrorism by erasing the population of indigenous people through slaughtering and enslaving (Ghosh, The Nutmeg's Curse, 23). Even they spread the production of Nutmeg trees on the neighbouring island to control the supply and demand. For the expedition of the EastIndian Company, they used the dictum "No war without trade, no trade without war" (Ghosh, The Nutmeg's Curse, 42) to continue trade and war parallelly. This same dictum has unfolded its roots in countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and Ukraine. In the words of Ghosh "The dominance of Capitalism was made possible by Western military conquest" (Ghosh, The Nutmeg's Curse, 116). To grow their business and do the necessary work, like Nutmeg Plantation and extraction the Dutch created a huge inception of the migration of the indentured labourers that they brought from different colonies. This strategy is very similar followed by other countries like the USA and even in the Age of Enlightenment. The process of extraction of resources happens through racial subjugation and terraforming. The term terraforming was borrowed by Ghosh from Jack Williamson. By this term, Ghosh explains the way colonizers generate a tabula rasa on the indigenous communities of the captured country. They completely erase the historical past and impose a new meaning on them. They are directed by the Darwinian view that civilized races of man will exterminate savage races (Ghosh, The Nutmeg's Curse, 79). The European colonisers inspired by

that started to extinguish the life of humans as well as nonhumans by imagining them as savage and brute. This is a common thing for most of the colonies. Apart from Lanthor in Africa, Australia and the USA, the lives of the indigenous people were disrupted by the settlers (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 51). The colonisers disturb the material basis by demolishing the "...entire web of nonhuman connections that sustained a certain way of life" (Ghosh, The Nutmeg's Curse, 41). Other innovative techniques like using a disease as bio-weapon is employed to eradicate the population of indigenous people in many places (Ghosh, The Nutmeg's Curse, 61). Killing women and children was also involved with the "...weaponisation of the environment" (Ghosh, The Nutmeg's Curse, 57). Thus we have created the environmental crisis and nature-culture dichotomy. The concept of Gais given by Ghosh would be beceficial in blurring the boundary of communication between humans and nonhumans and understanding the flow of vitality within earth. Thus the balance can be restored. The shamans who are the indigenous people possess a special power of interacting with the spirit of the universe and informing us about disasters like extraction of resources or serious issues like global warming. They are struggling a lot to protect the forests and tribal lands. According to Ghosh, in India, Adivasis are standing in a very questionable position when the tribes protest against "...rapaciously extractivist nationalism" (Ghosh. The Nutmeg's Curse, p.231). They are regarded as anti-nationals. In Ghosh's opinion storytellers can take a visit against the environmental crisis and Nutmeg's Curse addresses the issue of climate in a global way. In the work, The Great Derangement (2017) Ghosh has raised the question that environmental concerns are not considered as serious issues and that's why it is not the place in important fiction. The writers are interested in writing with the ambit of society and politics. The climate crisis brings impending disaster to the lives of a huge population. So the fiction does not focus on "morbid individualism" (Ghosh 2021:177) or the individual's journey rather the concept of a pluralist society can deal with crisis in a staggering way. Ghosh has also dealt with the themes of Anthropocene, colonisation and migration in his Gun Island (2019). On the other hand response of nonhuman agencies to human entities became an important part of both Gun Island and Nutmeg's Curse exploring the history of the Anthropocene through multiplotted narratives. The character of Gun Island named Tipu describes the crisis of immigration from the perspective of the Western world though in Nutmeg's Curse. Ghosh refuses to describe the crisis from the Western point of view rather he calls it "...the so-called European migration crisis that started in 2015" (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 153). He emphasizes that Europe is mainly responsible for the crisis of migration as it has a history of colonization of four hundred years therefore making it a general form of justice and migration rather than "climate justice" and climate migration respectively (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 153). Ghosh points out in Nutmeg's Curse that,

...climate change is but one aspectof a much broader planetary crisis: it is not the prime cause of dislocation, but rather a cognate phenomenon. In this sense climatechange, mass dislocations, pollution, environmental degradation, political breakdown, and the Covid-19 pandemic are all cognate effects of the ever-increasing acceleration of the last three decades. (Ghosh, *TheNutmeg's Curse*, 158).

The observation of Nutmeg's Curse is portrayed through the stories of migrant characters like Tipu, Bilal and Rafi. Ghosh talks about a migrant worker from Bangladesh named Khokon (Ghosh, *The Nutmeg's Curse*, 155). He met him in a place inItaly called Parma and the story of his life is very similar to a Bangladeshi migrant worker Bilal in Gun Island. Khokon's decision to migrate from Bangladesh is "the conditions in the district are lethal now... Before it was just oppression: now on top of the oppression there's disaster after disaster" (Ghosh *Gun Island*, P.156) some of those were "prolonged dry spells, violent hailstorms, and unseasonal downpours" (Ghosh, *Gun Island*, p.156).Kokhon at first reached Libya and then with the help of the traffickers and paying money, he went to "Sicily in a ramshackle boat" (Ghosh, *TheNutmeg's Curse*, 156). Ghosh says that "...these men were climate migrants, whether they knew it or not..." (Ghosh, *TheNutmeg's Curse*, 157). According to Ghosh, there are other reasons too for their displacement apart from the climate crisis:

What migrants like Khokon know, on the other hand, is thatevery aspect of their plight is rooted in unyielding, intractable, and historically rooted forms of class and racial *injustice*. They know that if they were wealthy or White they would not have to risk theirlives on rickety boats. They know that the processes that have displaced them are embedded in very old and deeply entrenched social relationships of power, national and international. From that point of view, forms of governance, national and international, exist notto promote justice or welfare but precisely to protect the systemic inequalities and historic injustices that produce the displacement of refugees. (Ghosh, *TheNutmeg's Curse*, p.158).

Only human beings can restore the balance between nature and culture by creating a familiar bond of love and kindness within themselves and respecting or valuing nature on the other. This will hinder the process of environtal degradation and make the planet a better place to live for the human and nonhuman beings and create a proper balance within the ecosysyem. As a result of harming the nature people are forced to move from one place to another and not only human beings animal also face a great crisis of extinction. Thus Universal Brotherhood can save lives and protect the earth from Climate crisis as well.

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