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Politics of Grief and Resistance in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

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Abstract

Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) provides an interesting literary analysis of political and social paradoxes in contemporary India. Exploring the experiences of individuals and communities positioned beyond the hegemonic centers of power, the novel is based on events that take place in Delhi, Kashmir, Gujarat, and other regions of violence and forced migration. In this article, the interrelation of grief and resistance in the novel will be discussed, revealing how grief is presented as a means not only for the response to the suffering but also for remembering and transforming it into resistance. Frantz Fanon's criticism of postcolonial nationalism as described in *The Wretched of the Earth*, namely, *The Pitfalls of National Consciousness*, will serve as a primary source of the present analysis; however, some insights from the historical account of Indian nationalism by Robert I. Crane will also be considered. Insights regarding racism, caste, gender, and political representation will be provided in accordance with the works of Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown, Uttamkumar S. Bagde, Prashant Maurya and Nagendra Kumar, and Danish Suleman, Abdul Halim Mohamed, and Md. Firoj Ahmmed.

This article addresses the issues of neoliberal development, dispossession, violence, communalism, caste oppression, and the Kashmir dispute, as portrayed in the novel. This article also claims that Roy turns individual and collective mourning into counter-memory/counter-archive through narrative. Places like Khwabgah show how alternative communities of care and recognition might confront hegemonic notions of belonging. The article concludes that *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reframes nationalism as an ethical question of belonging.

Keywords: Politics of Grief, Resistance, Postcolonial Nationalism, State Violence, Neoliberalism, Caste, Communalism, Kashmir, Marginality, Counter-Archive

Introduction: Nation, Grief, and Resistance

Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) holds significant importance in modern-day Indian English literature due to its focus on the politics and ethics of contemporary India. While *The God of Small Things* was published close to two decades ago, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy's second novel, goes past the scope of a more limited narrative setting and includes an array of political incidents, geography, community and history. The book alternates between Delhi and Kashmir and also includes memories of violence, discrimination, repression, displacement, militarization and development. Rather than portraying the nation as an integrated whole, she portrays India as a fractured socio-political space where divergent views on citizenship, identity and development emerge.

The key characters in the book Anjum, Tilo, Musa, Saddam Hussain, Dayachand, S. Balmiki, and others belong to different socio-political contexts. Yet, the lives of the characters are united by the sense of marginality, violence, loss, and struggle. Anjum's experience as a Hijra, Tilo's engagement with politically contested territories, Musa's association with Kashmir, as well as the life stories of Dalits demonstrate the uneven distribution of vulnerability in the nation. She is concerned not only with the victimization of the characters because of certain historical events but with placing the experiences of the characters into bigger narratives of power structures.

The essence of the current article is that the grief in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is political as the circumstances which give rise to grief are also political. The bereavement of one's homeland, a relative, community, security, means of earning one's living, self-respect, or freedom is not always a personal tragedy. In most cases, these tragedies are caused by or exacerbated by certain systems and politics. Therefore, Roy turns the emotion of grief into a form of historical consciousness. The history of the oppressed is safeguarded through memory and narration against the process of forgetting which is caused by the dominant political and historical discourse.

It thus becomes a pertinent point for consideration that whose suffering gets included in the national consciousness, and whose does not. This point is highly relevant where communities exist in a marginal place in the hierarchical structure of caste, religion, gender, class, and politics. Throughout her story, Roy constantly questions the notion that national history could be written only by means of institutional or dominant communities. Rather, she creates a polyphonic narrative where individual memory plays a significant role in the history of the nation.

The theoretical perspective guiding this study is largely drawn from the critique of post-colonial nationalism made by Frantz Fanon. In *The Pitfalls of National Consciousness*, Fanon is cautioning us that political freedom does not necessarily mean social equality or economic justice. Even after the end of colonialism, the postcolonial elite will continue to perpetuate structures of oppression and injustice. Fanon's critique offers a useful lens through which to view the portrayal of an independent India in Roy's novel.

The historical dimension of the study of Indian nationalism has been considered by Robert I. Crane. In analyzing the various types of Indian nationalism, Crane makes clear that nationalism cannot be considered a historically uniform or ideologically monolithic concept. Although Fanon and Crane represent two distinct intellectual traditions, through their combined analysis, it becomes easier to understand the gap between nationalist idealism and the real social situation.

Moreover, the present article also considers relevant literature on racism, caste politics, political representations, and gender issues. The contributions of Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown to the understanding of racism help to explore the process of social differentiation and othering. Uttamkumar S. Bagde's research on Dalit rights can be used as an analytical framework for considering the problem of caste discrimination and exclusion. The articles by Prashant Maurya and Nagendra Kumar take into consideration the political references and historical allusions found in Roy's novel.

Taking all these perspectives as its starting point, this article suggests the notion of the politics of grief as an approach to bringing together the political themes of the novel. This article maintains that grief is turned into resistance by Roy through memory, narration, community formation, and the recovery of marginalized histories. Alternative spaces created in the novel, especially Khwabgah, show that resistance may also come through care and belonging outside the traditional domains of family, religion, caste, property, and respectability.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Critical literature on *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has come to acknowledge the political dimensions of the novel. The novel's political relevance owing to its connection with contemporary politics, marginal identities, communal violence, caste, gender, and Kashmir has led critics to consider it not just as a work of fiction but also as a sophisticated literary response to the contemporary socio-political scenario.

Prashant Maurya and Nagendra Kumar analyze the political connotations and historical references in the novel. The study illustrates how political events are woven into the work of fiction by Roy. This method of critical analysis becomes relevant for this paper because of the political connotations in the novel that create a connection between personal experiences and history.

The authors Danish Suleman, Abdul Halim Mohamed, and Md. Firoj Ahmmed analyze political and gender issues within the novel. The works of these scholars are relevant when analyzing the character Anjum and different alternative modes of identity and community that exist within her life story. This paper continues the analysis of the issue by linking gender and social marginalization to broader aspects of politics of mourning and resistance.

The framework of the discussion on Dalit rights by Uttamkumar S. Bagde is also important. Discrimination against people of a lower caste in India includes social, economic, cultural, and political elements. Thus, the portrayal of Dalit characters by Roy proves that caste is linked to the notions of labor, social position, vulnerability, and violence. It becomes an integral element of the novel's criticism of national unity.

The analysis of processes of racism done by Robert Miles and Malcolm Brown also helps understand social differentiation and othering in terms of broader social dynamics. While race and caste cannot be considered equal phenomena, the concept of racialization and processes of social differentiation may help understand how inferior or undesirable identities may be created through these mechanisms. Examples of such a process may be found in the book when dealing with different religious, caste, gender and social identities.

However, the key theory on which the analysis will be based belongs to Frantz Fanon. As he explains in *The Wretched of the Earth*, postcolonial national bourgeois class may fail to change the structure of the colonial society and instead continue reproducing it. Thus, the national bourgeois class may become “a transmission line between the nation and a capitalism, rampant though camouflaged” (122), and “step into the shoes of the former European settlement” (122). It should be emphasized, however, that this theory does not predict the development of any postcolonial society but only warns against certain mistakes in the understanding of postcolonial politics.

This distinction is especially relevant to the reading of Roy. While India is officially an independent nation, there are social situations where the nation is marked by unequal distributions of freedom and citizenship. There might be talk of development, democracy, and economic prosperity; however, there are groups of individuals whose lives are left out of such discourses. Hence, the novel questions the discrepancy between the nation that is an ideology and the nation that is experienced.

Grief, therefore, is viewed in this study in terms of political and structural exclusion in this novel. It is not seen only in terms of being a psychological experience but also in relation to the institution or structure that gives rise to grief. Furthermore, grief becomes resistant in that it becomes memorialized, testified, and narrativized.

Fanon, Crane, and the Contradictions of Nationalism

A critique of postcolonial nationalism put forward by Fanon offers a unique perspective through which the portrayal of the contemporary nation made by Roy can be viewed. In Fanon's opinion, the gaining of political independence will not necessarily lead to the disintegration of the hierarchy that exists both economically and socially. The ruling class in postcolonial nations will serve as a mediator between the nation itself and global capital.

The contradiction between development rhetoric and dispossession is highlighted on numerous occasions in Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. “Kmart was coming. Walmart and Starbucks were coming” (Roy 97). Here, the coming of global consumer culture is mentioned. It refers to something bigger, to a certain process of modernization in which the city is turned into a place for consumption, and poor people are relocated from there.

Roy heightens this analysis by focusing on those who build the new urban landscape through physical labor. She refers to them as part of the “pyre of capitalism,” their “eyelashes and lungs” filled with “stone dust” arising from building the new urban shopping centers (256). Here, she highlights the unequal power dynamic between those who profit from economic development and the people who make it happen.

Hence, the dilemma is not just about development vs. poverty, but the differences in experiences of the same national agenda. While for some sections of society, modernity might mean malls, infrastructure, jobs, consumption, and mobility, it could mean being evicted, insecurity, precarious work, and even the destruction of one's way of life for others.

Crane's historical examination of Indian nationalism adds another layer to this. Nationalism in India has grown through many different political, cultural, and ideological formations. In this way, Roy can be understood as being read against Crane in order to see that the nation was never a wholly coherent

ideological formation. Rather, competing ideas about what it means to belong and to be a citizen have always been at play.

What is important for this study then in terms of Fanon and Crane is not the idea that they are theoretically equivalent, but rather how their theories can be put into productive conversation. Fanon highlights the tensions of postcolonial nationalism, while Crane contextualizes the complex development of Indian nationalism. Roy's novel is positioned between these two issues – the history of the nation and the lived experience of exclusion from it.

Development, Displacement, and State Violence

One such manifestation of the contradictions between national development and social justice is evident in the way that Roy depicts urban displacement. The modern city usually represents progress, development, and technological advancement. Yet Roy discloses another face of this idea: the price that humans pay for the city's development.

The displacement of slum residents is depicted using the metaphor of “State-of-the-Art machines” and “yellow bulldozers imported from Australia” (99). While the technological advancement of these machines stands in sharp contrast to their victims, the following quotation: “People who can't afford to live in cities shouldn't come here” (99) illustrates the urban ideology. According to it, the right to reside in the city depends on one's economic ability.

The destruction extends beyond the physical structures of the homes: “their homes, their doors and windows, their makeshift roofs, their pots and pans, their plates... their children's schools” (Roy 99). The cumulative list is important in the sense that it illustrates how displacement is not only about demolishing buildings. A house is more than a place for dwelling. It is filled with memories, relationships, routines, possessions, dreams, and social history. Demolition of a house destroys an entire network of belonging.

Displacement leads to grief both on an individual level and on a collective level. Not only does one lose the physical space of dwelling but one also loses his/her social environment. Roy's representation challenges the language of development by inviting us to think about the things that are lost when cities are reconstructed according to economic needs.

Bhopal Gas Tragedy offers us yet another example of the effects of displacement. Roy asks whether victims could “buy new lungs, new eyes” (130). The question highlights the unequal power balance between corporations and people. While industrial development can bring economic gains, the victims of industrial accidents have to face consequences which are irreversible.

Development is thus made not to be a concept automatically equated with progress on a national level by Roy. On the contrary, development has to be judged in ethical terms; who is benefiting from it, who bears the burden of its costs, whose misery is deemed acceptable?

Communalism, Religious Identity, and Minority Grief

Religious identity is yet another important aspect of political exclusion in the novel. In Roy's depiction of communal violence, one can detect echoes of the violence perpetrated in Gujarat in 2002. The act of “being pulled apart limb from limb” and set “on fire” (61–62) transforms the history of violence into a very personal experience of bodily pain.

Such depictions are important because they refuse to treat communal violence in terms of mere statistics or political events. Roy brings back the human body into the history of violence. Bodies that get hurt and die become proof of what political hatred can lead to.

The novel also mentions the arrest of Muslims “without trial for months” (61–62). It draws our attention to the connection between religious identity and suspicion. Such depictions show how the Muslim can be made a category of political suspicion and vulnerability.

The story of Anjum highlights another way in which the concept of identity is linked to survival. In times of communal violence, she makes Zainab recite the Gayatri Mantra in order to make the little girl be able to “try and pass herself off as a Hindu” (Roy 47). This example shows that communal violence forces people to hide or change certain aspects of their identities in order to stay alive.

In particular, the story of Anjum is highly illustrative because the identity of Anjum herself is very complicated in terms of gender, religion, and society in general. The Hijra identity makes her fall into a different category of gender, while her Muslim identity makes her vulnerable in yet another way.

These political references noted by Maurya and Kumar become especially important in this particular case. Historical incidents described in Roy's novel do not constitute mere background information. They influence the lives of the characters emotionally and socially. The individual body is tied up with national history, while personal tragedy cannot be separated from political violence.

Kashmir and the Politics of Political Grief

Kashmir serves as one of the most politically charged places within the novel titled *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. Using the character Musa and others, Roy delves into the interaction between militarization, political conflict, memory, and grief.

Through the Kashmir story, Roy confronts the depictions of conflict which only emphasize politics, geography or security. Instead, she brings the experiences of ordinary people whose lives have been changed by the conflict into focus. The phrase “everybody on all sides is making money from the dead bodies of young Kashmiris. Nobody wants the war to end” (228) captures her skepticism toward the politics and economics built on violence.

In Roy's narration, the Kashmiri body turns out to be the place where politics becomes inscribed through death, which should be perceived as an element of a bigger whole, which includes militarization, nationalism, resistance, fear, and economics. The sorrow of the family members cannot be disconnected from the political past of the region.

The case of Musa can serve as an example of such an intersection of individual sorrow and political events in the region. The losses experienced by Musa are impossible to separate from the overall conflict he lives surrounded with.

Thus, the Kashmir parts of the novel extend the notion of grief. Grief means not only the sorrow of people, whose close relatives have been killed but also the grief of people who lost their homes, their future, and their sense of belonging because of the long-lasting conflict.

Caste, Untouchability, and Structural Grief

The concept of caste is yet another important aspect of Roy's criticism of Indian society and nationalism. Caste shows the connection between caste system and labour, indicating the historically determined occupations of particular castes.

"Balmiki" Suresh belongs to the "shit-cleaning caste" (Roy 114). The very name establishes the link between caste membership and labour activity. Another example is Dayachand's reminiscence about the request of upper-caste farmers to send people from his family to clean the dead animals, because "they couldn't pollute themselves by touching them" (86).

These examples illustrate the ideology of purity and pollution. Work essential for the well-being of society is at the same time considered degrading if done by some particular castes.

The attack on Dayachand's father is another example of how caste hierarchy leads to destructive acts of violence against the individual. It is the body of the Dalit subject that becomes vulnerable through caste because it is through caste that social value is assigned.

Bagde's analysis of Dalit rights in light of Roy's portrayal of caste is thus helpful here. Discrimination against Dalits is a phenomenon that is social, economic, political, and cultural at the same time. Caste is made visible through Roy's narrative.

It follows that the concept of caste becomes integral to Roy's criticism of nationalism. While the ideal of nationalism presupposes unity among people, the existence of caste-based humiliation undermines this ideal. It is impossible for national unity to be truly realized as long as groups of people experience different levels of dignity, opportunities, and protection.

Gender, Marginality, and the Politics of Belonging

Gender and transgender identity is yet another crucial aspect of political imagination within Roy's novel. The example of Anjum shows how dangerous can be the life of a person who does not fit into traditional notions of gender and respectability.

However, the marginality of Anjum is not presented only in the form of her victimhood. With time, her existence turns into the act of constructing new ways of being part of a community. Roy contests the idea of the family that is traditionally viewed through the prism of biology as the only legitimate form of identity. In this respect, the study by Suleman, Mohamed, and Ahmmed proves to be especially useful since it draws attention to the political and gender aspects of the novel.

Resistance in Anjum's story emerges through the establishment of alternative identities and relations. Contrary to the quest for total acceptance by the oppressive structure, marginalised characters create spaces where other forms of identities and relations are possible.

Such an aspect of the novel is important in its politics since it defines the meaning of resistance in a different way. Resistance does not have to be depicted as political activism against oppression at all times. It can also

mean survival, memory, care, protection, and building of alternative relations that the dominant society refuses to recognise.

Khwabgah and Alternative Communities

Khwabgah may be considered as the most important example of alternative communities in the novel. It is the place where rejected individuals unite in order to live and build relationships based on care and mutual recognition.

What is politically significant about Khwabgah is its alternate way of belonging. Belonging in conventional terms may be organized around biological kinship, religious faith, caste, gender, ownership of property, or social class. Khwabgah subverts these ways by constituting a community through chosen bonds.

So, it turns marginality into community.

This shift constitutes the core of Roy's politics of resistance. Marginality is not just an inclusion in a particular form of social structure, but the creation of a new kind of space where diverse identities and relationships flourish.

Khwabgah thus constitutes an ethical and political alternative to conventional systems of social organization. It is not a politics of power but that of care because in an exclusionary society caring for those who are excluded from it is a political act.

The community also shows how resistance does not necessarily mean opposition but can also be constructive. Resistance does not merely mean contesting an order but also creating an alternative to it.

Storytelling, Memory, and the Counter-Archive

The politics of grief in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* cannot be separated from Roy's storytelling technique. In this manner, storytelling becomes a mechanism through which Roy preserves experiences often overlooked or even excluded by dominant historical narratives.

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Arundhati Roy creates a story that weaves personal reminiscences, politics, history, and fictional experiences together. Such a narrative does not unfold along linear lines. On the contrary, it is a narrative movement through different times and spaces that connects apparently disjointed stories to uncover their historical and political connection.

This kind of narrative technique enables Roy to create what could be defined as a counter-archive. Counter-archive, in this case, is understood as a narrative space where the experiences of marginalized people coexist, and sometimes compete with, dominant narratives of history. Dominant narratives of history usually emphasize the role of institutions, governments, political leaders, and major historical events. Instead, Roy's counter-archive focuses on the perspective of people that experience history from below.

As such, the experiences of people like Anjum, Tilo, Musa, Dayachand, S. Balmiki, and others become an alternative way of remembering India's contemporary history.

The counter-archive becomes extremely important because memory becomes a form of resistance itself. By remembering people who have been forgotten and who have suffered, one resists. By telling their stories, one resists the hegemony of one version of history.

As a result, grief itself becomes productive. Grief does not remain a purely personal reaction to death. As a form of narration, it becomes memory; as memory, it becomes historical memory; and as memory, it becomes resistance.

In this way, the narrative technique Roy uses becomes a practice of the politics described in the novel. These characters do not become representations of marginality within a dominant historical narrative; rather, they become part of an alternative reading of the nation.

Grief as Resistance

The theme of grief provides a framework within which the various political movements portrayed in the novel may be brought together. The people mourn for individuals, places, communities, lost identities, and hopes that are now dead. Yet Roy is not ready to equate the concept of grief with defeat.

On the contrary, in the novel, grief is being transformed into memory and community formation. Those who are dead live on in stories; the dispossessed remember their former home; the marginalized form communities; and political violence finds its place in history.

It is important to mention that this transformation goes against the usual understanding of political resistance. Usually, political resistance is associated with protest, revolutions, political activism, and fight against state power. This is not the case with Roy.

In this context, the process of remembering is political as well. Since there are attempts to naturalize the violence or hide the pain, the process of remembering becomes a political tool of resisting these normalizations.

In this way, storytelling can become political as well, because one needs to choose whose stories will be told to people. The storytelling of an oppressed individual is a political statement since this means that the individual will tell a story that had been silenced before.

Forming communities becomes another form of resistance as well. In the story of Khwabgah, people who were marginalized by all other structures form their own community of solidarity. It does not mean that the feeling of grief disappears, but it transforms the grief into something shared rather than lonely. This is one of the key political messages of Roy's novel. Grief does not go away through resistance; instead, it is part of the very conditions out of which resistance is created.

Redefining Nationalism Through Ethics and Recognition

It is important to note that Roy's critique of nationalism goes far beyond just rejecting the notion of the nation. In other words, she does not call on her readers to reject this concept. Rather, she asks them to look at the terms of belonging to this group. It means that the question is not only whether or not one belongs to the nation but the nature of this nation and who belongs to it. This idea is particularly relevant in the case of Fanon's criticism of nationalism. A nation that achieves its political independence but keeps reproducing social and economic inequalities remains an incomplete form of liberation. Roy reveals this paradox of the language of nationalism and its failure to recognize the experience of communities suffering from the caste oppression, communal riots, displacement, and political oppression.

Therefore, Roy develops the idea of the ethics of nationalism. The notion of nation should imply dignity, equality, recognition, and justice. From this point of view, the marginalized characters do not exist outside the nation just because the dominant society pushes them to the margins. These are integral parts of the nation's history; their mourning is national mourning despite the denial of such an experience by dominant discourses.

In this sense, the politics of recognition becomes key to Roy's artistic project. Recognition involves recognizing that the marginalized people have equal human and historical value and that there should not be any disposable or invisible people.

These are examples of what this kind of recognition can involve. Khwabgah provides belonging without requiring conformity, while the counter-archive provides historical visibility without assimilating marginalized histories into one dominant narrative.

Roy, therefore, envisages a community of people who coexist rather than being identical.

Conclusion

The book, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Roy, can be considered an interesting literary critique of the contemporary concept of nationalism in terms of the inclusion of the marginalized people in the history of India. Through such characters as Anjum, Tilo, Musa, Dayachand, S. Balmiki, etc., the author proves that it is impossible to define a nation only through its institutions, ideologies, and development.

The theoretical framework suggested by Frantz Fanon is rather appropriate in this case because his critique of post-colonial nationalism explains the paradox of political freedom and inequality structures. In the same way, Roy's portrayal of the neoliberal development, displacements, communal violence, caste oppression, and political conflicts proves that it is impossible to assess the development of the nation only in terms of its economic and institutional development because the experiences of the marginalized people have to be included.

Crane's historical description of Indian nationalism provides an additional perspective on placing Roy's depiction in context of the history of rival nationalist movements. The narrative does not present nationalism as an ideological unity. On the contrary, it discloses contradictions between competing interpretations of citizenship, belonging, identity and justice.

Communalism and the issue of Kashmir are the elements in the novel that best illustrate the political production of grief. Suffering of Muslims, violence in Gujarat and the ongoing conflict in Kashmir exemplify how political structures turn religious and regional identity into vulnerability. The caste system continues the discussion of hierarchies inherent in the structures of power and uneven access to dignity and labor. Gender and transgender identity provide another example of marginalization of non-conforming individuals.

However, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is not only a tale of victimization. The existence of Khwabgah and other alternative communities allows the author to envision a world in which belonging is possible through caring, recognizing, being united and making choices about relationships. Thus, there is a possibility to see the potential for resistance in the creation of alternative communities.

Most notably, the politics of grief in the book is transformed by the author into a political resource. The stories of Anjum, Tilo, Musa and other characters are included in the alternative archive that contains the histories that have been deliberately excluded from the history of the nation. Here, the politics of remembering becomes an act of resistance against historical amnesia, whereas storytelling and building communities transform vulnerability into power.

Therefore, the politics of grief in the novel is realized on different interrelated levels. Grief is a way to record loss; remembering helps to preserve it, storytelling provides its public representation; recognition brings back the humanity of those who have been deprived of it and community turns suffering into unity. Thus, the novel does not distinguish between personal and political.

In essence, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* undermines the notion that nationalism should be understood solely in terms of sovereignty, territory, and political cohesion. Rather, as a novelist, Arundhati Roy calls for an ethical reassessment of the concept of the nation in terms of equality, dignity, recognition, and justice. For Roy, the power of the nation lies in its recognition of and protection of people whose existence has been erased by its dominant apparatuses rather than in the visibility of its power.

Through her politics of mourning, Roy intervenes both politically and ethically. The politics of remembering, narration, creation of alternative communities, and subversion of dominant historical narratives allows Roy to transform mourning into an act of political intervention. In essence, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* asserts that a true national imagination should incorporate a number of histories, memories, identities, and voices of marginalized people. Thus, its counter-archive is not only a record of suffering; it is also an attempt at imagining a different community.

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