

Reading Mukherjee's *Jasmine* through Contemporary Feminist Lenses

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Abstract

The present article reads Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* from a feminist perspective that incorporates postmodern and diasporic stances in order to interpret the protagonist's character based on her mutability in the diasporic space of the United States of America. The research shows that despite the agony and uncertainty Jasmine faces, she emerges as a strong individual after completing her diasporic trajectories. While facing crucial situations, she develops into an independent person in the following ways: she tries to keep a balance between tradition and modernity; makes choices based on her own mediation; and takes responsibility for her choices. The article parallels Mukherjee's own journey towards finding a new diasporic identity with that of her protagonist Jasmine. Therefore, the work traces both the real and fictional traversing of two characters who are abundantly influenced by each other in their quest to sculpting a new diasporic identity.

Key Words: Feminism, Postmodernism, Diaspora, Performativity, Identity, Adaptation

In *The Middleman and Other Stories*, Bharati Mukherjee portrays a character called Jasmine in a story of the same name. At first, she did not have any intention to expand the story into a full novel but the Jasmine in the story was a character with whom she "fell in love with" and "would have liked to have

been" (Mukherjee18). Although the Jasmine in the novel is different from the one in the short story, both are similar in the sense that they are fighters and adaptable. Both the Trinidadian Jasmine in the short story and the Punjabi Jasmine in the novel see their endeavors in America as opportunities for climbing higher in the social stratum. The present article studies Mukherjee's Jasmine from two distinctive feminist perspectives, namely: Postmodern Feminism and Diasporic Feminism. It also sees Jasmine through some of Mukherjee's non-fiction prose that clarifies her beliefs and convictions as an American immigrant with a postcolonial past. Like Mukherjee herself, Jasmine is also largely shaped by her colonial past and her present status as an illegal immigrant.

Jasmine and Postmodern Feminism

"There are no harmless, compassionate ways to remake oneself. We murder who we were so can we rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams" (Mukherjee 29). Jasmine's oft-quoted words remind us that this novel is essentially about remaking and rebirthing. With each name Jasmine acquires in the novel, she experiences a life in keeping with that specific name. Her identity changes with every single name she is given. The interesting factor is this: though Jasmine admits that navigation through different identities is painful, she seems quite at ease with each of them. The second section of the article scrutinizes how Jasmine's multiple identities can be seen in perspective with the help of postmodern feminism.

In the essay "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," Mukherjee gives an account of her disposition towards her own identity. The fixity of identity was a given fact for Bharati Mukherjee from her childhood because when she was growing up in Calcutta in the 1950s, "[she] heard no talk of "identity crisis" communal or individual. The concept itself of a person not knowing who she or he was, actually was

unimaginable in a hierarchical, classification-obsessed society. One's identity was absolutely fixed, derived from religion, caste, patrimony, and mother-tongue" (30). This disposition in Mukherjee about an identity that is given is thoroughly shaken because of the political and cultural circumstances that she experiences. As a child, she witnessed religious and cultural riots that created a permanent resentment in her about the purity of identity. As a result, it was easier for her to opt for new identities repeatedly in her diasporic life. In the essay "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," she recalls how she came to the United States with a large notebook given to her by her father. In that notebook, her "guiltlessly patriarchal father" set some clear goals for her (29). But, Mukherjee notes the futility of such instructions by admitting:

That impulsive act (her marriage with Clark Blaise) cut me forever from the rules and ways of upper-middle-class life in Bengal, and hurled me precipitously into a New World life of scary improvisations and heady exploitations. Until my lunchtime wedding, I had seen my life as an Indian foreign student, a transient in the United States. The five-minute ceremony in the lawyer's office had changed me into a permanent transient. (30)

Mukherjee refers thus to her position as someone who had been permanently transient in the sense that there would be no fixity in her identity; rather, she assumed whatever self was needed to cope with changed situations. Her portrayal of Jasmine vividly reflects these moments of her own life. Jasmine makes the utmost use of these "scary improvisations" and "heady exploitations" in shaping her multiple identities. In her eventful American life, Jasmine has to make and remake herself repeatedly to fit in and to go on. The curious thing is that she does not see herself as a victim. Mukherjee makes her character enjoy the transformations and at the same time feel empowered

rather than overpowered by each of her identities. It is also worth noting that though Jasmine is given each of her names by different men, only Prakash partially shapes her identity. All the other identities are made and lived by Jasmine's ownwill.

In his monograph on Bharati Mukherjee, Alam places Jasmine in the "Exuberance of Immigration" phase of the writer's life. While writing *Jasmine*, Mukherjee was feeling excited "about the ceremony in a Federal District Court House in Manhattan that February that made her a citizen of the United States" (Alam 77). Likewise, her characters of the two books Mukherjee wrote in this period, *The Middleman and Other Stories* and *Jasmine*, narrate the stories of the new immigrants whose life is full of "exuberant tales of immigration," the writer fills them "with surprising stories of the clash of cultures, and with fascinating portraits of people in transit or caught in the middle or split between an old world and a new one" (Alam 78). According to Alam, the "exuberance of immigration" phase of Mukherjee's life is preceded by the "darkness phase" of her writing, which was about expatriates "trying to preserve their identities in a hostile world" (ibid). On the other hand, in the exuberant phase of Mukherjee's life, she dealt with "immigrants striving to transform their identities and stake out their claims to America" (ibid).

Jasmine is one of these immigrants who strive to transform their identities. She is very flexible in the sense that she constantly changes her profession, dwelling, role, and name in the narrative. As has been stated earlier, she is the controller of her actions and identities. To analyze Jasmine's identity formation from a postmodern feminist perspective, it helps to observe her growth from the viewpoint of postmodern feminism. In this section, the article uses Judith Butler's performative theory along with the theory of Chandra Talpade Mohanty about the individuality of third world women and takes note of third world feminist issues to study Jasmine's evolution through her

different identities in the novel.

In "Interrogating the Ambivalence of Self-Fashioning and Redefining the Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine*," Suchismita Banerjee interrogates Bharati Mukherjee's views of female agency. Banerjee argues that Mukherjee makes *Jasmine* use her foreignness as something exotic in order to become more attractive in the eyes of white men. By luring white men towards her, she exercises her power over them. Mukherjee distinguishes between the exotic and the foreign by saying that "[e]xotic means you know how to use your foreignness, or you make yourself a little foreign in order to appear exotic" (qtd. in Banerjee 22). Banerjee observes that Mukherjee thus makes a statement about feminist agency by presenting *Jasmine* as "empowered with the choice of identity creation because she knows how to use her exotic appeal" (Banerjee 22). Mukherjee emphasizes *Jasmine*'s thirdworld origin as opposed to Western feminism by commenting that *Jasmine* is an activist and a woman of action. *Jasmine*'s feminism does not conform to Western feminism because she exercises her agency by manipulating her foreignness. In an interview, Mukherjee describes *Jasmine* as a feminist activist in the sense that "more than Wylie, or any other American woman, [she] manages to leave a futile world, make herself over, pickupmen, discard men, and make money. She is an uneducated village girl.... [who] can make a life for herself. So she is an activist - or a woman of action - who ends up being far more feminist than the women on Claremont Avenue who talk about feminism" (qtd. in Banerjee 23).

However, echoing Susan Koshy, Banerjee finds Mukherjee's description of agency and power problematic and opines that the refashioning of *Jasmine*'s identity by herself is an ambiguous action because, on the one hand, such agency requires pleasing men, which is a gesture downright opposite to Western notions of feminist agency. On the other hand, *Jasmine*'s

autonomy is measured by Western criteria like controlling men, making money and having a career. But when accused of making her heroines swerve from their ideals and making them "ultimately cast their lot with men" Mukherjee speaks out against "the imperialism" of feminists and accuses them of being ready to impose "ready-made" solutions to the problems facing immigrant Asian women in North America (qtd. in Alam 12). Mukherjee claims that she would "enable [immigrants] to control their fates than make them mouthpieces of white, upper-class feminist rhetoric" (Alam 12).

Mukherjee's emphatic claim in such an instance reminds one of Chandra Talpade Mohanty's account of Western, middle class, white feminism. Traditional Western feminism, especially second-wave feminism, refers to third world women as a homogenous, singular group. Mohanty criticizes the representation of third world women as a "singular, monolithic" subject in Western feminist texts because such representation assumes "an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination" (51, 64). The homogenizing of women across the globe is founded on the notion of a shared oppression. Such homogeneity creates a problem for the collective term "women." In her essay, Mohanty observes that while the term "women" may denote a discursively constructed group, another denotation of the term, the fact that women are "material subjects of their own history," thereby remains neglected (56). Thus the discursively formulated definition undermines the "historically specific material reality of groups of women" (ibid).

Both Mohanty and Mukherjee seem to claim that third world women are culturally and historically different from their white, Western counterparts. Therefore, whenever the power and agency of a colored, third world woman like *Jasmine* is considered, it has to be viewed in terms of her own cultural and historical contingencies. Postmodern feminism believes in

theorizing this kind of plurality among women across the globe. Hence, the emancipation of Jasmine, viewed from a postmodern lens, is not to be deigned but can be understood.

Jasmine refashions herself repeatedly in the narrative whenever she changes her location. This article would like to read such shifts with the help of Judith Butler's ideas as illustrated in her essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." In *Jasmine*, the protagonist often declares that she is performing multiple roles consciously to change the design of fate. In her essay, Butler assumes that identity is performative as gender is a socially constructed idea. At the beginning of her discourse, Butler aligns the act of performativity with philosophy rather than theatre before tethering her argument to Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (qtd. in Butler 519). Butler claims that "naturalized conceptions of gender" is constituted and is "hence, capable of being constituted differently" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution..." 520). I argue that Jasmine makes use of these naturalized conceptions of gender to remold herself in the light of her dreams.

Butler, being an American feminist, opposes the perpetuation of socially constructed gender identity. However, Jasmine consciously resorts to performativity of gender by making herself an amalgamation of Mukherjee's representative of transforming individual and Mohanty's example of third world feminism's plurality. Mukherjee herself defines Jasmine as "an uneducated village girl... [who] can make a life for herself. So she's an activist - or a woman of action - who ends up being far more feminist than the women on Claremont Avenue who talk about feminism" (Mukherjee 25-26). In other words, to her, her heroine's nonconformity to Butler's criticism of performative gender is logically plausible. Since Jasmine is an uneducated Indian village girl, her views of empowerment have every

chance of clashing with Western notions of feminism.

Jasmine's emancipation thus does not comply with Western views of feminist empowerment. Her agency is tangled and problematic. In her Master's thesis "The Maximalist Transformation of the Female Immigrant Identity in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* and *The Holder of the World*," Lauren D. Hazenson analyzes Jasmine's multiple identities in the following words:

The text's tangled structure allows Jasmine the freedom to float between classic Western feminist female characters such as Jane Eyre, Eliza Doolittle and Calamity Jane to powerful Indian goddess Kali. This structure also prescribes the breakdown of cultural barriers in such a way that it nullifies the boundaries between American and Indian classic literature. (15)

Hazenson thus indicates that Jasmine's emancipation cannot be measured by any standardized formula. Her agency follows the pattern of postmodern feminism's idea of plurality that accommodates individual instances as normative.

Before returning to Butler, this article will attempt to ascertain the extent of Jasmine's consciousness about performativity. It seems to the author that in most cases, she deliberately chooses her role and acts it out willingly. Her role-playing can be divided into two phases of her life pre and post-American. The first change of her identity, from Jyoti to Jasmine, is caused by her husband Prakash who, being a modern man, wants to "break down the Jyoti [she] had been in Hasnapur and make [her] a new kind of city woman" (Mukherjee 77). She incarnates Kali in herself when she kills half-face but turns into Jazzy at Lillian Gordon's house while learning to "talk and walk" American from her (Mukherjee 133). In the Vadhera Household in Flushing, Jasmine feels that she is losing herself in their ghettoized life. Therefore, she decides to create a new identity

for herself yet again by becoming a caregiver in the Hayes' apartment. This identity is deliberately chosen by herself. As she notes: "I wanted to become the person they thought they saw: humorous, intelligent, refined, affectionate. Not illegal, not murderer, not widowed, raped, destitute, fearful" (Mukherjee 171).

In Iowa, Bud calls her "Calamity Jane," but Jasmine declares that she wants to be Plain Jane because "[p]lain Jane is a role, like any other" (Mukherjee 26). The maimed Bud observes Jasmine: "...likes me to change roles, from caregiver to temptress, and I try to do it convincingly, walking differently, frowning, smiling..." (Mukherjee 36). However, when it comes to choosing between "the promise of America and old-world dutifulness," she chooses to leave Bud and move Westward with Taylor. "I realize I have already stopped thinking of myself as Jane. Adventure, risk, transformation: the frontier is pushing indoors through uncaulked windows. Watch me re-position the stars, I whisper to the astrologer who floats cross-legged above my kitchen stove" (Mukherjee 240). These words of Jasmine not only leave the novel open-ended, but also leave Jasmine open to other identities. She mostly controls the multiple identities she accommodates throughout the narrative, including the last adventurous one she visualizes with Taylor towards the end of the text.

In her essay, Butler criticizes the fact that the performance of gender is normalized in society at the cost of "a historically delimited possibility..." (522). Jasmine constantly changes her identity as a strategy of survival. As Butler puts it: "as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (ibid). Thus, by seemingly conforming to the normalizing process of society, Jasmine is asserting her agency. In her essay

"Subverting the taste buds" of America: Transnational Political Agency in Bharati Mukherjee's *Novels Wife* (1975) and *Jasmine* (1989)" Sumita Lall defines Jasmine's identity shifts as "a fragmented subjectivity as a model for the immigrant's postmodern survival under Global Capitalism" (49). Lall argues that "Jasmine embodies what could be called an ideal subjectivity in a postmodern world: fragmented, split, and ever-shifting or nomadic in her global cultural positioning" (ibid.). Such subjectivity in *Jasmine* upholds the theory of the performativity of gender and makes her postmodern.

Woman in the Diaspora: Always in the Flux

Mukherjee draws clear lines between different types of transformations among immigrants based on their dispositions and character traits. Jasmine's realization of the dissimilarity in the nature and extent of adaptation in the analysis of her adopted Vietnamese son Du and herself is illustrated in the following words:

I am amazed, and a little proud that Du had made a life for himself among the Vietnamese in Baden and I hadn't had a clue. Aside from Dr. Jaswani and from Dr. Patel in Infertility, I haven't spoken to an Indian since my months in Flushing. My transformation has been genetic; Du's was hyphenated. (Mukherjee 222)

Jasmine's concluding line clearly demarcates two ways to become an American as a diasporic subject. Jasmine makes her status clear by declaring that her "transformation [as an American] has been genetic" (Mukherjee 222). Her disposition, in fact, voices Mukherjee's own view about immigration in many aspects. For example, in her essay "Two Ways to Belong in America," she points out the difference between her sister and herself by noting that her adaptation to American culture was spontaneous, like an immigrant, as opposed to her expatriate

sister's adaptation to the same culture. Jasmine's diasporic journey does not end in stasis; rather, it opens up new possibilities of exploring new horizons. It is clear that as a diasporic woman, Jasmine is very fluid and adventurous, someone to whom onward movement is more thrilling than reaching a destination.

This article studies how Jasmine relates to Mukherjee's own experience of immigration that she recounts in many of her non-fiction writings. To that end, it explores her personal experiences as recorded in many of her non-fiction writings as well as in writings about her life.

About Mukherjee's immigrant life, Alam comments in his book *Bharati Mukherjee*, "her personal history consists of a series of displacements and expatriations" (8). Alam describes the phases of Mukherjee's experience as an immigrant in it. As he points out:

Mukherjee's attitude towards exile, expatriation, and immigration has changed over the years. Although she now has a full and joyous sense of herself as "an immigrant, living in a continent of immigrants, "she had at first felt like an exile, or at best an expatriate. The three phases that Mukherjee negotiated can thus be termed as that of "exile," "expatriate," and "immigrant." Later in his book Alam divides Mukherjee's literary career into three phases as well, characterizing them thus the "aloofness of expatriation," the "exuberance of immigration," and a "hunger for connectedness." (9)

Alam places Jasmine in "the exuberance of immigration" phase of Mukherjee's literary career. This phase coincides with the publication of Mukherjee's essay "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!" This essay registers Mukherjee's movement "away from the "darkness" phase of her writing, where she dealt with expatriates trying to transform their identities in a hostile world, to immigrants striving to transform their identities and stake out their claims to America" (Alam 78).

In her "Immigrant Writing: Give Us Your Maximalists!" Bharati Mukherjee articulates many of the ideas that she would later invest in creating Jasmine, the novel's protagonist by the same name. Mukherjee observes that characters like Jasmine have lived through "centuries of histories in a single lifetime." Mukherjee comments that these rural, colonized, and tradition-bound people have travelled time in transformative ways. She thinks that the assimilation of these people in 30 years has taken the West "10 times that number of years to create. Time travel is a reality I've seen it in my own life. Bionic Men and Women are living among us". In her several symbolic rebirths, Jasmine reminds the readers of the bionic people Mukherjee describes with fervor.

In *Jasmine*, the protagonist repeatedly talks about her immigrant experience in terms of rebirth, echoing the "time travel" theory of Mukherjee, based on gathering experiences and carving a trajectory in the light of those experiences. Such travel does not require infinite time for life-changing experiences. In the very first chapter, Jasmine recalls an incident about her village astrologer in Hasnapur, placed in Punjab, by saying that it happened "lifetimes ago," indicating thus that the present Jasmine was reborn and living a new life (Mukherjee 3). Commenting on the way she has adapted to American life, Jasmine says all surviving immigrants like her are "quick studies" who "let go just one thing, like not wearing a tika on the forehead?the rest goes on its own down a sinkhole" (Mukherjee 29). Jasmine does not suffer from nostalgia because she knows "[f]or me, experience must be forgotten, or else it will kill" (Mukherjee 33). However, she does not forget the reincarnations that have made her a surviving warrior. To Mary Webb, a university professor who asks Jasmine about the rebirths of Hindus, she replies, "I am sure that I have been reborn several times, and that yes, some lives I can recall vividly" (Mukherjee 126). Therefore, Jasmine considers her diasporic life a

combination of several lifetimes, a journey that started in her childhood and was still going on.

Jasmine believes that her assimilation to America was genetic, and not hyphenated. This can be directly related to Mukherjee's own realization in the essay "A Four-Hundred-Year-Old Woman" where she announced:

I am an American, I am an American writer, in the American mainstream, trying to extend it. This is a vitally important statement for me I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate.... I look on ghettoization whether as a Bengali in India or as a hyphenated Indo-American in North America as a temptation to be surmounted. (2)

This quote testifies to the fact that becoming American was Mukherjee's conscious choice. She embraced America to blend with it as an American, casting aside other hyphenated identities. Jasmine's rejection of hyphenation thus reflects Mukherjee's stance on diasporic subjectivity.

In another essay "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," Mukherjee expresses her anguish against Eurocentrists and ethnocentrists who create a hostile binary among European and Asian immigrants with an "us" versus "them" mentality. Mukherjee launches a new discourse to "reconstitute the hostile biology" by creating "a new consensual community of we" (32). Jasmine's yearning to avoid ghettoization and blend with mainstream American community is mainly evidenced in the Vadhera house where Indian identity is artificially maintained. Here she wants to distance herself from everything Indian, everything Jyoti-like. This yearning reaches its peak when she visits Kate Gordon-Feldstein's apartment, which she finds disordered in a way that speaks to her of flexibility, freedom, and possibility. She finds all these things in her new life as a caregiver in the Hayes household on Claremont

Avenue. Jasmine's Americanization is nurtured in the free environment of the Hayeses' house where she is treated as a professional, and a family member, rather than as a servant. Jasmine describes her growth there in the following words:

I took in everything. Every morning, the news sank into my brain, and stayed. Language on the street, on the forbidden television, at the Hayeses' dinners,...all became my language, which I learned like a child, from the first words up. The squatting fields of Hasnapur receded fast. (Mukherjee 174)

However, like the nonlinear narration of Jasmine, its protagonist Jasmine's transformation is marked by unpredictability. Though she blends into mainstream America, she is well aware of its failings and dark spots. Throughout the whole text, Jasmine's relationship with America is as ambiguous as her view of the country, which is interspersed with bitterness and anguish but also with admiration. This ambiguity is seen in Mukherjee as well. In her essay "Beyond Multiculturalism: Surviving the Nineties," she criticizes American immigration policies by declaring that "scapegoating of immigrants has been the politicians' easy instant remedy. Hate speeches fill auditoria, bring in megabucks for those demagogues willing to profit from stirring up racial animosity" (32). She is also critical of the panic Americans feel about immigrants causing a downturn in the American economy. Mukherjee terms this "a fear of the Other" (ibid.). Jasmine faces some of these racial issues and local instability during her stay in America. According to Alfonso-Forero, Jasmine encounters an America in the 1980s that is "undergoing drastic political and socioeconomic changes. Post-Vietnam disillusionment, an increase in illegal immigration, and an economic recession provide the backdrop for Jasmine's counter-narrative, the development of a more corporate and diverse United States" (66). Plenty of examples are found in the Iowa part of the novel of how farmers of this area have been facing financial trouble resulting in frustration that leads to

violent incidents such as killing, maiming, and suicide.

Jasmine's constant fear of being recognized as an illegal immigrant, references to the INS, the sordidness of the living condition of other illegal people, and passing remarks about American racism and its role in the Vietnam War, problematize her relationship with the country. Apart from these fears, Jasmine's realization after Wylie falls in love with another man that everything is fickle about Americans comes as a blow to her. Out of frustration, she ruminates that nothing is permanent here, "nothing so terrible, or so wonderful, that it won't disintegrate" (181). It is also to be noted that though fluidity and mutability are celebrated in the novel, and though Jasmine is eager to remake herself repeatedly, the experience itself can be traumatizing. She realizes that her onward movement is something beyond her control but also that she has to go with it irrespective of the consequences. The following words beautifully capture her dilemma and her disposition:

It is by now only a passing wave of nausea, this response to the speed of transformation, the fluidity of American character and the American landscape. I feel at times like a stone hurtling through diaphanous mist, unable to grab hold, unable to slow myself, yet unwilling to abandon the ride I'm on. Down and down I go, where I'll stop, God only knows. (138-39)

Jasmine's unstoppable journey, powered by her greedy wants and reckless hope, makes her a perpetual sojourner, always on the move and never too deeply rooted anywhere. Ralph J. Crane compares Jasmine's westward journey with protagonists of American Westerns, which gestures at a continuation of the adventure instead of culmination of any kind. He comments that the ending of Jasmine is open because it "refuses that the future will be stasis. It is a fluid closure which, to borrow Du Plessis's phrase, writes beyond the ending" (Crane

n.p.). The diasporic journey that Jasmine undertakes is in fact based on the course, not destiny. She will exalt her ongoing movement and not a static destination. In a sense, Jasmine's journey towards California can be compared with Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield's since all three are motivated by a personal impulse of self-actualization. Disillusioned by the double-standard of society, both Huck and Holden seek a free territory. Jasmine's pursuit is, however, not so much related to disillusionment at the moral standards of the world. Her life-experiences have rendered her too mature to lament the loss of innocence. Her journey can be compared with Huck and Holden's quest because all three of them search for personal freedom, which gives them an opportunity to live life on their terms based on their own choices, not others.

Conclusion

The present article has read the character Jasmine portrayed by Bharati Mukherjee to explore her identity formation with the help of two different lenses. As a conduit of Mukherjee, Jasmine attracts the readers with her immense variety and a life full of unexpected bends. She reflects developments in the South Asian diasporic community in the United States. Due to numerous shifts in international politics and economics, concepts like postcolonialism, postmodernism, and diaspora have been taking newer forms. The identity formation of people in this changing state of affairs is not static either. Therefore, the new identities of Jasmine represent distinctive states of diasporic existence in Mukherjee's most popular novel *Jasmine*.

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