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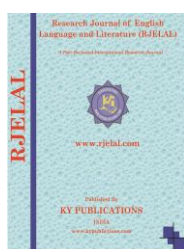
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INDIANNESS IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *SEA OF POPPIES*

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to analyse the elements of Indianness in Amitav Ghosh's Novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008). It is the first part of the *Ibis* Trilogy. The next two parts are *The River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015). As Indian Writing in English has become a powerful branch of modern English language and literature, an odd curiosity about the striking aspects of Indianness has been risen in different parts of English speaking world. Certain aspects of Indianness like colonial exploitation of the poor, judicial exploitation, caste system, performing sati, migration of Indians to new colonies, plight of people in labour camps, male domination in the society, peculiar aspects of the Indian seas, Indianness about the background, Indianness in using vernacular languages, etc. are analysed briefly. Amitav Ghosh has established as one of the prominent writers of Indian post modern literature. Ghosh was born in Calcutta in a Bengali family and has a firsthand knowledge of the Indian milieu. As a historian and anthropologist, he depicts life of the Indians especially in Bihar and Bengal, under the colonial rule with minute precision. Meanwhile the elements of Indianness are uncovered harmoniously without any exaggeration.

Indianness

The term 'Indianness' (*Bharatheeyatha*) is a popular usage in Indian writing in English. It is so complex and complicated that it can not be defined in one or two sentences. Collins Dictionary's website defines Indianness like this: "Perception or feeling of 'being an Indian' socially, culturally and spiritually." India is a vast country of 1.2 billion people with 30 states, more than 100 languages and dialects. It has a unique socio - cultural heritage where the yellow, brown, white and dark races live together and mingle easily. There are races like Dravidians, Aryans, Mongoloids, etc. and religious followers like Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jains, etc. who follow their own beliefs, customs, worship practices, rituals and traditions. Thus India has become an amazing land of cultural wonders and paradoxes. The very term 'Indianness' reflects

the religious practices, beliefs, food habits, dress code, attitudes and the lifestyle of an average Indian. In spite of these racial, social, cultural and religious differences, there are certain things which unite all Indians together. These elements of unity are collectively known as the salient aspects of Indianness. Eminent writers highlight the varied features of Indianness according to their understanding, experience and imagination. Being an Indian, Amitav Ghosh has a direct and intimate knowledge about the Indian social, cultural and historical background, and has presented them in his novel *Sea of Poppies*.

Sea of Poppies

Sea of Poppies is a historical fiction, set in the background of Opium War, between British India and China during the 19th century. It narrates two economic and social themes in detail. One is the

cultivation of opium as a cash crop in Bengal and Bihar for Chinese market. The other is the transport of Indian indentured workers to work in sugar factories of the British colonies such as Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad.

The novel is divided into three parts: 'Land', 'River', and 'Sea'. In the first section 'Land', the characters who were somehow related to the story are introduced along with the ship. The second part 'River' centres on the activities of the owner of the *Ibis* in Calcutta and also some of his friends. The third part 'Sea' is concerned with the inmates of the ship as it leaves Calcutta and moves on towards its destination in Mauritius.

The name of the ship is the *Ibis*, a schooner that was formerly a slave carrier between Africa and America. As the slave trade has been banned, it is rebuilt befitting to carry indentured workers from colonized countries to new colonies. Several main characters come together in the schooner who belong to different strata of the society. Kalua, an untouchable man from a socially 'lower' class, rescues Deeti, a 'high-caste' Hindu widow, from her husband's funeral pyre. They elope from their native village and get married. They fear the anger of her dead husband's relatives, become indentured workers to Mauritius and aboard the schooner. Another character Zachary Reid, who is the second officer (foreman) in the *Ibis*, is a mulatto from Boston. He has concealed his mixed race status from his British employers, fearing discrimination and loss of livelihood. Paulette, another character is a runaway orphan French girl escaping from her

British foster family also seeks refuge aboard the *Ibis*. Jodu is a Muslim lascar in the ship who feels attachment to Munia, a Hindu girl and both of them become victims to the wrath of religious bigots on the ship. Neel Rattan accused of forgery is being taken to a jail across the black water as a part of capital punishment. Ah Fatt, an ugly man is the co convict of Neel Ratan.

This first novel of his trilogy ends on a dramatic note of suspense and excitement. The ship faces a great danger in the mid-sea, with half of them trapped on board, and the remaining adrift on a raft amidst a stormy ocean. Ghosh makes use of

this long array of characters to depict Indianness in its genuine grandeur.

Colonial exploitation of the poor

Colonial exploitation of the poor is one of the major themes of Indianness. The story begins among the people lived in Ghazipur, a small Hindu village bordering between Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. People used to grow wheat, cereal and pulses which have been staple food items in the Indian subcontinent for centuries. The British trading company forced them to stop the farming of their traditional food crops and compelled them to cultivate poppy plants. The British factories process these plants in order to extract opium and export it to China in large scale. The majority of the people work in those factories for low 'wages'. Deeti's husband Hukam Singh, an ex-soldier works in Ghazipur opium factory. Here the colonizer exploits the poor villagers in two ways: the authorities tempt them to stop farming of their traditional food crops and lead them to starvation. Besides they lose their employability in farming and are forced to work at low wages in opium factories. The working conditions prevalent in the Ghazipur Opium factory is another example for how the colonizers exploited the Indians. Once Deeti is summoned to the factory to take her sick husband home. She couldn't believe what she witnessed there: 'Their eyes were vacantcompletely naked'. (p 95) As a historian, Amitav Ghosh brings out this unnoticed page of Indian history very realistically. No other Indian English writers have touched on to this dark side of the Indian village life.

Judicial exploitation

Ghosh clearly exposes how the judiciary under colonial rule tortures the Indians even the well-off landlords. Such a case is brought out through the landlord of Rashkali, Neel Rattan Halder. He had an unshakable faith in the company's policy and a high regard for the Queen's rule. He and his late father had business dealings with the British merchant, Mr. Burnham. He was ignorant of the cunningness of the colonial agent. Later there arose a dispute between the two and the English magistrate Kendal Bush awarded the sentence in favour of his own countryman Mr. Burnham. There

were clear indications of the British merchant's forgery.

Ghazipur Opium Factory harvests high profit out of its opium export business to China. But it does not give any financial compensation to Deeti after her husband's death. As a widow and the mother of a girl child, Deethi deserves a reasonable help from the company for the premature death of Hukam Singh. The company doesn't show any moral obligation to help a destitute who has no other source for survival. The prevailing British judiciary has no provision to insist the company to do something for the unfortunate.

Caste System

It is the system of dividing society into classes based on differences in family origin, rank or wealth. It is so cruel that it brands some unfortunate sections of the society as untouchables and expel them from the normal social and cultural life of the society. For several centuries caste constituted the core of social life in India. Yuval Noah Harari, the anthropologist and philosopher makes the following remark about caste system in India:

The Hindu caste system and its attendant laws of purity became deeply embedded in Indian culture. Long after the Indo-Aryan invasion was forgotten, Indians continued to believe in the caste system and to abhor the pollution caused by caste mixing. [*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*]

Ghosh depicts the real picture of the caste system prevalent in India during the 19th century in the first few chapters of the novel. Untouchability, a social evil closely associated with caste system prevailed strongly among the residents of the village. According to this practice, if a higher caste individual happens even to view an untouchable quite accidentally, it would pollute him. So Hukam Singh, the husband of Deeti, an upper class Hindu takes special attention not to view Kalua, his carriage driver an untouchable, while travelling in his bullock cart going to the opium factory in Ghazipur, three miles away:

Kalua, the driver of the ox-cart, was a giant of a man, but he made no move to help his passenger and was careful to keep his face

hidden from him: he was of the lather - workers' caste and Hukam Singh, as a high - caste Rajput, believed that the sight of his face would bode ill for the day ahead. Now, on climbing into the back of the cart, the former sepoy sat facing to the rear, with bundle balanced on his lap, to prevent its coming into direct contact with any of the driver's belongings. Thus they would sit, driver and passenger as the cart creaked along the road To Ghazipur conversing amicably enough, but never exchanging glances. (p.4)

The cruelty done to the untouchables by the upper class surpasses all our imagination: There were three young scions, thakur - sahibs in Ghazipur, who were much addicted to gambling. They heard about Kalua's physical prowess and promised him an ox-cart for participating in the wrestling matches on behalf of them. He became victorious in all those matches. Eventually he suffered his first defeat in the presence of the Maharaja of Benares. The three landlords humiliated him at first mating him with a well-known prostitute, Hirabai. Later they forced him to mate with a large black mare. They enjoyed themselves much the cruel scene:

Suddenly with a swish of its tail, the mare defecated unloosing a surge of dung Over Kalua's belly and thighs. This excited yet more laughter from the three men. One of them dug his whip into Kalua's buttocks: Arre Kalua! Why don't you do the same? (p.37)

Even the colonial people were passive to the injustice done in the name of caste. Bhyro Singh, the foreman of the *Ibis* seeks permission for sixty lashes to be inflicted on Kalua the untouchable for his elopement with Deeti, an upper caste widow, and his wish is granted by the British Captain of the *Ibis*. The captain was sure that Kalua would certainly die before the flogging came to an end.

Ghosh's reformatory approach to performing Sati

The plight of an Indian widow was shocking. The patriarchal system regarded that women's

existence should lose 'its rationale once the husband was dead.' (Sakunthala Narasimhan, 51)

The untimely death of Hukam Singh is a terrible blow to Deeti, but her relatives take it as a golden chance to enhance the prestige of the family by forcing her to perform 'sati' (widow burning ceremony). Sati refers to the former practice in Hinduism of a widow burning herself, either willingly or by force, with the body of her dead husband.

When Deeti's husband Hukam Singh's health condition grew worse a few weeks before, her brother-in-law Chandan Singh came near to her and promised the position of a 'mistress' in the case of her husband's death. He assured her if she kept him happy, he would look after her well. But she reacted sharply to him: 'I will burn on my husband's pyre rather than give myself to you.' (p.158) It means that she has taken a strong decision to perform 'sati' after her husband's death. Here Ghosh reveals the reasons why many a widow were ready to perform 'sati' in the past. As far as a Hindu widow is concerned, death is more welcome than being dependent on her relatives and kin.

Ghosh describes the ritual of performing 'sati' in detail. It is a strange experience to a modern reader. Here the novelist is not a mere silent spectator to a horrible scene. Instead he comes forward with a clear cut solution.

On one evening while Kalua was coming back to his village, he happened to meet two unknown travelers and knew from them about the death of Hukam Singh, the former sepoy. He came to the scene and assumed that there was already an arrangement for performing 'sati' by Deeti. For the time being he forgot that he was a mere bullock cart driver and an untouchable belonging to the chamar caste, whereas Deeti was the wife of an upper caste man. He has seen her before when he takes her husband back home from the Ghazipur Opium factory while he is sick. However Kalua decides to save Deeti's life from performing 'sati'.

Kalua observed the whole scene concealing himself from others. The pyre was arranged on a great mound of wood, on the banks of the Ganga. Hukam Singh's body was carried out of his dwelling,

in procession, and laid upon the mound. A second procession was headed by Deeti, covered in white sari.

Half dragged and half carried, she was brought to the pyre and made to sit cross-legged on it, beside her husband's corpse. Now there was an outbreak of chanting as heaps of kindling were piled around her, and doused with ghee and oil to ready them for the fire. (p.177)

Kalua waited until the pyre was lit and everyone was intent upon the progress of the flames. He crept down to the edge of the crowd and rose to his feet. He cleared a path through the crowd like a hurricane. People fled to different places like cattle. Then he did the impossible:

Racing to the mound, Kalua placed the platform against the fire, scrambled to the top, and snatched Deeti from the flames. With her inert body slung over his shoulder, he jumped back to the ground and ran towards the river, dragging the now-smouldering bamboo rectangle behind him, on its rope. On reaching the water, he thrust the platform into the river and placed Deeti upon it. Then, pushing free of the shore, he threw himself flat on the improvised raft and began to kick his heels in the water, steering out towards midstream. All of this was the work of a minute or two and by the time Chandan Singh and his cohorts gave chase, the river had carried Kalua and Deeti away from the flaming pyre, into the dark of the night. (p.177)

Later we see that Kalua helps Deeti to board a ship named *Ibis* that carries slaves or indentured labourers from Calcutta to Mauritius. They begin a new life after boarding the ship. Deeti becomes Aditi and Kalua becomes Maddow Colver. Thus Ghosh proves that 'sati' is neither a sacrifice nor a solution to any situation in life.

Migration of Indians to new British colonies

The migration of poor Indians to new British colonies is a common Indian theme in Indian

writing in English. Ghosh depicts the situation highlighting the reasons for such migration. The third part of the novel 'Sea' takes place in the schooner which moves from Calcutta to its destination in Mauritius. Some coolies sign the agreement of labour contract to escape from the poverty and misery at home.

Deeti, the protagonist in the novel, is forced to perform 'sati' when her husband Hukam Singh meets a premature death. In the critical moment, just before burning to ashes, Kalua, an untouchable lower caste ox man from the neighbouring village, rescues her. Her escape is not acceptable to her upper caste relatives. In order to escape from the wrath of Deeti's in-laws, she and Kalua become indentured workers on the schooner named 'Ibis'.

Neel Rattan Halder, the native king of Rakshali, who has business dealings with the British, is tried for forgery by Burnham and his cronies. The court punishes him by sentencing him to work as an indentured labourer for seven years in Mauritius. When he comes to the prison in the *Ibis* he gets Ah Fatt, a half Chinese and a half-Parsi, an opium addict from Canton, as his sole companion. Later the two are taken together on the *Ibis*. Paulette, a French orphan born and brought up in Calcutta easily disguises herself as an Indian woman joins among the indentured workers on the *Ibis*. She feels more at ease with Indian manners, food, and clothing than with Western ones. After her father's death Mr. Burnham and his family take up her protection. Later she finds that the British family has a plan to get her married to Justice Kendalbushe, an old Englishman. So she decides to run away and joins the *Ibis* disguising herself in a sari.

Plight of the people in labour camps

Ghosh describes the sufferings of the people in labour camp at Calcutta. It is another aspect of Indianness. It was the time of Diwali. The city resounded with celebrations. But there wasn't any sort of enjoyment in the camp. The silence within the camp was all the more difficult to bear for the inmates. When Diwali came, the migrants marked it by lighting a few lamps - silently. They had no idea when they would start from Calcutta. New

rumours spread in the camp each day. Deeti and Kalua were the only people who believed that a ship would come to take them away. Many of them regarded the camp as a jail where they had been sent to die. Their bodies would be turned into skulls and skeletons, then they could be cut up and fed to the sahib's dogs, or used as bait for fish. The people gathered outside the fence stared at the inmates as if at animals in a cage.

One day a migrant tried to escape from the camp. Soon he was caught and brought back to the camp by the spectators outside. He was beaten severely and had to live without food for two days. Several people fell ill due to the poor climate of the city. Some recovered, but others wanted to be sick and to die at the earliest. One night a very young boy became seriously ill, but the sirdars and maistries were drinking toddy and they didn't give him any attention. Before daybreak the boy died. The overseers showed responsibility in carrying the dead body to the nearby burning ghats for cremation. They did not permit the girmityas to accompany the dead body. Later a vendor whispered through the fence that the boy had not been cremated at all: a hole had been bored in his skull and his corpse had been hung up by the heels, to extract the oil - the *mimiai - ka - tel-* from his brain. (p.340) The migrants talked of pujas and namazes, of recitations of the Qur'an and the Ramacharitmanas and the Alha-khand to overcome their hurdles in going to Mauritius. Their great trust in God for mercy is another element of Indianness.

Male domination in the society

Male domination is an integral part of a patriarchal society and therefore it becomes an important element of Indianness. In such a system women depend on men. Deeti herself becomes a cruel victim to this social system. Her husband Hukam Singh is an addicted to opium and has no potency to lead a married life. Her shrewd mother-in-law knows this deficiency of her son and tackles it cleverly. Deeti is drugged opium and raped on her wedding night by her brother-in-law, Chandan Singh. Deeti is sure that her mother-in-law also is an accomplice in this cruel deed. She thinks, ".....that confirmed Deeti's belief that the child in her belly

had been fathered not by her husband, but by Chandan Singh, her leering, clack jawed brother-in-law." (p.34)

When Hukam Singh lies in his death bed, his brother Chandan Singh approaches Deeti and offers to be his keep. Besides, the social system is against woman. The property of a man who does not have a male heir would automatically go to his brother. Being the mother of a girl child, Deeti has no chance to possess her husband's land after his death. Deeti is sure that her relatives would make her life unbearable after her husband's death. So she decides to end her life by performing sati in her husband's funeral pyre.

In a patriarchal society a woman has no identity at all. Her identity is closely associated with her father, husband or children. Deeti's neighbours and relatives do not call or address her using the name given by her parents. Instead they call her 'Kabutriki-ma' which recognizes her as the mother of Kabutri.

In a patriarchal society a girl child was considered as a burden while the male child was an asset to the family. The girl's parents had to offer money and gifts to the groom to get their daughters married off. Deeti's father had to thatch the roof of her groom's house as a part of her dowry.

Malati, the wife of Neel Rattan Halder, is another passive sufferer of a patriarchal society that followed Hindu tradition. She performs her duties as a wife and mother without any complaints. She never complains or questions her husband's relationship with his mistress Elokeshi. Neel's mother was also neglected by her husband and she lived in an isolated gloomy wing of the palace while he enjoyed with his mistresses. Later Neel is put in jail and all his estate is confiscated. Before he is deported to Mauritius as a part of the punishment, Malati comes to jail and meets him. She doesn't show any sign of ill feeling even in the complete ruin of their life. She has been forced to live in a small house. Even then she tells Neel only this to take care of himself. She suffers everything due to the mistake committed by her husband, but never complains. Ghosh becomes a master story teller in depicting Malati as a typical Indian wife who

performs her duties without expecting anything.

Peculiar aspects of the Indian seas especially tide in Bengal

Most of the Indian writers in English have taken much pain to depict the geographical features and climatic conditions in India during the different seasons. Salman Rushdie pictures Bombay genuinely in his work *The Midnight's Children*. Several readers prefer books belonging to Indian writing in English in order to understand more about India. Ghosh has never disappointed such readers for he narrates the varied aspects of the Indian rivers and seas. As a native of Bengal, he speaks on the tide in the Hooghly based on his direct knowledge. He says that no human agency can fix the date of the *Ibis's* departure to Mauritius. Instead 'a quirk of the tides' would fix such things:

.....the more dangerous oddities of the waterways of Bengal: namely the *ban*, or bore_ a tidal phenomenon that sends walls of water hurtling upriver from the coast. Bores are never more hazardous than in the periods around Holi and Diwali, when the seasons turn upon an equinotical hinge : at those times, rising to formidable heights and travelling at great speed, the waves can pose a serious threat to the river's traffic. It was one such wave that determined when the *Ibis* would weigh anchor: the announcement of the hazard having been made well in time, it was decided that the schooner would ride the bore out at her moorings. Her passengers would come on board the day after. (p.343)

Ghosh describes in detail how people get ready for the tide. The harbour – master warned in the morning that the bore was expected on the river around sunset. The moment onwards the riverfront was busy with preparations. The fishermen worked together to carry small boats, sailing boats and even light weight boats. They were moved out of the water and placed them beyond the river's reach. Patelis, budge rows, batelos and other river crafts were too heavy to be lifted from the water. So they were anchored at safe places. Brigs, brigantines,

schooners and other ocean - going vessels anchored strongly and unbent their sails.

Indianness in the background of the novel

Most of the Indian English writers have chosen either rivers or seas as the background for their stories. Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar in his *Indian Writing in English* comments on this aspect of Indianness like this:

Novels whose action is set by the side of a river are a category by themselves. Nirad C. Chaudhuri has advanced the ingenious theory that, for the Aryans in India, the 'river cult' is a symbol of their pre-Indian existence-a survival of the Danube! (p. 322)

Iyengar gives a few examples also for his remark. K.S. Venkataramani's novel *Murugan the Tiller* (1927) is set in the background of the village Alvanti on the shore of Cauvery. The action of Humayun Kabir's novel *Men and Rivers* (1945) takes place on the banks of the Padma. R.K. Narayan's novels centred in Malgudi on the shore of the Sarayu. In Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) the river Hemavathy is a person and presence. In his *The Serpent and the Rope* the Ganges appears as a goddess.

Ghosh also follows his predecessors to present the background of his story. In the first part of the novel 'Land' the protagonist Deeti and her daughter Kabutri are living and working a village near Ghazipur, some 50 km east of Benares (Varanasi), on the shore of the Ganges. The second part 'River' centers on the activities of the owner of the *Ibis* and of his friends in Calcutta on the shore of the Hooghli. The final part 'Sea' takes place in the schooner the *Ibis* in the Indian Ocean on its way from Calcutta to its destination in Mauritius.

Use of Indian vernacular languages

Social life in a large country like India is a varied and diversified one. There are people who live in the countryside, the seaside and the hillside whose way of thinking and living are entirely different from one another. Whereas the people who live in cities follow a metro culture. For an Indian English writer narrating a story in English that

happened in the Indian social, historical and cultural background is a herculean task. The reader should feel Indianness in each and every word of the novel. It is not easy to translate the strange slangs and idioms used by the common people to English. If it is done, the reader will miss the pleasure of reading. Similarly, it is very difficult to find out apt English words for several Hindustani words. Moreover, a good part of the story takes place in the schooner the *Ibis*. So the writer has to use a number of words connected with navigation. In this context, the writer has no other way except using vernacular words and phrases to convey the meaning he intended.

Ghosh narrates some scenes of the story in local language as suitable to the occasion. At the same time he describes them in English also. While Deeti was going to her new home after marriage, sitting in the prow of the boat, with her wedding sari drawn over her face, the women in the boat sang:

Sakhiya - ho, saiya more pise masala
Sakhiya - ho, baramithalage masala
 Oh friends, my love's a - grinding
 Oh friends, how sweet is this spice ! (p.32)

As the above song is given in two languages - Hindi and English - it doesn't hinder the flow of reading.

Ghosh has taken special care in giving meaningful Hindustani names to his important characters. The protagonist is given the name 'Deeti' which means an affectionate, respectable and older woman. This name helps much the reader to feel a genuine attachment to the character. Her daughter is called 'Kabutri' which means very loving. Her husband is given the name Hukam Singh. The family name 'Singh' suggests that they belong to the upper Hindu caste of Kshatriya. The other male character is Kalua who is a giant of a man in size and the name hints at his black colour. Ghosh has selected carefully the names connected with the zemindar of Raskhali: Raja Neel Rattan Halder, his wife is Malati, his eight-year-old son Raj Rattan, his main servant Parimal and his mistress Elokeshi who was once a famous dancer. All these names give this story a genuine Indian touch.

Conclusion

As a historian and anthropologist, Ghosh has known well the strength and weaknesses of Indian social and cultural tradition. He has never appreciated the caste system and performing of sati that followed in India for centuries. He wishes sincerely a total change to this situation. It is clearly seen in his presentation how Kalua, an untouchable oxcart driver, rescues Deeti, an upper caste Hindu widow from her husband's funeral pyre and marries her. It is the beginning of a new era in their life. Ghosh highlights how the colonial British rule has exploited the poor villagers in the first part of his novel. Formerly the peasants in Bihar and Bengal were engaged in the farming of food grains. The British merchants tempted them to cultivate poppy plants and offered them high prices for their products. Later the same merchants cheated them by offering low prices for their products. Besides, they were forced to work for lower wages in the factories. Thus the writer convinces the readers how the British colonial rule lasted for two centuries has drained the Indian villages physically and mentally. As a writer Ghosh is optimistic by nature. The last part of the novel takes place in the schooner the *Ibis*. It is an image of a new home giving new hopes and great expectations. The friendship and relationship prevailed among the migrants promote the concept of a new world without the pressure of race, caste, creed, religion, class, social status and nationality. All these hindrances for an imaginary welfare state are washed away by the very black water in the Indian ocean. Considering the various aspects of Indianness he has depicted, we can proudly say that Ghosh's novel *Sea of Poppies* is a great treasure to Indian Writing in English.

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