

BALANCING THE IDENTITY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S 'A FINE BALANCE'

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ABSTRACT

The present paper means to deliver the view of the post-colonial India at the time of partition happened with Indian independence in 1947 and the state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in Rohinton Mistry's novel 'A Fine Balance'.

'A Fine Balance', a second novel by Rohinton Mistry is a novel set at the time of Indira Gandhi when she declared a state of emergency setting up herself as virtual dictator. It is a novel with full of contentment, compassion and consideration. It is divided into sixteen chapters describing the life of four characters from varied backgrounds such as Dina dalal, Ishavar darji, his nephew OmPrakash darji, and the young student Maneck kohlah whose lives intertwine with each other and develop a connection. The book mainly focuses on the two great events: the partition happened with Indian independence in 1947 and the state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi between idiocies of the political regime in an impressive satirical way. The novel reflects the reality of India's greedy policy of corruption ,oppression, brutality and the pains of poor people and individuals .Every character has their own story which are connected with the larger historical pretext. One have to read the novel carefully in order to look at those historical facts mixed with personal ones.

Keywords: Imbalance, Marginalization, Alienation, Social Discrimination, Poverty, Injustice, Displacement, Identity Crises, Untouchability, Insurgency.

INTRODUCTION

'A Fine Balance' shows the interference of the public historical sphere with the personal intimate one. By using some historical facts, Mistry will present us with the reality of the postcolonial India in 1947 that how the untouchability were widespread ,how women's were marginalized, how they lose their identity and all the political situations which impose an imbalance on the narratives of nationhood. Mistry never directly referred "Indira Gandhi " with her name throughout the novel. The first female protagonist of the novel, Dina Dalal, a widow in her forties struggling to lead a happy and independent life in the later part of the novel, through her memory we came to know about her earlier life and also the circumstances which she faces since her teenage .We can get the glimpse of her condition in the novel through the word of Maneck:

“ Poor Dina Aunty , how much of the past she was still carrying around with her, although she deceived herself that these were happy memories she was dwelling upon .And now the problems with the sewing ,the rent, the rations (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.389). Mistry discusses the Indian's reality i.e. ,gendered society through the character of Dina Dalal they are foretold that they occupy a role of a

subordinated member in the family and also in the society . They are expected to be an obliging daughter, loving mothers

,devoted wives after marriage, women like a commodity becomes a property which is to be fully controlled by their husbands, the writer high lists the discriminations done to the women's, masculine of a women in a patriarchal society and shows the inequality of the two sexes caused by the cultural constructions of gender differences, We can see in the novel how Dina 's brother ,ill-treats her and she was expected to do all the household works. Even Mrs., Shroff (her mother) also supports Nusswan's and asked Dina to do all work.

Although Dina shows that how a "new women" should be like she is a perfect symbol of a women refuses to be yielding and non-resistant not accept the clichéd, feminine role assigned to her since past times. After her husband's death , she struggles a lot .she at one points ,when there is no place for her to live after the eviction of her from the flat she comes to her brother Nussawan's house at this , many argue that the writer does kind of prejudice to her. This shows that women cannot live freely and safely in the world without the male protection of any sort.

Mistry's novels shows the sense of displacement, the sense of displacement is a persistent theme in his literary works .He is an exile Indians Parsi writer living in Canada.In his writings he tries to show the history of his home land, Om and Ishwar are symbolic of under privileged Indians who left their homeland and caught between two worlds the native land and the alien world which they are totally unaware of. It seems that they are totally uprooted from their comfortable world but they are unable to find peace in the new world . They struggle for the new identity by making a compromise in an alien world. "We don't have to worry about cancer", said omprakash.

"This expensive city will first eat us alive for sure" (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.85).

Mistry in his novel points out the theme of "Diaspora" into the limelight through the character of Dukhi Mukhi, A tanner who did not want his children Ishvar and Narayan to follow the family business and remain at low in the Scale of social hierarchy. He sent his children to the nearby town in order to work them as a tailor, to get the training of it so that they would come out to the clutches of caste hierarchy , this shows the condition of India in terms of social hierarchies prevailing at that time ,moreover it shows the first displacement of Ishwar and Narayan in the novel After learning they decided to leave the town earn money. They also faced many problems in the city of Mumbai. They tried to forget their ancestry but at the end they turned into beggars. Thus they faced double displacement but also they lost their identity in the course of the novel.

Diasporic writers show how they felt the pain when they have to leave their homeland through their writings .Writer shows the pain through the character of Dukhi Mukhi who refused to leave his homeland, he responded when Ashraf said him to migrate to the town which was nearby he Said; "And where would we stay? Here at least we have a hut .Besides, that's where my ancestors have always lived .How can I leave that earth? It's not good to go far from your native village. Then you forget who you are" (Mistry, Rohinton 1995, pg. 121).

What finally happens to them is totally devastating. Mistry in his novels mainly focused upon his own community i.e., Parsi community and the various changes and situations which Parsi in India faces.

He narrates the story of these community people at the post-independence era .politics plays an imminent role in construction of his plot in novel. All the major novels of Mistry shows the politics as an important part such as in “Such a long journey”, Bangladeshi war with Pakistani. His another novel Fine balance focuses the state of emergency happened at time of Indira Gandhi which affects the lines of every character in the novel. Finally the novel Family Matters focuses the extremist Hindu turmoil and riots happened for Babri Masjid and the effects of it on the lines of the people.

The novel shows the political suppression and the upper caste hegemony which was rampant at that time .There is one incident in the novel which shows the dominations of upper caste people and oppressing the subordinate class even in modern times .When Ishvar and his brother Narayan ,who belongs to a chamar family decided to give their votes themselves rather than the upper class people by focusing on their own opinions and matters they were brutally suppressed and their whole family was killed shows that they were not even allowed to give the votes.

The novel highlights the suppression of Sikh minority religion, which was another problem in the novel causes Maneck’s personal crisis and also leads to his suicide. When Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi ordered the military to capture Jar nail Singh, who was the secessionist leader, takes refuge in the golden temple the shrine of Sikhs. But when militant operated this operation turns out to be a disaster for them as the temple was damaged and Sikhs felt insulted after this incident, which leads to the assassination of the Prime Minister in the same year. The fine balance, fictionalizes the repercussions faced by Sikh community after the incident, including the torture and death of many. When Maneck came back to India from Saudi Arabia almost after ten years, taxi drivers advises him to cut his hair and shaves his mustaches so that people will not affiliate him to Sikh which could lead to his arrest or perhaps can even more worse.

Through these incidents, Mistry highlights the fact that nothing has changed for the common people in postcolonial India and they have to face the same injustice and oppression which they have faced at the time of Britishers and this is apparent from the dialogue of one of the character who says, “Of course, for ordinary people, nothing has changed”.(Mistry, Rohinton, 1997. Pg.666). The Monkey man likewise tortures his animals, both monkeys and dogs. He makes them to perform in front of the people to attract them. And pathetic animals under the threat of his master perform in order to save themselves from the beating of their master. This shows the cruelty of human beings not only limited to other human but it can also extends to the animal also. Moreover later in the novel after the death of their animals the monkey man brought two children as a substitute for the animals.

In Hindu caste system, Dalit is always considered to be impure who were considered to coming from the families of cobblers, leather worker or Mochi. They were assigned to as lower caste if they engaged in such kind of profession. The novel shows the perspective of subaltern people whose voice has been raised by Mistry and showcase their point of view in the novel. He not only sympathize with them but also provide a ground on which they can protest or struggle in the social space against the cruelty and mental torture faced by them. The narrative is full of woes and miseries running parallel in the past as the narrative describes the background of the characters from which they have come from. Each of these character is symbolic of the miseries faced by ordinary citizen at the time of emergency were declared.

The character of Dukhi dared to break the traditional chain of the occupation of his family and become tailor to his sons. Dukhi at the age of childhood forced to learn the occupation of his father which shows the burden which was carrying the younger children whose childhood was crushed under the responsibilities. Dukhi's mother remark shows the two parallel dilemmas inside her. Firstly, she has shown the pride on the adeptness of her children but moreover, she was totally shattered by the idea that her son will also remain bound in this traditional caste system and will face the same oppressiveness which the Dukhi's father had faced in all of his lifetime.

"You are becoming an adult, my son, I can sniff the change." (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.106). The catalogue of the woes, as Dukhi learns: "During his childhood years, Dukhi committed a lot of crimes as a low caste person could commit, and the corresponding punishment were engraved upon his memory. By the time he entered his teens, he had acquired all the knowledge he could would need to perceive that invisible line of caste he could never cross, to survive in the like his ancestors, with humiliation and forbearance as his constant companions". (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.107). Since his childhood he had committed a lots of crimes which shows the mental state of the lower caste people and the punishment was also engraved in their mind and throughout their lifetime they face the humiliation by the hands of oppressive landowners .The incident in which Dukhi's wife Roopa, did not hesitate to steal oranges from the gardens of landowners as she has to fulfill the physical appetite of her baby .Even the Entry of untouchable in the farm would destroy the sanctity of their land once one Dukhi was given the work of red chilies to ground into powder ,he was assigned a work to clean the mortar ,he split the mortar by his hands on which Thakur wife shouts and says:

"Oiee my husband! Come back! The chamar donkey has destroyed our mortar". (Mistry, Rohinton 1995, pg.347). After which Dukhi was heavily beaten up by the Thakur and Dukhi decides to send his children away from this world to learn tailoring. How a change in profession could uplift the entire status of an individual uplift the entire status of an individual is a matter of concern in the novel .though he has worked all day, he has been cheated of his payment. On which Dukhi enraged: "I could kill that Thakur. Nothing but a lovely thief. And they are all like that, they treat us like animals .Always have, from the days of our fore-fathers". (Mistry, Rohinton,1995, pg.118).

Mistry beautifully portrays the conflicts between the 'chamar' and the rich landlords as even after so many years of independence, nothing has been changed since then. Government was not taking any step towards this problems, Narayan Says: "Government passes new laws, says no more untouchability, yet everything is the same .the upper caste bastards sill treat us worse than animals. more than twenty years have passed since independence. How much longer? I want to be able to drink from the village well, worship in the temple, walk where I like". (Mistry, Rohinton 1995, pg.163).

The writer sharply shows the desolate picture of the people living in slum area. The children are malnutrition crying because of hunger and parents cannot even feed them properly.

"Outside the platform, a woman sat in the sun drying her laundered sari, one half at a time. One end was wound wet round her waist and over her shrunken breasts, as far it would go. The drying half was stretched along the railway fence". (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg327). Mistry describes the child labor and beggary which was rampant at that time and beggar master being an imaginative person, gives injury

to the other beggars to invoke the sense of pity and disgust in them, “Also, beggar master has to be very imaginative. If all, beggars have the same injury people gets used to it and feels no pity. People like to see variety.... Putting out a baby’s eyes will not automatically earn money... but blind with eye balls missing, face showing empty sockets plus nose chopped off- now any one will give one for that. Diseases are also useful”. (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.299-380).

Thematically, the novel raises a voice of the subaltern people which was very much suppressed. It also deals with the desires and longings of those middle class people who are struggling to fit in the metropolitan cities where they are hard to find the basic amenities and getting a job or a roof on the head is just like a dream come true. By depicting emergency, Mistry tries to reveal some political sides which creates a great impact on the rural life, also leads to change in the demands and aspirations of lower castes, and the attempts of the upper castes to preserve their status and the violence which they have committed on the poor people which is evident in the novel through the scenes of parliamentary elections when Narayan makes an attempt to cast his vote but he with other ‘chamars’ were tortured and hanged in the front of the people. Then they also destroyed their families and kill all the family member’s shows the unrequired anger and exaggerated self-opinion in order to maintain their supremacy in Indian society. Mistry showcase the dark realities and horrifying problems and exploitations which was going on in the society by the government in the name of beautification of the cities which resulted into chain of events, clearing of the slums which leads to roofless people which forced them to live on railway platforms and to carry the bundle of boxes to their work place. The people which forced them to live on railway platforms and to carry the bundle of boxes to their work place. The people were reacting to this condition and their anger can be shown in these words:

“The Prime Minister’s message is that she is your servant and wants to help you, she wants to hear things from your own lips” “If she is our servant, tell her to home here’! Someone shouted”. (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.299). But unfortunately rich people do not look over the point of view of poor people and they provide a support to the government measures. An example of this can be seen by Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta of au revoir exports:

“People sleeping on the pavement gives industry a bad name. my friend was saying last week – he’s the director of a multinational, mind you, you are not some small, two paisa business he was saying that at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated... got rid of counting them as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be mercy”.(Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.431). According to Nusswan; The Prime Minister is like our visionary leader and the state of emergency is “a true spirit of renaissance”.

Similarly Mrs. Gupta the capitalist ignorant of the condition of the poor speaks in favour of the socialist setting. She being a true capitalist pay low wages to the poor and earn good profit without having the fear of strikes. She becomes the voice of the capitalist society who stands in favor of Indira Gandhi ignoring the plight and fails to understand the humanity towards people. Mistry highlights the absurdity and idiocy of the political regime in many satirical scenes and also by naming the various government policies and construct his own story of both his community and nation.

Foucault termed as “regimes of truth that operate through the exclusion, marginalization and prohibition of other competing truths, a prodigious machinery designed to exclude”.(Hunt, Alan,1994). The chapter naming “day at circus, night in the slum” is a representative of all the government scenarios which expose the conceit of it. The metaphor of circus can be seen in the scene in which the government officials arrive in the area of “jhoadpatti” to meet poor people and people gathered around to hear the speeches of them. Everything seems to be surreal and fake. The stage decorations when the Prime Minister is coming to give her speech is full of flowers and colored lights and through the cardboard setting there was an outline of India’s map forming a battered halo behind her back. And in contrast to all these decorations, her speech seems little impressive. This unimpressiveness is further expressed through the waving her hands and flinging the garlands which was not well taken by the crowd: “Her father also used to do that when he was a Prime Minister” said Ishvar. ‘YES’ said Raja ram, ‘I saw it once, but when he did it he looked humble’. ‘She looks like she is throwing rubbish at us” said om”. Raja ram laughed, ‘isn’t that the politician’s specialty? (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.301). Mistry has shown how the implementation of the twenty point program have caused a devastating effect upon the lives of the many people Ishvar and Om when reached their houses, saw their ‘jhoppadis’ were crushed down on the earth in the name of beautification of cities. The prime minister efforts to eradicate poverty and control population growth was not done with humanity and scientific approach, rather than dealing with these problems, cruel methods and approaches were taken up.

In eradication of poverty, the decision were taken up to lift the beggars from the street and brought them into the work camp where they were treated like slaves and have to work in the most inhumane conditions. The descriptions of how work was made to be done by those beggars in the novel provides a critical view of government policies. The word like ‘beautification’ and ‘development’ has a hidden irony in them. These words are only applied to the upper class or elite people who were enjoying the favors of the government policies whereas the poor people were forced or neglected by the government in the name of so called ‘law’ which was indirectly made only to exploit the poor. The oppression which the novel shows has come in many forms in the name of caste, gender and politics.

The power can come from caste and if we looked at the realistic picture of Indian society since independence we will see the roots of India clutched under the power of caste system. There are many evidences in the novel which shows that professions are divided on the basis of caste system. And how lower caste people are suppressed or dominated by upper castes. How they are beaten up when they made even a small mistake. The incident of Dukhi Moochi when he was brutally beaten up which made an everlasting impact on him and he thought that his children will not involve in this traditional business. This shows that how they were supposed to follow the business of their families from generation to generation and coming out of that family business was not an easy task to do. Their identity was always in question and they suffer from identity crisis. Another level of power goes with the gender. It is undoubtedly a fact that Indian society was totally under men and is totally patriarchal.

This can be evident through the fact that how Dina Dalal fights all her life to stay independent without the control of any men in her life. How she was brutally handled by her brother Nusswan. Her education was also being stopped though she wanted to become doctor like her father, but after her father death and her mother illness she was forced to do all the household work and were abused by her brother physically too. Even when he found her not obedient related to her hair matter, he even slaps her on her

face and when sometimes she made a counter argument, considering that as backtalk, he lashes her with a ruler. The society is totally male dominated whether it is Hindu or Parsi. This can also be evident in the case of Roopa (Dukhi's wife) who is unfortunate to feed her baby by stealing fruits from the orchard of a rich man and her sexual exploitation by the rich man's orchard bodyguard shows the double standard of untouchability. And it also shows the gender inequality that women were only considered as an object of enjoyment, inferior to men.

Another power can be seen by the misused in politics which plays a dominant aspect in the novel. The period which is mentioned in the novel is from 1975 to 1984 brought a great impact on Indian politics and the novel highlights a violence which resulted into the partition of India when Indira Gandhi became the first prime minister of Independent India. In the novel, Ishvar asks: "Dina Bai what is this emergency we hear about?" "Government problems games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us". (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg83).

But what we see in this novel is totally opposite emergency affects only the ordinary people of the country. It takes about the terror which every man experienced. In this novel, he shows how the downtrodden or marginalized people are at the mercy and how they face the extreme torcher at the hands of Brahmin caste who considered themselves as the upper caste. The adverse effect of emergency is faced by the two main characters Ishvar and Om who were reduced to beggary. The slogan "the nation is on the move" seemed to be shown a contrast because in the name of development and prosperity, all the four characters show the loss of identity and experienced destruction in their lives. They were forced to shift in the work campus where the conditions are derogatory and unimaginable. And both Ishvar and Om were forced to be undergone through the process of sterilization and the result of which Ishvar develops an infection in his one leg due to which his one leg stops working and the result of which is that he could not be able to earn his livelihood and continue his tailoring, and besides all this derogatory and unimaginable condition they also face to face untouchability which shows the needless arrogance of the upper class to maintain their so called supremacy in their society and despite having so many laws against untouchability and exploitation, still it was prevalent widely in the society. Through these things, Mistry shows that it is not an easy task to fight against all these ills. The emergency defies any logic or rationale in its imposed political arbitrariness; "With the emergency, everything is upside down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, ending people to jail is very easy. There is even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure". (Mistry, Rohinton (faber and faber), 2006).

He as a social novelist, becomes a representative poet to point out the social evils of his time and becomes a member of writers such as Mulkraj Anand, Charles Dickens, Salman Rushdie and Thomas Hardy. He desires to show the social ills, so that society lives in a peace after finding all the solutions of these never ending problems. The 'fine balance' is based on the theme of denunciation of struggle for peace. Mistry describes the indecision and equivocation of the common man, as a humanist in his works: "You cannot draw lines and compartments and refuse to budge beyond them. You have to maintain A Fine Balance between hope and despair, in the end, it's all a question of balance". (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.267).

According to Arzan Wadia, “The name Gandhi comes not from the Mahatma but from Indira’s husband Feroze Gandhi, who was a Parsi. The Parsi variation of the word Gandhi which means grocer or merchant in Gujarati, is normally spelled Ghandy. But by a happy coincidence Feroze used the conventional spelling and the most powerful name in Indian politics was given extension.” (Wadia, Arzan, 2009).

One of the interesting part is that Mistry finds human values & feelings even in the evil character. But this cannot be seen in rich people or politician but the goodness can be seen in the characters occupying the lower status .The character of Ibrahim can be put into the category .He is an old man and a rent collector of their society in which Dina Dalal lives. He takes rent on the behalf of the real landlord who issued a legal notice against Dina not to do a tailoring work in her department. Despite giving so many warning letters she continues to do work in her department. Then the real landlord send two goondas who started destroying their machines and clothes. When Maneck came forward to stop them one of them took out his flick knife. But when Ibrahim finds out this he was disappointed as he didn’t thought that they will do this much far. When goondas departed after disintegrating and shattering everything, he felt apologetic and could not control himself, the tears starts rolling down his cheeks and he started to cry noiselessly and said:

“It’s no use, his voice broke, and said, I cannot do this job. I hate it! Oh, what has my life come? (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.306). Briefly, dina’s cramped dwelling becomes what Trikha calls a harmonious “Cross fertilization of cultures”.(Trikha, Pradeep, pg.215).

The title ‘A Fine Balance’ is itself very apt as it shows a balance between hope and despair or may be it is their very survival is a continual challenge to keep their lives balanced. There are various balances which is maintained or mentioned in the novel such as between individualism and societal norms and between tradition and modernity. One of the reason why book is so desolating or devastating is that every character becomes battered in the process of searching their identity or asserting their individuality. How they got out of their traditional norms such as Dina who comes out from the clutches of the orthodox ideas of her family and maintain new independent self of her.

Similarly, Om and Ishvar are moved from the clutches of their traditional profession and becomes a tailor. The title shows the government oppressiveness that can change someone’s life and it can be seen developed through a contrast between city and country, and how even the smallest occurrence of the events in the society can lead to the drastic changes in their lives. He gives the meaning to the title by showing the comparison and show how one can make a ‘balance’ between two extremes. The setting in the beginning of the novel is the express train where it serves as an important link where all the main characters meet and get to know each other. The train in the novel is symbolic of the struggles of the four main characters as well as every Indian.

The train has no fixed destination only temporary ones like the main characters who do not know the proper destination or goal in their lives but wandering for finding their true self. Maneck studies not because of his secure future or any predetermined goal in his life but just to fulfill their parents wish. He does not have a goal of setting down, and to get a job but like a train he is simply moving forward, accepts his fate unwilling to change anything in his life. One of the chapter in his novel ‘A Fine Balance’ Mistry named it as “sailing under one flag” in which he shows that sharing and co-operation is very essential in order to save live life. All the main four characters transcend their class, gender, religion,

caste and come together for the professional and personal motives. Dina belongs to 'city of sea' whereas Maneck to 'The Mountains' and Darjis to 'the village by the river'. They come together under one flag and remains in peace. They were living a happy and contently life. But everyone's life shattered when they encountered reality. Dina's happy life shattered after the death of rustom. Maneck in dreams, desires to live a peaceful life after completing his education. But the charm was lost with the years. He came to know about darji's plight and from newspaper he got to know that his college friend avinash has not committed suicide but was brutally murdered. Maneck's life suddenly shattered and he is heartbroken. His mental setup was not finding any solace or solution. Totally exhausted he was just sitting at the railway platform looking at rails.

"How they glinted, like the promises of life itself, stretching endlessly in both directions, silver ribbons skimming over the gravel bed, knitting together the blackened, worn-out wood of the railway ties". (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg.704). And at last he ends his life, he failed to maintain a balance in his life. Every person have to face many ups and downs in life but they have to maintain a balance between them to get going. The quilt plays a role of beautiful imagery in the novel. The memory in the novel is the thread of life and weaves them into a beautiful quilt which dina keeps sewing. The quilt is made up of different colored pieces and each little piece is equally important as a whole. Dina keeps this quilt with her at night to keep herself worm and each little part remind her to happy childhood her adolescence, tragic marriage and disillusioned dreams. The tailor aptly states: "It will look beautiful, just keep connecting patiently, dina bait that's the secret. jihan, it all seems meaningless bits and rags, till you piece it together". (Mistry, Rohinton, 1995, pg403).

Even when she came to her brother's house at the end she have that quilt in her arms which not only keeps her warm but also makes her reminiscence of the happy days and independent life which she lives with darjis and maneck. Similarly, like the patches of the quilt which makes the quilt multicolored shows the technique of mistry in which stories and people come from various sources and places and put together by him to form a beautiful story. Mistry, as a parsi novelist never felt any kind of distance between him and his motherland, he does not felt any spiritual distance from her. As an immigrant parsi novelist, he also wrote about double displacement in his novels and also shares the pain in that process. But according to him if a person shares a 23 year bond with someone or something it will always remain same and embedded in you, like you are always present there.

A Fine Balance becomes a story of courage and dignity of the marginal battered by a conscienceless rule that distorted nation's balance. The morbid end each meets becomes the author's sensitive reply to the grimness of living during the times of political imbalance.

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