



THE AESTHETICS OF SUFFERING: M.K. BINODINI DEVI AND THE POLITICS OF PERFORMANCE IN COLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the aesthetics of suffering as a central theme in the literary works of M.K. Binodini Devi, a pioneering feminist writer from Manipur. Set against the backdrop of colonial India, Binodini Devi's writings vividly depict the complex dimensions of suffering endured by women, embedding it within a broader narrative of cultural identity and resistance. The study examines how she re imagines suffering not as a passive condition but as an active, transformative force—an aesthetic and political act that challenges colonial domination and patriarchal structures.

Drawing on feminist theory, postcolonial criticism, and performance studies, this research investigates Binodini Devi's creative articulation of suffering as a performative tool for reclaiming agency and preserving Manipuri cultural traditions under colonial rule. Her works, including *The Princess and the Political Agent* (2020), *The Maharaja's Household* (2014) and her reflections on Manipuri performing arts like Devotional Essence, Graceful and Subtle Movements, Traditional Costumes, Musical Accompaniment, Narrative and Theatre Traditions, Martial Influences etc are analyzed to illustrate how suffering is both performed and politicized within her narratives. The paper highlights her significant contribution to redefining the aesthetics of suffering, portraying it as a medium of empowerment and cultural resistance during a period of socio-political upheaval.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Suffering, Resistance, Colonial India, Performance Studies, Gender and Agency.

INTRODUCTION

In M.K. Binodini Devi's oeuvre, the aesthetics of suffering emerges as a profound and culturally embedded mode of expression, particularly within the framework of Manipuri history and womanhood. Rather than reducing suffering to passive endurance, Binodini

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reconfigures it as a quiet assertion of agency, shaped by gendered experiences, familial constraints, and the trauma of colonial entanglement. Her protagonists often experience pain in deeply personal ways that resonate with larger socio-political realities. In her novel *The Princess and the Political Agent*, Binodini crafts the character of Princess Sanatombi as an emblem of both royal grace and existential turmoil. Inspired by a real historical figure, Sanatombi navigates the emotional complexities of loving a British political agent while simultaneously bearing the weight of royal duty. Her internal conflict is neither sensationalized nor heroicized; instead, it is rendered through moments of quiet introspection. At one point, she reflects, —I am a Princess, but whose Princess am I? (Devi *Princess* 143). This single line encapsulates the profound fracturing of identity under colonial rule—where even royalty is not exempt from uncertainty, loss, and dispossession. The question is not rhetorical, but haunting—suggesting how personal suffering reflects a colonized land’s fractured selfhood.

Binodini deepens this exploration in her memoir *The Maharaja’s Household: A Daughter’s Memories of Her Father*, where she merges the personal with the political. Through recollections of palace life and her relationship with her father, Maharaja Churachand Singh, she reveals the emotional labor of royal women, often consigned to the margins of recorded history. She describes the royal palace as —a beautiful cage, whose golden bars kept out both freedom and truth (Devi *Maharaja’s Household* 89). The metaphor is striking in its simplicity—linking spatial confinement with emotional and intellectual suffocation, particularly for women. Her mother, she implies, endured this with stoic silence, her suffering etched into the fabric of everyday life, yet rarely acknowledged.

What distinguishes Binodini’s treatment of pain is its aesthetic restraint. Drawing inspiration from Manipuri classical traditions such as Raslila, her narratives mirror the form’s grace and containment. Raslila, known for its spiritual yearning and gentle expressiveness, permeates the emotional tonality of her prose. Suffering is not loud or theatrical; rather, it is internalized, poetic, and dignified—an echo of the region’s own history of marginalization and survival. This aesthetics of suffering becomes a form of cultural resistance, where feminine pain is neither erased nor romanticized, but transformed into a space for reflection and resilience.



For Binodini, writing itself becomes cathartic, a way to recover and preserve the unspoken. In documenting the lives of royal women, she not only reclaims familial memory but also asserts a literary and cultural presence for Manipuri women, long silenced in mainstream discourse. Her narratives, steeped in longing and loss, ultimately become sites of healing and historical reclamation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The idea of aesthetics in connection to suffering has been discovered by different research scholars such as Elaine Scarry in 1985 and Susan Sontag in 2003. Scarry emphasizes that the articulation of suffering can serve as a form of resistance: *“Pain has no voice, but the act of expressing it can be a powerful form of resistance”* (Scarry, 1985, p.4). Sontag debates that suffering and pain can be aestheticized, transforming personal pain and emotions into a shared experience that resonates with audience: *“The representation of suffering is a form of art that can evoke empathy and understanding”* (Sontag, 2003, p.12).

In *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry argues that physical pain is uniquely resistant to representation, claiming it —does not simply resist language but actively destroys it (Scarry 4). Because pain defies articulation, it becomes invisible and isolating, making its performance inherently inadequate. While not theatrical, expressions like cries or gestures are performative attempts that fail to fully convey the inner reality of suffering. This failure allows for the objectification and political misuse of pain, especially in contexts like torture. As she puts it, —To have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt (Scarry 13), highlighting the epistemological divide between sufferer and witness.

Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), approaches pain from the angle of visual representation, particularly photography. Unlike Scarry, she examines how suffering is consumed by audiences, turning into a performance for the viewer. She notes, —The image may be a vehicle of condemnation, but it can also be a vehicle of fascination, even of eroticism (Sontag 95), warning of the emotional distance and voyeurism such imagery can provoke. Pain, in her view, is not just under-represented but overexposed, and repeated images risk desensitizing the viewer. —Being a spectator of calamities... is a quintessential modern experience (Sontag 18), she observes, underlining the ethical complexity of viewing suffering.



Together, Scarry and Sontag show that pain challenges both expression and reception. Scarry emphasizes its incommunicability; Sontag critiques its commodified visibility. Both explore how pain's performance, whether through the body or through media, raises urgent questions about authenticity, ethics, and responsibility.

MEANING OF AESTHETICS OF SUFFERING

In reality the —aesthetics of suffering‖ refers to the artistic and philosophical assessment of pain, vulnerability and hardships as a means of manifestation and association in communication. This idea investigates how suffering can go beyond its negative connotations to become a source of aesthetic commitment and implication in life. Some of the authors and writers have used this concept of —aesthetics of suffering‖ in literature studies, religious expression of crucifixion, modern art and in the related fields of studies. It also refers to bodily expression of inner turmoil, a medium to externalize the inner struggles and pain, and has been visible metaphor from the historical to modern art forms of representation of emotional struggles and empathy. The empathy and universality of —aesthetics of suffering‖ is a form of resonating the pain and sufferings of audience shared vulnerability and fragility.

Andrej Démuth and Slávka Démuthová explore the aesthetics of suffering, particularly focusing on self-harm and its representation in art and society. In their work "The Aesthetics of Suffering or Being Enchanted by Van Gogh's Ear," they analyze how suffering, while a part of everyday life, is often expressed in ways that transcend the ordinary to communicate with others and evoke change. They note that acts of self-harm or self-sacrifice, though typically private, are performed with an audience in mind, aiming to affect observers. —Although self-harm and self-torture may and often have in principle a hidden and intimate character, they are nevertheless addressed to a certain audience that is supposed to see them and whom they affect.‖ (2021)

It explores how suffering goes beyond its everyday nature to express deeper purpose and meaning to an audience. In this the authors portray the real pain in historical and modern art, namely, Van Gogh's self-mutilation and literary works like Goethe's —The Sorrows of Young Werther‖.



MEANING OF POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

Political performance denotes to symbolic acts, forms or embodied behaviour that communicate and represent political meaning and critique power structures. Young Cheon Cho (2009) discovers how the body in pain and struggle can attend as a medium participation of public, particularly through extra linguistic confrontational practices like vulnerability, self-immolation, emotional struggle. The marginalized and socially excluded groups do really exhibit traditional and political participation by using physical suffering to protest and resist against social and political injustices, challenging the powers, systematic violence, oppression, male domination and so on. It is an expression of personal and collective unhappiness and emotional struggle.

The representation of suffering in visual art and political performance reveals a profound intersection where personal pain becomes a communicative and often political act. Aesthetic suffering—defined as the crafted depiction of trauma or pain to evoke emotional or intellectual engagement—transforms individual agony into a shared cultural experience. As Démuth and Démuthová (2021) observe, —the presentation of suffering in art often aims to provoke a response, be it empathy, awareness, or even discomfort, suggesting that such expressions are not merely cathartic but are consciously communicative. This is particularly evident in performance art and political protest, where the body itself becomes both the medium and message. Artists like Marina Abramovic, in *Rhythm* (1974), subjected themselves to potential harm to reveal how pain, once made visible, disrupts the viewer's moral complacency. Political performance, in this sense, not only aestheticizes suffering but weaponizes it—transforming vulnerability into resistance. Elaine Scarry (1985) underlines this transition by asserting that —to have pain is to have certainty; to hear about pain is to have doubt, thus underscoring the urgency of rendering pain visible and embodied. The fusion of visual art and political performance, therefore, allows suffering to move from private torment to public discourse, reshaping it into a potent form of social critique and advocacy.

In *The Princess and the Political Agent* and *The Maharaja's Household*, M.K. Binodini Devi further deepens the aestheticization of suffering by situating women's emotional and physical pain within the political upheavals of princely Manipur. Both texts reveal how female characters, especially royal women, experience forms of systemic silencing and



emotional trauma that mirror the colonized state's subjugation. The Princess, caught between the expectations of royal decorum and personal desires, becomes emblematic of what Scarry (1985) terms —the unsharability of pain—her suffering is both intensely private and politically symbolic. Similarly, in *The Maharaja's Household*, the royal family's women live in luxurious confinement, yet their stories, as narrated by Binodini, underscore a subtle resistance through observation, recollection, and storytelling. The personal narratives unfold against a backdrop of colonial dominance and native patriarchy, transforming domestic spaces into theatres of aesthetic suffering. In line with Démuth and Démuthová's (2021) notion that suffering in art is intended —to provoke a response, Binodini's storytelling acts as a form of soft resistance—bearing witness to the invisible pains of royal women while asserting their agency through memory and narration. Her autobiographical framing thus blurs the line between personal witness and political performance, using the aesthetics of suffering to critique the entwined hierarchies of gender, power, and colonization.

Judith Butler's *The Force of Nonviolence* (2020) reveals that political performances do really challenge neoliberal ideas of sovereign mastery by portraying the precariousness of life and the embodied expressions to claim democratically. Judith Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes how collective expression of vulnerability used a vital medium for political resistance.

Giacaman, R., & Nguyen-Gillham, V. (2016) in mental suffering in conflict research in Palestine discovers how the violence of politics exacerbates psychological distress and the author explains how this has been employed as a means of resistance of both personal and collective people against oppressive systems seeking collective dignity and identity.

Rowman & Littlefield (2011) describes the intersection of suffering, human rights and aesthetics in literary works written by political prisoners by presenting how narratives and styles of suffering used to critically analyze oppressive systems while evoking resistance and empathy in human life.

Heidegger's philosophy reveals that suffering is not merely an emotional state but an existential condition integral to human existence (*Dasein*). In *Being and Time* (1927), he asserts that —anxiety reveals the nothing, suggesting that moments of suffering confront us



with the limits of our being, pushing us toward authenticity. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, he further argues that art is a —setting-into-work of truth,^l or *aletheia*, where suffering, when aesthetically represented, becomes a means of revealing deeper truths about existence. Through poetic disclosure, art does not simply depict pain—it transforms perception, urging us to dwell more truthfully in the world. Thus, aesthetic suffering, in Heideggerian terms, becomes a profound ontological encounter with being itself.

M.K. Binodini Devi's portrayal of women's suffering in her autobiographical and fictional works resonates with Martin Heidegger's conception of art as a medium of truth-revealing (*aletheia*), particularly in how she aestheticizes pain not for sympathy but for ontological insight. In *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Heidegger argues that true art —sets truth to work,^{ll} meaning that it discloses aspects of human existence that would otherwise remain hidden. Binodini's writing, especially in *The Maharaja's Household*, renders visible the often-unspoken emotional and psychological burdens borne by royal Manipuri women. These sufferings—ranging from political marginalization to inner conflict—are not presented as private woes but as experiences that compel a deeper perception of historical and gendered realities. As Heidegger posits, suffering and anxiety are integral to authentic existence because they confront us with the finitude and fragility of being (*Being and Time*, 1927). Similarly, in *The Princess and the Political Agent*, the protagonist's inner turmoil—her longing, frustration, and constrained agency—invites readers into a space where pain is not merely depicted but disclosed as a condition of both existence and resistance. Binodini's aesthetic of suffering thus functions Heideggerianly: not as passive lament but as an act of poetic disclosure, allowing both self and society to perceive truth through the lens of feminine experience and political subjugation. In this light, her literature can be seen not only as a mode of life-writing but also as a site of existential unveiling, where perception is transformed and historical pain becomes philosophically charged.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study employs a multidisciplinary approach to analyze M.K. Binodini's contribution of *The Maharaja's Household* and *The Princess and the Political Agent* considering how her narratives and styles investigate with the aesthetics of suffering and the political performance in Colonia India. This multidisciplinary methodological approach employs feminist theory and aesthetic theory investigating how gender impacts experiences



of suffering and agency while postcolonial criticism in examining the influences of colonialism on women's roles and cultural identity for women. This research project also uses performance studies to analyze how performance can be used as both an artistic expression and political statement.

This interdisciplinary approach deals with the complex interplay among the aesthetics, political reality and the historical context of colonialism in Manipur. The researcher employs a combined literary analysis with cultural studies understanding the position of women in the society. Primary Source Analysis of her writings including *"The Maharaja's Household"* and *"Boro Saheb Ongbi Sanatombi"* with the themes of suffering, political life and impact of British colonialization in Manipur.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Seeking a deeper knowledge on Binodini Devi's understanding of aesthetic of suffering and resistance has brought the interest of various scholars and writers in gender studies, performance and postcolonial studies. The author's analysis of Manipuri theatre, Chatterjee in 2010 states that, *"Devi's works are a testament to the resilience of Manipuri culture in the face of colonial oppression"* (p.45). Again, Sharma in 2015 emphasizing the importance of Devi's narratives in articulating the life experiences of girls and women in the period of colonial era noting that *"her characters embody the struggles of women navigating a patriarchal and colonial landscape"* (p.78). Das in 2018 by examining Devi's work on the theme of aesthetics of suffering reveals that *"the portrayal of suffering in Devi's narratives servers as a means of reclaiming agency for marginalized voices"* (p.102).

As per Roy (2020), *"Binodini's imagination takes wing from cues she culls from the Cheitharol Kumbara"*, which projects her strong connection with Manipuri historical period.

THE PRINCESS AND THE POLITICAL AGENT: THE AESTHETICS OF SUFFERING

The Princess and the Political Agent is one of her famous and most celebrated literary contributions that prominently portray the themes of loss, love, suffering and resistance against the backdrop of oppressions of colonial rule in Manipur. In this play, Devi reveals



the character of *Sanatombi* as a young Manipuri woman whose life is a complex reality filled with political and personal turmoil. The play is reflecting the pains, struggles and the sufferings of the Manipuri people against the colonial period of British rule. Devi's novel *The Princess and the Political Agent* (1979) won the 'Sahitya Akademi Award' and is mostly prominent for its portrayal of tough female characters who directed the complexities of foreign rule (Roy, 2020).

Devi uses a rich tapestry of symbolism and imagery to express the sufferings experienced by Sanatombi and in all her characters throughout the play. The real sense of aesthetic in the play is deeply rooted in utilizing cultural performance techniques and strategies to evoke emotional responses from the audience and people. The reflection of the sufferings of Sanatombi is a personal tragedy as well as the collective anguish and pain of a community grappling with subjugation of colonial power. M.K. Binodini Devi in her own words states, "*The pain of one is the pain of many; our stories are intertwined*" (Devi, 2000, p.56). The relationship of suffering of one with many people in the Manipur community highlights the broader socio-political environment in which the characters occur.

Binodini Devi's usage of traditional forms of storytelling and dance serve both as an art form as well as agency for her characters. The play challenges the dominant colonial discourse by offering a nuanced depiction of Manipuri dignity, identity and resilience. Chatterjee in 2010 stated that "*Devi's work is a powerful assertion of cultural identity in the face of colonial erasure*" (p.47). The association between resistance and performance is very clearly seen when Binodini Devi explains how traditional attire is worn with superiority despite colonial powers: "*Our ladies go bare shouldered when they really dress up formally*" (Roy, 2020). Through this, she highlights how art forms and its performance become an act of disobedience against colonial and male-controlled customs, norms, and powers transforming struggles of suffering in a celebration of dignity, individuality and identity.

Roy in 2020 presents in *The Princess and the Political* novel where Devi portrays the character of Sanatombi's choices of wearing the attire resembling her inner strength and courage against imposed identities, and her courage and fearless face in confronting suffering. "*She carried a parasol with a long handle in her hand... on another day a limp sarong of pale pink and a small rose stole*" (Roy, 2020).



THE MAHARAJA'S HOUSEHOLD: THE AESTHETICS OF SUFFERING

Binodini Devi, in her work *"The Maharaja's Household"*, presented the complexities of power and gender within the context of colonial India under the British rule. This novel and its narratives reveal the lives of women in the household of the royal family, emphasizing their aspirations, pain and struggles amid constraints. This play serves as a microcosm of the bigger societal issues confronted by women during this colonial era.

The female character portrayed in *"The Maharaja's Household"* is imbued with a sense of pain and suffering that surpasses individual sharing of experiences. The theme of the aesthetic of suffering is implicitly linked to the socio-political experiences of colonial rule, where the women were frequently trapped in the crossfire of power dynamics. The characters of Binodini Devi embody the struggle, pain of displacement and the desire of autonomy, reflecting the broader struggles and difficulties confronted by women in colonial Manipur society. Binodini Devi's own words express that, *"In our silence, we carry the weight of our histories"* (Devi, 2005, p.34). Her depiction of suffering transcends simple victimhood expressing agency and strength while suffering transforms personal pain into collective resistance.

POLITICAL RESISTANCE THROUGH PERFORMANCE AND AESTHETICS

The political performance in Devi's work of *The Maharaja's Household* serves as a critical interpretation of the intersection of gender and power in the colonial era of India. Political performance refers to artistic or theatrical acts designed to communicate political ideas, critique societal structures, or challenge dominant narratives. It combines aesthetics with activism, using performance as a medium to engage audiences and provoke critical reflection on political issues (Serafini, 2018).

Manipuri performance techniques are rooted in the rich cultural traditions of Manipur and include dance, music, rituals, and martial arts. *Ras Leela* is a classical dance narrating the love stories of Radha and Krishna through gentle movements, intricate gestures, and expressive expressions. Female dancers wear vibrant traditional costumes like the Potloi skirt. *Nata Sankirtana* combines singing, dancing, and drumming, performed during religious ceremonies and festivals as an expression of devotion. *Thang Ta*, a martial art



form, features fluid weapon-based and unarmed movements resembling circular patterns. These forms emphasize graceful, serpentine body movements and continuous flow, expressing emotions like love and longing, influenced by the *Natyashastra*.

Manipuri dance holds deep cultural and religious significance, rooted in Vaishnavism and social rituals, preserving Manipuri heritage and fostering community identity (Miettinen, 2018). Devi's work, particularly *The Maharaja's Household*, uses traditional Manipuri techniques to challenge patriarchal and colonial oppression, amplifying marginalized voices, especially women, in cultural and political spheres. Her performances critique patriarchal structures by empowering women to reclaim their narratives, aligning with movements like the *Meira Paibis*. Through aesthetic choices, Devi employs dance as embodied resistance, transforming personal struggles into collective narratives while fostering dialogue on gender issues and social justice

Binodini uses the customary Manipuri performance techniques permit her to challenge dominant descriptions and create a space for the voices of women. Through the play she challenges the traditional patriarchal structures that restrict women in the political oppression, offering a platform for their voices and stories to be validated in the society. According to Sharma (2015) she is a voice of the voiceless in the patriarchal and male dominated society. Sharma states, "*Devi's narratives provide a voice to the voiceless, illuminating the struggles of women in a patriarchal society*" (p.80). Devi emphasizes the significance of cultural heritage in shaping the identity and resistance and, for her, the arts are powerful means of expression in the collective marginalized community. Her promotion of Manipuri performing arts such as —*Ras Lila*” has succeeded in preserving the traditions and have brought recognition both on national and international platforms.

Devi used the traditional dance forms of Manipur as a means of her narrative stories to reclaim their individuality, identity and richness of their culture. "*The integration of Manipuri dance forms... illustrates how performance can serve as both an artistic expression and a political statement against oppression*" (CCRT). Through these art and dances, she projected her sufferings, pain and difficulties not as termination points but as an energetic force that nurtures resilience and hopefulness among women in the Manipuri community.



The concept of Manipuri people particularly “*Machu Taba*” symbolizing an aesthetic which is rooted in ethics, grace, beauty and culture is very well reflected in Binodini Devi’s writings. In her writings she investigates the cultural elements and asserts the prominence of preserving Manipuri legacy even amid colonial subjugation in the following words: “*Noblemen from the four boroughs set out for the palace... adorned with the blue vanda orchids... came in a procession towards Kangla Fort*” (Roy, 2020).

SUFFERING AS AN EMPOWERMENT

M.K. Binodini Devi’s narratives transcend the boundaries of personal grief to articulate the collective suffering of Manipuri women across generations. Her writings, particularly in *The Maharaja’s Household* and *The Princess and the Political Agent*, serve as powerful testimonies that amplify silenced female voices within a rigidly hierarchical and patriarchal society. Rather than portraying suffering as isolated or purely emotional, Binodini situates it within the broader socio-political currents of Manipur’s transition—from a princely state to a modern political entity—thus linking personal pain with historical transformation. Dutta in 2019 states, —Binodini’s narratives are marked by modernity rooted in Manipuri’s traditions. Through her nuanced portrayal of royal women grappling with internalized tradition and emerging individual consciousness, she captures the tensions between cultural continuity and modern identity. This interplay reflects what many postcolonial feminist scholars identify as the —double bind faced by women navigating inherited roles while asserting new forms of agency (Mohanty, 1991). In Binodini’s work, this synthesis is not resolved but creatively rendered, revealing how women’s courage lies not only in resistance but in their capacity to endure, remember, and narrate their own evolving realities.

The protagonist Sanatombi personifies the transformative process of her personal experiences of losses, sufferings and betrayal from the point of tragic events into formative steps to empower her to be an assertive personality against colonial suppression. Sanatombi turns her suffering relationship with Colonel Hendry St. Patrick Maxwell who is a British Political agent into a relationship of self- discovery, moment of growth and empowerment of one’s life in the complexities of life. Her suffering also becomes a catalyst for her resistance and resilience: “*I have taken up a task well beyond my ability but I have tried to depict a Sanatombi of a world of alien ways who had lived during a time of great change in*



Manipur's history” (Roy, 2020). This realization of her painful moments and tussles explains how Binodini Devi reframes anguish as a means of up-lifting in the society.

CONCLUSION

M.K. Binodini Devi's works illuminate the intersection of personal suffering and collective historical trauma, reconfiguring pain as a potent aesthetic and political force. Her portrayal of royal Manipuri women—bound by tradition yet subtly resisting colonial and patriarchal authority—demonstrates how suffering becomes both a form of embodied memory and a performative act of defiance. Rather than framing suffering as passive lamentation, Binodini aestheticizes it, in line with Heidegger's view that —art is the setting-into-work of truthll (*The Origin of the Work of Art* 36), revealing deeper existential and political truths through narrative. In *The Maharaja's Household* and *The Princess and the Political Agent*, suffering is situated within the complexities of loyalty, modernity, and womanhood, transforming private pain into a narrative that speaks for a silenced collective. Her autobiographical impulse resonates with feminist life-writing traditions, where —the personal becomes politicalll and memory serves as an archive of resistance (Smith and Watson 34). Thus, the aesthetic of suffering in Binodini's work is not simply expressive but revelatory and oppositional, functioning as a cultural performance that confronts colonial control and gendered invisibility. In articulating the tension between tradition and transformation, Binodini Devi not only recovers women's voices from the margins of history but also challenges dominant narratives by presenting suffering as an act of self-assertion, historical testimony, and political agency.

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