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“Words as Bullets”, Poetry as a Veritable Tool for Social Criticism and Reformation: A Study of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo’s *Heart Songs and Waiting for Dawn* (Pp. 354-368)

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Abstract

Poetry is one of the genres of literature and has over the years found its best application and usage as a weapon, a tool for criticism with which poets mock and satirize societal actions, values and attitudes in the hopes of correcting and instilling in the people the right and ethical moral values which in no small measure will institute a more harmonious, idyllic and tension free society as well as engineer a more appreciable peaceful co-existence among individuals in society. This in turn will lead to a high degree of productivity and growth in all spheres of human endeavor. Typical of every society is the presence of all forms of vices, problems and evil peculiar to the society which militate against her growth. Writers have continued to use the gains of literature to decry all forms of evil and dehumanizing

practices as a way of fulfilling their calling and duty to society as writers. This paper examined how poetry, a peculiar genre of literature, serves as a weapon for social criticism and reformation in the quest to free and purge the society of certain forms of vices and evils which militate against her peace and highly expected progress. The study selected the two collections of poetry by Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo Heart Songs and Waiting for Dawn respectively. How the poet blended and weaved her lines of poetry; harnessed her fountain of poetic ingenuity to criticize, satirize and mock with the hope of reforming her society and her visions of a new future as a prophetic poet is the crux of the study.

Introduction

Poetry is one of the genres of literature. It has its antecedent in the early Greek practices with which they sought to project their worldview and understand themselves better. From study, poetry originated among the early Greek classical writers. It originated from two major essence, one being man's love for imitation, the other from man's love for music and harmony. Overtime, poetry has survived from the early practices, in the praise singing poise and worship of their gods to find better expression in several issues as it relates and affects life. As poetry evolves, it acquires newer forms and tendencies, even modes of expression and this is the journey of poetry over centuries and decades ago as it transcends even to our contemporary era where it has become not just a means of pleasure, gratification and inspiration but a means of social criticism, reformation, re-orientation, conformation and rehabilitation.

It has not always been easy to define poetry. Some critics project the view that it is very easy to say what poetry is not than to say in all lucidity what poetry is and one could easily be allured to subscribe to this view owing to the cumbersome and variegated nature of poetry. J.O.J Nwachukwu Agbada aware of this fact and the problem which poetry poses in its definition explored poetry in several related dimensions. In his words:

The question remains one of the most difficult to encounter. The reason is that poetry has been put to various uses so that if one was asked to define it, one would have to do so from a specific standpoint, which at any rate would never cater for all the dimensions of its signification. The truth is that some people have considered poetry from the point of view

of rhythmic articulation i.e. its musical properties, some from the angle of feeling and emotion, some from its philosophical and ideational content while some others have focused on poetry as experimentation in linguistic possibilities. Thus, when Osundare define poetry as ‘man meaning to man’, he chose to relate poetry from the stand point of social praxis. Similarly, we have often heard that William Wordsworth, the English Romantic poet defined poetry as ‘the birth and finer spirit of all knowledge ... (p. 5).

Agbada went on to give various definitions of poetry by several poets, scholars and critics like Samuel Coleridge, P.B Shelly, W.B Yeats, even of our Nigerian, Romanus Egudu, Obi Maduakor, Luke Eyoh among others. In all these definitions, one could see the herculean task of making a general and forceful statement that will in all entirety define poetry. In this vein, it is quite easier for one to say what poetry is not than what poetry is, owing to its multi-faceted nature. In the end, Agbada concludes that:

From all these testimonies as to what poetry and the poet are, one may then remark that poetry is an attempt by a committed individual to articulate a vision of the world via a compressed use of language in a manner which engages the senses and liberates the soul for a unique perception of life (p. 6).

Thus, poetry has become one of the veritable tools and avenue through which writers articulate their visions, perceptions, beliefs and individual manifestations as it affects our society and the life which we live. Poetry as a genre of literature has laboured and has done enough in fulfilling the goals of literature in society. Poetry from its origin has been an act of social instruction; it reflects the societal mores and values. If poetry is anything, it is also a tool for social reformation, re-education, re-orientation and re-ordering that must be done for the institutions of society to be free of evil, vices and crime; a society that takes it breathe from the finer breathe of peace, harmony and peaceful co-existence. Poetry delights the mind and also serves the purpose of instructing and educating society. It does this by assembling together some conspicuous human vices and follies and ridicule them with the sole aim of correcting them. Like an arrow, it dips its pointed edge into

the poisonous cup of injustice, corruption, oppression, poverty and denigration among other hard realities of human life and direct the poisoned arrow unto the society from which it hopes to shoot straight into the heart of its victims but not to destroy them as one might easily conclude but to hurt their feelings and awaken in them a new love, passion, patriotism, sense of orderliness, equity and justice which will lead the society to its peace, and destiny. This is the point where poetry becomes a weapon of satire, to bring into limelight, human follies and vices as it projects the truth about human existence through which it ushers in change and reformation.

Social Consciousness and Criticisms in the Poetry of Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo

Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo is one of the surprising poets that have emerged in the continent of Africa, and Nigeria to be more precise. Reason is in the fact that she has devoted a greater percentage of her life to writing fiction. It was then with surprise and mixed feelings that society received her first volume of poetry entitled *Heart Songs*, a fact well known to her for in her words in the preface, “it is a marvel that I have at last come up with a poetry collection, I who was said to be trapped in all cavernous cave of fiction...” Just as her readers were coming to terms with the new volume of poetry and were settling to devour the little anthology; make out as much meaning as they can in the various titles that replete the work, Akachi added a new volume of poetry entitled *Waiting for Dawn*, a collection one can unarguably say that it brought her vision and mission as a poet clearly and closer to the court of her readers. Its message was more urgent and expressive and the tone more satirical with such an optimistic ending about the new dawn that is fast enveloping us; a dawn which no one would wish not to be part of.

Akachi’s poetry may exist for the purpose of pleasure and entertainment, but on a deeper level, not many poems in the collections delight the readers, rather it awakened a response, a feeling in the deepest part of their hearts as they are invited to have a taste, encounter a sight and behold in a good painting and poetic expression what their country, their society has degenerated to. With eagle eyes, the poet x-rayed the society and as expected from a genuine artist sincere to her craft, she replete in the pages of her collection, injustice as she felt it; corruption in its high and low places, suffering in the height it has risen to; poverty as it affects the people presently, bad politics, tyranny in new guises and poise; exploitation, oppression, violence, brutal killing, discrimination, inequality, gross mismanagement, kidnapping, thuggery, lack of patriotism which like an

iroko tree has grown and towers over our heads, and like vultures it continues to devour and send to untimely grave, both the straying and careful chickens. Much is the pain and sadness in her heart that she writes in the preface to the second collection that:

This collection is a poetic response to the parlous condition in which we continually find ourselves in our country as well as the inequities of the so-called globalized world. It’s a poet’s attempt to exorcize the nightmares of terrors of our contemporary society by sublimating them in poetry. It is an attempt to sing of change which the world awaits with hope – a new dawn that will usher in peace. Living is synonymous with hoping. Indeed, it is also an attempt to explore creatively the significant events – including personal and interpersonal experience that impacted and continue to impact on us as human beings (p. 7).

This is her mission and vision as a poet. In her collections she launched into her writing with the same feeling of despair anger and bitterness which obviously forced her to write. She created memorable lines filled with disgusting images of decay, brutality, violence, stench and poverty, exploitation, oppression and dehumanization while our leaders pop up champagne and make merry of their newly acquired power and wealth irrespective of the general feeling of the masses. She x-rayed the insensitive nature of our leaders, who do not practice what they preach; a situation that has continued to militate against the peace and growth of our country as one people, one nation, thus, her poetry exists for social criticism, reawakening and reformation that must be done.

The Poet and Poor Leadership, Tyranny and Insensitiveness of Our Leaders

Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo’s collections of poem will always be remembered for their vociferous criticism and contribution as well as the quest to make our country a more befitting, society and productive environment. It has always been an issue however one might look at, it that a great percentage of the problems of the masses and the people of the country at large are products of; insincerity of purpose, insensitivity, exploitation, corruption, looting, bad politicking, brutal killing and all other denizens of bad leadership on the part of our leaders who cling onto power to amass the

wealth of the country and stash them away in their foreign accounts. They care less about the problems and desolate situation of the lower class only themselves and their tall ambitions and anyone who stands between them and this power must be brought down and buried in the sand of time. They wield power and guns, hidden beneath the facades of their glittering laughter and vain democratic gospels. It is in recognition of this fact that Akachi devoted her first poem in her first volume *Heart Songs* in praise of our leader whose wealth and powers are beyond measure. The poem entitled “Ram Syndrome” on a surface level looks like a praise poem in celebration of our leaders, but on a closer look, it a bitter satirical poem, a criticism on our leaders who kill and maim in their quest to actualize all their selfish and evil ambitions. The poem itself was dedicated to the victims of naked power who in their bid to protect and speak for the masses met their untimely death in the hands of these leaders. The poet borrowed her allusion from the oral tradition of the Igbo community which has a proverb that ‘whoever eats the genitals of a ram, owes elephantiasis of the scrotum a debt’. In that same vein, however, this proverb has been applied for the poet to achieve her mockery and satirical stance. The genitals eaten by these men were their activism and decision to stand for what is right. The penalty of course is death.

From the Ancients/wise words:
He who consumes/the testicles of a ram
Owes ibi a debt -/scrotum diseases,
Penis pilfering/prohibited
Penalty?/ ram albatross
Early symptom:/loss of favour
And patronage/the risk is all yours
To your peril/a scourge (p. 14).

Thus, the poet went on to recount the number of men who had met their death by this singular error, the error of speaking the truth and standing for what is right which in fairness is what is expected of every patriotic citizen. These men like Dele Giwa, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Bola Ige, Moshood Abiola, Kudirat Abiola, even Chuba Okadigbo, all to the poet were victims of naked power and brutality.

In another title in the same collection “Lootocracy” the poet calls to mind the looting and plundering perpetuated by our leaders which have continued to militate against the expected and desired economic, social and political growth of our nation. These politicians line up to loot and plunder the

national treasury till it breaks. The poet towards the end of the poem laments in a somber mood what seems like her helplessness and that of millions of people of the nation thus:

The fruits long have ripened/The harvest well
underway
In the orchard of lootocracy/ubiquitous parasites
Eyeing the bursting treasury/looting national
treasuries
For personal pleasures (p. 24).

In “Brave Stab” the poet mocks the intrigues and political hypocrisies perpetuated by our politicians who hold the bible in one hand and a gun in the other. According to the poet, these politicians profess love, oneness but give hatred and dichotomy in return. In the poem, the poet mocks their involvement with women as well as other unchecked excesses:

News in brief - /official news, of course
Observation confirmed/female presence
On the increase in the vicinity/of/
Government House ...

But news behind the scene reports thus:

News behind the scene - /unofficial news, of course
Some skeptics/regard it as rumour
Politicians womanize/Too much
Too many/women/around them ...
These men permanently/stand for erection
Rather than election (p. 4)

The poet thus wounded posed these heart-touching and important questions:

What time/do they have to
Steer the ship of state/before it stalls
Or sinks/they
Deport dubious lovers/import impressionable ones
If press sniffs fresh scandal / it is silenced
With treats/or shot-gun
The long/And
The short/of it is
Judge for yourself (p. 96).

The poet allows us the opportunity to make our final and personal statement on our leaders and their involvement not just with women but all other forms of social vices which breed and nurture disorder, disharmony, dichotomy, discord and disunity that have continued to divide and destroy the peace of the nation. In the title “Fallen Tyrant” the poet captured the death of a tyrant irrespective of his riches, powers and might which could not save him. His death, he likened to every other death and the poets wished for more death, the death of all tyrants in order to save the soul of the nation.

In *Waiting for Dawn* her newest collection, her mockery and criticism on our leaders became more pronounced; her tune became more urgent and her pessimism more glaring. In “Dark Days Are Here” the poet predicts more dark days to come with the leadership style of many of our selfish politicians:

I see a re-enactment/ of the terrors of those earlier days
meant to usher in our democracy
But instead wove a death dance ...
What reason have we/ for our inaction/
For our show of shame? ...
Take heed,
Dark days spray their boot
None can escape the smear (p. 21).

The poet foresees a period of evil and darkness more than what we today experience and is baffled by our silence and inaction in the face of tyranny and oppression. With this poem the poet hopes to appeal to our conscience and spirit for positive actions to save our humanity. The poet extended his poetic vision even beyond the shores of our country, to Africa at large as she captures the African dictators whose actions have continued to relegate their people. The poet called them Darfur in the title “Darfur” and speaks of them thus:

The Khartoum Jackals/cannibals masquerading as saviours
Predators perpetuating ripe orgies/ presiding over fountains
of black gold
In ‘richly poor’ region
Mark them, legislators of the soul
Wolves in a world gone away/you are in Darfur
Therefore dying is fine ... (p. 18).

The poet went on to reenact the deeds of blood and betrayal evident in the affairs of many Africa leaders but with a prophetic vision, she foresees the end of it all; a time of vengeance and justice looming around the corner:

Time is running out for traitors/who barter the souls
of their people, misappropriate abundant
resources/Dictators, trading in oil and blood,
in the wake of continuing conflict ...
Salvage Generalissimos. Bravo! Keep it up!
Let the carnival of death roll on!
Drink to your hearts' content, until your cups are
empty ...
Surely the time of reckoning will come
When all traitors will drown in their own blood (p.
18).

A striking situation noticed in the two collections, is the satirical tone in the former with little or no remedying and a more optimistic and revolutionary tone in the latter. In *Waiting for Dawn*, many of the poems foresee the end of political exploitation and oppression as the poet calls on all of us to unite for actions, be it revolution, if that is what will bring this reign of terror and leadership disharmony to an end. In “Action Time” the first poem in the collection *Waiting for Dawn* the poet questions our inactions in the face of tyranny, hardship, suffering and oppression and wonders thus:

When will we act/to tame the wild cats
Who spray our sweaty faces/with chameleon faeces
In a farce played in phases? (4)
... See, danger sallies forth
Will the porcupine
Not release its deadly needles?

This rhetorical question calls for our sober reflection, for if one does not wrestle with the people who pass through the pathway in his compound, such an intrusion will never stop. In “They Murder to Dismember” the poet went on recount the injustice of the oppressors as well as the quest for blood and brutality. She mocked their evil and dark intentions and their insatiable appetite to loot and intimidates the masses but this time, the people must stand for what is right as the poet called out:

You saw through it all/and kept silent in the face of lies

What will happen if you embrace truth
And utter it as it is: raw, pungent?
Ya kpotuba! Let the noise spilt the ear drum
Let it out run a gazelle/fly faster than an angry wind
Aga asi! Ka asikene! ... (p. 75).

In "Impeachment Fever" the revolutionary vision of the poet was made more manifest as she recounts how our leaders accuse and impeach themselves in that corridor of power, their "House of Horrors and Re-presentaThieves". They are nothing but 'bandits that kidnap virtue, awaiting a handsome ransom.' These men 'cry wolf when what we see is sheep' and agitate not for the nation but for their selfish political ambitions and desires. The poet lets out her clarion call thus:

You watchers, arise! /let your righteous anger gather strength
And catch fire like the blazing sun/spill into streets
Burst the seem of your imprisoned rage
Cry blood and brimstone/ let the earth shake
Ya kwobe!
Aha, ya kwobe!
Flush out the rotten elements in the House
With rocks dislodge the jokers

Who mortgage your destiny/and your children's tomorrow (p.48).

Indeed, that is the message, the urgent message the poet hopes to pass across, that it is not time to watch and weep, if it time to act and destroy. It is violent time, a time violence should be paid with violence. No stone ought to be left unturned, nothing is to be left undone; the political houses must be sanitized and all the selfish leaders dislodged, if we must witness the new dawn that is fast descending.

The Poet and Social Disillusionment/ Disenchantment

Akachi Adimora did not only attack politics and our political leaders, nor did she felt satisfied with writing just about poverty and suffering but a greater portion of her poems mock the activities of the people in the society with the belief that the products of our actions and inactions in what we reap today. It is the sum total of our activities as individuals in high and low places that have continued to ensure dichotomy, disorder, anarchy, evil and all other forms of inhumanity all around us. It is many of these social anomalies that she sings to correct:

In “Cultism” a title in *Heart Songs* she turned her attention to the activities on our campuses. Our students are fast turning into cultists while parents, lecturers and all do nothing. In her pidgin language she condemns thus:

School dem no wan go again/lecturers dey chop money for nothing
De youths no wan stay for classroom/if I be de president of this
country
I go prosecute every cultist and him papa
If him kill somebody, him papa go die ...
Yes, if bird dey fly, dey fly without perching
Na so hunter go dey shoot without aiming (p. 38)

In “Nudity” the poet was disillusioned by the craze in fashion and dressing sense of our youth in the guise of modernism and globalization. It is madness to the poet and the poet advises thus:

I wan make government arrest woman
Wey commot for house naked or half naked ...
If daughter dey drown, mama dey drown
Na who go save de and one de oder? (p. 40)

In “Mad Pursuit” the poet satirizes our youth and their made pursuit for vanities.

In “New Pension Scheme” the poet draws her attention to the plight of the pensioners, the retirees waiting for the reward of their lifetime labour as they walk on empty stomachs

In “Brainwashed” title in *Waiting for Dawn* the poet expressed her disgust with the new killer squad all in the name of religion and fair cause. She criticized the Boko Haram wishing they should leave her life alone. In “Riddles” the poet turns her attention on the sum total of our actions that bedevil the nation and depress the spirit of the nation. In form of a riddle, which the persona and the poet exchanged questions and answers, the poet draw our attention to certain activities that generate unnecessary tension in the country and how we too are partakers in the scene of disorder:

I am a parcel hidden in someone’s robe
What do you say I am?
You are the time bomb hugging the flesh of a suicide bomber
If I am a fly following a corpse to the grave
What do you say I am?

You are a sycophant cheering a tyrant to perdition
I am a battered fruit by the void side
What do you say I am?

You are a country abused by her people and their leaders (p.30).

The tone of the above poem seem to be the also the tone of the poem entitled "What You Made Me". The poet captures her helplessness, hunger, starvation, diseases, lack of patriotism, waning spirit, feeling of anger, sadness and rejection all as a result of what the society made her with our actions and inactions:

Do you see the bird/lying half-dead
Under the acacia tree?
It is me lying there/what you made me
With your violence ...
See the stray dog over there/body raw with scabies
That will not stop itching
That's me, you know
What I became/with your taunts, your scourge ...
I am the destitute by the park/stripped of honour
By your profound conspiracy ... (p. 81).

This poem seemed to be directed to our leaders but it not just our leaders but we too, in our day to day actions and activities. With several images of pain, pity and suffering, the poet was able to paint out how our activities hinder and militate against the welfare of our nation.

In "Highway Cymbals" she mocks the police and society who have reduced the image of the country to a thing of scorn and mockery:

This is a country of rascals/clothed in mutley garbs
Privileged dusky ensemble/Dark as their souls
Weird wearers mourning no one/Deadly players with fierce village
Aggressors without assailants ...

In 'Okigbo's Labyrinth' the poet points accusing fingers on our people who now beat war drum as a result of their conniving and unscrupulous activities. These are people who enjoyed the poems of Okigbo but learnt nothing from them. The civil war indeed has ended with its lesson and memory still fresh in our hearts and with a heavy heart the poet expresses how 'some spoilers beat again, the drums of war.' It would not have bothered the poet if these

war mongers will suffer the effects of the war alone, but just like the finger that contaminated oil it will affect the rest of us:

Oh, if only war mongers/would face its righteous wrath
It does not work like that we know/that wayward finger that thrusts
into oil
will ensure that the other fingers/do not escape the smear (p. 69).

The poet wondered where this groping in the dark and violence will lead us all. In “Sorrows of Motherhood” the poet expresses solemnly how mother Nigeria weeps for her children and all they have done and still doing to her beloved soil. The mother is now ashamed of the children:

I am ashamed/to be the mother
Of these veldt vipers/mambas and grassland adders
I suckled them all/with my overflowing sap ...
Let children of Omenikor rescue me/from untimely transition
And if this reprieve be denied/let me die the death of vapour (p. 39).

It is the sum total of our activities, actions and inactions that mother Nigeria weeps and wish we could assuage her tears and reorganize our mindset, attitudes over depend, hence and importance on materialism, vanities wealth and time. If we can reform our attitudes and better our actions, with oneness, love, unity, equality, justice, patriotism, brotherliness, ours will be a better society, our generation will witness a new dawn and mother Nigeria will rejoice in and pride in her offspring and would not die ‘the death of vapours’ like she threatened in the poem.

The Poet and Her Vision of Social Changes and Reformation – The New Dawn

Akachi unlike many poets of our time did not end her collection with the scene of anarchy, despair, desolation, wretchedness, violence, bloodshed and all other forms of vices which often leave the impression in the mind of readers that all is lost and that since one can no longer beat them or sanitize the system, one has to join them. The poet irrespective of all she has seen and passed through; all that has gone wrong was optimistic about a new dawn that is fast approaching; a dawn that is almost at our doorstep, the morning that will usher in a new light and take away all our sorrow with it. Akachi devoted the last section of her collection *Waiting for Dawn* in readiness, celebration and anticipation of the new dawn, which she is very optimistic that it is coming, almost with us. It does not matter to the poet how long and

deep our politicians have soiled their hands in bribery and corruption, killing, looting and plundering; it does not matter to her the poverty, desolation, suffering and agony of the thousands of destitute and down trodden among us; as well as all forms of social anomalies practiced by not one, but all of us which have prevented us from beholding our promise land; what matters to the poet is the joy and promises of a new dawn that is fast coming. In *Waiting for Dawn* she assumes a celebration mood as she urges us to wait that:

It does not matter how long/nightmares steal our sleep
It does not matter how far/we have been blown off course
Our ship adrift in the storm/Heading the wrong way
We will wait for dawn, tireless/knowing it will usher in the sun
it comes with vitalizing rays/ with powerful wings
Dawn stars us awake/from the slumber of the watchful (p. 84).

In 'Music of Hope' the happiness and merriment persisted. The poet calls us to dance with all sort of musical instruments and celebrate with the masquerade for the masquerade 'comes, riding the tail of dawn! It is time to dance and shove off our burdens as the dawn approaches. The poet wakes all 'who complain of time, that 'its morning on celebration day'.

In the 'New Day' the last poem in the collection, we too, could now feel the dawn closer, closer to our hearts. Just like the poet, we all sing the new song of hope. Just like the poet 'we sing a new song on a new day', welcoming Dawn to Earth's bed chamber' where a lover's embrace awaits her and where she will be thrust and thrust with a lover's stroke.

In the vision of the poet, our eyes too, see a new vision 'Afar off but nearer, nearer still! In the end we sing:

Lux fiat. Hurry for Dawn
Welcoming the end of dark times (p. 87).

This is a song of hope, a message of reformation, redemption and rehabilitation. The dawn is coming and it is all up to us to welcome it. This waiting for dawn and preparations could be likened to the changes going on in various sectors of human affairs as some men of patriotism are now out to make a change and navigate our boat towards the rising of the new sun, our new dawn.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen how Akachi Adimora used her poetry as a tool for social criticism. She criticized and mocked several facets of human lives but with the sole aim of correcting and reforming our society. Just like the Igbo proverb, the poet wishes in her poems that ‘the monkey’s hand in our soup pot’, should be removed before it turns to a ‘human’s hand’. In other words it is a situation that implies that we should remedy our ugly conditions and corrupt state of affairs before they degenerate and deteriorate to an uncontrollable level and all would be lost. This could only be done when we embrace her message; when our leaders will act aright, and salvage the poor masses and the downtrodden who look up to them for survival. This can only be fully realized when the wealth of the nation will be evenly distributed among the people and when our actions and inactions are all geared towards reformation and rehabilitation of our fallen walls and ugly images. With the new dawn in our mind, we shall nurture it and this poem with its urgent message can lead to a change of attitude, perception and outlook to life and together with zealous hearts and unwavering spirits, we shall bring forth a new dawn on earth and all the people shall rejoice. When this is done no matter what it will take us, history and posterity will remember our efforts and sacrifices and writers, poets and artists all can indulge in dalliance aware that their labours have yielded a rich and bountiful harvest, a harvest our generations yet unborn will feast on and will never go hungry again. This is possible and could be done if only we shall hearken to the voice of the poet, like the voice in the wilderness crying, praying and hoping.

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