

## An Analysis of Gender Based Violence in African Literature

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### Abstract

*Individuals in a society often witness, or experience specific societal practices as they grow up in their respective communities. As such, literary writers cannot be separated from their societal experiences. Many literary writers in Africa therefore utilize fiction as a mirror to reflect on the culture of their communities, and as a window through which other cultures can be viewed. Our aim in this paper is to demonstrate how Henry Ole Kuret uses fiction to explore gender based violence among the Maasai in Kenya through his text, Blossoms of the Savannah (2008). Kuret creates female characters that help the reader understand the factors that cause violence on women, especially in certain African societies where patriarchy was/is rampant. We argue that African literature is a conduit through which African culture can be appraised. Towards the end of the paper, we demonstrate that education for the girl child in Africa is one of the tools that Kuret proposes for challenging gender based violence in the contemporary society.*

**Key Words:** Maasai, Africa, Gender-based violence, literature, Women, Women liberation.

### 1. Introduction

Female circumcision ... was not only an honoured rite of passage ... but an important practice that tamed an otherwise wild gender. Like cattle that required to be dehorned, to reduce accidental injuries to each other, a certain measure of docility was also necessary to keep more than one wife in one homestead (Ole Supeyo – a male character in *Blossoms of the Savannah* [BoS]<sup>1</sup>, p.22).

The women held meetings all over the country searching for answers. After years of searching, one woman declared that she had located within herself, the source of that salacity that caused involuntary gravitation towards men when provoked. After debating for long, the Maa women finally said they had found the answer to their perplexity. And when the solution was tried it worked perfectly.... And it was from that resolution collectively made by women of Maathat gave birth to *enkemuratani* [circumciser]. And her *olmurunya* [circumcising blade] was shaped, sharpened and handed to her (BoS, p. 88)

The term gender-based violence is controversial because while some scholars see it as violence against women, recent definitions tend to connect it with all acts of violence rooted in some form of patriarchal ideology, and can thus be committed against both women and men. Gender-based violence is therefore “an umbrella term for any harm perpetrated against a person’s will and it could be physical, sexual, psychological, economic, or sociocultural”.<sup>2</sup> Violence is thus a means of control. This paper explores gender-based violence with reference to violation of women’s right – that is, acts that cause women pain and suffering. The paper examines the representation and evaluation of the Maasai culture in Kenya through literature.

<sup>1</sup>In this paper we use *Blossoms of the Savannah* and *BoS* alternately to refer to the text under discussion.

<sup>2</sup>[http://eycb.coe.int/gendermatters/chapter\\_2/1.html](http://eycb.coe.int/gendermatters/chapter_2/1.html)

It is an analysis of Henry Ole Kuret's text, *Blossoms of the Savannah* (2008) which helps us to understand how this culture causes women different kinds of suffering. Specifically, we examine the lives and experiences of some of the female characters in the text and how they are used by the writer as tropes to demonstrate the kind of gender based violence in this society. The role of men in perpetuating gender-based violence in the Maasai community is also examined. Towards the end of the paper, we argue that Kuret is a self-conscious modern writer who demonstrates that women who live in cultural backgrounds that cause them suffering shall be their own liberators. This is because although he represents the Maasai culture as having deep roots, he shows that modern education is a powerful tool that will help women liberate themselves from gender based violence in such societies.

The analysis done here relies on arguments by feminists critics like Schipper (1987), Ogundipe-Leslie (1987; 1994) and others. Mwangi's argument on postcolonial societies is also utilized. We specifically rely on Mwangi's argument in *African Writes Back to Self* (2009) where he posits that contemporary African literature should be read away from the notion of "writing back" to Europe. Instead, he suggests, African texts be read as being about self-perception; these texts are more preoccupied in writing back to themselves and other local texts to address emerging realities and to express the growing diversity of identities in Africa. For Mwangi "contemporary African novelists resort to self-reflexive devices to signify a state of being in postcolonial African societies rather than to retaliate against, parody, or negate western discourses" (4). Using Mwangi's suppositions, we argue that in *Blossoms of the Savannah*, Kuret does not just demonstrate the richness of Maasai culture, but he is writing back to this culture; cautioning its adherents about some of its negative aspects.

The two quotations at the beginning of this article partly reflect our main argument. The metaphor of dehorning in the first quotation, which refers to circumcision of women is both violent and embarrassing. The woman clitoris is seen as harmful to the men because it tends to give women more sexual power than men. Circumcision was therefore meant to render women less powerful in sexual matters. Kuret instructs the reader to look back and evaluate such cruel practices in societies where they are still evident. However, while the men in *Blossoms of the Savannah* prefer to marry only those women that are circumcised, we discover that it is women themselves who started the act of circumcision to help reduce their sexual urge, as seen in the second quotation above. Therefore we contend that while patriarchy and its accompanying practices like polygamy and preference of male children is a form of psychological violence on women, the female figure in the Maasai society is to blame for one of the most painful form of physical violence: Female Genital Mutilation (FGM).

Patriarchy is a system in which the male acts as the leading authority figure in a social organization. In a patriarchal society, fathers hold authority over women, children, and property. Patriarchy therefore implies male rule and privilege, and entails female subordination. Schipper (1987) argues that in any given cultural context male and female behaviour patterns are fixed by norms and anyone who tries to break the rules can meet with serious problems in a community in which the ruling group produces images and conceptions of the others to legitimize the status quo. Patriarchy ensures that it is the male who is in control and therefore in such societies women are expected to venture only in territories that men endorse, as we will see in the text under discussion.

*Blossoms of the Savannah* is a story of members of Ole Kaelo's family who undergo psychological suffering when he is retrenched and therefore forced to relocate from Nakuru town where he works, to the rural village of Maa. This relocation brings the reader face to face with the patriarchal and subordinating Nasila culture, which causes physical, social and psychological suffering on the characters. The most affected by this relocation are three female characters – Taiyo, Resian and their mother (also known as Mama Milanoi); they are relocating to unknown spaces, and Resian and Taiyo are only vaguely aware of the Maasai culture. Even when Mama Milanoi tries to be optimistic that life would be good in the new place (Nasila), there is some truth that she needs to reckon with: that her two daughters are *Intoiye Nemengalana*; girls who are not cut – a derogatory description of uncircumcised girls. The status of the two girls causes them a lot of suffering in the new environment. The girls are subsequently relocated twice, and in the process Taiyo gets forcefully circumcised, as it shall be clear later in this discussion. These movements are not only read as violent in themselves because the characters do not move willingly, but they also cause other forms of violence that become like mountains on the characters' backs (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994) which continuously suppresses their efforts to live happily. Ogundipe-Leslie identifies six mountains that she argues are on African women's backs.

Some of these mountains that we find relevant for our discussion, and which we refer to later, are “oppression from traditional structures” “man” and “the woman herself” (28). Ole Kaelo, who is more of a traditionalist than a modern man causes the three women a lot of psychological suffering. He is so stubborn and rooted in patriarchy that he does not listen to their opinions. Patriarchy has placed Ole Kaelo in a pedestal, where like a powerful king, he commands and orders around his wife and daughters as he wishes; he somehow holds their lives in his hands since he is not only the family breadwinner but also the only man in the house. The mother of the two girls seems to accept the fate of relocation and she also subordinates to the demands of Nasila culture by hoping that relocation would give her a better chance to marry off her daughters to rich men. Mama Milanoi’s outlook in this narrative cuts a picture of a traditional Maasai woman at crossroads; she has lived a modern life in Nakuru for 21 years, yet she is subdued by the cultural demands.

## **2. Aspectsof Culture and How They Cause Violence on Women**

Psychological violence in this essay refers to the act of suffering in one’s mind, which is read as gender based violence because women suffer psychologically for having to cope with demands from men. While the girl child is useful in the Nasila culture, her usefulness is only visible in so far as she can beget dowry for the father, and more importantly, she is born amongst boys. In this society, a woman was also not expected to give birth to female children only, and unlucky is the baby girl who is born when a father expects a boy! In *BoS*, Resian suffers psychologically because Ole Kaelodislikesher. She is born against her father’s hope that mama Milanoi’s pregnancy would bring forth a boy:

His two girls occupied separate parts of his heart. Taiyo, the eldest, was his pride. When she was born ... his heart was enthralled. She was the proof of his fatherhood. When his wife got pregnant the second time, he prayed for a healthy boy who would carry the Kaelo’s name to the next generation. Against his expectation, and to his utter disappointment, nature had given him another baby girl. From the time she was born, mute and helpless, he detested her. The very sight of her enraged him. Her arrival and her continued stay in her father’s home remained detested and unwelcome.... Even her physical appearance angered her father.... Resian’s body had blossomed early. Signs of early womanhood were evident. The earlier he disposed of her, he declared to himself angrily, the better (10).

It is clear from the text that in the Nasila tradition, a woman was not expected to live without getting married because firstly, she must beget children, and secondly she needed somebody to care for her and the children. Mama Milanoi explains that it was expected of her not to resist her marriage to Ole Kaelo and laments that she had “failed miserably by not giving him the sons he had so much looked forward to” (30). While we are not told why Mama Milanoi did not give birth to more children, it is clear that girls were not recognized as full children. The woman therefore depended on the man solely and giving birth to a boy child confirmed her usefulness in her family and the society at large. This demand on the woman is a form of psychological violence as she would not be at peace without having given birth to a boy. Cooper (1992) posits that in Africa, “the mothering and nurturing of children is glorified and reaffirmed as the primary defining characteristic of women” (77).Cooper adds that it however becomes a problem when the role of mothering is used to paralyze women and to restrict their potential to childbearing and nurturing. The situation presented in*Blossoms of the Savannah* is also visible in *Things Fall Apart*(1986) where Chinua Achebe tells a story of a masculine society in which women are accorded a very low status. Okonkwo’s wives are just among his minor achievements. These women are not even mentioned by name but in numbers until later in the novel. Women are in this text seen as subsidiary characters and their good deeds are not recognized. Even when Ezinma portrays a sense of brightness, Okonkwo always wished she were a boy (see page 44; 45; 122). This subsidiary level at which women are placed makes them silent throughout the text. For instance, when Okonkwo goes to exile, Ezinma has to follow her father’s orders of not accepting any suitor in Mbanta until they are back to Umuofia. This is in contrast to Okonkwo’s male child, Nwoye, who refuses to follow his father’s strict model of masculinity, and also rebels against the instructions to keep off the Whiteman’s religion. Culture had therefore conditioned Ezinma as a girl to take instructions without questions. According to Stratton (1994), Ezinma submits to Okonkwo’s definition of gender, “taking on the role of the tractable, serviceable, and selfless daughter” (30), while Ekwefi[the mother] seems to be content with her condition as battered woman, seen by her response to Okonkwo’s beatings, and his attempted murder.Stratton adds that in *Things Fall Apart*, women are silent in the face of their oppression under Igbo patriarchy.

Like Okonkwo's wives, Mama Milanoi accepts her place with a kind of helplessness which makes the reader pity her. This helplessness echoes Ogundipe-Leslie's supposition about the sixth mountain on women's back in Africa which is the woman herself. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that "women are shackled by their own negative self-image by continuous internalization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy" (36). This internalization, she shows, makes the woman to react with fear – adopting dependency complexes and attitudes to please where more self-assertive actions are needed. In *BoS*, Kuret unveils a culture that subordinates women, causing them psychological suffering. Therefore, *BoS* can be read as what Mwangi (2009) calls a "self-conscious, self-reflexive and self-referential" (5) text, which problematizes patriarchy, showing the disadvantages it causes African women

Physical violence in *Blossoms of the Savannahs* shown to result from failure to adhere to cultural beliefs and practices especially when the Kaelos arrive in Nasila. Mama Milanoi is constantly haunted by the fact that her daughters were in a new and seemingly unsafe environment and her fears are confirmed by the repeated physical violence that her daughters get from some rogue male figures. The new spaces they relocate to bring trauma in their lives, especially due to the fact that they were not circumcised:

... [T]hey were accosted by a tall heavysset young man with a thick dark beard and moustache.... On his face was a wide impudent grin.... On seeing the man approaching, a heavy knobkerry in his hand, Resian almost fainted.... "Are you the *intoiyenemengalana* from Nakuru?" He asked laughing contemptuously. "I want to have a good look at you and know what kind of stuff you are made of!" And he roughly grabbed Taiyo's hand.... Taiyo tried to wrestle her arm from the man's grip without success (18-19).

Although the man mentioned in the above quotation does no serious harm, he leaves after warning Taiyo and Resian that soon they would discover that there was no place for women of their ilk in the Maa society. Relocation to the Maa society therefore makes Resian and Taiyo foreigners in their motherland because all the girls of their age had been circumcised and unless they underwent the rite, they would never get peace. The two live in fear that their father would be forced by his clansmen to circumcise them; which he succumbs to when Oloisudori Lokinyaa comes knocking with his conditions to marry Resian as we will show later. Looking at the situation that women are facing in *BoS*, one can argue that Ole Kuret is challenging African women [read Maa women], to follow Ogundipe-Leslie's advice that women should look for their voices in their own spaces and resist practices and stereotypes that are a source of their subordination (1994).

The social organization in Nasila also shocks the Kaelo daughters. For example, visitors come to Kaelo's home without notice and demand to be fed, which we read as social violence against Taiyo and Resian who had not got used to such kind of life in Nakuru where they had grown. Patriarchy also ensures that men do very few chores around the home. The women are therefore presented as beasts of burden that cook while men sit. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) argues that in most African societies gender supremacy was taken for granted and "women's work was viewed as subordinate and unimportant with men wondering what makes them[women] tired at the end of the day" (34). It is such societal structures that anger Taiyo and Resian. The Maa men do not wish to abandon patriarchy because as Ogundipe-Leslie further observes, "male domination is advantageous" to men, and that is why she suggests that "man has to be thrown off a woman's back" (36).

Unfortunately, some women in this society seem to be helping men in maintaining their patriarchal position because it is them that perpetuate some of the practices that are demeaning to the female figure. For example, women flock to Ole Kaelo's homestead looking for co-wives, or wives for their sons, while the *enkamuratani* (the circumciser) visited to look for potential clients in Resian and Taiyo. We are told: "Confusion reigned supreme in the forlorn hearts of the two daughters of Ole Kaelo, immediately after the homecoming ceremony. Feelings of anger, panic, helplessness and hopelessness alternated stressfully in their minds" (55). The reader empathizes with them as they often cry under their blankets in the night. For example, Resian gets sleepless nights after the *enkemuratani* shows them the *olmurunya* – "the bladelike tool shaped like smoothing plane blade" which was used for circumcision, and demonstrated how she "went about her profession of transforming young girls into young women through the cut" (59):

Resian did not find it funny. When she thought of the barbaric operation, she felt scared and inched closer to Taiyo who lay there beside her. She thought of the aggressive young man who grinned impudently at them and kept reminding them that they were *intoiyenemengalana*. Would he one day drag them to *enkemuratani* and let her *olmurunya* transform them into decent women of Nasila? God forbid! (59)

The dilemma for the two girls however is that most people in the Maa society do not seem bothered by this subordination and suffering of women. Anybody who campaigned against female circumcision, like Minikene Nkoitoi, the educated young woman who has now been nicknamed the Emakererei, for having studied at Makerere University, and “the wasp”, for her campaign against FGM was therefore abhorred as she was seen as a “great threat to the Maa culture” (22). In her anthropological study of East African women and their struggle for economic independence, Obbo (1980) argues “it seems that women’s own attempts to cope with ... situations they find themselves in are regarded as a ‘problem’ by men, and a betrayal of traditions which are often confused with women’s roles” (143). Such notions that Obbo identifies, limit women’s ability and serve to silence them, making them invisible in circles that have been deemed “exclusive for men”. But Minikin BoS does not bow down to criticism from the traditionalists. She is a manager of a sheep ranch and it is here that she creates a home for the girls she rescues from circumcision. Although she is circumcised, Minik’s effort to save others from the painful ritual, presents her as pillar for young girls and a symbol for women liberation from the negative cultural demands and practices.

Another practice that leads to the suffering of the Kaelo daughters is polygamy. Many old men in Nasila, including Ole Kaelo’s brother are polygamous. Although women in this society accepted polygamy and co-wives were often at peace with one another, it becomes a problem when girls are forced to marry old men like the way Ole Kaelo wants to marry off Resian to Oloisudori Lokinyaa as hinted earlier. Oloisudori intimidates Ole Kaelo to give up Resian for marriage after loaning him money to start a business. It is clear that Oloisudori is a modern crooked businessman, who is a crafty thief, and an extortionist. But he in addition uses the Maa traditions of polygamy to his advantage, where he demands that Resian gets circumcised before she can become his wife, for “he did not trust *intoiyenemengalana* at his home” (113). The patriarchal character of Ole Kaelo shows its face when we learn that although he felt helpless at Oloisudori’s conditions, he found it easier to give out Resian for marriage since he had never loved her for being born a girl. He even gets physically violent when Resian refuses to accept the marriage. Resian’s proposed marriage to Oloisudori Lokinyaa traumatizes not just her and Taiyo, but also their mother, who as a woman squeezed under the patriarchal foot, seems to have no preferable choices for her daughter:

Mama Milanoi...turned in her bed.... She writhed and cried with pain. Her silent anguished cry burned deep in her heart and in her pit of her stomach like an inferno in the bowels of the earth. Yes, she was inconsolable. Was that what she set out to achieve in Nasila? She lamented bitterly. No, certainly not.... “Could Oloisudori be her son-in-law? God forbid! How could a man who was the age of her husband be her son-in-law? (114-115).

While culture seems to be changing in contemporary Africa, Kuret shows that it is only changing to the advantage of men. On their part, women continue to suffer because they are objects of admiration and vessels for satisfying men. Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1987) identifies the representation of the female character in African literature as “the figure of the ‘sweet mother’, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice” (6). This figure, Ogun-dipe-Leslie argues, is often conflated with mother Africa, with eternal and abstract beauty and inspiration. The figure of beauty, she reiterates, is usually related to the woman as the passionate and sensual lover, a view that makes women feminine archetypes and objects of sexual desire for men. Most often women are fixed by these stereotypes so that their attempts to transcend this position are often questioned. In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, it is not just Oloisudori who traumatizes Resian with marriage; the village men also torment and assault the two girls physically because allegedly, any man had a right to marry them, since they were just women. This object status of women leads to further physical violence seen in the near rape incidence where two men are dragging Taiyo and Resian into the bush before they are saved by a man named Olarinkoi, who has been staying at the Kaelo home helping them with keeping the compound clean:

... [T]hey were terribly shaken. They sobbed with rage and shame. The incidence left a feeling of invasion and degradation. Their dresses were soiled and torn and one of Resian’s breasts ached from the vicious squeeze by one of the vagabonds. Later that night as they lay on their bed each one of them was contemplative. Resian thought how hazardous it was to live in a society where men thought they had right to every woman’s body. The sooner she left Nasila; she thought angrily, the better it would be for her (145 - 146).

The fact that Olarinkoi saves the two girls from the above ordeal makes the reader view him positively at first. However, his gesture is rather on selfish grounds because we discover he has a different, even worse, plan for Resian. When Oloisudori Lokinyaa's demands force Resian to run away from home, she lands in the hands of Olarinkoi who hoodwinks her, and Resian believes him because of his previous "kind gesture". Resian travels with Olarinkoi to a faraway village, specifically because he promises to take her to Minikene Nkoitai, the *Emekereri*. Both the reader and Resian are however shocked when it is clear that the reason why Olarinkoi had camped at Ole Kaelo's home was not to offer a helping hand, but he was waiting for the right time to kidnap Resian, circumcise her, and then marry her. Olarinkoi is therefore a selfish patriarch who is rather violent, visible when he attempts to rape Resian. The reader sympathizes with Resian, and also gets fatigued with her as she undergoes a series of psychological and physical suffering, for she moves from the violent space in her father's house surrounded by a cruel culture, to an even worse environment with no food and eviler demands for a girl like her.

As mentioned earlier, women in this society seem to be their own enemies because they do not appear to realize that they are suffering as a group, and that they have the potential to stop this suffering. Even when young girls like Resian and Taiyo make effort to free themselves from cultural torture and disadvantage; it is women who let them down, especially the old women. Olarinkoi's mother for example, is presented as a dangerous witch who neither sympathizes nor identifies with Resian's suffering after her son's attempted rape. She instead rebukes Resian:

"So it is you who chewed my son's hand to near amputation?" the old woman asked in a low rambling and frightening voice. She sneered at Resian contemptuously and spat on the ground. "What were you guarding so tenaciously and valiantly when I am told you are not yet a woman? Are you not ashamed to be among the *intoiyenemengalana* at your age? *Ptu* ...that fool called Oloisudori does not deserve you. You belong to Olarinkoi, my son. As soon as we clip that erogenous salacity that destroys homes, you will become a respected woman... (232-233).

The derogatory words that the old woman uses are rather offensive, presenting the older women to be the reason why women in this society continue suffering the physical violence of circumcision; it is them that lure Taiyo to the circumcision den so that she could marry Oloisudori Lokinyaa after Resian is kidnapped by Olarinkoi. With Mama Milanoi's consent, the women trick Taiyo that they were taking her to Resian, only to later circumcise her:

It was dark when they got to Esoit village. Nobody attended to her or even spoke about Resian who was the reason for their travel to the village.... She had just dozed off at dawn when suddenly a pandemonium broke loose at the entrance of the small hut. Many women struggled to enter amidst excited chants, arguments and banter. In no time she was dragged out, despite her fierce resistance. Once outside, about twenty litres of very cold water were emptied over her head. She shivered and tried to clear water from her eyes and ears, but strong hands held her and wrestled her to the ground. In the dim light of dawn, she saw the *enkemuratani* who she had once seen in their house at Nasila. She screamed and screamed, but nobody came to rescue her. Then she fainted (278).

The voice of women in the Maa society therefore seems to be swallowed in a bottomless abyss; they act to please men and therefore cooperate in torturing their own bodies, minds and personality. Ole Kaelo gives out Taiyo to substitute Resian and instructs that she must be circumcised but Mama Milanoi could do very little to save her daughter from the ordeal since she lived in fear of her husband, just like her daughters.

### **3. Where Will Salvation For Women In Africa Come From?**

*Blossoms of the Savannah* represents what Mwangi (2009) calls an "art of positive self-affirmation that is also not blind to internal malaise within African societies" (2). In this text, the writer instructs women to work towards freeing themselves from gender based violence. The character of Minik, Resian, Taiyo and Nabaru are used to suggest ways in which women can forge routes to freedom from societal subordination and suffering. Nabaru is an old woman hired by Olarinkoi's mother to take care of Resian before she is circumcised. Although she is from the old school of the Maa tradition, Nabaru assists Resian to safely get to the ranch managed by Minikene Nkoitai before Olarinkoi's mother circumcises her, where she reconnects with her sister, Taiyo. Although it is unfortunate that Taiyo has already been circumcised, the positive point is that Minik organizes her rescue from the remote hut where she had been confined to heal before she was moved to Oloisudori's home.

The two girls later achieve their dream of going to the university. Therefore, while it is men who force women to carry out female circumcision by “insisting that they can only marry a girl if she is circumcised” (282-283), the power of women’s liberation from such violence lies in women’s hands and they must gang up to save themselves, for according to Nabaru:

...they [women] were the perpetrators of the obnoxious and repugnant tradition of female circumcision and its perpetuation.... [N]o man had taken up the *olmurunya* to circumcise a girl. Theenkemuratanihad always been a woman. What would happen if theenkemuratanithrew away the *olmurunya* and refused to wield it again? (282)

Nabaru’s point is supported by Minik who argues that “... culture was supposed to be dynamic and it ought to shed off aspects that had outlived their usefulness” (268). Therefore, rather than cooperating with men to harm themselves, women in Africa must stand strong against patriarchy, which causes them suffering. Resian is presented as an open – minded young woman and she often wonders whether it was a curse to be born a woman in the society. We argue that Resian, Taiyo and Minik are prototypes of the modern woman who must fight to undo and prevent the damage the women of the past have done. The figure of Nabaru, who has more of traditional background than modernity however demonstrates how both the old and the young women must cooperate to liberate themselves from gender based violence. One can therefore conclude that African literature is a powerful channel and tool to project the suffering of women in traditional African societies, and it can also be used to suggest remedies for this suffering. In *Blossoms of the Savannah*, Kuret shows that education for girls is the perfect tool for complete emancipation. The learned modern woman like Minik is therefore the blossom of the savannah; it is she that will help in making the female figure in the wild African savannah, free herself from bruises and hitches caused by the dry grass.

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