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Ecofeminism: Reading Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

JUBINAROSA. S.S
PhD Research Scholar
Department of Tribal Studies
School for the Study of Culture
Central University of Jharkhand, India

Abstract

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as myriad forms of feminist and environmental theories and activisms intersected. The term was introduced by Francoise d' Eaubonne in her book Le Feminisme ou la Mort [Feminism or Death] published in 1974. Some theorists, such as Ynestra King, name it as a third wave of feminism, while others place it in the general category of deep ecology. Ecofeminism serves as an environmental critique of feminism and a feminist critique of environmentalism. Rosemary Radford, Ruether, Ivone Gebara, Vandana Shiva, Susan Griffin, Alice Walker, Sallie McFague, Luisah Teish, Sun Ai Lee- Park, Paula Gunn Allen, Greta Gaard, Patrick Murphy, Karen Warren and Andy Smith are among the voices speaking from ecofeminist viewpoints. It is possible for the readers to make an ecofeminist reading on Thomas Hardy, because of his depictions of society as a system of power relationships that tend to create a position of the human before the nature and the male before the female. Hardy usually narrates his tragic fiction focusing upon the depictions of the destruction of nature and the subjugation of women by a male-dominated society and its tyrannical moral codes. Because of this thematic representation Hardy's major novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* lends to an ecofeminist reading. The current novel illustrates different perspectives in Hardy's work in which applicable to both contemporary environmental studies, feminist schools of criticism and also makes his fiction the perfect point of time for the reading of ecofeminism.

Keywords: ecofeminism, patriarchy, oppression, deep ecology

Ecofeminism asserts that all forms of oppression are connected and that structures of oppression can be addressed in their totality. Oppression of the natural world and of women by patriarchal power structures can be examined together. This kind of socially constructed forms of oppression comes out of the power structures of patriarchal systems. In one of the first ecofeminist books, *New Woman/ New Earth*, Ruether states:

> Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the woman's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping

> of the basic socio-economic relations and the underlying values of this [modern industrial] society. (204)

Ruether makes clear the most important principle of ecofeminism: earth and the non-human things are experiencing oppression along with the women, because of the tyrannical attitudes of patriarchy. Ecofeminism claims that patriarchal structures justify their dominance through categorical or dualistic hierarchies: heaven/ earth, mind/ body, male/ female, human/ animal, culture/ nature, white/ nonwhite. Oppressive systems established these kinds of binary assumptions. As a justice advocate for the entire web of life, ecofeminism resists dividing culture into these dualistic arenas. In her *Introduction to Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature* editor Warren asserts:

> What makes ecofeminism distinct is its insistence that nonhuman nature and naturism (i.e. the unjustified domination of nature) are feminist issues. Ecofeminist philosophy extends familiar feminist critiques social isms of domination to nature. (4)

Throughout the 1970s, few ecofeminists in academic settings designed themselves as such, though several theorists engaged in similar theoretical proposals which link feminist and environmental ideas. Early publications that analyze the woman/nature connection in light of the environmental crisis include Ruether's *New Woman/ New Earth* (1975), Mary Daly's *Gyn/ Ecology* (1978), Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* (1980)

Some of the earliest articulations of ecofeminism analyzed the patriarchal concerns in religious and philosophical systems of the European and Mediterranean world. Scholars like Anne Primavesi, Carol Christ, Merchant, Daly and Charlene Spretnak examined cultural and religious systems from such areas as ancient Mesopotamia and Greece, as well as religious systems like Judaism and Christianity. They proposed that patriarchal cultural structures revolved around layers of symbol systems that justified domination. For example, they interpret the creation stories in the book of Genesis, foundational for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as demonizing both woman (Eve) and animal (the snake).

Several conferences focusing on ecofeminism were organized: "Women and Life on Earth: Ecofeminism in the Eighties" (1980), "Ecofeminist Perspectives: Culture, Nature, Theory" (1987), a group at the "National Women's Studies Association"(1989). These efforts, along with other attempts to create sustainable organizations such as the "Feminist Peace Institute and Woman Earth", led to the publication of several foundational anthologies like *Reclaim the Earth: Women Speak out for Life on Earth*, edited by Stephanie Leland and Leonie Caldecott; *Healing the Wounds*: *The Promise of Ecofeminism*, edited by Judith Plant (1989); and *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* edited by Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (1990). All three volumes were edited by Euro-American ecofeminists but the editors included authors from various cultures. Petra Kelley, in her foreword to *Healing the Wounds*, proclaims a "global ecological sisterhood" and calls on the women of the Chipko Movement (India), the Greenham Common (England), the Krim Region and the Western Shoshone Indian Nation to "link arms" as global sisters. Still these anthologies, while influential, were criticized for essentializing the woman/ nature connection and for

over-romanticizing or over-simplifying women in non-western cultures. Vandana Shiva, a physicist and environmental researcher/ activist in India, published *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival in India* (1998), which reflects the increasingly global nature of Ecofeminism during the 1980s. Shiva connects "the death of the feminine principle" with "maldevelopment", a term she uses to describe the introduction of western, intensive agriculture to the "third world". In her essay "Development, Ecology and Women", Shiva makes relationship clearly:

> Maldevelopment militates against this equality in diversity and superimposes the ideologically constructed category of western technological man as a uniform measure of the worth of classes, cultures and genders. Diversity, unity and harmony in diversity, become epistemologically unattainable in the context of maldevelopment, which then becomes synonymous with women's underdevelopment (increasing sexist domination) and nature's depletion (deepening ecological crises). (*Healing the Wounds* 83)

According to most ecofeminist theorists, society's further positive advancement and mankind's journey towards both human and environmental equality is hampered by the inequality faced by women living in a male dominated society and the devastation visited upon nature by humans, along with those features of patriarchy that work to protect the existence of such inequalities:

> The emerging discourse of ecofeminism attempts to take up the slack left by those who focus on various symptoms rather than the course of expression. In doing this, an often heterogeneous group of theorists had begun analyzing the connections between woman and nature and offering alternative conceptions of how we should live in the world. Whether theoretical, practical or spiritual ecofeminists of whatever variety (and there are many) are united in believing that it is immediately important that we each change our own perspectives and those of society form death-oriented to life-oriented from a linear, fragmented and detached mindset to a more direct, holistic appreciation of subjective knowing. (*Ecofeminism,* Gruen 60)

One must offer a context for ecofeminist literary theory an individualized definition of patriarchy, while identifying relevant features of patriarchal dominance and patriarchal society, as a whole. In the case of an ecofeminist reading of Thomas Hardy, patriarchy is a form of social inequality that oppressively assigns greater value to any being, object or concept considered male than that which is assigned to non-male counterparts; additionally, patriarchal society selfishly places the interests of humans above those of all other parts of nature. These two main hallmarks of male domination in society make their presence in patriarchy's definition especially suited to Hardy's thematic portrayals of the struggles between rural and urban societies, the conflicts between agricultural and industrial systems of commerce and patriarchy's clash with efforts seeking to end oppression of women and destruction of nature in his tragic fiction.

The surface reading of Thomas Hardy's novels, based on the real-life of counties like Devon, Dorset, Somerset, Wiltshire, Berkshire and Hampshire invites readers to revel in the silly dilemmas of the villagers, farmers and labourers that populate the pastoral world with

delectable dialects. Even when Hardy's vision is deeply tragic, he maintains an interest in a colourful and sometimes even comic cast of rustic people. The closer reading of Hardy, however challenges the readers to chart the changing times of agricultural labour in middle to late nineteenth century Britain.

Hardy was born around mid nineteenth century in Higher Bockhampton in Dorset, a rural region of South Western England that was to become the focus of his fiction. Being a child of a Builder Hardy was apprenticed at the age of sixteen to John Hicks, an architect who lived in the city of Dorchester. The location would serve as the model for Hardy's fictional Casterbridge. Although he built a reputation as a successful novelist, Hardy considered himself first and foremost a poet. To him, novels were primarily a means of earning a living. Like many of his contemporaries he first published his novels in periodic installments like conventions of serializations. To ensure that readers would buy a serialized novel, writers often structured each explained the convoluted, often incredible plots of many such Victorian novels. The general notion which aims at a reading that Hardy is a Victorian must need a new mode of rethinking. He can't simply be categorized as a modernist in the stream of writers like Virginia Woolf or D. H. Lawrence, who were determined to break the conventions of nineteenth century literature and build a new kind of novels.

Hardy lived and wrote in a time of difficult social change, When England was making its slow and painful transition from an old- fashioned, agricultural nation to a modern, industrial one. England's economic system underwent a jarring progression of changes during the country's most recent industrial revolution, a period beginning during the second half of the eighteenth century and continuing through out the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hardy was born in the lonely and silent hamlet of Higher Bockhampton, Dorsetshire, situated a few miles away from the town of Dorchester. This town was situated within walking distance of a small working community consisting largely of agricultural people. The surroundings of the village of Hardy were certainly not happy and it would be misrepresentation of the environment of Hardy's childhood if one recreates it in idyllic terms. The working class people lived in the most abject condition of which Hardy must have had the first-hand knowledge and which went a long way in determining the sort of thinking that is revealed in his major novels. In the novel *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy presents a village love-story that exhibits his deep knowledge of rustic life and speech. The publication of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, which followed the popularity of *Under the Greenwood Tree* established Hardy as novelist of growing reputation. However, Hardy made it up in his *The Return of the Native* in which once again he returned to his coveted rural scene. One of Hardy's remarkable novels *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is set in Dorchester where Casterbridge is the fictional name provided by his versatility. But a greater sensation was created by the publication of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. By this time Hardy was generally recognized, at home and abroad, as one of England's leading novelists. *Jude the Obscure* was his last novel, which like *Tess* was subjected to mixed reactions.

He always keeps the spirit of Wessex alive before the reader's mind. He depicts the pasture valleys, the high downs, the long white roads, the wooded hills, a dreamy cluster of little houses– the villages, the deep meadows, fields full of sheep or cows, the clear rivers, green down

lands and dark heaths. Hardy presented the towns, villages, rivers, hills and valleys of his chosen district in a thinly veiled nomenclature, which any native of the place can identify with exactness. Thus his Casterbridge is Dorchester; Budmouth is Weymouth; his King's Bere has been transformed to Bere Regis and Wintoncester as Winchester.

Being a worshipper of nature, Hardy gives a significant role to nature. There is no book of Hardy that does not abound in nature pictures, some delicately sketched, some composed of broad masses of colour, but all carefully observed by an extremely skilful artist. Hardy shows in places a wonderful, even uncanny knowledge of the signs and symptoms of the above referred entity.

Ecofeminism, essentially a form of social theory which combining feminist beliefs with environmental ideals- most often aligns women and nature due to their shared oppression at the hands of patriarchy. England's change from an agrarian based society to a nearly urbanized social system must not be overlooked by ecofeminist theorists. The impacts of both industrialization and urbanization upon English society embody the most basic theories at the very heart of ecofeminism. Especially the effects of urbanization upon woman, nature and the social minority groups comprised of rural dwelling, agriculturally employed people are significant. Among the Victorian authors and their writings, Hardy's body of work and his attitude is distinctive.

Considering Ecofeminism as a form of literary criticism, it is more valuable. Because it cites the outdated, oppressive attitudes and behavours of the patriarchal society causes damaging to both women and nature. Ecofeminist literary criticism combines principles from feminist schools of thought with theories emerging from Ecocriticim, also known as environmental criticism in order to overcome patriarchal dominance in society. In the case of an Ecofeminist reading of Hardy, patriarchy is a form of social inequality that oppressively gives greater value to any being or object that considers male than that of a non male counterpart. More over patriarchal society selfishly places the interest of human above the other parts of nature. Both oppression of women and destruction of nature can be seen in Hardy's novels. Hardy's major works of tragic fiction will certainly reveal his concerns regarding the division between rural and urban life styles, the unfair Victorian morality, and ultimately devastation which originates from patriarchal society's subjective rules of conduct. Hardy's fiction depicts the human suffering and tragedy as a result of patriarchal society's biased illogical social norms.

In the *Introduction to Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interprentation, Pedagogy* editors Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy, both well-known critics addressing the application of ecofeminist theory to literature, define ecofeminism by its goals and practices:

> Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggle of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the "maldevelopment" and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism. They are waged for environmental balance hierarchal and multifocal socities, the continuance of indigenous cultures, and economic values and programs based on subsistence and sustainability. (2)

Hardy's major tragic novels reveal an outstanding level of harmony between the subject matter and prevailing attitudes of his fiction and many of ecofeminist theory's principles. Ecofeminism relates the oppression of women to the destruction of nature by identifying patriarchal society as the root cause of both problems. Women and nature are often injured by patriarchal dominance in Hardy's fiction. And it can be observed that a sort of unavoidable association is formed between the natural world and its female inhabitants in Hardy's novels. This powerful association creates considerable textual support for the very basic principles of ecofeminism which asserts any attempt to analyze the effects of patriarchal social control focusing on female oppression as well as environmental destruction. Patrick Murphy's comment on this case is noteworthy:

> The specifics that both environmentalism and feminism separately oppose stem from the same source; the patriarchal construction of modern western civilization. Thus, to be a feminist one must also be an ecologist, because the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates sexual metaphors of male domination of nature, one can not effectively challenge the world view that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere, in which human beings participate or perish. (Murphy 48)

Obviously one can analyze that Hardy's body of work illustrates the interconnection of women and nature, but among the most powerful examples are Hardy's characterizations and his narration of the main character's life experiences in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. In the *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*, editor Norman Page notes:

> For Hardy the relationship between humanity and nature is always close, at least for the characters who are presented sympathetically. It is only morally suspect outsiders like Sergeant Troy and Alec d'Urberville who seem indifferent to the natural world and untouched by it. (60)

In addition, Hardy depicts nature as sympathetic to Tess's plight and as a result in reader's mind women and nature become linked each other. Also, Hardy's female characters have the same significance as their male counterparts, and the nature also portrayed as an actual character rather than a mere background. Already some critics have identified and addressed Hardy's connection to nature, so an ecofeminist reading of his work would be negligent to ignore these aspects of Hardy's character and their influence upon his work. This connection to nature certainly informs Hardy's frequent treatment of nature as a vital character rather than merely a background atmosphere to the actions of human characters. Virginia Woolf, a notable naturalist and an influential literary critic of her time notes in her essay, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy" the way in which Hardy's powerful personal relationship with nature and his ability to write fiction in a poetic way:

> He already proves himself a minute and skilled observer of nature; the rain, he knew, falls differently as it falls upon roots or arable land; he knows that the wind sounds differently as it passes through the branches of different trees. But he is

> aware in a larger sense of Nature as a force; he feels in it a spirit that can sympathize or mock or remain the indifferent spectator of human fortunes.
>
> (267)

In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy does much more things to liberate many aspects of England's rural culture from destruction by time and social change. He also portrays one young woman's negative experiences within this system, a move that reveals much of the gender inequality present in English culture at her time. Tess' character lives the life of an individual who is struggled both by patriarchal society's inflexibility and her own highly individualized experiences and actions in many ways. However, Tess' character may also provide great insight into the much broader plight of women in general, especially living in rural areas at the time. The moral censure Tess experiences when she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child out of wedlock would have been very common for any woman in her situation during the time in England, but her experiences are amplified slightly, as if their use of this narrative technique to construct tragic fiction Hardy wished to demonstrate the worst possible effects of Victorian society's gender discrimination in moral standards and the treatment of individuals might have.

These are the most significant events in the novel. Hardy presents complex pictures of both the importance of social class and the relationship existing between man and woman in nineteenth century England. One of the recurrent themes of the novel is the way in which men can dominate women, exerting a power over them linked primarily to their maleness. Sometimes this command is purposeful, in the man's full knowledge of his exploitation, as when Alec acknowledges how bad he is for seducing Tess for his own momentary pleasure. Alec's act of abuse, the most life-altering event that Tess experiences in the novel is clearly the most serious instance of male domination over a female. But there are other blatant examples of women's passivity towards dominant men. When, after Angel reveals that he prefers Tess, Tess's friend Retty attempts suicide and her friend Marion becomes an alcoholic who makes their earlier school girl- type crushes on Angel seem disturbing. This devotion is not merely fanciful love, but unhealthy obsession. These girls appear utterly dominated by a desire for a man who is told explicitly, does not even realize that they are interested in him. This sort of unconscious male domination of women is perhaps even more unsetting than Alec's outward and self-conscious cruelty.

Even Angel's love for Tess as pure and gentle as it seems, dominates her in an unhealthy way. Angel substitutes an idealized picture Tess' country's purity for the real life of woman that he continuously refuses to get to know. When Angel calls Tess' names like "Daughter of Nature" and "Artemis", we feel that he may be denying her true self in favour of a mental image that he prefers. Thus, her identity and experiences are suppressed, albeit unknowingly. This pattern of male domination is finally reversed with Tess' murder of Alec, in which, for the first time in the novel, a woman takes active steps against a man. Of course this act only leads to even greater suppression of a woman by man, when the crowd of male police officers arrests Tess at Stonehenge. Nevertheless for just a moment the accepted pattern of submissive women bowing to dominant men is interrupted and Tess' act seems heroic.

Specific examples of Hardy's fiction which connect with ecofeminist critical perspectives abound in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as a main female character; Tess Durbeyfield is repeatedly

victimized by various men in her life. In the novel, the down-trodden Tess eventually loses her life as a direct result of the violent actions she takes to free herself from the oppression she suffers from patriarchal dominance in the Victorian society. Tess' death stands out to the ecofeminist reader because the tragic event illustrates both the destruction of nature and the suppression of one young woman's life and freedom to a critical point at which she must cause destruction and subject herself to nearly certain death in order to escape. An ecofeminist perspective is also likely to recognize the way in which Hardy's description of the natural world, so often reflects the human tragedies found in his work and Tess' story provides an apt example of this paradigm. When Tess is raped and becomes pregnant as a young woman, a situation for which she is condemned by patriarchal society's inflexible values while her rapist goes on with his life in the same state as it was before he raped her, nature itself reflects the darkness and confusion of this moment in her life. For example as Tess suffers through the social exclusion and resulting sense of shame that accompany her pregnancy, she takes frequent walks after dark: "Walking among the sleeping birds in the hedge, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren or standing under a peasant laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of guilt intruding into the haunts of innocence" (*Tess* 115). Here from the walk Tess often feels that nature itself is judging and reprimanding her. Hardy's thoughts and the nature that surrounds her, actually cements the author's tendency to link women to nature because his next statement indicates clearly that Tess is not truly an entity divided from nature in any way: "But all the while she was making a distinction where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism she was quite in accord. She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law know to the environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly" (*Tess* 115). Hardy declares that Tess has merely broken a rule invented by humans, one that does not apply to the natural world in any real way, and his assertion of unity between mankind and nature implies that patriarchal society's moral code destructs not only Tess but also nature itself. It is absolutely wrong and damaging.

Hardy's portrayal of overworked animals and other such creatures of the natural world always changed from its original form for the sake of human convenience also support an ecofeminist reading. Each of these depictions is a clear example of nature being destroyed by patriarchal society, and when a domesticated animal dies or natural processes fail due to environmental alterations made for human benefit. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* contains several powerful examples of such victims of patriarchal society's ongoing attempts to improve the situation of humans through the manipulation of the nature, but one of the most powerful instances is the death of the Durbeyfield family's horse: " Prince an overworked beast of burden, is killed in an accident with a speeding mail cart while Tess and her brother, both mere children, drowsily attempt to assure their family's financial survival by driving bee hives to market before dawn" (*Tess* 55). Here Tess is forced to perform the roles of driver and instigator in the horse's death create in her an unwilling accomplice, and her actions are inherently destructive to nature because they commodity the beehives and bees and alter the insects' existence in a negative manner to satisfy mankind's selfish purposes. Tess' tragically witnessed the accident due to both her father's irresponsible drunkenness the previous evening and the generally oppressed states of nature and women in patriarchal society. Tess is bound by the patriarchal conventions of duty

and obedience to her father, so she is also oppressed into assisting in the destruction of nature through her involuntary contribution to the horse's death.

Male dominated society exerts pressure on Tess to carry out the destruction of nature when she carry the beehives from village to market and takes part in the accident that kills Prince, and her situation in fact connects perfectly with Greta Gaard's assertion that men are encouraged by society to focus on their rights, while women are bound to responsibilities. Ecofeminist theory can link the mistreatment of Tess as well as the destruction and misuse of nature at the hands of patriarchy. The relationship between women and nature can be analyzed by identifying patriarchal dominance as the root cause of both problems, as Gaard states:

> Drawing on the insights of ecology, feminism and socialism, ecofeminism's basic premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women, (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature. (Gaard, *Ecofeminism*1)

Hardy's sense of loss and the tragic pain Tess feels at her own helplessness and the loss of a tool vital to her family's survival stand out in the precise, evocative words Hardy chooses to present the horse's gory death: "The pointed shaft of the cart had entered the breast of the unhappy Prince like a sword, and from the wound his life's blood was spouting in a stream, and falling with a hiss into the road ... Prince lay alongside still and stark, his eyes half open, the hole in his chest looking scarcely large enough to have let out all that had animated him" (*Tess* 55).

Hardy's well-documented love of animals has been noted by many aspects and this aspect of Hardy's character appeals to many ecocritics and ecofeminist critics alike: "Hardy's love of concern for and affinity with animals permeate his fiction ... Farm animals, in particular, abound in his novels. They are invariably treated sympathetically and frequently anthropomorphically" (Page 8).

Hunting would have been widely encouraged by society during the Victorian era and despite the obvious destruction of nature and the brutally represented by the act of killing animals for food or sport, patriarchal society continued to advocate hunting as a noble pastime for men, especially those from the upper socioeconomic classes. Disparity is manifest in the difference between Tess' perspective and place in society as a working class female and the social positions of the men who have so brutally wounded the birds and they kill them, and another equally cruel result of the gunfire's catastrophic effects. The agony of Tess who happened to meet the hunters is described briefly in the novel. Hunters being a brutal form of dominating patriarchy are something mysterious and dangerous in this context. All organisms seen in nature are afraid of man's invasion to their ecological system:

> She had occasionally caught glimpses of these men in girlhood, looking over hedges, or peering through bushes, and pointing their guns, strangely accoutred, a blood thirsty light in their eyes. She had been told that, rough and brutal as they seemed just them, they were not like this all year round, but were, in fact, quite

> civil persons during certain weeks of autumn and winter, when, like the inhabitance of the Malay Peninsula, they ran amuck, and made it their purpose to destroy life- in this case harmless feathered creatures, brought into being by artificial means solely to gratify these prosperities- at once so unmannerly and so unchivalrous towards their weaker fellows in Nature's teeming family. (*Tess* 318)

Thus it reveals a sense of unity in nature, viewing the environment and its inhabitance as a single, complex system made up of many life forms, including humans. Hardy spoke out against the past times resulting in injury or destruction for any portion of the natural environment, asserting that such activities were purely unnecessary, barbaric and destructive.

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