



Popular Fiction a New Vista in Literature: Critical Outlook on women Characters in Sidney Sheldon Novels

Dr. Kavitha k

Government First Grade College Devanahalli (Rural) Bangalore-562110

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of women characters in Sidney Sheldon novels. It provides a practical outlook of the world focused on women's power, position and profession. Women protagonist in his novels sanctions the conceptual strategies of change and developments in the socio-political contemporary situation. Sheldon's women characters are seen as purveyors of modernity. Women characters are visualized as 'success patterns' in the contemporary situation of women's freedom and power. Women characters in his novels explicitly make a quest for 'self-identity' in a male dominated world. The difficulties they encounter by their identity construction takes up a contextual analysis and interpretations of Feminism. The critical intercession approaches feminist's theories of self, power, consciousness, individualism, and identity foregrounding the issues of women's equality in the public and the political spheres. Women's success is seen as a positive peace universally tied to human needs irrespective of sexual divisions saying "mind has no sex".

INTRODUCTION

*"A piece of writing may start off life as history or philosophy and then come to be ranked as literature; or it may start off as literature and then come to be valued for its archaeological significance. Some texts are born literary, some achieve literariness, and some have literariness thrust upon them. Breeding in this respect may count for a good deal more than a birth"*¹

Popular literature indicates certain kind of perplexing trends apparently, focusing on the world at random, pertaining to the shifts and changes in cultural values. Integrating cultural studies as an 'inclusion' in academics, fiction has been confined to the dichotomy of "*disciplinary identification*."² This has been partly recognized in literary theory. "*Literature, defined "highly valued writing"*",³ has not been a stable entity

for popular literature and therefore the value-judgments on it are notoriously variable. There are many ways to understand civilization in a changing scenario. A profound path is through investigating the novels by its perspectives. Sheldon novels, however, confined being serious literature, but women characters in his novels energize critical analysis. ***“Times change though argued values do not change,”***⁴ it is argued, but, then where are the values to be found? Unless human beings follow the values how can the ongoing process of literature embody them? As said literature is the mirror of the society or civilization. Obviously, literature has to follow the human conditions, for human situations are the essential products of literature.

Lionel Trilling observed that modern literature embodies a fierce doctrine of damnation offering legitimized of the subversive and a strange message of ambivalence towards the life of civilization because, material progress has led man towards rivalry, hatred, competition, destruction and domination. In such a juncture, literature may produce to the related aspects being expressive by the inherited ethics of the past. Hence, Popular fiction also effectively records contemporary conditions related to the human condition. Every novelist, irrespective of divisions as highbrow, middle brow and lowbrow, has truly made their explorations of their contemporary situation. For instance, writers like Henry James, Tolstoy, Stephen King, are gifted personalities in the world of literature. Their logic signifies that any piece of writing has its own values, based on reasons contemplated in it. Terry Eagleton argues that there is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it, and he arguably questions as how can literature be judged as lowbrow? ***‘Value’ is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes.***⁵

In terms of such analysis, the growth of academic criticism in the late twentieth century is seen that popular fiction also plays an important role as a new vista in Literature. Morris Dickstein in ‘Twentieth Century Literary Criticism’ recommends Russell Nye’s views on dime novels, popular music, film and television serials. Emphasizing the validity of some popular literature like *The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America* (1970) which was rejected by academic criticism as lowbrow, he claimed that ***“the content was the mirror image which could serve as a literary history”***⁶. Dickstein further argues that, such popular arts are the ‘missing links’ in the official literary canon and states; ***“The artificial separation of the “literary” and the “popular” and the parallel split between the “critical” approach and the “cultural” one, (is) especially vexing when we are dealing with fiction”***⁷

“Popular literature does emphasize on its; ***“originality, difficulty, experimentation, and devalues the formulaic stereotypical elements.”***⁸ To determine a formal approach, the popular novelist Sidney Sheldon novels exactly fit into such a category. “Sidney Sheldon novels are set in a world, essentially mundane”, however says Clive Bloom, Yet, Bloom credits him as a writer who has aimed to illustrate women’s position, profession and power, she expresses the views as; ***“His stories are considered as implausible and exciting melodramas, but lively and energetic through his portrayal of enigmatic women personalities.”***⁹

Substantiating Bloom views his women characters are transformative, positioned to the situational demands. They directly associate to the shifts and changes that had occurred by long lasting struggle of 'women's movement' in America. They are unique by exceptions of the past stereotypical models. They combat the re-organized structure of 'women power and freedom in America'. They seemingly pose as a credo of reference to the social condition of America.

Culture and society are the dynamic agents of changes and it has been recently an extensive debate as, how fast changes occur. The interpretations on popular literature have differing views about how much it depends on changing realities. Historically, human conditions are always subject to change. Transitions in cultural values, beliefs, and institutions are the means of responding to such realities. In this regard, popular fictions seemingly help us understand and accept the dynamic of changes through its content. The role of women characters in Sheldon's fiction favors new critical interventions. Raymond Tillis states that any work of art is to be judged by reference to something internal to itself arguing that a novel should be valued for its openness and fidelity. Further, clarifies that the critical judgments should test the work of art by its content. Significantly, Terry Eagleton's experience of reading literature makes us understand that; ***"It is true that many of the works studied as literature in academic institutions were "constructed" to be read as literature, but it is also true that many of them were not."***¹⁰

Sheldon's novels were criticized 'trashy' or 'melodramatic' by critics. Illogically, most of the novels were leading in the best-sellers list. Though "trashy" is a word that appears regularly in reviews of his work, Sheldon remarks, "I don't write for critics, I write for readers", and his novels have sold millions and millions of copies worldwide. Sheldon never looked for critical recognition, but made an endeavor in representing 'women' as his protagonists. He once said in an interview that; ***"Stories had always been told about male genies.....Never had the genie been a gorgeous woman, (?) So that idea really appealed to me, and I created the series based on that premise"***¹¹ However, he was accused of not writing serious literature, but all of his novels remained popular because, he exposed the 'patriarchal politics'. There is a record of average 300 million copies sold for each of his novels. He entered Guinness world record as the most translated author. His novels have been translated into 51 languages and published in 108 nations globally. Sheldon's first novel, *The Naked Face* was published in 1969. His protagonists were usually libido-women. Sheldon in an interview has declared: ***"Another woman approached me while I was having lunch at the Russian Tea Room in New York and told me that the reason she had become a lawyer was because she had read Rage of Angels. To me, that kind of feedback has more meaning than any sales figures."***¹²

Women characters in Sheldon's novels deals with the concept of 'self'. Their struggle for 'self-identity' provides new insight expressing conceptual views of oppression and resistance. Sheldon created his heroines with ardent desires following the laws of success. His heroines are strong in mind, resourceful in knowledge, and challengeable. They are shown ambitious and powerful strugglers for position and power. Sheldon apparently brings the notion of 'Equality' by portraying such successful patterns. Sheldon's once

spoke in an interview about Abraham Lincoln. It's evident that he had in his mind the concept of equality where he dealt with women characters as strugglers for equal positions.

“A man filled with great compassion who believed that all men are created free and equal, and was not afraid to stand on that platform. The way Lincoln lived his life has served me well in mine”¹³ Sheldon novels follows mainly two concurrent streams. Firstly, relating the issues of women's 'personal life' where they promote the need of emotional values which hinders the way to success. Secondly, their desire for success in 'professional life' motivates them being rational. Sheldon is very much objective about their weakness, yet, also describes their success. Eliza Lynn Linton defines ***“women's emotional values are the dearer, tender emotions of a true woman”***.¹⁴ Women thinking rational has been criticized as ***“a curious inversion of sex.”***¹⁵ This explains the set-forth position of women in the Modern World. Sheldon's women characters indicate the shades of 'masculinity' and their preference of being strong female personalities which becomes inevitable for success in the competitive male-centered professions.

Modernity compels women into the world of industry, consumerism, mass, media, and technologies which were essentially male centered during 1970s. This analysis looks at the strategies employed by women in their pursuit of recognition. Women had to confront the challenges hassled by the 'survival schemes. Juliet Mc Cannell argues that modernity is predicated on the elimination of woman and sexual difference. Rita Felski's discussions on sexual division of labor economic and political rights provide useful analysis for further discussions. The issue of 'women empowerment' is relevantly interpreted by taking some selective women characters from Sidney Sheldon novels. As such, women's position in the political field is seriously seen as implausible. In the separation of the public sphere from the private sphere the world of politics was seen as an exclusively male public domain whereas, women were confined to the private sphere of domesticity. Feminist activity made efforts to claim women's rights, liberty and justice. Feminist's challenges contributed seminal changes and fore-grounded the issues of women's equal participation in public and political spheres.

The popular belief of America in the modern world is seen as genuinely democratic and pluralistic society. It is believed that after the Great Depression and the World War II, American society emerged as the successful democratic nation in the world by encouraging individualism, individual enterprise, equal rights and equal opportunities. Wright C. Mill in his work *Power Elites* spotlights male individuals who constitute much to the position of power elite in America. It is distressing to see that women were discarded from Mill's point of view. Astonishingly, Sheldon novels engender the views of women's involvement in the corporate field and political field. His novels signal for women's equal position in the world equal to another human being with the same rights followed by the other sex. Women roles of *masculine mode* related to Sidney Sheldon's heroines identifies to an individual's mind irrespective of 'sexual identity'. The arguments are determined by 'intellectual power' to that of man equal rather than identifying women biologically polarized. These aspects have been analyzed by generating the perception of 'women power' as a source sustaining equality. Thereby the paper concludes detailing the stirrings and development of the women's movement in America which was a growing impetus right from the women's suffrage movement until the post-modern

movement of the 21st century. Locating the key issues of the feminist agendas and chronicling the growth of women's progress that reached its peak in the 21st century offers an assessment to generate the ideas of women's position to be more democratic and less sexist.

BIOGRAPHY OF SIDNEY SHELDON

“In the work of each performer, there is an attempt to create oneself, to make a new man out of what is inherited and what is imagined.”¹⁶

Sidney Sheldon was born on 11th February 1917 in Chicago, of a Russian Jewish Ancestry. His father



SIDNEY SHELDON

Ascher Otto and his mother Natalie Marcus were in the occupation of salesman and saleswoman. Sheldon at the age of ten published his first poem in the name of his uncle in *Wee Wisdom Magazine*. During the depression period (1929) though poverty haunted him, his talent saved him from the crisis. He joined the Northwestern University and continued writing dialogues for short plays and dramas. In 1973 he moved to Hollywood where he wrote scripts and stories for a number of box- movies. He also served in the military during the World War II as a pilot taking training in the war service. After the war he returned to Hollywood and continued his career as a scriptwriter. Sheldon slowly discovered chances for writing musicals for the Broadway stage and later wrote screenplays for Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios and Paramount Pictures. His sincerity and hard work earned him good reputation as a prolific writer.

Sheldon was married for 30 years to Jorja Curtright, who was a film actress and later became an accomplished well-known interior designer. She died of heart attack in 1985. Their only daughter Mary Sheldon followed her father's footsteps also became a novelist. He then married Alexandra Kostoff, an advertising executive of Macedonian origin in Las Vegas in 1989. Sheldon died on 30th January 2007 from complications raised of pneumonia for which at the last stage he was admitted in Eisenhower Medical Center. He died in the hospital and was cremated in Westwood Village Memorial Park Cemetery.

SIDNEY SHELDON'S CAREER AWARDS

His dedication and hard-work earned him immense popularity. In 1948 he received the Oscar Award as the Best Original Screenplay Writer for *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer*. In 1951 he received Tony Award for the libretto of Broadway Musical *The Merry Widow, Alice in Arms, Redhead, Roman Candle, and Games*, which earned him immense popularity. In 1967 he received Emmy Award for the television serial *I Dream of Jeannie* and *The Patty Duke Show*. He spoke in an interview that; ***I produced The Patty Duke Show (serial) and I did something nobody else in TV ever did... for seven years, I wrote almost every single episode of the series. I Dream of Jeannie (serial) which lasted for five seasons. It was during the last year of I Dream of Jeannie; I decided to try a novel.***¹⁷

In 1969 he wrote his first novel *The Naked Face* which received Edgar Allan Poe Award as the Best Novel of the Year 1970. Thereafter, altogether he wrote eighteen novels and an autobiography. Some of his novels have been made into motion pictures and television serials. Most of his novels have the same willful and determined *Women* protagonist. In an interview (1982) he stated: ***“I like to write about women, who are talented and capable, but most important, retain their femininity. Women have tremendous power in their femininity, because men can't do without it.”***¹⁸ The statement was very much applicable to Sheldon's women character roles. He gave them full exigency to identify their 'self' capacity during times of their failure and forced them to fight their equal rights. Thus, Sidney Sheldon's women characters are lively and energetic.

ANALYZING WOMEN CHARACTERS IN SHELDON NOVELS

Sheldon's first phase novels: *The Naked Face* (1970), *The Other Side Of Midnight*, (1973), and *Memories of Midnight*, (1990) *A Stranger in the Mirror*, (1976) are discussed under the problems faced by women during 1970s to which the period envisaged the social and cultural crisis due to transitions. Women characters in *The Naked Face*, Carol Roberts (African) patient of Dr. Stevens (psychiatrist) represents the racist discrimination of color and sex. The other character Teri Washburn, a Hollywood Star who takes treatment under Dr. Stevens, is found hysterically sick of men. She has been raped by her step-father at the age of eight. Her total disinterestedness towards men and her situation for survival makes her a psychic patient. She represents the period's lack of women's economic independence and individuality. Relatively, Anne Blake, the wife of De Marco, the rich Mafia Don, is portrayed as a rebel who fights her domesticity. Her role determines the concept of "self" symbolizing women's movement in America. Connecting these characters to the 'first wave feminism' mainly responds to specific problems related to women's education, employment, and marriage laws.

Alexander Catherine and Noelle Page, two strong and powerful characters portrayed in *The Other Side of Midnight*, (1973) and later in 1990 in *Memories of Midnight* are very exciting for their roles depicted to be recognized as the models of the 'second-wave feminism' primarily concerned with the problems of working-class women. During mid-twenties working class women faced tremendous patriarchy in their work place. Noelle Page, a small-town French girl who wanted to become a film actress, struggles fighting her sex as a problem. She succeeds to become an international celebrity by selling her sex which was the typical situation of the 1960s for women who wanted fame and money. Alexander Catherine in contrast plays the significant conventional role of the 1960s supporting the ideas of transition.

Ambitious women have been traded of their rights and liberty for material success. The reason for such tyranny was their second-class status. The character Jill Temples, in the novel *A Stranger in the Mirror*, also struggles to become a film star. However, finds Hollywood as men's world with all their politics but, also as a place to fulfill women's ambition. To her agony, she realizes that her sex (body) was more valuable than her talent and intelligence. The unavoidable circumstance forces her to surrender miserably to the male dominated politics. This situation has been stated by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* that women's miserable surrender deliberately exposes the mystique which kept their position in the second place.

The second-phase of Sidney Sheldon's novels: The novels; *Bloodline* (1977), *Rage of Angels*, (1980), *The Stars Shine Down* (1992), *Nothing Lasts Forever* (1994), and *Are you Afraid of the Dark?* (2004) These novels relate to the problems of women's position and professions. They exhibit the obstacles and discrimination of women's position in the field of law, medicine, journalism and politics. Professional class women faced many hurdles during 1980s. It has been noted that the professional power had its privilege only for men during those decade. Women were discriminated repressing them to traditional feminine jobs. However, their education put them in professions like law, medicine, journalism, and politics, but had to face a lot of discrimination in their work place.

The novel *Bloodline* discusses women facing the problem of being "born female." Elizabeth Roffe, young and beautiful, the only heir to rule the Roffe dynasty, makes tremendous effort to acquire her position equal to that of man's place in the corporate field. She proves to be more capable than a man. Jennifer Parker in *Rage of Angels* as an attorney fights her rights for 'equal opportunity'. The novel *The Stars Shine Down* the character Lara Cameron, young and beautiful, well skilled in architectural ideas, enters the real estate business. However, she feels much envied by men for a women talent. she wins the position through great struggle. The novel *Nothing Lasts Forever* portrays three female doctors establishing their 'self-identity' in medical profession. The novel *Are you Afraid of the Dark?* Kelly Harris and Diane Stevens, two young widows struggle their way to endure adversity they face in men's world of power, money and fame. They succeed by fighting way for dignified statuesque.

The novels *The Sands of Time* (1988), *If Tomorrow Comes* (1985), *Tell Me Your Dream* (1998) are discussed by taking the issues of 'women's consciousness' combating the pressures of modernity. In the novel *The Sands of Time* four nuns play crucial roles to erase the norms and customs practiced by the churches. The four characters are focused on different situations to represent the sad pursuit of 'women's identity' in the world of patriarchy. In the novel *If Tomorrow Comes* the character Tracy Whitney is shown as a criminal who fights her way to show the disproportionate powers between the sexes. She finds various way to eliminate male dominating powers. The novel *Tell Me Your Dream* expresses the perverted and obsessive sexual desires of men. Child sexual abuse is bitterly exposed in this novel.

Some of the novels expose the views of women's political activism in America. The novel *Wind Mills of the Gods* (1987) the character Mary Ashley, a political science professor from Kansas University, selected by the American President as the US Ambassador to Romania. Against all the obstacles her intellectual powers help her strongly to retain her powers. Similarly, Leslie Stewart in *The Best Laid Plans* (1997) is portrayed extremely intelligent. The evidence of her intelligence lies to the fact that she becomes the owner of half the American media networks. The novel *The Sky is falling* (2001) espouses women's courage. The character, Dana Evans, is depicted as a Washington TV journalist who takes up the dangerous task of visiting the war zones of the Balkans. In 1980s, the capitalist structures of global economics provided effective strategies for women's position in the corporate field. The novel *Master of the Game* (1982) depicts Kate Blackwell as an entrepreneur who inherits one of the largest Diamond factories manages her position equal in the male-centered corporate world.

Sheldon's women characters specially attempt visualizing "*the intra-psychic dynamics*".¹⁹ The term intra-psychic is a psychological terminology identifying the internal psychological problems of an individual. Sheldon's women characters pass through both the positive and negative aspects of life. This has been interpreted by coining the phrases 'emotional values' and 'rational thinking' which has conflicting effects. The positive intra-psychic process refers to the development of higher-level social skills acquired through education or specific social contact, like working in a corporate environment. The negative intra-psychic process concerns to the stress over social responsibilities, conflicts of the social mores, morals and values. Sheldon's women characters travel both these zones with conflicting realities. However, women in Sidney Sheldon novels experience the psychic depression; their resistances are shown deliberately to grasp the positive precinct of life. Hence, women characters in Sidney Sheldon's novels withstand their vocational success in their professional life. On the contrary they virtually seem to be congruence with their personal life too. Understanding their success in professional life is very complex as it is mixed up with personal conflicts and subsequently, success and competitive gains lose their importance. Thus, success is a terrifying matter in his novels. These aspects are related to the slogan that "personal is political" which was the first major step towards progress for women to overcome the patriarchic politics.

The dictum "personal is political" first took hold via the protest against Miss American Pageant by Carol Hanisch. In 1960s women in the Anti-War and Civil Rights Movements noticed that their feelings of exclusion and exploitation were uniquely unfair. The magazine *The Atlantic City* in 1968, documented the protest of Miss American Pageant, as a myth of beauty based on consumerist politics. Advocates of Women's Movement found that in the name of liberty and freedom women were exploited. They were degraded with the false standards of beauty myths. *The Atlantic City* stated that "***A new Feminist Movement is afoot in the land.***"²⁰ American democratic laws politicize the issues of gender equality.

Feminists made it clear that the problems of women in menial jobs were due to their lack of their *self-consciousness*. Consciousness-raising group feminists (Shulamith Firestone, Kathie Sarachild, and Carol Hanisch) discovered women's situations in marriage, child-rearing, sex, work, culture, even language should be altered. They found that the cause of suffering was not personal but something systemic and political to transform society into a more gender-equitable place. Consciousness-raising group aimed to get a better understanding of women's oppression by bringing women together to discuss and analyze their lives. The workshops conducted in 1973 by Kathie Sarachild remarked; what really counted in consciousness-raising are not methods, but results. Rapping from personal experience was used as a basis for further discussion and analysis based on the limits and the true potential of Women Power. To quote a brief paragraph by Betty Friedan: "***I believe that the women's movement, in the political sense, is both less and more powerful than we realize. I believe that the personal is both more and less political than our own rhetoric ever implied. I believe that we have to break through our own feminist mystique now to come to terms with the new reality of our personal and political experience, and to move into the second stage.***"²¹

Jane Adams interviews with few women who were in the highest positions spoke with pride and explained their success as big and bold, whereas a majority of women spoke about the politics played on them

by men and their struggle to cope-up their ways for success. Even some spoke about their dual roles in family and work place as still unsolved, and many who spoke about the troubles caused by their identity as woman. Professional success, says a woman who described herself as a professional activist, is that...“at the top, where the power games are, ...the maneuvering goes on, you look at yourself and see how manipulative you have become and wonder how it happened while you were pursuing the “unreachable dream.” Putting forth the ideas of successful women Adams says, “**Successful women are strong personalities.**”²² Sheldon also created strong women personalities exposing the oddities faced for their success. Therefore, Sheldon novels represents triumphs and failures of women to examine the redefined roles of women’s position in the American society.

INFERENCE OF FEMINISM IN SHELDON NOVELS

Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969) which was the major work where feminism got its importance in literature. Women roles in Fiction gradually increased, representing positive individual roles. Feminists had the thrust to anatomize both liberating and constrained thoughts at various levels by taking novels as a source of interpretation. In this way Feminist /Women’s Writing came into existence as a separate category of scholarly interest in the academics. Alexis de Tocqueville says “**liberty and democracy becomes an industry in literature and turns man’s imagination away from externals to concentrate on himself alone.**”²³ This is an indication that the cannons and divisions in *Literary Academics* were displeased.

The publication of feminist works improved the theory of feminism. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* sought to dispel the false illusion about women and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* expressed radical views on gender. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* launched a powerful attack on the sexist attitudes of the male writers; D.H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet and also appealed to women to come out of their subordination. These works drew attention to the domesticity forced upon women and contributed to the public debate and constitutional remedies for women’s liberation. Thus, the sexual revolution was at its peak calling for social and cultural transitions. “**For a sexual revolution ...it would have required a truly radical social transformation...Without such radical change it remained impossible to eradicate those evils attendant upon the[se] institutions which reformers found most offensive: the economic disabilities of women, the double standard, prostitution, venereal disease, coercive marital unions, and involuntary parenthood. A complete sexual revolution would have entailed, even necessitated, the end of the patriarchal order through the abolition of its ideology as it functions through a differential socialization of the sexes in the area of status, temperament, and role.**”²⁴

The representation of strong women characters in Sheldon novels provides wide scope for equality. His novels are radical in approach. Anticipating the women characters in his novels are deeply an inference to feminism. Each novels deplore the prediction for women futuristic agenda for success. Therefore, Sheldon novels and the depiction of strong women roles become the device to impose new ideas concerned to the developmental strategies of women in the American society. The explicit modernized version of women characters occupies the concept of modern women by their challenges towards success. Hence, the analysis perpetuates the ideas of ‘female heroism’ agreeably freezing the divisions of gender-identity.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Sidney Sheldon as a novelist stands proud among many who represented women's role with objective truth. Women roles in his novels are associated with strong will power such as; ambition, self-assertion, dynamism, potency, confidence, keenness, forcefulness, and vigor. For instance, in one of Sheldon's novels *The Other Side of the Midnight* (1973) as the character Noelle Page notes; "Men ruled the world because they had the strength, the money and the power; therefore, it was necessary (for women) to rule men, or at least one man...in order to that one had to be prepared. (TOSOM, p: 49) Sheldon gave special preference for women in his novels. He asserted that women are capable of being heroes in his novels. His creation marked a glorious wonder sustaining changes by gender identity. Thus, Sheldon's depiction of women characters makes a great reading to understand the world as a scale for human expediency.

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SIDNEY SHELDON'S CAREER AWARDS

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