

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN FAIRY TALES

ABSTRACT

Gender being a social phenomenon is perpetually constructed in the society through various social institutions and as we perform it in everyday life (Butler, 1990). This process of naming, labeling, categorizing, and assigning attributes and roles starts very early in one's life. The construction of gender shapes and determines different sets of expectations, roles, and opportunities for males and females (Goddard and Patterson, 2000). Story telling is a popular practice in most of the societies. Children are exposed to stories at home and also in school in initial classes as a part of educational activities. Children love to listen to the stories and also enjoy reading colourful story books which take them to the world of fantasy and imagination. One can find a common pattern in most of the tales that consists of an issue, problem, question, challenge, dream or a desire, followed by a travel, involving challenges, adventures, calamities, and dangers. The problem is ultimately resolved by a saviour, who is usually kind, good looking, cooperative, skilful and brave. These stories successfully manage to imprint some serious messages on tender minds in a subtle manner by perpetuating some serious gendered stereotypes in an indirect manner. The stories promote some stereotypical physical and mental attributes of male and female. The young readers are made to believe that there is a link between beauty and goodness and evil is always linked with ugliness. The ideal girls/women in stories are supposed to be pretty, tall, fair in complexion, shy, meek, submissive, and compliant. These initial impressions about gender remain with them for a long time. This paper critically analyses the Grim's fairytales in terms of unequal gender treatment and focuses on their implications for the young learners.

Key Words: Gender, Fairy Tales, Stereotypes, Social Construction, Female attributes

Introduction:

Language has been a subject of interest not only for linguists but also for anthropologists, biologists and culture-study specialists. During different periods of history, some fundamental questions have been raised regarding the nature and function of language.

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One school of thought believed that language was a 'neutral' phenomenon, a passive transmitter of ideas that reflected what happens in a society. Language was thus viewed as a tool whose sole purpose was to communicate ideas, emotions and information.

The significance of language in individual and societal lives is vital. It's one of the important cultural expressions and acts as an identity marker. With the passage of time socio-political aspects of language were brought to light by linguists, anthropologists, and social thinkers and now language is no more considered as just a linguistics phenomenon but a highly socio-political concept that is linked with power. It is no more viewed as merely a neutral and passive tool of communication but a powerful constituent of social reality. A number of linguists explored the direct relevance of various social factors to vocabulary, grammar and phonology. Some of these social factors included age, gender, social class, religion and education. Studies suggest the dominance of society over language.

It was in 1929 when Sapir came up with a hypothesis which was to revolutionize the study of language. According to Sapir, quoted in Salzman (1993:153):

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society... The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached.

According to this hypothesis, we perceive outer world with the help of our language. This hypothesis helped re-determine the functions of language which was no longer considered a passive tool of communication but a highly social and political phenomenon. To further explore the role of language we need to study the role of social institutions in the construction of social reality. Social institutions include family, schools, religion, the media, etc. These institutions construct, validate and perpetuate certain stereotypes as a part of the construction of reality. All these institutions use language as an important tool in the construction of reality. Language is linked with issues of power and politics.

Gender is a social construct that is manufactured by various social institutions. It is actually performed in a society on regular basis (Butler, 1990). The society makes up gender by determining roles, expectations, and opportunities for males and females on the basis of sex (Goddard and Patterson, 2000). The process of manufacturing of gender starts even before the children go to schools. The family plays a vital role in shaping the self image and identity of boys and girls. The choices of toys are based on the basis of sex. The boys stereotypically choose the toys meant for the boys and girls (Martin et al.,(1995:1415). Fairy tales also play an important role in the gender construction process. Story telling is a common phenomenon in most of the societies. Children are

exposed to stories at home and in school in initial classes as a part of educational activities. Children love to listen to the stories and also enjoy reading colourful story books which take them to the world of fantasy and imagination and some serious messages are imprinted in on their tender minds in a subtle manner. These initial impressions about gender remain with them for a long time.

Method

The sample for the research comprised 211 fairy tales contained in the book, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (2000). The book was compiled by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. Its first volume, containing 86 stories, was published in 1812 followed by the second volume in 1814 that contained 70 stories. In the newer editions of the book certain stories were added, deleted, or modified. Most of the tales contained in the book have German or French origin. The book is considered to be the most famous collection of fairy tales. Some of these tales are used in a number of countries as part of their syllabi. The research study textually analyzes the fairy tales with reference to the representation of women in terms of themes, roles, expectations, relationships, language, and symbolism.

Findings and Discussions

Common pattern in tales

One can find a common pattern in most of the tales that consists of an issue, problem, question, challenge, dream or a desire, followed by a travel, involving challenges, adventures, calamities, and dangers. The problem is ultimately resolved by a saviour, who is usually kind, good looking, cooperative, skilful and brave. Going through these stories one may observe that women do not figure in a number of stories.

Exclusion of women

The exclusion suggests that women were not relevant to the kinds of roles and themes presented in the stories. This exclusion is a reflection of female exclusion in real society. There are a number of tales, however, where women are presented and this chapter focuses on such tales with an attempt to analyze the politics of representation.

Concept of female beauty

The fairy tales perpetuate certain gender stereotypes in an indirect manner. In most of the fairy tales the heroine of the tale is a beautiful girl who is sweet and innocent, e.g., *Little Red Ridinghood*, *Cinderella*, *Goldilocks*, *Rumplestiltskin*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Snow White*, and *Rapunzel*. The description of physical features of women makes them an unearthly creature. Here is the description of Snow White, “*skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood, and hair as black as ebony.*” (p. 330). She had a magic glass, and she used to stand before it, and look in it, and say,

“Looking- glass on the wall,

Who s fairest of us all.”

And the looking-glass would answer,

“You are fairest them all.” ((Grim & Grim, 2000:330)

Rapunzel’s was “the most beautiful child in the world” (*Rapunzel*, p. 94). Her hair, in terms of colour and length, “shone like gold in the sun and it was so long that it reached from the top of the tower right down to the ground.” (p. 94). In *King Thrushbeard*, the king’s daughter was “beautiful beyond measure.” (p. 43) In *The Skilful Huntsman*, “...the King’s daughter was lying sleeping, and she was so beautiful that he [huntsman] stood still and, holding his breath, looked at her. (Grim & Grim, 2000:72).

In, *The Princess in Disguise*, “A king once had a wife with golden hair who was so beautiful that none on earth could be found equal to her.” (p.75). In *The Goose-Girl at the Well*, the *feminine* beauty is described from different perspectives. The physical description is so exaggerated that the female characters emerge as superhuman and out of this world.

...the youngest of them [daughters] was so beautiful that the whole world looked on her as a wonder. She was as white as snow, as rosy as apple-blossom, and her hair as radiant as sunbeams. When she cried, not tears feel from her eyes but pearls and jewels only.” (Grim & Grim, 2000:281)

Correlation between beauty and goodness

At a very young age children are made to believe that there is a correlation between beauty and goodness and that the heroine of a fairy tale could only be a pretty girl. Similarly ugliness is associated with evil, e.g., in *Cinderella*, Cinderella’s sisters are ugly and evil. In *Sweetheart Roland*, we come across this categorization in direct manner. “There was once a woman who was a witch, and she had two daughters, one ugly and wicked, one pretty and good.” (p. 187). In *The Three Little Men in the Wood*, the mother was jealous of her step daughter who was “pleasant and pretty, and her real daughter was ugly and hateful.”

The ugliness is considered as something unacceptable. In *Skilful Huntsman*, we come across the consequences of ugliness:

The wedding was fixed, and the maiden had already arrived; because of her great ugliness, however, she shut self in her room and allowed no one see her...(Grim & Grim, 2000:62)

Correlation between ugly and evil

Ugliness is not only considered as a social crime but at times it touches the boundaries of sin. In, *Brother and Sister*, the step mother’s own daughter was “as ugly as sin, and had

only one eye.” (Grim & Grim, 2000:297). The fairy tales show a clear division between males and females in terms of attributes. In *Sharing Joy and Sorrow*, the tailor’s wife is “good, industrious, and pious” (p. 18). In *King Thrusbeard*, the king’s daughter is beautiful but “proud and overbearing.” (p.43). In *Clever Gretel*, the female cook is glutton and liar who would eat while cooking. In, *The Maiden without Hands*, “The miller’s daughter was a modest and beautiful maiden, and lived in innocence and obedience to her parents.” ((Grim & Grim, 2000:206.). The attributes of the princess in *The Sleeping Beauty*, are summed up in one sentence, “She was so lovely, modest, sweet, and kind and clever, that no one who saw her could help loving her”. (Grim & Grim, 2000:97)

Male characters associated with animals

It is important to note that male characters in fairy tales are associated with animals. We come across animal characters including bears, wolves, frogs, rabbits, donkeys, and lions, etc. This suggests that male characters possess the attributes of animals in terms of strength, swiftness, domination etc.

Female characters are dubbed as weaklings, insecure, emotional, and at times troublesome creatures. In , *The Twelve Brothers*, red flag of warning is associated with the birth of a daughter:

If a little son is born I will put out a white flag, and then you may safely venture back again; but if it is a little daughter , I will put out a red flag, and then flee away as fast as possible as you can, and the dear God watch over you. (Grim & Grim, 2000:431)

Men and varied professions

It is interesting to note that a vast range of professions are mentioned in stories. Some of these professions include tailor, cook, farmer, shoe maker, robber, huntsman, locksmith, musician, surgeon, butcher, woodcutter, carpenter, forester, cook, turner, joiner, miller, baker, apprentice, fisherman, drummer, etc. Importantly all of these professions in tales belonged to the male characters in the stories. Women usually do not figure when there is a mention of professions. However there are some indoor professions that have been associated with women. There are references to spinning wheels and broom making (*The Elves*), and basket making (*King Thrushbeard*). There is also mention of female characters who are sorceresses and enchantress. We come across a woman who by profession is cook but this character is painted as a negative character. One woman can be seen as a beggar by profession.

In the tale, *Fair Katringle and Pif-Paf-Poltrie*, there is an interesting paragraph that not only mentions some of the professions of that time but also their relative significance.

Pif-paf-poltrie, what is thy trade? Art thou a tailor?" "Something better." "A shoe maker?" "Something better." "A joiner?" "Something better." "A smith?" "Something better." "A joiner?" "Something better." "Perhaps a broom-maker?" "Yes, that's what I am, is it not a fine trade?" (Grim & Grim, 2000:38).

Socially constructed gender roles

As a part of the process of socialization roles are assigned and naturalized by the society. Women have been usually confined to domestic chores. Men, on the other hand, move in the public domain where they are in possession of economic resources to fund the domestic expenses. It is interesting to note that in *Hansel and Gretel*, the witch treats the brother and sister according to their gender:

Then she grasped Hansel with her withered hand, and led him into a little stable, and shut him up behind a grating; and call and scream as he might, it was no good. Then she went back to Gretel and shook her, crying, "Get up, lazy bones; fetch water, and cook something nice for your brother..." (Grim & Grim, 2000:105)

In *Old Rinkrank*, the princess ends up in a house where her role was automatically decided.

The princess had to cook his dinner, make his bed, and do all his work, and when he came home again he always brought with him a heap of gold and silver." (Grim & Grim, 2000:99)

The witch orders the sister to fetch water and cook nice food for her brother. These roles are assigned to the women in a society. In, *The Hut in the Forest*, a girl ends up in a strange environment in a hut in the forest where an old man lives with animals. The arrangements are immediately sorted out as the old man suggests, "Here you shall have shelter and food; go to the the fire, and cook us our supper." Similarly in *Snow White*, the dwarf tells Snow White, to accomplish the task expected of women.

If you will keep our house for us, and cook, and wash, and make the beds, and sew and knit, and keep everything tidy, and clean, you may stay with us, and you shall lack nothing. (Grim & Grim, 2000:332)

In *Mother Hulda*, a little girl is granted the permission to live in the house provided she does the assigned chores. She is told this in clear terms. "Come and live with me, and if you do the house-work well and orderly, things shall go well with you."

The undesirable role of step mothers

In most of the fairy tales the tormentors happen to be females, e.g., *Goose Girl*, *The foundling bird*, and *One eye, two eyes, and three eyes*, we see a number of step mothers who are presented as evil characters (*Cinderella*, *Brother and Sister*, *Mother Hulda*, *The True Bride*, *The Lambkin and the little fish*, *The Juniper tree*, *The Three Little Men in the Wood*, and *Hansel and Gretel*, etc.). We also see witches who are architects of evil designs (*Rapunzel*, *Mother Hulda*. In *The Twelve Brothers*, *Donkey Cabbages*, we come across a wicked mother in law. Fairy tales presents some female characters as evil and disloyal, e.g., in *The Little Farmer*, *Old Hildbrad*, and *The Three-Snake Leaves*. At an early age students get the message that women are the greatest enemies of women.

Women as wstithces

Another representation of women is in the form of witches who are odious in looks and evil in character, e.g., *Hansel and Gretel*. Similarly wives in fairy tales, in general, are boring, vicious and timid, e.g., wife of giant in *Jack and Stalk bean*, is frightened of her husband who is a giant.

Asymmetrical gender roles

The gender relationship shown in the fairy tales is unequal. Male characters appear to be strong, dominant, generous, and helpful whereas female characters are portrayed as weak, meek, and helpless. The following lines from *Donkey Cabbages*, reflect the unequal relationship:

The beautiful girl fell on her knees before him, and said, Ah, my beloved, forgive me for the evil I have done you; my mother drove me to it; it was done against my will, for I love you dearly. (Grim & Grim, 2000:256)

In some cases it is declared by the male character as a challenge to identify and marry a certain girl as in, *The Gifts of Little Folk*, the tailor claims that, "I shall be master, and marry my dear object (for so he called his sweet heart). (Grim & Grim, 2000: 155). It is important to note the use of the word of 'object' for a living human being.

Here is an excerpt from the conversation between a husband and wife. The husband wants to run a race with a hare. When his wife asks, "What can make you want to run a race with the hare?" The husband becomes furious and retorts:

"Hold your tongue woman," said the hedgehog, "that is my affair. Don't begin to discuss things with me." What could the hedgehog's wife do? She was forced to obey him, whether she liked it or not. (Grim & Grim, 2000:112).

The husband believes that he had a right to do whatever he likes and is not supposed to 'discuss' matters with his wife. This shows a typical mindset encouraged and conditioned by the patriarchal society.

Female characters and the notion of sacrifice

The female characters and the notion of sacrifice go together. We see mothers and sisters sacrificing their desires and needs for their kins. In *The Goose Girl*, we see such a mother whose daughter is about to part with her.

So when the hour of parting had come, the aged mother went to her bedroom, took a small knife and cut her finger with it until it bled then she held a white handkerchief to it into which she let three drops of blood fall, gave it to her daughter and said, "Dear child, preserve this carefully; it will be of service to you on your way." (Grim & Grim, 2000:66)

In *The Shroud* we see a typical lonely mother struggling in life patiently.

Then the mother gave her sorrow into God's keeping, and bore it quietly and patiently, and child came no more, but slept in its little bed beneath the earth." (Grim & Grim, 2000:373)

The voiceless female characters

In some fairy tales the female characters lose their voice or as a condition forbade to speak for a certain period of time. This voicelessness of female characters has a symbolic significance. A similar girl is found in *Our Lady's Child*, "Although she could not speak, she was so beautiful and charming..." In *The Six Swans*, the sister wants to rescue her brothers. She can do that on one condition, i.e., by losing her voice.

For six years you would be obliged never to speak or laugh, and make during that time six little shirts out of aster flowers. If you were to let fall a single word before the work was ended, all would be of no good. (Grim & Grim, 2000:426)

A similar condition is applied to the sister in *The Twelve Brothers*, who is striving to get her brothers released.

thou canst not release them but by being dumb for seven years: thou must neither speak nor laugh; and wert thou to speak one single word, and it wanted but one would perish because of that one word. ((Grim & Grim, 2000:434)

The condition for female characters to become 'voiceless' in order to survive could be a wishful thinking of a patriarchal society.

The obligation of dowry

While we read fairy tales we are constantly reminded of the problems faced by women in real life. One of these problems is the curse of dowry. Dowry is a popular practice in

Indo Pak when at the time of marriage girls are given gifts by her parents for the new home. The worst part of it is that the wish list of dowry items is given by the in-laws of the girl. In some cases it becomes so demanding that marriages cannot take place. In *Fair Katrinelje and Pif-Paf-Poltrie*, a central question is, “Fair Katrinelje, how much dowry has thou?”(p. 38). The parents make all efforts to make their daughter live comfortably after the marriage. One of the ways to do so is through dowry. In *The Goose Girl*:

...the aged Queen packed up for her many vessels and silver and gold, and trinkets also of gold and silver, and cups and jewels; in short, everything which appertained to a royal dowry, for she loved her child with all her heart. ((Grim & Grim, 2000: 66)

Childless mothers

A recurring theme in some fairy tales is that king, has apparently got everything but doesn't have a child. A number of fairy tales starts with this issue. *Hans the Hedgehog*, begins with similar situation:

There once was a countryman who had money and land in plenty, but no matter how rich he was, one thing was still wanting to complete his happiness – he had no children. Often when he went into the town with the other peasants they mocked him and asked why he had no children. ((Grim & Grim, 2000:484)

One can realize the social pressure but the ultimate stress comes on wife who is considered responsible for not having a child. In another tale, *The Donkey*, we can feel the agony of a childless wife:

Once upon a time there lived a King and a queen, who were rich, and had everything they wanted except one thing: they had no children. The queen lamented over this day and night, and said, I am like a field on which nothing grows.’ (Grim & Grim, 2000 481)

The weakness of female characters

Most of the beautiful good girls in the fairy tales suffer from ever poverty or magic spell or some other problem inflicted on them e.g., *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, *Snow White*, etc. An early impression about a normal female character children find in the fairy tales is that of helplessness. At times this weakness is associated with fragile physical structure as grandma in *Little Red Ridinghood*, but at other times the weakness is associated with simplicity and naivety, e.g., the character of Little Red Ridinghood.

Stereotypical view of gender

There are certain gender stereotypes which are perpetuated in fairy tales, e.g., in *Goldilocks and Three Bears*, the daddy bear's chair and bed are *too high*, and mummy bear's chair and bed are *too soft*. Similarly daddy bear's voice is *gruff* and mummy bear's voice is *sweet*. These stereotypes are based on the taken for granted knowledge categorizing human beings on the basis of sex.

Male saviours

The saviours in most of fairy tales appear to be male characters who are physically strong, good natured, helpful and smart. In *Sleeping Beauty*, a prince comes and breaks the magic. In *Golden Goose*, a boy named Billy helps the princess who forgot to smile. In *Cinderella*, a prince rescues Cinderella from the maltreatment of her step mother and marries her. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the saviour is also a prince. In *Jack and Beanstalk*, Jack who kills the giant and emerges as a savior is a male character. In *Red Ridinghood*, the male wood cutter comes and saves the girl and her grandma. In *Old Hildbrad*, the frog prince comes as a savior. In *The Foundling Bird*, the savior is a young prince. Similarly in *Jorinda and Joringel*, the savior is a male.

In most of these cases the saviour takes the girl as a trophy and marries with her. This happens in a number of fairy tales, including *The Skilful Huntsman*, *Cinderella*, *The Glass Coffin*, *Rapunzel*, and *The Sleeping Beauty*, etc.

Females presented as naïve characters

The females are presented as naïve characters whose only objective in life is to wait for their deliverers and marry them. In *The Three Little Men in the Wood*, the little men with magical powers try to reward a good girl by granting her three things:

...the first one said, "She shall grow prettier every day." The second said, each time she speaks a piece of gold shall fall from her mouth." The third said, "A king shall come and take her for his wife."

(Grim & Grim, 2000:287)

Look at the short speech of a female character, in *Glass Coffin*, who catches sight of the prince and spontaneously utters the following words:

My long-desired deliverer, kind heaven has guided you to me, and put an end to my sorrows. On the self-same day when they end, shall your happiness begin. You are the husband chosen for me by Heaven, and you shall pass your life in unbroken joy, loved by me, and rich to the overflowing in every earthly possession. (Grim & Grim, 2000:91)

Male characters presented as deliverers

The male character appears a heavenly figure who come for deliverance. It is this unequal relationship between male and female that defines the politics of power.

A similar situation can be seen in *The Water of Life*, where the arrival of the deliver is painted like this:

So his horse rode onward up the middle of it, and when he came to the door, it was opened and the Princess received him with joy, and said he was her deliverer, and lord of the kingdom, and their wedding was celebrated with great rejoicing. (Grim & Grim, 2000:166)

The female characters are viewed as characters with material needs only. In *One-Eye, Two-Eyes, and Three Eyes*, we can see how eating, drinking, and clothing are considered as the ultimate objectives of young girl's life:

So the knight lifted Two-eyes on to his horse, and took her home with him to his father's castle, and there he gave her beautiful clothes, and meat and drink to her heart's content, and as he loved her so much he married her, and the wedding was solemnized with great rejoicing. ((Grim & Grim, 2000:182)

Imposed marriages

The female characters are painted as weaklings whose marriages are usually arranged rather forced by their father who happens to be a King in most of the cases in tales, e.g., *The Frog Prince, King Thrush beard, The Robber Bridegroom, The Skilful Huntsman*. In a number of cases the king throws a challenge and offers his daughter as a prize. In *Old Rinkrank*, the king "...caused a glass mountain to be made, and said that whosoever could cross the other side of it without falling should have his daughter to wife." (Grim & Grim, 2000:99).

In *Golden Goose*, there was a king who had a daughter who was so serious that no one could make her laugh therefore "the King had given out that whoever should make her laugh should have her in marriage." (Grim & Grim, 2000:243)

In *The Donkey* the king gets concerned about the ailment of donkey and says:

"If I did but know would make thee content. Wilt thou have my pretty daughter to wife?" "Ah, yes," said the ass, 'I should indeed like her," and all at once he became quite merry and full of happiness, for that was exactly what he was wishing for. (Grim & Grim, 2000:483)

In most of the cases the daughters passively follow the orders but sometimes such unjust decrees are challenged. Challenging king's order is a crime and like any other crime it

does not go unpunished. In *The Skilful Huntsman*, an unjust decision is challenged followed by the pronounced punishment.

Now as it happened that he had a captain, who was one eyed and a hideous man, and he said that he had done it. Then the old man said that as he had accomplished this, he should marry his daughter. But the maiden said, “rather than marry him, dear father, I will go away into the world as far as my legs can carry me.” The king said that if she would not marry him she should take off her royal garments and wear peasant’s clothing, and go forth, and that she should go to a potter, and begin a trade in earthen vessels. (Grim & Grim, 2000:73)

Use of sexist language

Besides the biased content and perspective the use of language is also sexist. Frequently the masculine pronoun is used for both the genders. In *The Jew Among Thorns*, “...If I ask a favour of any one *he* shall not be able to refuse it.” (p. 40). In *Jorinda and Joringel*, “If anyone came within one hundred paces of the castle *he* was obliged to stand still. (Grim & Grim, 2000:276).

Conclusion

The analysis of fairy tales suggests a biased representation of women in the tales. A number of gendered stereotypes, e.g., physical description of women, unrealistic notion of beauty, fixed roles for males and females, discriminating expectations from males and females, forced marriages of girls, women as weaklings and males as saviours, women as naive and males as clever, correlation between beauty and goodness, the relationship of ugly and evil, women as step mother and witches, the voiceless female characters, the issues of dowry, childlessness, and use of sexist language. These fairy tales are collected and written by male writers whose world view was influenced by patriarchal thinking. The fairy tales reflected the politics of labeling and categorization where roles, expectations, and opportunities for males and females were decided on the basis of sex. The ideal girls/women in stories are supposed to be pretty, tall, fair in complexion, shy, meek, submissive, and compliant. These good females are tormented in the stories by other female characters, e.g., witches, step mothers, mothers in law who are greedy, vicious, sadist, callous, and cruel. The good male characters in fairy tales are supposed to be brave, good natured, cooperative, and smart. Generally they appear as prince charming and after saving the girls in plight marry them. Thus fairy tales, together with, other social institutions, contribute strongly in the process of manufacturing and perpetuating gendered stereotypes.

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