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Demystifying the Concept of *Place* as a Literary Trope in Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*

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Abstract: Several African and African American literary critics and writers have examined literary techniques such as suspense, setting, scene and flashbacks from different perspectives. However, scanty attention has been given to *Place* as a literary technique as few scholars mistake it for setting and scene. Therefore, this paper intended to fill this gap in scholarship by examining Decontextualisation of the concept of *place* as a literary technique in Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*. Tuan's (1974) *Topophilia*, Slovic *et al.*'s (2019) nature writing as the growth of environment, and Serpil *et al.*'s (2011) theories on Ecocritical Literature on ethical responsibilities as awareness to protect environment were used as the theoretical frameworks for this study. The findings in the text revealed different kinds of places in Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck* as averred by de Certeau (1984). These were common place, abstract place, action place, delimited place, triumph place, place of mastery, and place of establishment. This paper, therefore, concluded that places such as those explored should be considered by Africans, both at home and in the Diaspora, as tenets that would make them navigate and contribute to the world positively anywhere they find themselves. All these are recommended for both African government and government in the Diaspora so as to make their citizens live healthily, happily, and successfully in all their strata in life.

Keywords: Demystifying, *Place*, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, *Topophilia*

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INTRODUCTION

In Literature, some writers and characters make realism of place by alluding to actual place names that geography may not be able to explain. Some writers or authors allow their characters to travel to abstract places while others do allow their characters to move and travel to physical places which more are "therapeutic" than those who travel abstractly as they lack physical movement that is therapy their well-being. Knowledge of places and processes of the places improves places and realities in characters as well as readers. In this case, places are created to nurture a character's physical and intellectual minds together with economic growth. Some writers are too blunt and rudimentary about place as they devote time revealing places of hatred, survival, assault, love and killing. Both character and reader need to learn that being in a central place or place of honour requires more strength or intellectual capabilities. This proves that, it is essential to put right character in the right place as this makes such character to learn, maintain or stay in a place he or she can withstand. According to de Certeau (1984), everyday life to ordinary man has no meaning but to "a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets" gives meanings to places as he encounters them. To him, the practice of everyday life is synonymous to the concept of "place" or how a character or person finds place for himself or herself to achieve a set purpose or goal. He identifies eight different places: common place, abstract place, action place, temporal place, delimited place, triumph place, place of mastery or place of physical learning, and

establishment of place or place of establishment. In this paper, few of these places are considered and explored in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are relevant existing studies considered in this paper but focus is basically on de Certeau's (1984) kinds of places that one needs to consider and adhere to to achieve success and live a meaningful life with little or less humiliation, domination, segregation, and omission, or privation.

de Certeau (1984) argues that the practice of everyday life to ordinary man has no meaning but heroes, and people that know more about the deeper meaning of life know that there are kinds of places in everyday life to every sane and insane man. To him, the practice of everyday life is synonymous to place or how a character, or person finds space for himself or herself to achieve a set purpose or goal. He posits that "a *common place* is a place where everyone is totally silent" (p. 6). This can be termed to be lonely or solitary place as it requires "muteness or stillness" of individual. According to him, it is a place where ordinary language is spoken. He further submits that there is *abstract place* too where abstract models are used (29); action place is revealed too, as a place where "frontiers divide time, place and type of action (29). In action place, de Certeau discusses industry and activities taking place. This can be termed industrial place or place of industry. Also, he discusses

temporal place, “temporal articulation of places into a spatial sequence of points” (60).

de Certeau (1984) identifies another place in the practice of everyday life, delimited place; it is a place of threat, or evil target that enemy targets people, customers or consumers. He includes triumph place (or proper), a place of success where people, characters engage in discussions of their advantages. Furthermore, he submits (36) that there is another place called place of mastery through sight. This can be called place of practical, creative or technological idea. This, however, can be otherwise called place of practical or physical learning. In addition, he identifies another place called establishment of place or place of establishment. To him, this place requires serious utilisation of time and opportunities before this can be achieved.

Lutwack (1984) argues that Literature of twentieth century perceives the elements of traditional literature as obsolete. He posits that many literary criticisms fail in their inclusion of science in theorising but literary geography does as it specifically renders space, motion things, processes and places in their exploration with the assistance and knowledge of literary geography critics. In addition, he argues that many take interest in place as an important issue in general while technologies render the earth inhabitable for men as its cause of fear and anxiety and poses warnings to environment. To him, the aim is whether or not man can change and think outside the best and reason better to make his environment habitable inspite of all these.

According to Lutwack (1984), Literature of place has distinct elements from ecological and historical literature. He submits that a new look and interest with formal elements are the peculiarities in literature of place. He further submits that such literature gives the public a new recognition and radical change occurs in such environment that possibly makes such place uninhabitable. From the position of Lutwack, the meaning of place according to him can be termed to be delimited place as explained above from the submission of de Certeau.

Lutwack (1984) argues that it is essential that some elements of Literature such as setting, scene, landscape and space are not essential to him unlike place. To him, place is more scientific and philosophical than the rest, without considering landscape, space and scene that they are scientific too if they are thoroughly explicated especially negotiating space from diasporic point of view where characters struggle to survive and fight for position in foreign land that is hostile to them. In other words, space means survival that Lutwack does not pay attention to. Again, he distinguishes between place and setting. According to him, setting denotes a place of action in both fictional and dramatic works but it cannot describe the “use of places unrelated to action, metaphors and consciousness of characters”.

Lutwack (1984) defines the term landscape as events that could be seen and unseen in the surface of the earth as the psychology of individual could create and figure this out. In other words, to him, landscape has to do with physical and invisible objects or anything in life with little impact on the author, or movement and action of the characters. He further submits that place has literal and symbolic meanings as it serves both geographical and metaphorical functions.

Thus, mountains have come to represent aspiration and trial; forests and swamps, peril and entrapment; houses, stability and community; roads or paths, ad-venture and change.

The above extract discusses traditional or archetypal meanings of places in Literature but the term “place” to Lutwack is philosophical and experimental that old position of place was. To him, place reveals how humans manage time and how authors manage time in certain places for certain effects—hatred, assault, survival, and freedom.

Bhabha (1994) views boundary as a place as it is a place to start something. To him, boundary becomes a place from which something begins its movement, “ambivalent articulation of the beyond”. The submission of Bhabha points to two kinds of places across boundary: good and bad.

Gennep (1909) expounds the etymological submission of “the rites of passage”. To him, it is transition from one level, stage or place in life to another such as from birth to social, to puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialisation, and death. In addition, he divides rites into sections such as contagious rites, sympathetic rites, positive rites, negative rites, direct rites, and indirect rites. He further stresses that all these are under animistic rites. For example, a pregnant woman who is afraid of eating berry to avoid being affected by her baby falls under sympathetic rites and dynamic rites because the woman sympathises with the baby in her womb and her choice is dynamic. To Gennep, transformation from one stage to another is called “liminal spaces” or “liminality” because it points to boundary spaces or transformative places.

According to Vaneigem (1967), the world is full of *-isms* practice as the core indicator of truthfulness about humanity. Furthermore, he argues that the feeling of humiliation is mainly the feeling of being an object. To him, it is not a mirage experiencing humiliation, racism, hatred and domination from others but solutions to avert all the listed abnormalities are essential.

In Jackson’s (1994) view, the importance of landscape studies or writings causes change in/to human culture and actions. He submits that because man lives in urban or industrial environments that are always busy,

time is more essential to man, than place and performance. In addition, he argues that busy places, parking lots, loading docks and suburban garages are places purposely for work, leisure and sexual intercourse rather than means of getting to places (achieve tangible goals).

According to Jackson (1994), “sense of place” in modern period is not the same in classical. He reminiscences the classical period as people considered places as unique even if dilapidated they believed they were controlled and nurtured by spirits unlike the modern period that means little to urban planners, and interior decorators. To him, modern culture rejects the notion of divine or supernatural presence. He acknowledges the regard the eighteenth century accorded to divine presence of environments and places “the genius of a place” to express the influence of supernatural impacts on places and environments. He concludes that some old architectures and places were not taken care of and people appreciate events in most of the sacred places than the places that nurture the events.

Cosgrove (1998) stresses the importance of geographical humanism over traditional geography as geographical humanism deals with both preserving and nurturing landscape and nature as well as establishes the identity and experience of the insider”.

Code (2006) views place as ecological thinking and considers it to be the study of habitats both physical and social where people endeavour to live together. Invariably, she posits that men and women from different places inspite of their color or race are encouraged to live well in any region, city or continent they find themselves. To her, ecological thinking works against “the imaginary of God-given human dominion over all the earth but to re-examine the world better with solutions to cause growth to humanity.

Auge (2023), in the introductory segment of his work entitled, *Non-places*, argues that there are places of meeting and exchange for some outsiders that are not considered to be part of the meeting. Therefore, Auge’s submission reveals that there are instances and situations where there is/are no place(s) for some people or characters in any work of art. He further stresses that there are places that have “walls, positions, and barriers” that intentionally restrict people from migrating to their cities or countries such as America, Latin America, Cairo and so me other parts of the world. In other words, the kind of place here can be called restricted, controlled or private place. However, there is purpose for such which may be on attempt to control from external problems, or ability to control economy, to maintain morality, and to avoid threat and banditry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theories used in this paper are Tuan’s *Topophilia* (1974), Slovic *et al.*’s (2019) nature writing,

and Serpil *et al.*’s (2011) ethical responsibilities and awareness towards planet nurturing. To Tuan, *Topophilia* is a component of Eco-Literature that perceives environmental protection as the target of Americans and Europeans as well as other places on Earth. He posits that Americans “see everywhere as a threatened earth.” Furthermore, he defines topophilia as the “affective bond between people, place or setting”. Tuan’s submission could be termed *double entendre* that “threatened earth” by Americans. It could be threat to other places as Americans are viewed as industrious and intelligent that people from other continents are struggling to relate with.

Tuan (1977) argues that both space and place are synonymous because they “denote common experiences.” He further argues that “place is whatever stable object catches our attention.” In addition, he defines place, space and time as components that one cannot avoid and one cannot do without the other.

As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at point of interest. Each pause is time enough to create image of place that looms large momentarily in our view. The pause may be of such short duration and the interest so fleeting that we may not be fully aware of having focused on any particular object; we believe we have simply been looking at the general scene.

In the above excerpt, it should be noted that between time and place, there is an atom of space that likely makes a character reacts positively or negatively which may constitute another time in action.

According to Tuan (1977), places are not necessarily visible or physical but places can be made physical and visible through some means such as rivalry and conflict with other places, visual prominence, and the evocative power of art, architecture, ceremonials and rites.

Tuan (1977), stresses the importance of literary art of place, to readers and to the viewers of such art as it reinforces human reasonings and knowledge.

A function of literary art is to give visibility to intimate experiences, including those of place... Literary art can illuminate the inconspicuous fields of human care such as a Midwestern town... Literary art draws attention to areas of experience that we may otherwise fail to notice.

To him, literary art assists readers or viewers to know more about people and themselves as readers as they read people in themselves as readers. In addition, he submits that space and place merge but “space is more abstract than place.” In other words, space is the vehicle that drives man to occupy a place. Therefore, place and space are twins that assist each other to function in any successive literary composition or engagement.

Tuan (1996), submits that cultural particularism and ethnic heritage carry greater resonance than cosmopolitanism and universalism. To him, cultural affiliation and ethnic heritage are greater and meaningful than “space” as they assist people to find space and maintain their culture and heritage together with their identities as they precede space.

Tuan (2008), submits that human goodness is exciting and has “its range of manifestation”. To him, “human goodness” has positive results more than exhibition of bad or evil features. His position is superb but he fails to expatiate on any kind of human goodness because “variety is the spice of life” they say. Therefore, situations would determine human goodness, or goodness of any personality. In addition, human good behaviour has space between him and another man which could be termed to be feeling or attitude; attitude or feeling shapes one’s life to have a better space that would definitely create a better or habitable place(s).

Slovic *et al.* (2019) reveal that early ecocriticism started as the field of study that examines Literature and environment as they conclude that it is otherwise called “nature writing”. Furthermore, they allude to William Rueckert’s work entitled *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, 1978 that ecological concepts are embedded in the literary expression, especially in poetry. From the position of Rueckert stated by Slovic and Rangaraja, it could be inferred that they are romanticists as they submit poetry is the core genre of Literature that discusses nature writing. Therefore, they fail as they do not recognise other genres of Literature (drama and prose) as there are elements and instances of nature issues and ecological knowledge in them.

Serpil *et al.* (2011) argue that Ecocritical Literature has to go with emphasis on ethical responsibility towards the planet. They further submit that without ethical foundation, man would not know how and where to intervene in the world’s problems. In addition, they submit that the future of Ecocriticism requires awareness in their own countries and teach everyone such as programmers and universities around the world, raising awareness and ways of protecting environment.

DEMYSTIFYING THE CONCEPT OF PLACE AS A LITERARY TECHNIQUE IN ADICHIE’S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*

Action place, according to de Certeau, is a place of “frontiers” dividing time and type of action where activities are taking place. In this case, leaders can either be black, or white be positive or negative as they carry out hurdles before them. In one of the stories in *The Thing Around Your Neck*, entitled, *Jumping Monkey Hill*, action place comes to play as black characters converge in South Africa in a place called Jumping Monkey Hill as it is the eponym of the story. Black characters together

for action where African writers workshop always holds for the successes to promote African writing to the world about their heritage, identity, and aspirations.

At mid-morning, discreet black maids made the bed, cleaned the elegant bathtub, vacuumed the carpet, and left wildflowers in handcrafted vases. Ujunwa found it odd that the African workshop was held here, at Jumping Monkey Hill, outside th Cape Town....Later, she would learn that Edward Campbell had chosen the resort; he had spent weekends there when he was a lecturer at the University of Cape Town years ago. (p. 61)

The excerpt does not only depict African young writers coming together to build themselves and the different countries in the continent of Africa (as action place) but also explores triumph place as charaters like Ujunwa, Senegalese, Ugandan, and the Zimbabwean come together to be triumphants in their chosen career (Pp.61-62). The excerpt also portrays place of mastery as they all come together to master the art of writing which is obvious (P. 63) as Ujunwa, a Nigerian writes a story about Chioma, a graduate of Economics at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria. The lecturer at the workshop is a whiteman, Edward Campbell, whose temporal stay reveals temporal place as he soon plans to leave for abroad after his long stay at the University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Furthermore, common place takes a form of silence and muteness for a certain reason or aim. In the story, *Jumping Monkey Hill*, another story, story-within-story occurs through creative writing prowess of Ujunwa who writes how her shero, Chioma keeps mute when her interviewer who wishes to give her job squeezes her breast and she decides to keep mute without telling her mother her experience. This is a common place to the interviewer but to the interviewee (Chioma, the shero), it is a place termed delimited place because it is a place of threat and taking advantage of her by her supposed boss.

In *Jumping Monkey Hill*, abstract place occurs when the leader of the workshop, Edward Campbell, introduces his wife, Isabel to the African butting creative writers at the workshop. The appearance of Isabel and her gesticulation creates pure art when she tells her husband after introducing her in the workshop that “Now, dear, remember to introduce me properly at lunch. Her tone would have been delicate” (P. 63). The arena reveals abstract place which creates a kind of self-confidence and self-love of Isabel as self-love and self-confidence are the elements of creativity that disappear after action or performance. From the above quote, place of establishment is created to the emerging creative writers in attedance probably learning to correct or dominate their husbands in the future if they wish to marry.

In another instance in the *Jumping Monkey Hill*, Isabel creates a delimited place but Ujunwa creates an abstract place when she imagines the proud attitude of

Isabel towards her but keeps mute to hide her royal lineage.

The next day at breakfast, Isabel used just such a tone when she sat next to Ujunwa and said that surely, with that exquisite bone structure, Ujunwa had to come from Nigeria royal stock. The first thing that came to Ujunwa's mind was to ask if Isabel ever needed royal blood to explain the good looks of friends back in London. She did not ask that but instead said—because she could not resist—that she was indeed a princess and came from an ancient lineage and that one of her forbears had captured a Portuguese trader in the seventeenth century and kept him, pampered and oiled, in a royal cage. (P. 63)

In the above extract, the attitude and the mien of Isabel are threats to Ujunwa as this can be said to be delimited place but the stakes of the story from the space of Ujunwa shows the triumph place as the past of Ujunwa reveals that her forbears subdued and captured a Portuguese trader in the city in the past. This is no doubt that triumph place comes to play through the thought of Ujunwa and this creates emotional balance that her ancestors had control over a Portuguese may point to the capturing of some invaders in the continent of Africa in the past, during colonisation in Africa.

There are other strands of places in the description of each place in Africa in *Jumping Monkey Hill* by the narrator when the voice describes Africans in the past.

You Kenyans are too submissive! You Nigerians are too aggressive! You Tanzanians have no fashion at all! You Senegalese are too brainwashed by the French! They talked about the war in the Sudan, about the decline of the African Writers Series, about books and writers. (P. 64)

In the above extract, the narrator in the first line creates a delimited place as the narrator does not get the point right because the Kenyans were not submissive in the past as their Mau Mau uprising shows their aggressiveness not submissiveness as pointed out by the narrator. This is a delimited place as it is obvious that Adichie through her narrator understands literary censorship probably she is afraid of the western criticisms that is why she writes that the Kenyans in the past were submissive. To these researchers, Adichie through her narrator, creates a delimited place that serves as threats to the Kenyans as the wrong information is dished out about them. In addition, it can be said that it is ironically written that the Kenyans were submissive because they were the threats to the West. In this case, the situation here makes this delimited place to be termed ironical place, according to the first line of the excerpt. Other lines in the extract discuss place of mastery and place of establishment as each of the people from each of the countries masters and knows the peculiarity of her

people. This makes the lines the place of mastery as the behaviours of these people are mastered by the narrator and the readers. The case of Nigeria is ambiguous because the narrator does not say the era of Nigerians' aggressiveness; colonial period, or Nigerian Civil War. The place of establishment is obvious as the narrator points out the fact of the establishment of writers' workshop in the *Jumping Monkey Hill*, and erecting of African Writers Series and the decline of it. No doubt, the establishment of the place or African Writers Series serves as trajectory and promotes education and enlightenment in Africa and beyond.

DEMYSTIFYING THE CONCEPT OF PLACE AS LITERARY TECHNIQUE IN ADICHIE'S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*

There are instances of de Certeau positions of kinds of places in the text as against the traditional concept of place that can be termed setting, arena, or location. Therefore, kinds of places such as common place, delimited place, abstract place, action place, triumph place, place of mastery, and place of establishment are explored in the text, *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

The narrator narrates the kind of place most of the African Americans live in America especially how they drive miles away from white men's environment before they can plait their hair. The extract below reveals delimited place.

He laughed and said the job was good, was worth living in an all-white town even though his wife had to drive an hour to find a hair salon that did black hair. The trick was to understand America to know that America was give-and-take. (P. 72)

In the above voice of the narrator, it is clear as crystal that African Americans experience serious threat and hatred to the extent they have to drive away from the white men's environment before they could do their hair. This depicts delimited place as the Blacks face segregation and try to create a comfortable and better place for themselves despite whatever it costs them like wasting fuel, stress in driving and sweating out unavoidable sweat all in the name of survival. However, it is obvious in the excerpt that, America is a triumph place as pointed out that "the trick was to understand America" to know that it is give and take space. This proves four places; delimited place, place of mastering America's gimmicks, triumph place, and place of establishment. All these are obvious in the above excerpt but there are questions that have unexhausted answers such as, Is America truly a triumph place for the colored people? Is it truly a place of mastery if not hatred towards blackness? Is it truly a place of reliable establishment for the colored people?

In the text, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, Adichie reveals delimited place which occurs among

black people; Akunna and her uncle who sponsors her to America but later turns threat.

Until your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept with old boxes and cartons and pulled you force-fully to him, squeezing your buttocks, moaning. He wasn't really your uncle; he was actually a brother of your father of your father's sister's husband, not related blood. (Pp. 72-73)

Apart from delimited place or place of threat and humiliation exhibited by Akunna's uncle in America, there are also abstract place and temporal place that Akunna's uncle does not understand in illicit or immoral sex that kills than AIDS. If he had understood the consequences of temporal or abstract place during illegal sex, he would not have made such advancement to have "dirty affairs" with her own blood that would not only bring shame on him but also cut strong tie that Africans cherish and appreciate as their heritage.

In Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the narrator uses swift as readers are eager to know the name of the shero of the story which later reveals to be Akunna, meaning "Father's Wealth". This can be termed to be place of establishment of fact or expected fact. (P. 74) This is contrary to places of establishment that have been explored above as they point to places of establishment of physical things, or successes. Here, it is talking about emotional successes that can be termed narrative therapy (instead of usual suspense in literary space). From another lens, it can be called place of action as readers and critics later get the grip of what the story is all about and how to weave the shero with other events in the story as they are in the dark from the beginning of the story having focalisation of who the shero would be.

Another kind of place is portrayed in the aim of Akunna's boyfriend, Professor Cobblewick's who aims to visit Nigeria so as to mock people and add them into his memorabilia of mockery.

He said he really wanted to see Nigeria and he could pay for you both to go. You did not want him to pay for you to visit home. You did not want him to go to Nigeria to add it to the list of countries where he went to gawk at the lives of poor people who could never gawk back at his life. (P. 77)

In the excerpt, there are two places. First, triumph place; visiting Nigeria by Professor Cobblewick's is triumph to him as he believes that it is another achievement. Another place is delimited, as he would turn Nigeria and Africa to objects of hatred, and mockery before his people any time he goes back to America.

Delimited place is obvious in the way Akunna observes in her conversation with Professor Cobblewick's that American tertiary institutions do not

embark on strike actions and they do back home in Nigeria, or Africa.

He was a senior at the state university. He told you how old he was and you asked why he had not graduated yet. This was America, after all, it was not like back home, where universities closed so often that people added three years to their normal course of study and lecturers went on strike after strike and still were not paid. (P. 75)

Undoubtedly, delimited place does not only happen when black and white people come in contact but also from the excerpt it is clear as crystal that there are instances of delimited place as African and Nigerian governments deny the university lecturers their pays and entitlements. The above excerpt reveals pessimism when the narrator ends his regret that "and still were not paid".

There is a clash of place of triumph or establishment and delimited place in the experience of Akunna in America. The narrator relates with Akunna that "The thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go". (P. 77) Akunna's meeting with Professor Cobblewick's, a white man, relieves her delimited place she has been living (*The Thing Around Your Neck*) as the man treats her like queen with little or no segregation. She later experiences triumph as a new place after much delimited place she has been encountering in the streets of America.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the concept of place is demystified as the researchers used the submission of de Certeau that place is more than settings and common events but unique and place of serious assignment such as delimited place, action place, place of mastery, place of establishment, and place of triumph. The findings in the text, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and *Jumping Monkey Hill* reveal some instances where the Blacks suffer in the hands of the Whites which termed to be delimited place or place of threats. In addition, Blacks also torment their own people back home in Nigeria, Africa as Nigerian government both in the past and present refused to pay remunerations that commensurate with lecturers tasks in various universities across Nigeria. Therefore, to avoid "the thing that wrapped around Akunna's neck" not to choke many Africans both at home and in the Diaspora, most of the Africans or colored people need to strive hard for success and create especially place of establishment and place of triumph to make them unique and productive anywhere around the world. This research recommends that Africans should recognise and adhere to the African concept, *botho* among the Batswana people in Botswana that "people or humanness" is important to live a successful life. In other words, the concept of "Eniyan", from etymology, *eni ti ori yan*; translated, *the chosen* which must be understood by the Africans that any

human is uniquely created to occupy places of establishment and triumph with little delimited place.

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