

The Representation of the Violation of Afghan Women's Social and Political Rights in Canadian Newspapers

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RESUMEN: Utilizando una metodología basada en el «análisis de contenidos», se estudia cómo aparece representada la violación de los derechos de las mujeres afganas, en una muestra de periódicos representativos canadienses, tras los atentados del 11 de septiembre de 2001 y la consiguiente guerra en Afganistán. Los problemas planteados en la descripción de una sociedad y cultura lejanas y desconocidas, desde un punto de vista occidental, afloran con mayor intensidad en momentos traumáticos o de gran carga emocional para la sociedad que se propone abordar tales representaciones. En consecuencia, la polarización y el maniqueísmo desplazan a la objetividad y la imparcialidad, como métodos defensivos de demonización del «otro», mientras que los medios de comunicación adoptan un papel primordial en la legitimación de la diferencia, en connivencia con las ideologías dominantes.

Palabras clave: derechos humanos, discriminación de la mujer, sociedad musulmana, violencia, representación cultural, medios de comunicación, análisis cualitativo.

ABSTRACT: Resorting to «content analysis», this paper explores how the violation of Afghan women's rights is represented in four leading Canadian newspapers in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks and the subsequent war in Afghanistan. The problems and shortcomings inherent in any attempt to represent societies and cultures different from one's own, from a Western perspective, surface openly when such societies are faced with traumatic events. Thus, Manichean polarization substitutes objectivity as a defensive method to protect and reaffirm one's own society and culture. The media, in turn, contribute to such a process, aiding in the legitimization of difference and alterity by aligning with the current dominant ideologies.

Keywords: human rights, women discrimination, Muslim society, violence, cultural representation, mass media, qualitative analysis.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article (1), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms [...] without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article (2), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

Representing a turning point in history, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted on 10 December 1948 as a result of the Second World War and the violations against humanity that occurred during that period. The Declaration, a cornerstone of human rights, sets out the fundamental rights shared by the whole human family, explicitly rejecting, as asserted in Articles (1) and (2) quoted above, any type of discrimination based on gender differences.¹ Since 1976 a number of international conferences have addressed issues concerning women's rights in particular,² but in spite of all the international efforts, women continue to suffer: increased violations of women's rights, including social, physical, economic, and even educational ones, have been documented in many countries all over the world over the past few years. Georgina Ashworth's *The Silencing of Women* (1999) provides many examples of the inequalities and violations against women, young girls, and even children, while examining, as well as their limited political participation, the increase in women's poverty, the violations of their right to physical security, the access to health care, and the abuse of their economic rights. Rendel (1997: 179) declares, «women are disadvantaged both in the private domain of the family and in the public domain of employment,

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1. In addition to the Declaration, two important international documents complete the recognition of basic human rights: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Both were adopted internationally in 1966 and entered into force in 1976. Their advantage lies in their statement of procedures for reporting and enforcing the human rights status.
 2. These include: the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Women's Convention) held in 1979; the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna Conference); the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD or Cairo Conference); the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (Social Summit or Copenhagen Conference); and the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Women's Conference or Beijing Conference).

economic activity and political life. These disadvantages rest on long-existing traditions and profound beliefs about women». The issue of the representation of women's rights and the violations of those rights features prominently in the mass media. However, such coverage must be subjected to a certain critical analysis, since the media often present the violence against women selectively, choosing to focus on specific violated rights while ignoring others. Alternatively, the rights of women in Western societies are compared at the same level with those of women in other societies governed by different ideologies. Using representation theory, this article tries to determine how a sample of four Canadian newspapers (*The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, and *The Montreal Gazette*) represent the issues of women's rights and their violations - as a part of the representation of violence - in a society with an ideological background different from its own, specifically, the Muslim society of Afghanistan.

1. Media and the Representation of Violence

The mass media are both important channels for the transmission of ideas, thoughts, norms, and values within societies, and key participants in the representation of such issues as religion, race, and gender. In his 1983 publication, *Mass Media and Human Services: Getting the Message Across*, Edward Brawley clearly outlines the importance and deep influence of the mass media in our lives:

The mass media constitute a powerful and pervading force in our lives. We are exposed daily to a bombardment of media messages. Most of the information we receive about our community, our state, the nation, and the world comes to us through newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. (Brawley, 1983: 11)

Moreover, the mass media play a vital role in shaping their audiences' knowledge, as well as the images and opinions of people about events surrounding them: «Our understanding of and attitudes toward people, events, and problems are greatly influenced by the information and views communicated through these media» (Brawley, 1983: 12). Above all, using different approaches and techniques, the mass media mix news stories - «facts» - with their interpretation in the representation of any given information: «News stories, like myths, do not “tell it like it is”, but rather, “tell it like it means”» (Bird and Dardenne, 1988: 71).

In his study on the effects of ethnicity and national culture on the interpretation of media texts - specifically, television texts - Harindranath (2000: 154) states the relevance of the audience's social positioning:

[The audience's] socio-cultural situatedness can and must be assumed. They function as social subjects of a particular class, society or culture, as family members, and it is not difficult to see their behaviours, including media consumption and interpretation, being shaped by the membership.

In the context of representation theory, Stuart Hall (1997: 15) conceives representation as closely involved with the production of meaning: «Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things». Additionally, in «The Work of Representation», Hall (1997: 16) offers a precise definition of representation from the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: «To represent something is to describe or depict it, to call it up in the mind by description or portrayal or imagination: to place a likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses; [...]to represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for».

This is in fact what the mass media (including television, radio broadcasting, newspapers, etc.) usually do. They represent the world for us by portraying it through language, features, comments, pictures, and audio / visual materials, and in so doing they confer meaning to events. For this reason, true representation by the media is extremely important, especially in transnational reporting, because audiences understand and remember information, as well as the meaning of events, according to the way these are constructed and represented by the mass media. The representation of factual reality by the mass media poses questions as to its full implementation and ultimate accomplishment, as Bird and Dardenne (1988: 82) suggest: «Journalists know that events seem more real to readers when they are reported in story form; when they do this they find themselves slipping into the mire of “fiction” and hauling out the lifebelts of objectivity and fact». Another perspective concerned with the part that language plays in the representation process is that of Deacon, Pickering, Golding and Murdock (1999: 144), who argue that the linguistic analysis carried out in media research can reveal how powerful media discourse is: «The most interesting linguistic analyses of media texts and representations have exposed the assumptions and values that are wrapped up in the construction of even relatively simple grammatical forms, such as headlines». Additionally, in early feminist studies, scholars assumed that the process of representing women was mainly an expression of social reality. Simultaneously, they recognized that this expression reflected male attitudes and the status of women in their respective societies, constituting, in fact, the misrepresentation of «real women» (Barker, 1999: 97).

2. The Problematic Nature of Cultural Representation

Following the 11 September 2001 attack on the United States of America, the world has gathered in front of the television screens, the newspapers and other media all over the world to keep up with the ensuing events. After establishing that the key person behind the United States disaster was leading training camps for terrorists in Afghanistan, the United States military began its retaliation against the governing regime in the Afghan territories. This situation has led to mounting interest in the West in getting more information about Afghan women, human rights and Islam, and other associated issues in the context of the United States «war on terrorism».

Given that «human rights are [assumed to be] gender neutral», it is important to study the representation of women's rights by the mass media, for, as Ashworth (1999: 259, 263) notes, women have frequently been misrepresented by them: «The media often savaged the female victim - misrepresenting, ridiculing, denigrating, and inciting sexual hatred». Following Ashworth's argumentation, this paper examines how Canadian newspapers, when representing violations of the rights of Afghan women, indirectly present their own society, «the self», as a perfect protector and defender of women's rights. In contrast, the Afghan society, «the other», including its religious, political, social, and cultural systems, is portrayed as one which humiliates women and violates their human rights, and specifically, women's rights - an approach which can be described as «self-serving positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation» (van Dijk, 1998: 317). The purpose of this paper is to explore the representation by the Canadian newspapers (Western media) of the human rights status of women in Afghanistan immediately following the United States air strikes, concentrating on the violations of the social and political rights of Afghan women, and evaluating the nature of such representations, whether positive or negative.

In order to engage in a meaningful discussion of the representation of violence against Afghan women in Canadian newspapers, a note must be made about the debates concerning Islam and human rights: one standpoint claims that Islam is a barbaric religion that violates human rights, especially those of women; that Muslim man mistreats, subjugates, and disadvantages women and discredits their role in society and as human beings. According to Subbamma (1988: 3), the Muslim woman is «a miserable creature without any rights whatsoever in respect of marriage, succession, guardianship or birth control». Such a view is also in consonance with the statement that claims that most Asian and Middle Eastern countries continue to embrace a patriarchal social system which supports and perpetuates male domination. Other scholars, however,

refute this accusation, arguing that Islam respects women as equal to men, and that it upholds their rights. In her study of the religious debate concerning Islam and gender in Iran, Ziba Mir-Hosseini (1999) argues that gender roles and relations generally, and women's rights, specifically, are not fixed, not given and not absolute; they differ from one society to another, from one culture to another. Supporting this view, Karim (2000: 63) states that the differences between Western and Islamic cultures underlie the misunderstanding between both. Similarly, Edward Said (1979: 272) maintains that

Islam has been fundamentally misrepresented in the west - the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer.

3. Methodology and Sampling

For this study, content analysis is adopted as the method of data collection, since «content analysis involves specialized procedures for processing scientific data. Like all research techniques, its purpose is to provide knowledge, new insights, [and] a representation of “facts”» (Krippendorff, 1980: 21). However, this paper relies only on the qualitative approach of content analysis in terms of the specific qualitative factors which conform the main topics of this research: 1) descriptions and types of women's rights, and their violation (this category includes the characteristics of the rights and the violators of these rights); 2) attitudes (whether positive, neutral or negative); 3) style of reporting (informative, problematic or comparative); 4) drawing attention (including photos and pictures).

Sampling for this paper includes four categories: newspapers, forms of coverage, duration, and specific topic under analysis. In order to include various perspectives to fairly represent the range of Canadian newspapers, the following four newspapers³ have been selected - *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, and *The Montreal Gazette*.

3. The analysis includes many different forms of coverage such as news, features, opinions, articles, comments, etc., published throughout October 2001. The topic under analysis is the social and political rights of Afghan women, including rights to education, health, employment, and political participation, as well as the rights in marriage.

4. Main Findings of the Study

4.1. Style of Reporting

Largely, the four newspapers under scrutiny use the comparative style (comparing the status of women's rights in Afghanistan with that in either the United States, Canada or Western societies generically); the problematic style (illustrating the sophistication of human rights in Western societies and the decline of human rights in the Afghan regime or ideology); and finally, the information style (an average style of representing news about Afghan women's rights).

The National Post: During the period of analysis, *The National Post* did not mention Afghan women's rights specifically, but concentrated basically on the overall civil rights of Afghan citizens. While it did mention in a broad way Islam and its impact on Afghan society, it did not use Afghan women's rights as a tool in representing either the Afghan society or Islam. This newspaper dealt with the subject of human rights directly by opening various debates, mainly centred on Islam and the terrorist leaders. In particular, the Taliban regime was represented as the violator of all Afghan citizens and their rights, positioning the Taliban as «the Other». Conversely, *The National Post* represented the Western «Self» as the hero or defender of those rights by illustrating the kindness and generosity of the United States troops, who distributed humanitarian aid to the Afghan civilians.

The Globe and Mail: *The Globe and Mail* constituted a relevant source for discovering how a mainstream Western newspaper would represent Afghan women's rights. Two examples were provided by this newspaper to prove the violations of women's rights. One of these was a feature on the «Sunera Thobani» case, which sparked wide debate as a result of Thobani's criticism of the United States for waging war against Afghanistan, and for her description of the United States policy as «soaked in blood». *The Globe and Mail's* Margaret Wenté stated in a commentary published on October 4, 2001, entitled «Two reasons to thank Sunera Thobani», that she was an «idiot» and said «idiotic things». Wenté's remarks in this context are important because she resorts to the comparison style of reporting to state that only women in Western democracies enjoy basic human rights and freedoms: «The truth is that the emancipation of women anywhere on this planet depends solely on the spread of Western democratic values».

Yvonne Ridley's story is another example of this type of feature. Ridley, a British reporter who was captured and jailed after sneaking into Afghanistan, is now back in England reporting her tale of fear, as well as the status of women's rights in Afghanistan. She describes limitations on women's freedom such as the

mandatory wearing of the *burqua* and the prohibition to talk to men, which she experienced first hand while disguised as an Afghan woman. This story was published on 15 October, 2001 under the title «Prisoner of the Taliban».

The Ottawa Citizen: *The Ottawa Citizen* concentrated on comments and articles documenting news from Afghanistan. In their coverage, a noticeable word choice was the use of «we» when talking about the Canadian or the USA point of view, while «they» was preferred to refer to the Afghan regime, or Muslim regime, generally seen as «other» from the Western perspective. As in *The Globe and Mail*, Sunera Thobani also figured in *The Ottawa Citizen's* illustration of Afghan women's rights. The newspaper adopted the comparative style of reporting in posing the question as to whether the women in Afghanistan were enjoying their human rights in the same way as women in the United States or in Canada were. To answer this question, the newspaper illustrated the types of human rights violations suffered by women in Afghanistan, and, contrasted these with the enjoyment of such rights by USA and Canadian women. For example, in a report titled «The Taliban's secret foes» (20 October, 2001), Hilary Mackenzie cited a remark made by an Afghan woman regarding the depressed psychological state of Afghan women: «If these women were in the United States, I would hand out anti-depressants».

4.2. Attitude of Representation

In general, the attitudes of the four newspapers towards this particular issue were mainly negative, especially when dealing with social rights. The use of significant words was an indication of each newspaper's attitude towards the subject, especially when interpreting the «other» point of view. For example, if there is a piece of news where Afghan women appear working or studying - which are positive aspects - some of the following modifiers tend to be used: «rarely», «slightly», «few», «some», «briefly», which can be viewed in that context as negative words. In the same vein, «almost», «all», «every», «daily» tended to qualify the violation of such rights. On the other hand, a positive attitude was displayed in these four newspapers' representations of the opposing parties to the Afghan regime.

The Citizen resorted to negative attributes to report the Afghan regime's violent practices against women, such as «more violent», «most conservative».

Similarly, *The Montreal Gazette* utilized overt negative words to describe the Afghan women's violations, such as «most treacherous», «most-criminal», and «most anti-democracy».

The Globe and Mail adopted absolute words to describe the type of violation along with the violators, e.g. the «dictators» and «fascists», who force girls and women to stay at home, forbid them to socialize with males, and even to go to school or work.

No definite positioning could be inferred from the data collected from *The National Post*, despite the fact that it had a general negative attitude in the coverage of other features of the violence against Afghan women.

4.3. Location of the News / Narratives

On the whole, most of the news regarding Afghan women's rights or human rights in general were placed on the front pages or in the front sections of the four newspapers under analysis. This fact reinforces Karim's (2000: 117) assumption that the dominant discourses of a society usually appear in the front pages: «Even though alternative narratives do appear occasionally in the back pages of newspapers, the enactments of the dominant discourse continue to be placed in the front sections».

4.4. Usage of News Photographs

Photographs are an important feature of the daily newspapers. Sometimes they can represent exactly what the author / editor intends to communicate but cannot express easily with words. Stuart Hall notes the importance of the «encoding process», in which the media produce a symbolic message, mainly understood as a system of signs (including, of course, language), and the receiver in turn translates it into the real meaning or event. Hall (1977: 343) argues that this process of «encoding» has different ways of representing events, which may be applied to the usage of photos or illustrations in newspapers: «There are significantly different ways in which events - especially problematic or troubling events, which breach our normal, common-sense expectations, or run counter to the given tendency of things or threaten the status quo in some way - can be encoded». It is important also to consider here Karim's (2000: 69) consideration about the effect of photos or illustrations in the news: «The captions of news photographs reinforce their ideological messages».

The Montreal Gazette: Photos published throughout October 2001 in *The Montreal Gazette* showed diversity in representing Afghan women's rights. On the one hand, Afghan women appeared practising their political rights in photographs

where they wore the traditional *burqua*, raised their hands in protest against the war, and demanded that the United States stop killing their people. On the other hand, they were also represented as victims, hidden from head to toe by the *burqua*, helpless, seeking refuge in Pakistan. Occasionally, they were pictured doing elementary / primary work, such as sewing or carrying a child in the street.

The National Post: In addition to being a way of expressing the power of the West against terrorism, photographs published throughout October 2001 in *The National Post* were a means of representing Afghan women. Mostly, women were presented as miserable, hungry, sick, and hidden, covered from head to toe with the *burqua*, or depicted as refugees carrying their children in the desert. These pictures also contain images that include signs of inequality towards women, or that imply the violation of gender equality or the social rights of women, such as an Afghan man walking in the street with his wife and children walking behind him. This specific representation may be the only one to contain an implication of the status of women in Afghanistan shown in *The National Post* during the period under analysis.

4.5. Characteristics and Traits of Afghan Women's Rights and the Afghan Regime

The terms used to describe characteristics and traits of both the Afghan women's rights and status, and the Afghan regime may be considered revelatory of the newspapers' positions.

The Montreal Gazette: Some important characteristics were mentioned in the news, articles, comments and features in *The Montreal Gazette* referring to both the Afghan Regime and the human rights status of Afghan Women. Some of the terms used to qualify the Afghan regime were: «most treacherous», «most-criminal», «most anti-democracy», «anti-women», «Islamic fundamentalist parties» and «violators». Words used to characterize the human rights status of the women in Afghanistan included: «pitiful conditions», «more pain», «first victims», «trapped», «escaped» and «assault on women's rights».

The Globe and Mail: The following words were adopted to indicate characteristics of the Afghan regime: «thugs», «dictators», «fascists», «repressive regime», «tribal chieftains», «fundamentalist Islamic movement», «hard-line regime of Taliban», «hostility of women», «hate», «Islamizing society», «conservative Muslim man». The most frequent terms employed to describe the Afghan women's status were: «violence against women», «women in trouble», «powerless women and girls».

The Ottawa Citizen: *The Citizen* refers to the Afghan regime in negative terms such as: «misogynist Afghani leadership», «male culture», «Sharia law», «twist Islam», «more violent», «most conservative», «Taliban regime», «polygamist, Islamic Extremist», «fanatics», «terrorists», «wild men», «inhumanity in the face of religion», «criminals», «fundamentalist», «backwards». The terms attributed to the Afghan women's status included: «grieving women», «oppress women», «miserable women», «helpless», «plight of women», «dark future for women», «oppression of women», and «brutality of women».

4.6. Description of Women's Rights

In the representation of the Afghan women's rights in *The Montreal Gazette*, the following are the types of rights or violations of rights mentioned throughout October 2001:

Type of Right	Description of Violation
Socialization / social life	Prohibition to talk with strangers Prohibition to associate or mix between males and females Prohibition to ride in a car alone
Employment	Lack of availability of choices in employment for Afghan women Mid-wife, teacher or seamstress are the only available jobs
Education	Prohibition to study for girls over 8 years old
Marriage	Pressure to marry Multiple marriage for the husband Marriage before a suitable age
Health	Lack of health care for both adult and young Afghan women Spreading of diseases
Physical rights	Malnutrition Hunger, lack of food Sexual aggression Being beaten by husband Being raped during wars among Afghans
Political rights	None

The Globe and Mail, in its representation of Afghan women's rights, mentioned the following as the types of rights or violations of rights throughout October 2001:

Type of Right	Description of Violation
Social rights	Inequalities between men and women in society Religious restrictions
Employment	Prohibition to work
Education	Ban on going to school Ban on music lessons at schools Strictness in learning the scriptures of the Qur'an
Marriage	Multiple marriage for the husband
Health	Ban on medical treatment by a male health worker Malnutrition Spreading of diseases Lack of vaccinations
Physical rights	Beaten Raped Harsh policies towards girls and women Kidnapping girls
Political rights	Ban on any and all public roles since the Taliban seized power in 1996

The Ottawa Citizen has represented the following types of rights or violations of Afghan women's rights throughout October 2001:

Type of Right	Description of Violation
Social rights	Death threats No social role or norm for women in society Forcing women to live separately from the public in Purdah Demand to cover head to toe with the <i>burqua</i> Prohibition to wear high heels Ban on any make-up Families and communities have been torn apart
Employment	Limited opportunities Prohibition to work
Education	Bombing and closing schools Lack of education Threatening teachers with public execution
Marriage	Giving a difficult and tough time to the Afghan widows Forcing into marriage
Health	Clinics set up for girls and women were bombed and looted Lack of food, malnutrition Spreading of diseases

	Denial of any medical care Denial of psychological rights
Physical rights	Forcing women into prostitution Driving women to depression and suicide Beating women Throwing acid in women's faces as punishment Raping girls
Civil and political rights	Not encouraging participation in politics Lack of freedom of speech Lack of safety in the country No democracy or freedom

As the above tables illustrate, employment, education, health and marriage appear as recurrent features in the description of women's rights in Afghanistan.

We must point out that only three newspapers were analyzed because a scanning of the publications of *The National Post* from the month of October showed that there were not any descriptions of Afghan women's social and political rights. *The Montreal Gazette*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Ottawa Citizen* concentrated mainly on the social rights and their violations, while they rarely mentioned political rights: *The Montreal Gazette* did not mention any political rights; *The Ottawa Citizen* appeared as the only newspaper that mentioned extensively the civil rights of Afghan women in relation to their political rights.

5. Final Considerations

In conclusion, there is certainly something to be said regarding the role of the mass media as an important tool in the representation of violence, where images, words, photos, and symbols are illustrative of the complex issues surrounding the violence against women. No one can deny that the 11 September 2001 events have affected not only the international and national political environment, but constituted a turning point in the cultural, social, and communicational levels as well.

This paper has explored how four Western newspapers represent the violations of Afghan women's social and political rights after that date. The findings show that *The Globe and Mail*, *The National Post*, *The Ottawa Citizen*, and *The Montreal Gazette* adopted both the problematic and comparative styles of reporting to draw a direct comparison between the Afghan and the Western societies in the representation of the violence against women, disregarding the major differences existing between these two societies on the ideological, social, and cultural levels.

Hence, major representations of the «self» position the West as hero and defender of women's rights.

Alternatively, the Afghan regime and society were, according to this sample of newspapers, the «other», usually identified as barbaric, and violator of women's rights. As examples of the latter, these newspapers cite, among others: forcing women into marriage, forcing women into prostitution, beating girls, raping women, the ban on education or schooling for girls, the lack of freedom of speech, or the rate of suicide. These results are largely consistent with Stuart Hall's (1997: 25) statement that the narrator plays a key role in interpreting events: «It is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning of the world through language».

It has been argued so far that the representation of violence is extended well beyond the actual action of violence, to the symbolism of violence. A Western newspaper that publishes a photograph of an Afghan woman wearing the *burqua* from head to toe, carrying a child, and holding another child in the desert, while accompanying her husband, who has the privilege of riding on the back of a donkey, is not only representing the violations of Afghan women's human rights: such a photograph suggests other conceptual images that are intertwined with it, and it is up to the reader / viewer to decode and interpret them.

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