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ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN'S *SULTANA'S DREAM*: A POST-MODERN READING

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Abstract:

Critics and research scholars have so far attempted to interpret and analyze Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's (1880-1932) *Sultana's Dream* (1905) from various perspectives, deriving specific meanings from the novel. Most of them discussed gender discrimination, women's equality, and the importance of education for women's emancipation, overlooking the indeterminacy of the novel's meaning and its multilayered meanings, as well as the concepts of intertextuality, pastiche, satire, and irony, which are key aspects of postmodern critical theory. The present study seeks to draw upon the senses, which are not precisely fixed in extent, intending to expose different meanings and styles the novel can pose. For

a better understanding of the meanings of the novel, it is necessary to closely examine some other writings of Begum Rokeya while interpreting the novel. Therefore, to attain the study's objectives, eclectic criticism, a combination of theories such as feminism, post-colonialism, and ecocriticism will be employed to uncover the exploitation and oppression of women by patriarchal capitalist society, colonial and religious agencies, celebratory manifestations of nature and environment, the interconnectedness of the novel with other works, and the combination of multiple elements of the style of the novel.

Key Words: Post-modernism, women, exploitation, patriarchy, environment.

Introduction:

Sultana's Dream, probably the most renowned writing of Begum Rokeya, was first published in Indian Ladies Magazine in 1905; later, it was published in 1908 as a book by S.K. Lahiri & Co. In the novel, she sketches her dream of women's rise and emancipation in India, a plan she dreamt of at the beginning of her literary career. Rokeya imagined a Utopian Ladyland without epidemic disease, mosquito bites, and premature death. Here, women are free from seclusion, independent, and authoritative over men. As men are also shackled inside the house, there is no thievery, robbery, or murder, and hence, there is no need for police and magistrates. It is a self-independent country where women's reign is wholly established.

This short novella lays bare enough scope for the critics and researchers to analyze and interpret it from different points of view and find their meanings, which are carefully reviewed and summarized in this research paper to find the research gap and validate the research topic. It is observed that the novel can be interpreted from a postmodern perspective, as some of the aspects of postmodernism are conspicuously prevalent in the story. This paper, therefore, aims to use some features of postmodernism, like indeterminacy of meaning, multilayered meaning, intertextuality, and pastiche, to interpret the novel to achieve the goal of the research paper.

Literature Review:

The article "Sultana's Dream And Its Conception Of A Feminist Utopia" (Sharma, 2017) discusses the gender discrimination Begum Rokeya experienced in her own family in terms of receiving education. Although she is from a higher-class Muslim family, she was not allowed to take any institutional education along with her elder sisters in the name of maintaining purdah. While her brother was sent to the Western world for higher education and later became a magistrate of colonial Indian administration, she was confined within the house's four walls. She also talks about child marriage, as Rokeya's elder sister was given marriage before the age of fourteen. Begum Rokeya, therefore, dreamt of an imaginary Lady Land where there would be no discrimination, and women would get more space in the public arena. She wrote the novel as an inspiration for Indian women who could not talk about their rights and bear the patriarchal oppressions silently. Through the novel's story, Rokeya tries to engage the female readers to believe in their worth and stand on their own to emancipate them from the clutches of patriarchy.

Mookherjea-Leonard, D. (2017), in her article "futuristic technologies and purdah in the feminist utopia: Rokeya S. Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream'" examines the experiences of Sultana as a purdah observing women in the lady land where Begum Rokeya reversed the role of men and women, and kept all men inside the houses. Sultana felt awkward and shy in her dream, walking in broad daylight

without a veil, even in front of unknown women in the streets of the ladies' land. It shows the strict purdah observation in Indian Muslim societies, socio-cultural repressions of women, and misinterpretation of religious scripts, which Rokeya ridiculed and tried to break through Sultana's dream. The article also talks about the skills and abilities of the women scientists competing with each other for new inventions at the universities of the Lady Land. They concentrated sun rays, used them to baffle the opponent's armies, and protected their country. They also invented air vehicles for transportation and drew rain from the clouds artificially, which they used to improve the country. Thus, Rokeya understood the importance of education and tried to inspire Indian women through the success stories of the women of the Ladyland to eliminate patriarchal oppressions.

The power of women and how they will achieve it are vividly expressed in her essay "Begum Rokeya, Sultana's Dream and Woman Power" by Falguni, A. (2010, Dec 11). Begum Rokeya understood it very well that, for the emancipation of Indian women, education is a must, which she showed in the novel. The dynamic queen of the Ladyland took many steps to educate the country's women. Therefore, she established many schools, colleges, and universities and equipped them with scientific knowledge as if they could serve themselves. Rokeya, thus, encouraged Indian Parents to empower their daughters with education through the initiatives of the queen of Ladyland so that they can earn their walk of life. Chakrabarty, P. (2014), in her article "A Contemplation on Sultana's Dream," also focuses on the importance of women's education to transform society. Begum Rokeya got all the women out of their houses, participated in politics, worked in schools, colleges, and laboratories, and maintained all interior decorations. Through her dream in the novel, she challenges the traditional set of principles laid down by patriarchal society, especially in Muslim communities. Her attempts to educate women made a consensus among the Hindu and Muslim communities. They comprehended the importance of women's education for their growth, to become an excellent companion to their husbands, and to become a good mother.

The article "Sultana's Dream: An Alternative View of Colonial Bengal" by Chatterjee, S. (2018, Sep 25) raises the issue of women's education and equality in colonial India. In the novel, men are kept inside their houses doing domestic chores, while women reign the country, lead educational institutions, and establish matriarchal power. Instead of making them adorable housewives, Rokeya urges women to be responsible citizens. She also illustrated the idea of women's education as a necessity rather than a privilege for the gradual development of the country.

Ahmed, I. (2022, May 16), in his article "Justice in Sultana's Dream: A Secular, Feminist, Anti-colonial and Sustainable Utopia Embodying the Ideas of Indian Modernism." focuses on the necessity of changes in the world of Rokeya as she explores the feminist society in her dream where the roles and norms of gender have been reversed. Women are posited in all socioeconomic and political affairs, while men are secluded only in household activities. In the article, the scholar has tried to show different forms of oppression and systematic marginalization of women, seeking proper justice instead of mere equality of women.

Hasanat, F. (2013) examines *Sultana's Dream* in the context of Utopian fiction, science fiction, and ecofeminism in her essay "Sultana's Utopian Awakening: An Ecocritical Reading of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*." Begum Rokeya wanted women of her society to have an illusory experience of freedom, setting the novel in a Ladyland and satirizing the very foundation of

the Muslim patriarchal system. The issues of gender, science, education, and religion are incorporated into the novel and challenge the restrictions that underestimate women's rights in Indian society.

Objectives:

- To identify postcolonial aspects of the novel with a particular focus on the indeterminacy of meanings of the story.
- To identify the oppression of women by patriarchy and religious agencies.
- To disclose postcolonial resistance by Indian women.
- To discover the causes of environmental degradation and ways to protect nature.
- To find out the unique writing style of the novel.
- To locate multiple elements from the previous genre.
- To focus on the interconnectedness of the story with other texts.

Research Method:

The qualitative descriptive method has been used to examine the data collected from primary and secondary sources to attain the research goal. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream*, *Women's Downfall*, and *Padmaragh* have been used as primary sources where the data related to the repressions of women, capitalist attitudes of patriarchal society, and environmental celebration and degradation have been collected as notes. Books, book chapters, journal articles, website articles, and newspaper articles on the literary works of Begum Rokeya have been used as secondary sources in this study. Information from all these sources related to the main idea of the research has also been accumulated and examined delicately. The researcher has also conducted a thorough literature review to show the contribution of other research scholars to authenticate and validate the research topic.

Discussion:

Indeterminacy of Meanings:

Postmodern writers do not have any control over the readers' response to their works. They keep their text open for the readers to make their meanings, interactions, and interpretations. There is no specific meaning of a text. The writers also do not guide the readers to find the purposes of the texts. In post-modern writings, the authors are declared dead and considered only paper authors. This idea came from Roland Barthes's *Death of the Author*, *From Work to Text*, and Derrida's "*Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*". Indeterminacy of the meaning of a text is, therefore, part and parcel of postmodernism, which is very much evident in *Sultana's Dream*. However, many scholars have tried to find specific meanings in the novel, which is also open to exploring different meanings in the same paper. Therefore, an eclectic critical theory, a combination of other approaches, will be used to examine the indeterminacy of the implications of the novel.

Feminist Point of View:

Sultana's Dream contains the elements and aspects of feminism, a critical theory that advocates women's equal rights in all aspects of life, exposing the oppression, deprivation, and marginalization of women by patriarchal religious agencies. Rokeya experienced bitter discrimination at the beginning of her life as an aristocratic landlord family member. She also witnessed the deplorable condition of women in society, which stirred her soft mind and urged her to find ways to alleviate their sorrows

and sufferings. Nevertheless, it was not easy to discuss women's issues in a society where patriarchy and religion decide the lot of women. Therefore, Rokeya attempted to present the plight of Indian women and how to attain their emancipation in disguise of a dream in *Sultana's Dream*. According to Alam, M. & Rima, N. A., it seems that Rokeya has portrayed the prevalent idea of gender in Indian society through the conversation between Sultana and Sister Sara in the story where Sultana represents the Indian stereotype, and Sara presents the concept of Rokeya that she wants Indian women to achieve.

From the beginning to the end of the story, Sultana's words reveal the utter oppression of women in society. When she was walking with Sister Sara, she said, "I was feeling very shy, thinking I was walking in the street in broad daylight." She also said, "I feel somewhat awkward. As being a purdahnishin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled." (Hossain, 1988, p. 7). We can comprehend the actual deplorable condition of women, especially Muslim women, from this statement of Sultana. Women in India cannot walk outside their houses in the daytime. They are also not allowed to walk without a veil as part of religious practice, restricting them from participating in sociocultural affairs. In *Oborodhbashini* or *Secluded Ones* (Hossain, 1931/1988, 26), Rokeya has delineated some of her experiences of purdah observation in different parts of India. One such observation is like this:

"Once, a house caught fire. The mistress of the house had the presence of mind to collect her jewellery in a hand bag and hurry out of the bedroom. But at the door, she found the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She could not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom with the bag and hid under her bed. She burnt to death but did not come out. Long live purdah!"

This is how Indian Muslim women are kept inside the dark house. They have no right to enjoy the sunlight in the open space. They cannot express their opinion and protest the injustice of the patriarchal society and fanatic religious scholars, which is evident from the words of Sultana on another occasion: "We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up women in the zenana." (Hossain, 1988, p. 9). The relationship between men and women in India is like that of a master and slave, which Rokeya expresses in her other essay, *Woman's Downfall*. To talk about the adversity of women, she boldly expresses her grievance over men who deprive them of receiving education, do not allow them to show their 'efficiency,' consider them as 'weak,' 'incompetent,' and 'inferior' and extend their helping hand leading them to 'become slaves of indolence and, by extension, of men.' When women lose their "ability to differentiate between freedom and captivity, progress and stagnation, slowly, from being landlords and master of the house, men, in stages, have ended up being our lord and proprietor" (Hossain, 2011, p. 6-7).

In such a state, Rokeya protested the attitude of men and reversed the role of gender in *Sultana's Dream*, where men are kept inside the house called *Mardana*, and women control all aspects of life. Through Sister Sara's words, we know that women receive compulsory education, run Universities, work in laboratories, discover new inventions, fight on the battlefield, receive all bounties and amenities from nature, and reign the country. Therefore, Sultana wants to amuse and amaze the people in India and "tell them that in the far-off Ladyland, ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the mardanas to mind babies, to cook, and to do all sorts of

domestic work.” (Hossain, 1988, p. 15).

Rokeya, thus, satirizes the existing social stratification that does not allow women to receive education and stand on their own. She also yearns for Indian women to endeavor to step ahead toward progress, cultivate their knowledge and intellect, and turn into commendable ladies of society, showing the success of women in the Ladyland.

Ecocritical Point of View:

The novel can be interpreted and examined through an ecocritical lens, focusing on the relationship between human beings and the physical environment. This relationship can be manifested in two ways: celebratory, which exalts and highlights the bounties of nature, and minatory, which shows the destruction of nature by human beings and many other agencies. The novel draws both aspects of nature through conversations between Sister Sara and Sultana. Rokeya’s concern about nature, its beauty, generosity, and power, are explicitly expressed through their words in the Ladyland, where women, nature, and scientific inventions live in a harmonious relationship. When Sultana was walking with Sister Sara, she enjoyed the delicate and grand scenario of the streets. She mistook a patch of green grass for a velvet cushion. It seemed to her that she was walking on a soft carpet. She found paths covered with moss and flowers wherever she looked in the Ladyland. The country looks like a garden since women skillfully plant all the trees.

Since women reign the country, they develop a sisterhood with nature. They maintain cleanliness and hygiene in all aspects of life, even in the kitchen, and never harm or destroy nature.

The kitchen was situated in a beautiful vegetable garden. Every creeper, every tomato plant, was itself an ornament. I found no smoke, nor any chimney either in the kitchen- it was clean and bright; the windows were decorated with flower garlands. There was no sign of coal or fire as cooking is done with solar heat. (Hossain, 1988, p. 11)

The noble queen of the Ladyland is fond of botany and wants to convert the whole country into a grand garden. She likes to walk on a garden path. She also employs all her lady scientists to discover and invent new gems from nature, and they enjoy nature’s gift as much as they can. Therefore, Ladyland has no epidemic, plague, mosquito bites, thunder, or flood since women live there rhythmically with nature. Here, people smoke most of the day, cut trees, burn wood and coal for cooking, do not maintain hygiene and cleanliness, and do not take care of botany and gardens, resulting in water and air pollution. When Sultana praised the way women in the Ladyland take care of flowers and gardens, Sister Sara said, “Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this, if only your countrymen wanted to make it so.” (Hossain, 1988, p. 8)

In reply to this statement, Sultana says that the people in India think that giving so much attention to horticulture is useless. Hence, people in India suffer from droughts, floods, mosquito bites, epidemic diseases, and premature death. Rokeya, therefore, wanted to show the people of India how to treat nature through the manifestation of nature in the Ladyland for ecological balance and sustenance of the environment.

Postcolonial Point of View:

Rokeya challenges not only the oppression and inequalities from a variety of sources like toxic masculinity, religious patriarchy, and industrial pollution but also British colonialism and its military

intervention. She was well aware of the fact that the European colonizers were destroying India politically, economically, and culturally. She was also well-informed about anticolonial resistance, like the Indian Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, the Indigo Revolt of 1859, the decades-long rejection of British interference in religious reform around the practice of *Sati*, and the later Tanka and Tebhaga riots (Ahmed, 2022). She also witnessed the anti-colonial movements in different parts of India and the mounting tension between communities. Therefore, she defied the expectations of her middle-class Muslim upbringing by pursuing her education in Bengali rather than in Arabic or Persian. She used her access to English education primarily to critique the colonial enterprise. (Dil, A. 2014). The use of the English language in writing the story acts against the ‘linguistic colonialism’ (Alam, 2006) prevalent during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. East India Company introduced English in the curriculum all over India to make Indian people accustomed to it, intending to make them suitable for official administrative work. However, this language was restricted only to the upper-class Hindus, depriving the Muslims, predominantly Muslim girls. In such a state, Rokeya started to campaign for the need for education for Muslim girls in India and published *Sultana’s Dream*, where she argued and justified female education. She learned English not only for official works but also to create literature to disclose her ideals as if the colonizers could comprehend, just like how Caliban was taught English by Prospero in *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare.

Rokeya exposes the brutal invasion of colonial power over the Layland thirty years ago through the words of Sister Sara. Referring to the country's history, Sara told Sultana that the neighboring country's king, representing the colonial power, declared war against our country since our noble queen refused to hand over some refugees. Despite the military officers, soldiers, countrymen, and boys over sixteen fighting bravely, they could not defeat the foreign army as they were too strong. Most of the warriors of the country were either killed or driven back, and the enemy came within twenty miles of the capital. In this situation, the lady principal of a university, with her two thousand students, marched to the battlefield, directed the concentrated sun heat towards the enemy, which they could not bear, and fled away, leaving guns and ammunition.

Here, Rokeya emphasizes education and scientific innovations for women in the Ladyland to fight against colonial power instead of brutal force. She understood very well that it is futile to fight against colonizers with arms and ammunition. Using scientific inventions to improve and defend existing territory is better than using military violence to conquer and expand boundaries. In this regard, the success of women in the Ladyland is a slap against the British colonial power and the religious patriarchy since women’s marginalization was caused by, in Loomba’s words, ‘the intermixed violence of colonialism and patriarchy’ (Loomba, 1998). According to Rokeya, it is better to ensure equal rights for men and women in society and empower women with knowledge and opportunities so that they can participate with men in a meaningful anti-colonial struggle (Hasan, 2015). Therefore, Rokeya wrote the story in English to reveal her critical message to the British and the higher-class English-educated people of Bengal.

Writing Style: Satire, Irony, and Parody

One of the most common features of postmodern authors is that they treat serious subjects playfully and humorously. Postmodern authors were not the first to use irony and humor in their writing, but for

many postmodern authors, these became the hallmarks of their style. (Nuri, M.A. 2013) observes that postmodern authors are very frustrated with World War II, the Cold War, and conspiracy theories; they try to illustrate it indirectly, so satire, irony, playfulness, and black humor come. One of the examples of texts that bear the above features is Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*. The central concept of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is the irony of the now-idiomatic "catch-22", and the narrative is structured around a long series of similar ironies. Such a feature is prevalent in *Sulana's Dream*, where Rokeya satirizes the dominating attitude of the then-patriarchal society as she kept all men inside the house doing household work and let women dominate over men in all aspects of life. She reversed the role of gender in the *Ladyland*, and it is evident from the first interaction of Sultana with her guide, Sister Sara, as she didn't find any men in the public places she visits:

"Where are the men?" I asked her.

"In their proper places, where they ought to be."

"Pray let me know what you mean by 'their proper places.'"

"O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors."

"Just as we are kept in the zenana?"

"Exactly so." (Hossain, 1988: 8)

Begum Rokeya, thus, shows her skills in implementing satirical language, which she uses on several occasions to gratify the humor of the readers in the same novel. She satirizes an opinion that men's brains are bigger and heavier than women's. She says that man can enchain an elephant and employ it according to his wishes, although it has a more significant and solemn brain than man's. She also satirizes the role of men in the *Ladyland*. The country has no sin or crime since men are kept inside the house. Hence, there is no need for police to arrest those criminals or magistrates to file and run cases against them in court.

Although it seems that the primary purpose of *Sultana's Dream* is to preach hatred against men because of some norms of seclusion of men and some comments of sister Sarah in the *Ladyland*, it is not like that. It is, in fact, a reactionary writing as a protest against the injustice and oppression of patriarchal society. Rokeya planned this novel to get Indian women to believe in their extraordinary power.

Pastiche:

Another feature of Postmodern writing is a pastiche, a stylistic imitation of another artwork of literature, in which an artist takes a work's central idea or theme and uses that to create an original piece. Pastiche means to combine, or "paste" together, multiple elements in a single piece of writing. In postmodern literature, many authors combined or "pasted" characteristics of previous genres and styles of literature to create a new narrative voice or comment on the writing of their contemporaries. (Nuri, M.A. 2013). For example, William S. Burroughs uses science fiction and detective fiction; Margaret Atwood uses science fiction and fairy tales; Thomas Pynchon uses elements from detective fiction, science fiction, and war fiction. In the same way, Begum Rokeya uses the aspects of science fiction and dreams of a developed society where people believe in science and scientific inventions in *Sultana's Dream*. The extraordinary scientific farsightedness of Rokeya is evident in the novel, where she sketches a society where the reign of science is established in all affairs of daily life under women's leadership in the *Ladyland*. The Lady Principal, with her students, concentrated the rays of the sun and

heat, which they directed toward their enemy and defeated. She also talked about collecting and restoring solar energy and using it for cooking and keeping houses warm in winter. They tilled land, pulled, and carried complex jobs through aerial ways employing electricity. They drew rainwater artificially through water balloons and pipes. Rokeya also introduced an air car run by electricity in the novel, and Sultana rode it with sister Sara to the palace of the great queen. It is a great wonder that Begum Rokeya talked about multidimensional uses of solar energy, which no other scientists discussed before one hundred years ago. It is worth mentioning Mr. McPherson's, the then commissioner of Bhagalpur, comment about *Sultana's Dream* as it is quoted by Jahan (1988): "I wonder if she has foretold here the manner in which we may be able to move about in the air at some future time. Her suggestion on this point is more ingenious."

Intertextuality:

Intertextuality, one of the features of postmodern literature, is a reference or parallel to another literary work and a way of interpreting texts that focuses on texts' borrowing words, concepts, and cultural environments from each other. There are three types of literary intertextuality: obligatory, optional, and accidental. *Sultana's Dream* manifests optional and accidental intertextuality. Optional intertextuality is a milder kind of interrelatedness. In this case, an author or poet may allude to another text to create another nonessential layer of meaning. If the reader picks up on the reference and knows the other text, it can add to their understanding. This reference is evident in Rokeya's other essay named *Bayu Janea Panchas Mile* [Fifty Miles in an Air Car], published in 1932, where she describes the background of writing *Sultana's Dream*. She says there was no airplane, Zeppelin, motorcar, electric light, or fan when she wrote *Sultana's Dream*. She did not see anyone of these things at that time (Hossain, 1931, p. 311). The interconnectedness between these two works is that the air car Rokeya uses in *Sultana's Dream* as part of science fiction came true in *Bayu Janea Panchas Mile* [Fifty Miles in an Air Car]. She experienced an air ride over the sky of Calcutta, which she shared in the essay.

There are also many references to accidental intertextuality, a connection a reader makes that the author or poet did not intend to make. This can happen when a reader knows texts that perhaps the author does not, or even when a reader creates links to a particular culture or personal experience. One of her main concerns is to express her ideas about the importance of education to emancipate Indian women from the clutches of religious misinterpretation and patriarchy, which is exposed through Sister Sara in the novel. The queen of the Ladyland circulated an order that all women in her country must be educated, and she established many schools and colleges for girls supported by the government. All the outstanding achievements of women in the Lady Land came through education and the development-oriented mentality and patronization of the Great Queen, as she says:

"We dive deep into the ocean of knowledge and try to find out the precious gems, which nature has kept in store for us. We enjoy nature's gifts as much as we can." (Hossain, 1988, p. 17)

Begum Rokeya also talked about her idea of education in her other writings. In a conference paper titled "Education Ideals for the Modern Indian Girls," Rokeya says that women's education in India has been deplorable for centuries. By all means, we should broaden our girls' outlook and teach them to modernize themselves. The future of India lies in its girls. Developing its educational system on proper lines is a question of permanent importance.

This idea of women's education is also advocated by Keshab Chandra in his speeches entitled “Female Education in India” (13 May 1870) and England’s Duties to India” (24 May 1870) that a solid education should be given to women if their miseries were to be alleviated” (Sinha, 1968, p. 251). A few writers like Faizunnesa and Kazi Imdadul Haque, Taherunnesa, and Latifunnesa in Indian Muslim society also wanted to spread education among women for the sake of the development of society. In this regard, the observation of Kazi Imdadul Haque is worth mentioning: “Now it seems that we do not have any hope of development without spreading education. Especially female education is a must to spread immediately. There is no way out of it” (Hasan, 2008, p. 121).

Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it is observed that the novel *Sultana’s Dream* exhibits multi-dimensional issues like feminism, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism, which give different meanings of the novel to different readers instead of giving a particular meaning. It also highlights a unique writing style of using parody, irony, and satire to criticize the socio-political and religious prejudices that marginalize women in all affairs of life. Moreover, the novel uniquely combines elements from previous genres like science fiction and references from other writers. Therefore, the novel can be considered a postmodern reading.

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