

**THE DIALECTICS OF OPPRESSION AND RESILIENCE: REREADING AMRITA  
PRITAM'S *PINJAR***

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**Abstract:**

The subcontinent's Partition in 1947 and its unparalleled repercussions contradicted most expectations of the approaching future. The historical narratives of the cataclysmic Partition chronicle the collective agony of marginalized, oppressed, and silenced women who endured the harsh realities of the male-dominated patriarchal society. Relegated to a vulnerable position, women faced utmost savagery, ignominy, double marginalization, and gender inequality. Their subjection to traumatic experiences of abduction along with geographical and psychological dislocation left ineffaceable scars on their psyche. This research paper examines the established nature of gender dynamics, focusing on the atrocious violence and oppression, exploitation, and victimization that woman endured with particular reference to Amrita Pritam's novella *Pinjar*. The paper not only endeavours to reposition women in nation's history, but also critically engages in revisiting Pooro's identity crisis and her transformative journey from Pooro to Hamida. Additionally, it highlights Pritam's artistic dexterity in unravelling an alternative outlook, highlighting the experiences of a victimized abducted woman. Furthermore, it delineates how Pooro, the central character defies the stereotypical portrait of women; despite her subjugation, she emerges as a strong and resilient character by dismissing the decision of restoration and rehabilitation, and opting to remain back with her abductor husband, Rashida.

**Keywords:** Partition, Violence, Gender, Oppression, Resilience.

The 1947 marked the establishment of nations – Pakistan and India, and liberation from long years of deprivation and humiliation under British colonialism. There was an extensive upsurge of sectarian savagery and unpredicted genocidal violence among the different religious communities of the Indian subcontinent. This not only marred the bliss of freedom, but also resulted in an intense and vicious exodus of millions of Sikhs and Hindus to India, and Muslims to Pakistan. There were heart-wrenching episodes of ruthless massacres, sexual violence, arson, and abduction along with the forced displacement of millions. As the Radcliffe line split the Province of Bengal and Punjab, millions of uprooted people turned homeless refugees who left behind their valuable possessions including families, home and other belongings, and most importantly their cultural and linguistic identities. The dark, murky terrain was a mute spectator to inhuman murders, plunderings, and train coaches loaded with beheaded dead bodies. The displaced people travelled frenziedly through the corpse-cluttered territory of the newly developed nation in expectation of an assuring future. Just as the Holocaust shaped the Jewish identity, similarly, the Partition marked by unanticipated cruelty and bloodshed has substantially influenced the national identity and self-imaginings. In this context, Ayesha Jalal, a distinguished historian reflects that it is a “defining moment that is neither beginning nor end, partition continues to influence how the peoples and states of postcolonial South Asia envisage their past, present, and future” (4).

The tragic event left a distressing effect on several sensitive and delicate people who recorded their traumatic first-hand experiences of the Partition brutalities. Creative writers not only

from India but also from Pakistan and Bangladesh in multiple languages like English, Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu attempted to document the oral testimonies of the horrendous divide. They strived to present the agony and the psychological inquiry of the muzzled voices that went unobserved beneath the power politics of the leaders. The corpus of literary representation dealing with the 1947 Partition encompasses, Bangladeshi short story writer Syed Waliullah's short story "The Escape" (1950), Abul Fazl's novel *Ranga Prabhat* (1957), Khushwant Singh's *A Train to Pakistan* (1956), Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961). There are notable works in Urdu like Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem *Subh-e-Azadi* (1947), short stories of Manto namely "The Dog of Tithwal" and "Thanda Gosht", creative outputs in English include *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) by Urvashi Butalia, Kamla Patel's 2006 memoir *Torn from the Roots: A Partition Memoir* (to name only a few). Apart from that, some cinematic representations that capture the dismal experiences of the uprooted people include *Hey Ram* (2000), *Khamosh Pani* (2003), biopics such as *Jinnah* (1998), *Gandhi* (1982), Bengali filmmakers Ritwik Ghosh's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960) and Srijit Mukherji's *Rajkahini* (2015).

Women have experienced and endured gender discrimination, gender violence, injustice, and oppression not just during and after the Partition, but since prehistoric times. It profoundly affected the psyche of these voiceless women. The early literary responses to Partition were recorded from the perspective of male writers like Khushwant Singh, Bisham Sahni, Chaman Nahal, who failed to articulate judiciously the disillusioned and stifled female voices. Women writers like Shauna Singh Baldwin, Amrita Pritam, Bapsi Sidhwa, Krishna Sobti and many others undertook the task of bringing the marginalized section to the mainstream. The hypocritical male centric society that constructed iconic images of women and worshipped her as mother earth or as mother of the nation was the one to dishonour her integrity and disempower her of all rights. Official historiographies have often excluded facts like the possession of women, the supremacy, and vindictive attitude of men of same and other religion towards them and the exhibition of power. Women were subjected to brutal rapes; their bodies were dismembered, mutilated, and carried in wagons across the borders. The sexual violence that women encountered were not merely acts of concupiscence; however, they were creatively planned to make the bodies of victims a root cause behind the divided nations to rage wars of hostility. The work *Borders and Boundaries* records Bhasin and Menon's observations on the tumultuous period:

Marking the breasts and genitalia with symbols like the crescent moon or trident makes permanent the sexual appropriation of the woman, and symbolically extends the violation to future generations who are thus metaphorically stigmatised. Amputating her breasts at once desexualises a woman and negates her as wife and mother; no longer a nurturer (if she survives, that is) she remains a permanently inauspicious figure, almost as undesirable as a barren woman. (43-44)

The mental distress, anguish, and trauma that men faced at the time of Partition were mostly with reference to loss of family members, estate, and economic hardships. However, the trauma that women faced was immensely intense and internalized. Repeated challenges and questions on women's body and sexuality reduced their pious bodies to a site of nationalist politics. Even the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, the two great Indian epics, aptly elucidate female exploitation and oppression. Owing to their constructed societal image, women were associated with all wars, conflict, and political struggle. The social conditions of 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian women were quite

depressing and instances of female infanticide, brutality after marriage, and practices like *sati* made women experience narrow consciousness. During the geographical divide, women's diverse personal experiences were largely dependent on their social position. Conditioned to perceive themselves as commodities to be exploited, women in post-Partition India continued to occupy a subservient position relative to men. As a result, their socio-cultural and socio-economic position did not undergo significant changes. The established patriarchal values that were generated at every layer in society perceived women as the 'other', and made them victims of violence, alienation, and ostracization. Designed as a control mechanism to dominate bodies and maintain a power hierarchy, gender as a concept was dominated by a convoluted socio-cultural construction. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* says, "Women are the "sex" which is not "one." Within a language pervasively masculinist, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*" (14). Even without appropriate representation, women have become a target of political representation.

To address the problems of women, a rehabilitation and recovery initiative was taken by Pakistani and Indian government. The Abducted Persons (Recovery and Restoration) Act of 1949 was a temporary measure by the Indian government, which considered any conversion after March 1947 as coerced and involuntary, and their recovery and restoration to their respective nations as the only solution. Women's religion was a determining factor for deciding her nationality. Women in several cases faced further marginalization as their opinions received least significance. Women like Mridula Sarabhai and Rameshwari Nehru headed the recovery operation of the Indian government. As women could only handle such a delicate situation so, many women Social workers like Damyanti Sahgal, Sushila Nayyar, Kamlaben Patel and many others came forward in this rescue operation. Ramachandra Guha's *India after Gandhi* provides an overview of this condition:

By May 1948 some 12,500 women had been found and restored to their families. Ironically, and tragically, many of the women did not want to be rescued at all. . . . Now, as they were being reclaimed, these women were deeply unsure about how their original families would receive them. (95)

Although women faced oppression, subjugation, and emotional turbulence in public and domestic sphere during the Partition, yet they have displayed commendable strength and endured such challenging circumstances by bravely facing the unacceptable realities. Some strongly resisted the torment either by executing their tormentors, or by dying as faithful martyrs.

Amrita Pritam, a prominent writer of Partition literature through her writings has made the history of Partition more vivid and lifelike by her delicate documentations of the trauma and anguish undergone by women. Her contribution to Partition literature lies not only as a novelist but also as an outstanding poet, an essayist who has penned down her experiences in Hindi and Punjabi. Forcibly uprooted from her native place, Pritam, a victim of the cataclysmic Partition, through her feminist approach has delineated her own unspeakable hardships as a young woman during the pre and post Partition times. Some of her prominent works are *Safarnama*, *Lok Peed* (Anguish of the People), *Raseedi Ticket* (Revenue Stamp), her autobiography, and poems like *Sunehade*, which bagged her Sahitya Akademi Award in 1956.

The repressed memory of the Partition violence slowly takes shape as she reimagines the raped, violated, and dead woman of Punjab. Thus began Pritam's journey of traumatic memory recall. . . . Translating traumatic memory into narrative memory was no easy task

for Pritam. As she tries to translate traumatic memory to reinscribe herself, her body gets in the way. (Kaur 87)

With the 1947 Partition of India as the setting of the novella, *Pinjar* (The Skeleton, 1950) explores the psychological complexities of a young girl named Pooro, her abduction, feeling of estrangement, loss of her individual identity, and her endurance to overcome not only the grim realities, but also the psychological trauma of being rejected by her family members. The distinguished writer Khushwant Singh has translated the work from Punjabi into English in the year 1987, and Denis Matringe has translated it into French language. Director Chandraprakash Dwivedi in the year 2003 has adapted the novella into Hindi cinema that achieved national recognition. Through the central female character Pooro, Pritam has elucidated the heart-wrenching predicament of millions of tormented women during the horrendous Holocaust. Pritam has challenged the archetypal image of women, and portrayed a bold, powerful character who takes a strong decision towards the end to lead the rest of her life with her abductor husband, Rashida. The novella is a journey of Pooro's struggle, the eventual reconstruction of her identity, selfhood, and ultimate empowerment. The seminal work also illustrates the oppression of other female characters like the abducted girl in the camp, the mad woman, Kammo and Lajo who faced severe atrocities, dehumanization, and powerlessness during the communal upheaval in both sides of the border. One community to take revenge on the other rival communities have used women as agents. Pritam has highlighted the issues related to women's sexuality and the subsequent trauma they have faced. She has also attempted to show the interconnectedness between individual trauma of women and the collective trauma.

Pooro, the chief female protagonist of the novella at the onset is in a nostalgic mood, recollecting her past. As she shells peas sitting in her haunches, memories of her parental home at Chattoani village of undivided Punjab overshadows her mind. Her ponderings expose the fact that Pooro, a young girl of fourteen years is the eldest daughter of a family of Hindu moneylenders known as *Sahukars*. The opening of the novella peeps into her psychological complexities when while opening a pod, her thumb is stuck to a slimy tiny slug, and she instantly correlates with her tormented life. She perceives that her body carries a slimy caterpillar in the shape of a pea-pod, which metaphorically represents the child inside her womb. The unborn child is an undesirable result of her forced marriage. Pritam says, "Her body was unclean. If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn! Pluck it off as if it were a maggot or a leech . . .!" (1). Pooro's thoughts take us back to the time when her family to unburden themselves of their daughter, gets her engaged to a young, intelligent and elegant man named Ram Chand from a prosperous family of Rattoval village in undivided India. At the same time, the younger brother of Pooro is married to Lajo, the sister of Ram Chand. The situation turns topsy-turvy when a Muslim boy named Rashida abducts Pooro to settle old animosities that *Shaikhs* had for several years towards the *Sahukars*. On compelling him to tell the reason behind her abduction, Rashida confesses that several years back the *Shaikhs* took a small amount of money as debt, an on unable to repay it, the *Sahukars* verbally abused the Muslim women. They *Sahukars* abducted and held Rashida's aunt captive for three nights. The *Shaikhs* have provoked Rashida and made him swear by the Holy Quran to retaliate back by abducting the *Sahukars*' elder daughter before her wedding. Deepti Misri puts it, "Honor is at the center of this transaction: in penetrating the girl, the buyer would deplete the honor and therefore the masculinity of the "other" community

and enhance his own accordingly” (39). However, he said that apart from the instigation, he was genuinely interested in her, Rashida confessed, “Allah is my witness that on the very first day I cast my eyes on you, I fell in love with you. It was my love and the prodding of the *Shaikh* clan that made me do this. But I cannot bear to see you so sad” (Pritam 18). The abduction of Rashida’s aunt and the subsequent revenge on Pooro delineates the reduced status of women as an object of target in a patriarchal society from times immemorial, and shows the loss of rationality at the time of communal and religious conflict. Women epitomise respect, chastity, and modesty but at the time of war became the tools of communication between men of different communities. The violation of their bodies is symbolical of the defilement of not only their respective communities but also the nation as a whole.

Pooro one night escapes to her parental home with a lot of hope and expectation to re-unite with her parents, but her father’s detached attitude and reluctance to receive their daughter because of the terror of social disgrace and religious fear of getting contaminated, shatters her completely. Her father’s indifferent behaviour and social pressure reflects in his words:

The neighbours will hear. There will be a crowd. . . . Daughter, this fate was ordained for you, we are helpless . . . The *Shaikhs* will descend on us now and destroy everything we have. . . . Who will marry you now? You have lost your religion and your birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left behind to tell of your fate. (22)

Pooro anticipates her mother to embrace her close to bosom and comfort her, but to ensure safety of the other family members she mercilessly utters the wish of Pooro’s death at the time of her birth. Despite belonging to a high caste Hindu family that worships women as goddess (Devi), Pooro’s mother has double standards, the male members are of more importance to her than the daughters of the family, she says, “If the *Shaikhs* find you here they will kill your father and your brothers” (23). If a woman is a victim of male oppression, the family honour and reputation comes into question, in this case the social norms restrict the family members to restore the former relations. Pritam has very poignantly depicted the incomprehensible predicament of abducted women during the harrowing days. Had Pooro not been a woman, her situation would have been different. The trauma of rejection for Pooro is more intense than the trauma of abduction, “she had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any fear. What more could anyone take from her than life? The thought dried up all her tears” (23). Pooro faces utmost violence twice in the novel—firstly, Rashida by abducting violates her personal space, and furthermore, the emotional violence she faces because of the family’s reluctance to welcome her back.

Pooro decides to end her life when Rashida rescues her. She unwillingly returns to him and they leave for a new place, Sakkar. The Maulvi performs the marriage ceremony of Rashida and Pooro without her consent, and Pooro’s identity as an individual after marriage also undergoes considerable changes. Rashida forcibly converts her religion, much to her discontent, and inscribes a tattoo in dark green color, the new name ‘Hamida’, which Balbir K. Punj considers as a stratagem to “obliterate Pooro’s Hindu identity”. The color green has cultural associations and is considered a sacred color by the Islamic communities. The concept of renaming women apart from having religious influences is also steered by an impulse to command, avenge, or possess the vulnerable ‘other’. Being extremely sensitive, the transition for Pooro has not been smooth. Caught in an entirely new ambience, the hardships to get habitual to a new life evoke in her feelings of

alienation. Pritam recounts Pooro's fragmented identity, "In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parents' home, everyone still called her Pooro. At other times, she was Hamida. It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night", her commodification and exploitation has made life nothing more than "a skeleton, without a shape or a name" (25), lifeless, meaningless without any self-respect and individuality. Though Pooro is physically staying with Rashida, yet her subconscious mind keeps dreaming of her old friends at her parental home who still address her as Pooro. In addition, the yearning for a blissful life with Ram Chand still obscures her senses.

Pritam delineates subjugation of women by reflecting on the other female figures in the narrative. Pritam recounts the mistreatment of a twelve-year-old motherless girl, Kammo, by her aunt with intense poignancy. After her mother's death, her father disowns her. She enjoys some motherly affection from Pooro, who provided her food and clothing, but as Pooro aka Hamida is a Muslim, Kammo's cruel aunt tries to sever her connection, yet Kammo and Pooro transcend their religious barriers to maintain an affectionate bonding. Pritam vividly draws the painful depiction of the tragic fate of orphan girls like Kammo living in wretched condition, and the delineation of how society forces them to live a life of despair by making them victims of physical and mental abuse.

Through the other female character Taro, Pritam highlights the societal approach towards married women. Taro, a young melancholic woman, has been suffering from some unknown disease. Having lost interest in her, Taro's husband forces her to undertake prostitution as her profession. She faces dejection not only from society but also from her parents who support the thought, "once we give away a daughter our lips are sealed. It's up to her husband to treat her as he likes. It is a man's privilege" (47). To support the basic necessities, Taro is compelled to live with her husband. Taro's cognizance of the brutality she is facing harbours in her feelings of disgust and frustration, turning her mentally unsound. She calls herself, "a slut, a whore, a common tart . . ." (46). In spite of being powerless, Taro is outspoken and courageous enough to question the institution of marriage and the violence she is withstanding. Although in a moment of frenzy, she strongly rebels against the cruel social hegemony, "only my lips are sealed and my feet put in fetters. There is no justice in the world; nor any God. . . . God's fetters were meant only for my feet" (47). Taro can utter such daring words but she is incapable to detach herself from the unhappy, deceptive marriage.

The tragic story of a lunatic woman who arrives to Sakkar village half-fed and half-clad, with dirt all over her body, who is "more like a skeleton than a living person" (51), presents another aspect of oppression and marginalization in patriarchal society that women grapple with. However, the sexual assault and impregnation of the lunatic woman by some stranger, surprises and perturbs the villagers. Nonica Datta says, "The mad woman was conjured up from Amrita's own experience of having seen her in a Sheikhpura village, in the very land of Waris Shah, just before Partition" (18). Innumerable women were subject to sexual exploitation during the turbulent time. "What wretch could have lusted after the charred body of the mad woman - Did she consent to the act or was she raped? . . . Her shrieks must have been lost in the loneliness of the dark night" (Pritam 55-56), Pooro feels deeply distressed with the disorder in a brutalized society, which limits a women's identity only to her sexual organ. Pooro and Rashida take up the responsibility of looking after the infant as their own child with much warmth and affection.

The trauma, anguish, and despair of women owing to mass hysteria and communal frenzy resonates in the novel. Pritam's psychological pain reflects in the lines when she puts forth, "one day Hamida saw a band of a dozen or more *goondas* pushing a young girl before them. She had not a stitch of clothing on her person. The *goondas* beat drums and danced about the naked girl" (87). Considering the pitiable condition of women, Pooro introspects how unfortunate it is to be born as a girl in this savage world. Pritam reports another heart-rending incident of a young girl, whom Pooro finds in the sugarcane field. The girl is waiting for evacuation to India and seems to have come from a nearby village refugee camp. Forced to spend nine nights with various men, the girl explaining her plight says that she has somehow escaped from her ravishers. One of the most secured places for women where military men guard women are refugee encampments, but in reality, the situation in such camps were entirely different and rendered terribly unsafe for women. On hearing the situation of camp-women, Pooro finds herself disgusted and ashamed, "the camp was guarded by Pakistani soldiers. After sunset, bands of *goondas* stole in, picked out women they liked and took them for the night" (88).

Pooro still harbors ambivalent feelings of annoyance and desire for Ram Chand, so she promptly agrees to accompany Rahima's mother to a holy man in Rattoval, who has divine blessings to cure poor eyesight. However, Pooro is a strong woman who is not prepared to surrender herself to the hardships of life, so for the last time she suppresses her deepest desire and wishes to see Ram Chand, the man who broke his promises, and proceed for a better future. Throughout the journey she ponders over her tragic past, even after meeting Ram Chand in Rattoval, she cannot exchange a word, "the tears came in torrents" (77). In the dark, Pooro goes under the acacia tree where she earlier met Ram Chand and "picked up a handful of dust from the spot on which he had stood and reverently smeared it on her eyelids" (78), this action is indicative of her deep longing and admiration for him.

At the time of Partition, Pooro again encounters Ram Chand in a refugee encampment and comes to know of Lajo, her sister-in-law's abduction by a gang of *goondas*. Pooro's tremendous power, strength, and boldness comes to the forefront when she with the help of Rashida makes a vigilant escape plan to recover Lajo from Ramchand's house, captured by a Muslim goon. Pooro risks her life to ensure that Lajo does not go through the same rejection and resentment that she encountered. Pooro alias Hamida's hyphenated identity helps to disguise herself as a salesperson and rescue Lajo, who is a pawn of communal hostility. When Lajo is dubious about her acceptance, Pooro assures her, "You will go back to your home, your husband and your brother. . . . Lajo, I will never allow such wickedness while I live. You will certainly go back to your home. You were not to blame for what happened to you" (118).

Rashida's kind and compassionate nature makes Pooro accept him as her life partner. Rashida plays a significant part in the overall metamorphosis of Pooro. She wants to dismiss the thought of her abduction and receive him wholeheartedly, "she longed fervently to make love to him. After all, he was her husband and the father of her son. This alone was true; this alone mattered" (49). He supports Pooro's decision of rescuing and adopting the mad woman's child. Even later, he deceives his Muslim community to rescue Lajo from her Muslim abductors as an act of repentance for his erstwhile guilt. Pritam writes, "when he had abducted Pooro, his conscience had weighed like a stone . . . that night as the mare sped through the starlit countryside; the weight seemed to lift and he felt as light as a flower speeding in the fragrant breeze" (109-110).

Despite abducting Pooro, he surrenders his happiness to her and bestows all pleasures of the world. He says, “You are the mistress of this home” (26) and in the meantime, Pooro gradually pulls the string and starts controlling him. Even the news of Pooro’s brother burning down his harvest does not nurture any feeling of hatred and revenge towards her. Rashida’s genuinity and generosity once again reflects when he discloses the news of the government proclamation for recovering and rehabilitating abducted women, though he knows very well that revealing the news can provoke Pooro to take a strong decision of leaving him for returning to India. Pritam has given an unconventional twist to the narrative by making Pooro praise her abductor. Nonica Datta puts it, “Pritam, in fact, dilutes the stereotype of the Muslim as the other . . . she resists labelling Rashida as a ‘Mussalman abductor’, and, without justifying his action, offers a context for his having abducted Pooro” (18).

In spite of her vulnerable position, Pooro displays high degree of resilience, boldness, and courage throughout the novel. Pooro is a dynamic, multi-dimensional character who has undergone several changes. Initially she has animosity towards Rashida and finds difficulty in accepting the child growing inside her womb, she considers herself as unclean and undefiled; nevertheless, her son’s birth is an overwhelming experience that bolstered her strength to accept the differences in life. The societal subjugation and objectification of women could not demoralize her; instead, she turns to be more considerate and compassionate, and extends her helping hand to the other oppressed and subjugated women. She enjoys a privileged position in the family by wiping out the fear of social taboos and religious virtues. Rather than portraying her as a powerless victim, Pritam delineates that Pooro is audacious enough to persuade her husband to rescue Lajo from her abductors and ensure her safe return to her family. She vehemently asserts, “Lajo is welcomed back in her home, then you can take it that Pooro has also returned to you. . . . Whether one is a Hindu girl or a Muslim one, whoever reaches her destination, she carries along my soul also” (Pritam 127), this statement itself shows that Pooro is associating herself with the other abducted women. Pooro showers affection towards a twelve-year-old orphan girl Kammo, embraces the lunatic woman’s son as her own, and ensures safe evacuation of a camp girl. Pooro’s brother implored her to return to India asking her to make one final choice. However, knowing the plight of women recovered after abduction, the loss of self-respect and humiliation they have to face throughout their life, makes Pooro take a non-conformist, rigid, and highly individualistic decision at the end to deny her family, nation and the hypocritical community, which once questioned her purity, thereby proving her dauntless and firm personality. Pooro satirically and emphatically comments on the government’s recovery policies, “When it had happened to her, religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; and now, the same religion had become so accommodating” (100).

Pooro’s final decision restores her individuality, dignity, and identity, she proves that a woman has right on her choices and is not simply a commodity whose worth completely depends on its possessor. A woman possesses the fundamental right to determine her own desires and choose the individual she wishes to establish her life with. The novel is not only a skilful portrayal of the victimization, dehumanization, and marginalization of its female characters, but an impressive account of the transformation and development of Pooro, the chief female protagonist, from an oppressed woman to a strong, outspoken, and resilient woman who makes a resolution of confronting life fearlessly amidst adversities.

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