

‘INTRA-LANGUAGE’ AND ‘SOCIAL HETEROGLOSSIA’ IN *OTHELLO*

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Abstract: *As a Renaissance playwright, Shakespeare wrote Othello during a time when humanist and racist tendencies were prevalent in England. Whereas humanism emphasized the value of human virtues regardless of race, complexion and nationality, racism glorified white Europeans as the supreme race and looked down on black people. The play, in its depiction of an exceptionally outstanding black protagonist/hero, therefore, can be interpreted as a challenge to racism. However, the hero's tragic downfall seems to be an affirmation of it. Critics throughout the long history of Othello's staging have relied mainly on Iago's characterization and the extent to which he, or Othello himself, plays a role in determining the ending of the play as a key to deciding if the play is promoting the humanist cause or sides more with the racist disposition. The present study, drawing mainly on Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia', detects the constant tension between the two ideologies both in Othello's position, and in Othello's and other characters' utterances about him. This analysis reveals the racist inclination functions as a powerful 'centrifugal force', going against the 'centripetal force' of the humanist ideology, and eventually disintegrates Othello from the white society.*

Keywords: *centrifugal force, centripetal force, heteroglossia, humanist ideology, racism*

1. Introduction

Shakespeare lived during the Renaissance era which is known to be a time of tremendous cultural rebirth. This rebirth affected all aspects of European life - social, economic, and political - and ultimately brought about a significant era of intellectual growth. The most dominant theme of the Renaissance was humanism, the product of what Greenblatt (1980: 2) calls, "an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity", which stressed the need for a rounded flourishing of an individual's different potentialities—physical, mental, artistic, and moral. Alongside the prevalent humanist ideology of the Renaissance period, there existed some racist and xenophobic predilection, lurking in the society. These biases could not be interpreted separately from England's colonial enterprises overseas. As Hendricks (2010: 541-542) contends, "Race, indeed, is a Renaissance category". It was during this era that due to "England's pursuit of power in the Americas", "the impact of colonialism and the African slave trade" race was regarded "as a category of identity". The predominant colonial and racist discourses glorified white Europeans

as the supreme race and looked down on people of other races and nationalities, especially black people – whose complexion was assumed to be a marker of inferiority, ugliness, backwardness, and barbarity. This association of blackness with negative attributes, as Maguire (2004: 35) explains, was “an iconographic colour coding”, “inherited from the Middle Ages”, which established an equity between “black skin” and “the devil”. The main threat posed by black people was miscegenation and its consequent danger of undermining white homogeneity and superiority. As Hall (1995: 12) points out, English people associated white skin colour with ‘Englishness’ and black complexion with the racial ‘other’. Therefore, the inclusion of a biracial child “in the nation” would signify the breaking of “the desired homology between land, skin, and group identity” (ibid), which meant dismantling the associations of Englishness with white skin colour and beauty.

Considering the pernicious racism of the Renaissance era, it is obvious that a play like *Othello*, which features an outstanding black male protagonist, endowed with humanistic virtues of courage, compassion, fortitude, eloquence, and benevolence, must have endangered white English men’s sense of superiority and undermined the established hierarchical social order. Bartels (qtd. in Chapman 2017: 109) refers to this sense of danger on the part of the white audience as “anxiety” not over Othello’s differences from, but rather his similarities to the English, his position as an “insider” rather than an “outsider”. The likelihood of the reception of the play as a source of threat becomes even stronger when one takes into regard that not only does Othello occupy an exceptionally high position in the Venetian society, but he has also been charismatic enough to win the hand of one of the noblest and prettiest women of the white race - hence, the possibility of the graver threat of miscegenation, too.

The tragic ending of the play can, to some extent, mitigate the sense of danger the white audience felt. Nonetheless, considering the fact that Othello’s moving downfall is, at least partially, the consequence of the machinations of a white villain, the question of what purpose Shakespeare pursued by writing this provocative play remains unresolved. Did he intend to undermine the racial and nationalistic ideologies of Renaissance England? Or, on the contrary, was the play, in its depiction of a black man who could momentarily assimilate into white society to be soon removed from it, an affirmation of established racial stereotypes? After all, to what extent was Shakespeare under the influence of the two contradictory ideologies of humanism and racism in devising the plot of the play? Critics, throughout the long history of Othello’s staging, have had different answers to the above questions, almost all relying mainly on the characterizations of Iago and Othello and the role each plays in determining the ending of the play. Du Bois, the black American historian and sociologist, mentions that the name of his grandfather was Othello (cited in Cartelli 1999: 147). This naming shows that the name ‘Othello’ was honorific and ennobling to his family. In their view, Othello, in Shakespeare’s play, is a noble Moor whose honour is ruined by the schemes of Iago - a corrupt European. Yet there is a second group of black readers who believe that Othello’s murder and suicide are in accordance with a horizon of expectation that white people maintain about blacks. In view of such readers, the play *Othello* even strengthens established racial stereotypes, since it depicts, as Neill (1989: 393) writes, an “assimilated savage” who unsurprisingly

falls back into primitiveness under pressure. Ben Okri, the Nigerian writer, is one such reader. He contends, the long history of Othello's "committing murder and suicide on the stage" has not produced any "significant change in attitude toward black people" (cited in Cartelli 1999: 123). In his view, *Othello* has done nothing to change the long-lasting system of white racism. In view of such black readers, Iago is no more than a catalyzer; he is not the inventor of the murder plot. He does not accompany Othello on entering Desdemona's chamber, and he does not persuade him to murder Desdemona and commit suicide. That is why some prestigious 20th century critics, too, such as F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, condemned Othello, denying him high tragic status. In their view, as Bloom (2010: 2) contends, "tragic dignity" cannot be maintained for Othello since he is "reduced to incoherence" by Iago's machinations.

The present study attempts at answering the above-mentioned questions by recourse to Bakhtin's master trope of 'heteroglossia' and its two types, 'intra-language' and 'social'. In applying and explicating these two types of heteroglossia, the article also draws on two other Bakhtinian concepts, namely the 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' forces, which are believed to operate in every utterance.

It is important to note here that by considering Bakhtin's main reliance on the novel as a genre suitable for elucidating his theories, and his apathy towards drama, the application of his ideas to *Othello* may sound weird. Though Bakhtin expresses some comments on some of Shakespeare's masterpieces, his main argument is to prove that the nature of drama is different from the novel and as such it does not qualify as a suitable genre for explicating his views on the interrelated terms of heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogism. He writes, "to speak of a fully formed and deliberate polyphonic quality in Shakespeare's dramas is in our opinion simply impossible" (Bakhtin 1984: 33). In his opinion, "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters" are the "fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel" (Bakhtin 1981: 92). Hence, drama, lacking some of the above elements, is "alien to genuine polyphony" (Bakhtin 1984: 33). Bakhtin only finds Shakespeare, along with such Renaissance figures as Boccaccio, Rabelais, and Cervantes, as "one basic source of carnivalization" (idem: 157). So, in Bakhtin's view, Shakespeare is carnivalesque, but not polyphonic. As Knowles (1998: 8-9) argues, this comment is not acceptable, as both concepts of 'carnival' and 'polyphony' "are linked by Bakhtin's overarching idea of dialogism which parallels his other term, heteroglossia". Knowles calls this a "bias in Bakhtin's thinking" (ibid).

In recent decades, some undaunted critics have taken issue with Bakhtin's "sometimes sweeping dismissals of drama, paradoxically providing the theoretical groundwork for re-reading drama on Bakhtinian lines" (Longstaffe 1998:14). Among Shakespeare's plays, his *Othello*, as a play that includes a black man as its main protagonist, has encouraged some scholars to think of a Bakhtinian reading of it, mainly relying on Bakhtin's major tropes of 'polyphony', 'dialogism' and 'carnivalization'. In his book, *The Properties of Othello*, James L. Calderwood (1989: 67-68), allocates one chapter to a Bakhtinian reading of *Othello*, focusing on an analysis of Othello's utterances to reveal that as long as Othello talks in

monologues, “he commands language, as a writer does when he writes”, but as soon as he enters into dialogic form of language, especially when he is entrapped in verbal exchanges with Iago on the topic of Desdemona’s infidelity, he breaks down. This breaking down, in Calderwood’s view, is quite natural, because “he is not privy to the world shared by Venetians”; he is a stranger; he, not capable of establishing a genuine dialogical relationship with the Venetian society, always speaks from “a place outside or at the borders of [Venice] cultural scene” (ibid).

In “Unbending Bakhtin’s Carnivalization and the Related Approaches in *Othello*”, the authors (Maleki et al. 2013: 433-434) argue that Shakespeare’s *Othello* offers a good “repository” of Bakhtin’s views of ‘polyphonism’ and ‘carnival’. Explaining that an indispensable characteristic of Carnival is “the reversal of all hierarchies” and orthodox outlooks, they go on to demonstrate in what ways in *Othello* hierarchies are reversed. The writers refer to the negative epithets used by Iago and Roderigo in their descriptions of Othello as “a kind of carnivalistic disrespect,” which Othello attempts to reverse. They also argue that Shakespeare’s *Othello* contains the multiple voices which indicate the case of polyphonism.

In “Shakespeare and the Bakhtinian Dialogism: The Case of *Othello*”, Goudarzi (2021: 36) presents a dialogic reading of *Othello* with a focus on the utterances of Iago. His analysis reveals that Iago’s language is not a mere tool for conveying “neutral description or information”, but it is designed to provoke a response and to initiate dialogue. Hence, it is charged with “polemic, parody, evaluation and so on”. This dialogism, in Goudarzi’s view, is evidence of Shakespeare’s inclusion of the voice of dissidence in the hierarchal society of Elizabethan England.

What makes the present study different from the works presented above is that it finds *Othello*, as a play that includes an Other as its protagonist, a specifically suitable work for illustrating Bakhtin’s master trope of ‘heteroglossia’, evident in the utterances of characters about Othello, which is itself a reflection of social heteroglossia surrounding the issue of Othello’s assimilation into Venetian society and occupying a high status in it.

2. Methodology

Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981: 102), introduces the two concepts of ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces in order to describe the nature of language and the way it gives voice to “forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization”, and, on the other hand, toward the continuous “processes of decentralization and disunification”. Bakhtin calls these opposing forces working within language as “intra-language heteroglossia”, explaining that in every utterance “[t]he processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect” (idem: 35-37). This quality implies that the utterance answers both the demands of “its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act” (idem: 35), and the demands of heteroglossia. In other words, while an utterance conveys a seemingly one-layered, unitary meaning, it also reflects the numerous voices of a certain culture, people and era about an issue, or to use Bakhtin’s term, about an “object”. Therefore, it is

possible to have a concrete and thorough examination of any utterance, when we have approached it “as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language” - i.e., as a unity of ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces (idem: 102).

To clarify his definition of ‘intra-language heteroglossia,’ Bakhtin introduces the concept of ‘social heteroglossia’ as well. He explains that by language, he does not merely mean “a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a worldview” (1981: 101). This suggests that “the seeds of social heteroglossia” are “embedded in words” (ibid). Hence, when Bakhtin talks about centripetal forces within each utterance, he is referring to “the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (ibid). In other words, by close analysis of any utterance, one can grasp the ideologies-in-tension within a culture and the way these tensions affect the worldviews, modes of lives, and even fates of people living in that culture.

Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in its depiction of a black character, as the focal point of its plot - whose racial difference affects the course of events and determines his own fate and the fates of the main characters of the play - provides a rich context for analyzing the two modes of heteroglossia Bakhtin identifies. In what follows, we present a scrutinized analysis of Othello’s ‘tension-ridden’ position and the mode of language he himself and other characters use in order to expose the ‘social’ and ‘intra-language heteroglossia’ working in the play. The quite varied and even contradictory approaches of different characters to Othello’s exceptional status in Venetian society, and the presence of a constant tension in the Venetian people’s utterances about him, as this study demonstrates, bears witness to the ‘social heteroglossia’ surrounding him and indeed surrounding the general question of black peoples’ assimilation into white societies and the lack of, to use Bakhtin’s term, ‘finalization’ in white-black racial dialogues.

3. Heteroglossia in *Othello*

Othello’s character, his position, his utterances and other characters’ utterances about him are the best embodiment of both ‘intra-language’ and ‘social heteroglossia’ surrounding him. Through a comprehensive study of various aspects of his character, it is possible to fully grasp how two opposed discourses of the white European society of the 16th century England, the humanist and the racist, were in constant conflict with no possibility of reconciliation. This constant clash leads to hidden racism’s outdoing the humanist ideology, resulting in the ultimate poignant perish of Othello, and the heinous murder of innocent Desdemona in his hands.

From the outset of the play, Othello is not a participant in, or at least an onlooker of, many of the events that are central to the plot and have a direct impact on him. The opening dialogue between Iago and Roderigo, before Othello himself takes any role, reveals his ‘contradiction-ridden’ situation as one who has got unified with the white race but at the same time, as Roderigo and Iago’s racial epithets reveal, his race disqualifies him, endangers his position and puts him at the threshold of ‘disunification’. Roderigo and Iago talk vaguely about a “he” or “him” for much of

the first scene. When they begin to talk more directly, especially when they continue their talk under Brabantio's window, they use such racial epithets as "the Moor" (I.1.18), "the thick-lips" (I.1.18), "an old black ram" (I.1.20), and "a Barbary horse" (I.1.22), instead of his proper name. Later, Othello's ship is the last one to arrive in Act II, Scene I; Othello is standing apart when Cassio and Iago apparently talk about Desdemona in Act IV, Scene I; and Othello wrongly thinks that Cassio is killed because he is not an onlooker of the fight scene in Act V, Scene I. Indeed, throughout the play, as Cartelli (1999: 126) discusses, Othello hardly speaks *to* the reader: "he is either 'inward' with Iago or inward with himself" yet not in a way that gives the reader "direct access to his subjectivity". He is a center constantly on the verge of de-centering. The processes of what Bakhtin (1981: 35) calls, "centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification" intersect in his position as a successful black Moor in the racist white society.

Othello's position as an outsider - both racially and culturally - in the eyes of Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio, is balanced by his stature as a highly important part of Venetian civic society in the eyes of the duke and the senate. His skill as a soldier and leader puts him in high demand for the safety of the state as it is evident in Cassio's report that the senate "sent about three several quests" to search for him (I.2.30). The Venetian government counts on Othello to the extent that he is allowed to have a complete command of Cyprus, both martially and politically. The contradiction in Othello's status is by now quite obvious. He is rejected and loathed by one party of characters, utterly the bad ones of the story, but wanted and liked by another party, the good ones of the story. The opposing 'centripetal forces' of humanism and 'centrifugal forces' of racism are in a conflict, thwarting each other and preserving Othello's status as both an outsider and an assimilated one. Iago and Brabantio see the marriage of Othello and Desdemona a combination of binary oppositions: "black and white, Venetian and alien, age and youth" (Leggatt 2005: 117). Yet, Duke of Venice, extolling Othello's virtues, assures Desdemona's father of his merits:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black; (I.2.54)

In Duke's eyes, Othello's humane and martial merits beautify his black complexion. But what is quite interesting about Othello's position, as an assimilated black man in the white society, is that even those characters who regard him their social and cultural peer, such as Duke and Desdemona, are mainly under the influence of his exotic past and personality. Interestingly enough, Othello himself is aware of this fact as it is evident in his account of the way Brabantio became his friend: "[Desdemona's] father loved me, oft invited me,/ Still questioned me the story of my life/ From year to year" (I.3.46). He fascinates his listeners with his exotic tales. The duke's response to Othello's description of the way he wooed Desdemona is: "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.3.48). Hence, though Othello's marriage with Desdemona can be interpreted as his assimilation, yet, when we look closer, we find it is not a true unification; it is the result of his bizarre stories that, as Brabantio claims, work as "spells" and "witchcraft" and "subdue and poison" Desdemona's affections (I.3.108). The social heteroglossia surrounding the issue of a black man's

assimilation into white society disallows proper unification of Othello in this society; he is temporarily admitted into it for, in the first place, the good service he can offer it due to his courage and physical power, and second, due to his exoticism, something that keeps the established white/black binary opposition intact.

Furthermore, the same characters, who are advocates for Othello in the beginning of the play and have enough faith in his honesty and greatness as a man, irrespective of his race, by the end of the play, enraged by his sudden violent outburst towards Desdemona, resort to his racial distinctions in their rebukes. This is evident in Desdemona's reaction to his rage on her deathbed: "And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then/ when your eyes roll so" (V.2.222). It is also evident in Lodovico's reaction to Othello's striking of Desdemona:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,
Could neither graze nor pierce? (IV.1.180)

In this excerpt, Lodovico is undermining all of Othello's merits which bought him Duke's and Senator's favour - merits of nobleness, virtuosity and self-control. Othello, therefore, is an outsider, a barbarian, who momentarily assimilates into the white society and is doomed in it. His marriage can be interpreted as an intrusion that is in contradiction with a dominant established ideology that eventually incorporates it. It can be argued that Othello may serve as a military subject in white society, but not as a cultural peer. On the battlefield, Othello is adept and victorious; in the living room, he is unenthusiastic until Desdemona takes the lead and encourages him to tell his adventurous life story. It is Desdemona, rather than Othello, who renders their secret marriage as a rightful act with her eloquent defense. All this shows that Othello is not a wanted son-in-law for a Venetian senator. "He can never truly become a Venetian" (Dillon 2007: 78).

The social heteroglossia surrounding Othello's 'queer' position as a black man who has, against all odds, successfully acquired a high position in the Venetian society is reflected even in his own utterances; his words reflect his ambivalent status, as both insider and outsider. He sometimes plays up his outsider position; he either recognizes his exotic attraction to Venetians or is self-aware and wary about his visibly different complexion. For instance, despite his obviously eloquent speech in Act I, he exclaims, "Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (I.3.42), hence undermining his own eloquence.

He becomes more self-conscious, and hence less self-confident, about his different complexion as a black man among the white race when he is provoked by Iago to doubt Desdemona's fidelity. On his first reaction to this warning, he talks of his "own weak merits:"

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,
For she had eyes, and chose me. (III.3.128)

Iago's clever responses to Othello's certainty about Desdemona's true love for him includes both 'centripetal forces' of humanistic ideology and 'centrifugal forces' of racist propensity, which seem to be thwarting each other. A closer look, however, reveals that Iago even puts the humanistic ideology in the service of the racist one. On the one hand, he talks of Othello's "free and noble nature:"

I would not have your free and noble nature,
Out of self-bounty, be abused. Look to't. (III.3.128)

On the other hand, he refers to Othello's black complexion as a possible source of "shake and fear" for Desdemona and, by extension, for the whole white race:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;
And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,
She loved them most. (III.3.128)

Iago, in his next remark, continues to focus on the racist traits to build further distrust in Othello's mind:

Ay, there's the point! as (to be bold with you)
Not to affect many proposed matches
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,
Whereto we see in all things nature tends - [...] (III.3.130)

In the above utterance, Iago boldly and frankly undermines Othello's "clime, complexion, and degree" by recourse to Desdemona's natural inclination to marry a man of her own nationality, race, and rank. Here, the utterance is totally imbued with the 'centrifugal forces' of the racist mindset, pushing completely to the background the humanist ideology that endears Othello to Desdemona and centralizes him in the Venetian society.

Othello, pondering on Iago's words, affirms Iago's racist view of him, which becomes evident in his speculation on the possible reasons why Desdemona may have become disloyal:

Haply, for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years - yet that's not much -
She's gone. (III.3.132)

In this utterance, Othello draws a binary-opposition distinction between himself and the white race, attributing the negative qualities of coarseness, i.e., lack of civic social graces, and aging to himself, because of his black race, in contrast to the positive attributes of civility and beauty which are assumed to be the natural characteristics of the white race. 'Centrifugal forces' of the racist mentality are powerfully disintegrating him from the white society.

Nowhere is Othello's own awareness of the tension he suffers, as a black outsider in a white society, better illustrated than in his speech preceding his suicide:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
 Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
 Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog,
 And smote him, thus. (V.2.244)

In the above excerpt, Bakhtin's (1981: 102) view that "every utterance participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia" is very well evident. Othello starts his speech with an effort to "participate" in the "unitary language" by wanting to be remembered as a soldier who "has done the state some service" and who has killed a lot of Venice's enemies. Yet, the rest of his speech reveals social and historical heteroglossia of his position; he establishes a comparison between himself and a "turban'd Turk", i.e. Venice's sworn enemy. He later accentuates this comparison by committing suicide with the same sword that he used to "smote" the "malignant" Turk on the battleground. By this point, Othello sees himself as a savage outsider (like a "Turk" or a "base Indian"), which is what characters like Brabantio have been calling him all along.

It is important to note that, as Hopkins (2015: 180) argues, Othello's own personality "is to be understood not in terms of a racialized concept of human identity, but of the insidious impact of the cultural construction of difference". This means that "he is less black than marked as 'black'" (ibid). In other words, it is the dominant racist and xenophobic ideologies of the Venetian culture that render him an Other. Ania Loomba (1989) (qtd. in Roux 2009: 23) describes the process of *otherization* of Othello as moving from the position of a black "subject", who exists "on terms of white Venetian society" and attempts "to internalize its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way, until [he] occupies [his] 'true' position as its other". Othello collapses his humane identity into the 'centrifugal forces' of the racist thought that render him as Moor, i.e., a black Other who is represented as jealous, intemperate, murderous, and barbaric by nature.

4. Conclusion

The play *Othello*, featuring a black Moor, i.e., an Other, as its protagonist, provides a rich context for analyzing the two modes of heteroglossia Bakhtin identifies – intra-language and social. Othello's position, as an outstanding black

man who has achieved an exceptionally high status in white society, is tension-filled. He is the locus at which 'centripetal forces' of the humanist ideology and 'centrifugal forces' of the racist ideology are in constant war. On the one hand, his skin colour, his origins and the tales he narrates render him an exotic outsider. On the other hand, his military and moral merits make him competent enough to be put in full command of Cyprus, and to win the love of Desdemona, one of the noblest and prettiest women of Venice. However, his 'unification' does not last long; the 'centripetal' humanist ideology which defines Othello's character not in terms of his black complexion, but in terms of his humane merits is ultimately defeated by the 'centrifugal forces' of the racist penchant. The 'contradiction-ridden' situation of Othello and the 'social heteroglossia' surrounding him as reflected in the characters' varied responses to his position and downfall embody both intra-language and social heteroglossia surrounding the long-standing question of black people's assimilation into white societies which has no end/ 'finalization' to it.

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