

The Impact of New Cultural and Social Values on Identity Formation in Philip Kan Gotanda's *The Wash*

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Abstract— When one is exposed to two cultures, he or she encounters a conflict within himself or herself. Gotanda's *The Wash* is concerned with the conflict between old Japanese values, represented by Nobu, and new values in a new changing social and cultural climate, represented by his wife, Masi. The study aims at giving a true image of the Asian American man and woman through demonstrating historical facts, such as Internment camps; Asian American stereotype, such as woman's passivism and submission; the injustice, and racial discrimination of the white.

Keywords: Gotanda, Asian Americans, Internment Camps, New Social Values, New Cultural Values, Identity.

I. INTRODUCTION

Philip Kan Gotanda began to write *The Wash* in 1984, but it was not published until 1987 [1]. This play is about a husband-wife relationship through a Japanese American perspective. After forty years of marriage, Masi Matsumoto leaves her husband, Nobu, to search for her identity, regain her confidence, and try to begin a new life by establishing a relationship with another man, Sadao. Unlike his wife, Nobu never changes and continues the same routines. He cannot believe that his wife has left him. Like his wife, Nobu finds another woman, Kiyoko, the Japanese restaurant's owner. But he cannot go on with her. This shows the effect of individualism, one of the landmarks of the American culture, on Asian American people. Lifestyles and ideas that were unthinkable in their original cultures began to find their way in their lives in their new homeland.

The play, therefore, addresses "deeply personal and private issues that the Japanese American community would rather ignore" [2]

The Wash was inspired by three things. First, it was motivated by a conversation between the dramatist and a friend whose mother had left her husband, which was unusual for an older Nisei couple [1, p. 32.]. Second, at that time, the dramatist was doing his study on elderly Japanese American widows and widowers [1, p. 32.]. This enabled him to collect a lot of information about this issue. Third, another friend of Gotanda told him a story about a woman who despite her divorce, her ex-husband "came over to mow her lawn" [1, p. 32.].

While Masi is prepared to move on with her life, Nobu lives in the past. He tries to maintain a particular way of life and patterns of social relations. He hates change; when he eats at Kiyoko's restaurant, he always sits in the same seat and eats the same meal [3, p.43.], and he even does not change the design of his kite.

Nobu, as an American, who is attached to his Asian roots, is difficult to change. Consequently, it is not easy for Nobu to replace his wife with another woman. He says to his daughter, Judy, about Kiyoko "She knocks on the door but I don't let her in. She's not Mama" [4, p.50.]. Nevertheless, Curley Sakata, Kiyoko's cook, and Kiyoko speak of Nobu's repetitive acts:

CURLEY: And dat's your seat, huh? All da time you gotta sit in dat same seat. Last week Mr. Koyama was sitting dere- I saw you come in- you left and came back later when dat seat was open. What's a-matter, your butt got magnet for dat seat?

[]

CURLEY: (Moving away, to Nobu.) And you always order da same thing.

NOBU: The combo plate.

KIYOKO: And you like the eggplant pickle.

[4, p.11.]

Throughout the play the audience sees that Nobu is building his kite in the way his ancestors did. Masi asks him to change its design and he replies, "My old man did it this way" [4, p. 9.]

In fact, Kite in Japan represents three themes: the Samurai warrior, the good luck of "the boy-hero Kintaro," who lived in the mountain with the fierce animals, and the Kabuki actors of the religious plays [5, p.2.]. In this particular sense, the kite represents courage, strength and faith or religion; the three things that are necessary for Nobu to go on in his life. Furthermore, there are different symbolic meanings attached to the kite. First, it means liberty. Nobu chooses to live in his self-made prison, and never gets out of it. Second, it is a gift to the first son to bring good luck [5, p.11]. Moreover, the symbolic meaning of flying the kite suggests directing one's destiny. As Nobu is unable to fly the kite, this means that he is unable to direct his destiny. This point is expressed later:

JUDY: I can't believe he gave the kite to Timothy. He gets so mad if you even touch them. And he never flies them. (Pause)

MARSHA: (Moving the kite.) No. He never flies them.
[4,p. 54.]

Nobu's kite is a symbol of freedom. He is unable to grasp—the possibilities of America, which, he feels, are unavailable to him because of his Japanese heritage. Later, Nobu imagines that his kite soars high, showing his longing for the greater freedom he felt as a child, but the weight of his own life and the traditions he feels he must live by, keep him and his kite on the ground. He gives the kite to his grandson, Timothy, as a sign of acceptance; Timothy, whose allegiance to his cultural background is weaker, may be freer to fly it [3, p.43].

At the end of the play, Nobu gives the kite to his grandson, as if he wants to pass this tradition to him. Nobu's gift to Timothy signifies his acceptance of the latter as a new member of the family as an American who has roots in Japan. It also represents the end of the generational conflict between Nobu and his daughter over her interracial marriage. Judy herself is surprised by her father's behaviour. By this act, Nobu wants his grandson to be strong and brave, because according to the Japanese tradition, a kite is given to the new-born child to give him strength and courage [17]

At a certain point, Nobu breaks the kite after recognizing his ignorance of the love affair between Masi and Sadao. This signifies the break of his ancestors' tradition. It also prepares the audience that there will be a change concerning Nobu and his strong relation to his roots. He will give the kite to Timothy.

II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF INTERNMENT CAMPS ON JAPANESE AMERICANS

This experience has its effects on the Nisei couple and especially Nobu. It makes them question their own identities and ask whether it is right to go on living in their host country. According to Mel Gussow [1990], the experience of the internment "casts a continuing shadow over their lives and over the play itself" [6]. Thus, Nobu recounts the incidents within the walls of the Internment camp:

NOBU: Remember those dances they used to have in the camps? You were a good dancer. You were . Best in the Camps.

MASI: You couldn't dance at all. You were awful.

NOBU: Remember that fellow Chester Yoshikawa? That friend of yours?

[]

NOBU: Remember that dance you were supposed to meet me out front of the canteen? ... I waited and waited.

MASI: Nobu, that was 40 years ago.

[]

NOBU: You didn't show up . Chester didn't show up either.

(Masi puts up cream and sugar into Nobu's coffee.)

MASI: Nobu, didn't we talk about this? I'm sure we did. Probably something came up and I had to help Mama and Papa.

NOBU: Where were you, huh?

MASI: How am I supposed to remember that far back? Chester died in Italy with the rest of the 442 boys.

NOBU: Where the hell were you?

MASI: How in the hell am I supposed to remember that far back!

[4, pp. 19-20)

Nobu is suffering because of the internment memories which happened more than forty years ago. These memories disturb him because they imply that Masi had a relationship with another man Chester, in the camp. It appears that Chester participated in World War II and was killed with regiment 442. For this reason Masi married Nobu. Nobu, however, loves Masi but he fails to reveal his emotions because of his pride and stubbornness. Masi mentions this, " I didn't think anyone could keep up with Papa. But, you could work like a horse. You and Papa. Proud. Stubborn" [4, p. 40].

It seems that Masi's father was a rich man and owned a farm. But, Nobu did not like his way of management. He thinks that the father mismanaged the store and he could run it better if he got the opportunity. He was promised to have this opportunity, but he lost it because of World War II. The following exchange between Masi and Nobu exposes this issue:

MASI: IT WASN'T HIS FAULT (Silence.) Who wanted to be in the Relocation Camps. Did you? Do you think he wanted to be in there. It broke Papa's heart. He spent his entire life building up that farm. A very proud man. It broke his heart when he lost it. And now how come you didn't go to the bank like I told you. I told you to go to the bank. And ask for ...

NOBU: I'm just saying I'd run the business different. Shig is a "baka" [fool]. That's all I'm saying.

MASI: You're retired. Shig passed away 8 years ago. The store's not even... (Continuing.)

NOBU: (Overlapping.) If all the Japanese move out you can't keep selling all that Japanese things, you can't. That's all I'm saying.

[4, p. 39]

On an exceedingly dramatic occasion, Gotanda refers again to the sufferings of the Japanese Americans in post-war America. Nobu remembers how he was humiliated in the bank:

NOBU: I tried, I tried Masi. After the war , after we got out of Camp? After-

(Continuing.)

MASI: (Overlapping.) Nobu, Camp? What are you-

NOBU: (Continuing.) – we get out I went to the bank like you told me. So your Papa can't give me money, that's alright-(Continuing.)

MASI: (Overlapping.) Nobu, what's this you never told me-

NOBU: (Continuing.) – I'll do it on my own. I got there and ask the man how do I sign up to get money. He says sit there and wait. I wait, I wait, I wait 5 whole goddamn hours. I go up, ' How come nobody sees me? ' He says, " Sorry, but the person to see you is sick, come back tomorrow.' I get so pissed off I throw the magazines all over the place. Everyone is looking. I don't give a damn, I'm shaking I'm so pissed off. And then , and then ... I'm filled with shame. Shame. Because I threw their magazines all over. After what they did to me," I'm" ashamed, me," me." When I get home I feel

[4, p. 44.]

The revelation of Masi pictures the private sufferings of a Nisei woman who tries to find a way out of her stagnant domestic life and her true self from her husband.

In a serious attempt to do this, Masi chooses Sadao, a Japanese American, not a white man or even a man from other ethnic group. This indicates that she is still under the influence of the internment experience and Japanese traditions. It is also obvious that almost all the characters of the play are Asian American or Japanese American. Gotanda asserts his Japanese social inclinations:

Almost all my work is driven by a Japanese American psychology. I grew up in a Japanese household in an extended Japanese American community. It was very much an American upbringing, with traditional American holidays - but Thanksgiving meant turkey, yams and stuffing next to striped bass sashimi, rice and Japanese pickles. And everyone around the table looked like me, so my stories are peopled by Asian American faces... [7]

Interestingly, Masi juxtaposes her husband. She is prone to change and assimilation (though it is partial). She is skilled enough to use new equipment, like phone answering machine, fishing instruments, as well as her training courses of ceramics. Moreover, she revolts and changes her old place by living in a separate apartment. Masi, in admitting these changes into her life, finds her true self.

Masi has an answering machine to which the confused Nobu replies with difficulty. The next scene shows the contrast between the couple:

NOBU: Masi? You got any ... Masi? (Masi's phone machine kicks in. Nobu doesn't know how to deal with it.)

MASI'S RECORDED VOICE: Hello. This is Masi Matsumoto. I'm not in right now, so please wait for the tone and leave your name, your number and a short message. Thank you, bye bye. (Nobu listening to the message end. The beep sounds. He's panicked. Not quite sure what to do.)

NOBU: I am Nobu Matsumoto. My telephone number is 751 ... damn. (Checks the number.) 751-8263. (Not sure if he has said his name.) I am Nobu Matsumoto. (Nobu hangs up. Picks up his kite and stares at it. Masi lit in pool of light. Casting. She is working on perfecting her technique, putting together all the little things that Sadao has taught her. She goes through one complete cycle without a hitch. Very smooth. Having done the whole thing without a mistake gives her great satisfaction. She smiles to herself. It feels good. She begins again. Dim to darkness on Masi and Nobu.)

[4, pp. 29-30.]

Unlike Nobu who seems unable to communicate with Masi, Sadao teaches her how to use the fishing equipment. He treats her as a human being who deserves to share him his interests. He submits a fishing pole and reel as a present to her. She is not sure about accepting the present, saying: "No, I can't accept this. I don't have anything for you. (Masi unwraps pole, which is broken down into pieces. Sadao sets reel on table and takes pole from Masi and proceeds to put it together.) [4, pp. 13-14.]. She declares that she does not know fishing and, " He's [Nobu] the fisherman. I just pack the

something so tight inside of me. In my guts, tighter and tighter, getting all balled up. How come I feel like this? Huh? How come I feel like this? I'm scared, Masi. I'm scared...

[4, pp.51-52.]

This incident shocks Nobu because he feels that he has no value as a human being in his new country. He is lost. He feels that he will not be given the opportunity to take part in the American dream [7]. His hopes of overcoming the scars of his painful experience past in the camp are aborted by the American system that discriminates against minorities. According to Randy Barbara Kaplan (2002), Nobu is obsessed with "anger and self-loathing" [8, p.71.].

Nobu, however, suffers before the war, during the war, and after it. Nobu feels inferior because of this suffering from discrimination. This inferiority leads to self-loathing. It is not possible for him to assimilate. In fact, he prefers to imprison himself in the cocoon of the past, rather than adapting himself to the present.

III. ASIAN AMERICAN WOMAN : FROM SUBMISSIVE TO AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN

One of the stereotypes of the Asian American woman is that she is weak and dependent on man. Throughout The Wash, Gotanda challenges this image and gives an authentic picture of the Asian American woman. In the play, the audience sees Nobu mistreats his wife. In a flashback, Masi remembers Nobu's stubbornness, and his quarrel with her about the size of the hook:

NOBU: No, Masi, I said size 8, size 8 hook.

MASI: You told me to buy size 6, not size 8. That's not what you told me.

[]

MASI: Nobu, Nobu, you didn't tell me to get size 8 hooks. You told me size ...

NOBU: (Interrupts.) I said size 8. I said size 8 hooks. (Pause.) This is my house. Masi? After I come home from that damn store- here ... This is my house. (Silence.)

MASI: (quietly.) I'm sorry. I'm wrong. You said size 8 hooks.

[4, p. 27.]

From this incident, one concludes that Nobu is arrogant and that he became angry at trivial things. This is one of the reasons behind the separation between him and Masi.

Masi decides to depend on herself and start a new life. Nobu does not treat her as his equal partner, on the contrary, he treats her as a slave, and makes her feel stupid. Moreover, he deprives her emotionally. She, thus, reveals to her daughters, Marsha and Judy her tense relation with their father:

There are things you kids don't know. I didn't want to talk about them to you but... Every time I wanted to[sleep], he pushed me away. Ten, fifteen years he didn't want me. (Pause) We were having one of our arguments, just like always. And he was going on and on about how it was my fault this and my fault that. And I was trying to explain my side of it, when he turned on me, 'Shut up, Mama, you don't know anything. You're stupid.' ... I was tired. I couldn't fight him anymore. He won. He finally made me feel like shit... I like Sadao very much. (Marsha turns away, then gets up and

lunch and off he goes" [4, p. 14]. Masi recognizes that she finds herself with Sadao, since he does not treat her as a servant.

Because of his mistreatment, Masi leaves her husband and lives in another place. He makes her an alien in her own house. According to Kaplan, "Masi, Nobu's wife leaves him to seek a meaningful and independent life for herself" [8, p.71.]. She, therefore, tries to liberate herself from the shackles of her marriage.

Despite her desire of liberation, Masi confronts a difficulty. She has an inner conflict between her Japanese cultural values and the new American values. It is demanded from woman, in the Japanese culture, to devote herself to her husband and children, without paying any attention to her needs and desires [3, p. 42.]. While in America, "one of the highest divorce rates in the world," woman is independent and makes her own decisions," such values conflict with Masi's Japanese background [3, p. 42.]. That is why Masi continues to be dutiful to Nobu by doing his laundry and preparing his food [3, p. 42.].

It seems that Sadao is a foil to Nobu [6]. The dramatist makes this clear as Nobu is preparing his solitary meal. Sadao is preparing his meal pleasantly with Masi [6]. He mixes waffles and says that everything in the meal is low in cholesterol, "except for the Cool Whip." Then he adds a dash of MSG [6]. According to Fuchsia Dunlop, MSG is "a ubiquitous seasoning, considered as 'normal' as salt, soy sauce and vinegar" [9]. This implies that his relation with Masi is a healthy one.

Though Masi is separated from her husband, she remains dutiful to him and does his laundry and shopping. She comes every week and replaces Nobu's old and dirty clothes with new and clean ones. Her assimilation is, therefore, partial, not total. It is behavioural as she absorbs the host country cultural standards partially [10,p.2.].

In an interview with Hwang, Gotanda says that he has based some characters of *The Wash* on family members he knows [11, p.1.]. It seems that Nobu is modeled on Gotanda's father, while Masi is modeled on his mother. In reality, Gotanda's father is a domineering figure, and his mother is a fearless figure. In an interview with Robert B. Ito (2000), Gotanda says that when some organizations visit us asking for donation, my mother says, "It's because of you people we were put in the camps; why should I give you money?" [12,p.174].

Masi is courageous enough to begin a new life with a new man in old age. By doing so she changes her personality from a submissive to an independent woman who makes her own decisions. Most importantly she takes the divorce decision after forty years of marriage. This is not familiar in her own time as a Nisei woman. At the end of the play, Masi leaves Nobu alone and decides not to do his laundry again. She, thus, frees herself from Nobu's bondage and sets off to begin a new life with Sadao.

Abbotson depicts love as another motivation for Masi's new decision. From this love Masi gains the strength and courage to leave her husband's laundry behind along with the responsibilities of the past [3, pp.42-43]. Unlike her husband, Sadao is a compassionate man who makes Masi happy. Abbotson describes him as:

an enlightened Japanese American male, who can cry in public and feel no shame, contribute to the household chores, complement his woman, include her in all aspects of life, and allow her far greater freedom---all impossibilities for Nobu, who has a very traditional attitude toward women. [3, p.43]

By this Abbotson justifies Masi's decision to leave Nobu and find herself by establishing a new relationship with Sadao.

Although Nobu-Masi relationship is the focus of the play, Gotanda uses in *The Wash* the Japanese traditional music and songs as well as Nobu's lullaby to assert Japanese American identity.

It seems that Kiyoko's restaurant is the best example of the Japanese American community. In this place the Japanese food is served and the Japanese language is used. Moreover, the Japanese music is played. A Japanese music equipment "Karaoke" is brought from Chiyo's beauty shop to Kiyoko's restaurant because it is seen as the proper place for playing Japanese music. As a strict Japanese American, Nobu spends a lot of time there.

Whenever he sings, Nobu chooses a Japanese lullaby. This implies that he longs to his childhood in Japan. In the restaurant, Nobu sings a lullaby that he used to hear from his father:

Sleep, sleep, hushbye
Little boy, good boy, go to sleep now
Little boy, Where has your ball gone?
Way over the mountains to the distant fields.

[4. P. 22]

It is clear that Nobu used to sing this lullaby to his daughters. At a certain point, the audience hears the following exchange between Masi and her daughter, Judy:

MASI: Daddy used to.

JUDY: Used to what?

MASI: Get up at night and feed you kids.

JUDY: Dad? You're kidding.

MASI: He used to sing to you. No wonder you kids would cry. (They laugh.)

[4. pp. 22-23]

Living in the past does not mean that Nobu has no feelings towards his family. As the lullaby is an indication of "the truest forms of love" [15, p.4.], Nobu shows his love to his daughters through singing the lullaby. Furthermore, he expresses his love to his grandson, Timothy, in his lullaby, at the end; [Translation] :

Acorn, acorn, rolling along
Fell into a pond, what will we do?
Up comes a loache fish, says 'good afternoon.
Timothy, lets go play together.

[4, p. 43]

This indicates that Nobu is proud of his heritage and longs for his ancestors, and while "other people's lives move on ... Nobu is left behind" [3, p.43.]. Consequently, Nobu is unable to assimilate into mainstream culture.

Nobu, is confused. He, culturally, is unable to do anything to save his marriage [3, p.42.]. He is not strong enough to make the "grand gesture" of suicide [3, p.42.]. At the same time, he cannot assimilate in the host country especially after the painful experience of the Internment Camps. In this

particular sense, Gotanda makes the audience sympathise with Nobu since "he is a victim of his culture rather than a real tyrant" [3,p.44]. Nobu, cannot believe that his wife is leaving and this is why he never asks her to come back again. He thinks that it is her duty to do his laundry and his shopping [3, p.43].

As Masi finds another man, Nobu also finds another woman, Kiyoko. But just as he never flies his kite, he never allows himself to consummate this relationship [3, p.43]. This indicates that he cannot liberate himself from the past and begin a new life.

Masi, on the other hand, tells her daughters that Nobu mistreats and neglects her for more than ten years. According to Kaplan, *The Wash* illustrates the liberating journey of a neglected wife to an independent woman [8, p.75.]. Masi has to choose between Nobu's abuse "in the name of husband and family" and saving herself, she definitely chooses the latter [8, p.75.].

In affirming his ethnic identity, Gotanda does not resort to tradition only, but he also uses the Japanese language. According to Rusi Jaspal (2009), language has another role besides communication. It is an effective means of asserting one's identity [13]. Moreover, the mother-tongue has an important role in ethnic identity since it is considered "immutable and inherited from birth" [13]. Gotanda's frequent use of the Japanese language in *The Wash* is an evidence of his regard to his heritage.

In order to assert the Japanese American identity, Gotanda tends to use Japanese culture and tradition such as Japanese music, and kites. Moreover, *The Wash* is crowded by Asian American characters. In this context Gotanda says in an interview conducted by Berson in *The Seattle Times*:

I am coming from a specific place as a Japanese American, but I want to make sure audiences can meet me halfway. When you want to reach a lot of people, your work should be inclusive enough for everyone to find its center.

[14]

Gussow (1990) comments on Gotanda's presentation of Japanese Americans in his works, saying that the dramatist's purpose is not to blame "these [Japanese Americans] seemingly close-knit people but to understand them." He wants the audience to appreciate those people through understanding their values and traditions. He wants the future generation to know their history and learn lessons from their experience, "it was important for me to write about my parents and grandparents' generations, just to remember" [7].

About the future generation and their impact on the Nisei, Kaplan observes that:

Only Timothy, the personification of the future, has the power to crack Nobu's isolation. In a powerful moment of transracial, transgenerational love and acceptance, Judy offers Timothy to Nobu to hold in his arms for the first time. As Nobu holds the infant to his chest, he softly sings a lullaby to this new face, so familiar and yet so strange to him.

[8,p.76.)

This means that the upcoming generation can assimilate better than the older.

However, the dramatist offers a contrast among his characters. For instance, Masi is hesitant about her relation with Sadao, Kiyoko challenges to have Nobu [6]. Kiyoko is a widow of an American soldier, she is, thus, a war bride. In a sense, she is different from Masi. Finding a husband is a natural thing for her. Gotanda offers another contrast. He uses Curley, as a contrast to Nobu (3,p. 43.). Curley is able to express himself freely, "Like Nobu, he has a firm sense of his own identity but without being so restricted" [6]. He differs from Nobu because he is a free-thinking man. Curley takes life as it is and enjoys it. He drinks beer, despite Kiyoko's refusal, because he likes to drink. He is unlike Nobu who suppresses his emotions [6]. This indicates that Kiyoko's assimilation is faster than that of Masi. The same thing can be seen in the case of Curley and Nobu because Curley's character is more flexible than that of Nobu. Hence, his assimilation is faster than that of the latter. Though both Nobu and Masi stick to their roots, Masi has managed to adapt herself to the new culture.

Nobu and Masi's daughters are third-generation Japanese Americans, and they both embrace Japanese culture and mainstream American culture; their names, Marsha and Judy, reflect this [3,p.43.]. Both are concerned for their parents, but they do not reveal the traditional Japanese sense of duty. Of the two, Judy is more assimilated because she encourages her mother to leave her father and she marries an African American without parental consent [3,p.43.].

At the end Nobu is left alone with nobody around him. He is just like Dale in Hwang's *FOB*, who is also left alone on the stage. As if the dramatist wants to say that living in the past leads to complete isolation. So, those two friends (Hwang and Gotanda) seem to say that complete assimilation and complete isolation from the mainstream lead to the loss of Asian American. That is why they prefer the middle way.

In a sense, Elaine Kim suggests four components of Asian American Identity [16, p.173.]. Among these components is the awareness of structural barriers and racism [16, p.173.]. Masi is aware of racism and this might be added to other reasons of preferring a Japanese American, Sadao, to other white men.

CONCLUSION

Through the journey of Masi, the dramatist subverts the stereotype of the Asian American woman as weak, obedient, and passive. Masi is strong enough to separate from her husband, ask for divorce and escape the maltreatment of her husband. In this sense, Gotanda proves that Asian American woman can revolt against oppression, exploitation and savagery. She can liberate herself and find her own way without depending on man, even in her old age. By this, Gotanda gives the true image of the Asian American woman, and consequently, her true identity.

The characters in *The Wash* are divided into three groups. The members of the first group stick to their roots and live in the past. Therefore, they cannot assimilate. This group is represented by Nobu. The second group is a totally assimilated one, which is represented by Judy. The third group takes the middle way. It chooses to adapt itself to the new society. This group is represented by Masi. She, thus, chooses a free-thinking Japanese American as a suitable partner. Nevertheless, identity crisis stems from the

characters' desire to have an identity according to their own position in life. Masi expects her husband to change because they are living in changing circumstances. On the other hand, Nobu expects his wife to remain submissive to him even if they are living in a new society.

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