

A WOMAN OF A NEW ERA: A FEMINIST READING OF CARYL CHURCHILL'S OWNERS

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse Caryl Churchill's Owners from a feminist point of view. The play is written mostly under the influence of the second wave feminist movement and thus it explores the key points of the movement. Simone de Beauvoir's ideas on women are paid attention while discussing the play as she is one of the most significant feminists of the time. Churchill draws distinctive female characters in the center of the play and approaches male dominance in a variety of ways. The paper deals with a short history of modern feminism along with focusing specifically on second wave feminism and Simone de Beauvoir. It also interrogates the socially determined roles of woman and impact of patriarchy in Churchill's Owners. As a result of this, one can comprehend that the playwright sheds light on the problems of women and display them in the play, along with showing the importance of women's financial and emotional independence that were essential at the era of the play's production.

Keywords: Woman, feminism, patriarchy, Caryl Churchill

1. Introduction

Modern feminism, as a historical movement, has changed its form rather a lot over the last century, that is it started with suffrage and still continues as the third wave feminism. During this long period, the movement began to be used as a theory in

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literature, influenced many writers and became the subject of literary works. Caryl Churchill's *Owners*, which coincides with approximately the mid of last century, is the subject of this paper and feminist theory is applied to it. With the emergence of second wave feminism, the statement "The Personal is Political" became popular among feminists, which means that women's personal actions are determined by their conditions in politics and thus by the patriarchal structures. Simone de Beauvoir, in her influential non-fictional book *The Second Sex* (1949), basically argues that matters that are related to femininity are commonly shaped with the influence of the patriarchal society. Social and cultural norms determine gender roles especially for women who have to deal with the male domination. Also, she deals with motherhood in her book, suggesting that due to the limited contraception and abortion rights of the time, women are constrained to give birth to unwanted babies, resulting in maternal problems as well as troublesome familial issues. Churchill rejects traditional gender roles and emphasizes the difference between biological sex and gender.

2. Owner in the light of Feminism

Caryl Churchill was born in London in 1938 and she was the only child of her middle class parents. (Hiley, 1990, 14). Churchill had a prosperous life during when she was provided an opportunity of decent education by her hardworking parents. She lived with her parents for seven years in Canada and studied at Trafalgar School in Montreal between 1948 and 1955. After graduating, she went back to England and enrolled in Lady Margaret Hall College at Oxford University in 1956. She graduated from Oxford University in 1960 and married David Harter in 1961. This marriage was the triggering point of her way to theatre stages of London and thus she started a carrier as a playwright (Keyssar, 78). Due to her husband's job, Churchill had to leave the center of London for the suburbs and she gave birth to three children. She became almost a housewife there and went through a number of miscarriages (Itzin, 1987, 279).

Churchill did not give up writing and she produced a number of plays for the radio broadcast. While writing these plays, she was worried about "the corrupting power of ownership – of humanbeings as well as of property" (Keyssar, 79). Churchill states that her main concern was not to promote any specific ideology at that time, these plays were written with a motive that was caused by painful personal experiences and rage (Itzin, 279). She was able to start to get over her unpleasant experiences and established a political consciousness in herself, with the influence of which she wrote her first staged play *Owners*. In this play, Churchill deals with the inequality between men and women in mostly economic and political areas, which she also experienced in her personal life (Keyssar, 80). It seems that she was not content with her life until she started her serious professional carrier with the staging of *Owners* at the Royal Court Upstairs in 1972. In an interview with Itzin, she explains how she felt at that time as:

I didn't really feel a part of what was happening in the sixties. During that time I felt isolated. I had small children and was having miscarriages. It was an extremely solitary life. What politicised me was being discontent with my own way of life – of being a barrister's wife and just being at home with small children (279).

Owners centers around an overly ambitious woman character, Marion who is mentally ill and hospitalized for some time as implied in the play. Although she is formerly a housewife, she turns into a dedicated property-developer owing to her successful managing skills. Possessing is the main theme of the play, that is the more Marion possesses properties, the less her husband Clegg, who stands for patriarchy, is able to 'possess' her. Worsely, who is Marion's assistant, helps her with the business and he constantly tries to kill himself by cutting his wrists. Marion and Worsely are interested in buying a specific building where Lisa and her indifferent husband Alec live. They try to persuade them to sell the apartment with a variety of offers. Lisa is a pregnant woman and Marion and Clegg do not have a child, Marion plans to take the baby from her after she gives birth and she succeeds in her plan. Clegg's patriarchal attitude is so dominant and full of hatred that he keeps on making a plan in order to kill Marion, however he is not able to do it. Worsely knows about his plans but he does not warn Marion about taking caution. Marion is so driven by the influence of capitalism that she lacks humanistic approach, unlike Lisa who is naive and not capable enough. Churchill expresses how she was inspired for writing *Owners*:

I was in an old woman's flat when a young man offering her money to move came round – he was my first image of Worsely and one of the starting points of the play. Another was wanting one character with the active, achieving attitude of 'Onward Christian Soldiers', the other the 'sitting quietly, doing nothing' of the Zen poem. The active one had to be a woman, the passive one a man, for their attitudes to show up clearly as what they believed rather than as conventional male and female behaviour. So Marion and Alec developed from that train of thought. I'd read Figs' *Patriarchal Attitudes* not long before, which may have affected the character of Clegg, and had recently reread Orton's *Sloane*, which may have done something to the style (1985, 4).

As the play was written and staged in 1972, the British women's condition and impact of feminist ideas on theatre will be explained in order to take a look at the atmosphere of the time. Women's Liberation Movement gained speed as women factory workers were demanding for equal payment and thus they started a campaign. The first Women's Liberation Conference was held in the early 1970s with the participation of over 600 women. A National Women's Coordinating Committee was constituted in order to claim equal education, employment and payment opportunities for women (Hannam, 140). With the influence of second wave feminism in Western Europe, minimum one million women became activists and the movement gained nearly 12 million supporters by the late 1970s. The movement enabled certain kinds of legislation which help women improve their standards regarding employment, wages,

education and legalization of abortion. One of the developments was that women established independent organizations rather than relying on only political and social ones in order to support their rights. Health centers for women raised consciousness among them about their own bodies and sexuality while rape crisis centers were useful for helping them who were victims. The first refuge was formed in 1972 in order to stand by mistreated women. 1970s were significant in a way that circumstances under which woman as a subject was discussed improved, and developments paved the way for rising their courage for thinking and acting differently (155). Moreover, the employment rate of married women who were under the age of 60 increased dramatically in the UK, from around 50 per cent to 60 per cent by the early 1980s. This was a progressive raise since the end of Second World War as nearly one third of married women were employed before the war broke out (Gomulka & Stern, 1990, 171). The wage of husbands increased around 10 per cent and the household income which refers to the income neither husband nor wife provides, rose over 20 per cent. It can be inferred that both husband and wife's and other sources of income dramatically showed an increase. Rising income of the husband and rising income that is provided by somewhere else do not seem to lower the women's enthusiasm to work, on the contrary studies indicate that women's employment rate gradually rose during the decade (176).

If 1960s and 70s are compared in terms of the number of woman workers in the area of theatre, any comprehensive study can be found, however it is certain that the number of woman workers in male-dominant areas such as directing and writing increased. Also, there were more plays which center around women experiences and which were the products of women's creativity. Young and conscious audience began to be interested in theatre stages, through which they could be a part of fundamental change in theatre area in the 1970s. The radical improvement began with the year 1968 when people experienced changes on cultural level too. During the 1960s, there was a struggle to rule out theatre censorship, however it was not until 1968 that it brought to a successful conclusion. After the censorship had officially been abolished, theatre did not have to obey any longer, that is playwrights felt more independent to write on a variety of subjects and the way of representation was diversified. In this respect, it became easier to react political ideologies and conflicts of the time. With the decision of Lord Chamberlain in the 1960s, erotic heterosexuality scenes, indications to homosexuality, especially for the male, and obscene language were removed from the stage, but towards the beginning of the 1970s, a new feminist-activist ambiance occurred it corresponded to a more liberal and experimental environment for theatre representations (Wandor, 1984, 76).

The year of 1968 had a significant influence on theatre as it changed the ideological background of it. The new wave suggested that art should be for society's sake and accordingly theatre should not only be for middle class, it should take place in the neighbourhoods or workplaces of lay people. However, among socialist people, "this was translated into a mixture of naturalistic telling-it-like-it-is (derived from TV

naturalism) (77). Once the feminist styles of theatre became subjective, the same perception was adopted. In 1970 and 1971, marches were organized in order to protest Miss World contest and thus the consumerist point of view, which was executed to take advantage of femininity was disordered. These marches involved street theatre, making fun of with the exaggerated feminine look and raised questions about the financial aspect of this ‘only look’ promotion. Also, agitprop plays attracted attention to the struggles of working-class women, sexual discrimination, and male domination in the family. This feminist propaganda mirrored the concerns and excitement caused by the unification of radical feminism and reconsidered Marxist studies. Theatre was reshaped as a rough and enthusiastic area followed by deliberations after the plays were staged.

As a result of these changes, two categories of feminist playwrights emerged: firstly, there was a “new generation (not always young) of women many of whom are either undeveloped in the craft or writing or simply throw off easy television-influenced sitcom type plays, or inadequately structured social realism”. The second group consisted of successful playwrights in real terms like Pam Gems and Caryl Churchill, who are more famous, older, internalized, and well-known (86). These women playwrights criticized the way society was governed by a narrow set of patriarchal ideologies.

In *Owners*, Clegg’s patriarchal ideas reach the level of misogyny and thus he never gives up the idea of killing Marion throughout the play. His perception of gender roles is very rigid and he believes that a woman can never be superior to a man from any aspect:

WORSELY: You could get another shop better placed. Wouldn’t Marion buy you a shop?

CLEGG: I don’t let her buy me a drink. I was going to be big myself, you don’t seem to realize. That was my intention as a young man (Churchill, 1985, 9).

The two sexes have distinctive biological features which are considered to form their patterns of behaviour and establish specific roles for them. These roles are defined in almost every society, which tends to attribute cultural meaning to both sexes, that is the biological distinctions are not enough for them. Biological differences are usually regarded as interrelated with certain social and psychological features. Therefore, a woman is expected to present feminine characteristics and accordingly a man is expected to behave in a masculine way. To put it in another way, either a man or a woman is supposed to perform certain characteristics which are formed and settled by cultural norms, however these norms differ from each other as each culture’s expectations are different. Recent gender studies have indicated that while sex is a biological determinant of a person, gender is not related to physical characteristics, in that it is mostly shaped by social and cultural norms. In other words, the two terms get in a vicious circle as it seems that they can not be separated thoroughly. Once

difference of gender between the two sexes is constituted, it is considered as the presentation of biological distinctions that establish the demand for gender roles. The vicious circle never ends, that is biological differences are used to constitute gender differences which are employed to describe biological differences which, again, need gender differences to be determined. Although gender refers to the physical characteristics and sexual identity of a person, the main factors which establish the gender difference are social and cultural understandings or misunderstandings. For most of the cultural norms of societies, these determined gender roles create plenty of disadvantageous conditions for women (Kochuthara, 2011, 435).

Churchill presents how women are landed with difficult responsibilities particularly for the marriage institution. While Alec is not concerned about the future of their marriage, Lisa worries about the possible problems that she would face in the case that they broke up. The role of 'raising children' is seen as one of the primary roles women and thus they usually have to work and raise their children at the same time even if their husbands are supposed to be also responsible for looking after them. Even though Lisa expresses her concerns and fears, Alec seems to be indifferent about his family:

ALEC: Yes, you must leave me if you want to.

LISA: I always hate it when you say that because what you mean is you want to leave me.

ALEC: No, if I wanted to I would.

LISA: Yes, you would, wouldn't you. You wouldn't worry about us at all. You wouldn't wonder how I'd bring up the kids. I can't go on working with a little baby you know. You'd go away and forget all about us (Churchill, 14).

In the societies where patriarchal ideas and norms are adopted, women are dominated by political, social and economic establishments, which also result in their political, social and economic subordination in their societies. The family union, the primary unity of the society, maintains patriarchy where father is the authority of the house "and controls the productive and reproductive resources, labor force, and capacities on the notions of superiority and inferiority, which is learnt in the gender role socialization." Moreover, he speaks to the women around him in an obviously cunning way. While he acts like a kind and pleasant-spoken shop owner in front of his female customer, the moment the customer leaves, he reveals his true personality:

CLEGG: Lovely day dear. Been sitting in the park in the sun? I know you ladies. Twelfe ounces of mince. And what else? Some nice rump steak dear? You don't keep a man with mince. No? Twenty p, thank you very much. Bye-bye dear, mind how you go.

[She goes.]

Old cow (Churchill, 7).

There is a significant matter which weakens the rigid norms of patriarchy, that is the more women become financially independent, the more they have the authority to produce an effect on social and economic systems. As Beauvoir suggests, economic empowerment of women has been distressing the maintainability of the marriage institution. Modern understanding of marriage refers to getting together of two independent individuals whose responsibilities are personal and also mutual. It is like a contract and having a sexual relationship with anyone else violates the agreement. Both parties have the right to divorce one another under the same circumstances. With these changes in the perception of marriage institution, women's function is not only to give birth anymore, that is the reproductive function has become more optional, rather than women's obligation for their families and societies (415).

Clegg commits adultery and engages in a sexual relationship with Lisa, who is an old friend of Marion and him. Lisa, compared to Marion, is more submissive and ineffective, which gives Clegg the opportunity to take advantage of and dominate her sexually. While they are in bed, Clegg implies that she should be sexually passive as it is how a woman is supposed to be:

CLEGG: I didn't say you could get up. You won't be suitable unless you lie flat, did you know that, very feminine and do just as you're told. On your back and underneath is where I like to see a lady. And a man on top. Right on top of the world. Because I know what you ladies like. You like what I give you. I didn't say you mustn't move at all. But just in response (Churchill, 54).

The position in the society and interrelation with other people determine one's social status in the social structure. Socio-economic status is represented mainly by gender roles. Patriarchy stimulates men's prepotency in the social system, financial opportunities manage and handicap women to reach to acquire an equal or superior socio-economic status. Women's social and economic emancipation is mostly related to making decisions and executing their practices. In the play, Marion is presented as an independent woman who has clawed her way up to a high socio-economic status. It is implied that she earns more than Clegg, which is a serious problem for him. Moreover, when Clegg closes his **butcher** shop and starts to look after Lisa's baby, the only financial provider of the household becomes Marion. According to Clegg, the male should be the financial provider and thus he is very upset because of his desperate situation. On the other hand, Marion is aware of the fact that thanks to her socio-economic position, she is able to exercise her power over Clegg, which can be seen as a revenge for the past. She despises the butcher shop clearly, although a workplace is very significant and even sacred for a male as it is the main source where he gets his 'power'. However, Marion thinks that it must be closed while she talks about her big success which deserves to be honoured:

CLEGG: Congratulations my love.

MARION: We shall celebrate. It stinks in here, Clegg. Does it always? No wonder you've no customers. Throw it all away. Shut the shop. Whatever's that you're clutching, Worsely? Meat? You won't want it, you'll eat out with us. Chuck it in the bin. What about the rest of it, Clegg? Will you pay the dustman to take it away? I think I'm turning into a vegetarian (Churchill, 12).

In this respect, determined gender roles are challenged in *Owners*, as it somehow reverses the gender roles of a married couple. Although Marion is biologically female, she plays the role of head of the household and also a strict decision-maker. Moreover, while Clegg is a typical patriarchal male, he ironically has to perform the established role of a woman. Thus, as Butler argues, gender is not directly related to the biological factors:

Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gender (BUTLER, 1988, 519).

Sex roles have been included in the woman sociology by influencing a variety of studies and researches. The male and female behavioral attitudes were analyzed, and some hypothesis were put forward in order to analyze behavioral differences. Conceptions of sex and gender were differentiated from each other and it was concluded that while sex connotes the difference of some parts of male and female bodies, gender refers to the culturally determined identity through which people introduce themselves to their community. Therefore, patriarchy upholds the idea that the male 'possesses' the female, which is one of the main points of *Owners*. Clegg is surprised that Marion does not care about him, as he thinks she belongs to him like a property:

WORSELY: A house the same. Your own. You knock the floor out if you like. That's what it's for. A car the same. You drive how you like. Within a reasonable speed limit. My flesh and blood the same.

CLEGG: A wife the same.

WORSELY: A wife is a person.

CLEGG: First and foremost a wife. One flesh. Marion leaves me (Churchill, 35).

In most of the communities women's status is evaluated by three main canons. The first one is a woman's efficiency of reproductive functions and biological completeness. The second one refers to a woman's participation in and authority on significant issues such as properly paid employment, education, family planning and property. The last canon is women's networks. Researchers work on cross-cultural and historical studies in order to exemplify the kinds of communities by using these

three canons as determinants (Flora, 556). Accordingly, 1970s was a decade when women recently started to be effective and reformist in the areas mentioned above. If Marion is judged by the three criteria, it can be argued that she succeeds in the third and especially the second one. She buys and sells properties to make a living, which irritates Clegg. Also, she has a network through her assistant Worsely and her job in general. She celebrates her success, eats out with Clegg and Worsely and even takes them to a strip club.

She defies the gender role that patriarchy determines for women since she is financially independent and has the power to manipulate and manage the people around her. She can be regarded as a woman of a new era regarding the understanding of marriage institution and familial gender roles of the time. As Beauvoir asserts:

Nevertheless, the epoch in which we are living is still, from the feminist point of view, a period of transition. Only a part of the female population is engaged in production, and even those who are belong to a society in which ancient forms and antique values survive. Modern marriage can be understood only in the light of a past that tends to perpetuate itself (Beauvoir, 415).

When Clegg does not earn money and looks after the baby, Marion becomes the ‘father’ of the household, which can be interpreted as a rejection of traditionally settled gender roles. Also, she makes a living as a result of her own work and struggle, not by depending on her husband and seeing him as the source of livelihood. She does not face with any kind of oppression because of her sex by the state as she has the opportunity to live and work independently without any limitations. As regards to male-on-female violence, she is not exposed to violence by her husband neither physically nor psychologically, and instead, she even tries to dominate him with her determined and self-confident manner. She feels and acts independently in sexual sense, because while she is in the strip club with Clegg and Worsely, she and Worsely kiss. She does not care about Clegg’s presence there and thus she does not hesitate to kiss her assistant although a man is expected to kiss a woman in a strip club from the viewpoint of traditional gender roles. All these actions of her indicate that she defies the cultural norms which determine the patriarchal gender roles. She expresses her ambition and long for cruelty that are mostly attributed to a male:

MARION: [...] Every one of you thinks I will give in. Because I’m a woman, is it? I’m meant to be kind. I’m meant to understand a woman’s feelings wanting her baby back. I don’t. I won’t. I can be as terrible as everyone. Soldiers have stuck swords through innocents. I can massacre too. Into the furnace. Why shouldn’t I be Genghis Khan? Empires only come by killing. I won’t shrink. Not one of you loves me. But he shall grow up to say he does (Churchill, 62).

This power gives courage to defy the patriarchal gender roles, that is she does not perform any of the stereotypical female roles. She exercises her power mostly over

Clegg, she even does not let him oppose her and thus she makes him feel uncomfortable by interrupting the conversation:

MARION: Are you mad, Clegg? Giving him away? Once she's got hands on him he won't be ours any more. You'll lose your little butcher.

CLEGG: I don't want that. We'd have to have a written agreement about his future.

MARION: There are plenty of people to look after babies. He will have a trained nanny.

CLEGG: But Lisa –

MARION: I said he will have a nanny. Are you going against me, Clegg? It was entirely for you I got the baby. I bought him a shop, for you. If you don't like the arrangements you can go. Clear right off. It would be a delight never to see you again (Churchill, 60).

If Marion was a housewife, who spends most of her time at home, looking after the kid and taking care of her husband, she would not probably utter these words so self-confidently. Therefore, considering the time period of the play, Marion's strong personality seems extraordinary to some extent. Her authoritarian and bossy personality pushes her to perform the roles of a male which are regarded to include oppressing, administrating, dominating the situations and people around. She creates her own opportunities and space in order to act, talk, work etc. like a man. She can be counted as a lucky woman since she has the chance to overcome the condition of women in general which has come to a deadlock. As Beauvoir explains:

Hence the paradox of their situation: they belong at one and the same time to the male world and to a sphere in which that world is challenged; shut up in their world, surrounded by the other, they can settle down nowhere in peace. Their docility must always be matched by a refusal, their refusal by an acceptance. In this respect their attitude approaches that of the young girl, but it is more difficult to maintain, because for the adult woman it is not merely a matter of dreaming her life through symbols, but of living it out in actuality (567).

In *Owners*, Churchill shows that stereotyping is one of the primary reasons of providing certain gender roles for the male and female. Generalizing women with negative adjectives such as weak, sensitive, soft etc. causes to establish specific roles for them. This leads to the problem of inequality as less important and/or uncomplicated tasks are assigned to them, which results in being positioned as subordinate. Accordingly, patriarchy imposes that women are not trustworthy:

CLEGG: She's told you, has she? She said she wouldn't. Woman's like that. Deceit is second nature. Due to Eve. But I'm too crafty for them by half. I know their ins and outs. You keep her rather short of it I'd say. Unless it was me that specially appealed

to her. Yelping for more. I expect she told you. Or did she not bring out that side of it? I keep myself a little in reserve. You never know what else may turn up. I wouldn't want to waste myself on something as second rate as your wife. She was quite useful. A handy receptacle. But quite disposable after. Isn't that your attitude to Marion? (Churchill, 55)

As a result, not compromising of the natural gender characteristics with the biological structure causes a major problem particularly for women since they are expected to be submissive and weak because of the stereotypes which restrict them from making decisions, acting, talking, living independently (Fricker, 2007). For the situations when these two conceptions do not match, like Marion, women tend to focus on only their natural gender characteristics and ignore the socio-cultural roles in order to proclaim their individuality freely. She goes against Clegg, and thus patriarchy in general, by ignoring the traditional gender roles that are imposed upon her.

Churchill revolts against this established gender role by giving the responsibility of child rearing to a patriarchal character. Clegg thinks that "even a women can do it" (54). On the other hand, ironically, he ends up staying at home and looking after the baby while Marion becomes the financial provider of the household, a gender role which Clegg considers as suitable for men.

The male and female accomplish their socially determined responsibilities and improve their social involvement fundamentally. However, women's sources and opportunities were limited when compared to men's, which caused to dealing with obstacles in the process of practicing their interests. The unequal sources and opportunities resulted in a change in women's areas of interest and roles. Women were positioned after men in the social hierarchy because of their limited resources. They historically had less resources, inferior socio-economic status, and fewer financial opportunities. Moreover, they had to cope with the cultural restrictions. Therefore, women could not have the chance to enhance their conditions individually by engaging in direct arguments with men. Accordingly, women had to put up with the possible outcomes of a marginal lifestyle by setting up a home with a limited income or enrolling in a denomination in order to keep away from dependency on their husbands, fathers etc. They needed to look for new chances or take part in collective actions in order to accomplish more (Jackson, 1998, 176).

Marion does not have to choose neither setting up a home nor joining a denomination, instead she continues to live with her husband by oppressing him as if she took revenge on patriarchy, which can be seen as a way of reversing patriarchal gender roles. She has the opportunity to start a new household owing to her financial status, but she seems not to prefer it on purpose to dominate the men around more easily. Thus, it can be inferred that Marion deliberately continues to live with him in order to make him psychologically suffer, likewise she used to do formerly. Marion

distresses him by fulfilling 'his role', as he sees, that is why as a conventional male, who fiercely defends the male-dominated system, he cannot stand her rejection of the that can be performed by both sexes.

The contrast between Marion and Lisa indicates that every woman is a unique individual, each one of them has a distinctive identity. On the other hand, if they become united for a specific purpose while accepting their differences, they will be able to revolt against the patriarchal system. Although Marion and Lisa have quite different personalities, the common point between them is that they do not seem to have healthy psychological states. What Churchill presents with the binary portrayals of these women is that no matter how powerful, talented, ambitious or on the contrary, submissive, ineffective she is, a woman has to encounter with the problem of patriarchy as it can be understood by both women's troublesome interactions with Clegg. Also, Churchill points out that the higher socio-economic status a woman holds, the more power she attains in the social hierarchy as it can be seen in the case of Marion.

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