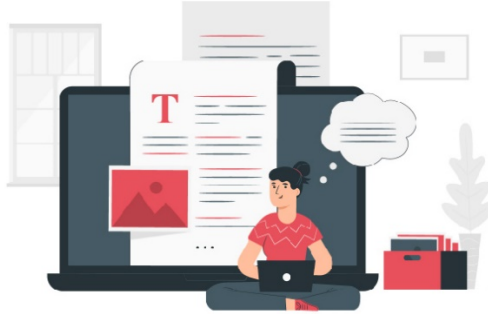


IMPACT FACTOR: 7.86

ISSN 0976 - 8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

12<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Peer-Reviewed  
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. 12, Issue - 5 (October 2021)

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
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## **Subjugation of Women as a Road Map for Understanding Totalitarian Absurdity in *The Queue* by Basma Abdel Aziz**

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**Article History:** Submitted-28/09/2021, Revised-17/10/2021, Accepted-18/10/2021, Published-31/10/2021.

### **Abstract:**

Basma Abdel Aziz (1976- ) is a globally distinguished Egyptian author, psychiatrist and journalist. Aziz formerly worked with torture victims at Nadeem Center in Cairo and is a weekly columnist for Egypt's Al-Shorouk, a popular newspaper. She won the Sawiris Cultural Award in 2008 for her first short story collection *May God Make It Easy* and Ahmed Bahaa-Eddin Award in 2009 for a sociological study of police violence in Egypt entitled *Eghraa'Al Solta Al Mutlaka* in Arabic and translated into English as *Temptation of Absolute Power*. The novelist is nicknamed 'the rebel' in her native country for her dissidence.

This paper primarily focuses on her debut novel *The Queue*. This novel was originally published in Arabic as *Al Tabuur* (2013) and has been translated into English by Elisabeth Jaquette as *The Queue* (2016). The paper focuses on how the belligerent policies of an apathetic regime demoralize the citizens and marginalize them. They are economically deprived and pushed towards insecurities and strange apprehensions. The women suffer incessantly under the authoritarianism that overshadows their fate. The narrative reveals the dark side of the unnamed Middle Eastern city that Aziz explores while sketching a messy picture of life in a severely cynical and fragmented dystopian society.

**Keywords:** Totalitarian absurdity, Realist dystopia, Economic austerity, State surveillance, Subjugation of Women.

“We were the people who were not in the papers,” she read. “We lived in the blank white spaces at the edge of print. It gave us more freedom. We lived in the gaps between the story.”

— Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*

Contemporary writers from the Arab world do not limit their literary excursions to the destabilized forms of governance in their homelands, but focus on a universal evocation of relationships between oppression of women and escalating totalitarianism. The post-revolutionary Arab fiction brims with images of defiance and voices of the dissenters. The rise of the genre of post-revolution or post-Arab spring literature has sowed the seeds of revival and revolt against entrenched authoritarianism. People are collectively raising their voices against the panoptic mindset of the authorities and stand united against state oppression. Voices of writers like Ahdaf Soueif, Radwa Ashour, Hoda Barakat, Sahar Mandour, Mona Prince and Basma Abdel Aziz have paved way for futuristic stories, dystopias, apocalyptic narratives, grim satires and genre-defying literature. The narratives that have emerged in the recent decades telescope the harrowing abuses against the weaker sections of the society, absurd laws and procedural obstacles, disillusionment of failed uprisings and an atmosphere of cynicism. The literary output of the writers from the Arab world finds worldwide resonance in works of other contemporary writers who oppose the totalitarian absurdity. Some such writers include Turkish writer of Kurdish descent Selahattin Demirtaş, Palestinian writer Adania Shibli, Iranian author Shahriar Mandanipour, Indian novelist Arundhati Roy and Yōko Tawada a Japanese writer.

The shift from illiberal democracy to a totalitarian form of governance is not a rapid phenomenon for a nation. The transformation of governance is a process that brings many changes in the lives of the people. The most significant impact of such a form of shift is seen upon the lives of women and other marginalized sections of the society. In nations like Turkey, Hungary, Brazil, Poland and India the dissident corners are being silenced. The democratic nature of the country is being diminished by the ruling regimes. Efforts are being made to homogenize the nations by unmaking their pluralistic culture. Literary works that emerge from such illiberal democracies in the making are bound to be against the apathetic methods of governance. The novels that are being written pose serious questions and focus on issues related to the rights of the people. The space for creativity in the literary sphere is primarily reserved for the stories that narrate the realities of the degenerating human condition under totalitarianism and illiberal democracies. The writers of

fiction and non-fiction equally participate in the process of dissent that is needed in the face of such political apathy. The victims are often women and other minority populations who are deprived of their rights and not allowed to articulate their distress.

The journalistic reports and narratives that make an attempt to give voice to the silenced are targeted and subjected to bitter attacks. The recent assaults on women writers, journalists, orators and social activists across the globe are evident of the fact of rising intolerance against the voices of truth. An activist from Somalia, Almaas Elman, was killed in 2019, Marielle Franco, a Brazilian politician was assassinated in 2018, Su'ad al-Ali an Iraqi human rights activist was shot in 2018 in central Basra, Shehla Masood an Indian environmentalist and Right to Information activist was killed in 2011 and Gauri Lankesh a prolific Kannad journalist was shot in 2017. These killings exhibit the reality that the rise of totalitarianism and a shift towards tyranny fuels subjugation of women as its first milestone after dividing the society on communal lines. The most vulnerable are women as they are subjected to atrocities not only under the banner of male-hegemony, but also by the misogynist attitude of the government that makes false claims of protecting women. The political uprisings in many countries against the inhuman laws and acts of the governing regimes like the Arab spring, the anti-CAA protests in India, the revolutionary voices from Sudan and other countries have united women and revealed the true nature of state repression. During the protests women have been detained, tortured and disgraced in innumerable ways by the ruling majority to castrate their will to seek liberation and ask for their rights.

In countries like Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Bangladesh if a woman transgresses the limitations positioned by the male authority, then she is either marginalized, or brutally killed. This authoritarianism based on gender is another kind of oppression that women are subjected to. Different strains of feminist discourse have emerged from the writings of women from these countries. Urdu writer Kishwar Naheed's *Buri Aurat ki Katha* (translated as *A Bad Woman's Story*), Ada Jafarey and Parveen Shakir's politically charged feminist poetry and Khadija Mastur's novel *Aangan* (translated as *The Women's Courtyard*) are some early literary masterpieces from Pakistan that have been translated into various languages to provide the global readers with a picture of the grim realities of a country's orthodox socio-political setup and pitiable condition of a majority of women. In the Indian context the works of female writers during the post-partition era that sowed the seeds of early feminism include writings of Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Kamala Markandaya and Mahasweta Devi. Their works such as Devi's *Hajar Churashir Maa*

(translated as *Mother of 1084*), Markandaya's *Nector in a Sieve*, Pritam's *Pinjar* (translated as *The Skeleton*) and Ismat Chughtai's *Tedhi Lakeer* (translated as *The Crooked Line*) have a timeless appeal and are milestones for future writers. Women writers like Fevziye Rahgozar Barlas, Maryam Mahboob and Homeira Qaderi have contributed greatly to the trajectory of women's writing from Afghanistan. Whereas, Bangladeshi female writers like Rabeya Khatun, Mokbula Manzoor and Shazia Omar have outlined various significant issues of women. These writers articulate the true condition of women under boundless male supremacy. Freedom seems to be an illusion for the women who are trapped in the unyielding prison of socio-cultural regulations. Their bodies are traded and trafficked, their privileges are seized and their freedom is curtailed by the totalitarian regimes.

In recent decades powerful and captivating narratives have emerged from many obscure corners of the world. This paper primarily focuses on the debut novel of contemporary Egyptian author, psychiatrist and journalist Basma Abdel Aziz entitled *The Queue*. This novel was originally published in Arabic as *Al Tabuur* (2013) and has been translated into English by Elisabeth Jaquette as *The Queue* (2016). Aziz formerly worked with torture victims at Nadeem Center in Cairo and is a weekly columnist for Egypt's *Al-Shorouk*, a popular newspaper. She won the Sawiris Cultural Award in 2008 for her first short story collection *May God Make It Easy* and Ahmed Bahaa-Eddin Award in 2009 for a sociological study of police violence in Egypt entitled *Eghraa'Al Solta Al Mutlaka* in Arabic and translated into English as *Temptation of Absolute Power*. Another short story collection of Aziz is entitled *The Boy Who Disappeared* (2008). Her non-fiction includes *Beyond Torture* (2011), *Memory of Repression: A Study of the Matrix of Torture* (2014) and *The Power of Text* (2016). The novelist is nicknamed 'the rebel' in her native country for her dissident nature.

This novel is an earnest attempt to create a dystopian narrative of an unnamed authoritarian regime that is adamant on distorting the realities and changing the history. It resonates with the dystopian form mastered by prolific authors like Frantz Kafka and George Orwell. The regime's manipulative measures are based on the idea of panopticism and manipulative tactics. The telecom company that is mentioned in the text called the Violet telecom works in collaboration with the authoritarian regime to record the conversations of the common people so as to subjugate them and pry on their privacy. People do not realize their sinister motives and use the phones that record their conversations even when not in use. As pointed out by the author in the novel, "Somehow

both phone calls and discussions happening around the phone were all being recorded—even when they weren't actually making a call, and even when their phones were turned off" (*The Queue* 120). In this dystopian narrative the writer creates an unnamed Middle Eastern City, but the incidents and issues bothering the people resonate with the everyday life of people in Egypt. A boycott campaign is run to stop the telecom company from betraying the trust of the people, but nothing much can be achieved as the ruling regime secretly supports the telecom company and uses its data to achieve its shallow motives. The prison of surveillance that the people are unknowingly trapped in is lethal and eventually ruins many lives. People feel that they are free, yet they are under strict vigilance of the state as pointed by the symbol on the cover page of the novel that shows the ancient Egyptian 'Eye of Horus'. It is not just a symbol for safeguarding the people from evil by means of an omnipresent divine authority, but it represents the all-seeing eye with a security camera in place of a pupil.

The 'Gate' before which the queue stands stretching for miles across the city is a pillar of totalitarian absurdity. It is not a human figure that governs the people, but a gate that never opens and is protected by the Deterrence Force. People queue before it with their documents even for the most ordinary requests such as buying food or getting their eyesight examined. As stated in the novel, "The queue was like a magnet. It drew people toward it, then held them captive as individuals. . ." (91). Some people need the certificate of true citizenship for saving their livelihood and some like the central character Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed need approval for a bullet removal surgery. He was shot during the popular uprising called the Disgraceful events by the state authority. However, in order to distort the history of the violent events the regime denies any sign of bloodshed and refuses to acknowledge Yehya's plea. The X-ray reports are hidden, the hospital equipment is confiscated and the staff is silenced by the higher authorities. Tarek Fahmy, the doctor who had attended Yehya is also caught in a dilemma and the novel is structured by his repeated readings of Yehya's patient file. On the one hand he cannot overlook his duty towards an ailing man with a bullet lodged in his body while on the other he fears the sinister web of state surveillance. He had always been a lawful citizen and it is only in Yehya's case that he is subjected to remorse. He cannot perform the surgery without permission from the state, but the state denies any sign of bloodshed during the Disgraceful events, a failed popular uprising. His conscience pricks him for not doing his duty as a doctor.

The women in the novel are the worst victims of totalitarianism. Though all of them belong to different walks of life, yet they suffer in great proportions on account of their vulnerability. The normalization of their suffering by the absolute authority is an important aspect of the novel. The author subverts the bipolarity between fact and fiction by giving voices to the peripheral characters. The queue is the place where diverse people assemble and spend their lives. They eat, pray, rest, sleep, preach and even philosophize in the queue. While they stand in the queue, they face an existential crisis that seems to unite them on one hand and separate them from rest of the citizens on the other hand. The autocratic rulers in this dystopia camouflage their motives and construct a non-human entity called the 'gate' to subjugate people without having to face them. They escape accountability by hiding behind a lifeless entity, though they exercise absolute control secretly.

Female characters like Um Mabrouk, Ines, Sabah, Amani and the woman with short hair are all victims of state repression. The opening pages of the novel introduce the readers to the queue. The old woman who begins the discussion on the despotism of the state authorities and the hostility of the fellow citizens tells the people in the queue that she was stopped from purchasing "government-made baladi bread" (11). The shopkeeper came to know from her that she had voted for a candidate other than the one with a pyramid symbol and snatched the bread from her. He refused to sell his bread to her and all the other sellers too refused to entertain her. She had finally resolved to file a complaint to the gate so that she could buy the most basic of food items like bread. This asympathetic attitude of the fellow citizens points towards growing intolerance among people. The woman who consoled the old woman affirmed that, "Politics had eaten away at people's heads until they in turn had begun to devour one another" (12). The "plague" that inflicted people was to be cynical about the personal choices of others and to find out who voted for whom. The young woman Ines was a school teacher and was in the queue for "Certificate of True Citizenship" (13). She came under the panoptic eye of state surveillance when she praised her student for an essay on the "conditions in the district where she lived, and then went on to speak more broadly about the state of the country and developments in the region" (12-13). As a teacher Ines appreciated the efforts that were made by the student and she made her read out her essay. Ines was later informed that an inspector had scrutinized her personal file and asked for her to submit a certificate of True Citizenship or he would refer her to the administrative office. Since this incident Ines was forced to join the queue irrespective of her innocence.

Another prominent female figure in the novel is an enterprising woman called Um Mabrouk. A diligent woman who served Amani's family, but when her parents pass away begins to serve Amani. She cleaned the house, toiled in the kitchen and also worked at her office thrice a week. However, as her children grew her expenditure escalated and she began to do additional work to earn a livelihood. She believes that destiny had not favoured her and her life had always been populated with adversities. She travelled in the old metro facing all sort of sexist remarks by fellow male passengers such as, ". . . a woman's place was in the house . . ." (19). Um Mabrouk lived with ailing children in a pitiable state. Her husband did not contribute in any way to lessen her burdens. He spent his life in the coffee shop lusting for hash and pills. The economic burden of her children's treatment drained her. Her son lived with a defective kidney and the two daughters with rheumatic heart disease. Due to lack of economic assistance and delay in medical help they had dropped out of school. The solace the High Sheikh gave her was to provide her with a solution to all her problems that she could not practice for long. She was asked to perform all her prayers so as to mitigate evil from her life, but she failed to perform all obligatory prayers and reconciled with her misfortune. She wanted a working phone line and this is the reason why she stood in the queue.

Amani Sayed Ibrahim often referred to as Amani in the novel is a headstrong woman in love with Yehya. The bullet lodged in Yehya's pelvic region blemished their relationship and made their lives complicated. Yehya spent his life in the queue seeking approval for removal of the bullet from his body and Amani kept worrying for him all the time. She shows fortitude and decides to visit the Zephyr hospital, a state-sponsored hospital guarded by the Concealment Force to find Yehya's X-ray. However, Amani's visit to Zephyr hospital turned into a fiasco. She entered the restricted zone called the Department of Critical Bullet Files. The man in charge questioned her and refused to tell anything about Yehya's X-ray. She lost her patience and shouted at the man for his lies about the bullet in Yehya's body that was evidence enough against state repression during the Disgraceful events. She was captivated after this episode and psychologically traumatized in an absurd mode of punishment. Amani's punishment tormented her psychologically:

Nothingness. She wasn't blindfolded, but all she could see was black. She moved her palms away from her face . . . nothing. She heard no voices, her hands felt no walls, no columns, no bars. She saw and felt nothing, only the solid earth underneath her, where she stood or sat or slept. (151-152)



Her screams, her words and cries did not change her situation in that dark place. She explains that, “First the color drained from her imagination, then so did the light, so that her mind too became black” (152). She was deprived of her dreams and sleep. There was neither any colour around her nor a speck of light. She pleaded, refused to meet anyone, agreed to stay away from all forms of dissent and surrendered when felt that, “She was already beginning to disappear: her tears were the first part of her to vanish” (153). There was infinite nothingness around her and, “With every moment that passed she was drawing closer to the edge of collapse” (153). As time passed, she realized that she found herself in a tunnel and as she walked through it she reached some place near the booth. The absurd detention she faced fragmented her strength and destroyed her emotionally. She estranged herself from all her friends and distanced herself from Yehya. She could no longer concentrate on her profession or live life the way she used to. Her mind failed to overcome the ghastly incident that she faced and the, “Things had happened to her that no one else knew, things she couldn’t speak of, things she still hadn’t admitted even to herself” (175). The totalitarian surveillance ruined her life and scarred her memories forever.

Another female character who is subjected to the manipulative measures of the state authority includes Sabah. She works as a nurse in the hospital where Yehya was admitted when he received the gunshot. She is ordered to change Yehya’s report from his medical file by altering the language in it. She agreed to do such an act because she felt that the man who asked her to do so was influential and could easily take away her job and close the entire hospital. The fear of losing her only monetary support made Sabah unethical and revealed the true face of despotism. Women face economic oppression under such despotic state measures. Due to paucity of monetary resources many women are forced into demeaning practices and immoral acts. Their pressing needs corrode their ethics and they are manipulated at will by those in power. The woman with short hair, as she is referred in the narrative, is a woman who stands against the men fighting over the possession of an unclaimed bag that was left behind by someone. She was supported by Ines, but from that moment this woman was under the judgmental gaze of those in the queue specifically the man in the galabeya who professed to be a religious preacher. He is portrayed by Basma Abdel Aziz as zealot who victimizes women on account of their attire and their opinions. He targeted the short-haired woman for her potential to articulate her views. She headed a boycott campaign against the Violet telecom company’s unethical marketing strategy and suspicious share in state surveillance activities. She kept resisting and protesting against the unjust propaganda of the state

and the totalitarianism that it promoted. She is the face of female empowerment even in the middle of a dystopian setting and offers hope to others in the queue. Though the zealot in the queue accused her of “. . . planting seeds of evil among people by urging them to think, and ask questions . . .” (170), yet she continued expanding her revolt against the corrupt measures of the regime.

Mrs Alfat is another minor female character in the novel who is introduced as a head nurse. Yehya’s doctor told him that his X-rays were with her and that she was on a vacation. However, when Yehya searched for her, he found her in the queue. She bluntly refused his claim and denied that she was handed over any reports on the day of the Disgraceful events. Her automated and inconsiderate reply marred his hope. It is clearly evident at this point that Mrs Alfat too had been subjected to some absurd penalty like Amani. She was scared of speaking the truth like many others. It is evident that women under the despotic laws are treated as mere mannequins devoid of any identity and esteem. As the narrative progresses it is seen that Um Mabrouk sets up a tea-stall in the queue for the people who stood there for long hours. She earns a good living from the stall. In spite of her profound unhappiness she finds ways to earn a living and support her family. She initially provided people with a phone service as she had won a Violet telecom phone line with endless credit. She provided people with various key services so as to earn their credibility and also support her family. The belligerence of the totalitarian regime did not avert Um Mabrouk’s urge to survive even in the face of innumerable oddities. She supported other women in the queue and made herself useful for others to earn their respect and achieve a sense of gratification in her new-found vocation. However, Ines succumbs to the uncertainties of a murky future that she felt awaited her on account of her candid verbal expression and freedom of thoughts. She feared that she too will disappear if she left the queue and will not be able to return. The totalitarian panopticism apprehended her, and she refused to leave the queue. She was deeply terrified by the disappearances of people around her and began to dress more modestly to share the orthodox views of the man in the galabeya. Finally, out of fear of the invisible system and her own uneasiness Ines agrees to the zealot’s proposal for marriage. She begins to devote herself to his lessons and accompanied the women who sided with him. Her fear of the totalitarian absurdity convinced her to marry a man without her choice and put an end to her apprehensions. She knew that the legislation had been weaponised to persecute the citizens and the only way to survive was to become invisible. The intransigent regime had no concern for the female population and the marginalized.

The absurdities of the unnamed totalitarian regime reach their prime in the narrative. The state is adamant on distorting the facts that emerge out of the popular uprising and a pro-state doctor affirms that, “the high mortality rate was due to the fact that these rioters were simply too sensitive . . . . Others had stumbled upon the grisly scene and were so traumatized by it that they froze, and then they collapsed, too, falling one after another like dominoes.” (52). Some journalists who were sycophants of the ruling regime confirmed that “... the people who died were not in fact killed but had committed suicide when they saw what had happened. They even claimed that one of them had stabbed several others with an iron stake before turning it upon himself, Japanese seppuku-style” (52-53). When people launched a boycott campaign against Violet Telecom an insane fatwa ensued saying that, “A believer who is weak of faith, and does not join his brothers, is guilty of a sin, which shall be weighed on Judgment Day. This sin can be absolved by fasting, or by making seven consecutive phone calls, each one not separated by more than a month” (133). The lunatic behaviour of the Fatwa and Rationalizations committee reached its zenith when a boycott was imposed on a candy factory that produced candies made of sugar swirls. It was said that, “in a certain light—one could make out the word God” (123) in the sugar swirls.

The totalitarian absurdity is enhanced by the kind of anxiety it promotes among the people of this unnamed city. The only newspaper that is circulated in the city is ‘The Truth’ which is ironically overloaded with falsehood. People act out of fear of an unknown future instead of living in the present situation. The officials at the Booth were equally absurd when they instead of aiding an impoverished man whose farming land in the village had been flooded accused him of causing the “downpour” (210) and intentionally flooding the huts to procure land. As the narrative reached its end another fake news is broadcasted by the Youth Station that a “big-budget blockbuster had been filmed in the square recently” (212). The movie was sponsored by countries that demanded the scene to look “as natural as possible” (212) and this is the reason why the cameras and filming equipment were hidden. The bullets, the teargas, the smoke and violence were just artificial and special effects created for the movie that some citizens believed to be true. This spoof broadcasted by the Youth station creates a mockumentary of the bloodshed that took place during the uprising.

The bizarre authoritative dictates deceive people and by the end of the novel most of the characters have been churned by the absurdities that they are subjected to. Amani loses her sense of decisiveness and believes that the entire violence was orchestrated by movie-makers, Ines marries the zealot out of strange fears, uncanny changes are made in Yehya’s patient file by an

invisible agency, Sabah and Alfat refuse to stand by truth and Um Mabrouk learns the ways of the world. The state sponsored surveillance and repression exceeds its limits as it begins to control every aspect of people's lives. They are left with lives that are full of mundane worries and empty emotions as they stand trapped within the perimeters of the queue. The queue acts as a maelstrom that captivates those who come to it and gradually drain people of their assets. The realist dystopia engineered by Basma Abdel Aziz is not a prophecy, but a cautionary tale that points towards the path of self-destruction that the society has set itself on. The complacency of the people who refuse to register their dissent against the unyielding authoritarian forces makes the situation more complex. This novel is Aziz's individualistic utterance that legitimizes her right to resist against the unjust nature of the contemporary regime. The country she depicts in her novel is an unnamed country because she wants the readers to give the country whatever name they want as per their experiences. The novel is open-ended so as to continue the dialogue that it begins. It allows the reader to interpret it in myriad ways and look for answers to the questions posed by the author.

Basma Abdel Aziz in a talk with Charlotte Bailey talks about the hazards of writing fiction in Egypt under a repressive regime. She affirms that "I am continuing to oppose this regime's extreme violence and torture. And I will keep doing it as long as I can" (92). Aziz dissects the nature of contemporary gender-based violence of the totalitarian regime that shatters dreams and silence voices. The economic austerity and the lurking fear in the atmosphere are well-portrayed by the author. The women suffer incessantly under the authoritarianism that overshadows their fate. The narrative reveals the dark side of the unnamed Middle Eastern city that Aziz explores while sketching a messy picture of life in a severely cynical and fragmented dystopian society. Aziz does not want her writing to be captivated in a prison of generic categorization. Her novel is not only futuristic, but has an unflinching concern for the peripheral population including women. In the face of anarchy, the condition of women faces rapid deterioration and they are pushed behind the walls of anonymity and seclusion. Aziz's galvanic storytelling urges women to stand in solidarity against injustice and authoritative brutality. *The Queue* befits George Orwell's assertion that, "We have now sunk to a depth at which restatement of the obvious is the first duty of intelligent men" (n. pag.)

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