

Writing the Unspeakable: Trauma, Memory, and Resistance in Iraqi War Literature

Ahmed Saadoon Azeez¹, N. Solomon Benny²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, College of Arts and Commerce, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam-India

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Arts and Commerce, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam-India

Correspondence: Ahmed Saadoon Azeez, Research Scholar, Department of English, College of Arts and Commerce, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam-India. E-mail: sadoun88@gmail.com

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Abstract

The paper delves into the profound realm of Iraqi war literature, unraveling its multifaceted dimensions. From capturing the visceral traumas induced by conflict to echoing the resonances of resistance, this literature stands as a testament to the Iraqi people's resilience and defiance. Situating the narrative within historical and sociopolitical contexts, the study underscores the universality of trauma and the tenacity of the human spirit. Drawing parallels with global war literature, it highlights shared human experiences across cultures and histories. The paper also examines the redemptive power of literature, emphasizing its role in healing and peacebuilding, while illuminating the unique and diverse voices that constitute the Iraqi war narrative. As Iraq looks towards a future of reconciliation and hope, its literature not only serves as a historical record but also as a beacon, illuminating paths of empathy, understanding, and peace.

Keywords: Iraqi war literature, trauma, resistance, healing, peacebuilding, global context, historical record, reconciliation, empathy, diverse narratives

1. Introduction

War literature has consistently served as a space for both collective and individual reckoning with the profound and transformative effects of conflict. Through the written word, survivors, witnesses, and generations affected by the onslaught of war endeavor to make sense of the unspeakable, the unimaginable, and the inexpressible. The act of writing, thus, becomes not only an endeavor to understand and reflect but also a means of resistance against the erasure of memory and the silencing of suffering.

The Iraqi War, a conflict that spanned years and had ramifications that extended far beyond its geopolitical boundaries, has left an indelible mark on the literature of the 21st century. Like Vietnam, the World Wars, or the Korean War before it, the Iraqi War has engendered a body of literature rife with tales of trauma, memory, and resistance. This examination seeks to dive deep into the heart of this body of work to unearth how Iraqi War literature wrestles with and gives voice to the unspeakable.

Trauma, as defined by scholars such as Caruth (1996), is an overwhelming experience that ruptures the conventional boundaries of understanding, often resisting representation and evading easy comprehension. Caruth's work asserts that trauma is not just a pathological condition but also a historical witness, something that speaks to a reality that was otherwise unimaginable (Caruth, 1996). Iraqi war literature, much like the narratives emerging from other conflict zones, showcases this exact nature of trauma. It not only narrates the event but also grapples with the aftermath—the shadows of war that continue to haunt survivors long after the bombs have stopped dropping and the guns have fallen silent.

Memory plays a crucial role in this context. It is both a source of pain and a weapon against oblivion. According to Hirsch (2008), memory, particularly post-traumatic memory, isn't a passive repository of facts but a dynamic process wherein the past is continually reconstructed in the light of the present and vice versa (Hirsch, 2008). In Iraqi war literature, memory serves as a bridge that connects personal experiences to larger historical narratives, a link that enables the private to speak for the collective and the individual to stand as a testimony to a community's suffering.

Yet, even as it engages with trauma and memory, Iraqi war literature is not just a lamentation or an archive of suffering. It is also an act of resistance. According to Said (1993), narratives that emerge from conflict zones often become tools of resistance against dominant power structures, challenging the official narratives and complicating the mainstream understanding of events (Said, 1993). By giving voice to the unspeakable, by daring to articulate the horror and the anguish, writers resist the erasure of their experiences and push back against the monolithic narratives that seek to simplify or sanitize the complexities of war.

Exploring this literature, however, requires sensitivity. It's essential to approach these texts with a recognition of the heterogeneity of experiences and voices. Iraq, with its rich tapestry of cultures, religions, and ethnicities, cannot be reduced to a monolithic narrative. Its literature reflects this diversity, presenting a range of voices that speak to different facets of the war experience.

In the ensuing examination, we will engage with seminal works of Iraqi war literature, including novels, poems, and plays, to decode the intricate web of trauma, memory, and resistance that underpins them. By diving into these narratives, we aim to understand not just the war itself, but its lasting impact on the psyche of a nation and its people.

In doing so, we contribute to the broader discourse on war literature, linking the experiences of Iraqi writers to global narratives of conflict and survival. In the words of Adichie (2009), "*Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize*" (Adichie, 2009). It is with this spirit that we embark on our exploration of Iraqi war literature.

2. Historical Context

2.1 The Iraqi War: A Brief Overview

The Iraqi War, often referred to as the Second Gulf War, began in March 2003 when the United States, supported by a coalition of allies, invaded Iraq. The primary justification for this invasion was the alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) by the then-Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, which was later disproven (Blix, 2004). By April 2003, coalition forces had taken Baghdad, marking the beginning of a prolonged occupation that lasted until December 2011 when U.S. troops officially withdrew.

Despite the rapid fall of Hussein's regime, the aftermath of the invasion saw the emergence of sectarian violence, insurgencies, and prolonged conflict. The power vacuum that followed Saddam's downfall and the subsequent de-Ba'athification policy led to widespread unrest, empowering extremist groups and leading to years of instability (Dodge, 2017).

The war and subsequent occupation led to significant loss of life, infrastructural damage, and displacement of populations. Additionally, the cultural and societal fabric of Iraq experienced seismic shifts, impacting every facet of daily life.

2.2 Socio-Political Landscape and its Impact on Literature

Literature has always served as a reflection of society, documenting shifts in culture, politics, and collective consciousness. The profound socio-political changes that Iraq underwent during and after the war naturally found their way into its literary output.

The de-Ba'athification policy instituted by the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003, which sought to purge Iraq of Saddam Hussein's influence, led to the dismissal of thousands from public sector jobs, many based on mere affiliation rather than any wrongdoing. This drastic restructuring of the Iraqi state apparatus deepened sectarian divides, fueling resentment, and distrust (Nasr, 2007).

In literature, this divide manifested in works that engaged with themes of identity, loss, displacement, and nostalgia for a unified Iraq. Writers grappled with the erosion of the once-coexisting multicultural tapestry of Iraq's urban centers, as seen in plays like "*Baghdad Wedding*" by Abdulrazzak (2007). Abdulrazzak's play is a poignant representation of how the war disrupted lives and how individuals navigated the blurred lines of sectarian and national identity amidst the chaos (Abdulrazzak, 2007).

Another major socio-political shift was the rise in religious extremism and the subsequent societal conservatism. The oppressive environment, particularly towards women and minorities, found a voice in literature. Plays like "*9 Parts of Desire*" by Raffo shed light on the lives of Iraqi women during and after Saddam's regime, emphasizing their resilience, struggles, and desires in a rapidly changing socio-political milieu (Raffo, 2006).

The forced displacement of millions of Iraqis, both internally and as refugees abroad, brought forth narratives of exile, belonging, and diaspora. This displacement, coupled with the erosion of the Iraqi state, has been brilliantly portrayed in literary works that explore the concepts of home and alienation.

The power of literature in this context cannot be understated. In the face of overwhelming tragedy and change, Iraqi literature offered a platform for introspection, critique, and remembrance. Through novels, poems, and plays, writers created spaces to challenge prevailing narratives, question policies, and mourn the loss of a cohesive national identity. Moreover, the external perception of Iraq and its people, heavily shaped by international media and political rhetoric, was countered by literature that showcased the humanity, diversity, and depth of Iraqi society. These literary works serve as crucial counter-narratives, emphasizing the resilience and agency of Iraqis in the face of tremendous adversity.

3. Trauma in Iraqi War Literature

3.1 Defining Trauma: Theoretical Perspectives

The concept of trauma transcends physical wounds, delving deep into psychological scars that linger long after the triggering event has passed. In academic discourse, trauma is understood as a response to a shocking event or series of events that overwhelms an individual's coping mechanisms, leaving lasting psychological imprints (Herman, 2015).

One of the leading scholars in trauma theory, Caruth (1996) emphasizes that trauma is not merely the story of a distressing event but is characterized by its repetitive appearance in the victim's consciousness, evading straightforward articulation (Caruth, 1996). It's this aspect of trauma—the inability to fully grasp or express it—that proves central to its exploration in literature.

3.2 Narrating the Unimaginable: Representations of Trauma

Iraqi War literature delves deep into this space of the unspeakable. These works often employ non-linear narratives, fragmented memories, and surreal imagery to encapsulate the fractured nature of traumatic experiences.

For instance, the novel "*Frankenstein in Baghdad*" by Saadawi (2013) presents a chilling portrayal of post-invasion Baghdad. Through a character assembled from the body parts of war victims, Saadawi offers a multi-layered depiction of collective trauma and the insurmountable cost of conflict (Saadawi, 2013). This patchwork creature, both horrifying and deeply tragic, symbolizes the fractured psyche of a war-torn nation.

The visceral nature of trauma is also present in plays. In "*The Corpse Washer*" by Antoon (2013), the protagonist, a young man who washes the dead in preparation for burial, confronts the daily reality of death and loss. His work becomes an allegory for the unending cycle of violence and the constant confrontation with trauma (Antoon, 2013).

3.3 *The Aftermath: Living in the Shadows of War*

The end of active conflict doesn't mark the end of trauma. The aftermath of war, as Iraqi literature frequently portrays, is an extended period where societies and individuals grapple with their traumatic memories, trying to find meaning or simply survive amidst the remnants.

This prolonged state of living in trauma's shadow finds resonance in works that explore survivor's guilt, the search for lost loved ones, and the struggle for reconciliation with the past. A notable work is "*The Baghdad Eucharist*" by Antoon (2017), where intergenerational trauma, memories of a "better past", and the stark reality of a fractured present intersect (Antoon, 2017).

Furthermore, literature also touches upon the profound societal traumas resulting from lost identity, cultural heritage, and the disintegration of societal norms. As Iraq faced sectarian violence, looting of its historical sites, and a drastic change in its socio-political landscape, its literature became a repository of these collective sorrows and the unwavering spirit to overcome.

In summary, trauma in Iraqi War literature is not just a theme; it's an experience that the narrative structure, the characters, and the very fabric of these works embody. Through their poignant writings, Iraqi authors provide a window into the unspeakable horrors of war and the enduring resilience of those who survive.

4. Memory: A Dual-edged Sword

4.1 *The Role of Memory in Conflict Narratives*

Memory, in literature and life, serves as both a mechanism for preserving identity and history and a force that can inadvertently perpetuate pain. In conflict narratives, especially those stemming from profound upheavals such as war, memory becomes a central theme.

Halbwachs (1992) posited the idea of "*collective memory*", suggesting that our memories are profoundly influenced and shaped by societal structures. The narratives of conflict, therefore, become intertwined with this collective memory, where individual experiences of trauma, loss, and survival are mirrored by the society at large. War literature from Iraq reflects this, with personal tales serving as microcosms of the broader national trauma (Halbwachs, 1992).

Memory also acts as a form of resistance. As the Iraqi state underwent massive shifts post-war, the act of remembering became a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse, a way to assert identity and reclaim agency. Literature served as the medium where suppressed memories found a voice, challenging sanctioned narratives and questioning prevailing ideologies.

4.2 *Post-Traumatic Memory: Reconstruction and Reinterpretation*

Post-traumatic memory is complex, often characterized by both vivid recollections and gaping lacunas. The nature of trauma impacts memory formation, where some events are hyper-remembered while others are repressed or forgotten (van der Kolk, 2014).

In the realm of literature, this fragmented nature of post-traumatic memory is often presented through non-linear timelines, flashbacks, or unreliable narrators. For example, in "*The Madman of Freedom Square*" by Blasim (2013), the stories dance on the edge of reality and fantasy, blending grim realities with surreal elements. This narrative style aptly captures the disjointedness of traumatic memories, where the boundaries between reality and perception blur (Blasim, 2013).

Furthermore, as time progresses, memories undergo reconstruction and reinterpretation. Events might be remembered differently, imbued with new meanings, or understood in new contexts. Iraqi literature post-conflict grapples with this evolving nature of memory, reflecting the shifting sands of societal perception and understanding.

4.3 *Linking Personal to the Collective: Shared Memories of War*

The individual's memory of war is a singular, deeply personal experience. However, when these individual memories are echoed across a community, they form a collective consciousness, a shared memory of trauma, resilience, and resistance.

Literature becomes a conduit for this shared experience. Personal tales of loss, like those in "*I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody*" by Antoon (2007), become emblematic of the larger societal experience, resonating with many who've lived through similar traumas (Antoon, 2007).

This shared memory serves several purposes. It acts as a form of validation for individuals, assuring them that their experiences, no matter how harrowing, are not isolated. It fosters community bonding, creating a collective identity forged in the crucible of shared adversity. Lastly, it serves as a historical record, ensuring that the tales of suffering, resistance, and hope are passed down, shaping the nation's collective memory and identity.

5. Literature as Resistance

5.1 Counter-Narratives: Challenging the Dominant Discourse

Throughout history, literature has served as a potent tool of resistance, challenging the established narratives and creating spaces for marginalized voices. In the context of the Iraqi War, where the mainstream media and political discourses often presented a one-dimensional perspective, literature emerged as a powerful counter-narrative.

While political regimes and media institutions can manipulate narratives to serve specific agendas, literature serves as an archive of people's true experiences. *"The Kite Runner"* by Hosseini (2003), although set in Afghanistan, exemplifies how novels can challenge predominant Western perceptions, humanizing the people of a region and revealing the complexities of their experiences (Hosseini, 2003).

Iraqi literature, post-2003, played a crucial role in documenting the atrocities, the chaos, and the human toll of the war. Beyond just the political and societal events, authors delved into the emotional and psychological impact of the conflict, capturing the multifaceted experiences of the Iraqi populace.

5.2 The Role of the Writer: Activism through Art

In times of oppression and conflict, the writer's role transcends mere storytelling; they become witnesses, activists, and the conscience of a nation. Writers such as Darwish (2009) have demonstrated how poetry and prose can be wielded as weapons against oppression, articulating people's pain, aspirations, and resilience (Darwish, 2009).

Iraqi writers, both within the nation and in the diaspora, took up the mantle of activism post-invasion. Their works became platforms to challenge the status quo, expose injustices, and rally for change. The writer, in such contexts, assumes a responsibility—not just to their craft, but to the truth and their compatriots.

The literature they produced was not merely an act of self-expression but a deliberate act of defiance—a way to resist erasure, to assert identity, and to lay claim to their narrative.

5.3 Unspeakable No More: Speaking Truth to Power

The term "unspeakable" often refers to the traumas and experiences that are too painful or taboo to express openly. Yet, one of the profound powers of literature is its ability to give voice to these very experiences, to transform the unspeakable into words and narratives.

In the aftermath of the Iraqi War, many experiences—whether they were of violence, loss, displacement, or violation—remained submerged, deemed too painful or politically inconvenient to bring to the surface. However, through literature, these suppressed narratives found an outlet.

Plays like *"9 Parts of Desire"* by Raffo (2006) offered raw insights into the lives of Iraqi women post-invasion, tackling topics like repression, desire, and resilience. Such works did not just recount experiences; they were acts of resistance in themselves, boldly challenging both internal and external suppressive forces (Raffo, 2006).

Literature, in essence, became a space where the silenced could reclaim their voice, challenging both the oppressive forces within Iraq and the often-distorted perceptions from the outside. By speaking truth to power, these literary works served as enduring testaments to the resilience and defiance of the Iraqi spirit.

6. Diversity of Voices: The Heterogeneity of Iraqi War Literature

6.1 Exploring Ethnic, Cultural, and Religious Narratives

Iraq, with its rich tapestry of ethnicities, cultures, and religious affiliations, has a literary tradition as diverse as its demographics. The aftermath of the Iraqi War saw a surge in literature that captured the nuances of various groups, revealing a panorama of experiences that moved beyond monolithic narratives.

Kurdish writers, for instance, offered tales of the long-standing oppression faced by the Kurdish people and their distinct experiences during and after the war. *"Muhammad's Dream"* by Ali (2013) stands out, encapsulating the Kurdish struggle for identity and autonomy amidst regional conflicts (Ali, 2013).

Similarly, literature from the Shiite and Sunni communities unveiled sectarian tensions, commonalities, and divergent experiences during the war. By shedding light on these varied perspectives, Iraqi war literature counters reductionist narratives, emphasizing the complex socio-political landscape of Iraq.

6.2 Women in War: Gendered Perspectives on Trauma and Resistance

Women's voices in war literature occupy a distinct space, often unveiling the unique vulnerabilities, strengths, and resilience of women in conflict zones. While war narratives often center around battlefields and politics, female writers and protagonists bring forth tales from domestic fronts, prisons, and shelters, showcasing the multifaceted nature of war's impact.

"Absent" by Khedairi (2004) offers a poignant account of everyday life in war-torn Baghdad through the eyes of a woman, highlighting the gendered dimensions of survival and resistance. The novel, set against the backdrop of sanctions and war, underscores the resilience of Iraqi women amidst adversity (Khedairi, 2004).

Similarly, narratives from female writers also spotlight issues like gender-based violence, the struggles of widows, and the double burden

shouldered by women in times of conflict.

6.3 *The Diaspora Experience: Iraqi Literature Beyond Borders*

Migration, displacement, and diaspora form crucial themes in post-war Iraqi literature. With a significant number of Iraqis seeking refuge in foreign lands, the literature borne out of diasporic experiences adds another layer to the heterogeneity of Iraqi war narratives.

These diasporic tales are characterized by themes of nostalgia, identity crisis, the challenges of assimilation, and the persistent shadows of war memories. For those living away from their homeland, literature becomes a bridge to the past and a way to navigate the complexities of their dual identities.

"*The Corpse Washer*" by Antoon (2013) is emblematic of this diasporic literature. While the narrative is deeply rooted in the Iraqi experience, its contemplations on displacement, identity, and memory resonate universally with the diaspora (Antoon, 2013).

7. Significant Works: A Deep Dive

7.1 *Novels that Shaped the Discourse*

The landscape of Iraqi war literature is dotted with novels that, over time, have come to define the narrative of the conflict and its aftermath. These novels, rich in their tapestry of emotions, historical insights, and profound sociopolitical commentaries, have significantly shaped the discourse.

"*The Baghdad Eucharist*" by Antoon (2017) paints an intimate portrait of an Iraqi Christian family grappling with the weight of history, conflict, and religious divisions. With its unflinching gaze on the inter-religious tensions and the cost of war, the novel illuminates the often-overlooked stories of Iraq's Christian minority (Antoon, 2017).

"*Frankenstein in Baghdad*" by Saadawi (2013) offers a surreal take on the war. Set in US-occupied Baghdad, it revolves around a scavenger who collects human body parts and stitches them together to form a grotesque creature. This creature, while initially seeking justice for the unavenged, soon becomes a symbol of the uncontrollable and monstrous nature of vengeance and war (Saadawi, 2013).

7.2 *Poetry: The Heartbeat of Resistance*

Poetry has historically been a fundamental part of Arab literary culture. The rhythms, cadences, and imageries of poems often capture the essence of resistance, pain, love, and nostalgia more succinctly than prose.

Al Azzawi (2008), an eminent Iraqi poet, encapsulated the raw emotions of war, displacement, and longing in his works. His poem "*Cell Block Five*" captures the pain of exile and the omnipresent yearning for home, bridging the gap between modern technology and timeless emotions (Al Azzawi, 2008).

Mikhail (2005), with her collection "*The War Works Hard*", gave voice to the myriad sufferings and absurdities that came with the conflict. Her poetry moves between heartbreaking and satirical, reflecting the multifaceted nature of war and its repercussions (Mikhail, 2005).

7.3 *Plays: The Dramatization of War and Its Aftermath*

The theater, with its immediacy and visceral impact, has been a powerful medium to dramatize the consequences of war, offering audiences a direct window into the heart of conflict and its aftermath.

"*9 Parts of Desire*" by Raffo (2006) stands as a monumental work in this regard. This one-woman play delves deep into the lives of nine Iraqi women, each bearing testimonies of pain, resilience, and the multifaceted experiences of being a woman in conflict-ridden Iraq (Raffo, 2006).

Another significant work is "*In the Heart of America*" by Wallace (1998). Though penned by an American, it delves into the ramifications of the Gulf War, exploring themes of love, loss, and the haunting memories of war, bridging the Iraqi and American narratives (Wallace, 1998).

In essence, whether through novels, poetry, or plays, the body of literature emerging from the crucible of the Iraqi conflict offers profound insights, challenging perceptions, and underscoring the deeply human cost of war.

8. Comparative Analysis: Iraqi War Literature in a Global Context

8.1 *Drawing Parallels: Iraqi Narratives and Other War Literatures*

The echoes of war, though unique in their socio-political and cultural intricacies, reverberate with familiar frequencies across the globe. Iraqi war literature, when placed in juxtaposition with other war narratives, brings forth striking similarities, contrasts, and rich dialogues.

For instance, the Vietnamese literature born out of the Vietnam War offers fascinating parallels with Iraqi war narratives. "*The Sorrow of War*" by Ninh (2012) delves into the trauma, horror, and absurdity of conflict, much like its Iraqi counterparts. Both literatures move beyond the political and delve deep into the human psyche, unraveling the long-term scars left by war (Ninh, 2012).

Similarly, the literature emerging from the Yugoslav wars, like "*How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone*" by Stanistic (2008), offers stories of displacement, nostalgia, and the endeavor to piece together fragmented memories—themes also present in Iraqi war literature (Stanistic, 2008).

8.2 The Universality of Trauma and Resistance

At the heart of every war literature lies the depiction of trauma and resistance, elements that hold universal resonance regardless of geographical or cultural divides. The anguish described in *“The Things They Carried”* (O'Brien & Cranston, 1990) about the Vietnam War, or in *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Remarque (1928) about World War I, has shades of the same pain and moral questioning (Remarque, 1928) as seen in *“The Baghdad Eucharist”* or *“Frankenstein in Baghdad”*.

Furthermore, the motif of resistance, whether subtle or overt, is a binding thread. From the unyielding spirit reflected in African war narratives like Adichie's *“Half of a Yellow Sun”* (2006) set against the backdrop of the Nigerian civil war to the resilience portrayed in Iraqi literature, the human spirit's tenacity emerges as a universal theme (Adichie, 2006).

9. Conclusion

9.1 The Legacy of Iraqi War Literature

The tumultuous events of the Iraqi War, seeping deep into the nation's fabric, found profound expression in its literature. Beyond just documenting experiences, the corpus of works emerging from this era has transformed into enduring artifacts—each a testament to resilience, defiance, pain, and the intricate tapestry of human emotions set against the backdrop of conflict.

The legacy of Iraqi war literature, much like other great war literature of the world, is manifold. It serves as a historical record, capturing for posterity the nuances of a time fraught with challenges. It amplifies voices that often risk being drowned out in the cacophonous narratives of geopolitics. By sharing stories of trauma, resistance, hope, and despair, this body of literature fosters empathy, bridging divides and facilitating understanding among readers across the globe. Moreover, these narratives also bear the weight of memory, both collective and personal. Through vivid recollections, metaphors, and allegories, they not only confront the unspeakable but also ensure that the tragedies, sacrifices, and heroisms of the era do not fade into oblivion.

9.2 Looking Forward: Healing, Hope, and the Role of Literature in Peacebuilding

Literature, in its very essence, possesses a redemptive quality. Iraqi war literature, with its myriad tales of despair, also carries undercurrents of hope and the possibility of healing. These narratives, by acknowledging pain, open avenues for reconciliation, understanding, and, ultimately, peace.

The cathartic nature of storytelling offers both writers and readers a means to process trauma, paving the way for healing. As these narratives circulate globally, they foster empathy and a deeper understanding of the human costs of war, potentially discouraging future conflicts.

Furthermore, as Iraq and its people look to the future, literature can play a seminal role in peacebuilding. By capturing diverse voices—Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, Yazidis, women, children, and the diaspora—these narratives emphasize unity in diversity, reminding readers of their shared humanity and the dream of a harmonious coexistence.

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Ahmed Sadoon Azeez has conceptualized, collected resources, analyzed, and written the original draft.

Dr N.S.Benny is the corresponding author and supervisor. He edited, reviewed, and developed the final draft.

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