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Elements of new historicism and historiographic metafiction in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

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New historicism and historiographic metafiction represent two of the most recent trends in the study of literary works which developed in the 1980s as a reaction to structuralism and post-structuralism's rejection of history altogether. They both mark a return to the story itself and the importance of history. However, it is not official history that they are mainly interested in but those stories of the excluded that have been left out by legitimate historical discourse. History is used as a subtext in Rohinton Mistry's "A Fine Balance" where the destiny of all characters is entwined with major events from national history. I argue that in their focus on synchronic analysis new historicism and historiographic metafiction lose sight of historical change.

Keywords: *new historicism, historiographic metafiction, synchronic, history.*

1. Introduction

Postmodernism with its agenda that challenged fixed, universally recognized concepts launched an unprecedented attack on history as well. The textuality of history was brought to the fore and history was exposed as a text produced by people who might be biased, inclined to subjectivity, unreliable and dependant themselves on various sources of information. Thus, the legitimacy and authenticity of official history were challenged.

Both new historicism and historiographic metafiction represent postmodern approaches to history which give voice and agency to traditionally disadvantaged groups and emphasize the importance of the context in which literary works were written. The literary work is no longer regarded as the result of an author's imagination but as a product of the context of its creation. Historical interpretation and literary explanation are expected to exist in a closer relationship.

My attention focuses on the interplay between context and exclusion in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). Mistry traces here major events in the history of the young independent Indian nation by illustrating how official history can blend with the small, personal stories of his characters. The reader has access to

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official history by witnessing the destinies of his protagonists who all suffer as a result of the decisions of those in power.

2. New historicism and historiographic metafiction – theoretical aspects

Pioneered by Stephen Greenblatt, new historicism is a critical movement insisting on the overwhelming importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds. It emerged as a reaction to the structuralism and post-structuralism's discarding of history altogether. New historicists are suspicious of the view which interprets history as a linear, uniform process and stress the diversity of historical contexts. Any statement, philosophical, historical, aesthetic, etc. needs to be situated in its historical context. In order to make an accurate interpretation of the past, one has to understand the exact context of each historical period.

In line with the postmodern thought, the truth of official history is challenged, as well as its capacity of presenting the past in an unmediated way. History is constructed from various sources – documents, tales, accounts, word of mouth – whose authenticity can always be disputed. All these sources contain biases and new historicists plead for the recognition of the fact that all knowledge is contaminated in one way or the other –

> New Historicism really does assume: (1) that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; (2) that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools that it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes; (3) that literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably; (4) that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature. (Currie 1998, 89)

Moreover, readers and critics alike are prisoners of their own social and ideological upbringing and it is virtually impossible for them to understand a text in the manner of those who are its contemporaries.

This theoretical challenge of the validity of official history was doubled by the questioning of the nature of the representations of the past. New historicists highlight the multiple versions of the past produced by both historical and literary narratives.

Similarly, both historical and literary texts are the result of linguistic operations of language and therefore characterized by their inherent textuality. It is precisely this which links the writing of history and fiction in a synchronic articulation.

> Literary interpretation and historical explanation are brought close together. The inconclusiveness of a literary interpretation of a text, the fact that it never

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> squeezes from a text a meaning rendering future interpretation redundant, derives from its historicity. (Hamilton 1996, 131)

This is exactly what historiographic metafiction - the term coined by Canadian theorist Linda Hutcheon - alludes to. History and fiction are brought together and exposed as linguistic human constructs marked by textuality. The problem of historical truth and that of representation are discussed in detail. History is exposed as mere fiction in that it is regarded as a text reliant on other texts with a claim to verity similar to other texts.

Historiographic metafiction accentuates the crucial importance of those little narratives which help us understand better official historical accounts – the stories of the excluded, of those left out and unheard of by writers of legitimate historical discourse. Historiographic metafictionists are essentially story-tellers who create stories about the past in a self-reflexive manner.

3. Post-independence Indian history as reflected in *A Fine Balance*

3.1. Historical data

This is Mistry's second novel, set in an unnamed city that the reader can easily guess is Bombay, the author's native city. The year is 1975 when Mistry emigrated to Canada and the year that Indira Gandhi declared a State of Emergency setting herself up as India's virtual dictator. The novel has received wide critical acclaim and numerous awards, among which the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Fiction and the Commonwealth Writers Prize can be mentioned, and was short listed for the prestigious Booker Prize. The novel concentrates its attention on the terror experienced by people during the Emergency underlining the most unsightly and hideous aspects of life such as poverty, despair and violence.

A Fine Balance can be labeled a historical novel as it presents some of the most important events in the history of post independence India and the way these affect the lives of ordinary people. The point of view of the people in power, the actual actors, is not given but instead, we deal with a view of the ones who suffer the consequences of their actions. The book focuses on two such events: the Partition coupled with Indian Independence in 1947 and the State of Emergency between 1975-1977. Though a comprehensive presentation of these historical events is beyond the scope of this paper, I consider that a certain amount of information is essential to an accurate understanding of the novel.

India had been a British colony for many years, but in 1946, after Indian nationalists had long fought for a sovereign state, British officials decided they would grant India independence if its leaders could agree upon a form of government. The New Congress Party and the Muslim League could not agree, and

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violence between Muslims and Hindus erupted throughout the country. Indian and British officials agreed upon a solution to the bloody quarrel: they would partition India into two separate nations – India and Pakistan. Unfortunately, this did not put an end to the bloodshed and many people had to leave their homes: Sikhs and Hindus in Pakistan moved to India and Muslims in India moved to Pakistan. The violence between Hindus and Muslims is presented in the novel and the reader is also witness to the impact it has on the lives of characters such as Narayan and Ishvar as well as Farokh Kholah.

On August 15th, 1947, the day after Pakistan achieved independence, India became an independent nation too. Jawaharlal Nehru served as the newly independent state's first Prime Minister. His inaugural speech, delivered at the stroke of midnight on the 15th of August, 1947, pointed to India's long history of ups and downs:

> At the dawn of history India started on her unending quest, and trackless centuries are filled with her striving and the grandeur of her successes and failures. Through good and ill fortune alike she has never lost sight of that quest or forgotten the ideals which gave her strength. We end today a period of ill fortune and India discovers herself again. (Herbert 1995, 15)

But the heralded good fortune was yet to come. Nehru was generally considered a successful leader and the nation was at peace during his time in office. After he died in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri came to power. Shastri's rule was more violent and bloody, he declared war on Pakistan after it invaded two regions of India. He died suddenly in 1966 after only twenty months as prime minister and was succeeded by Indira Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru's only daughter. Her appointment to the head of the ruling Congress Party was considered a compromise between the right and left wings of the party; however, right-wingers in the party continually questioned her leadership. Shortly after her New Congress party won a landslide victory in 1972, her opponents in the Socialist Party alleged that she had committed electoral malpractice In June 1975 the High Court ruled against her, which should have meant that she would lose her seat and be obliged to stay out of politics for six years. Rather than submit to the judgment, Mrs. Gandhi instructed the President of India to announce the State of Emergency just before midnight on 25th of June 1975. The Emergency led to the suspension of the basic fundamental rights guaranteed to every Indian citizen by the Constitution of India. The Emergency is regarded by most historians as one of the most inglorious chapters in the history of independent India. She imprisoned her political enemies, passed laws that limited personal freedom and placed the nation's press under strict censorship. She demonstrated her mastery over time itself by introducing constitutional amendments conferring on herself retrospective immunity from prosecution in respect of past or future criminal offences. Perhaps the most sinister elements of the Emergency were initiated by

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Indira's son and so-called heir, Sanjay Gandhi. In the guise of *'beautification'* a process of slum clearance and family planning was instituted. In practice, the former meant clearing the poor away from areas they had improved and made habitable all by themselves so that these slices of real estate could be used by Sanjay's friends, the property developers. The latter meant that people were forced or tricked into allowing themselves to be sterilized, in order that 'motivators', conscripted to impose the unpopular measure, could meet the targets imposed on them by employers who would in turn gain financial rewards. Sanjay Gandhi became extremely powerful during the Emergency because his mother saw him as one of the few people she could trust. When she felt certain that she had effectively silenced and destroyed her political opposition, Gandhi finally called for open elections in 1977. However, she misjudged her support and she and her party were defeated. She left office but returned to Parliament in 1978. She ruled as prime Minister again from 1980 until her assassination in 1984. Under Mrs. Gandhi's leadership India's democracy suffered immensely. Besides the abusive measures during the Emergency, Gandhi also increased the use of military force in the nation, and she brought about a culture of nepotism.

3.2. Historiographic metafiction in *A Fine Balance*

In the following lines I shall try to demonstrate how the lives and destinies of the excluded, the unheard are brought to the fore, how their stories are voiced and how the reader is made to understand a new dimension of official history by witnessing these stories. The novel focuses on multiple versions of the historical discourse allowing thus readers to improve their understanding of historical context.

Although the doing of the people in power, all the events narrated above have had a considerable impact on ordinary citizens such as the protagonists of this novel. After India's gaining independence in 1947 the majority of Indians rejoiced at the departure of the British colonizers. However, as history shows, Indians proved unable to cope with the immense responsibility of being their own rulers. The Parsis who had thrived during British colonization suffered immensely at the departure of the colonizers and complained that the latter had left too early. Instead of trying to cope with their new status within post colonial India most of them chose to celebrate the past and long for it. This is what Maneck's parents used to do during their gatherings with friends, while of course, following British fashions.

> Consolation, as always was found in muddled criticism of the colonizers who, lacking the stomach for proper conclusions had departed in a hurry, though the post-mortem was tempered by nostalgia for the old days. (Mistry 1995, 209)

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If we consider the situation of Farokh Kohlah we discover that it is not only nostalgia for times gone by but also a more pragmatic sadness over the departure of the colonizers as he had lost huge plots of land constituting the majority of his estate in the Partition. He is now left with only a small shop to run, out of which the family have to manage to earn their living.

> Once, though, Maneck's family had been extremely wealthy. Fields of grain, orchards of apple and peach, a lucrative contract to supply provisions to cantonments along the frontier – all this was among the inheritance of Farokh Kohlah, and he tended it well, making it increase and multiply for the wife he was to marry and the son who would be born. But long before that eagerly awaited birth, there was another gorier parturition, when two nations incarnated out of one. A foreigner drew a magic line on a map and called it the new border; it became a river of blood upon the earth. And the orchards, fields, factories, businesses all on the wrong side of that line, vanished with a wave of the pale conjuror's wand. (Mistry 1995, 205)

Farokh has to fight for the lost land but hope of getting it back is very scarce. His fight, though, is not only for the financial gains that the recovered land would bring him. We learn that he is a fierce lover of nature which turns out to be one of the things he cares most about. He gets all his energy and lust for life from the long walks in the forests. The fights and chaos brought about by the Partition are contrasted with the peaceful and orderly rhythm of nature.

Nevertheless, he is not the only character in the book whose life is shattered by the Partition. The violent conflicts between Hindus and Muslims reach unimaginable proportions in certain regions.

> …communal slaughter at the brand-new border had ignited riots everywhere, and sporting a fez in a Hindu neighborhood was as fatal as possessing a foreskin in a Muslim one. In certain areas it was wiser to go bareheaded, for choosing incorrectly among fez, white cap, and turban could mean losing one's head. (Mistry 1995, 87)

Ishvar and Narayan are witnesses to all this aggression while they learn the trade of tailoring in the house of Muslim Ashraf Chacha. They repay the Muslim's kindness to them by saving the latter and his family from the hands of an angry Hindu mob ready to slaughter and burn to the ground everything Muslim.

Though part of an upper-middle class family and living in the city Dina, too, feels the consequences of historical events even if not directly. As a young teenager she has a very troubled relationship with her brother whose strict and abusive rules she finds difficult to obey. As a result of the violence accompanying the

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Independence and Partition she is banned from leaving the house, a fact which traps her within the confines of her brother's tyranny.

> But a few days later riots started in the city, in the wake of Partition and the British departure, and Dina was stuck at home with Nusswan… When the curfew was lifted, Dina flew off to school, happy as an uncaged bird, eager for her eight hours of Nusswan-less existence. (Mistry 1995, 25)

Miraculously Nusswan allows Dina to throw away her plaits after the curfew as if the riots and aggression had touched a sensitive chord in his heart. She had gained a new right just like the country she resides in had gained independence.

The second historical event, the State of Emergency, has an overwhelming presence in the novel and devastating consequences for the existence of many characters. Ishvar and Omprakash are probably the ones who suffer the most. It is through them that the real human consequences of the Emergency are felt.

The first tragic-comical experience that the two tailors undergo since their arrival in the city is recounted in the chapter wittingly entitled *"Day at the Circus, Night in the Slum"*. It is to be noted that Mistry exposes the pomposity and the absurdity of the actions of the political regime in memorable satirical scenes. Here, Ishvar, Om, Rajaram and all the people living in the hutment colony are forced to get on buses in order to attend a rally where the Prime Minister will give a speech. The metaphor of the circus is introduced as government officials arrive in the *'jhopadpatti'* to gather the people for the speech.

> Their performance on the tightrope of mud soon collected a crowd. A puff of wind caught the umbrellas; the men wobbled. A stronger gust pulled them off balance. The audience began to laugh. Some children imitated the funny walk. The visitors abandoned their sandals to the mud and, mustering dignity, walked towards the water tap queue. (Mistry 1995, 258)

A "drum roll of water" (Mistry 1995, 258) accompanies the spokesman invitation to the rally and modifies his pitch. When despite the reward offered – five rupees, sandwiches and tea – most people prove unwilling to go, Sergeant Kesar orders his men to block the slum exits and force people to get on the buses. Ironically, Monkey –Man is prohibited from bringing his monkeys because their presence might give the prime minister's speech the appearance of a circus while her political acolytes bow in front of her with humiliation. The absolute alienation of the forced audience from the political discourse is made clear even before the rally by deliberately ironic comments of the slum dwellers to the party workers when invited to attend the rally:

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> Tell her how happy we are! Why do we need to come?
> "If she is our servant, tell her to come here!"
> "Ask your men with the cameras to pull some photos of our lovely houses, our healthy children! Show that to the Prime Minister!" (Mistry 1995, 258)

In addition, descriptions of the activities of the audience during the political speeches show their complete lack of relevance to the concerns of the hutment dwellers. The running commentary of the hair-collector Rajaram – "See? said Rajaram. I told you it's going to be a day at the circus – we have clowns, monkeys, acrobats, everything." (Mistry 1995, 263) – makes very obvious the otherwise unformulated criticism of the masquerade of overly courteous politicians, rehearsed hand-clapping exercises and ridiculous gimmicks. Everything seems staged and fake. The stage on which the rally is to take place is bedecked with flowers and illuminated by colored lights, and there is even an eighty-foot cardboard-and-plywood cut out of the Prime Minister, with arms outstretched, an outline map of India forming a battered halo behind her head. Compared to all these massive decorations, Indira Gandhi and her speech seem less impressive. Her gesture of flinging the garlands with which she has been overwhelmed into the crowd is not well received:

> "Her father also used to do that when he was Prime Minister" said Ishvar.
> "Yes", said Rajaram. "I saw it once. But when he did it he looked humble.
> "She looks like she is throwing rubbish at us," said Om.
> Rajaram laughed. "Isn't that the politician's specialty?" (Mistry 1995, 263)

Mistry takes the parody a step further when a helicopter takes to the sky scattering packets of rose petals, one of which fails to open concussing an onlooker, and the event is 'blessed' by the presence of Sanjay Gandhi floating above in a hot air balloon dropping above the audience leaflets outlining the "Twenty-Point Programme". The words of the master of ceremonies are hilarious and ridiculous:

> Yes my brothers and sisters, Mother India sits on stage with us, and the son of India shines from the sky upon us! The glorious present here, now, and the glorious future up there, waiting to descend and embrace our lives! What a blessed nation we are! (Mistry 1995, 266)

Unknown to Om and Ishvar the "Twenty-Point Programme" will have direct impact upon their lives. The Prime Minister expresses through this the wish to provide houses for the poor, control population growth and eliminate poverty from cities, towns and villages. Rather than adopt a humane approach in tackling these problems, the novel shows how coercion, abuse and tyranny are used to achieve the

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objectives. The farcical situation reaches the climax when the giant cutout, disturbed by the wind whipped up by the helicopter's blades, hovers over the crowd below:

> The crowd shouted in alarm. The figure with outstretched arms groaned, and the ropes strained at the moorings. Security men waved frantically at the helicopter while struggling to hold onto the ropes and braces. But the whirlwind was much too strong to withstand. The cutout started to topple slowly, face forward. Those in the vicinity of the cardboard-and-plywood giant ran for their lives. (Mistry 1995, 267)

The rally breaks up and ambulances "Come to collect the casualties of the eighty-foot Prime Minister's collapse" (Mistry 1995, 267).

Mistry prefers to refrain from presenting directly his opposition towards Emergency. There are instances in the novel where his characters voice their anti-Emergency opinions directly but these are scarce. However, in this illustrative scene he brings to the fore the excesses and absurdities of the political regime.

The implementation of the "Twenty-Point Programme" is almost immediate. A few days after the rally, Om and Ishvar return to their shack only to witness how the slum where they used to live is being destroyed by bulldozers according to "City Beautification" plans, much praised by the complacent middle and upper class. All this is carried out by the ubiquitous Sergean Kesar, the representative of the law who will be encountered at each unhappy turning point in the lives of the two tailors. It is left to the constables to explain what is being done to the disbelieving hutment dwellers: "It's our assignment – slum prevention and city beautification" (Mistry 1995, 296). The paradox of the decisions taken in the higher echelons of power is that the eradication of the 'jhopadpatty' is followed by the erection of two huge billboards with the Prime Minister's face. There are a variety of slogans to choose from to accompany the Prime Minister's image: "The City Belongs to you! Keep it Beautiful!", "Food for the Hungry! Homes for the Homeless!" and "The nation is on the Move!" (Mistry 1995, 303). The tailors and their friends save what they can from the debris and then desperately try to look for shelter elsewhere. They have to try to sleep in the railway station or on the pavement carrying their belongings in a trunk, until Dina finally allows them to leave it in her flat. However, she refuses to let the tailors live in her flat because of ethnic prejudices and fear of the landlord.

But the next point in the Programme is yet to be implemented. City beautification has to be followed by the elimination of poverty. Representatives of the law are given power to arrest inoffensive beggars. The tailors' next ordeal is to be lifted from the streets and taken by force to the work camp where conditions are almost unbearable for any human being. In this context the slogan of the government – "The nation is on the move!" (Mistry 1995, 303) – seems more than ironical because moving, which should stand for progress and advancement, does in fact stand for destruction and homelessness. Individuals lose their human dignity and

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basic rights. They are forced into relentless, backbreaking labor and treated little better than slaves. As a representative of the law and the state, Sergeant Kesar has had to do many such lawful but humanly shameful jobs, and the guilt of his actions resurfaces from time to time in his dreams: "My orders are to clear the streets" (Mistry 1995, 325). The description of the conditions in the work camp presents one horror after another and makes the reader realize how serious the author was when he warned them in the epitaph that they were going to read "a story of great misfortunes" (Mistry 1995).

The final blow to the tailors' human dignity will take place with the forceful implementation of another government policy: sterilization as way of population control. Here Mistry draws attention to the irony of development and beautification by exploring how such processes lead to cruelty and exploitation. The reader is made to understand that any urban development and government measure works in conjunction with the so-called law to exploit the poor. The politics of development is always at the cost of humanity. Ishvar and Omprakash are horribly mutilated by the enforced sterilizations and subsequent infection which causes Ishvar to lose his legs leaving him in the impossibility of practicing tailoring and thus earning his living. Very significant in this respect is Omprakash's remark: "You really thought they would help? said Om. 'Don't you understand? We are less than animals to them'" (Mistry 1995, 540). And as if this were not enough Ishavr and Om lose their good friend and mentor Ashraf who is beaten to death in the market place in the course of the irresponsible actions which characterized the State of Emergency. A man in the sterilization camp accurately summarizes the situation: "When the ones in power have lost their reason, there is no hope" (Mistry 1995, 535). Sadly, the fate of Om and Ishvar is reduced to a life of beggary, a life on the periphery of society.

Not just the very poor are powerless in the face of the terror of the Emergency. Maneck loses the only friend he had managed to make at college- the Students Union leader, Avinash, who is tortured to death by the police for speaking against government measures. It is again ironical that Avinash is the one who introduces Maneck to the game of chess. The use of chess as a metaphor for life fits on several levels and Avinash tries to use chess to teach the naïve country boy about life; not very successfully apparently. The chessmen are divided in function, pyramid style, like the structure of a society. At the top are the king and queen, who are protected and insulated by the various layers of defense below them: rooks, bishops, knights. The major and most dispensable layer consists of the identical pawns. Because they have no individual identities, these pawns are easily expandable. India's pawns are the poor, like Avinash, the homeless, like Ishvar and Om, all of whom exist at the bottom of the social pyramid. Unfortunately, the reader discovers that rich people do not make any effort to understand the drama of these individuals. An example would be the attitude expressed by Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta of Au Revoir Exports. Dina's brother is supportive of government measures considering that:

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> People sleeping on the pavements gives industry a bad name. My friend was saying last week – he's the director of a multinational, mind you, not some small, two-paisa business – he was saying that at least two hundred million people are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated… got rid of. Counting them as unemployment statistics year after year gets us nowhere just makes the numbers look bad. What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutter and look like corpses. Death would be a mercy. (Mistry 1995, 372- 373)

Nusswan calls the Prime Minister "Our visionary leader" and the Emergency "A true spirit of Renaissance" (Mistry 1995, 371) which is again highly ironical because one of the most important values associated with Renaissance is the celebration of the human spirit, the very spirit which is crushed during the Emergency. Similarly, Mrs. Gupta, the owner of Au Revoir Exports is the capitalist who prospers in a socialist setting. Like Nusswan, she is very ignorant of the fate of the poor and dispossessed and praises the Emergency benefits. Indeed, the State of Emergency gives her the possibility to pay low wages and make a good profit without fear of union leaders and strikes. She is the voice of the wealthier class who support Indira Gandhi and fails to see the humanity of the people below her. She relies on the empty but logically balanced rhetoric of Gandhi's corrupt government to justify her own actions in business.

4. Conclusion

The concern with history that informs *A Fine Balance* is evidence of the fact that Mistry writes a postcolonial literature that has something to say about the past. The novel displays a deconstruction of history which is supplemented by the construction of new stories – own versions of the truth that challenge official history and the politicians' truths. A radical critique, though, is insufficient. Mistry posits the idea that what is necessary is a new story.

A Fine Balance is a sensitive illustration of historiographic metafiction where the relationship between history and fiction is highly interactive – "history and fiction are intertwined and the boundaries between them blurred to allow a new perspective to emerge" (Morey 2004, 92).

A shortcoming of both new historicism and historiographic metafiction, and implicitly of Mistry's approach as illustrated above, is that they focus exclusively on a synchronic analysis, at a specific moment, highlighting the prime importance of historical context and lose sight of a diachronic analysis failing to trace developments in time and to acknowledge the fact that the understanding of certain events can be tracked down by an analysis of the evolution throughout centuries.

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