

Politics of Body in Margaret Atwood's  
*The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle*

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Margaret Atwood

Courtesy: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Atwood](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Atwood)

**Abstract**

The present paper attempts to focus upon female consciousness in the novels of Margaret Atwood. It presents you with an introduction that includes the background of the Canadian novel and female consciousness in the novels of Margaret Atwood. Like many of Atwood's other works, *The Edible Woman* (1969) and *Lady Oracle* (1976) are explicitly concerned with the complexities of body image. Feminist novel *The Edible Woman* speculates upon the predominant feminist issues such as loss of identity, subordination of woman in the male-dominated, male-chauvinistic society, woman striving to establish an identity of her own, and her being exploited in the consumer society where woman's body is treated as a toy, as a consumable item - a symbolic representation of consumerism and consumer problems prevalent in modern society.

*Lady Oracle* is Margaret Atwood's third novel, a comic masterpiece in its parodies of literary forms and subversion of literary expectations. Atwood's fiction might dismantle culturally-encoded concepts of femininity and propose a useful corrective to traditional readings of the female body in which the re-embodiment of the self is equated to a re-embodiment of culture. Margaret Atwood's novels depict the internal consciousness of women who break all the conventional identities in order to live with freedom.

**Key words:** eating disorder, female consciousness, consumable item, feminism

### **Commonwealth Literature**

Commonwealth is an international organization with colonized countries' of different social, political and economic backgrounds. These include the promotion of democracy, human rights, good governance, free trade, multiculturalism and world peace. Commonwealth Literature is commonly called New English Literature, Literature in English, Third World Literature and Post-colonial Literature. Many versatile writers explored the Canadian life and its inheritance in different genres like fiction, poetry, short stories and literary criticism. It often reflects the Canadian perspective on Nature, Frontier life and Canada's position in the world.

### **Canadian Women Novels**

Canadian women novels focus on the inner world of women's feelings and sensibilities. In Canadian women's fiction, Canadian feminists' attempt to focus on the 'New Woman', who is self-aware, independent, seeking to evolve an identity of her own. They want gender equality in Canadian society. Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Gibson, Susan Musgrave, Marian Engel and Beverley Simon are some of the notable figures in Canadian Literature. Besides expressing a peculiar Canadian sensibility, these writers have projected a broad spectrum of women's experiences from the feminine point of view.

### **Margaret Atwood and Her Feminist Themes**

Margaret Atwood is a prolific and honoured Canadian writer who is widely recognized as a poet, novelist, literary critic, essayist, feminist, social activist and has motivated developing

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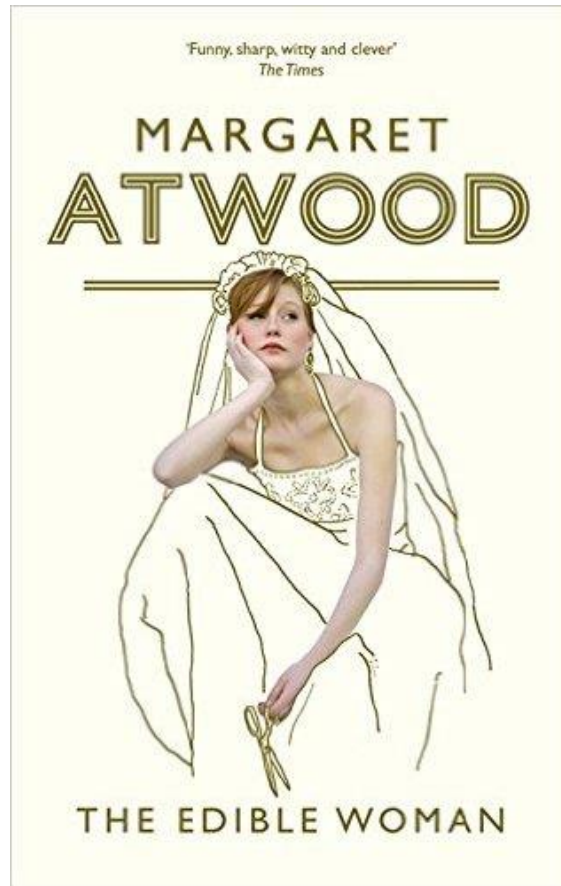
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writers. Margaret Atwood has written over thirty five books- novels, short stories, poetry, literary criticism, social history, and books for children. Her books have been published around the world in more than twenty two languages. Margaret Atwood's writing seem to have a remarkable position in Canadian Literature.

Margaret Atwood voices strong feminist themes through her writing. In several of her books, the female protagonist is a representation of "every women" who is victimized and minimized by gender and politics. Her novels that illustrated her strong feminist views are *The Edible Women* (1969), *Lady Oracle* (1976), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), and her recent novel *Alias Grace* (1996). These novels portray the strength and proactive nature of women as they struggle with inequality. At the thematic level, Atwood novels examine themes related to the politics of gender.

In *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* Margaret Atwood shows the correlation between eating disorder and social pressure on an individual. The most significant point is that it reveals the importance of food and the body of women and she describes how they are used by women for the purpose of self-expression.

### **Woman's Body and Consumer Society in *The Edible Woman***



*The Edible Woman* is structured to look like the journey of a woman called Marian, who is a researcher. During her journey in life through her association with several male and female acquaintances, role models and friends, she realizes and assesses different male strategies of exploitation and the causes of women's oppression. Her interaction with them brings a series of experiences, mostly unpleasant. Eventually, she picks up enough courage to turn against men like Peter and Duncan, who are out to exploit and humiliate her. Thus, she refuses to be the "edible woman" trapped in domesticity.

Images of female bodies are used to sell everything from food to cars. Media portrayal of men and woman can have a tremendous impact on cultural and gender ideals in society. Women are exploited by media in order to promote the sale of goods and services. Throughout history, women's bodies have been viewed as a commodity for sexual pleasure. In the past three decades, body image distress and eating disorders have become major social issue. The emphasis on sexualization and objectification of women and their bodies contribute to body image distress.

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The internalization of feminine ideals with regards to body, femininity, and sexuality must be disregarded because it only focuses on objectifying oneself, and thus perpetuating the problem. Similarly Marian in *The Edible Woman* has been trapped in consumer society in the names of love, marriage, and body exploitation.

*The Edible Woman* is the first Canadian novel by Margaret Atwood that anticipates the trends of feminism found in the later women novelists such as Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble and Toni Morrison. It's true that women's physical beauty and the sexual component make them particularly desirable in a commercial economy dominated by male relationship.

*The Edible Woman* gives the hope that women like Marian would eventually succeed in knowing life and how to deal with men around, irrespective of family or social castigation. In *The Edible Woman* Atwood explores the theme of sexual identity and consumerism.

Part and parcel of a "consumer society", Marian is faced with a choice of being "edible" to her husband and remains single as an individual and asserts herself. Marian's identification with food is closely linked to the general theme of consumerism. Marian's relationship with food and her struggle towards self-determination, relation with her fiancé Peter are played out against a determinedly Canadian backdrop, the survival of the country's cultural autonomy.

### **Marian MacAlpin, the Main Protagonist**

Marian MacAlpin, the main protagonist of the novel, interprets the world in terms of food and negotiates her way through life using it. She is a young, successful woman, working in market research for Seymour Surveys Company. Her career, private life, and social relationships seem to be idealistic, but once she discovers her boyfriend's consuming nature during a conversation in the restaurant, she loses the ability to eat. Non-eating and eating disorders in *The Edible Woman*, are also a metaphor of Marian's rejection of capitalism.

Marian's initial lack of appetite finally leads to an eating disorder, very similar to anorexia nervosa, which is her body's response to the society's attempt at imposing its rules on the heroine. Atwood explicitly illustrates consumerism, stereotyping and rebellion in Canadian

society through Marian MacAlpin. The protagonist truly identifies herself with the consumable goods. Women treated as commodities reflect the intense exploitation of women.

### **Status as a Commodity**

The stereotypical role set by the society for women reduce them to the status of a commodity. The moment, in which the heroine finds out that she is expected by society to adjust to the role of a wife and mother, she loses the ability to eat. Surprisingly, Marian is actually losing her ability to influence her own life. It may be even claimed that the heroine is uncertain about who she is and who she might become. The other female characters such as Ainsley, Clara and three office virgins: Emily, Millie, and Lucy, represent Marian's possible fates and versions of herself.

In the 1960s being organized meant meeting social expectations. Women, who like Marian, were torn apart and struggling with their dual nature could not find their place in such a system. They wanted to live among society but on their own conditions. Ainsley, Clara, and the three office virgins are created so as to embody social and gender roles offered to Marian by the twentieth-century reality.

### **Male Domination**

Margaret Atwood assertively presents the aspect of male domination through her protagonist's relationship with her fiancé, Peter. Peter is a person, who wants everything from Marian according to his own desires. Every action of Marian is instructed by him and Marian falls a prey to Peter's dictatorship. He finds her important only for her physical appearance, while he ignores her emotional and psychological requirements completely. Marian is strictly expected by Peter to fulfill his desires and needs. She does not want to annoy him because she is scared of him. Peter intends to give Marian an identity which would conform to his norms. She feels robbed of her identity as a woman which is unbearable to her. She is expected to be different from other women in her behaviour, thoughts and attitudes.

Marian wants to lead a healthy relationship with Peter, but he does not understand her desire. She is forced to follow Peter's actions without any argument. She is always neglected by

Peter and expected to accede to him in every way. Marian's submissive nature makes him more domineering. She knows that her relation with Peter is not compatible and comfortable, nevertheless she tries to make it fruitful. Atwood explores the predicament of women's dependency on men through her novel *The Edible Woman*. Through Marian, she portrays that burden of femininity makes woman an oppressed character and turns Marian's personality into a submissive follower of her fiancé, Peter. Her submissiveness gives him the realization of supremacy.

### **Status of Consumable Goods**

Atwood presents women who are reduced to the status of consumable goods in Canada during the 1960s. Women are not only celebrated for their beauty, but are also available for sale. Marian also tries to beautify herself by putting on a flashy red dress and wearing heavy makeup. She presents herself as a commodity to suit the wants of her consumer, Peter. Marian is aware of her feminist power in the consumer society and the politics of man's power over woman's body in the consumer society. It is the consciousness of the power of male superiority, male domination over the female body that motivates Peter to subdue Marian, which finally brings about the break between her and her fiancé. Further Peter with his camera episode in the novel serves as a turning point in the private life of Marian for it gives a clear picture of Peter, a "homicidal maniac with a lethal weapon in his hands". (EW246) Marian feels that a woman's primary market value in the marriage depends upon her charming image.

At Marian's engagement party, she feels uneasy because she thinks that Peter manipulated her cleverly and made her a puppet in his hands. She takes off from her own engagement party, escaping from Peter the hunter, and joins up with Duncan. Duncan, an important person whom Marian encounters during her survey in Seymour Surveys, aptly points out that her physical restlessness and refusal to take food are due to her eating disorder, called anorexia and it is nothing but her revolt against domineering patriarchal society. Hence, Marian chances to see her true self in her meeting with Duncan. Duncan relates her inability to eat as an inner rebelliousness: "you're probably representative of modern youth, rebelling against the system". (EW 192)



### **Duncan is Another Alternative?**

Marian believes that Duncan is another alternative, but when she finds out that Duncan wants to seduce and sexually exploit her, she realizes that he is not the alternative. Marian meets Duncan, but it is like jumping into the fire from the pan. Duncan's role in the novel is ambiguous as he seems to be more of a symbolic than a real character. Marian is not angry with Duncan's behavior, instead she is faintly relieved because her relationship with Peter is filled with confusion about his personality and his motives. She sees both Peter and Duncan in their true colours and understands how she has allowed both these men in her life to use and consume her in the process of victimization.

### **Cake-baking Symbolism**

The famous cake-baking episode at the end of the novel is developed with symbolic possibilities. The cake baked by Marian is shaped like a woman, looks like a pink and white doll, and symbolizes the conventional, suppressed image of women in society. The cake which she bakes is at once a remedy, a solution, a self-discovery, a potential symbol of freedom and a leading progressive step ahead. Sharon Wilson concedes that Marian "returns to the society" that has oppressed her, but maintains that there is a symbolic agency in Marian's return: "By baking, decorating, serving, and consuming the cake – the woman image she has been conditioned to project, Marian announces, to herself and others, that she is not food". (EW 96) The cake, which Marian bakes and eats, shows the development of her vision and her refusal to be a victim. Marian claims that she cannot be manipulated by people like Peter and Duncan. Marian is able to destroy the society's stereotypes of femininity through the ingenuous mirroring device of the cake and free herself to realize her own true identity.

When Marian serves Peter the cake, she consciously and verbally rejects the roles of a mother oppressed by her reproductive function, of a wife, of an over submissive female, of an underpaid worker, and of an ideal manipulated woman. Her body does not have to express her inner conflict and rebellion anymore. As Peter runs off, her appetite returns and she regains independence by eating the cake. By using the food imagery, Atwood underlines Marian's regaining control over her own life. Throughout the novel *Marian* tries to search for her identity and finally she is able to find herself.



### **About Woman and Her Relationships to Men**

Thus, Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* is about woman and her relationships to men, to society and to food and eating. It is through food and eating that Margaret Atwood discusses a young woman's rebellion against a modern male dominated society. It seems that Marian has problems not only with food, but with her social relations and with her love life too. Marian refuses to be The Edible Woman.

### **The Body's Response to Social Pressure in *Lady Oracle***



Body image is a complicated aspect of the self-concept that concerns an individual's perceptions and feelings about their body and physical appearance. Socio-cultural standards of feminine beauty are presented in almost all forms of popular media. In the media, women are presented as having images considered to be the "ideal body." Such standards of beauty are almost completely unattainable for most women.

Females have been found to experience dissatisfaction with their physical appearance at a much higher rate than males and women of all ages and sizes display body image disturbance. It appears that body dissatisfaction is more closely linked to appearance-related cognitions than

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physical reality. In fact body was considered as a sign to fight against cultural, moral, and political burden. Body image can have a wide range of psychological effects and physical effects.

### **Healthy and Balanced Man-Woman Relationship**

Atwood's third novel *Lady Oracle* advocates the healthy and balanced man-woman relationship. It is a feminist writer's frontal attack on the dominant pattern of gender relations in contemporary society. Joan Foster wishes to transform society through her writing and thus she deconstructs male discouragement in which the victimization and trapping of women are glorified. It also articulates the differences encountered by female writers to attain an equal place with men in the realm of literary production.

### **An Autobiography**

*Lady Oracle* is an autobiography of Joan Foster in which she records her growth from a girl to a matured writer. It is structured like a journey of the protagonist in which she realizes and assesses different male strategies of the exploitation and oppression of women in the mask of costumes. She attacks male egos mercilessly without any compromise. She deconstructs the roles assigned to women by means of the "power of her pen". Thus, her writing is an instrument for the changes, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought. In *Lady Oracle* she symbolizes not only the moral and psychological limitations of the female protagonist, but also the crippling emphasis the society places on the female image as a consumer item.

### **Body - A Slimy Interpretative Problem**

Body is considered as a slimy interpretative problem is demonstrated in Joan's life. Misreading of the female body by a cultural outsider is one of Atwood's most effective means of demonstrating how sex-citation works. In order to establish herself as a writer Joan changes her looks; she dyes her hair, puts on dark glasses and flees to Rome. Her search for a new identity is met with a stiff resistance from the patriarchal order.

The conflict between the person, the artist and the social environment is after all particularly acute for the woman for whom the quest for selfhood itself is problematic. The

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transformation from fat child to a stunning young woman represents the magical transformation. Joan's mother is a victim of the soul-damaging stereotype created by patriarchy. She feels so oppressed by her joyless life that she commits suicide by throwing herself down the cellar stairs. Her husband and the female roles expected of her by the male dominated society are responsible for her death.

### **Obesity**

Joan's obesity as a young girl is a matter of much concern to her mother, she advises strategies to make her daughter slim and thin, but Joan fails her mother's plans and secretly enjoys her rebellion. Joan's mother accuses Joan of going to extremist attitudes. She makes her starve to death and tries to frustrate her by baking goodies and leaving them around in the kitchen to tempt her. As a young girl Joan accepts her mother's control over her life. The control which her mother has at home, school, neighbourhood and the dancing school are acceptable. Her mother tries to mould her physically and psychologically according to her own ideas of beauty and personality. She declares, "I was not her puppet", and continues to do everything to disentangle herself from the strange hold of authority.

### **Aunt Lou as a Saviour**

Aunt Lou is an important character in Joan's life. After her unhappy life with her mother Joan comes into contact with Aunt Lou, whom she regards as her saviour. She is practically brought up by Aunt Lou. She gives Joan all the warmth, affection and attention, which she needs as a child and a teenager. The sad tale of victimization of Aunt Lou further influences Joan's thinking on the man-woman relationships and she begins to assess social relations from a fresh perspective. Joan benefits much from her association with Aunt Lou. She learns a great deal about the oppressive nature of the patriarchal world and the helplessness of women in playing out the roles prescribed by men in the contemporary society from the life of Aunt Lou.

At the age of seven Joan was pretty fat and so she was stuffed into a mothball suit and forced to dance. She shed tears when she had to put on the white teddy bear costume and hung around her neck a large sign that said "mothball". Therefore, she withdraws from the dancing school thinking that overweight should not be a criterion to judge women. She feels that good

looking women are as horribly exploited and oppressed as ugly fat women by men. Atwood deliberately portrays Joan as a fat girl in the novel to question male attitudes to women's body thereby presenting her as a victim of sexist social pressures.

### **Joan Meets Paul in London**

Joan begins her adult life in England as a versatile writer. Joan meets Paul in London. Even though she doesn't love the count, she tries to convince herself she does and lives as his mistress for a few months. The Polish Count is a banker as well as a writer of nursery fantasy novels. He is a compulsive and romantic liar. Paul's attitude towards Joan indicates that he has got the ideas of womanhood from fairy tales and romances. He compliments her "You have the body of a goddess". (LO142) Later Joan realizes that he is a manipulator. He regards women as dependent and inexperienced. He considers woman as an empty vessel and prescribes her the roles such as childbearing and sewing. Paul categorizes women as mistresses.

### **Joan and Arthur**

Joan's husband is Arthur, who she gets involved with, in a romance within a few months. Arthur wants Joan to be a domestic servant to serve him for years. He does not want Joan to wear fashionable dresses in public because it may attract the exploiters. He becomes sadistic in the bedroom. Just as with Paul, Joan's first act of doing something for herself creates a change in her relationship with Arthur. Joan goes even further and has an affair, further asserting her own needs and identity, instead of Arthur's. It is no surprise that she fakes her own death and runs away from married life, soon thereafter.

### **Joan and Chuck Brewer**

Joan gets involved with the Royal porcupine alias Chuck Brewer. Joan meets him after a T.V. interview. He is not a creative poet. Later he wants to marry Joan and drags her into sexual immortality. When Joan refuses to marry him, he frightens her. He wants to occupy Arthur place. Towards the end of their relationship, when he suggests a double suicide, Joan sees him as a homicidal maniac. Physically slim and beautiful, she remains, emotionally, a bitter, self-conscious adolescent.

## **Transgressive Space**

With topic on top of topic, body on top of body, Atwood RE - cites the body at the intersection, where women's physical bodies and the topical citations of the female body come together. Thus she points to a transgressive space that the "normally" heterosexual body might occupy. Similarly, in *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster testifies to the slippage of a single essential body attached to a single essential life.

## **Life is Full of Changes – Social Expectations Towards Women**

From obese teenager to sexy mistress, from the author of cheap romances to avant garde poet, from the lover of a polish count to the wife of a left wing radical, Joan's life is full of changes. The story of her quest for happiness through self change is told by Margaret Atwood in *Lady Oracle*. The story is told in first person, with commentary of the present juxtaposed with flashbacks from Joan's life. These techniques allow an intimate view of Joan's life from her perspective. Joan Foster discovers a new aspect of her personality, one neither she nor the men in her life had previously seen. She has accepted herself and with that her own potential to do harm, to affect her world.

*Lady Oracle* raises the issue of social expectations toward women, which are viewed as destructive to female identity and self-confidence. This novel also deals with the capitalist reality and preoccupation with consumption, influencing the heroine's condition and her negative and strange attitude toward food.

## **Narrative Techniques of Margaret Atwood**

Narrative techniques are the methods that authors use to tell their stories. When analyzing a novel, it is important to identify these techniques in order to shed light on the ways in which they function in the story. Atwood has used a number of narrative techniques in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*. *The Edible Woman* illustrates Atwood's metaphoric technique. The central metaphor of *The Edible woman*, reinforced by the title, is that woman as food, as object and the theme is a woman's endeavour to attain humanity and a human identity. Atwood has used a number of imageries in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle*.

Margaret Atwood has attempted to convey the theme of woman as an edible commodity for man through her image sequences. Atwood has used dream imagery, the zoological images, animal images, atmospheric images, as well as the image of the hunter and the hunted, the image of the salable commodity in *The Edible Woman*. In *Lady Oracle* Atwood uses the sequence of the images. John invokes the dual images of the Fat lady and the Lady of Shallot.

Another important narrative technique in *The Edible Woman* which Atwood uses is symbolism. The eating as well as the refusal of food described in the novel have a symbolic meaning. The leading metaphor of the novel, an edible-woman in the symbolic shape of a cake which Marian bakes and ices for Peter, is both the ultimate image of bodily dismemberment and also the sign of Marian's recovery.

Throughout *Lady Oracle*, Atwood uses ellipsis to make apparent silenced, hidden voices. In *Lady Oracle*, Atwood uses Parody. Parody is a vehicle for social satire directed outside the literary institution, at the limitations of being a woman and a Canadian and about the inexperience of much feminism and nationalism, even as it creates bonds with other women and among fellow nationals who are readers. In *Lady Oracle*, parody is the mode of a well-read and mature artist. Atwood uses these techniques to make the novels more effective. Through the narrative technique Atwood portrays life of the protagonists.

## **Summation**

As a novelist Margaret Atwood discovers the anomalies of Canadian civilization in which women are not allowed to make any strategy to grab the male spaces. Her novels represent and reflect an important development in the post-sixties Canadian writing. The quest for identity, traditionally and by implication was with reference to the male in terms of the night out male-questers. The woman's quests were perceived in terms of marriage and socialization. In her fiction she attempts to fictionalize the progress of the women protagonists' quest for feminine identity.

In the *Edible Woman* Marian's progress as a strong individualist is evident from the fact that she rejects the conventional role that her society offers her as a woman and it is no more aware of her inner self, other than at the novel's outset. By creating her false image in the forms of the cake woman and consuming it, Marian seems to have started out on the path of mythic heroes. She chooses her own freedom and refuses to be the edible woman. At the end, she is aware of her own resilience, openness and her capacity to love and care for others. Joan in *Lady Oracle*, as a wife takes recourse to extra marital affairs. The novel shows how this dramatic choice affects her life. The consequences of her affairs are painful and she realizes that she has made a mistake in taking a short route to pleasure. Joan fails in her relationships with men and she regards all men as killers. Later she realizes that like all men she too is capable of living her life as she likes. She catches a few glimpses of her authentic self. Ultimately she emerges as a serious writer and offers an equal and better relationship between man and woman.

Through her protagonists, Margaret Atwood has revealed not only the stereotyped perception of women and the traditional society's expectations from them, but she has also shown the changing man-woman relationships. She has tried to show how women are trying to redefine themselves.

Thus, the present paper shows that through the protagonist and other characters in *The Edible Woman* and *Lady Oracle* Atwood provides us with a map of the spiritual condition of modern Canadian fiction with specific reference to the physical and cultural setting. The most interesting aspect of her novels is that her characters' dilemmas and sufferings, desires and errors and their ability to consciously or unconsciously wound others make her readers react to them not as fictional characters but as live human beings.

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