

EXPLORING SOME DAMAGING ASPECTS OF SLAVERY AND COLONIZATION IN AMERICAN AND AFRICAN NOVELS: A READING OF NARRATIVE OF SOJOURNER TRUTH AND THINGS FALL APART

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<https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2025.8215>

ABSTRACT

This article is based on exploring some damages caused by the institution of slavery and colonization to Africans and black America's black slaves through the Narrative of Sojourner Truth and Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe. In effect, the era of European institution of slavery as well as their colonization of Africa had been tragic and traumatic to people of African origins in Africa and in Western nations, particularly America. In the area of research, the comparison of the era of slavery and colonialism at the same time is unusual. Thus, the objective of this research study is to show side by side how the institution of slavery and the colonialism had been tragic for Africans as well as America's black slaves. Methodologically, a pure qualitative method is used in the collection of the study's data. Postcolonialism is equally employed in the analysis and interpretation of the data of the investigation. As for the results of the study, the survey has clearly shown that the institution of slavery had driven some enslaved Blacks into total alienation and self-negation. In that, it has been shown that because of the mental alienation of the bondage, some slaves strongly believed in the godliness of the white enslavers. Hence, some slave women could let their own children starve just to show their faithfulness to their masters. In the same way, some were also very happy to beget many children just to participate in the enrichment of their masters. On the other hand, the study has demonstrated that the colonization of Africa has also alienated a number of natives. In this regard, it has been evinced that the Europeans came to Africa pretending to be in a religious mission. Once fully settled, they devised ways to disintegrate African families by converting a lot of local Africans and opposing them to their communities. As a result, the African societies lost a lot of aspects of their cultures, traditions or founding principles of their land.

Keywords: alienation colonialism, dehumanization, postcolonialism, slavery

1.0 INTRODUCTION

African content has suffered two tragic events in its history. The first one was slavery which started in the seventh century with the Arabs and the fifteenth century with Europeans. Secondly, the continent has experienced another form of bondage (colonialism) orchestrated by European powers. Both periods had been tragic for Africans as well as their deported offspring of Western nations, America in particular. It means that even people of African origins reduced to slaves in America, have been dehumanized too. Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850) by Sojourner Truth is an African American autobiography which denotes the destructive

side of slavery for the America's black slaves. As for *Things Fall Apart* (1959) by Chinua Achebe, it gives an insight into the European colonization of Africa and its negative implications for Africans and their nations.

Researchers have tackled the issues related to slavery and the colonization separately; however, it seems to me that very few of them, so far, have investigated the two most disastrous periods of the history of humanity (slavery and colonization) side by side using Truth's *Narrative* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, the objective of this research is to account for the incommensurable downsides of the Europeans' institutions of slavery and colonialism on both Africans and their deported descendants in the West, America in particular. The theoretical framework used to conduct the analyses of the study's data is postcolonialism. The qualitative research method is also used in the process of the data collection, and the design of this research study is content analysis. The study is split into two main sections. Primarily, it accounts for the mental damages of slavery and colonialism for Africans and African Americans. Lastly, the study presents the physical and cultural shortcomings of slavery and colonialism for Blacks.

2.0 PSYCHOLOGICAL DAMAGES OF SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM

This section strives to show how black people were ideologically impacted by the institutions of slavery and colonialism in Africa as well as in America.

2.1 Mental Damages of Slavery according to Truth's Story

Slavery had a tremendous damage on the mindsets, behaviors and personalities of the enslaved Blacks. In the story of Sojourner Truth, the narrator relates the traumatic effect of slavery for slaves. Truth is portrayed as a mother who could do everything just to please her master. Her situation as a slave made her believe that the role of a subaltern is to execute the orders and desires of the master at all cost. With this regard, it is related that every task or work she was asked to complete was done with pleasure and pride as shown in the following lines of her narrative:

Her ambition and desire to please were so great, that she often worked several nights in succession, sleeping only short snatches, as she sat in her chair; and some nights she would not allow herself to take any sleep, save what she could get resting herself against the wall, fearing that if she sat down, she would sleep too long. These extra exertions to please, and the praises consequent upon them, brought upon her head the envy of her fellow-slaves, and they taunted her with being the white folks' nigger (Truth, 2006, pp.21-22).

The excerpt shows how Sojourner Truth was determined and devoted in the execution of her duty. For the sake of her daily tasks, she would work nights and days without taking any rest. Surprisingly, she felt no regret doing all these works and sleepless nights. Just like Sojourner Truth, it is evident that many other slaves during the era of slavery had undergone similar experiences. Some worked hard in order to get some favors from their masters or special treatments. But in the case of Sojourner Truth, she thought that it was normal that she worked hard, because she considered her master to be like a god. A god must be worshiped, so all Sojourner's actions or hard works were like worshiping her god. This is as well confirmed in the following lines:

At this time she looked upon her master as a god; and believed that he knew of and could see her at all times, even as God himself. And she used sometimes to confess her delinquencies, from the conviction that he already knew them, and that she should fare better if she confessed voluntarily: and if anyone talked her of the injustice of her being a slave, she answered them with contempt, and immediately told her master. She then firmly believed that slavery was right and honorable (Truth, 2006, P.22).

The extract means that in the eyes of slaves, their masters were not human beings but gods; this elucidates the extent to which slavery had mentally alienated the protagonist from the actual reality. In spite of her servitude, Sojourner Truth was a religious person, born in slavery, and had imbibed the western ways of life and religion. Besides, as a mother, she wanted her children to be honest no matter what the cost as instructed by her master because she believed in the sacredness of the latter. She didn't want her maternal affection for her children to hamper her devotion and honesty towards her master. For the sake of the intertextuality, the foregoing idea is corroborated by Olaudah Equiano in like manner:

I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us, and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit and imitate their manners; I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement and every new thing that I observed and treasured up my memory (Equiano, 1996, p. 38).

The passage highlights one more time the psychological consequences of slavery upon the enslaved Africans. The situation of slaves viewing white people as perfect beings is a sign of slaves' self-negation and their feeling of inferiority to some extent. Just like Truth, Equiano has also testified the negative impact of slavery on the mindset of slaves.

Furthermore, the narration unveils that Truth could leave her children starve because, for her, it was sinful to take something that is not given to her or belong to her to feed her progenies. So she left her children suffer from hunger while she could give them food as depicted by the narrator in like manner:

In obedience to her mother's instructions, she had educated herself to such a sense of honesty, that, when she had become a mother, she would sometimes whip her child when it cried to her for bread, rather than give it a piece secretly, lest it should learn to take what was not its own!"(Truth, 2006, P.22).

Through the passage, one can understand that the protagonist had the possibility to provide her child with food. However, as she was mentally affected by bondage, she believed that it was not normal to feed the child without the consent of her master. It can be inferred from the same assertion that she was unconsciously ready to deprive her child of food just because of the psychological damage she was suffering from. In fact, a sound and clear-sighted mother would do anything to feed her offspring. In the case of the Truth, it is obvious that she was not the master of her mindset. Hence, all her actions were guided by an ulterior force that she did not control. The same attitude of the female protagonist is also explained in the following words:

I have already alluded to her care not to teach her children to steal, by her example; and she says, with groanings that cannot be written, 'The lord only knows how many times I let my children go hungry, rather than take secretly the bread I liked not to ask for'.

All parents who annul their perceptive teachings by their daily practices would do well to profit by her example.”(Truth, 2006, P.25).

As in the previous passage, the above one also emphasizes the mental alienation and the sacrifices of Sojourner Truth. Latter considered herself and her children as inferior to her master. Truth’s belief in the superiority of white people was also true for many other slaves because most of them accepted their servitude as natural and the supremacy of white people. To better understand the depth of the mental damage of the black slaves, the next details about the story of Sojourner Truth would leave the reader dumbfounded:

In the process of time, Isabella found herself the mother of five children, and she rejoiced in being permitted to be the instrument of increasing the property of her oppressors! Think, dear reader, without a blush, if you can, for one moment, of a mother thus willingly, and with pride, laying her own children, the flesh of her flesh, on the altar of slavery-a sacrifice to the bloody Moloch! But we must remember that beings capable of such sacrifices are not mothers; they are only things, chattels, property (Truth, 2006, p.25).

The foregoing once again ascertains that some alienated slaves, like Truth, were determined work in the hope of amplifying the wealth of their masters. Indeed, Truth revealed that she believed that by delivering many children, she would help enrich her master. In other words, she was happy to deliver more children just to enrich or increase the wealth of her master. The above passage demonstrates that a severe mental blow was inflicted to Sojourner Truth which has altered her mindset. As a result, the poor Truth would think of the good of master rather than her own.

2.2 Mental Damages of Colonialism According to Achebe

The mental impairment of the colonization of Africa was immense. Achebe relates through *Things Fall Apart* psychological turmoil of colonialism of Africa. This author displays that when the Europeans, precisely the British set foot for the first time on the Africans soil, the Igbo land in particular, they pretended to come with good intentions. Thus, the indigenous people accepted to give them land to settle. However, once they settled comfortably, they started brainwashing the mind of the local Africans with their religion. In the following passage, it is shown that the methods of the newly arrived Europeans worked out as planned as they got some converts among the indigenous people: “The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there, won a handful of converts and were already sending evangelists to the surrounding towns and villages” (Achebe, 1959, p133). It is stated that at their arrival in Umuofia, the so-called white missionaries have contrived to brainwash a couple of Africans into adhering the latter’s religion. The news of the conversion into the white man’s religion was not welcome by the leaders of Umuofia. They knew that if that situation had to continue, it would mean losing their manpower and cultures. Nevertheless, the number of African converts had continued to rise.

Okonkwo who is the one chiefs of his tribe has also lost a son because of the new religion. Surprisingly, the African coverts have denied their community people, considered as sinners. That is why, when asked about his father by a villager, Nwoye, the son of the main protagonist Okonkwo, said that the latter was no longer his genitor:

“What are you doing here?” Obierika had asked when after many difficulties the missionaries had allowed him to speak to the boy. “I am one of them,” relied Nwoye. “How is your father?” Obierika asked, not knowing what else to say. “I don’t know. He is not my father,” said Nwoye, unhappily (Achebe, 1959, pp.133-34).

Inferring from the above, the reader understands that the African converts were instructed to distance themselves from their families who are said to be ignorant of the true God and uncivilized. Hence, the converts were told to challenge their own cultural ways for the true ways, the European ones. By analyzing the same extract, one may affirm that, in order to fulfill their colonization plan, the British have used their religion to destroy the mindset of some indigenous Africans who would be used to face their own people. Colonization was based on exploitation of Africa and the manipulation Africans. With this regard, the British colonizers, self-styled missionaries, had manipulated Africans psychologically, by instructing them that all the African ways: customs, traditions and even religions were not good.

In the light of the foregoing idea, Achebe relates that the white settlers have decided to send some African converts into the Umuofia to openly challenge local Africans by denigrating African faiths and cultural practices. In that, the writer puts as follows: “But on one occasion the missionaries had tried to overstep the bounds. Three converts had gone into the village and boasted openly that all the gods were dead and impotent and that they were prepared to defy them by burning all their shrines” (Achebe, 1959, p.144). Through the passage, it is clearly shown that the African converts were alienated and incentivized into coming into conflict with their community people. This policy of ‘divide and reign’ was used to weaken the local people and pave the way for the imposition of the British full control over African nations. To substantiate the foregoing, Achebe writes:

But stories were already gaining ground that the white man had not only brought a religion but also a government. It was said that they had built a place of judgment in Umuofia to protect the followers of their religion. It was even said that they had hanged one man who killed a missionary (Achebe, 1959, p.144-45).

The extract demonstrates how cunning the British colonizers were. At their arrival, they pretended to be missionaries. Then they started to brainwash African youth, and finally they created their own system of government on the African continent. Although it is mentioned in the passage that the creation of a place of judgment was meant for the protection of the converts, one can presume that it was put in place in order to create fear and confusion in the mindset of resisting local Africans.

As an illustration, the narrative of Olaudah Equiano, although talks about slavery, confirms Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* about psychological damage of bondage on the psyche of some Africans. In fact, it is revealed in this story that slavery had a tremendous damage on the ways and customs of Africans just like in *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, it is related through the eyes of Equiano, that the impairing effect of slavery on Africans’ culture is perceptible at the time when African traditional ways and customs, centered on kinship and collectivism, were considerably compromised at the inception of Westerners’ institution of slavery on African mainland. They used cunning ways to destabilize Africans. In the case of Equiano, they used

commerce with African communities in order to fulfill the stated plan. In relation to that, the writer puts:

They generally bring us fire-arms, gunpowder, hats, beads, and dried fish. The last we esteemed a great rarity... Sometimes indeed we sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as they had been convicted of kidnapping ...or other crimes which we esteemed heinous. ... This practice of kidnapping induces me to think that, notwithstanding all our strictness, their principal business among us was to trepan our people (Equiano, 1996, p.6).

This quote shows that the European enslavers initially presented themselves in Africa as businessmen. They used to bring their European merchandise and barter them for African slaves. They used their goods to incentivize some African tribe to do slave business with them. It means they urged Africans to sell their own brothers into bondage. They also used some local Africans to kidnap little children. All in all, according to Equiano, European enslavers used their merchandise and kidnapping to destabilize the minds of Africans, making some of them materialistic and ready to bargain their brothers. This situation is a psychological damage because a normal person cannot bargain his/her fellows for goods.

3.0 TRAGIC SIDE OF EUROPEANS' INSTITUTIONS OF SLAVERY AND COLONIALISM

This section accounts for inhumane side of the institution of slavery and colonization in respectively the Narrative of Sojourner Truth and Things Fall Apart. It seeks demonstrates how slavery as well as the colonization have caused a lot damage to enslaved Blacks as well as the indigenous people of Africa physically and culturally.

3.1 Inhumane side of Slavery for Blacks through the Perspective of Truth

The period of slavery was marked by the objectification of black slaves by the agents involved in that process. That is, whether a slave was an African or a European born, he faced approximately the same hardship and sorrow, be it physical violence or family separation. In the case of Sojourner Truth who was born into slavery in America had also experienced the tragic face of slavery. It means that slaves who were born in European colonies also suffered a lot, for they had no right over their lives as far as their children's upbringing and future were concerned. If a slave gave birth to a baby, the baby was extracted from his or her mother and sold away. This idea is demonstrated here by Sojourner Truth:

She was the mother of some ten or twelve children: though Sojourner is far from knowing the exact number of her brothers and sisters; she being the youngest, save one, and all older than herself having been sold before her remembrance (Truth, 2006. P.9).

This passage puts emphasis on the fact that slave parents did not have the right to bring up all their children. It was difficult for slave children to know how many brothers and sisters they had, for when a slave child grew up, he was immediately purchased by another slave owner, and never returned back again. Slaves had no right on their children, and the pain that they felt was very huge, given the fact that they were the ones who should have taken care of their children. This sad reality is foregrounded as it follows:

She was often surprised to find her in tears; and when, in her simplicity, she inquired, Mau-mau, what makes you cry? She would answer, Oh, my child, I am thinking of your brothers and sisters that have been sold away from me(Truth, 2006,p.10).

Maumau bett is the term that Sojourner Truth used to call her mother in the narrative. As unveiled through the passage, when Sojourner asked her mother why she was crying, her answer was that she was missing so much her children who were taken away from her and sold away without her agreement. Many of the family separations had happened at the auction block as shown by Sojourner Truth through the following passage:

At length, the never-to-be-forgotten day of the terrible auction arrived, when the slaves, horses, and other cattle of Charles Ardinburgh, deceased, were to be put under the hammer, and again change masters. Not only Isabella and Peter, but their mother, were now destined to the auction block (Truth, 2006, p.11).

As detailed in the narrative, when the auction day arrives all slave owners decided which slave to sell and which one to keep no matter their gender, age, or family status. A mother could be sold away leaving her children motherless, and children also could be sold too leaving their mothers childless. When the separation was done, it was difficult for those who have been sold away to pay visit to their families, even if their families were in difficulty as evidenced by her: “She remembers going to visit her parents some three or four times before the death of her mother, and a good deal of time seemed to her to intervene between each visit (pp.9-10)”. This is what happened to Sojourner Truth when she was separated from her parents. She would have liked to stay by them but it was impossible for her to do so, because she was someone else’s property. In sojourner Truth’s narrative, her father and mother were then set free due to the poor health condition of her father who was very old and could not work again. Her father and mother lived in a very deplorable situation far away from their children. The passage below shows that that kind of separation was terrible and painful for both parents and children. At the death of her mother, her father stayed in a miserable state as shown here:

I had thought god would take me first, -Mau-mau was so much smarter than I, and could get about and take care of herself;-and I am so old, and so helpless. What is to become of me? I can’t do anything anymore- my children are all gone, and here I am left helpless and alone (Truth, 2006,p.14).

This lamentation is from Sojourner’s father about his situation, and proves that it was inhumane to part parents from their children. This idea is also supported in like manner: “He again, as usual, bewailed his loneliness, - spoke in tones of anguish of his many children, saying, ‘they are all taken away from me! I have now not one to give me a cup of cold water – why should I live and not die (p.14)’”? It is better to die rather than live in total loneliness. If all your dear folks are far from you, the only relief will be the death. All these shocking situations happened in slavery, and even the least basic rights of human beings were not granted to slaves. Slaves were not authorized to get married to other slaves of different masters as depicted by Sojourner:

As she advanced in years, an attachment sprung up between herself and a slave named Robert. But his master, an Englishman by the name of Catlin, anxious that no one’s property but his own should be enhanced by the increase of his slaves, forbade Robert’s visits to Isabella, and commanded him to take a wife among his fellow-servants[...]

They were terribly enraged at finding him there, and the eldest began cursing, and calling upon his son to `Knock down the d-d black rascal`; at the same time, they both fell upon him like tigers, beating him with the heavy ends of their canes, bruising and mangling his head and face in the most awful manner, and causing the blood which streamed from his wounds, to cover him like a slaughtered beast, constituting him a most shocking spectacle (Truth, 2006,pp.22- 23).

The foregoing clearly explicates that the freedom of enslaved persons was actually hampered in case of any disobedience from a slave to abide by the rules; he is severely punished and may even be killed. This also happens when Robert refused to stop seeing Isabella and his master sent a group of men after him. When they caught him, he was severely beaten; this is the evidence that slavery hampered the least basics of human rights.

3.2 Horrendous Side of Colonization for Africans through the Perspective of Achebe

This section, like the previous one, strives to show how bitter the colonization of Africa had been tragic for Africa and her sons and daughters through the point of view of Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.

As a matter of fact, the novelist has demonstrated that the advent of the British colonists under the cover of the religious missionaries had caused a tremendous damage to Africans as well physically, culturally as humanistically. The African societies which were formerly based on kinship, commonality, dignity and solidarity were impaired with the coming of the European colonists. Indeed, as indicated in the previous sections, when the white men set foot on the African mainland, they first tried to destroy the foundation of the African nations, namely the African sense of kinship, commonality and dignity. This was done when they cleverly used their religion to create division and hatred among the natives. The next passage evidences the foregoing statement: "Mr. Kiaga's joy was very great. "Blessed is he who forsakes his father and his mother for my sake," he intoned. "Those that hear my words are my father and my mother"(Achebe, 1959,p.142). The speaker in the extract, Mr. Kiaga is a native, who was converted by the white missionaries and used as a preacher among the native people. In a word, the white colonists had used some local Africans as church men to part their African brothers and sisters from African ways. The passage demonstrates that the converts were urged to abandon their families who were regarded as cursed.

As a result of that, the narrator relates that many young Africans had left their communities to follow the new religion, resulting in a lot of damages for defenders of African values in those communities. Okonkwo, the main protagonist and a fervent defender his African tradition, was very affected by the white men's clinching on the youth of his community, particularly his son N'woye. He even thought of attacking the white man's church because it represented for his people and community: "As Okonkwo sat in his hut that night, gazing into a log fire, he thought over the matter. A sudden fury rose within him and he felt a strong desire to take up his machete, go to the church and wipe out the entire vile and miscreant gang"(Achebe, 1959,p.142). The excerpt evidences the beginning of the disunion among Africans following the imposition of the white man's colonial rules and religion. The resisting Africans, in the light of Okonkwo, became frustrated and engaged in defiant actions against the Europeans' new system. For instance, a number of white men and their local marionette were lynched by native Africans:

“And so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man’s friends ... And then one morning three white men led by a band of ordinary men like us came to the clan. They saw the iron horse and went away again. ... For many market weeks nothing else happened. They have a big market in Abame on every other Afo day and, as you know, the whole clan gathers there. That was the day it happened. The three white men and a very large number of other men surrounded the market. They must have used a powerful medicine to make themselves invisible until the market was full. And they began to shoot. Everybody was killed, except the old and the sick who were at home and a handful of men and women whose chi were wide awake and brought them out of that market.” He paused (Achebe, 1959, pp.128-129).

The foregoing statement is from a character, named Obierika, who is relating a sad event that happened in one of their neighboring villages, Abame. As expounded, a white man wandering in a village was killed by angry villagers because of their hostility toward the new system. Having seen the crime of the native against one Whiteman, the colonists, helped by the newly converted Africans attacked the market of the mentioned village, killing everybody that were there. That odious crime by the British colonists were meant to deter the natives against further actions that could jeopardize the implementation of their colonial plan. This mass killing of native Africans demonstrates that the alleged religious mission was not founded. No religion requires mass murder for the sake of God. In fact, the religious reason was just an alibi covering the real intention of those white invaders.

Furthermore, like in the village of Abame, the people of Umuofia had also decided to fend off the invaders by burning their churches. As a result, the white men’s administration summoned the leaders of Umuofia. Once they arrived there, they were immediately arrested and urged to pay a fine over the offence. The below lines evinced that idea:

The six men were handcuffed and led into the guardroom. “We shall not do you any harm,” said the District Commissioner to them later, “if only you agree to cooperate with us. We have brought a peaceful ad- ministration to you and your people so that you may be happy. If any man ill-treats you we shall come to your rescue. But we will not allow you to ill-treat others. We have a court of law where we judge cases and administer justice just as it is done in my own country under a great queen. I have brought you here because you joined together to molest others, to burn people’s houses and their place of worship. ... The six men ate nothing throughout that day and the next. They were not even given any water to drink, and they could not go out to urinate or go into the bush when they were pressed. At night the messengers came in to taunt them and to knock their shaven heads together. (Achsbe,1959,pp.178-79).

The six leaders who answered the call of the District Commissioner were handcuffed and jailed because they protested against the encroachment of their land by white colonists. They were ill-treated, humiliated and their heads shaved. It is even revealed that they were given no food or water. All that ill-treatment was meant to downplay the leadership status of the imprisoned leaders of the community. It also means that they were no longer the masters of their territories. The real masters were thus the British. Finally, this passage evinces clearly that the motivation of the missionaries were not religious, but also colonial.

4.0 CONCLUSION

To conclude, we may say that the Narrative of Sojourner Truth and Things Fall Apart are inclusive narratives that highlight the psychological, physical and cultural damages of the European institution of slavery and colonization. Enslaved Africans have been impacted by slavery mentally and physically. It has been evidenced that some mentally damaged slaves, had accepted their fates as normal because they believed in the superiority of the white race. For such slave, slavery was like doing one's duty. The study has also shown that some slaves accepted to starve their own children because they did not want to disappoint their godly masters. In addition, it has also been evinced that some slaves were happy to beget as many children as possible in order to enrich their godly masters. Indeed, some slaves used to consider their masters as superhuman beings or merely as gods. In a different way, the study has evidenced that the lives of slaves were not important to masters, for they could dislocate slaves' families by selling out their children leaving parents in tears and desolations. On the other hand, the investigation has shown that the colonization of Africa by Europeans, especially the British, had caused approximately the similar damages to Africans and their nations as slavery. As a matter of fact, the study has expounded those European colonizers came to Africa under the cover of a religious mission; once settled, they began to destroy African families, customs and principles. This was done through the conversion of African youth into Christianity, and the African converts were used against their communities. In this relation, it has been demonstrated that in the process of implementing their colonial plans, the Europeans colonizers committed a lot of crime on native Africans. All in all, the study has deduced that the success of European colonizers in Africa rested on the deterring violence perpetrated against local Africans.

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