



## REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE FIGURES IN KALIGHAT POT PAINTINGS: A CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the depiction of women within the Kalighat Pot Paintings, an 19 th century Bengali folk art tradition that developed out of the devotional Patachitra into a socially conscious visual folk art. Based on historical background, stylistic approaches and field work (including Pingla village patuas and contemporary performers Bhashkar, Bahadur and Rupsona Chitrakar), the paper follows three overlapping periods of representation (1) mythological representations of women as the divine embodiment of Shakti (Kali, Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi) to encourage moral authority and spiritual capabilities; (2) the social and satirical ones (e.g. the BabuBibi motif and the narrative of Elokeshi) challenge modernity in the This paper claims that the kalighat paintings serve as both cultural storage and critical arena of gendered text as an expression of continuity, and transformation in Bengal visual and social past.*

**Keywords:** *Kalighat Painting; Women Representation; Patua Art; Gender and Modernity; Folk Art Activism; Babu–Bibi.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Kalighat Pot Painting tradition, born in 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal occupies a special position in the Indian art history. This art form began around the Kalighat Temple in South Kolkata the goddess of Kali, the personification of divine female strength, it developed as a fusion between country folk art and a city with modernism. The earliest village migrating patuas or scroll painters were those who originated in villages of Bengal and Odisha, and started painting on paper rather than long narrative scrolls. They were originally religious art and portrayed mythological motives of gods and goddesses like Kali, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati as religious souvenirs of the visitors and pilgrims of the temples. With time as these artists were exposed to life in the urban environment as well as the influence of the colonists their art evolved to be the social record of all the moral and cultural changes that were going on in the Bengal environment.



**Figure 1:** Old Kalighat temple (Mayer ghat and Adi Ganga) during late 1800s



**Figure 2:** Nowadays Kalighat temple

Women are the key figure in the artistic tradition of Kalighat, which represents the spirituality and social identity. Figure of goddesses was early manifestations of purity and moral righteousness divine power of the conventional ideals of a woman. The representation of women in the Kalighat art however broadened as the colonial modernity transformed Bengali society by rendering the more complicated representations of women in the day to day experiences of life. The female characters took the form of the admirable and the criticized, through the Babu-Bibi culture, home affairs, and the satirical mockery of urban elites all were themes through which female characters were used. They reflected a certain kind of contradiction in society, in which women were idealized as moral guardian and at the same time, analyzing women as symbols of desire or vanity.

The painting development of Kalighat can therefore be seen as following the reversal of the position of the women in 19 th century Bengal- the archetypical mythological images were replaced by the self conscious and socially conscious portraits. These paintings did not only document how Bengali culture was changing under the impression of the colonialists, it also started a premature debate about gender, class, and morality through visual art. This paper will explore



the ways in which female figures in Kalighat Pot Paintings are used to signify the shifting conceptualizations of being female, and how devotion, satire and empowerment intersect with each other. It also examines that modern patuas, especially female artists are still revisiting these stories in the present times and perpetuating the cultural and artistic tradition of this great tradition.

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF KALIGHAT PAINTING**

The Kalighat Temple in the banks of Adi Ganga at Kolkata, West Bengal is one of the most sacred temples used to worship Goddess Kali. The spiritual significance of the location can be traced back to the 15 th century, when it was already a modest hut-like shrine, yet it was officially first renovated and then expanded several times. As per the Hindu mythology, the temple is the holy place where the toe of the goddess Sati dropped, when she did self-immolation and Lord Shiva performed his cosmic dance (Tandava). Even the name of the site, Kalighat, is a combination of the word kali, the goddess of the place, and ghat (meaning bank of a river, or landing steps) due to being situated on the Hooghly River.

The legacy of the Kalighat Pot Painting had developed in the 19 th century with the presence of the temple as a pilgrimage and a cultural center. The art is of the descent of rural patuas (folk painters) of Bengal and Odisha, who were initially wandering painters that painted patachitras on scrolls, with a theme of mythological stories and religions. These artists used to move to village to village telling stories using songs (pater gaan) and rolling their painted scrolls. Over the years several patuas immigrated to Calcutta (Kolkata) the city where they found livelihood and patronage especially towards the amassing temple district where pilgrims cluster in thousands.

As they moved closer to the temple precincts, these artists modified their art to suit the needs of an urban audience bringing about the Kalighat style of painting. They also started making single frame paintings on paper or cloth (patta) instead of long scrolls- portable and cheap souvenirs to be taken by temple visitors and foreigners. The patuas used natural pigments that were based on local material:



- Basella seeds red (pui shak).
- Raw turmeric, which has been crushed and made yellow.
- Bluish flavour of butterfly pea flower.
- Green miscellaneous leaves of plants.
- Black Soot (soot on oil lamps) Black on Diaya.

These were cemented with stone apple gum (bel) to make them durable and glossy which formed the distinct earthy yet radiant palette of the Kalighat aesthetic.

Originally, the painting in Kalighat was of a devotional character, and consisted predominately of such subjects as the Hindu gods of Kali, Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Vishnu. These were spiritual ideals and religious worship and were consequently popular among pilgrims as offering at the altar or as a treasure of religion. Over the years, though, the art took a lively twist when artists started responding to the social milieu which was fast evolving and occurring in colonial Bengal.

It was the beginning of the Occidental phase, during which the patuas shifted their focus on secular, social and satirical topics. They started to depict the life in the cities, hypocrisy of the colonial population and gender relations under the impact of the West. The visual commentaries of the modernization and the moral duality in the Calcutta society took place in the form of scenes of the flamboyant babus (gentlemen) and the fashion conscious bibis (women). Scandalous paintings such as the Elokeshi affair, in which a woman commits infidelity and was killed, were the moral warnings and the feminist statement.

Cultural hybridization of Bengal by the British rule also manifested through the onset of this style. Although keeping indigenous visual idioms of flat colors, heavy outlines, rhythmic brushwork, Kalighat artists added observational realism, simplicity in space, and narrative immediacy. Their work thereby facilitated folk and modern insights, as their art started and moved to a higher stage of being, as they transformed into temple souvenirs and further to be social documents, which reflected and reflected the colonial experience in India.



At present, the Kalighat paintings are not only considered as folk artifacts but also considered as one of the early examples of proto-modern Indian art, which includes spirituality, satire, and social consciousness. The patuas of that time spawned a new iconographic language one that has remained a source of inspiration to artists of our own times investigating issues of gender and identity and cultural resistance.

### **3. REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN EARLY KALIGHAT PAINTINGS**

An initial stage of the Kalighat Pot Painting was marked with the heavy spiritual orientation with women mostly being representing creatures of divine power, purity, and virtuousness. These illustrations were not only expressions of the religion, but symbolic descriptions of the societal ideals regarding womanhood in Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A distinctive vocabulary of artists of this era bold outlines, long fluid strokes of the brush, application of flat colors, rhythmic composition, stressed the individual beauty and a looming presence of the feminine form.

Kalighat painters, who had lived at a period when patriarchy was the dominant social hierarchy of Bengal, preferred to exalt the feminine soul in the painting in honor of the women as embodiments of Shakti (cosmic energy). The repetitive image of goddesses was an aesthetic proclamation of the creative, spiritual and moral power of women. These preliminary productions appealed to the religious believers who were flocking the Kalighat Temple in immense numbers and worked to the cultural ideology that female divinity is core to the sustenance of the overall order.

#### **3.1 Mythological Representations**

The painters of Kalighat greatly relied on Hindu mythology, and depicted goddesses like Kali, Durga, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Sati and Brahmani, who were depicted as depicting different virtues and attributes of womanhood. These goddesses were turned into archetypes and, in this way, the patuas used to reflect the complex character of female identity fierce and motherly, wise and graceful, spiritual and earthly.

Kali, the goddess who was over Kalighat, was among the most popular ones. She is the very essence of devastation and generation, which is the timeless force of change. The Kalighat Kali

was painted in a colour, the jet-black, bearing the huge tongue, the fierce eyes and the flowing hair, wielding weapons in one hand, and blessing the devotees with the other. Bright contrasting colors and strong outlines imparted by the artists depict the frightening and protecting energy of the female divine image, the manifestation of the powerful paradox, the power of the feminine divine.



**Figure 3:** “Ma Kali” – Goddess of Power

(Watercolor on paper, Kalighat, 19th century)

The contrast between the sharp lines and the bright tonality of colors provide the artist with the effect of divine movement. Not only is Kali predatory in her posture and she is strikingly examining her gaze but also is undergoing the duty of the avenger of the righteous- a serious statement of female agency in the cosmic hierarchy.

Another Kalighat icon that is dominant is Durga, she is the triumphant goddess because she cuts off the head of the demon Mahishasura. In such pictures, Durga is often shown being mounted on a lion holding numerous weapons in her hands with the presence of heavenly radiance. Her image

goes beyond the religious confines and is even more of a metaphor of cultural women across cultures who show bravery, endurance, and qualities of moral standing against all odds.



**Figure 4:** “Ma Durga” – The Embodiment of Shakti  
(Kalighat style watercolor painting)

The artist uses symmetrical arrangement and decorative elaboration emphasizing immensity of Durga. The dynamic pose and the expressive eyes show the ferocity as well as maternal compassion, and the duality, which is a core of the Indian understanding of being a woman. The artists used such imagery to place women in a role not of passive beings but rather of goddess warriors who were able to uphold ethics.

Another popular subject was Saraswati a goddess of wisdom, knowledge, music, and arts. In contrast to aggressive power and efforts of depicting Kali or Durga, the image of Saraswati in Kalighat paintings is peaceful and of intellectual beauty. Patuas were employed with light tones, fine lines and the simplest color schemes to represent her calm composure now grasping a veena (string instrument) along with palm-leaf manuscripts the symbol of learning and imagination.



**Figure 5:** “Ma Saraswati” – The Goddess of Wisdom

The painting itself creates a sense of calmness and the intellect by the delicate line and subdued colors. The image of the goddess Saraswati is an expression of the respect that the artist had on knowledge as a manifestation of divinity in its purity because he held on to the cultural perception of women as the guardians of discovery and moral insight.

Equally, the Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and wealth was presented as a god who sprang coins or places on top of a lotus surrounded by elephants. Her visuals were rich, fertile and home-stedied - characteristics of the ideal woman in Bengali culture. Flat watercolor backgrounds and accurate brushwork used by the painters represented material prosperity and inner virtue symbolism.

Also, there were certain Kalighat artists who painted minor gods like Brahmani in much gentler colors and simpler poses, emphasizing motherhood and caring features - which is essential to the feminine ideal.

All these mythological images placed women in the role of the guardians of moral order and world harmony, overcoming the boundaries of social classes. The artists were creative to fulfill the theological ideals in a visual means with the goddess serving as a metaphor of religion and civilization of the female gender.



In these portraits, the artists of Kalighat not only honored femininity of deities but also re-established the role of women in art and the society. The adoration of the female body - fierce, elegant or giving - was made a unspoken yet intense proclamation of admiration and strength. It showed how deeply the idea of the perfect feminine divine had been imprinted in the artistic minds in Bengal and how art was used to conserve and transfer these ideals through generations.

#### **4. SOCIAL AND SATIRICAL REPRESENTATIONS**

With the 19<sup>th</sup> century socio-cultural and economic revolution in colonial Bengal, the Kalighat patuas reacted by altering artistic perspectives in favor of their artistic work to be more secular rather than more religious in its themes. It was also greatly shaped by the shifting urban environment in Calcutta (Kolkata) a city straddling in the traditional Indian spirit and the increasingly dominant Western modernity in British rule.

The patuas noted that together with the establishment of the colonial regime and missionary education, there arose a new breed of well-off, English-educated Bengali-origin people also known as the Babu culture. These people tended to copy the British ways, dressing and way of life and were both aspiring and morally conflicting. The patuas and everyday life continued to be the source of their inspiration, but as the social fabric started changing, they started to apply their art as a satirical prism to comment on the new fabric.

In this regard, there was a great change in the female characters paintings in the Kalighat paintings. They were no longer the objects of depiction as divine or mythological entities but as the participants and representatives of urban modernity. These women were a mixture of fascination with criticism, on the one hand they were elegant, self-assured and free but on the other they were also the symbol of moral fears and hypocrisies of the era.

Kalighat artists were able to render these tensions into their paintings by using humor, exaggeration, and irony and thus transformed these paintings into formidable instruments of social commentary. The stylized figures of women in contemporary dresses with jewelry and other Western fashion accessories were not only a sign of the beauty of women but also a more profound change in gender identity, morality, and autonomy in society.

#### 4.1 The “Babu-Bibi” Culture

The most familiar topic of the secular Kalighat literature is the popular motif of Babu-Bibi which satirically depicts the new elite city of Calcutta. The babu, a pompous, Westernized man, and the bibi, a fashion-conscious, social woman, were both symbols of the changing social desires of the middle-class of Bengal.

In the paintings, you can find the babu either fussing over his hair, hookah-smoking or looking at himself in a mirror, the bibi beside him, gracefully dressed in a sari worn in an European fashion, in Victorian jewelry, shoes, hair ornaments. With these kinds of representations, the patuas effectively parodied the vanity, moral decadency, and cultural mimicry of the West-educated Bengali elite.



**Figure 6:** “Babu-Bibi on Auto” – Satirical Depiction of Colonial Modernity Painted by Bhaskar Chitrakar

(Image source: necessitystore.in)

The new urban couple is the symbol of modern excess, which is caricatured in this painting. The woman, sitting in a graceful position next to her husband, is well-confident and socially acceptable,



which is a complete contrast to the isolated domesticity that women had to imagine in the past. Nevertheless, under the beauty, there is satire: the unnatural poses of the couple combined with exaggerated gestures of fashion highlight the nonsense of following a colonial culture blindly.

Of great importance to Babu-Bibi series is the depiction of gender roles in the state of transition. On the one hand, it seems that in this way the author has satirized the vein nature of women, but on the other hand, they are also given their agency by these paintings. Previously locked up in the domestic, the bibi has now become visible, self-conscious and demonstrative, claiming some sort of empowerment in a male dominated social structure. By so doing, the Kalighat art is a criticism as well as a glorification of the modern womanhood.

#### **4.2 The “Elokeshi” Narrative**

The other strong theme that came out during this era is the Elokeshi narrative that was based on a scandal that happened in actual life that became the subject of imagination among the people of colonial Bengal. The novel of Elokeshi, or the woman with undress hair, is based on a young wife who had an extramarital affair with a temple priest, and this is what makes her husband kill her in anger. This tragic event, which was greatly covered in newspapers at that period, gained moral discussion and social interest.

The kalighat patuas grabbed the opportunity presented by this story and created paintings that condemned the woman and sympathized them. On the one hand, some of her artworks depicted her downfall as a lesson against the moral offence, on the other hand, some of her works were rather subtle criticisms of the patriarchal judgment upon her. Such a recurring motif as her unkempt hair (elokeshi) had more than sin or shame to it--it was rebellion, sensuality, the crude strength of feminine emotion.



**Figure 7:** “Elokeshi” – The Woman with Disheveled Hair

In this classicized image, the artist employs sweeping strokes of the brush to underline the wild hair of Elokeshi - a symbol of her emotional and physical freedom. Her emotional eyes, which are usually painted with a blend of vulnerability and defiance, are something one can sympathize rather than condemn. The simplicity of the background and the visibility of her figure contribute to the fact that the narrative tension increases directing the viewer to answer questions about desire, morality, and justice.

The Elokeshi theme has been reinterpreted by artists such as Anwar Chitrakar and Uttam Chitrakar in the modern era, and they have used it to speak against the ongoing sufferings of women in the face of societal reproach and oppression of their gender. By doing it, they associate the tradition of historical Kalighat to the contemporary feminist discourse, which, in turn, makes the story of Elokeshi not only relevant but also revolutionary.



## **5. MODERN TRANSFORMATION: WOMEN AND CONTEMPORARY PATUAS**

The Kalighat Pat culture has gone through an impressive revolt in recent decades taking on a fresh life form in which it started as a religious and satirical practice and evolved into an active socio-political practice. The patuas with the descendants of the ancient scroll painters of Bengal have always served to suit the modern realities and had the art form not only served as a carrier of the cultural continuity but also as the medium of the contemporary discourse.

Having become more digitalized and global, these artists have now been able to extend their sights of temple fairs and local exhibitions. Patuas have gained a broader national and international presence as well as economic autonomy through the application of digital platforms, participation in international art festivals, and in partnership with cultural organizations. Kalighat painting, which previously focused solely on the temple, was now developed as an informative tradition of narrative form that covered issues of green sustainability, social equality, pandemics, and women empowerment.

Their social consciousness is depicted by the activeness of the patuas in dealing with the existing issues. They are no longer confined to mythological or colonial satire, but their paintings now bring to question burning issues of climate change, gender discrimination, communal harmony and societal health. Such a shift to secularism and localism to globalism marks the spirit of resilience and flexibility of the folk traditions in Bengal with the changing times.

### **5.1 The Role of Pingla Village: A Living Heritage**

A major hub of this renaissance is the small village of Pingla in Medinipur district of West Bengal commonly referred to as the Patachitra Village. Generations of patuas whose ancestors laid down the ancient tradition still continue to maintain and develop this tradition in this settlement. All members of the community, whether men, women, or even children, of Pingla are occupied with the craft of painting, singing pater gaan (story-telling folk songs) and the impartation of the craft by word and example.

Within the recent years women of the Pingla village were the strong keepers of this heritage and the creators of innovations. Historically, the art has been male dominated although currently

women artists have taken center stage in the continuation and repositioning of the traditions of the Kalighat and Patachitra. These artists are not just artists, they are also business people who engage in national and international art shows, crafts and online art auctions.



**Figure 8:** Women Artists of Pingla Village, Medinipur

This photo embodies the revolutionary spirit of the female artists and painters of Pingla who create in open land and in community places. Their cooperative character represents culture and modernity alike, art as a means of livelihood, education and empowerment.

As part of the field trip, one can observe that the women of Pingla have incorporated educational narrative into their art. They portray women, their health, literacy, environmental conservation, and social cohesion in their scrolls and panels, and visual art has been changed to become an awareness tool. Their skills of intertwining the traditional aesthetics of patachitra with an array of the contemporary stories have won their admiration across the globe.

## 5.2 Contemporary Masters of Kalighat Tradition

A number of modern patuas have been instrumental in preserving the Kalighat tradition but adding new ornamentation in regard to content and style.

Bhashakar Chitrakar was brought up in and born in Kalighat, in a way that lacked a boundary between tradition and innovation. In his works he reexamines the classical idiom of Kalighat in his new color techniques and compositions but does not change the typical flat viewpoint, rhythmic line or the cultural narration. His women characters, that are frequently done with dignity and grace, bring out the role of women and their emotional strength in contemporary society.

Other great artists in Medinipur are Bahadur Chitrakar who has gained national appreciation due to his contribution to the Patachitra and the painting inspired by Kalighat. His panorama of artistic expression includes mythological motifs to modern society in most cases with a mixture of classic iconography and international influences. He has also experimented with motifs of Egyptian style and modern designs still keeping the indigenous methods of using cloths to paint and using natural dyes. His award winning works are now in the museums of India.



**Figure 9:** “Bahadur Chitrakar at Work”



An expert in innovation in tradition, the paintings of Bahadur testify to the development of folk art according to the world aesthetics. His works usually portrayed social conscious themes with goddesses feature, retaining the cultural traditions yet to the appeal of the contemporary tastes.

Rupsona Chitrakar, the daughter of Bahadur, is the new generation of women patuas that are defining the identity of Indian folk art in the 21 st century. Her paintings are amalgamations of classic Kalighat line-work with modern times social storylines. It is worth mentioning that her COVID-19 pandemic series earned her attention due to the visual education of the rural community regarding hygiene, vaccination, and unity during the lockdowns. Rupsona has made her contribution to show how folk art can not only be a means of expression but also a means of social activism and communication.

### **5.3 The Digital Turn and Global Outreach**

The digital platform and social media are other crucial tools of visibility and survival that have been adopted by modern patuas. They have placed themselves as cultural ambassadors of the living legacy of Bengal through displaying their works in online galleries, taking part in international virtual exhibitions and through their activities with NGOs and cultural agencies. Organizations like Art for Life, Banglanatak.com and Rural Craft Hubs have enabled these artisans to be exposed all over the world and remain authentic at the same time.

This increased online presence has led to benefits by the women artists, especially as they utilize the digital space to sell their art themselves and to identify buyers, scholars and museums. This shift represents not only a change in medium but also a change in agency as traditional female artists who at one time relied on middlemen have now gone forward and are now self-representing, negotiating their worth, and creating and building their own narratives.

### **5.4 Art as Empowerment and Continuity**

The changes which Kalighat painting has gone through to the modern times show how the art form based on spiritualism and social parody could remain strong as a source of empowerment and education. The women patuas of Pingla with their collective work are demonstrative of resilience



and flexibility. The same spirit, their paintings, dedicated to the goddesses of classical Art or dedicated to women of the present-day world, uphold the power, creativity, and pride of the feminine spirit.

The fact that folk art is a living dialogue of the past and the present is evidenced by the fact that the tradition was continued even after the 21st century. The combination of the traditional methods with the international issues and feministic stories have made the Kalighat and Patachitra heritage not only eternal but also not once a part of the history.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

Potential intersection between art, society, and gender consciousness in Kalighat Pot Paintings is very strong with the image of female figures. The history of this form of art is reflected in the shift of the ancient mythological images of the divine goddesses to the modern, satirical image of the urban woman elite under colonial modernity. The visual poetry of the creative art of the Kalighat formative times depicted the spiritual ideal of womanhood wherein goddesses like Kali, Durga and Saraswati were viewed as aspects of moral virtuosity, creative activity and power. But with the rise in influence of the colonial and urbanization, the role of women in art started to become more complex and more humanized, causing less of a representation of virtue and more of an agency, vanity and self-expression. In a humorous and ironic way, the patuas revealed the hypocrisy of the modern Bengali society, and women in particular who were at the same time treated as divinity and consigned to a certain degree of patriarchal standards. In this way, Kalighat paintings transcended the status of a devotional image; instead, it became a social statement on gender relations and cultural transformation, which connects the sublime and the secular in terms of visual satire.

The tradition still flourishes in the contemporary period due to the activity of modern patuas, especially of female artists in the village of Pingla, and in the province of Kalighat. They have transformed their traditional craft in their descent as a tool of empowerment, education, and social awareness and applied it to discuss aspects such as gender equality, environmentalism, and health in the people. Their interactions online and their representation in global exhibitions are an indication of how indigenous art can be modified to fit the new conditions without losing its



culture. The fact that women currently portrayed in the Kalighat paintings become the creators and the narrators of their own shows is the significant cultural adjustment; the adjustment that proves that female power will persist through the years. The changing face of women, as depicted in the Kalighat art, is, in a way, the measure of the artistic tradition of Bengal, as well as the long-lasting resistance and strength of feminine spirit under the influence of social change.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The study of the female representation of the Kalighat Pot Paintings shows an in depth story of the culture development, innovation in art and gender consciousness in the Kirala culture of Bengal. Since the 19th century, the Kalighat art has moved beyond image of the divine goddesses in their forms Kali, Durga, Saraswati and Lakshmi, which represented power and virtue and moral authority, to include representations of worldly women through satirical and socially critical themes, such as the BabuBibi culture, and the elokeshi episode which attacked hypocrisy, gender norms, and colonial modernity. These changes spell an important change of reverence to realism where women became not just the passive symbols of admiration but agents and critics. Contemporary patuas, especially the female makers of Pingla and Kalighat, have revived the art form in the modern period combining old motives with new themes such as environmental consciousness, community health, digital literacy and the empowerment of women. They have transformed Kalighat art by combining the folk aesthetic with international platforms as well as taking the feminist viewpoint turning the art more of an archive into a living discourse on gender and society. In such a way, the process of women becoming the objects of depiction to empowered producers becomes the embodiment of the spirit of the unrelenting tenacity, imagination, and change that keeps the tradition of Kalighat alive as a linking point between the holy past and the socially-conscious present.



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### **Author's Declaration**

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