Black Skin and White Brain: Exploring Internalized Racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract: This paper intends to show Toni Morrison's way of addressing racial supremacy and its hegemonic influence on the Black Americans, especially black women, in The Bluest Eye. Tn her novel, the black characters become subjects to a set of internalized racist ideas which lead them to a cycle of self-victimization and double oppression. The female characters conform to the white-defined idea of beauty and try to possess an otherness by denying and hating their own blackness. The protagonist, an eleven-year-old little black girl Pecola Breedlove aspires for a pair of blue eyes to reach the standard bar of beauty. She ultimately loses her sanity and steps into the path of madness. This paper aims at critically and textually examining the idea of internalized racism by focusing mainly on Pecola's traumatized journey as well as the vulnerable and fragile existence of other black characters in The Bluest Eye.

Keyword: Internalized racism, Toni Morrison, Black American, madness, *The Bluest Eye*.

Racism, as defined by Audre Lorde in "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", is "the belief in the inherent superiority of one race over the others and thereby the right to dominance" (Lorde 855). It began in America as soon as the white masters imported the African slaves as laborers to work on plantation farms in the early 16th century. From then on, the history of America stood on the oppressed and silenced ground of the unspoken and unheard history of the African Americans. The Black Americans were reduced from the position of humans to money-making bodies. They were trapped in the significantly traumatic conditions of Racism, Sexism and Classicism. In a racialized, sexualized and inequal society in which the dominant class produces and spreads white ideologies among its members, soon "the black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behavior will be the other, for the other alone can give him worth" (Fanon, 467). During such psychological and ideological turmoil suffered by the Black community, African American literature

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tremendously helped the subaltern to gain their voices and make them speak of their rightful existence. Among the powerful contemporary Black iconoclasts, Toni Morrison is a noteworthy and prolific name who boldly and explicitly addressed the multifaceted oppressions and double marginalization faced especially by the Black women since the black working-class women are the most oppressed group in American society. Their stories have been marginalized from the mainstream sphere of American literature which Morrison unapologetically brings into light in front of her global readers' community.

Toni Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (Morrison 1005). As a writer, she was conscious of and concerned with the double marginalization of the Black women, especially adolescent girls. White female writers also addressed their feminine issues in a patriarchal system. However, as bell hooks comments in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, "White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politics, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status in the racist, sexist and capitalist society" (hooks 4). In this regard, Toni Morrison writes about the marginalized oppression by aiming at bringing these issues to the center.

Morrison started bringing her peripheral existence to the mainstream, because "it was deeper, more complex, it had a tension, it related to the center but wasn't the center" (Morrison quoted in Pal 2439). The author was more into reading than writing. Therefore, she planned to write a book which she always wanted to read, but never existed in the literary field. Being a single mother of two sons and a full-time editor in Random House, Morrison managed to wake up at 4 am every day and worked on a book in which she wanted to focus on "how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (Morrison quoted in Hoby 2015). This is how, by exploring the meaning of blackness in a white male dominated society, her first novel *The Bluest Eye* came into being in 1970.

Set in Toni Morrison's birthplace Lorain, Ohio, her first novel *The Bluest Eye* exposes the social and psychological defilement of the eleven-year-old adolescent Black female protagonist Pecola Breedlove who is peripheral and invisible to the mainstream white world and thus is neglected and physically,

psychologically and sexually tortured by the members of her own community. The tragic aspect of her life is as ironic as her name. She is marginalized by her own people; and she cannot breed love, but hatred for herself which destroys her mental sanity by the end of the story. Morrison, as a very composed and unbiased writer, "does not limit herself to an indictment of the dominant white class only. She turns her gaze to the problems within the Black community, as she relentlessly exposes intra-racism, male brutalities, female sexual abuse and incest" (Pal 2441). For all the sexually explicit narration and detailed graphic presentation, this book was banned by several schools. Nonetheless, later the book received wide appreciation and earned an important place in the academia. The author mentions it in the Afterwards of the book which was added to the main text in 1993, "it has taken twenty-five years to gain for her the respectful publication this edition is" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 172). Until then, the rejection and dejection faced by the author and the text itself were historically rooted in racism, sexism and classism.

bell hooks writes, in her book *Ain't a Woman?*, "white people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, though sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third and finally black women last" (hooks 52). Therefore, Black women are the victim of double marginalization. In the names of race, gender and class, black women become the victim of triple oppression. hooks goes on clarifying the position of black women in the white-dominated society in another book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. She states, "Black women are in an unusual position in the society, for not only are we collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but our overall social status is lower than that of any other group" (hooks 14). Like hooks, Morrison is also aware of the marginalized and peripheral position of black women, and so she writes to make the invisible visible and the unheard heard.

Toni Morrison herself was an educator and thus knew the importance of educational institutions as a means to transmitting ideologies among young learners. She begins the book with a prologue which is a typical "Dick-and-Jane" school primer. The prologue has three paragraphs with similar language, but different syntactic formation. In the first paragraph, Morrison introduces a picture-perfect family consisting of a strong father, a good mother, a playful sibling and their domestic pets. The narration is "clear, straight, rendered in Standard English, correct and white" (Klotman 123) which creates a false consciousness in the black readers. The author deciphered the structural and institutional racial politics which is interpellated through children literature. Brynn F. Welch comments,

"Because of the long shadow of racial segregation, many Americans will learn about people of other races from second-hand representations. Consequently, the second-hand representations are powerful, especially for young children, because these early representations can shape lasting impressions" (Welch 371). Thomas H. Fick writes that the epigraph of Dick-and-Jane story "serves as an ironic commentary on the MacTeer's and Breedlove's family" and that it represents "the 1940s racist America" (12). However, the orderly presentation of the story seems very simple and innocent.

In the second paragraph, there is no punctuation mark. The words boundlessly flow, and the meaning gets complicated. Still, one can read through the lines and tries to make sense out of it. The last paragraph graphically looks extremely tumultuous that gives "a chaotic, fragmented and incomprehensible image of this happy family" (Mahaffey 158). Morrison repeats the description thrice and each time intentionally and gradually removes "grammatical indications of normalcy like punctuation, capitalization and even spacing between words" (Mahaffey 158) which metaphorically destroys the normalcy of the family structure. Whether directly or by implications, Morrison "uses this technique to juxtapose the fictions of the white educational process with the realities of life for many black children" (Klotman 123).

The complicated textual representation of the story prepares the groundwork of the "idea that the childhood fable does not exist within the context of an adolescent imagination of what growing up should be like but rather within an adolescent's imagination negatively influenced by an adult world of racial, gender and class politics" (Mahaffey 158). Moreover, even in the first paragraph in which the story is syntactically well-constructed, there are loopholes and scratches in the underlying structure of the happy family picture. Jane has a lovely family, but she is disjointed and all alone. She finally has a friend with whom she plays. Morrison foreshadows the final scene of Pecola's story. Pecola is left alone—cursed, disconnected, grabbled—with her only imaginative friend who makes her feel visible in the white dominated adult world.

Besides an omniscient third person narrator, most parts of the story in *The Bluest Eye* are narrated by Claudia Mcteer, a nine-year-old black little girl who is too young to be hegemonized with the mainstream and dominant idea of beauty. Besides, she is well aware of her identity as a young, black and female member in an "unnurturing adult world" (Mahaffey 163). She sees the prominent, yet absurd line that separates the young from the adult. She

notices that "adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information" (5). There is a significant communication gap between the youngers and the adults of the same community. Nonetheless, little Claudia resists against white supremacy in her own way by dismantling the white barbie doll which she receives from her parents as a Christmas gift. She dismembers and tears off the doll just to see "what it was that all the world said lovable" (21). The doll symbolizes "the artificiality found in the construction of not only racial but also gender and class identities" (Mahaffey 164). In the name of the white dolls, the white masters manipulate the black young girls and ideologically make them accept the hegemonic white idea of beauty. Morrison writes that the idea of physical beauty is "probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought" (95). Not only Pecola but also other female characters of the novel fall in the trap of Racism and become subjects to a set of internalized racist ideas. From the very beginning of their lives, they have accepted the idea and also internalized the concept of beauty by submitting themselves as the inferior and dominated deformed creatures. They tend to deny their blackness to become the other that is conventionally beautiful, accepted and celebrated in society. Here, internalized racism works as a tool to subjugate these fragile and fragmented minds.

The Bluest Eye is set in Ohio in America where the American media "sells a white way of life to its multi-ethnic society. Through golden haired dolls, Mary Jane candies and an enormous range of cosmetics promising white skin and blond hair, the dominant group sells an ideal of beauty" (Pal 2440). Beauty, as defined by Tracey Owens Patton, is "a subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class" (25). Patton also claims that "beauty is subject to the social condition of racism, sexism and classicism" (30). Pecola, as a black adolescent poor girl, "had not failed to be aware of America's standard of beauty nor the fact that she was not included in it" (Wallace quoted in Patton 26). She clearly understands that she is not accepted by the people of her own community due to her multifaced assigned social identities which are poor, black and female. Therefore, she internalizes white standards of beauty with a view to getting accepted and loved by her own people. She knows that she cannot change her skin color, and so "each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (35). However, as Ruth Rosenberg points out, "Nothing can be more damaging to a dark-skinned girl than such valorization of what she could not be" (Rosenberg 439).

When Pecola meets Claudia and Frieda, she is homeless. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, sets fire to their house for which the entire family falls apart, which Claudia calls "outdoors" (11). Cholly is in jail and Pecola with the Mcteer family where she finds friends in the sisters. The Macteer family

knows that Pecola has no place to go. Even the child narrator knows that "there is a difference between being put out and being put outdoors. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go" (11). Knowing Pecola's "minority in both caste and class" (11), they accept her. As they start living and playing with Pecola, they understand her psychological construction better.

Claudia, unlike Frieda, is not hegemonized by the white concept of beauty. However, the adult world around her gives her an exposure to the white standard of beauty in every possible way. They present her "big, blue-eyed baby doll" because "the doll represented what they thought was my (Claudia's) fondest wish" (13). The child narrator critically says, "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasure" (14). All these peripheral insignificant young black girls live in a world where the adults of their own community embrace the idea of racism. Therefore, Pecola wants to have a blue pair of eyes for social acceptance. She, like Frieda, is innocently fond of the "blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup" (12) and "took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (16). She, while drinking milk, drinks away the whiteness and imagines herself to be white like the milk itself or at least like the printed photo of the heartthrob Shirley Temple who "to the girls, represents everything that society finds adorable, everything worth having" (Portales 497). Klotman comments that "Whether one learns acceptability from the formal educational experience or the cultural symbols, the effect is the same: self-hatred.... In yearning to be Shirley Temple, Pecola denies her own" (Klotman 124). This is how Shirley Temple becomes a benchmark of beauty for the adolescent black girls.

Not just Shirley Temple, there is another white brand that sells candy and the idea of beauty together. The brand is every young girl's favorite Mary Jane candy. In the store, a "fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss" (36) marginalizes Pecola's existence due to the internal racism and "her blackness" (37). Pecola spends three pennies to buy nine Mary Jane candies. As soon as she looks at each "pale yellow wrapper" (38), she finds "a picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean

comfort" (38). Pecola looks at her pretty eyes and then she devours the sweetness in it. While swallowing the candies, she tries to guzzle the whiteness of Mary Jane as "to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (38). She fetishes Mary Jane and derives a sexual pleasure from it as "three pennies had brought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane" (38). Morrison uses homophonic pun in "pennis" to show Pecola's desperation to be accepted and loved. It also foretells the story of Pecola's distasteful encounter with her own father's violent genital tool.

The eleven-year-old little black girl Pecola internalizes white concept of beauty because the racial world around her never lets her feel beautiful. The previously mentioned incident takes place between Pecola and a white storekeeper. White masters, historically, treat the black community as subalterns. However, Pecola is harassed by three young black boys outside of her school. This is the brutal aspect of internalized racism when people from the same community push someone towards the margin. Three adolescent boys tease Pecola saying "Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleep nekked. Black e mo" (50). Ironically, "they themselves were black" (50). These adolescent boys do not harass Maureen Peel due to her light-colored skin. These black girls and boys feel subjugated because Maureen "enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly" (48). Claudia and Frieda feel "bemused, irritated and fascinated by her" (48) and eventually discount "six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (48) as to diametrically oppose their racial identity. Maureen screams at them saying, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I am cute" (56). Her humiliating words make the young narrator Claudia raise questions on the ruling class ideology of the world around her. She thinks to herself, "Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and friends" (57). Despite the abhorrence of the whole world, Frieda and Claudia are "still in love with ourselves then. We were comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness" (57). Frieda intermittently internalizes white ideology, but Claudia seems to be a rebel.

Although "Claudia survives all the forces" (Portales 498), Pecola "growing up in a black community that idolizes everything Maureen represents, believes the only resources left for her is to first accept community's racial preference and then withdraw into an isolated community of the self" (Mahaffey 160). Thus, Pecola prays to God for a pair of blue eyes as she steps into the horizon of self-denial.

Nevertheless, Pecola's self-denial starts from the very beginning of her life. Her mother Pauline Breedlove who is also hegemonized by the racial

supremacy of the White, declares Pecola to be an "ugly baby" (97) as soon as she is born. During the labor, she is victimized by the nurses who literally dehumanize Pauline's existence. She feels quashed when the doctor stereotypes black women saying, "they deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses" (97). Pauline asserts, "I hurt just like them white women. Just 'cause I wasn't whooping and hollering before didn't mean I wasn't feeling pain" (97). The reason behind Pauline's pain, however, is deeply rooted in the Hult of racism. She is shaped by others. She finds her newborn daughter Pecola to be "a cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, Lord, she was ugly" (98). Pauline's declaration makes her believe that Pecola is ugly and does not deserve attention, care, love and acceptance. Therefore, she turns to the white Fisher's family where she works as a servant and takes herself off from her domestic territory where she has a drunken poor husband, a black boy and an "ugly" black daughter.

Pauline accepts white supremacy by accepting the name "Polly" given by her white master. She retains "this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children" (100). Pauline's double consciousness is a result of the racism she has been facing and struggling with since her childhood. She herself is not loved by her parents. When she meets Cholly, they fall in love and soon get married. After marriage, they move to Ohio where she meets a good number of white people in the neighborhood. The more she observes them the less she feels positive about herself. She develops a sense of nonexistence. She desires to dress like the white women in order to belong to their community. Therefore, she seeks a job as a maid servant at a white household. Living a life full of dejection, unacceptance and racial prejudice, Pauline becomes a distorted woman who hates her community due to the blackness of their skin color.

Even Cholly Breedlove, a "dangerously free" man (125), goes through racial oppression during his adolescence. While making love to Derlene behind the bushes, they are caught by three white men who make Cholly forcefully have an intercourse with Derlene in front of their mocking, luscious and aggressive eyes. Morrison's use of language echoes the long history of racism. The white men call Cholly "nigger". They say, "get on wid it. An make it good, nigger, make it good" (116). The entire pleasure of having intercourse with a loved one quickly disappears. Cholly rages with hatred and "with a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear" (116). At this moment, Cholly abominates Derlene. This hatred comes from his own failure and disgrace. He "never considers directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small,

black and helpless" (118). Cholly accepts his racial inferiority. Thus, his action with Derlene turns out to be sexualized hostility.

Audre Lorde writes, "sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society but implemented within our black communities as well" (857). Cholly's treatment towards Derlene and his own daughter Pecola shows the internal racism growing in him since his childhood. His past brutal experience with Derlene has been haunting him for years. He looks at Pecola and feels uncomfortable and then his "discomfort dissolves into pleasure" (127). Such perversion occupies his mind due to his reaction to her "young, helpless and hopeless presence" (127). Then he rapes her and releases his aggression the way he did with Derlene. While raping his eleven-year-old daughter, he visualizes both Pauline and Derlene since Derlene was also at Pecola's age when Cholly had intercourse with her. When he was raping Derlene in front of the white men, he "wished he could do it—hard, long and painfully, he hated her so much" (116). Now that he rapes Pecola, "he wanted to fuck her—tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear" (128). Therefore, he does it the way he wanted to do with Derlene—aggressively. Audre Lorde comments that "rape is not aggressive sexuality; it is sexualized aggression" (858). While raping Pecola, he shows his sexualized aggression, but gives it a name of love.

The novel begins with a curiosity of the young minds who look for the answer to the question, "how do you get someone to love you?" (23). At the end of the novel, the hegemonic idea of internalized racism contaminates the concept of love. The narrator says, "love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved" (163). Cholly Breedlove is "free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt" (124). He feels aggressive in Derlene's case and then tender in Pecola's case. However, in both cases, he acts dangerously, because "Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him" (126).

Geraldine and Soaphead Church are two other black characters who constantly go out of their primal identities by disregarding their blackness. Geraldine has a negative impression on black children for which she does not let her son play with them. She even constantly propagandizes white ideology to her son saying, "colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (67). This binary idea makes her son Junior a racist as he mistreats Pecola after inviting her at his place. He throws his black cat on

Pecola's lap and tries to make her feel uncomfortable. However, Pecola loves the cat finding blue eyes on its face. She sees a probability of her wish to be fulfilled by having blue eyes on her black face. When Geraldine returns, she finds Pecola with the sickening cat and gets annoyed at her. She curses Pecola saying, "you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (72). Gerladine's disgrace towards Pecola and her own community reveals her hegemonized racial perspectives. Her treatment of Pecola "reveals her intense, adult self-interest of class concerns" (Mahaffey 163). Geraldine is unconsciously made a victim of racism which she internalizes, but never notices voluntarily.

Soaphead Church, a self-claimed "Reader, Adviser and Interpreter of Dreams" (131), has been raised up in a "family proud of its academic accomplishment and its mixed blood" (132) that indoctrinates him with white supremacist ideology. He is taught De Gobineau's hypothesis that "all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it" (133). The church accepts this racial superiority and thus hates the black community. Even for fulfilling his sexual desires, he prefers young girls, because "his patronage of little girls smacked of innocence and was associated in his mind with cleanliness" (132). That is to say, he considers young boys and black adults filthy and dirty. However, when he sees Pecola, he finds "an ugly little girl asking for beauty" (138). He truly wishes Pecola to have a pair of blue eyes because deep inside he also knows that blue eyes will guarantee her the ever-anticipated acceptance in her community. Morrison writes, "A little black girl who wanted to rise out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power" (138). With all his racial prejudices, Church then taints Pecola's thought process and makes her believe that she has a pair of blue eyes now.

Here begins the most vulnerable episode. Pecola happens to live the last five lines of the prologue—"Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play" (1). She imagines an invisible friend who assures Pecola that she has blue eyes now which are "much bluer than Joanna's. Much bluer than Michelena's" (155). Pecola's sense of possessing blue eyes and an invisible friend metaphorically empowers her by giving her voice back to reassert her own existence in the black community. From the conversation between Pecola and her friend, it is clear that Pecola is raped by Cholly again. Susan Brownmiller writes in her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, "for if the first rape was unexpected battle founded on the first woman's refusal, the second rape was indubitable planned" (Brownmiller 14). Cholly rapes the second time because Pecola remains silent after the first attempt. Pecola is silent even in

the second venture too. She reveals it to her friend and hides it from her mother because "no use of telling her when she wouldn't believe" her (158). Rape, like race, becomes a tool of oppression. Mahaffey argues that "Pecola does not have a voice because she has not been taught the language of resistance" (163). In a racialized, sexualized and inequal adult world, Pecola has to deal with her identity that has three of the subaltern features: black, poor and female.

Claudia Mcteer is Pecola's reversed personality who vocally critiques the racialized adult world by refusing to accept and nourish the white baby dolls. She wants to dismantle it in order to look for what is all embraced and accepted by the whole world. When Pecola gets pregnant by her father, Claudia and Frieda feel pity for Pecola and her unborn baby as they overhear the "secret, terrible and awful story" (148). When everyone blames Pecola and her family saying, "she carry some of the blame" (149), the Mcteer sisters pray for the baby to live. Nonetheless, when Pecola loses her baby and becomes insane, these sisters turn their faces off from her saying, "She, however, stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end" (163). The nine-year-old narrator Claudia, nevertheless, still blames the entire society for Pecola's permanent damage as the novel ends: "it's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (164).

Pecola, like *The Bluest Eye* during the early years of its publication, is, as the author herself mentions in the Afterwards, "dismissed, trivialized, misread" (172). Morrison writes about the traumatic and inhumane experience of a coming-of-age black girl. The readers feel an emotional response to the story. However, as Jerome Bump writes, "A novel can elicit pity from us, but, as we have seen, that may not be the most useful emotional response to racism" (Bump 157). From feeling grief and pity for Pecola, the journey towards dismantling the racialized system of oppression begins. Morrison shows that the problematics in a black girl asking for beauty deeply lies in the brutal and longstanding history of racism. *The Bluest Eye* requires to be read and understood historically. Throughout the novel, the blackness and black characters are seen to be stereotypically associated with ugliness, viciousness and fragility. They suffer from existential crisis because the white masters have been marginalizing and silencing them for long. Thus, they internalize whiteness and want to become the "other" by hating and getting rid of the "self". Morrison critically and flamboyantly shows how damaging the concept of racism is when it creates binary between the human races. She also shows how internalization of the otherness can lead a person to madness. This novel is a very important literary piece which reveals sociocultural aspects of America and the entire world.

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