



Apprehending the Contemporary Indian Society through the Lens of Social Realism- A Study of Shashi Tharoor's 'The Five Dollar Smile And Other Stories'

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Abstract— *The emergence of Indian novels in English was not purely a literary phenomenon. Rather than a historical romance, it began as a novel of social realism. Social realism is the faithful representation of reality. It limns familiar real-life places and mundane, everyday stories of ordinary people, primarily society's middle and lower classes. The depiction of different shades of modern Indian life is one of the principal sources of appeal in Shashi Tharoor's fiction and non-fiction works. Tharoor's writings predominantly deal with India's historical, social or political aspects, and the characters are the central focus of the narratives. Tharoor's *The Five Dollar Smile And Other Stories* (1990) is a collection of short stories and a farce based on his childhood and early adulthood anecdotes. The stories reflect themes like love, hate, loss, deceit, and many other social evils. The paper attempts to explore and critically analyse Tharoor's collection of short stories in the light of social realism in modern India from an adolescent's perception.*

Keywords— *Social Realism, Modern Indian English Literature, Shashi Tharoor, The Five Dollar Smile, Short Stories*

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is a document of contemporary happenings and conscious actions of social dissemination written by someone to read and convey something to someone else. It emerges from life and records dreams and ideas, motives and passions, failures and disappointments, hopes and aspirations, experiences and observations etc. Therefore, literature is believed to represent the highest forms of development of human sensibility and serves as a bridge, linking the writer with society not merely at a specific time frame but somewhat beyond the time and social divisions. As Sánchez Adolfo Vázquez in *Art and Society* writes-

The relationship between art and society cannot be ignored ... art itself is a social

phenomenon...because the artist... is a social being... his work, however deeply marked by his primary experience... however unique or unrepeatable its objectification or form might be, it is always a bridge, a connecting link between the artist and other members of the society... because a work of art affects people- it contributes to the reaffirmation or devaluation of their ideas, goals or values... and is a social force which has its

emotional or ideological weight, shakes or moves people. Nobody remains the same after having been deeply moved by a true work of art. (Vázquez 112-113)

Every generation is born with its own set of aspirations, logics, fears, and tensions that inspire the writers, who then produce a responsive work to societal changes. For instance- Indian English fiction, right from its beginning, has been responsive to the changes in society. The Indian English Novel's emergence was not an absolutely literary phenomenon; rather, it began as a novel of social realism. The solid fascination of Indian writers towards the changing scenarios of the country and country life motivated them to portray the Indian people with a rustic background. Thus, they have explored the various dimensions of the relationship between man and Indian society over all these years.

"... contemporary novels are mirrors of the age... a mirror that reflects not merely the external features of the age but also its inner face, its nervous system, the coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it." (Allen 16)

Over recent years, writers have addressed the prevalent social issues in several outstanding works of Indian literature under realism. For instance, at the primitive stage, the fictional works of Indian writers such as Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayana, and Raja Rao were mainly concerned with the oppressed society, the Indian middle-class life, and the reflection of tradition, culture, and ethos of India. Then, writers like Kamala Markandaya, Arundhati Roy, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Khushwant Singh, Ruth Pawar Jhabvala, Chaman Nahal, Nayantara Sahgal, Arun Joshi, Shashi Tharoor etc., wrote about the themes related to the social realities post-Indian independence such as nation-building, partition effects, patriotism, social ills, etc.

II. REALISM

Literature is like a canvas- a combination of thousands of colours paints a beautiful piece of art, with each colour important in that masterpiece. Similarly, different narrative techniques in literature add to the quality of a literary work. Among the narrative techniques, realism

is an approach that presents life as it is, omitting nothing- ugly or painful and without any idealisation or romantic subjectivity. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o remarks, "... literature cannot escape from the class power structures... a writer... whether or not he is aware, his works reflect on aspects of the ideological struggles in society." (Thiong'o 6)

Literary realism is a slice of the Realist Art Movement that emerged in 19th-century France and lasted until the early 20th century. The realist writers published their works on realism in novels or serial form in periodicals. It began as a reaction to 18th-century works of Romanticism that were considered way too exotic and had lost touch with actuality. One of the earliest realist writers, Honoré de Balzac, infused his works with complex characters and detailed observations about the world. On the other hand, Gustave Flaubert initiated realist narration as we know it today.

Ambrose Bierce, in his satirical Devil's Dictionary, defines realism as "The art of depicting nature as seen by the toads... the charm suffusing a landscape painted by a mole or a story written by a measuring worm." (Bierce 36) Despite its satirical intent, this definition is quite insightful when assessing a work of literary realism, where a writer transfers one's own identity or real-life experiences to some of the characters. Realism, therefore, is chiefly concerned with the ordinary day-to-day life among the middle and lower classes, as Henry James describes it- "...the drama of a broken teacup", where a character is the result of social factors, and environment is an integral part of the dramatic complications in literature.

The novel is a fiction. The fiction and realism are strikingly opposite concepts that cannot exist together; if they do, it is not easy to separate them. However, several classic elements of literary realism help distinguish it from other literary works- First, it renders reality closely and in complete detail. Second, there's a selective representation of reality with a great deal of attention on verisimilitude. Third, the character is more important than the action and story; complex ethical choices made by characters are often the subject. Characters develop in their real complexity of temperament and motive; they are inexplicable to their past, to their social class, to each other and nature. Fourth, class is essential; realism works traditionally serve the aspirations and the interests of an insurgent middle class. Fifth, events are usually plausible and avoid the dramatic or sensational elements of naturalistic novels and romances. Sixth, language is natural vernacular, not heightened or poetic; tone could be satiric, comic, or matter-of-fact. And lastly, interior or psychological realism is present in a variant form.

Therefore, a realistic novel is not merely for the sake of art but the sake of an individual's life or society.

Presented by a typical character -as one finds in R.K Narayan's *Swami and Friends* or Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*- a person can easily relate to, making reality even more real. Thus, Realism "... is a genre that is concerned with showing the tension in a society between man as an individual entity and the man as social phenomenon, and ultimately to resolve that tension by allowing its characters to achieve a balance between the two modes of existence, thus ensuring a harmonious survival of society." (Lukács 1054-1055)

SOCIAL REALISM

The word 'social' is omnibus, covering all aspects of human activity. "Social Realism" is an exceptional understanding of social life. It involves personal, social and cultural changes in all the spheres of life with their intricacies and nuances, such as the details relating to family, class, marriage, educational standards, religion, morality, politics, and economy. However, it relates to social maladjustments or readjustments, like unemployment, industrial indiscipline, youth unrest, and crime- their causes and consequences. George Parsons Lathrop, in *The Novel and its Future*, describes social realism-

...it sets itself at work to consider characters and events which are the most ordinary and uninteresting, to extract from these their full value and true meaning. It would apprehend in all particulars the connection between the familiar and the extraordinary and the seen and unseen of human nature. Beneath the deceptive cloak of outwardly uneventful days, it detects and endeavours to trace the outlines of the spirits that are hidden there, to measure the changes in their growth, to watch the symptoms of moral decay or regeneration, to fathom their histories of passionate or intellectual problems... where we thought nothing worth of notice, it shows everything to be rife with significance." (Lathrop 24)

Social realism evolved as a reaction against idealism and the overstated ego encouraged by Romanticism. The ramification of the industrial revolution became an apparatus; urban centres grew, and slums proliferated on a scale contrary to the display of wealth of the upper classes with an advanced sense of social consciousness. The social realists pledged to confront beautiful art and any style which appealed to the eyes or emotions. They instead focused on the ugly realities of contemporary life and sympathised with the labour or working class, particularly the poor. They documented what they saw as it existed, for instance, Charles Dicken's *Hard Times*.

The primary goal of social realism is not to amuse the reader or observer but to convince him of societal evils. It aims at the unadorned depiction of contemporary social life in various aspects. Social realism thus mirrors the human experience in varied forms and shapes. It reflects society, its virtues or ethical values, and its corrective function also reflects society's ills to make people realise their mistakes and amend them.

III. SOCIAL REALISM IN THE FIVE DOLLAR SMILE AND OTHER STORIES

The Five Dollar Smile And Other Stories is a collection of fourteen stories and a farce by Shashi Tharoor, published in 1990. The book consists of his early writings, although chronologically, it is his third fiction. The stories were written during his adolescent years, except for the two, 'The Five Dollar Smile' and 'The Death of the Schoolmaster', and published in mass-circulation magazines in India and abroad. Tharoor deals with the part of Indian society he knows the best, which entails leaving out the stereotypes of poor peasants, godmen etc. In the foreword to the book, he explains-

The stories largely reflect an adolescent sensibility... their concerns, their assumptions, their language all emerge from the consciousness of an urban Indian male in his late teens... I presume to inflict them years later on a new public... not because I think they represent an enduring contribution to literature, but... in their own modest way, they might be fun to read... they reflect the aspects of

modern Indian life which
are still relatively ignored
in more serious writing.
(Tharoor 10)

As Whitman describes it, India is a vast country that "contains multitudes." Tharoor's fascination for India's remarkable diversity in almost everything is reflected through his explorations in his literary works. Despite his international career in the U.N., all his books are set in India simply because of the formative years he spent growing up in India- "India shaped my mind, it anchored my identity, influenced my beliefs, and made me who I am ... India matters immensely to me, and in all my writings, I would like to matter to India. Or, at least, to Indian readers."

While writing *The Five Dollar Smile* and other short stories, the readers that Shashi Tharoor had in mind were that of the Indian magazines written in English. His main intention was to entertain and reflect upon the aspects of modern Indian life which are relatively ignored in more serious writings: "I wrote essentially for a specific audience, the readership of Indian magazines in the English language; most of these stories do not aspire to do more than entertainments."

The most moving piece in the anthology is the title story- '**The Five Dollar Smile**', in which a lonely orphan is used as the poster child of an organisation that raises money for charity. Joseph, the central character in the story, recalls the colonial ambience surrounding the missionary school system on his way to America to meet his foster parents.

Through the story, Tharoor presents India post-independence as a land full of underfed children who need money and help to remain alive and outlines the living conditions at an Indian orphanage. Joseph is handpicked as the face for a charity drive, for he is thought to be a perfect fit- a tribal child with infant malnutrition who lost his mother in his early childhood, and his father left him with the nuns. Joseph was hardly seven years old when the photographer took his snap. His photograph was in every significant and famous magazine and paper to ensure that the organisation attracts more donors to get money to help the other children. "MAKE THIS CHILD SMILE AGAIN", the black type on the crumpled, glassy newsweekly page read. 'All it takes is five dollars a month'" (Tharoor 13).

A few years later, Joseph's foster parents send him a ticket to visit America during the vacations, and this incident somehow boosts new confidence in him.

He was given a little
suitcase for his clothes...
he swelled with pride at his
tangible evidence of
possessions. He had things;

he was somebody ... With
a passport, a suitcase, a
ticket, he was not just a
little brown face in a crowd
around the gruel bowl; he
was Master Joseph
Kumaran, and he was going
somewhere. (Tharoor 24)

Joseph feels a sense of pride for visiting a foreign land that no other child at his orphanage ever got. For an Adivasi lad like him, America was a land of magic and dreams.

On his way to America, on a flight filled with strangers, his mind returns to all the minor incidents at the orphanage that left him feeling neglected. He thinks of the day the foreign photographer clicked his picture and how he was deprived of *papadams* that day and had to sleep empty stomach-

But I wanted the *papadams*,
he wanted to scream in rage
and frustration. And why
did you need to take me
away from my *papadams*?
What was so important
about that man with the
camera that you had to
deprive me of something
I've been waiting a month
to enjoy? But he did not say
all that. He could not.
Instead, the lump in his
throat almost choking him,
he flung the tin plate of
gruel to the ground and
burst into tears. (Tharoor
17)

He is reminded of yet another incident with sister Eva that made him question his mere existence-

They had sent Joseph their
picture so he would
recognise them, but they
had not asked for his.
'We're sure we'll spot him
as soon as he gets off the
plane,'... Then one day, in a
fit of temper, sister Eva had
threatened to replace
Joseph with another little
dark-skinned boy from the
orphanage. 'Do you think
they'd be able to tell the

difference?' she had demanded. In silent, desperate misery, Joseph had not known what to say. (Tharoor 25)

Through this story, Tharoor points out the harsh realities of the orphanage and the lives of the orphans. In addition, this story deals with the psychology of a young boy Joseph who is deprived of the love he deserves. On his way to a foreign land filled with strangers, he reminisces about the intense orphanage experiences of inexplicable loneliness that leave him thoroughly dispirited.

Tharoor's fascination for P.G. Wodehouse's writing style during his teenage years is reflected in his next story, '**The Boutique**'. In this story, he tries to paint and confront the Calcutta of his adolescence. In the short introduction to his story, he writes-

"The Calcutta I wrote about as a teenager- the Calcutta of the short stories I published in urban English language magazines at the time was not the Calcutta of politics and poverty, of foetid slums and flowery songs, of Coffee House communism and vibrant culture, that later occupied my concerns... I grew up in a Calcutta of ex-colonial clubs and Vintage Car Rallies, imbibing the brittle sophistication of ad world parties and the surreal decadence of air-conditioned salons where shirts were sold at a price that could have fed the neighbourhood. (Tharoor 27)

The story is based on class discrimination embedded in Indian society and is a perfect example of social realism. As the writer points out, "The Boutique depicted an ambience I had felt at first hand, and it is practically social realism-I had a very specific basis for every image, every face, every article of clothing, every character in the story." (Tharoor 27)

'The Boutique' gives us an accurate picture of the attitude and behaviour of snobbish people in Indian society. The story is about an Indian boy and his mother's visit to an inaugural ceremony of a posh boutique at the Plaza Lounge

in Calcutta city. The aura of this magnificent five-star building is meant only for the rich, the famous and the glamorous. As a result, the mother-son duo feels like alienated outsiders. Their way of dressing displays their middle-class status compared to the other guests, wearing branded clothes and making a fashion statement:

Amma in her plain cotton sari with her slightly greying hair done up traditionally at the back... me in my loose kurta that fell awkwardly from bony shoulders, in narrow trousers that went out of fashion five years back, sporting an unshaved under-chin, looking more unkempt than dashing. (Tharoor 27)

At the very outset, they were humiliated while entering the Plaza Lounge when the liftman looked at them disrespectfully, "he lifted an eyebrow ever so slightly" (Tharoor 27). The second instance of insult is when a waiter who serves coffee passes them without a look-

The waiter passed us, looking through us without pausing his stride. I thought at first that the coffee had to be paid for, then saw him offering steaming hot cups of it to all the visitors. Anyone who chose to could take a cup of coffee... We had been insulted. (Tharoor 29)

And then there's another instance when Amma begins to fondle a jacket she likes, and the salesgirl curtly reminds her of the 'Please don't touch' sign-

'Here, you can't touch the articles,' the salesgirl said, coming up behind Amma suddenly. 'can't you see the sign?' she pointed to a PLEASE DON'T TOUCH card among the clothes. 'don't you know English?' Amma flushed a deep red. 'I'm sorry,' she mumbled in confusion, hastily trying to put it back. (Tharoor 30)

However, when a celebrity guest arrives and casually flips through the ties on the rack without disapprobation from the salesgirl, the momentary hurt soon subsides into resignation, and the duo decides to walk out. The writer comments- "Quietly we walked to the door. No one noticed our exit; it was as if an insect had been removed from the cup of tea, something which ought not to have been there in the first place... We used the stairs." (Tharoor 32)

This story is about the alienation and isolation faced by middle-class people like Amma and her son amidst the glittering yet smothering aura created by the rich men and women who form the cream of society. And though the liftman, the waiter and the salesgirl belong to the lower stratum of Indian society, they do not hesitate to discriminate between the people belonging to the middle and the upper class.

Tharoor's fondness for P.G Wodehouse continues in his third story- '**How Bobby Chatterjee Turned to Drink,**' as he dedicates the story to him. In the introduction of the story, he writes-

I was introduced to the world of P.G. Wodehouse at the age of eleven by an otherwise wholly unpleasant schoolteacher who read a passage from the Master as part of a dictation test. Five years later, I sought to pay inimitable humourist homage by writing a Wodehouse story set in Calcutta- more specifically, in the Saturday Club, of whose dread committee my father was a member, and whose fabled Light Horse Bar I was too young to enter myself. (Tharoor 33)

'How Bobby Chatterjee Turned to Drink' is the emulation of the literary world of P.G. Wodehouse. The Light Horse Bar was a go-to place for Bobby Chatterjee, and he was a regular visitor there. The narrator said the bar crowd constituted the people whose beloveds had dumped them. Such people took a resort in heavy boozing there. However, Bobby was never fond of drinking "... alcoholic liquor, the one vice or so he had assiduously maintained- that he had not yet succumbed to." (Tharoor 35). The other day the narrator is surprised to see Bobby Chatterjee boozing, and Cedric, another regular visitor and Bobby's friend, tells him, "... 'the one cause of all the world's ills,

etc., in short, love. Love came to poor Bobby Chatterjee's heart and broke it too'" (Tharoor 35). He muses over the anecdote of how he fell in love with model Myra and how he learned that she was in love with another man called Au, an IAF officer.

The drunken conversation between Cedric and the narrator is just a ploy for the former to get himself free drinks. Thus the latter refuses to believe it- "Bobby in love? But why, the fellow's a confirmed misogynist!" (Tharoor 35). So he finally approaches Bobby Chatterjee on the other side of the table, and to his utter surprise, it is not a matter of love and betrayal. Still, he drank to overcome his frustration of losing 1000 bucks on his favourite horse, 'Happy Boy', who was seventh in a seven-horse race.

The inborn literary genius of Shashi Tharoor is also visible in the stories like 'The Village Girl' and 'The Professor's Daughter'. '**The Village Girl**' is a commentary on the marriage institution in India. On his annual trip to his native village, Sunder meets Sunita, a seventeen-year-old girl, and learns about her plans to marry instead of going to college.

I did well in SSLC, but my father does not believe in college education for me.' She shook her head violently. 'It is not his fault, he can only afford the fees for one child, and my brother is more important'... 'He says a girl has to graduate from homework to housework. (Tharoor 52)

Ironically, Sunita's father, a schoolteacher, wants his daughter to marry as soon as possible because he cannot afford the dowry. "... his family is not asking for any dowry. They are only wanting a good, homely bride who can cook and look after the house and the little girl... everyone is saying we are very lucky" (Tharoor 53). Thus, it is evident that the villagers enjoy their primitivism and are utterly impervious to urban modernity. Moreover, the conditioning of their girls and women in the village shapes them into reticent, passive, and shy women.

Sunder cannot comprehend how a seventeen-year-old girl can agree to marry a widower with a two-year-old baby and be happy. His reaction to such rural customs fuels anger in him. Unfortunately, he cannot do anything about it since these marriage transactions happen nationwide.

Similar is the situation of Jaswinder, known as Jazzy, in '**The Professor's Daughter**', who is denied her rights and freedom. When H.B. tries to initiate a

conversation with her, she admits she is forbidden to talk to boys. "... I'd better not call you anything... my parents won't like it... I'm not supposed to talk to you" (Tharoor 78). Tharoor brings out the unspeakable misery of Jazzy despite being a daughter of a highly educated man. These two stories represent the condition of millions of girls across the country, with no exception to the rural or urban setting.

In the introduction to his next story, 'The Temple Thief,' Tharoor writes, "the central idea opportunistic, for the papers at that time, were full of stories about valuable temple artefacts being stolen and smuggled to rich collectors in the west" (Tharoor 56). The story questions the person's faith in God and religion. It is the story of Raghav, a devout Hindu and how he falls into stealing from temples. He justifies his actions as an economic necessity based on the fact that "...if God could not fill his belly by divine action, Raghav was surely justified in using God to fill his purse and his belly..." (Tharoor 57)

The first line of 'The Simple Man', "Have you ever received a letter from someone who is dead?" (Tharoor 61), points to the famous railway strike in 1974. The story is about an unsuccessful novelist sitting in a bar and sharing his most profound secret of murdering his best friend and wife. Through this story, Tharoor shows how indulgence and fantasy concoct imaginary characters, and narrating a masterful incident that has never occurred helps people cope with disappointments in life through escapism.

'**Friends**' is a story based on the love and friendships of college days. The story revolves around two best friends, VV and PM, who have never fought with each other since they met. As PM explains- "... we never fought over anything... as soon as one displayed interest in a female, the other turned to look for fresh pastures for himself... girls didn't matter enough for us to quarrel over then" (Tharoor 84). However, they fall for the same girl, Rekha, and this girl becomes the very reason for the end of their beautiful friendship.

Through stories like 'Aunty Rita' and 'The Other Man', Tharoor presents different approaches to human relations. '**Aunty Rita**' has been spun around an adulterous relationship shared by Auntie Rita and her husband's nephew Arjun. This plot is an example of contradictions within Indian society. Tharoor psychologically unweaves the fabric of sensuality shared by an older woman and a young boy very minutely and intricately. However, the difference lies in the aftermath of their sensual encounter. Tharoor beautifully elucidates the unaffected psyche of Rita, who is well past her prime, and for her, it was nothing more than a physical attraction. Thus, she has neither remorse nor guilt on her part. However, Arjun is drowning

in the river of remorse and emotional loss, for adolescents take their first sexual experience very seriously.

On the other hand, '**The Other Man**' is a story of a woman impregnated by her lover, who later bid her goodbye forever. The story is a scathing satire on social realities and how they die under the rock of societal codes due to social taboos. The girl was eighteen and pregnant when she married off to the story's narrator. Although his wife is in love with some other man, he promises to look after her and her child and wait for the day when she'll love him as much as he loves her.

Tharoor doesn't romanticise the idea of the husband's sacrifice. For an Indian male, it is highly unacceptable to tolerate the intrusion and encroachment of another man in his wife's life. Although the story's theme is magnanimous, the husband waits for his wife to return to him, but the climax of the tale gives the readers a jolt from a complacency that comes from traditionality-

"... that the ring she wears in the second finger is not yours but mine. That the surname she bears today is not the one you wrote on the airmail you addressed to her, but the one I signed on our marriage register. That she chose at all to marry me when she was still yours. For there is one thing I know that you will never learn and that the world will never tell you. That six months after she became my wife, she bore me your son." (Tharoor 116-17)

'**The Solitude of a Short-Story Writer**' is a story of Jennings, who contributes his short stories to serially published newspapers. His story-writing skill has earned him popularity in America; as the author writes- "Jennings learned to measure his success by the number of calls he no longer had the courage to make. Each brilliant, honest, revelatory short story proved apocalyptic for some friend, ruined some relationship, shattered some illusion" (Tharoor 131)

Jenning's technique of story writing was that his works were not fictional but somewhat real-life experiences or encounters with people around him that later formed the substance of his stories. The projection of the characters' negative image that the real world people found impossible

to accept led to his distancing from the people who once were close to him.

The Americans believe in seeking psychiatric help while dealing with the issues of isolation, dejection and loneliness. Thus, Jennings visits a psychiatrist and shares that he has already written a story about his current girlfriend. Although the doctor advises him not to publish the story, he gets it published anyway. And to Jennings' surprise, his girlfriend is neither embarrassed nor upset. Instead, she's glad the story would lead her to success.

Even as a teenager, Tharoor has sensibly dealt with a mature subject like death in his stories like- 'The Pyre', 'The Death of a Schoolmaster', and 'The Political Murder'. 'The Pyre' is a story highlighting the issue of the caste system prevalent in Indian society and how lower-caste people have to fight for what they are worthy of. The story is about a Harijan boy Sujeet who dreams of getting into the Indian Administrative Services, regardless of his background. But unfortunately, he falls victim to a road accident and dies on the spot.

'The Death of the School Master' is a satire of how well-meaning attempts at land reform need not always have good results and paints the picture of the political realities in India.

And lastly, 'The Political Murder' is a story of how police during the emergency concocted the urgency to justify the political murders and those who solved them were rewarded with high positions.

IV. CONCLUSION

Shashi Tharoor's 'The Five Dollar Smile' is a compilation of multiple stories, perspectives, tellers and truths of modern India. A comprehensive evaluation of his short stories indicates that the writer has dealt with the different shades of human experiences, such as love, hate, loss, ego, deceit, hypocrisy, pride, flattery, immorality, etc. Even as a teenager, he sensibly deals with mature subjects like death, loss, deceit, hypocrisy, and honour throughout his collection of short stories. He has also pointed to the social evils in our society, like women's education, early marriage, unmatched unions, dowry system, caste system, corruption etc. Thus, all his stories, in one way or another, stress human life's peculiarities and are infused with social realism.

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