

IGBO PROSE AS A REFLECTION OF SOCIETAL ISSUES: A STUDY OF SELECTED WORKS

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Abstract

The study of literature is the study of life in which the people see the society through the writer's eyes. This paper examines Igbo literature as a medium for representation of contemporary issues of the society. Some studies which evidenced that literature is a reflection of societal issues have been in existence. Most just emphasized on the importance of literature to the society and often see Igbo literature as that which only portrays the lives of the Igbo people alone, but no previous works or studies have extensively used Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe and Ugonna to represent Igbo prose as a reflection of societal issues, hence the need for this present study which hopes to showcase and identify these societal issues for the interest of the members of the society and for the enhancement of wider readership of Igbo literary works. The societal issues brought out from these selected texts will help serve as an eye opener to readers and make them realize the obvious things that happen in the society where they will learn and find out things about life and living.

1.0 Introduction

Burton, (2002: 5) said that, "Literature is a reflection of the society which is a fact that has been widely acknowledged". It mostly reflects the society, its good values and its ills. In its corrective function, it tries to mirror the ills of the society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. This it does by projecting the virtues or good values in the society for people to emulate.

Igbo prose often imitates human actions and present a picture of what people think, say and do in the society. Most at times, the stories are designed to portray human life and action through some characters who by their words, actions and reactions convey certain messages for the purpose of education, information and entertainment, thus

Igbo prose is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror in which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for positive change.

In view of the above, this work takes a look at *Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe* and *Ugonna* written by Tony Ubesie and Chinedum Ofomata respectively to portray Igbo prose as that which also reflects societal issues with a view of making the members of the public realize the things they do and make amends where necessary.

2.0 Literature Review

Literature is mostly a medium for representation of societal issues. In view of the above assertion, Sophie, (2009:2) said that, “prose generally provides insight into the minds of other human beings, into the mind of the author and the minds of the character he or she brings to life”. This clearly indicates that prose as a genre of literature has a major impact on the development of the society. It has shaped civilizations and also gives a detailed preview of human experiences, allowing people to connect on basic levels of desire and emotion. This is so because many Igbo prose works have constructed societies through their contents.

Killam, (2011:73) is of the view that prose is a reflection of the societal issues. He stated that “prose as one of the genres of literature reflects the society because it allows the reader to look back on their memories and also allows the writers to share their experiences with the reader”. He further said that literature allows the reader to also learn life lessons by the writer’s experiences. This shows that in most cases, Igbo prose allows the reader to learn a person’s mistakes and wins. Therefore, it makes people to learn life lessons through the writer’s experience because they can see through other peoples thoughts and memories.

Mbah, Ikeokwu, Mba, Okeke, Nweze, Ugwuona, Akaeze, Onu, Eze, Prezi and Odii (2013: 321), said that “literature is an artistic work expressed in writing or orally about life and its living”. This definition gives a very clear picture of literature as that which is well written and imitates human actions and often presents a picture of what people think, say or do in the society.

Echeruo, (2001:16) said that “literature mirrors the society thereby trying to present to the people, the societal facts of life via its works”. Obviously, this statement tends to bring out another importance of literature as it tries to project the occurrences of life in the society.

Oruchalu, (1999:33) emphasizes on the function of literature to the society. This he stated as thus; “literature plays a very important and strong role in the awareness of civilization”. This means that with the help of a pen, one can change the mentality of the society. This has evolved many different ideas which have brought social reforms like prevention of child marriage etc.

Nwadike, (1992:27) said that; “literature acts as a form of expression for each individual author”. This is to say that some literary books mirror the society and allow people to better understand the world they live in. This entails that one role of the writer today is to reflect and interpret his society and his world at large.

Furthermore, Ikeokwu and Onyejekwe (2004:8) said that; “literature gives an image, but the image is not necessarily a true image”. They went further to say that the image can be distorted by the society as a whole. This implies that Igbo literature mostly tends to focus on subjects that are current to societal engagements. With this, one can easily say that literature mirrors the society and its mannerisms.

3.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

In this section, we are going to analyze the data collected from the selected literary texts show how they depict societal issues.

3.1 Literature as a Reflection of Societal issues

It is mostly impossible to find a work of Igbo prose that excludes the attitudes, morals and values of the society, since no writer has been brought up completely unexposed to the world around him or her. What writers mostly do is to transport the real-life events in their society into fiction and present them to the society as a mirror with which people can look at themselves and make amends where necessary.

3.1 Ubesie’s *Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe* as a reflection of societal issues:

Mmiri Oku E Ji Egbu Mbe portrays so many events that made it to be termed an Igbo prose which showcases issues in the society. Some of which are:

(a) The Tactful Withdrawal of People From a Scene of Crime on Seeing the Police:

People leave a place where a crime especially when a crime is being committed immediately the Police arrive. This is because of fear of being arrested by them for no just reason to give information about what happened. This was seen in Page one.

“Ka a na-eme, Mazi Uzodimma duru ndi uweojii bata.
Ozigbo ha bataara, ndi mmadu bidoro lawa n’ike n’ike,
niihina o dighi ahia ahia
ha ejidewe onye obula ha huru, ka o bia kwuo ka o si hu ihe mere,
ma o no mgbe o mere ma o nghị”.

“As this was going on, Mr. Uzodimma came in with Policemen. Immediately they came in, people started leaving the scene quickly because soon they will start arresting anyone they see around to testify on what he or she saw or knew not minding if he or he was present or not”.

(b) The conflict between wives of the same brothers in a family:

This was seen in the lives of Uzodimma and Okafor’s wives. They never agreed and were enemies. This was seen in page 2.

“...nwunye Uzodimma na nwunye Okafor adighi na mma”.
“... Uzodimma and Okafor’s wives are not in speaking terms”.

This conflict or quarrelling between these wives in this contemporary time, always extend to the brothers in question, who often engage in a conflict they did not originate. Uzodimma and Okafor became enemies though they were brothers. Their unending conflict resulted to their deaths.

(c) **Diabolism:** The issue of diabolism has become the order of the day. People sometimes use this means to destructively get at their victims when they fail physically. In some cases, the victim may be fortunate to know who was attacking him. This may result to a deadly retaliation. As in the case of Uzodimma, he felt that Okafor his brother was the person attacking his family diabolically. This was seen in page 2.

“...umunwoke abuo Uzodimma muru anwuola. Lee otu nkea bu Enyi ka o suuru ji sunye, Enyi richaa daa n’oria. Uzodimma wee si na ya agaghi anu ndu anya ya ahụ ntị ya, wee miri mma wakwu ya gbuo”.

“...the two sons of Uzodimma have died. Enyi the surviving son is the one he gave yam and oil and after eating it, he became sick. Uzodimma then made a declaration that he won’t let that to happen”.

Again in pages 6- 7, an attempt was made by Chinyere (Uzodimma’s wife) to cure their son Enyi of the diabolic effect of Okafor’s charm.

“...o ji wee si ka ya buru uzọ ga gwọọ Enyi bu nwa ya nwoke oria o na-arịa. O jere kpọọ otu onye dibia a maara nke oma maka imeru ihe ndi mmadu mere ibe ha. Mgbe o gwumiri ala, o gwuputa ntutu isi e ji akwa Enyi kara nka kechie. O si na nke a e liri n’ebe ha na-adowa ite ofe ebe ahụ, Enyi jiri ofe ahụ rie ihe, ahụ ga na-arịa ya. Ntutu a bu ntutu a kpuputara n’isi Enyi. Akwa ahụ bu akwa Enyi kara nka ka Okafo dokaara wee gwọọ ogwu”.

“...that was why she decided to cure Enyi her son first of his sickness. She brought one known native doctor who was known for his active work towards diabolism. When he dug deep, he saw inside it, Enyi’s hair tied with his worn out cloth. He said that the fact that that was kept where their pot of soup was kept showed that once Enyi eats the soup, he will always become sick”. The hair and cloth belonged to Enyi and Okafor used them for diabolism”.

(d) **Activities in the Law Court:**

i. Taking the suspect on bail: This is to enable him take his trial. This was seen in pages 3-4.

“E yighariri ikpe n’izu asaa na-abia, si na mmadu abuo ga-abia nara Uzodimma n’aka ebe. Ikenado na Ofodile wee ga nara ya n’aka ebe”.

“The matter was adjourned to the next coming seven days and it was made known that two persons would take

Uzodimma on bail after which Ikenado and Ofodile did same”.

- ii. Making the suspect take his plea, as to whether he is guilty or not of the offence with which he was Asking the suspect whether he or she is guilty of his offense or not and he or she will answer “guilty or not guilty”.

“Mgbe ụbọchi ikpe ruru, a jụrụ Uzodimma ma ikpe ọ mara ya, ka ọ maghiya. Ọ si na ikpe amaghị ya”.

“On the day of hearing, Uzodimma was asked if he was guilty or not and he pleaded not guilty”.

- iii. Process of passing death sentence on a murderer by a judge: The judge will change his from his previous black gown to red gown to indicate death sentence. This was seen in page 5.

“Mgbe ọ batara ọzọ, ọ gbanworo uwe oji o yi, yiri nke na-acha ọbara. Ebe ọ bụla ihe na-acha ọbara ọbara di, mara na ihe di egwu di ya niihina ebe ozu di, ka a na-ahụ udele”.

“When he (the judge) came back again, he changed from his previous black gown to a red colored one. It was clear that red color seen anywhere indicates danger”.

- iv. Passing and execution of judgment on criminals or convicting criminals: This was seen in page 38 when some members of Enyi’s gang were arrested, tried and sent to prison after judgment.

“Mgbe e kpechara ikpe, a turu ndi niile e jidere nga. Ufodu ka a turu afọ iri; ufodu ka a turu afọ asaa”.

After the trials, the criminals were convicted. Some were sentenced to ten years imprisonment; while others were sentenced to seven years imprisonment.

(e) The Death of Parents Especially the Mother Brings Hardship upon the Children: When Uzodimma died, though it was not easy for his wife Chinyere, Enyi did not feel the absence of his father; but immediately his mother died, his life changed from good to worst. His uncle Ebuzo took him, where hardship became the order of the day. Page 10 indicated this.

“Mgbe e lichara ozu Chinyere, Ebuzo kpọrọ Enyi lawa be ya... Ọ bụ otu a ka Enyi nwa mgbom si wee bido tawa ahụhụ uwa, mgbe ọ ka na-asa ahụ n’afọ”.

“After Chinyere’s burial, Ebuzo took Enyi and went to his house... It was the beginning of Enyi’s sufferings at a very tender age”.

Enyi suffered so much in the hands of Nneka (Ebuzo’s wife). She hated him for no reason or rather because he was not his son. A clear picture of this is contained in page 9-10.

“Site n’ubochi mbụ Enyi b́ara ebe a, nwunye nwanne nna ya ahụ kporo ya asị. Ihe kpatara o ji kpoọ ya asị abughị ihe ozo karịa ekworo umunwaanyi. Nneka sichaa ihe oriri, o kunye nke umu ya iche, kunyere Enyi nke ya iche. O ji aruru ala na-ata Enyi ahuhu. Nke ozo, Enyi atabeghi anu e ji sie ofe dika umu Nneka si ata. Nke a kpatara na I lee ya anya, ahụ na-aju ya oyi mgbe o bula”. “From the first day Enyi came to Ebuzo’s house, his wife never liked him. This was for no reason other than jealousy. Whenever she (Nneka) finishes cooking, she will dish out food separately for her kids and separately too for Enyi. This was an indirect way of punishing him. Again, Enyi has not eaten meat the way her kids do, that was why he was always dull and withdrawn”.

All these sufferings including the false accusation, made Enyi to remember his dead parents.

“Akwa Enyi na-ebe abughị maka utari otu nwatakiri napia ya ma o ju igba egwu a na-akuru ya. O chetara nne ya na nna ya nwuru anwu, o buru na ha no ndu, o dighi mmadu o bula puru ime ya udi ihe a”.

“Enyi was crying not because one of the children was flogging him whenever he stopped dancing but he remembered his dead parents whom he believed that if they were to be alive that nobody would do that to him”.

(f) Leadership in an Organization:

Though in this aspect it is a negative influential leadership. In this book, this was seen among Enyi and his criminal gang. In a gang of twenty-five, Enyi was made the leader and the head of the gang. They obeyed whatever he says. This depicts the saying that there is honor even among thieves. This was seen in page 28 as thus:

“Ndi ohi a mere Enyi onye isi. Ihe o si ha mee, ha emee. Ihe o si ha emela, ha agaghi eme ya. Ha na-ewe iwu ya ka iwu ochi agha nyere ndi agha nyere ndi agha ya”.

“The thieves made Enyi their leader. Whatever they do is what he tells them to do. They respect his opinion a lot”.

(g) The Negative Implications of Unemployment in the Life of a Youth:

Unemployment after school could make a youth do any bad work no matter the nature of that job, just to put food on his table. This was seen in page 31:

“O wee si nwoke ahụ na Enyi kwere ya nkwa inye oru, ma na Enyi agwabeghi ya udi oru o ga-nye ya”.

“He then told the man that Enyi promised him job but has not mentioned to him the kind of job it was”.

In this case, Chukwudi was determined to do any kind of job including accepting the job offer given to him by Enyi without even knowing what kind of job it was.

This aspect of the implications of unemployment as seen in this novel, Nduka was not left out of it. Immediately he came out of prison and was jobless, he joined Enyi's armed robbery gang in full force. Nduka was a policeman who condemns crime so much when he was working as a policeman but immediately switched over to the worst job when he became jobless just to put food on his table. This was seen in page 50.

“...nke a mere Nduka ji jekwuru Enyi, si ya na ya choro iso n'otu ya”.

“...this made Nduka meet Enyi and told him that he wanted to join their gang”

Again in connection with this, there is a danger of recruiting someone into a job especially force and sacking him. This could endanger the society. In fact, most time it does... In this case, a policeman who was sacked from police job, was among Enyi's gang. This was because he knows the in and out of the police. His job in the gang is to spy on the police after an operation as to find out what they are planning against them. This was seen in page 28 as thus:

“Oru ha bu ije nuta ndi uwe ojii ihe n'onu. Onye isi ha bu otu onye uwe ojii a churu n'oru. O buru na ha ezuo ohi, ndi uwe ojii na-achọ ha, o bu oru nwoke ahụ iga nuta ihe ha maara maka ha, gwa Enyi...”

“Their duty is to get information from the Police. Their leader is an ex police officer that was sacked. It is his duty to get information to know if the Police were after them after an operation”.

(h) Financial Inducement and Promise of a Job:

Here, Chukwudi changed from his decision of accepting Enyi's job offer to helping the Police officer (Ajuluchukwu) get the information he needed about Enyi and his gang's next operations and where about. This was because Ajuluchukwu gave him money and promised to give him police job. This was seen as shown in pages 31-32 as below:

“O tinye aka n'akpa, nye ya akwukwo ego naira iri, si ya na a ga-ewe ya n'oru uwe ojii ma o buru na o ruta oru ya ga-enye ya ugbua. Nwa okorobia ahụ wee kwee n'isi, si na ya ga-anwa ike ya. O wee kowaara ya na o bu ohi ka Enyi na-ezu; na a ga-ewe ya n'oru ndi uwe ojii ma o buru na o ga-enyere ha aka choputa mgbe Enyi na ndi otu ya ga-eje ohi ubochi ozo”.

“He dipped his hand in his pocket and gave him ten naira and promised to recruit him into the police if he does his work well. When the young man affirmed to this, he then told him that Enyi was a criminal and repeated that he would give him a police job if he would help them find out Enyi and his gangs next day of criminal operation”.

This made Chukwudi to emphasize so much on the money and the promises earlier made to him.

“Ego nwoke ahụ nyere Chukwudị buru ya isi. O nwebeghị ihe o mere, e nye ya Naira iri. O ruo oru a e nyere ya, ego ga-aburu ya asuru. O wee kpebie n’uche ya na ya ga-emere nwoke ahụ ihe o siri ya mee, niihina e nwere ike si na nke ahụ nye ya ezigbo oru”.

“The money the man gave to Chukwudi was more than enough. No one had given him such amount. He then vowed to do what the man told him to do, believing that more money would come and that they would give him a better job”.

(i) Greed and Wickedness as seen in the Society:

In page 49, as a mark of greed; Enyi wanted to enjoy the cow he stole with other members alone and as a mark of wickedness; he also incriminated others and went away untouched.

“The mere bu na mgbe ha jechara ohi ahụ, Enyi chere echiche ka ya ndi a ga-esi kee ihe ha zutere, chekwaanụ ihe o ga-egboro ya ma naani ya buru ya, wee choo iji aghugho chupu ha, ma ha ekweghi. O bu nihi nke a ka o ji wee tinye ha n’okwu na uka”.

“What happened was that after the stealing operation, Enyi thought about what he would gain if he takes everything to himself, he then cunningly wanted to scare them away. When this did not work, he implicated them in other to take what the stole all to himself”.

(j) Repentance and Blessings that follow:

This is another aspect of life. Repentance is necessary in life because it gives everyone a second chance and a second opportunity to turn a new leaf. In this book, Enyi repented from his dubious and criminal lives or ways and became a responsible man. He realized that living in sins does not pay anybody and that nothing good comes out of bad life, so he became a known farmer which made him a real wealthy man. This was seen in page 67 as below:

“ O wee tuo onwe ya mbọ, si na ya amalite udi ndu ganyere ya aka n’uwa. O kpokoo ndi obodo, si ha na ya ga-amalite oru ugbo. Ugbua ka o doru Enyi anya na ya nwereike iji ike okpukpu aka Obasi uru, karija iji ya na-eje ohi. Ka Enyi ruru oru ugbo afo ise, lee Enyi ka o ghokwara ogaranya ndi obodo ha ji na-etu onu. Mgbe o lere ndu o dibu mbu na nke o di ugbua anya, o wee doo ya anya na izu ohi abughi oru mmadu ji wee na-etu onu”.

“He now realizes that he has started a life that will see him through in life and called the villagers to inform them about his farming intentions. It also dawned on him (Enyi) that he could use his God given hands to do better things rather than stealing. After five years of farming, he became a well known wealthy man and after thinking about his previous life, he then realized that stealing is not a proud thing to do”.

3.2 Ofomata's *Ugonna* as a Reflection of Societal issues:

So many things that happen in the above-mentioned Igbo prose, shows that Igbo works also possess the features of revealing the things happening in the society to its readers and the society at large. Some of them are:

(a) **The Hardship created by the Death of a Breadwinner in a Family:** This happens especially when it involves a husband leaving his wife with many children to take care of. This was seen in page 2 where the death of Mmaduforo destabilized his wife. He left his wife with nine children, though they were poor and his death made them even poorer.

“Onwụ ya wutere ndị Udumọka ndị obodo ya. Ihe o jiri wute ha nnukwu bụ maka ụmụaka ọ hapuru were nwụọ. O nweghị ndị ga-azu ha. Naanị nwunye ya bụ Ihudiya agaghị emenwu ihe di na ya... ozigbo Mmaduforo nwuchara, ihe isiike were kariya n'ezinaulo ya. Ahuhu di egwu were gbaa nwunye ya na umu itoolu ha mutara okirikiri. Naanị Ihudiya anaghizi akpatanwu ihe umu ya na di ya mutara, ga-eri”.

“His death pained the people of Udumoka mostly because of his kids he left behind to suffer. No one to cater for them except his wife Ihudiya who cannot do so much to train them. Immediately Mmaduforo died, his family started encountering severe hardship”.

This hardship most times results to some of the children and in some cases all the children withdrawing from school. In this case, some of their children stopped going to school.

“Ufodu n'ime umu ha kwusiri iga akwukwo niihina ego eji azu ha adighi. Ugonna sokwa na ndi kwusiri iga akwukwo niihi ihe isiike”.

“Some of them stopped going to school because there was no money to train them in school. Ugonna was among those that dropped out of school because of hardship”.

At the same time, as a result of not meeting up with the needs of the family, the children will be taken into different families as maids. This was seen as in the case of Ugonna and his siblings in chapter 1, page 4:

“Ndi kporo Ugonna bu di na nwunye bi n'Owere...”.

“The people who took Ugonna as house help were husband and wife who live in Owere...”.

(b) **The Deceptive Heart of Man:**

This often happens in our present society. People tend to say one thing, while having another in mind. This was seen in Ugonna's case with his master. His master's promise to Ugonna's mother was that he will ensure that he puts Ugonna in school immediately they get to Owere. This was never his plan with his wife. They had different things in mind about Ugonna and his education. They never wanted him to go to school normally like they promised instead, what they had in mind was that Ugonna should go to afternoon class and at the same carter for his education. Ugonna never knew that Onwuekwe and Ijemma's plans were never to put him in school but to make him sell goods on the streets for their selfish interest. Instead of telling him that initially, they

tricked him into following them to Owere with the pretence of putting him in school. All these were seen in pages 15-16.

“Anyị ga-ahapụ itinye Ugonna n’ụlọakwụkwọ tutu na o mee ọnwa ise maọbụ isii. Ọ buru na ọ nọọ ọnwa abuo maọbụ ato, o doo anyị anya na ọ matachaala ala nke oma, anyị amalitere ya mgbreeahia. Anyị achoo nwobere ngwaahia bunye ya, o soro umuaka ibe ya kpaghariwa ma kpatawara anyị ego”.

“We won’t enroll Ugonna into school until after five months or six months. If after two or three months it becomes obvious that he has mastered this area, we will start up a mini move-about business for him where he will move about with his mates, sell things and make money for us”.

(c) Selfishness:

This has grown wings and is rooted in the society. In this book, all the intentions of Onwuekwe and his wife towards Ugonna were for their selfish interest and not to help the poor boy. This was seen in page 18.

“Ugonna bukwa nwata kara aka ma burukwa nwata na-agba mbu. Ọ ga-abara anyị uru, anyị abaara ya uru. Ọzokwa di ka ibe ya bu na mgbe ọ bula anyị ga-etinye ya n’akwukwo ehie. Nke a ga-enyere anyị aka nke ukwu. Ọ buru na ọ rucha oru di n’ulo, buru ngwaahia rechaa n’utu, ehie ọ lota, ọ kwado gawa akwukwo”.

“Ugonna is also a strong and industrious boy. He will be of importance to us as we will be to him. Again, whenever we will put him school, it will be the afternoon classes. This will help us greatly. When he must have finished with the house chores, sell things in the morning, when he returns in the afternoon, he proceeds to his afternoon classes”.

(d) The Ordeals of House Helps in the hands of their “Madams” as seen in the society:

A typical example of this was everything that happened to Ugonna in the hands of Ijemma (his madam). At Ugonna’s little age, he does everything in the house despite the fact that his madam’s children were there too. He sells water and soft drinks in Owere and its environs before going to his afternoon school. When he comes back from school, he would continue with the house chores including cooking as commanded by his madam. In fact, he was always the last to sleep at night and the first to wake up every day. He goes to school very late, looking so unkempt and sleeps a lot in class because he exhausts his strength on the house chores and other energy exerting activities he does for his madam and her family. All these were seen from page 19-29.

(e) Conspiracy by House Helps to run away, possibly back to their own Family in the Village:

When this happens, it means that they are being maltreated by their masters or madams. Chapter six showed how Ugonna and Ogunna conspired and executed their plans to escape from their masters' homes and return to their villages.

(f) Reporting a Case of a Missing Person to the Police:

In the society, once a person is missing, the custodian or family or any concerned person to the missing person will first of all report the case to the police. He or she will supply the police with the necessary information needed to enable the police carry out their duty effectively. In this book, when it was observed by Onwuekwe and Ijemma that Ugonna has gone missing, Onwuekwe quickly reported the case the next day to the police. This was seen in page 53.

“Onwuekwe ejechaala na nke ndi uwe ojii, ha na ya sọ banyere ochi cho ha na-achọ Ugonna. Ndi uwe ojii kwekwara ya nkwa na ha ga-enyere ha aka chọta Ugonna...”

“Onwuekwe had gone to the Police station and reported that Ugonna had gone missing. They assured him that they will assist him to find Ugonna”.

4.0 Conclusion and Suggestions

All these and more are typical examples of things that happen in the society and from indications, most of these issues change not only the people's mind but also their souls. It is therefore suggested to members of the public who live in the society to start improving on their logic, their concentration and start noticing things that they never paid attention to. This is because most societal issues touch people's hearts and raise romanticism in their minds. Also to readers, it is suggested that after going through this work, they start being good citizens of their country, good family members and friends. This is because these literary works give a chance to look at essential things from another angle and help analyze people's deeds.

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