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MUSLIMS' REPRESENTATION: A CRITICAL STUDY OF NADEEM ASLAM'S *MAPS FOR LOST LOVERS*

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Abstract

This study critically examines Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* using a qualitative research design based on textual analysis. It is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Eurocentrism and the concept of the "native informer," as discussed by Samir Amin and Hamid Dabashi. The research analyzes how the novel represents Islam, Muslim identity, and diasporic life, with particular focus on themes of religious orthodoxy, gender relations, honor-based violence, and cultural conflict in a British Muslim community. Findings suggest that the novel constructs polarized character types, often positioning religious figures as rigid or superstitious and secular characters as rational or progressive. This binary representation tends to narrow the complexity of Muslim identities and may reinforce simplified perceptions of Islam, especially when contrasted with implicitly positive depictions of Western norms. The study further argues that such narrative patterns align with Eurocentric discourse by privileging Western values as universal standards. In this context, Aslam's portrayal is interpreted through the lens of the "native informer," indicating how insider critique may unintentionally reproduce dominant Western narratives about Islam. Overall, while the novel addresses important social issues, its representational strategy is considered limited due to its reliance on binary oppositions and selective emphasis, thereby overlooking the diversity and plurality within Muslim communities.

Keywords: *Muslims Representation, Eurocentrism, Native Informer*

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1. Introduction

The global Muslim community has faced intensified xenophobia and racialization in the aftermath of 9/11, increasingly framing them as a threat to the West (Morgan, 2016). This marks a clear shift from earlier representations, where Muslim societies—such as the Turks—were often depicted as liberal, generous, and progressive. Post-9/11 discourse, however, recasts Muslims as conservative, extremist, and fundamentalist, indicating a significant transformation in their portrayal. As Pandith (2021) observes, Muslims in the United States faced heightened surveillance and suspicion following the attacks. Western media has been instrumental in constructing this altered reality by "othering" Muslims and persistently linking Islam with terrorism. Such narratives have also been reproduced by various writers, including South Asian diasporic authors, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes and inadvertently aligning with neo-imperialist agendas that marginalize and stigmatize Muslim communities.

The politics of representation remains central to postcolonial studies, where depictions of colonized peoples have historically served to legitimize imperial domination by portraying them as uncivilized and culturally inferior. This pattern dates back to classical antiquity, as noted by Sinusoid (2021), where Persians were characterized by Greeks as despotic and "Asiatic." While Black communities were long the primary targets of racial bias, the post-9/11 era has seen "brown" Muslim bodies increasingly subjected to similar prejudice. Thinkers like Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks*, foreground the psychological and social consequences of such racialized representations. In this context, Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis appears more visibly enacted, as Muslims bear the brunt of global backlash. Consequently, literary production within Muslim and diasporic contexts reflects these tensions, often portraying the struggles of Muslim identities in the West. However, some postcolonial writers, operating within Euro-American literary markets, reproduce Eurocentric frameworks—either deliberately or inadvertently—thereby reinforcing Western supremacy as the locus of civilization and moral authority. This study, therefore, seeks to examine how South Asian writers contribute to shaping post-9/11 representations of Muslims within such ideological structures by analyzing Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004).

1.1. Significance of the Study

This study contributes to ongoing scholarship on post-9/11 representations of Muslims, a discourse that has often intensified Islamophobia while implicitly legitimizing forms of American imperialism. It underscores the urgency of examining how some South Asian writers participate in and reproduce Euro-American–centric narratives, thereby reinforcing existing structures of cultural hegemony and neo-imperial influence. By critically examining these representations, the study expands the discourse beyond

Western authorship and emphasizes the influence of internal voices in shaping global perceptions of Muslim identities.

Furthermore, the research carries global relevance, as contemporary understandings of Muslims are frequently filtered through Eurocentric frameworks that claim universality. By exposing the ideological biases and possible complicities embedded in certain literary representations, the study encourages readers to approach such texts with critical awareness rather than unexamined acceptance. It argues that these portrayals often align with neo-Orientalist expectations, selectively presenting images of Muslims that resonate with dominant Western narratives, and thus calls for a more nuanced, context-sensitive engagement with South Asian literary production.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs Samir Amin's critique of Eurocentrism, articulated in Eurocentrism, alongside Hamid Dabashi's concept of the "native informer" from Brown Skin, White Masks, as its theoretical framework. Amin (1989) conceptualizes Eurocentrism not merely as an external form of domination but as a pervasive ideological mechanism that shapes cultural consciousness within non-European societies, thereby sustaining imperial and colonial power structures. Complementing this, Dabashi (2011) argues that "native informers" often validate dominant Western paradigms by portraying their own cultures as backward or obsolete, thus reinforcing asymmetrical cultural hierarchies.

Taken together, these frameworks provide a critical lens for examining the selected text. Through close reading and textual analysis, the study evaluates whether representations of Muslims by South Asian writers—particularly those framed through Euro-American perspectives—intersect with discourses of neo-imperialism and neo-Orientalism. It further investigates how this writer constructs and negotiates indigenous religious, cultural, ethical, and social values, questioning the extent to which such portrayals align with or resist dominant ideological narratives.

2. Analysis of *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004)

2.1. Trajectory

Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), often regarded as his seminal novel, earned wide acclaim and a Man Booker Prize longlisting. It explores the lived realities of the Pakistani diaspora in Britain, addressing themes such as identity, religion, racism, gender oppression, generational conflict, and cultural alienation. Set in an unnamed English town—ironically called "Dasht-e-Tanhaii" ("wilderness of loneliness") by its largely Pakistani inhabitants—the novel underscores the deep isolation experienced by immigrant communities. Aslam focuses less on action and more on psychological depth, particularly through the mysterious disappearance and suspected honor killing of the lovers Jugnu and Chanda.

Drawing on his own migration from Pakistan to England, Aslam examines tensions between tradition and modernity. Shamas, a liberal, near-atheist immigrant with a communist past, contrasts sharply with his orthodox wife Kaukab, whose rigid beliefs isolate her from her family and surroundings. Their children embody a generational shift toward Western values, intensifying familial conflict. The novel suggests that Jugnu and Chanda's disappearance may stem either from their defiance of social norms—living together unmarried—or from the community's conservative hostility.

Kaukab emerges as a complex figure shaped by religious indoctrination and limited education. Her resistance to change, fear of Western culture, and strict views on gender roles highlight the internalized constraints faced by some women. Yet her actions stem less from malice than from deep-seated conditioning. In contrast, characters like Suraya and Chanda represent women caught between cultural expectations and personal autonomy, often suffering forced marriages and social condemnation.

Ultimately, the novel critiques patriarchal and communal structures that perpetuate control and justify violence, even in diaspora contexts. It presents immigrant women as particularly vulnerable, navigating intersecting pressures of tradition, religion, and identity in their search for agency within Western societies.

2.2. Representation of Islam in Maps for Lost Lovers

In *Brown Skin, White Masks*, Hamid Dabashi critiques "native informers," arguing that they often disparage Islam in both cultural and religious terms. A similar critical lens can be applied to Maps for Lost Lovers, where Nadeem Aslam explores religious orthodoxy, patriarchy, and generational divides within a Muslim immigrant community in Britain. The narrative centers on the murder of Jugnu and Chanda, ultimately revealed as an honor killing carried out by Chanda's brothers, exposing the violent enforcement of communal norms.

Through characters like Shamas and Jugnu, the novel foregrounds skepticism toward religion. Shamas, an atheist with communist leanings, privileges rationalism, while Jugnu—nominally Muslim—frequently questions and criticizes Islamic beliefs. At times, the narrative closely aligns with their perspectives, which can be interpreted as favoring a critical, even dismissive stance toward religion. "I was born into a Muslim household, but I object to the idea that that automatically makes me a Muslim" (Aslam, 2004, p. 53). This emphasis risks presenting Islam less as a complex moral and spiritual system and more as a restrictive or imposed identity, particularly when characters suggest they would reject its foundational message.

Such portrayals may shape readers' perceptions by framing Islam as incompatible with modern, rational thought, especially since the critique emerges from characters of Muslim backgrounds. This internal critique can unintentionally reinforce reductive

assumptions about Muslim belief as unexamined or coercive, rather than diverse and reflective.

Chanda's storyline further highlights gendered constraints within patriarchal and diasporic contexts. Twice divorced in Pakistan, she returns to England only to enter another unstable marriage, contracted for immigration purposes and quickly abandoned. Her relationship with Jugnu remains socially and religiously untenable due to her unresolved marital status. Despite seeking guidance from clerics, she is bound by rigid interpretations that delay her autonomy, underscoring how institutional and cultural pressures circumscribe women's choice, particularly in matters of marriage and personal freedom in both her home country and her new environment.

Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* draws a sharp contrast between Western and Islamic societies, particularly in terms of moral frameworks and everyday life. He depicts Muslim communities as governed by Islamic laws and principles, while Western societies—despite containing large Muslim immigrant populations—are presented as predominantly shaped by secular, Christian-majority norms. In doing so, Aslam appears to satirize and critique the cultural and religious values of his country of origin, at times positioning himself as a "native informer" who exposes and questions the practices of his community. His criticism extends to Islamic restrictions on gender interaction, which he suggests limit personal freedom.

A key example highlights the divergence between Western and Islamic ethical reasoning. Aslam suggests that in Western contexts, an action is judged wrong primarily if it causes harm to others or society. In contrast, within Islamic belief, moral accountability extends beyond human consequences to include responsibility before God. Even if no person is harmed, actions may still be considered sinful due to their spiritual implications. This framing risks portraying Islamic morality as overly rigid and emotionally burdensome, while casting Western ethics as pragmatic and rational. Such a contrast aligns with Eurocentrism, where Western norms are implicitly treated as the universal standard of reason, thereby marginalizing alternative moral systems.

Through characters like Shamas and Jugnu, Aslam appears to normalize or defend Eurocentric ideals—such as cohabitation outside marriage—while critically examining both individual behaviors and broader societal values rooted in religion. His portrayal suggests a strong inclination toward Western social norms, accompanied by a sharp critique of the traditions of his native culture. This perspective resonates with Hamid Dabashi's notion of the "native informer," defined as someone who gains validation from Western audiences by denouncing their culture. Dabashi argues that such figures may internalize and reproduce external prejudices, turning critique into a form of self-denigration rather than balanced analysis.

A recurring trait attributed to so-called native informers is their tendency to belittle and simplify their own cultural, social, and religious traditions to secure approval from Western, often prejudiced, audiences. In doing so, they legitimize and reinforce Orientalist perspectives as well as neo-imperial agendas prevalent in American and European contexts, frequently framing such positions under the language of globalization and liberalism (Khan, W. & Ullah, M., 2019). According to Hamid Dabashi (2011), these figures can be described as comprador intellectuals and native informers—individuals who are "self-loathing Muslims" intent on disparaging their communities.

The novel extends this critical lens to the representation of characters, many of whom present distorted or reductive portrayals of Islam. For instance, Kaukab, a central character, is depicted as the daughter of a religious cleric raised within a rigidly conservative setting. Her strong attachment to religion manifests not only in strict observance but also in practices that verge on superstition, such as reliance on charms and talismans to influence her son's behavior. Her form of devotion, shaped by orthodoxy and superstition, often creates tension within her family, particularly with her husband and children who resist such rigid interpretations of faith.

Nadeem Aslam's portrayal of certain characters presents Islam in a negative light. Kaukab's exchange with her son, who states, "Mother, are you aware that Muslim women cannot marry a non-Muslim?" serves as a notable example. Their testimony in a court of law is worth half that of a man" (Aslam, 2004, p. 118). This dialogue highlights internal familial conflict while also foregrounding contentious interpretations of Islamic law.

Maps for Lost Lovers portrays Muslim characters in polarized ways, oscillating between strict orthodoxy and extreme liberal or atheistic positions. Ujala, the son of Shamas and Kaukab, exemplifies the latter. He is characterized by his strong criticism of Islamic beliefs and practices, frequently attributing the marginalization of women in Muslim societies directly to religion. As an openly atheistic and Westernized figure, he promotes a Eurocentric worldview and supports unrestricted personal freedom, including in matters of relationships and marriage, without acknowledging potential social consequences.

Ujala also challenges Islamic legal practices, particularly punishments, which he presents in a critical and sarcastic manner. In one exchange, he remarks: "A religion that has given dignity to millions around the world? Amputations, stoning to death, flogging—not barbaric?" (Aslam, 2004, p. 358). Here, he frames these punishments as inherently brutal, interpreting them in a way that emphasizes severity while overlooking their intended role within a broader legal and ethical system.

This quotation delivers a forceful and emotionally charged critique of Islamic law and Shariah. By isolating specific punishments and presenting them without contextual grounding, the narrative risks portraying Islamic jurisprudence as excessively harsh.

Terms such as "barbaric" carry strong evaluative weight, moving beyond inquiry into outright moral judgment. Such framing echoes a wider pattern in Western discourse, where Islamic legal principles are often measured against secular norms and deemed incompatible or unacceptable. Consequently, the emphasis remains narrowly fixed on physical penalties rather than engaging with the wider ethical framework, conditions of application, or intended social outcomes, reducing Islam to a limited and often negative representation centered on severity and violence.

2.3. Male Stereotypes in '*Maps for Lost Lovers*'

Edward W. Said identifies the construction of "type" as a central discursive and representational strategy within Orientalist discourse. According to him, such figures remain confined within a specific discourse and are denied individuality, functioning instead as reductive representations of an entire class (Said, 1978, p. 66). Read in this light, Nadeem Aslam's portrayal of Muslim religious leaders and clerics appears to align with this typifying tendency rather than offering nuanced characterization.

Karim H. Karim (2011) similarly argues that dominant representations of Islam frequently rely on visual shorthand, associating Muslim identity with the bearded male and the burqa-clad female (Karim, K.H., 2011, p. 118). These recurring images contribute to a narrowing of perception, particularly among Western audiences already predisposed to stereotypical understandings of Muslims. In media and literary discourse, these "type" characters serve as a detrimental representational strategy, perpetuating oversimplified and frequently biased perspectives. When a postcolonial writer like Aslam employs similar patterns, it risks reproducing rather than challenging reductive images of Islam, whether intentionally or not.

In *Maps for Lost Lovers,* Aslam foregrounds a Muslim cleric early in the narrative, signaling the perceived centrality of religion in both Pakistani society and diasporic Muslim communities. However, these clerics are notably unnamed, a narrative choice that strips them of individuality and positions them as interchangeable figures within a homogenized category. One such cleric is described as having "a beard large enough for peacocks to nest in" (Aslam, 2004, p. 186). While this exaggeration introduces humor, it simultaneously trivializes a significant religious symbol. In Islamic tradition, the beard often signifies devotion and piety, yet the comparison to peacocks nesting renders it absurd, undermining its dignity. Through such imagery, visible markers of Muslim religiosity are recast as signs of backwardness or fanaticism.

The same character is further depicted performing an exorcism on a girl believed to be possessed by genies. Aslam presents the episode in starkly violent terms: "The holy man heated a metal plate until it was red hot and forced her to stand on it […] the arms and legs broken by a cricket bat" (p. 186) and "The front of the chest had caved in as though she had been jumped on repeatedly" (Aslam, 2004, p. 186). This graphic portrayal

constructs the cleric as a brutal and irrational figure, thereby extending the violence to an implied critique of Islam itself. Such representation risks framing Islam as inherently barbaric and its adherents as superstitious and regressive, particularly when contrasted implicitly with Western rationality and moderation. The cleric's characterization, confined within this discourse, functions less as an individual and more as a symbolic stand-in for an entire class.

This pattern recurs throughout the novel, reinforcing what Said terms the "generic type" (Said, 1978, p. 66). The repeated appearance of clerics who look the same suggests that they are common in Pakistani Muslim society. For instance, in another episode, a man seeking guidance about wine is met not with counsel but with hostility, as the cleric responds by "thundering" at him (Aslam, 2004, p. 9). Such portrayals emphasize harshness and intolerance. Elsewhere, a cleric's denunciation of sex misrepresents Islam as suppressing fundamental human needs, while implicitly valorizing Western permissiveness as pragmatic and enlightened. His assertion that white women are impure further implies that Islam promotes social and religious isolation, thereby casting Muslims as inherently intolerant.

Morris (1993) notes that typecasting can serve dual purposes: critiquing social ills and propagating negative imagery. While Aslam's work may be defended as an attempt to expose harmful practices, his exclusion of diverse, moderate, or reformist Muslim voices results in a skewed representation. By foregrounding only extreme or regressive figures, the narrative risks reinforcing Islamophobic assumptions rather than offering a balanced critique.

Moreover, Aslam's depiction appears to resonate with entrenched Orientalist tropes that portray Muslim men as violent and oppressive. The characters of Chanda's brothers, Barra and Chotta, exemplify this tendency. They are presented not only as butchers by profession but also as inherently cruel, further implicated in criminal activities such as drug smuggling and alcoholism. Their murder of their sister and her lover in the name of honor is described in graphic detail, culminating in dismemberment and disposal of the bodies. While the novel addresses a real social issue, its narrative framing repeatedly gestures toward Islam as the underlying cause of such violence. The brothers' self-identification as "Allah's sword against sinners" (Aslam, 2004, p. 175) implicitly associates religious belief with brutality.

Such linkage constitutes a significant misrepresentation. By conflating individual acts of violence with religious doctrine, the text risks attributing systemic culpability to Islam itself. In reality, like other major religions, Islam emphasizes moral conduct and the sanctity of human life and does not condone such acts of violence. Consequently, Aslam's narrative, while engaging with important social concerns, ultimately reinforces reductive

associations between Islam and violence, echoing rather than interrogating dominant Orientalist discourses.

2.4. Nadeem Aslam as Native Informer

The preceding analysis suggests that Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* can be read, from a critical perspective, as aligning with the role often described as that of a "native informer" or comprador intellectual. Within this interpretive framework, contemporary imperial centers—particularly the United States and Western Europe—are seen as relying on such figures to produce narratives that frame Oriental and Muslim societies in reductive or distorted ways. Although these writers claim cultural intimacy and authority, their representations are frequently contested for oversimplification or misinterpretation. Critics argue that such portrayals may inadvertently—or deliberately—lend support to broader geopolitical agendas, including the moral justification of Western intervention in Muslim-majority regions.

This dynamic is often understood as mutually reinforcing. Writers positioned within Western literary markets may gain recognition, legitimacy, and material benefits, while dominant powers draw symbolic validation from insider critiques that appear to confirm pre-existing assumptions. In this sense, Aslam's novel can be interpreted as participating in a discourse that is both culturally authoritative and politically useful.

In *Maps for Lost Lovers*, Aslam repeatedly foregrounds themes such as gender oppression, superstition, and religious orthodoxy. Muslim characters are frequently polarized: on one hand, figures like Kaukab or the local imam are depicted as rigid, superstitious, or fundamentalist; on the other, characters such as Shamas, Jugnu, and Ujala appear alienated from religion, leaning toward atheism or liberal individualism. This binary construction risks presenting Muslim identity as fractured between regressive religiosity and wholesale rejection of faith. Simultaneously, Islam itself is often framed as restrictive or regressive, implicitly associated with extremism and social stagnation.

Such a portrayal, however, has been critiqued as selective and limited. As noted by critics like Khan and Ullah (2019), Aslam's engagement with Islam and Muslim societies appears partial, privileging certain negative aspects while excluding a broader spectrum of lived experiences, including moderate, reformist, or intellectually diverse voices. This narrowing of perspective raises questions about representational balance and interpretive authority.

Moreover, Aslam's narrative seems to reflect an affinity with liberal, Eurocentric values—particularly in its emphasis on individual freedom, gender autonomy, and the questioning of traditional institutions such as marriage. While these themes can be read as progressive critiques, they also risk being interpreted as privileging Western norms as universal benchmarks. In this regard, Hamid Dabashi's (2011) controversial

characterization of some diaspora writers as "self-loathing" becomes relevant, though such labels remain debated and should be approached with caution.

Formally, Aslam often articulates these perspectives through his characters, including Shamas, Ujala, Jugnu, and Charagh. Many of these figures express discomfort with or detachment from their Muslim identity, and the text portrays them as skeptical of religious belief. This narrative strategy allows the text to embed critique within character dialogue, yet it also amplifies a particular ideological viewpoint while marginalizing alternatives.

From a critical standpoint, the novel can thus be seen as contributing—whether intentionally or not—to discourses that normalize Western cultural paradigms and subtly encourage assimilation into them. At the same time, it has been argued that Aslam does not fully engage with the complexities, internal debates, and diverse realities of Muslim communities (Khan & Ullah, 2019). Consequently, while the novel raises important social issues, its representational scope may be perceived as limited, reinforcing certain dominant narratives rather than offering a more pluralistic account of Muslim experiences.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of *Maps for Lost Lovers* through the critical frameworks of thinkers such as Hamid Dabashi and Edward W. Said reveals a complex yet problematic mode of representation. While Nadeem Aslam's novel engages with significant social issues such as honor killing, patriarchy, and generational conflict within diasporic Muslim communities, it simultaneously constructs a narrative that risks reinforcing reductive and polarized images of Islam and Muslims. The novel's reliance on sharply divided character types ranging from rigidly orthodox figures like Kaukab and clerics to overtly secular or atheistic characters such as Shamas, Jugnu, and Ujala creates a binary that oversimplifies the diversity of Muslim identities. In privileging voices that are either deeply critical of religion or portrayed as regressive and superstitious, the text marginalizes the possibility of nuanced, moderate, or reformist positions within Islam. This selective representation aligns with Said's notion of "type," where characters function less as individuals and more as symbolic carriers of fixed cultural meanings.

Moreover, the narrative's repeated emphasis on violence, superstition, and gender oppression—often implicitly linked to Islamic belief—risks conflating cultural practices and individual actions with religious doctrine. The depiction of clerics as brutal or irrational and the framing of honor killing through religious justification contribute to an image of Islam as inherently repressive. Such portrayals, especially when unbalanced by alternative perspectives, may inadvertently echo Orientalist tropes that position Muslim societies as backward in contrast to a rational and progressive West.

The comparison between Western and Islamic moral systems further reinforces this imbalance. By presenting Western ethics as pragmatic and human-centered, while depicting Islamic morality as rigid and burdensome, the novel appears to privilege

Eurocentric norms as universal standards. This narrative tendency not only simplifies complex ethical frameworks but also risks legitimizing the assumption that modernization necessitates the abandonment of religious tradition.

Within this context, Dabashi's concept of the "native informer" becomes a useful, though contested, interpretive lens. Aslam's position as a diasporic writer addressing Western audiences, combined with his critical portrayal of his own cultural and religious background, can be considered participating in a discourse that gains authority through insider critique. However, this critique appears uneven, as it foregrounds negative aspects while excluding the intellectual, spiritual, and social diversity of Muslim communities.

Ultimately, *Maps for Lost Lovers* occupies an ambivalent space. On one hand, it brings attention to real and urgent social problems, inviting necessary reflection and critique. On the other, its representational strategies—marked by typification, polarization, and selective emphasis—limit its capacity to offer a balanced or comprehensive portrayal. As a result, the novel risks reinforcing dominant Western narratives about Islam rather than challenging them, emphasizing the necessity of more nuanced literary engagements that capture the plurality and complexity of Muslim lived experiences.

4. Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the analysis is based on a single literary text, *Maps for Lost Lovers*, which restricts the scope of interpretation and may not be representative of Nadeem Aslam's broader body of work or of diasporic Muslim narratives in general. Second, the study predominantly employs a postcolonial and Orientalist critical framework, drawing on theorists like Edward Said, Hamid Dabashi, and Samir Amin, which, while insightful, may foreground certain ideological concerns while overlooking alternative readings, such as feminist, sociological, or purely literary interpretations. Additionally, the research relies on textual analysis without incorporating reader-response perspectives or empirical data, limiting its ability to assess how diverse audiences actually interpret the novel. Finally, the absence of comparative analysis with other contemporary works constrains the study's ability to situate Aslam's novel within a wider literary and cultural context.

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