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An Islamic Approach to Poetics: The Role of Muslim Philosophers in Offering an Alternative Literary Theory

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the contributions made by the Muslim literary philosophers of the medieval age since their ideas on poetics have not been well documented. Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina, offered an explanation of reasoning to reconcile poetry with the corpus of consistent ideas regarding truths as revealed in the Quran. Ibn Rushd compared poetry to a logical organ of philosophy, claiming that its distinctive characteristics enable the communication of truth and draw the creative mind nearer to God. Despite their extensive theoretical resources in poetry, the literary philosophies of these thinkers are largely unknown to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In addition, there are some amounts of confusion and ambivalence about the distinctiveness of their literary theories and has much misunderstanding regarding the importance of faith and logic, as revealed in their exposition of poetic language, imagination, syllogism, nature of the subject, aesthetics and moral validity. Therefore, this paper sheds light on the tradition of poetics in both pre-Islamic Arab culture and medieval Arabic-Islamic period, discusses the reasons for the acceptance of Aristotle's Poetics within the Muslim community and explores the distinctive aspects of the leading Muslim philosophers' literary theories that make them more advanced, and dynamic compared to the Greeks.

Key words: Faith, Islamic approach, literary theories, Muslim philosophers, poetics.

The field of literary theory has long been dominated by Western philosophical thought along with Aristotle's *Poetics* providing the basis for classical concepts in literature and aesthetics. Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi (870-950 AD), Ibn-Sina (Avicenna) (c. 980—1037), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) (1126–1198) explored the similarities and essential differences in rhetoric between Greek and Muslim traditions, providing an invaluable alternative perspective in literary philosophy. They extended their intellectual pursuits beyond metaphysics and logic, formulating advanced theories about poetry and its relevance to truth, ethics, and spirituality—which

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remains largely unknown to many. In their perspective, religions and faiths are pivotal in influencing rhetorical thinking, facilitating creative processes and serving as ethical foundations that integrate traditional values and moral principles, stimulating collaboration in imagination and artistic expression. Accordingly, literature, as a reflection of the mental imagery generated by the dynamic nature of human self-perception, needs a reformation and restructuring in its philosophy, objectives, and content. Therefore, drawing from the Qur'an and Islamic thought, these Muslim philosophers tried to reconcile poetry with reason and faith, introducing a more advanced and dynamic alternative to Greek literary theories. Their impactful contributions set the foundation for subsequent scholars, who aimed to reform this important area of creativity by integrating new ideas and dimensions in response to the contemporary challenges.

Tradition of Poetics in Arabo-Muslim Civilization

In pre-Islamic Arab culture, there were three major occasions for celebration, one of which was "the emergence of a poet", considered as important as "a boy was born and when a mare foaled". In that Arab society, it was commonly believed, as Ibn Rashiqa pointed out, that poets could rescue their people from obscurity, prevent them from fading into history, shield their achievements from being lost to time and stand as their representative on the Day of Judgment (Kemal 1991: 5). These traditional beliefs reinforced the importance of poetry in Arab culture, contributing to the preservation of history, the formation of personal and collective identities, the celebration of bravery, virtuous behaviour, and wisdom, and the promotion of individual and tribal virtues. During the medieval Arabic-Islamic period, this literary practice began to incorporate the moral and philosophical concepts and messages derived from the interpretations of the Qur'an (Arberry 1965). As a part of this progression, Muslim scholars and theorists felt the necessity of developing principles for literary practice, aiming to establish a distinct literary identity rooted in Islamic values and ethics, before Aristotle's *Poetics* was introduced to Arab culture.

Al-Asma'i (740-828 AD) was dedicated to documenting Arabic poetry and preserving the language itself, which contributed to the understanding of Arabic literary heritage and the evolution of poetic forms. His *Fuhulat al-Shu'ara*, regarded as one of the first major contributions to Arabic literary criticism, presents brief and rather arbitrary assessments of early poets, driven by his firm belief in the superiority of Arab culture and the distinctiveness of their language and literature, free from external influences. During his time in the desert with Bedouin tribes, al-Asma'i focused on their linguistic features and speech patterns; and his findings led him to conclude that poetry was not mere a collection of language and vocabulary, but rather a medium that conveys deeper themes, emotions, cultural importance, and artistic expression and has a social role as well (Chejne 1969).

Ibn Qutayba (828-889 AD), in *Uyun al-Akhbar*, explicitly highlighted poetry as a key source of knowledge for the Arabs and sought to uncover both the religious and artistic dimensions in the works of pre-Islamic poets like Imru' al-Qays and Abu Nuwas. His introduction to *al-Shi'r wa'l-Shu'ara* addresses various topics including 'natural' versus 'affected' poetry, 'content' versus 'expression', the structure of the *qasida*, and prosodical defects, presenting an approach based on an earlier theoretical framework. Ibn Qutayba highlights the significant role of poetry in Arab culture, viewing it as beyond mere artistic expression; and recognizing its function as an essential means of preserving identity, history, and values. He highlights its capacity to shape and reflect social ideals, emphasizing poetry's critical role in sustaining cultural continuity and fostering a sense of communal pride (Nicholson 1994).

Al-Mubarrad (826-898 AD), in his *Epistle on Poetry and Prose*, dealt with the concept of '*balagha*' (eloquence), a key aspect of Arabic rhetoric and literary criticism, exploring the various components that constitute eloquence, including clarity, precision, and the ability to evoke emotion. He highlights the significance of '*balagha*' in both Arabic poetry and prose, emphasizing its role in differentiating exceptional, high-quality literary works from the ordinary ones, by combining the elegance of linguistic technique with the potency of rhetorical skill, employing metaphors, similes, and other figures of speech to elevate the depth and beauty of expression. Al-

Mubarrad's another work *al-Kamil* includes an extensive chapter on *tashbih* (simile), combining theoretical analysis with practical insights, offering guidelines for the effective use of similes in literary composition. He considers *tashbih* as a rhetorical method for comparing two entities with similar attributes, and examines the effectiveness of similes in achieving clarity, emotional appeal, and aesthetic pleasure; providing examples from classical Arabic poetry and prose (Grunebaum 1941: 376-382).

Al-Jahiz (726-868 AD), associated with the Mutazilite school, emphasized reason and logic in understanding Islamic faith and possessed a deep knowledge of Greek philosophy. Although he was not a philologist or a poet in the traditional sense, showed a keen interest in almost any imaginable subject, which are particularly evident in his major works, *al-Bayan wa-l-tabyin* and *al-Hayawan*. These works deal with his extensive involvement with language, literature, and rhetoric, addressing a variety of subjects, such as the nature of eloquence, the significance of clear communication, and the principles of effective expression, all of which reveal his deep understanding of linguistic and rhetorical dynamics. The scattered early ideas of these works greatly influenced literary theory, providing the foundation for later scholars to develop a systematic and organized method for analyzing literature and rhetoric (Al-Zyod 2024: 397-400). Al-Jahiz, emphasizing on the linguistic and literary attributes of the Qur'an, claimed that the uniqueness of the Qur'an lies in its remarkable syntax and eloquent structure of composition, rather than in its content, a view shared with al-Baqillani and al-Jurjani. He believed that language could convey the essence of a message, as seen in the Qur'an's unique word arrangement, which amplifies its beauty and effectiveness (Elhadary 2023:1668). His ideas motivated later Arabic theorists to continue and strengthen the tradition of linguistic analysis in poetics.

Accordingly, Abu Tha'lab (815–904 AD) played an effective role in the preservation and interpretation of the Arabic language in poetry, focusing on oral transmission and authentic linguistic sources from Bedouin Arab tribesmen. Tha'lab's main goal was to establish a systematic approach to classical Arabic, maintaining the purity and accuracy necessary for interpreting the Qur'an and poetry. The significance of his seminal work *Fasih al-Lughah* lies in its contribution to accurate language use and the understanding of linguistic phenomena, which made a considerable impact on Arabic philology and future scholars. Following this, Abdallah ibn al-Mu'tazz (861-908 AD), became a leading theorist in Arabic literary criticism, contributing to establish a foundation for future critics and serving as an essential reference in the rhetorical analysis of Arabic literature. His influential work, *Kitab al-Badi'* (The Book of the New Style), introduced and organized various literary devices, including metaphors, similes, and decorative forms in Arabic poetry. His concept of *badi'*, or stylistic innovation, emphasized the artistic and creative aspects of poetry, representing a new focus on valuing the aesthetic and complex elements of poetic expression (Mahrouqi 2004).

Another notable Arab scholar and literary critic Ibn Bishr al-Amidi (987 AD) brought about a revolutionary change in Arabic literary criticism with his work *Al-Muwazana* (The Comparison), providing an advanced systematic approach for assessing poetic form and content, promoting a balanced perspective that equally recognized classical and new innovative poetic styles. By valuing both innovation and tradition, he reveals the dynamic cultural context of the 10th century, a period known for its substantial intellectual and artistic advancements in the Islamic world. His systematic approach and balanced recognition of various poetic forms greatly influenced later literary critics and scholars, encouraging an exchange between past and present styles, to enrich the understanding the role of poetry in Arab culture (Danan 2018). Subsequently, Al-Qadi al-Jurjani (1009 – 1078 or 1081 AD), made pioneering contributions to Arabic rhetorical theory through his work *Dala'il al-I'jaz* (The Proofs of Inimitability) by introducing the concept of *nazm* (word arrangement), arguing that the Qur'an's miraculous quality lay in its unique word arrangement rather than its vocabulary alone. His analysis of rhetorical techniques, metaphors, and speech structure profoundly impacted later scholars and established foundational principles for Arabic rhetoric and eloquence.

The Transmission of Aristotle's *Poetics* to Muslim Society

During the Islamic Golden Age, which began with al-Kindi in the 9th century and ended with Ibn Rushd at the end of the 12th century, Aristotle's poetics drew significant interest of the Islamic philosophers through the Arabic reception of its translation in Muslim society. During the 8th and 9th centuries, the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad facilitated scholarly activity and translation of Greek philosophy, science, and literature into Arabic, which became a movement supported by caliphs like Al-Ma'mun. Hunayn ibn Ishaq and his students significantly contributed to the transmission of Greek philosophy, including Aristotle's the *Poetics*, and his other writings on logic, metaphysics, and ethics, to introduce Aristotle's ideas into Islamic philosophical discourse. Scholars like Ishaq ibn Hunayn (Hunayn's son) and Abu Bishr Matta ibn Yunus later refined these translations, making them more accessible to the intellectual community (Morewedge 1992). The translation of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Arabic by Abu Bishr Mattā, a Christian philosopher, was based on a Syriac version originating around 700 AD. The Muslim philosopher Al-Kindi was the first peripatetic philosopher who synthesised, adapted and promoted the Greek and Hellenistic literary thoughts in the Islamic world and made them both accessible and acceptable to the Muslim audiences. (Aydin 2005).

After the initial reception of Hellenistic texts into Islamic philosophy during al-Kindi's time, al-Farabi reconstructed a 'purer' version in the tenth century through his book *The Canon of Poetry*, using alternative sources to *Poetics* but remaining close to the original (Kennedy-Day 1998). Incorporating these interpretations into his own commentary, Ibn Sina later influenced Ibn Rushd, the final great Arabo-phone commentator on Aristotle. Ibn Sina's comprehensive analysis developed a method that integrated society, logic, practice, and episteme, considering their inter relationships as a central focus of study. The approach he applied to these issues represented a major advancement, providing a more profound insight into poetry and poetics that established the foundation of the Arabic Aristotelian theory of poetics, and thereafter paved the way for Ibn Rushd to exert a lasting influence on the European Renaissance (Alwishah & Hayes 2015). Ibn Rushd's insightful commentaries and thorough analysis of Aristotelian works, later led to the widespread adoption of Aristotelian tradition among Jewish philosophers and his influence contributed to the intellectual growth of Christian Europe during the scholastic period. Aristotle's *Poetics* became accessible to the Muslim world through both language translation and interpretative modifications. Its basic concepts on the nature of tragedy and poetic composition, were of great interest to those Muslim scholars who sought to develop their own literary theories and practices. Therefore, the integration of Aristotle's *Poetics* into Muslim thought is a complex but dynamic combination of intellectual curiosity, cultural exchange, and the adaptation of philosophical ideas, which not only enriched Islamic literary theory but also initiated a platform on the basis of cross-cultural influence for subsequent European intellectual progress (Aydin 2005).

Islamic Peripatetic Interpretations of Poetics: Innovation or Echoes of the Past?

Aristotle and al-Farabi both considered imagination essential for thought, but Aristotle separated the functions of reason and imagination, giving each a distinct role, whereas al-Farabi integrated both image manipulation and retention to imagination within the scope of imagination. In *The Canons of Poetry*, al-Farabi explored the complex relationship between man's imitation, imagination, and sensation, highlighting their collaborative function in creating illusions about objects, whether positive or negative. He emphasized the importance of imagination, arguing that its value lies not in truth or falsehood, but in its ability to bridge sensory experiences with intellectual thoughts. Imagination, as al-Farabi' pointed out, serves a prophetic role by generating imitations derived from the 'Active Intellect,' a concept that Greek poetics does not fully accept, as it restricts imagination from directly imitating intelligible forms (Black 1990).

Al-Farabi, in his explanation of imagination, categorized the intellect into four distinct types: potential, actual, acquired, and Agent. In his view, the potential intellect refers to the ability

to think, which is common to all human beings, while the actual intellect denotes being engaged in the process of active thinking. For him, thinking means extracting abstract, universal concepts from the sensory impressions of objects, which are preserved within the individual's imagination. This progression from potential to actual thinking leads the Agent Intellect to interact with the preserved sensory images, because through the Agent Intellect, the intelligible becomes clear, enabling individual to engage in thought (Mambrol 2020). Thus, al-Farabi defined poetry as the method of formulating propositions that connect intellectual ideas with the reality they represent, giving less importance to the metrical structure in which those propositions appear.

Despite recognizing the imaginative or fictitious nature of poetry, Al-Farabi believed that, like other art forms, it has the potential to reveal deeper truths and insights through its metaphorical, imagery-driven, and emotional expression. He argued that imaginative discourse might present claims about existing states of reality that are either true or false, but the expressions can still be meaningful depending on their context. In his view, the worth of images lies in their ability to facilitate intelligible thought, therefore, the purpose of poetry is to elevate the imaginative portrayal of the subject matters it addresses. Al-Farabi clarified this view by identifying the Aristotelian concept of the soul into four distinct components: the appetitive (the faculty of desiring or avoiding sensory objects), the sensitive (the faculty of perceiving physical substances through the senses), the imaginative (the faculty of holding and manipulating images of perceived objects), and the rational (the faculty responsible for intellectual activities). In distinguishing his Muslim viewpoint, Al-Farabi focused on the prophet's strong imaginative, rational faculties, and intellectual capacity, revealing how these intelligibles are connected to symbols and images, facilitating the communication of abstract truths to ordinary individuals (Kemal 1991: 90, 92 & 94). He argued that the uniqueness of prophetic knowledge lies not in its content, which philosophers can attain through reason and intellect, but in the imaginative form imparted by the prophet. Al-Farabi, by referencing this example, emphasized the spiritual and moral responsibilities of rhetoric practitioners to use their God-given intellect wisely, whether in poetry, prose, or drama.

Al-Farabi championed originality and creativity in poetry, suggesting not to oversimplifying the art form by emphasizing solely on similes and comparisons. His philosophical framework, integrating both psychological and epistemological insights, shaped his view of authentic poetic talent. Thus, he reserved the term 'syllogizing poets' for those who 'excel in similes and comparisons' because they are "truly and fully familiar with the poetic art to the point that none of its specific aspects or rules escapes them in whatever type of poetry in which they exert their abilities" (al-Farabi 1937: 274-276). He criticized those poets who do not have originality and creativity for producing similes and comparisons but imitate the works of others. He claimed that the best poetry is created spontaneously, arising naturally from the poet's inspiration, arguing that authentic poetic talent comes from the ability of independent and imaginative use of language,

Unlike Plato, Al-Farabi viewed poets not as opponents of philosophers and regarded the pursuit of poetic knowledge as virtuous. Plato's approach to poetry was critical, as he viewed it as potentially deviating from truth and reason, which could endanger rational thought and moral integrity. In contrast, Al-Farabi's perspective was more integrative, focusing on how poetry contributes to moral and intellectual development and its ability to convey philosophical truths. Al-Farabi believed that poetry can contribute to personal and social well-being by expressing moral and philosophical ideas, making them accessible to a broader audience. In the *Canons of Poetry*, he drew parallels between poetry and the decorative arts, asserting that the poetic art operates with words to convey meaning, whereas decorative art expresses its message through colours, both with the intention of evoking imagination and senses (Morewedge 1992).

The elements of al-Farabi's early theories are further developed in the work of his successor, Ibn Sina (c. 980–1037). While both philosophers share the Classical conception of beauty, Ibn Sina's theory expanded on the moral aspects of poetry, providing a comprehensive defense of the connection between aesthetics and morality, and advocating for an ideal relationship between Beauty and Goodness. First, he noted that the genre of creative works,

whether it is tragic, comic, or satiric, can be determined by the interpersonal balances that individuals attain through their relationships, dynamics, actions, choices and emotional interactions. Secondly, the balance individuals maintain in their moral lives shapes their pursuit of sensibility, ridicule, or nobility, which in turn matches them with comedy, satire, or tragedy. Finally, in his view, the moral quality of an actor determines the life it leads, the relations to itself and others it enters, and the kind of poetic community it belongs to (Özturan 2019:11-15).

Ibn Sina examined al-Farabi's Islamic philosophy with greater depth, separating it from the psychological contexts that were previously used to justify the validity of poetic works. He claimed in "*Remarks and Admonitions: Logic*" that al-Farabi's assessment is inadequate because it asserts that poetic syllogisms are false and impossible. According to him, all poetry is formed by complex logical structures, such as explicit or implicit syllogisms with man's 'rational imagination' not like the animal's 'sensitive imagination' only. By "rational imagination," he meant the human talent for abstract thought, logical reasoning, and creative work based on structured principles, in contrast to "sensitive imagination," which relates to the more instinctual and sensory-based imagination of animals, devoid of logical reasoning. Ibn Sina did not accept al-Farabi's categorization of syllogisms, but he recognized that al-Farabi's thoughts on poetry had significant intellectual and cultural value, as he addressed poetic elements, such as the exploration of validity, pleasure, response, and social action, which contributed to a broader understanding of human experience and expression. Ibn Sina aimed to clarify the connection between logic and language, and between syllogistic reasoning and poetry, assuming that "the validity of poetic syllogistic would fall victim to incompleteness unless we could show how the use of language evokes certain responses-of pleasure in a harmony of words and their meanings and of emotions appropriate to tragedy and so on" (Kemal 1991: 252 & 253).

In the introductory chapter of *Kitab Ash-Shir*, Ibn Sina presented a logical analysis of the poetic terms *muhakah* (mimetic representation) and *takhyil* (imaginative creation) within the context of Islamic philosophy. He established an etymological connection between 'imagination' and 'imaginative representations,' defining imagination as the power to recreate sensory experiences as mental images, even in the absence of the original objects. He argued that imagination is both dynamic and inventive, capable of transforming and reshaping experiences into new forms and combinations that are quite different from initial appearances or original versions, encompassing various activities like thinking, imagining, calculating, dreaming, remembering, and wishing (Fallahi 2019). In his view, poetic language is innately imaginative and the ability of imagination to generate images helps poetic language to differentiate between premises, arguments, and conclusions, which in turn creates the concept of poetic syllogism. Influenced by Aristotle's reasoning method for syllogism, where accepting specific statements results in necessary conclusions, Ibn Sina modified and expanded these theories to reflect his own philosophical and logical perspectives. While Aristotle prioritized the formal aspects of syllogistic logic within his comprehensive logical system, highlighting its importance in philosophical and scientific reasoning; Ibn Sina examined how syllogistic reasoning could be applied to a variety of contexts, including poetry and imagination, to show the role of imagination in poetic language, creativity, and metaphysical inquiries (Chatti 2019).

Ibn Sina considered poetry not merely as art but as a method for engaging with and influencing emotions, both distress and pleasure, through thoughtfully constructed images. He addressed the classical debate on the scope of language, grammar, and logic by highlighting that languages provide abstracted concepts which are regulated by logic. He pointed out that logic operates on an abstract level, remaining consistent and unaffected by sensory experiences because it deals with concepts that can be separated from the variability of sensory material. In *al-Isharat wa al-Tanbihat* (The Book of Directives and Remarks), Ibn Sina suggested that while various languages have their own specific rules for managing sensory information, they generally adhere to a common structural framework, which facilitates a broad understanding of linguistic principles. However, for him, imagination is a spiritual attribute since it distinguishes humans from other creatures, and is developed through artistic, scientific, and virtuous pursuits, helping humans understand their own cognitive capabilities. He recognized the significance of the

estimation capability of imagination, highlighting the role of logic, reminding that mankind are instilled by the 'free will' but have responsibilities as well (Portelli 1979).

Both Al-Farabi and Ibn-Sina discussed Aristotle's theories addressing the nature of beauty, its ability to obtain truth, its basis in a subject community of feeling and finally its relation to morality through the prism of Islamic principles. Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), like his predecessors al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, was deeply committed to advocating for the logical validity of poetry and maintained the Classical and Islamic connection between Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. However, some of his concerns have different focal points because he argued against al-Ghazali in order to strengthen his claim. In *Commentary on Aristotle's Poetics* (1198), he focused the function of metaphor more thoroughly than poetic syllogisms, with a clear inclination towards al-Farabi's interpretation of poetic syllogisms rather than Ibn Sina's (Habib 2024). In *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (1198), Ibn Rushd analyzed the significance of metaphors in the search for truth, considering how allegorical meanings can be valued without reducing them to true or false evaluations. He essentially argued for the criteria needed to reach a reliable agreement on metaphorical meanings, which, notably coincide with al-Ghazali's five modes of existence: 'essential', 'sensible', 'imaginary', 'intellectual', and 'metaphorical' (Hafees 2013).

Ibn Rushd's morality theory integrated both rational and divine aspects, arguing that moral approval requires a commitment to understanding and a connection with the fundamental truths of existence and the divine expectations set by God. He viewed truth as an objective reality rather than a mere subjective concept, since it is consistent with reason and rational understanding, asserting that moral approval is closely related to connecting with truth. He claimed that poetry, functioning as a logical organon of philosophy, capable of drawing one closer to God in its distinct manner and possesses significant value (Soleh & Rahmawati 2023: 174 & 175). Ibn Rushd considered reason as a divine blessing and God-given gift, emphasizing how essential human logical reasoning and understanding are for guiding actions and shaping decisions. He highlighted the need for rational analysis and justification of moral beliefs and behaviours, asserting that ethical principles should be based on reason and logical reasoning rather than being accepted blindly or on the basis of tradition (Adamson & Taylor 2009). According to him, rational philosophical reasoning and religious revelation are both valid means of uncovering truth, because the rational justification of ethical principles and divine instructions give the humanity insight into God's demands of subjects.

To conclude, the medieval Muslim philosophers not only contributed to formulate the disciplines of Arabic grammar, poetics, and rhetoric but also developed the method of appreciation for the aesthetics and precision of the language, establishing functional and effective literary theories. They turned to the Poetics of Aristotle to bridge a connection with the Qur'anic concept of Truth, Goodness as well as Beauty and specified their own virtuous literary thoughts following to Islamic tenets and principles. Their aim was to develop a new or revised literary theory, integrating Aristotle's Poetics with Islamic perspectives, presenting an approach that embodies a unique combination of classical Greek ideas and Islamic thoughts. This indicates that the adaptation of Aristotle's literary theory within Muslim community was influenced by both religious motivations and social contexts, representing the early stage of Islamization process. Therefore, in this regard, the role of Muslim philosophers cannot be considered as merely an academic activity or an intellectual pursuit; rather it was part of a broader religious and social movement within the Arab-Muslim world. Their insightful literary concepts encouraged many writers and thinkers to engage with spiritual and philosophical themes, promote cultural revival, and explore the complex relationship between the individual and the Divine. Their contributions added depth to the Islamic literary tradition, influencing broader discussions on the nature of art, language, and the role of literature in society, to highlight the connection between language, spirituality, and cultural values.

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