

Ecofeminism Reconceives Feminism in Potential Ecological Feminism

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Abstract

This paper argues that the capacity and control of ecological feminism provides a distinctive framework both for reconceiving feminism and for developing environmental ethic, which takes seriously connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. It discusses the nature of a feminist ethic and the ways in which ecofeminism provides a feminist and environmental ethic. Hence, it holds that feminism must embrace ecological feminism, if it is to end the domination of women, because domination of women is tied conceptually and historically to the domination of nature. It concludes that any feminist theory and any environmental ethic which fails to take seriously the twin and interconnected dominations of women and nature is at best incomplete and worst simply inadequate. This research employed analytic method.

Keywords: Feminism, Ecofeminism, Ecology, Environment and Ethics

Introduction

Ecological feminism (Ecofeminism) has begun to receive a fair amount of attention lately as an alternative feminism and environmental ethic (Warren 1990, p.220). It was in 1974 that Francoise d'Eaubonne introduced the term *ecofemmisme* to bring attention to women's potential for bringing about an ecological revolution (p. 213). Since then, the term has been used in many ways. Ecological feminism is the position that there are important connections- historical, experiential, symbolic, theoretical – between the domination of women and the domination of nature, and an understanding of which is crucial to both feminism and environmental ethics (Warren 1996, p. 230).

Ecofeminism is an ideology and movement that sees climate change, gender equality, and social injustice more broadly as intrinsically related issues, all tied to masculine dominance in society (200). Specifically, ecofeminism holds that most environmental issues can be traced back to the global prioritization of qualities deemed masculine (particularly the ones some would regard as toxic, like aggression and domination) and those in power who embody those attributes.

Ecofeminism also calls attention to the fact that women are disproportionately affected by environmental issues (Vareba *et al*, 2019). According to a report of Centre for Environment, Human Rights and Development (CEHRD), the *Adrift Fortunes: Testimonies of Women in Oil Polluted Communities of the Niger Delta*, women worldwide typically hold less monetary wealth and rely on the natural environment more, they are more likely to be displaced by climate change and have to travel farther for resources, like water, as dry seasons extend. Research shows women are also more greatly

affected by climate change than the men. (Vareba et al, 2019). This study also suggested some men may have internalized aversions toward environmentalism.

There are several sub-branches of this movement, including vegetarian ecofeminism, spiritual ecofeminism, and materialist ecofeminism. But at their root, they all assert that masculine dominance has led to a disconnect between nature and culture, which has adversely affected marginalized groups as well as nature itself.

Feminism, in all its waves, has experienced evolutions and resurgences since it formally began in the mid-1800s. As climate change awareness and subsequent activism rose in recent decades, feminists began to identify the ways in which the movement for gender equality and the movement for environmental protection are related. The term "ecofeminism" was coined by the feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974. According to her, the disenfranchisement and oppression of women, people of color, and the poor are intrinsically linked to the degradation of the natural world, as both arose as a result of patriarchal dominance (d'Eaubonne 1974. Pp 10).

Over the years, many more have explored the sentiment behind ecofeminism—and begun advocating for it. Women such as Vandana Shiva founder of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology, and Carolyn Merchant, author of *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, are just two prominent names within this movement since its inception. Some other names of note include Val Blumwood, Greta Gaard, and Susan Griffin, just to name a few.

Ecofeminism creates a linkage between ecology and feminism. Ecofeminists see the domination of women as stemming from the same ideologies that bring about the domination of the environment. Eboh believes that “Ecofeminism is about a sense of being in relationship with the natural environment” (2001, p. 23). Patriarchal systems, where men own and control land, are seen as responsible for the oppression of women and destruction of the natural environment. This applies to the Niger Delta region of Nigeria where the International Oil Companies (IOCs) have explored oil for decades without regard to environmental regulations and standards, thereby leading to the destruction of nature and the environment. The aftermath of this has led to the destruction of women's livelihood in the region. Vareba *et al* argue that pollution in the Niger Delta impacts more on women than men in the region as women depend more on the natural environment for livelihood than men (2019, p. 12). In the light of this, Ecofeminism argues that the men in power control the lands, and therefore, can exploit it for their profit and success. In this situation, ecofeminists consider women to be exploited by men in power for their profit, success, and pleasure. Thus, for them, women and the environment are both exploited. Hence, ecofeminists believe that the people in power are able to take advantage of them distinctively because they are seen as passive and helpless. Ecofeminism, therefore, as a way of repairing social and ecological injustice, calls on women to work towards creating a healthy environment and ending the destruction of lands that most women, especially rural women rely on to provide for their families (Vareba *et al*, 2019, p. 18). Ecofeminism again believes that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from a shared history of oppression by patriarchal systems. Shiva claims that women have a special connection to the environment through their daily interaction with it. She observes that “women in subsistent economies, producing and reproducing wealth in partnership with nature have been experts in their rights of holistic and ecological knowledge of nature's processes. But these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and substance need not recognized by the capitalist reduction paradigm because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature or women's lives, work and knowledge with the creation of wealth” (Shiva 1988, p.33). “It spreads the gospel of egalitarianism and equity” (Ebo 2001 p. 28). Ecofeminism aims to tackle livelihood issues in the

face of environmental degradation. It however leaves out health hazards, which women also suffer in a polluted environment. Its approach is also materialistic. However, in so far as ecofeminism will be very relevant in today, it is not a holistic approach to resolving inequality. It presses only for the economic interest of women.

Feminism, Ecological Feminism and Conceptual Frameworks

Feminism is simply the movement to end sexist oppression. It involves the elimination of any and all factors that contribute to the continued systematic domination or subordination of women (Eboh, 2001 p. 6). Shiva observes that feminists disagree about the nature of and solution to the subordination of women, however, all feminist agree that sexist oppression exist, is wrong and must be abolished (Shiva 1988, 40). A 'feminist issue' is any issue that contributes in some way to understanding the oppression of women. Equal rights, comparable pay for comparable work, and food production are feminist issues wherever and whenever an understanding of them contributes to an understanding of the continued exploitation or subjugation of women. Searching for water and firewood and fetching them are feminist issues wherever and whenever women's primary responsibility for these tasks contributes to their lack of full participation in decision making, income producing, or high-status positions engaged in by men. What counts as feminist issue, then depends largely on context, particularly the historical and material conditions of women's lives.

Environmental degradation and exploitation are feminist issues because an understanding of them contributes to an understanding of the oppression of women. In the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria, as the oil-polluted communities continue to grapple with the consequences of oil spills and gas flares resulting from unregulated explorative activities of the International Oil Companies (IOCs), women are seen to bear the greatest brunt. They bear the burden of caring for families and depend mostly on the natural environment for sustenance and livelihoods. The primary economic activity in the Niger Delta is farming and fishing. Notably, the primary sources of livelihood of women in the Niger Delta include fishing, gathering of seafood, fuel wood and subsistence farming. These livelihood structures depend on the endowment of the natural environment. Environmental pollution impacts men and women disproportionately. Given the different roles and responsibilities in the household and community levels; women are more impacted during oil spills. Women are more exposed to environmental change because of a number of cultural and socio-economic factors. Women in the Niger Delta are often poorer, relatively uneducated, possess fewer livelihood assets and depend more on the natural environment for their livelihoods. Consequently they bear the heaviest burden of environmental change. One of such apparent huge impacts of environmental change attributable to pollution on the Niger Delta women is loss of agricultural land. Research unravels how oil pollution specifically impacts on women in the region. Given the little attention giving to the impact of oil pollution on women in the Niger Delta, and the associated sufferings experienced by the local population, this research seeks to investigate into the grave human cost of oil pollution on women in the region (Vareba *et al*, 2019).

Feminist philosophers claim that some of the most important feminist issues are conceptual ones: these issues concern how one conceptualizes such mainstay political notions as reason and rationality, ethics and what it is to be human. Ecofeminists extend this feminist philosophical concern to nature. They argue that, ultimately, some of the most important connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature are conceptual. To see this, consider the nature of conceptual frameworks.

A conceptual framework is a set of basic beliefs, values, attitudes, and assumptions, which shape and reflect how one views oneself and one's world (Warren 1996, p.10). It is a socially constructed lens through which we perceive ourselves and others. It is affected by such factors as gender, race, class, age, affectional orientation, nationality, and religious background. Some conceptual frameworks are oppressive. An oppressive conceptual framework is one that explains, justifies and maintains relationships of domination and subordination. When an oppressive conceptual framework is patriarchal, it explains, justifies, and maintains the subordination of women by men. Warren argued that there are three significant features of oppressive conceptual frameworks: first, value hierarchical thinking, by this she means “up-down” thinking which places higher value, status, or prestige on what is “up” rather than what is “down” (Warren 1996, p.291). Secondly, is value dualism. By this, she implies disjunctive pairs in which the disjuncts are seen as operational rather than complementary and exclusive rather than inclusive and which place higher value (status, prestige) on one disjunct rather than the other (e.g., dualism which give higher value or status to that which historically been identified as “body,” “emotion,” and “female”); and thirdly, the logic of domination, i.e., a structure of argumentation, which leads to a justification of subordination (warren, 1996, p.35).

The third feature of oppressive conceptual frameworks is oppressive conceptual framework is the most significant. A logic of domination is not just a logical structure. It also involves a substantive value system, since an ethical premise is needed to permit or sanction the 'just' subordination of that which is subordinate. It also involves a substantive value system, since the ethical premise is needed to permit or sanction the “just” subordination of that which is subordinate. This justification typically is given on grounds of some alleged characteristics (e.g., rationality) which the dominant (e.g., men) have the subordinate (e.g., women) lack.

Contrary to what many feminists and ecofeminist have said or suggested, there may be nothing inherently problematic about “hierarchical thinking” or even “value hierarchical thinking” in contexts other than contexts of oppression. Hierarchical thinking is important in daily living for classifying data, comparing information and organizing material. Taxonomies (e.g., plant taxonomies) and biological nomenclature seem to require some form of “hierarchical thinking”. Even “value hierarchical thinking” may be quite acceptable on certain contexts. (The same may be said of “value dualism” in non-oppressive contexts). For example, suppose it is true that what is unique about humans is our conscious capacity to radically reshape our social environments (or “societies”), as Murray Bookchin suggests (Murray, 1987, p.9). Then one could conclude that humans are better equipped to radically reshape their environments than are rocks or plants- a “value hierarchical” way of speaking.

The problem is not simply that value-hierarchical thinking and value dualisms are used, but the way in which each has been used in oppressive conceptual frameworks to establish inferiority and to justify subordination (Warren 1996, p.230). It is the logic of domination, couple with value-hierarchical thinking and value dualisms, which “justifies” subordination. What is explanatorily basic, then, about the nature of oppressive conceptual frameworks is the logic of domination.

Ecofeminism Reconceives Feminism

The discussion so far has focused on some of the oppressive conceptual features of patriarchy. As we use the phrase, the “logic of traditional feminism” refers to the location of the conceptual roots of sexist oppression in the African societies, in an oppressive patriarchal conceptual framework characterized by a logic of domination. Insofar as other systems of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism) are also conceptually maintained by a logic of domination, appeal to the logic of traditional feminism ultimately locates the basic conceptual inter-connections among all systems of oppression in the logic of domination. It thereby explains at the

conceptual level why the eradication of sexist oppression requires the eradication of the other forms of oppressions (Alison 1980, p.42). It is by clarifying this conceptual connection between systems of oppression that a movement to end sexist oppression- traditionally the special turf of feminist theory and practice- leads to a reconceiving of feminism as a movement to end all forms of oppression.

Suppose one agrees that the logic of traditional feminism requires the expression of feminism to include other social systems of domination (e.g., racism and classism). What warrants the inclusion of nature in these “social systems of domination”? Why must the logic of traditional feminism include the abolition of “naturalism” (i.e., the domination of nonhuman nature) among the “isms” feminism must confront? The conceptual justification for expanding feminism to include ecofeminism is twofold. One basis has already been suggested: by showing that the conceptual connections between the dual dominations of women and nature are located in an oppressive and, at least in Western societies, patriarchal conceptual framework characterized by a logic of domination, ecofeminism explains how and why feminism, must be expanded and recognized as also a movement to end naturalism. This is made explicit in the following argument A:

(A1) Feminism is a movement to end sexism.

(A2) But Sexism is conceptually linked with naturalism (through an oppressive conceptual framework characterized by a logic of domination)

(A3) Thus, Feminism is (also) a movement to end naturalism.

Because, ultimately, these connections between sexism and naturalism are conceptual- embedded in an oppressive conceptual framework- the logic of traditional feminism leads to the embarrassment of ecofeminism (Warren *et al* 1991, p.288).

The other justification for reconceiving feminism to include ecofeminism has to do with the concepts of gender and nature. Just as conceptions of gender are socially constructed, so are the conceptions of nature. Of course, the claim that women and nature are social constructions does not require anyone to deny that there are actual humans and actual trees, rivers and plants. It simply implies that how women and nature are conceived is a matter of historical social reality. These conceptions vary cross-culturally and by historical time period. As a result, any discussion of the “oppression or domination of nature” involves reference to historically specific forms of social domination of women by men.

If ecofeminism promises to reconceive traditional feminism in ways which include naturalism as a legitimate feminist issue, does ecofeminism also promise to reconceive environmental ethics in a way which are feminist? We think so.

Ecofeminism as a Feminist and Environmental Ethic

A feminist ethic involves a twofold commitment to critique male bias in ethic wherever it occurs, and to develop ethics which are not male-biased. Sometimes this involves articulation of values (e.g., values of care, appropriate trust, kinship, friendship) often lost or underplayed in mainstream ethics (Warren 1990, p. 288). Sometimes, it involves engaging in theory building by pioneering in new directions or by revamping old theories in gender sensitive ways. What makes the critiques of old theories or conceptualizations of new one's “feminist” is that they emerge out of sex-gender analyses and reflect whatever those analyses reveal about gendered experience and gendered reality.

As we conceive feminist ethics in the pre-feminist present, it rejects attempts to conceive of

ethical theory in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, because it assumes that there is no essence (in the sense of some transhistorical, universal, absolute abstraction) of feminist ethics. While attempts to formulate joint necessary and sufficient conditions of a feminist ethic are unfruitful, nonetheless, there are some necessary conditions, what we prefer to call “boundary conditions,” of a feminist ethic. These boundary conditions clarify some of the minimal conditions of a feminist ethic without suggesting that feminist ethics has some ahistorical essence. They are like boundaries of a quilt or collage. They delimit the territory of the piece without dictating what the interior, the design, the actual pattern of the piece looks like. Because the actual design of the quilt emerges from the multiplicity of voices of women in a cross-cultural context, the design will change over time. It is not something static.

What are some of the boundary conditions of a feminist ethic? First, nothing can become part of a feminist ethic- can be part of the quilt- that promotes sexism, racism, classism, or any other “isms” of social domination. Of course, people may disagree about what counts as a sexist act, racist attitude, classist behavior. What counts as sexism, racism, or classism may vary cross-culturally. Still, because a feminist ethic aims at eliminating sexism and sexist bias, and (as we have already shown) sexism is intimately connected in conceptualization and in practice to racism, classism and naturalism, a feminist ethic must be anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist, and anti-naturalist and opposed to any “ism” which presupposes or advances a logic of domination.

Second, a feminist ethic is a contextualist ethic. A contextualist ethic is one which sees ethical discourse and practice as emerging from the voices of people located in different historical circumstances. A contextually is properly viewed as a collage of mosaic, a tapestry of voices that emerges out of felt experiences. Like any collage or mosaic, the point is not to have one picture based on a unity of voices, but a pattern which emerges out of the very different voices of people located in different circumstances. When a contextualist ethic is feminist, it gives central place to the voices of women.

Third, since a feminist ethic gives central significance to the diversity of women's voices, a feminist ethic must be structurally pluralistic rather than unitary or reductionistic. It rejects the assumption that there is “one voice” in terms of which ethical values, beliefs, attitudes, and conduct can be assessed.

Fourth, a feminist ethic reconceives ethical theory as theory in process which will change over time. Like all theory, a feminist ethic is based on some generalization (Frye 1986, p.291). Nevertheless, the generalizations associated with it are themselves a pattern of voices within which the different voices emerging out of concrete and alternative descriptions of ethical situations have meaning. The coherence of a feminist theory so conceived is given within a historical and conceptual context, i.e., within a set of historical, socioeconomic circumstances, including circumstances of race, class, age, and affectional orientation and within a set of basic beliefs, value, attitudes, and assumptions about the world.

Fifth, because a feminist ethic is contextualist, structurally pluralistic, and “in process,” one way to evaluate the claims of a feminist ethic is in terms of their inclusiveness; and epistemologically favored, which are more inclusive of the felt experiences and perspectives of oppressed persons. The condition of inclusiveness requires and ensures that the diverse voices of women (as oppressed persons) will be given legitimacy in ethical theory building. It hereby helps to minimize empirical bias, e.g., bias arising from faulty or false generalizations based on stereotyping, too small a sample size, or a skewed sample. It does so by ensuring that any generalization, which are made about ethics and ethical decision making include- indeed cohere with – the patterned voices of women (Warren 1996, p. 250).

Sixth, a feminist ethic makes no attempt to provide an “objective” point of view, since it assumes that in contemporary culture there really is no such point of view. As such, it does not claim to be “unbiased” in the sense of “value neutral” or “objective”. However, it does assume that whatever bias, it has as an ethic centralizing the voices of oppressed persons is a 'better bias'- “better” because it is more inclusive and therefore, less partial than those which exclude voices (Warren 1996, p. 31).

Seventh, a feminist ethic provides a central place for values typically unnoticed, underplayed, or misrepresented in traditional ethics, e.g., values of care, love, friendship, and appropriate trust (Nathan 1981, p.30). Again, it needs not do this at the exclusion of consideration of rights, rules, or utility. There may be many contexts in which talk of rights or of utility is useful or appropriate. In a feminist contextualist ethic, whether or not such talk is useful or appropriate depends on the context; other values (e.g., values of care, trust, friendship) are not viewed as reducible to or captured solely in terms of such talk (Cheney 2008, p.100).

Eight, a feminist ethic also involves a re-conception of what it is to be human and what for humans to engage in ethical decision making, since it rejects as either meaningless or currently untenable in any gender free or gender-neutral description of humans, ethics and ethical decision making. It thereby rejects what Alison Jaggar calls “abstract individualism”, i.e., the position that it is possible to identify a human essence or human nature that exists independently of any particular historical context (Jaggar 1980, p.42). Humans and human moral conduct are properly understood essentially (and not merely accidentally) in terms of networks or webs of historical and concrete relationships.

All the probs are now in place for seeing how ecofeminism provides the framework for a distinctively feminist and environmental ethic. It is a feminism that critiques male bias where it occurs in ethics (including environmental ethics) and aims at providing an ethic (including environmental ethics) and aims at providing an ethic (including environmental ethic) which is not male biased- and does so in a way that satisfies the preliminary boundary conditions of a feminist ethic.

First, ecofeminism is quintessentially anti-naturalist. Its anti-naturalism consists in the rejection of any way of thinking about or acting toward nonhuman nature that reflects a logic, values, or attitude of domination. Its anti-naturalist, anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-classist (and so forth, for all other 'isms” of social domination) stance forms the outer boundary of the quilt: nothing gets on the quilt which is naturalist, sexist, racist, classist, and so forth.

Second, ecofeminism is a contextualist ethic. It involves a shift from a conception of ethics as primarily a matter of rights, rules, or principles predetermined and applied in specific cases to entities viewed as competitors in the contest of moral standing, to a conception of ethics as growing out of what Jim Cheney calls “defining relationship”, i.e., relationships conceived in some sense as defining who one is (Cheney 2008, p.106). As a contextualist ethic, it is not that rights, or rules, or principles are not relevant or important. Clearly, they are in certain contexts and for certain purposes. It is just that what makes them relevant or important is that those to whom they apply are entities in relationship with others.

Ecofeminism also involves an ethical shift from granting moral consideration to nonhumans exclusively on grounds of some similarity they share with humans (e.g., rationality, interest, moral agency, sentience, right-holder status) to “a highly contextual account to see clearly what a human being is and what the non-human world might be, morally speaking, for human beings (Cheney 2008, 99). For an ecofeminist, how a moral agent is in relationship to another becomes of central significance, not simply that a moral agent is a moral agent or is bound by rights, duties, virtue, or utility to act in a certain way.

Third, ecofeminism is structurally pluralistic in that it presupposes and maintains difference-difference among humans as well as between humans and at least some elements of nonhuman nature. Thus, while ecofeminism denies the “nature/culture” split, it affirms that community (in some respects) and different from it (in other aspects). Ecofeminism's attention to relationships and community is not, therefore, an erasure of difference but a respectful acknowledgement of it.

Fourth, ecofeminism reconceives theory as theory in process. It focuses on patterns of meaning, which emerge, for instance, from storytelling and first-person narratives of women (and others) who deplore the twin dominations of women and nature. The use of narrative is one way to ensure that the content of the ethic- the pattern of the quilt- may/will change over time, as the historical and material realities of women's lives change and as more is learned about women-nature connection and the destruction of the nonhuman world (Warren 1996, p.28)

Fifth, ecofeminism is inclusivist. It emerges from the voices of women who experience the harmful domination of nature and the way that domination is tied to their domination as women. It emerges from listening to the voices of indigenous peoples of the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria (Ogonis, Ijaws, Igbos and Ibibio-Efik) who have been displaced of their livelihoods and are also suffering heinous health hazard due to pollution arising from oil and gas exploration by the International Oil Companies. (Vareba 2019, p.10). With its emphasis on inclusivity and difference, ecofeminism provides a framework for recognizing that what counts as ecology and what counts as appropriate conduct towards both human and nonhuman environments is largely a matter of context.

Sixth, ecofeminism makes no attempt to provide an objective point of view. It is a social ecology. It recognizes the twin dominations of women and nature as social problems rooted both in every concrete, historical, socioeconomic circumstances and in oppressive patriarchal conceptual frameworks, which maintain and sanction these circumstances.

Seventh, ecofeminism makes a central place for values of care, love, friendship, trust and appropriate reciprocity- values that our relationships to others are central to our understanding of who we are (Cheney 2008, p. 103). It thereby gives voice to the sensitivity that in climbing a mountain, one is doing something in relationship with another, an “other” whom can come to care about and treat respectfully.

Lastly, an ecofeminist ethic involves a re-conception of what it means to be human, and what human ethical behavior consists. Ecofeminism denies abstract individualism. Humans are who we are in large part by virtue of the historical and social contexts and the relationships with nonhuman nature. Relationships are not something extrinsic to who we are, not an “add on” feature of human nature; they play an essential role in shaping what it is to be human. Relationships of humans to non-humans environment are, part, constructive of what it is to be a human.

By making visible the interconnections among the dominations of women and nature, ecofeminism shows that both are feminist issues and the explicit acknowledgement of both is vital to any responsible environment ethic. Feminism must embrace ecological feminism, if it is to end the domination of women because the domination of women is tied conceptually and historically to the domination of nature.

A responsible environmental ethic also must embrace feminism. Otherwise, even the seemingly most revolutionary, liberational, and holistic ecological ethic will fail to take seriously the interconnected dominations of nature and women that are so much a part of the historical legacy and conceptual framework that sanctions the exploitation of nonhuman nature. Failure to make visible these interconnected, twin dominations results in the inaccurate account of how it is that nature has been and continues to be dominated and exploited and produces an environmental

ethic that lacks the depth necessary to be truly inclusive of the realities of persons who at least in domination of Western culture have intimately tied with that exploitation, viz., women. Whatever else can be said in favor of such holistic ethics, a failure to make visible ecofeminist insights into the common denominators of the twin oppressions of women and nature is to perpetuate, rather than overcome, the source of that oppression.

Conclusion

We have argued in this paper that ecofeminism provides a framework for a distinctively feminist and environmental ethic. Ecofeminism grows out of the felt and theorized about connections between the domination of women and the domination of nature. As a contextualist ethic, ecofeminism refocuses environmental ethics on what nature might mean, morally speaking, for humans, and on how the relational attitudes of humans to others- human as well as nonhumans- sculpt both what it is to be human and the nature and ground of human responsibilities to the nonhuman environment. Part of what this refocusing does to take seriously the voices of women and other oppressed persons in the construction of that ethic.

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