

Feminist Research: Beyond ‘add woman and stir’ Methodology

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Abstract: Feminist researchers generally resist the notion that there are essentials of feminist research methodology. Nevertheless there are significant beliefs that form foundations of their practice, theoretical frameworks and methodological stances. It also identifies how doing research on gender issues from a feminist perspective delves into sensitive areas of identity, sexuality etc., which are traditionally ignored as private, non-academic and most importantly treated as ‘non-issue’. It must be noted here that it is not necessary that all research done in gender-studies are done from a feminist perspective. If we retrospect why such a stance is taken by the mainstream researchers, we will trace two possible reasons- first it helps in masking the male hegemony which is the root of inequality of all forms and secondly it largely contradicts common-sense beliefs about essential gender-differences.

To balance this persisting inequality, a strong methodology must be practiced which would involve assertive questioning, redefinition of issues and most importantly vigilant monitoring of what questions are to be framed, how questions are to be asked and how research results are to be used and what implications are to be derived from the data gathered. A different framing unlike the practicing mainstream pattern is used by feminist researchers to focus on ‘woman’s ways’ of valuing, knowing, making meaning, living, working, drawing conclusions etc., Main intention behind this is two- bringing into focus those who were left out of researching and theorizing and secondly generating new theories of identity, health, sexuality and many more.

Feminist researchers perceive gender in an ever-expanding series of topics ranging from issues related to health, education to relationship and many more which are particularly important for feminist project. Depending on whether the theoretical roots of research come from liberal feminism or radical or critical feminism or post-modernfeminism, each of these feminist stances opt for a different methodological approach. Just as liberal feminists focus on unequal opportunity, radical thinkers prefer to focus on power and patriarchy as the root of hegemony.

However a note of caution to us that any discussion of women as a group would be prone to essentialist criticism, but still a large majority of feminist thinkers are dead against of doing away totally with the concept of ‘woman’ who they believe, live in most societies in uneven and oppressed conditions. In fact

today researchers have gone beyond just 'add woman and stir' strategy and enriched their research with strong epistemological, ontological and methodological footing.

Keywords: Empowerment, Reflexivity, Value-neutrality, objectivity, narrative.

Section 1.1:

Any research must begin with a problematic which is most commonly expressed in form of a question or a series of either related or unrelated questions. This research approach is general and is maintained by almost all disciplines across the board ranging from literature, social sciences to even hard and soft sciences. On deciding upon what questions a researcher seeks to answer, the obvious step that follows is to decide what methodology we would like to adopt or rather what methodology would be most appropriate or at all suit the kind of research one was undertaking. And on deciding upon the methodology question, now the researcher would finally move on to gathering, organizing, and analyzing of data, which forms the core of any research. This would finally lead to the writing and publishing of the research report.

Now what makes a research feminist-research? Feminists are engaged in both theoretical research and practical research. While the former type of research is more abstract and formal in nature, the latter category has direct bearing to our day-to-day life issues. However it should not be concluded from this categorization that there exists a water-tight division between these two types of research. In fact both the kinds of research have strong bearing on each other, one informs the other or in other words they are complimentary to each other. As we will delve deeper in to the *feminist* research, we will see that this *linkage between theory and practice* occupies a foundational position in feminist research.

Just as it is hard to arrive at a unanimous definition of feminism, so also there exists no solitary definition of *feminist research* as such. We know there exists heterogeneity of views amongst women who identify themselves as feminists with regards to what would entail as oppression, what are its sources and what can be the possible solution. This heterogeneity of feminist movement generates women's different interests in different topics of research, different preference for techniques and different conclusions about what action should be taken. So right from the formulation of the research question to the final reporting of research findings this heterogeneity prevails. However what really encompasses all these diverse approaches is that *gender must be included as a category of analysis in all levels or strata of research.*

Nevertheless our quest for certain common features will not go in vain. We can roughly

articulate some characteristics and call them as defining features of *feminist* research. And these features help us to distinguish or identify feminist research both from the traditional social science research, research that studies women and research that attends to *gender* but without an agenda for change. In fact here we must keep in mind that *any* research on women or gender issues cannot be regarded as a feminist research. Feminist research is not merely research *about* women but instead is research *for* and *by* women. What makes feminist research uniquely *feminist* are the kinds of questions asked, methodology undertaken, knowledge, and purpose brought to the research process. Majorly, feminist research constituted of women's struggles against the multiple forms of their oppression. To combat these different dimensions of oppression, unlike traditional research, its objectives include both the construction of new knowledge and the production of social change to terminate these oppressions. So feminist research is characterized by this *double-dimensional* approach. Feminists do feminist research not for gaining 'knowledge for its own sake' but the objective behind gain of such knowledge is dedicated in bringing about a change and improvement in the situation of women. Secondly, feminist research is grounded on feminist values and beliefs. These values and beliefs essentially *focus on the meanings women give to their world*. This recognition is important because research is often conducted within institutions that are still patriarchal. Thirdly feminist principles is applied at all stages of the research, from choice of topic to presentation of data, acting as the framework guiding the decisions being made by the people involved in the research. Fourthly, feminist research is characterized by its diversity. It is interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary, it uses different methodologies, and it is constantly being redefined by the concerns of women coming from very different perspectives. Feminist research addresses issues like antiracism and diversity, democratic decision-making and empowerment of women (including the traditionally marginalised women). So feminist research encompasses the full range of knowledge-building that includes epistemology, and methodology or method. In this paper we will take up the dialogues or debates surrounding these issues. Since these two issues are key concerns of feminist research, so I will treat them separately in different sections.

But before moving on to feminist epistemologies and feminist methodologies, I will rush through the three waves of feminism. I feel this discussion is essential in the sense that each new wave theorized about women's lives and lived-experiences in a new manner and in fact yielded new topics and new areas research and the type of solution they sought changed with or chimed with the wave which was dominant. The first-wave feminism (1848-1920) was characterized by diverse forms of interventions that claimed the natural equity of women and men and outlined political strategy for getting equal access and opportunity. Right to vote was the primary amongst

these issues. This declaration gave rise to the suffrage movement. In the early stages, the first wave of feminism which emerged dominantly in United States was mostly interwoven with reform movements. Suffragists confronted stereotypes of women and, in particular, claims of proper female behavior and talk. First, they engaged in public persuasion, which in those days was considered most unwomanly. To quote Campbell "No 'true woman' could be a public persuader". 'Second, their very activity challenged the "cult of domesticity," which in those days dictated that a true woman's place was in the home, meeting the needs of husband and children. Women were further required to be modest and to wield only indirect influence, and certainly not engage in public activities. So, when a woman spoke in public, she was, by definition, displaying masculine behaviors. She was even ignoring her biological weaknesses- a smaller brain and a more fragile physique-which she was supposed to protect in order to ensure her reproductive abilities. Such claims led some women's rights activists to argue that women should indeed gain the right to vote from an argument of expediency. This argument was based on the claim that women and men are, in fact, fundamentally different and that women have a natural disposition toward maternity and domesticity. However, the argument ran that it would therefore be advantageous to society to enfranchise women, so they would then enrich politics with their "innately" female concerns. The first wave feminists were concerned with other major or gross areas of inequality that perpetuated in the patriarchal society like equal right to education, right to property, etc.,

The second wave feminism marked a shift in focus of their demand- right to her body and sexuality. It was the time when they demanded abortion as legal. So their main focus was women's right to their own bodies and a sexuality of their "own"-a sexuality that is disconnected from the obligations of marriage and motherhood. Other radical feminists, such as the lesbian author Adrienne Rich and the African American lesbian author Audre Lorde (1934–1992) linked heterosexuality to women's oppression. Both of them claimed that heterosexuality is a compulsory institution designed to perpetuate the social power of men across class and race.

While the first and second wave feminism paid more attention to equality and sameness issue in general, the third wave feminists now moved on to difference-feminism. Now they were more concerned with the diversity amongst women of colour, race, ethnicity, sexuality etc., Moreover they felt that interests of all the 'others' who are not heterosexual, white-middle class women were simply ignored. Third-wave feminists are motivated by the need to develop a feminist theory and politics that honour contradictory experiences and deconstruct categorical thinking. Rebecca Walker who coined this term third-wave feminism described in her book *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995) the difficulty that

younger feminists experience when forced to think in categories, which divide people into “Us” and “Them,” or when forced to inhabit particular identities as women or feminists. Instead of bridging contradictions they rather embrace ambiguity and prefer it more than certainty. During this wave feminists stressed on multiple positions. Patricia Hill Collins, a black feminist complained that black women are “outsiders within”. Living socially within white society, black women have to cope up with the rules of the privileged white world, but, at the same time, they are constantly aware of their marginalized position in terms of their race and gender. While the socio-logical insiders, in this case the white middle-class women because of their privileged positionality, are “in no position to notice the specific anomalies apparent to Afro-American women, because these same sociological insiders produced them”². In India the lower-caste women especially those women belonging to dalit class face the similar plight, the status of being “outsiders within” in the caste rung. This has given birth to a movement similar to the Black-feminist movement of the west namely, Dalit movement. The patriarchy that exists in the Indian context is brahminical tradition or brahminical patriarchy. The emphasis on differences among women intensified during the third wave of feminist politics since the early 1990-s. The assertion of the differences in perspective came strongly from the dalit women’s movement who articulated their subordinate position and the need to recognize their ‘otherness’. They wanted separate space to articulate their own experiences of disadvantage and marginalization, which is distinct from that of the other (non-dalit) women. This set stage for a new kind of epistemology namely Dalit epistemology. However in this paper I will not go into further details regarding this issue and rather move on to characteristics feminist epistemology in general.

By *epistemology* is meant ‘a theory of knowledge that delineates a set of assumptions about the social world- who can be a knower and what can be known’. These assumptions directly or indirectly influence the decision a researcher makes right from what is to be studied or can be studied to how the study is to be conducted. Feminist epistemologists start with basic questions like what is the nature of social reality?, what is truth?, who can be a knower? Or what can be known? Let us start with the first question-what is the basic nature of social reality?

Positivism is the current mainstream mode of research or research paradigm which believes that there is a truth that lies “out there” in the social reality waiting to be discovered if only the researcher is objective and value-free in his pursuit of knowledge. This knowledge is essentially scientific and any intellectual activity aspiring to the title of science should follow that particular logic of science. Thus we see that positivism’s model of inquiry is based on logic and empiricism. It posits ‘causal relationships’ between variables that depend on the testing of specific hypotheses deduced from a more generalized theory. Its goal is to generalize research findings to a wider

population and even find causal laws that predict human behaviour. Interestingly *being scientific* syndrome was not confined to natural sciences only soon August Comte, Emile Durkheim and many others ventured into the project of making social-science disciplines scientific. Social-scientists were provided with specific rules and guidelines that will enable them to conduct value-free research, to separate facts from values and discover 'social facts' that have an independent existence outside the individual's consciousness. To present an example of how social-scientists would achieve this let me quote Durkheim from *The Rules of Sociological Method* "It is a rule in the natural sciences to discard those data of sensation that are too subjective, in order to retain exclusively those presenting a sufficient degree of objectivity. Thus the physicist substitutes, for the vague impressions of temperature and electricity, the visual registrations of the thermometer or the electrometer. The sociologist must take the same precautions."³

Another aspect of this positivistic paradigm is that it ascertains the viability of value-neutral and objective researcher who aims towards universal generalized truths. This foundationalist stance ensures positivism with specific answers to epistemological queries. Thereby certain kinds of knowledge do not reach the status of scientific knowledge or in other words knowledge per se, similarly the method for obtaining knowledge may not be considered as suitable and most importantly certain people may not be regarded or considered as *knowers*. Thus systematically the dominant paradigm excluded particular category of knowledge, people and methods of enquiry from social-science and even scientific research.

Feminist researchers do not embrace the practice of a positivist mode of enquiry since they believe that the practice of positivism can lead to "bad science". Other feminist scholars and researchers have critiqued positivism's tendency toward dualisms- between quantitative and qualitative research, between the subject and object of research, and between rationality and emotion. They argue that that by setting up a subject-object split, whereby the researcher is removed from the research process and placed on a different plane, the practice of positivism promotes a hierarchy between the researcher and the researched that mimics patriarchy.

Feminist empiricists tried to unveil these androcentric biases in both social science and science. Instead of working to improve the accuracy, objectivity, and universality of mainstream research by including women, feminists started to challenge the viability and utility of concepts like objectivity and universality altogether. Beginning with a critique of positivism's concept of scientific objectivity, and the idea of a "value-free" science with its stress on the detachment of the researcher from the researched, feminists looked for an alternative epistemology. They felt that knowledge cannot be achieved through or corrected by merely including women but by including specificity and

uniqueness of women's experiences and 'lived experiences'. So they sought to find new answers to questions like- who knows?, what can be known? Feminists have forged new epistemologies of knowledge by incorporating women's lived experiences, emotions and feelings into the knowledge-building process. By disclosing their values, attitudes and biases in their approaches to particular research questions and by engaging in strong reflexivity throughout the research process, feminist researchers can actually improve the objectivity of research. Broadly speaking we can trace three varieties of feminist epistemologies that have taken shape over the years as a resistance to traditional positivist epistemology namely- Feminist empiricists, standpoint theorists, postmodernists.

Feminist research endeavors often began by pointing out the androcentrism in the sciences. This research approach is often referred to as feminist empiricism. Feminist empiricists work within a positivistic model of knowledge building with the goal of creating "better" science. This better and more objective science is achieved through the application of more rigorous practices, incorporating difference into the research process, and more strictly following the basic tenets of positivism.

A brief note on standpoint epistemology before we move on to the notion of objectivity such an epistemological stance endorses. Feminist standpoint epistemology borrows from the Marxist and Hegelian idea that an individuals' daily activities or material and lived experiences structure their understanding of the social world. Karl Marx viewed knowledge as historically constructed and relative because it is based on a given "mode of production." Elites (owners of the "means of production") shape knowledge and ideology to justify social inequality. For both Marx and Hegel, the master's perspective is partial and distorted, whereas the worker/slave's is more complete because the worker/slave must comprehend his or her own world and that of the master—the worker/slave must know both worlds to survive. Feminist standpoint scholars argue that it is a woman's oppressed location within society that provides fuller insights into society as a whole; women have access to an enhanced and more nuanced understanding of social reality than men do precisely because of their structurally oppressed location vis-à-vis the dominant group, or men. Dorothy Smith, an early proponent of the standpoint perspective, stresses the necessity of starting research from women's lives: taking into account women's everyday experiences through paying particular attention to and finding and analyzing the gaps that occur when women try to fit their lives into the dominant culture's way of conceptualizing women's situation. By looking at the difference between the two perspectives, the researcher gains a more complex and theoretically richer set of explanations of the lives of the oppressors and the oppressed.

Sandra Harding's notion of strong objectivity for instance challenges to mainstream or positivist notion of objectivity because its focus resides only on the "context of justification" in the research process- how the research is carried out and making sure that the researcher's values and attitudes do not enter into this process. What is left out of consideration is the extent to which values and attitudes process that asks questions and formulates specific research hypotheses. Harding (1993) argues that through-out the research process, subjective judgments on the part of the researcher are always made "in the selection of problems, the formation of hypotheses, the design of research (including the organization of research communities), the collection of data, the interpretation and sorting of data, decisions about when to stop research, the way results of research are reported, and so on."⁴ And to practice strong objectivity requires all researchers to self-reflect on what values, attitudes, and agenda they bring to the research process—strong objectivity means that "the subjects of knowledge be placed on the same critical causal plane as the objects of knowledge" (pg. 69). How do a researcher's own history and positionality influence, for example, the questions she or he asks? It is in the practice of strong self-reflexivity that the researcher becomes more objective. However standpoint epistemology faced criticism even in the feminist circles. Critics of standpoint epistemology argued that such a stance collapses all women's experiences into a single defining experience and pays little attention to the diversity of women's lives, especially to the varied experiences of those women who differ by race, class, sexual preference, and so on. All these criticisms paved the way for emergence of yet another variety of feminist epistemology namely-postmodern feminist epistemology.

Roughly speaking postmodernism is a theoretical paradigm that serves as an "umbrella term" for a variety of perspectives from critical theory to post-structural theory to postmodern theories. What creates unity among these perspectives is their concern for highlighting the importance of researching *difference*-there is an emphasis on including the "other" in the research-process. Here lies the affinity between feminists and postmodernists – it meshes well with the general currents within the feminist project itself. Feminists from all traditions have always been concerned with including women in their research in order to rectify the historic reliance on men as research subjects. This is a general feminist concern. Furthermore, postmodernism's emphasis on the empowerment of oppressed groups is chimes with feminists' emphasis on social change and social justice. This congruence is also particularly the case with postmodern feminists, including postcolonial feminists who seek to explore "political cultural resistance to hierarchical modes of structuring social life is by being attentive to the dynamics of power and knowledge".⁶

Here we must not forget that though postmodern and post-structural perspectives invigorate feminist theory and praxis, there is also a tendency for them to destabilize it. For example, post-

structural theorists have challenged essentialist categories: women, sex, gender, and the body. The challenge for the feminists is to dialogue around these tensions and to be open to different points of view.

Again another well-known feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (1991), in her book *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*, challenges positivist objectivity from yet another viewpoint. She argues for a “mitigated relativism” that avoids charges of “objectivism” and “relativism.” To quote Code “I prefer to characterize the position I advocate as a *mitigated relativism*, however, or the freedom it offers from the homogenizing effects of traditional objectivism, in which differences, discrepancies, and deviations are smoothed out for the sake of achieving a unified theory. With its commitment to difference, critical relativism is able to resist reductivism and to accommodate divergent perspectives. Mitigated in its constraints by “the facts” of material objects and social/political artifacts, yet ready to account for the mechanisms of power (in a Foucauldian sense) and prejudice (in a Gadamerian sense) that produce knowledge of these facts, and committed to the self-critical stance that its mitigation requires, such relativism is a resourceful epistemological position”.⁷

Section 1.2:

In this section we will explore the different techniques feminist researchers use while conducting feminist research. An exploration of these techniques will reveal along with the differences with the mainstream techniques, how they are conducive to reducing male supremacy and generate an unbiased or rather less-biased research results. All of these different ‘feminisms’ lead to difference preference for techniques, differing theories for interpreting what they see as going on, and differing conclusions about what new actions to take. Feminist research starts from the personal experience of unease about a difference between the way things are and the way we might prefer them to be, whether in our ‘private’ lives at home or at work. In research this is sometimes referred to as starting from a ‘discrepancy’ between an ‘is’ and a sense of an ‘ought’. Feminist research has been devoted to hearing women speak, in our own words, about our own such experiences, experiences of being women, of being frustrated, humiliated, subordinated and put down, of being invisible, of violence and of being violated.

To begin with the most important spirit of practicing feminist research is reflexivity at its maximum. Reflexivity is a process whereby researchers recognize, examine, and understand how their social background, location, and assumptions affect their research practice. Practicing reflexivity also includes paying attention to the specific ways in which our own agendas affect

the research at all points in the research process—from the selection of the research problem to the selection of method and ways in which we analyze and interpret our findings. (“Feminist researchers are continually and cyclically interrogating their locations as both researcher and as feminist. They engage the boundaries of their multiple identities and multiple research aims through conscientious reflection. This engagement with their identities and roles affect the earliest stages of research design. Much of feminist research design is marked by openness to the shifting contexts and fluid intentions of the research questions”.)⁸ The philosophy behind practicing such reflexivity is that ethical discussions usually remain detached from the discussion of the research process. Even those researchers who consider this aspect of research regard it as an afterthought. Yet, the ethical standpoint or *moral integrity* of the researcher is a critically important aspect of ensuring that the research process and a researcher’s findings are “trustworthy” and valid. A feminist ethical perspective provides insights into how ethical issues enter into the selection of a research problem, how one conducts research, the design of one’s study, one’s sampling procedure, and the responsibility toward research participants.

In general some feminist researchers may use standard surveys, collect numerical information, and perform statistical computations, in order to establish matters of extent or amount regarding women’s position *vis a vis* men’s. Others will undertake secondary analysis of documentary material and policy papers or research and develop new policy and assess its impact on the position of women. Other women will concentrate on directly hearing the stories of women - perhaps using more or less in-depth interviews or ethnographies, recording verbal information, and writing them up and publishing. Still others will work more as members of groups of women doing their own self-directed research. These are popularly called ‘consciousness-raising’ groups or ‘cr’ groups in short. These were also called ‘participatory action research’ whose main goal was to discuss, study and possibly read about certain problems concerning women, and then draw conclusions about what to do, then take those actions, and then review them to decide on new actions. Out of these groups arose many concepts and ideas and services such as child care centres and other children’s services, women’s health services, termination and sterilisation services, neighbourhood houses, non sexist books and writing, equal opportunity and anti-discriminatory legislation, income security for single mothers, refuges for women fleeing domestic violence, and moves towards equal pay to name a few.

Techniques used in feminist research are concerned to present women’s perspective and are more likely to be, particularly at the earliest points of inquiry, ‘naturalistic’ and resemble the normal ways women communicate, or involve sources accessible to women. These normal ways are the ones with which women feel most comfortable and thus empowered to

speak. Conversation, group discussions, story-telling, and participant/observation (participants-as-observers) are more likely to be used than more artificial techniques such as questionnaires, one to one interviews, prestructured schedules, scales and standardised inventories, and secondary materials analysis. The latter kinds of techniques may be used, but only if they appear to empower women and women participants and are deemed by them the best ways of answering the particular research questions at hand.

Traditionally the researcher kept all the field-notes and assumed rights to 'write up' and publish whatever and wherever she wishes. Feminist research generates its own logic regarding what, how, where and even whether there is a written record of the research. For example, participating women will decide whether deeply personal revelations should be taped, transcribed and written up, or whether 'findings' may be shared within a group, perhaps on butchers paper, and no special write up necessary - or just a strategic summary or article produced. 'Findings' may take the form of a video, a tapestry, a collage, an art-piece, cartoons or drama. They may be transformed into a novel. Findings may be contributed to a popular women's magazine rather than (or as well as) the usual refereed professional journal. Matters of confidentiality, accessibility, appropriateness, validity or trustworthiness of data, rigour and the underlying issues of driving values and power and control now become matters to be determined by or in consultation with the women who are involved in and/or are to benefit from the research. The researcher no longer makes these decisions unilaterally or without connection to other women. Closely connected with this attitude, the feminist researchers also believe and strive to reduce or balance the power-relations within the research process by giving back something to the participants. For the researcher there are many inherent rewards in conducting the research ranging from satisfying curiosity to enhancement of career. The feminist researchers try to assure reciprocity in order to reduce oppression in such cases.

Another aspect of feminist research is that both the researcher and the participants gather data when collaborative methods are applied often in cross cultural settings. Again participants become co-researchers by contributing naive descriptions of their experiences so that researchers can identify common themes of meaning among those who have experienced the investigated phenomenon. Still the parts which are not captured by traditional verbal or narrative methods, participants are allowed to express their feelings through the use of art, music, drama, poetry and other artistic modalities.

Though we have mentioned a plethora of techniques feminist researchers use but still this list is far from being complete. Moreover these techniques are subjected to feminist ethical analysis:

does this technique disempower women? Will women be harmed by this approach - whether individually or as a gender group? Will women's knowledge and understanding be furthered by this technique? and many more.

Conclusion:

All women carry out their research under social and economic conditions currently still oppressive for women. Thus our efforts to transform women's oppression by using research are also carried out under these same difficult conditions and face the same associated barriers and pressures. Subsequently, at this point in time, feminist research can expect only to approximate any ideal. As Marianne Weston puts it that all feminist research exists on a fluid scale between traditional research and ideal feminist research⁹. It is perhaps more helpful to think of all feminist research as *more or less* feminist research, rather than taking an *all-or-nothing* approach and seeing research as either 'feminist' or 'not feminist'. Much feminist research requires huge courage, confidence and possibly independent means. The more radical or unfamiliar the project is the more difficult it is to get financial support, participants, resources, publishers and peer approval. Any funders, administrators, managers, professional groups or other parties who do not share feminist research assumptions and who have power to impinge may present barriers. Conventional assumptions about who owns and controls research, its findings, its write-up, and so on - may contradict the ethics which accompany feminist research. Moreover women still owing to status of being 'outsider' in the academia, their work on gender is often seen as peripheral compared to the 'real' research endeavour that academic men do and control. Diana Ralph constructed a power pyramid that illustrates how power informs the decision-making process, where the feminist researchers are on the bottom of the structure¹⁰ At the end I would say much responsibility lies with the academia as to how they would change their outlook about their fellow colleagues and especially how they would do gender-research studies.

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