



Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*: A Foucauldian Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) through a Foucauldian lens, focusing on power, surveillance, discipline, and biopolitics in the dystopian state of Gilead. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concepts of disciplinary power, panopticism, and governmentality, it analyzes how the theocracy regulates women's bodies through ideological, spatial, and institutional apparatuses. Rather than treating Atwood's novel as mere dystopian fiction, the study reads it as a speculative critique of patriarchal and authoritarian structures in contemporary society, aligned with Foucault's concerns about the interplay of knowledge and power and the disciplining of bodies. The study asks: What new norms are produced in Gilead? How does the novel reflect Foucauldian notions of power, discipline, and surveillance? How is panopticism embedded in state machinery? How is the female body regulated under biopolitical control, and how does resistance emerge? Using qualitative methodology and close textual analysis, the research explores how surveillance in Gilead fosters both coercion and consent, producing self-regulation among Handmaids. Findings suggest that Gilead operates as a panoptic society where power functions through internalized discipline as much as external force. Yet traces of resistance, particularly in Offred's fragmented narration and rebellious memory, demonstrate that total authority remains contested. Ultimately, Atwood's novel exposes the fragile artifice of absolute power, offering a Foucauldian dissection of domination and resistance within dystopian and real-world contexts.

Introduction

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood (1985) is one of the most powerful and prophetic dystopian texts of the 20th century. The novel, which, with a chilling, Orwellian concept, has continued to grow in power as time has moved on since its release. It is set in the Republic of Gilead, a theonomic military dictatorship formed within the borders of what was formerly the

United States of America by a racist, misogynistic, white supremacist, Christian nationalist, economic movement, and extrapolates upon these ideologies further. In Atwood's story, which is told by a Handmaid named Offred (a woman whose role is to bear children for the regime's commanders), the narrative subverts the regime's framings of oppression just as much as it emulates them, truly holding space for us to listen rather than simply extracting "the one account we believe at its end." Read primarily through feminist, political and theological lenses, it is also in many ways text about power and discipline, rendering it a rich site for a Foucauldian reading.

Margaret Atwood (b. 1939) is a Canadian author, poet, essayist and environmental activist who has written more than fifty books in fiction, poetry, and literary criticism. Her work often focuses on gender, power, and language and is set in speculative and dystopian worlds. As Atwood herself claims, "Nothing in *The Handmaid's Tale* is purely imaginary" (Atwood, 2006, p. 2); rather, the book draws on the surveillance, patriarchy and biopolitical control characteristic of various historical periods, such as New England Puritans and contemporary authoritarian nation-states. She is the recipient of multi-prized fiction of the Booker Prize and Governor General's Award and has been widely studied for the way her work juxtaposes feminism, political critique, and genre experimentation (Howells, 2006; Staels, 1995).

To address the issues of power relations and governmental control in *The Handmaid's Tale*, this paper uses Michel Foucault's critical theory, particularly his discussions of disciplinary power, panopticism, and biopolitics. Foucault (1977) argues that in modern societies, power works less through the oppressive instruments of institutions and more through the disciplinary network of surveillance and normalization that renders people docile and self-disciplined. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault invokes the metaphor of the Panopticon to describe a structure of ceaseless, internalized surveillance — and it's as good a framework as any to interpret the social order of Gilead, where women are indoctrinated, ranked, kept under surveillance, and punished in the name of religious purity and state control.

Foucault's later studies of biopolitics further resonate with Atwood's dystopia in the state's regulation of bodies, not just through the normalising power of discipline, but through managing reproduction and eugenics (Foucault, 1978). The economy of Gilead is, at heart, a biopolitical one: It assigns an absolute value to women based on their reproductive function, establishes sexual norms and accords violence divine sanction. Such a Foucauldian reading enables the re-evaluation of the novel not just as a feminist cautionary tale but as a reflection on the development of contemporary power from overt to covert forms of disciplining power (Bartky, 1990; McNay, 1992).

This paper contends that this novel plays out in dramatic fashion Foucault's ideas about power and resistance through the portrayal of Gilead's mechanisms of surveillance, disciplinary institutions (the Red Center and the Commander's household), and the internalization of discipline by Handmaids. Offred's ambivalence as a subject indexes an ambivalence about both her subjectivity (her subjection) and her agency, as her practices of narrative remembering and physical pleasure register as rebukes to the regime's disciplinary power. Through reading Atwood's feminist dystopia via Foucauldian theory, this article seeks to shed light on the ways in which ideological control is implemented both in literature and the real world.

Literature Review

Since its publication, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has inspired a multitude of commentary on the novel's dystopian portrayal of patriarchy, theological despotism, and the

disempowerment of women. Atwood's story does belong at its core to feminist discourse, yet it also serves for other interpretations, much more philosophical and socio-political with the core theory of power and subjectivity of Michel Foucault. The article positions the Atwood corpus in light of Foucauldian analysis, feminist literary criticism, and biopolitical theory.

Foucauldian Politics of Power and Discipline in Dystopia

Foucault's decentralized, productive, and internalized nature of power (Foucault, 1977; 1978) has influenced analyses of dystopian texts. His concepts of panopticism, disciplinary institutions and biopower provide crucial tools through which we may begin to grasp how regimes dominate their subjects without continually resorting to physical violence. Foucauldian conceptualizations have revealed the gendered dimensions of disciplinary practices, in patriarchal systems, female bodies tend to be the site of regulatory surveillance as demonstrated by McNay (1992). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the mechanisms that enforce Gilead's new language, rituals and surveillance technologies are closely in line with those.

A number of critics have used Foucauldian theory to analyze Atwood's dystopia. For example, Bartky (1990) reflects on how women are socialized into compliance by internalized ideas of femininity, an idea that is also present in Atwood's representation of the Red Center's practices of indoctrination. Also, for Grace (2000), Atwood's figure of Offred enacts "counter-conduct" in the form of a "subtle counter-strategy of resistance to Gilead's disciplinary gaze. The studies call attention to how Atwood's narrative not only deals with repression but of a sort of dramatises psychological colonization of the self, a concept at the heart of Foucault's notion of modern power.

Feminist and Biopolitical Readings

In addition to Foucauldian readings, feminist critics have highlighted Atwood's challenge to patriarchal definitions of gender and motherhood. Jadwin (1993) describes Gilead itself as a particular kind of "reproductive dystopia," in which women are commodified into state-owned wombs. The idea of biopolitics (Foucault 1978) is therefore rather appropriate; by controlling the fertility of women, the regime was intervening in life itself. Staels (1995) extends this claim, viewing Offred's performance of the narrative as a political one that refuses the ideological and material disciplines exercised on her body.

Contributing to this conversation, Almaarof (2024a) proposes a feminist critique of Atwood's *Alias Grace*, which demonstrates how women's agency is limited yet reclaimed within legal and medical discourses. Her insights echo those of biopolitical readings of *The Handmaid's Tale* in that women's bodies are at the centre of the politics of power in both novels. Additionally, Almaarof (2024b) uses an ecofeminist approach to *The Seed Keeper* and *The Handmaid's Tale* and Moores-Mehta (2024) offers that Atwood criticises not only masculinist control over reproduction but also ecologic impoverishment. She explains, "Atwood constructs Gilead as a government that uses and abuses the earth and the female body, problematically fusing issues of environmental and gendered oppression" (p. 223) captured in the environment. This ecological-biopolitical nexus of control lends additional complexity to interpretations of reproductive regulation within the novel.

Memory, Imagination and Resistance

Recent interdisciplinary research has investigated exactly how resistance forms at the site of subjective interiority. In a study by Rostam & Almaarof (2024), the way memory and

imagination work in literature to carry trauma and govern it are considered. Influenced by attachment theory, they assert that memory can be a type of psychological resistance to totalitarianism. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, Offred's flashbacks to her former (real) life, her daughter, her lover Luke, and her lost freedom itself, function both as a coping mechanism and as a political refusal to be entirely subsumed by Gilead's ideological machinery.

Foucault's theory supports this interpretation, most importantly his claim that resistance is everywhere there is power, "Where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Offred's fragmented storytelling, coded discourse, and clandestine romance with Nick perform this resistance, while she remains still-fulfilled in Gilead's disciplinary constellation.

Power, Genealogy and Postmodern Subjectivity

Almaarof (2022) further investigates Foucault's genealogy in the postmodern era, signalling how difficult the power between different elements changes over time through historical ruptures as opposed to systematic development. This genealogical challenge is particularly pertinent when applied to *The Handmaid's Tale*, a novel which according to Atwood can be entirely read as 'composed entirely of real history' (Atwood, 2006). Gilead isn't a departure from history, but a twisted extension of it, an amalgamation of Puritan morality, Cold War paranoia, and contemporary gender politics.

As Almaarof (2022) posits, history according to Foucault is not having a set of events that unfold, but it is a "network of forces that configure subjectivity through the archives, language and institutional memory." This creates the narrative space for a reader to identify the ideological conditions that had made Gilead seem at least plausible, and for us to discern the staying power in Atwood's message.

In sum, the current literature reflects a dense interweaving of Foucauldian theory, feminist critique and literary readings of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Atwood's project is more complex than it might seem at first; it not only fits Foucault's ideas about power and surveillance, but it goes beyond them, factoring in gendered, ecological, and psychological dimensions. Working at the intersection with recent contributions (e.g., Almaarof, 2024a, 2024b; Rostam & Almaarof, 2024), this article places itself within an active and growing conversation, in the hope of continuing to shed light on how power is embodied, resisted and remembered in Atwood's dark imagination of the future.

Methodology

This is a qualitative interpretative approach, which is based on literary discourse analysis. The latter uses textual analysis as their main mode of analysis, focusing on how power relations are constructed, (re) produced and subverted in the text by Margaret Atwood through narrative, character, language and setting. The research seeks to make sense of the inscriptions of discourses of domination in the novel's make-believe universe and how these resonate with Michel Foucault's notions of discipline, surveillance and biopower.

A fundamental principle of this approach is that literature is not merely a work of art but also a cultural product that mirrors and challenges the established socio-political structures. As Tyson (2006) points out, literary analysis from a theoretical perspective, "is a means of understanding how ideologies determine the way we interpret experience" (p. 249). This means that no less than MSA and other narratives that oppose reproductive technology, The novel will

be approached as a literary and ideological tale as it inscribes discourses and practices of social regulation and control in a dystopic vision.

The text will be viewed through a Foucauldian analysis of discourse, focusing in particular on the (ab) use of language as a medium for normalization and regulation, but also the possibility of resistance. We will focus on narrative voice, metaphors of vision and visibility, spatial structuration (eg, the Red Center, Commander's residence), and practices of corporeal control. Finally, I will also consider how Atwood depicts interiority and subjectivity under oppressive regimes, focusing in particular on Offred's self-monitoring conduct and psychological disintegration.

There is a library approach to this research, and it draws data from primary and secondary sources. The base text *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood, 1985), and the ancillary texts are writings by and on Michel Foucault and peer-reviewed critical interpretations of Atwood's text. The process includes the identification of textual moments where Foucauldian thinking is particularly dramatized and the interpretation of this within the larger socio-political allegory of Gilead.

Theoretical Framework

The paper draws on Michel Foucault's theorizations of power, surveillance and biopolitics, as expounded in particular in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality, Volume I* (1978). These theories are crucial for understanding how modern power works not just in institutions of repression but in microphysics of power – the everyday practices, discourses, and norms that turn people into self-regulating subjects.

The Technique of Disciplinary Power and the Production of Docile Bodies

Foucault (1977) describes in *Discipline and Punish* how modern societies move from sovereign spectacular to more subtle disciplinary and institution meant realised punishment that addresses the body. "the body is, only if has operated as a productive body and subjected body. (p. 26) 31. exit.writings3 19/2/04 3:22 pm Page 31 32. Gilead is an exactly perfect example of this: Women's bodies are discursively collapsed into their reproductive sex function, but then they're surveilled, regulated and trained on, i.e., the Aunts at the Red Center. The very idea of "docile bodies", bodies that are trained, normalized, and subjugated, is central to understanding how Gilead enforces its patriarchal order. As the critic Coral Ann Howells (2006) suggests, *The Handmaid's Tale* "represents the female body as a location of political contestation," disciplined and under threat from state apparatus (p. 35).

Panopticism and Surveillance

Foucault's panopticism from Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon shows how we internalize surveillance. In his words, "the Panopticon is the figure of this; we shall see that ... it is the greatest mechanism ... [and it brings about] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). In Gilead, the Handmaids are perpetually watched, not just by Eyes, and Guardians Aunts, but by each other. And "Under His Eye," the greeting, exemplifies the internalization of divine-political surveillance. Scholar Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor (1997) comments, that Gilead is "a panoptic culture par excellence," in which "surveillance and silence operate as [a] mutually reinforcing clasp" (p. 97). Even Offred turns herself into her watcher, editing her thoughts desires and memories.

Biopolitics and the Governmentality of Life

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault first mentions the concept of biopolitics, how the state manages life functions like reproduction, health, and sex. "Biopower" is for his control over populations through the management of life (Foucault, 1978, p. 140). In, the state's preoccupation with declining birthrates constitutes the institutionalized state assault and the plague of Handmaids, the personification of state-owned wombs. Their fertility is no longer private; it's public policy, biologically managed through ritualized intercourse, medical checks and regulated diets. Lisa Jadwin (1993) explains that Gilead's deployment of biopower is employed for "a debased form of reproductive capitalism," in which women's wombs are nationalized for the state's eugenic ambitions (p. 47).

Resistance and counter-Discourse

Despite Foucault's belief in the ubiquity of power, he does stress that "where there is power, there is resistance" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Resistance in Atwood's novel tends to be oblique, memory, proscribed reading, secret thoughts, and, indeed, narrative itself are acts of defiance. In Offred's narration, as in her relationship with Nick, Offred's story-telling and piecing together of the past are seen as Foucauldian forms of counter-conduct, micro-resistances that disrupt the dominant script of Gilead. As Sherrill Grace (2000) argues, "Offred's voice—indeed her words themselves—constitutes a form of resistance. The storytelling itself is a process of reappropriating oneself from the state" (p. 244).

Analysis and Discussion

The Handmaid's Tale, the dream Theocracy Atwood presents can be viewed in the light of Michel Foucault's theory of modern power but the structure of power in Foucault's understanding of modern power may be red on the Gileadian society that has become Atwood's theocratic totalitarian hemorrhoids is a dystopian nightmare. Gilead represents a world in which the panoply of disciplinary strategies, biopolitical control, and internalized surveillance combine to police the behaviour of citizens as well as the production of life. They mainly exist as both the effects and wielders of Foucauldian power relations through the design of the regime's spaces, the praxis of its institutions, and the rituals of its language.

Disciplinary societies, according to Foucault (1977), manufacture "docile bodies" that have been conditioned to adapt to institutional norms through observation, training, and administration: "Discipline makes individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (p. 138). In Gilead, it begins at Red Center, where women are indoctrinated into their current roles by the Aunts. Offred remembers the re-education:

"We had learned to whisper almost without sound. In the dim light we could reach out and touch each other's hands across the gap when the Aunts weren't looking" (Atwood, 1985, p. 14).

The silencing of voice, touch, and individual agency is a project of the regime to tear down the self. Gilead manufactures docility through stringent scheduling, punishment and religious slogans. As Bartky (1990) argues, so-called disciplinary power has a gender; it works on women through "a series of norms internalized as natural" (p. 65). The Aunts themselves, although women are instruments of state power, underline Foucault's argument that power

does not reside in any one point, or any one person, but flows through a circuit of nodes and conduits.

The society of Gilead is inspired by Foucault's (1977) notion of panopticism, whereby the many are regulated out of the fear of being monitored by the few. Foucault writes that 'visibility is a trap' (p. 200) in the Panopticon; surveillance is internalized, so fewer actual enforcers are required. Gilead renders this vivid in the all-seeing glare of "The Eyes," the state enforcers whose presence is unseen and everywhere. Offred constantly expresses a sense of fear concerning unknown observers:

"I know they're watching, the Eyes. I can feel it. If I move my head too far one way I'll tip something, too far another way, something will fall out of it" (Atwood Writer 18).

The result is an interior discipline that governs every small movement even of Offred's. As McNay (1992) points out 'disciplinary regimes colonise the body, exerting not so much control by force as control-by-learned-behaviour internalization' p30-footnote. Offred even adjusts her posture, and tone or stares to herself when no one is around, a chilling indication that Gilead has been able to break her emotionally.

This is also true for linguistic control. The basic welcome, "Under His Eye", is not only religious but panoptic; it's a spoken notice that God (and by extension, the state) can see you. The Handmaids present themselves as subjects of self-surveillance, maintaining Foucault's (1977) conception of "self-management without coercion of any kind" (p. 219).

Foucault's (1978) notion of biopolitics, governing populations by having power over bodies and life processes, lies at the heart of *The Handmaid's Tale*. As he remarks, current power is "focused not around the power to take life, but to make life or to counteract it to the point of death (p. 138). In Gilead, the state has an interest in what can reproduce. Women's wombs are nationalized; their sexuality is instrumentalized. Offred remembers the ritual sexual intercourse known as the Ceremony in Need of a Body:

"My red skirt is hitched up to my waist, though no higher. Underneath it the Commander is fingering. What he is feeling is my lower half" (Atwood, 1985, p. 93).

This dehumanizing process mirrors Foucault's theory that the body in biopolitical states, is reduced to nothing more than a function: the reproductive body, in service to the nation. Lisa Jadwin (1993) calls this "reproductive capitalism" in which fertility is commodified, policed, and dispensed by the state (p. 47).

The process is not just physical but ideological" The Handmaids are also re-named (e.g., "Offred"), to reflect their property status, stripping them of their name as they are stripped of their humanity and reduced to their reproductive potential. By determining whose life merits continuation, Gilead reflects what Foucault referred to as the "state racism" of biopolitics: valuing certain lives by allowing other lives to die (Foucault, 1978, p. 149).

Even in the face of Gilead's repressive machine, Foucault (1978) insists that "where there is power, there is resistance" (p. 95). In Atwood's tale, Offred's resistance is not of the macho-hunk variety, but only about quiet, stealthy subversion, including protest by memory, and protest. Counter-stories: rebellion by narrating, and by reclaiming pleasure. Language becomes her rebellion:

“But remember that forgiveness is also a power. It is a power to demand it, and power to refuse it, and power again to offer it ... Maybe none of this is about control” (Atwood, 1985, p. 133).

It is here that Offred makes a bid for the right to define her history, to refuse to be formed by Gilead’s collective grip on meaning, its stifling version of truth. According to Grace (2000), the narration of Offred can be seen as “a rhetorical resistance to institutional silence” (p. 244). Her mind is disjointed, non-linear, self-referential, oppositional, and wistful, refusing to conform to the regime’s quest for order, understanding and submission.

Her affair with Nick is another kind of resistance, not just to sexual regulation, but to emotional dehumanization. Tiny or not, such gestures reclaiming agency for her re-affirm her subjectivity because, as Foucault suggests, even in the context of domination the subject can make self-hood through acts of counter-conduct.

Conclusion

Seen through this lens of Foucauldian theory, *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a deep meditation on contemporary technologies of power. Nor is Gilead an artefact of the past but a hypothetical reflection of the current order, a place where bodies are disciplined, lives are managed and obedience is naturalized. The novel dramatizes state power not only as violence, but also as normalization, surveillance, and biopolitical utility.

But Atwood also provides moments of resistance and ambiguity that challenge Foucault's pessimistic view of modern power. As we have seen, Offred’s mediated agency, the fragmenting of her narrative and her deployment of desire all suggest that in the darkest regimens of control, subjectivity can remain a site of struggle, negotiation and memory. In this paper, we have used Foucauldian apparatuses to explore the reflection and critique of actual authoritarian practices and their vestiges left in the current gender politics.

The Handmaid’s Tale: Foucauldian Power, Discipline, and Surveillance

The novel is an example of power in the Foucauldian sense as diffuse, internalized and productive, i.e. as something which not only represses but creates. Power, in Gilead, doesn't flow from a single figurehead; it works through a system of institutions rituals and discourses. The Red Center operates as a disciplinary institution in the manner of Foucault's school or prison (*Discipline and Punish*, 1977), training the Handmaids to internalize their bodies as inferior matter, making themselves selves deserving of reproductive labour. Discipline works by more than mere physical confinement; it operates through language, naming, looks, and religious doctrine. In doing so, subjects are formed by and become tools for their oppression, a fact which corresponds closely with Foucault's claim that "the individual is not the vis-à-vis of power; he is, as Lenin said, one of its prime effects" (Foucault, 1977, p. 98), and Foucault asserts: To make oppressive power impede life is itself servile: like the logician's second operations which, as Hegel noted, merely extract from the premises something that was already implied in them, this strategy acknowledges the enemy's power, adapts itself to the system of domination, and therefore remains in, or at least very close to, the enemy's power.

Offred, for instance, is hyperconscious of her words and actions, censoring herself much of the time when no outward force is present. That self-surveillance, fear-based and habitual, demonstrates Foucault's point that modern power works best when least visible.

Gilead and Panopticism

Gilead's state apparatus operates on what for Foucault would be the logic of panopticism by incorporating surveillance into the very design of everyday life. The ever-present menace of "The Eyes" operates like the panoptic gaze: no one knows when they are being watched, so everyone acts as if they always are. According to Foucault, "One is a case file among others, determined as it is in a difference while being produced within the machinery of that difference." [Foucault, 1977 pp. 205] "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power." (Foucault, 1977, p. 202) In Gilead itself, Handmaids, Marthas and Wives, and even Commanders internalize that surveillance, adapting their speech, conduct, and movement to the ideological scripts of the regime.

Even the language of the commune and of religion, "Under His Eye" and "Blessed be the fruit", serves as a panoptic signal, a phrase repeated everywhere else in the new society, a constant reminder not only of visibility but also of control. This normalization of surveillance results in a society in which policing is mutual and self-reproducing, a pure embodiment of Foucauldian disciplinary power.

Biopolitical Governance and Resistance

The control of female bodies in Gilead is a paradigm of biopolitics as Foucault describes it in *The History of Sexuality* (1978). The reproductive process is now not only my affair but a national concern. The women are labelled, renamed and assigned roles, Handmaids, Wives, Marthas, and Econowives, according to their fertility and social value. Women, in the guise of fertile and infertile archetypes, are commodified and tightly controlled in terms of reproduction and pregnancies as a part of a divine mandate. This according to Foucault is part of the modern transformation from the "right to take life or let live" to the "power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death" (Foucault, 1978, p. 138).

But for all of Gilead's totalizing biopolitical order, the novel also dramatizes the subsistence of resistance. Offred's remembering, her illicit affair with Nick, and, most of all, her act of telling narratively, are forms of what Foucault calls counter-conduct, resistance not by outright rebellion but by telling, smuggling, and recollecting oneself in covered-over spaces. As Sherrill Grace (2000) states, "In the telling of her story of her self Offred finds herself, paradoxically, as the woman telling say: 'I exist.'... Her telling her self is a defiant act, not an anodyne catharsis" (p. 244).

These are not revolutionary acts, they do not topple the regime, but they do undermine its assertion of total control. Because of her individual memories, aspirations and musings, Offred doesn't wholly succumb to the system. This supports Foucault's argument that within mechanisms of absolute domination, the potential for opposition remains: "Power is everywhere...because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, 1978, p. 93).

It's from this Foucauldian perspective that the novel can be read not so much as a cautionary dystopian tale, as it can be a layered inquiry into how power penetrates the body, the mind, or the soul. Atwood's Gilead echoes some of Foucault's ideas of internalised discipline, panoptic surveillance and state-led reproductive control. At the same time, the novel both insists that resistance always lurks in the interstices of power. In memory, in stories, in sexuality, in language, you write the seeds of future insubordination—even in the extremities of dystopia.

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