

***Search for Home: A Comparative Study of Coetzee's Life & Times of Michael K
and Waiting for the Barbarians***

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Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate the postcolonial aspects of the search for home in John Maxwell Coetzee's (1940) novels—Life & Times of Michael K and Waiting for the Barbarians. From a postcolonial perspective, home is a fluid and fragile construct that challenges traditional notions of home under the force of displacement, oppression, and identity crisis. This paper discusses Coetzee's novels Life & Times of Michael K (1983) and Waiting for the Barbarians (1980), focusing on the definition of home both as a physical space and existential ideals. Whereas Michael K wants to secure a physical and psychological space as home in order to escape the unjust apartheid system, Magistrate struggles to get a moral and ideological space as home free from the brutality of Empire. Although their circumstances differ, both characters experience home not merely as a physical or ideological space, but as a shifting and unstable concept shaped by oppression, identity crises, and the longing for freedom. This paper represents how Coetzee deconstructs the traditional definition of home by presenting it as a fragile, shifting entity shaped by historical and personal struggle.

Key Words: Coetzee, post-colonial aspect, search for home, physical and psychological space, elusiveness.

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Introduction

Home is depicted as a stable sanctuary that provides security, identity, emotional attachment, and a deep sense of belonging. It is where memory roots itself, where identity is first shaped, and where the yearning to return becomes a powerful human impulse. As expressed in the evocative lines of the song with poetic lyrics “Home! Sweet Home!” by John Howard Payne—“Sweet, sweet home / There’s no place like home” (lines 10-11) — home is traditionally celebrated as a place of affection, warmth and security. The idea of home evokes powerful sentiments of belonging and return, from childhood lullabies to patriotic discourse. Home symbolizes the soul of a person’s world, serving as either a physical dwelling, a psychological anchor, or both.

Literature throughout history reflects the primal longing for a stable home. Odysseus’s prolonged voyage in *Odyssey* (1996) is more than a heroic tale; it reveals a timeless narrative of the human struggle to return to one’s rightful place—home—in the world (Homer 5.219-220). His homecoming to Ithaca, after twenty years of absence, signifies the profound struggle of the individual to return to a secure and welcoming home in order to restore identity, peace, and belonging. Although Odysseus ultimately reclaims Ithaca, his return is marked by unresolved loss and ongoing conflict, as a home once disrupted by war, exile and political violence can never be fully restored to its original construct. However, in the works of J.M. Coetzee—particularly *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*—this idealized notion is also challenged and deconstructed within a postcolonial framework.

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said reflects on the diasporic definition of home as a political and contested space, shaped by colonialism and displacement, which forces people into exile and compels them to redefine their concept of homeland under colonial influence (52). This idea is reflected in *Life and Times of Michael K*, where home is seen as a physical space that is constantly disrupted by colonial authority. Michael K’s journey in the novel shows his deep desire for a place to belong, but unjust colonial laws force him to keep moving from one place to another, each of which he briefly considers as home. During the time of political unrest and racial segregation, he is forced to leave Cape Town with his mother to return to Prince Albert. When he finally begins to see Prince Albert as his home, the colonial system again intervenes, labeling him a criminal and removing him from the land. As a result, his search for home becomes both futile and elusive, revealing how colonialism denies individuals even the simplest human right—to live in peace in a place they can call home. Similarly, in *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), Salman Rushdie defines home in the diasporic context as a fluid, fragmented entity shaped by memory, loss, and nostalgia (174). This understanding of home as a psychological space is clearly illustrated in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Unlike Michael K, the protagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate experiences a profound inner estrangement from the Empire he serves. Witnessing the inhumane torture inflicted on the so-called barbarians by the colonial authorities leads to his moral awakening, which ideologically exiles him from the very system he once upheld. The Empire interprets this inner exile as an act of betrayal, responding with brutal punishment that intensifies the Magistrate’s feelings of abandonment. Consequently, his search for a psychological home—anchored in moral clarity and inner peace—is ultimately crushed by the oppressive forces of imperial domination.

As a descendant of colonists, a white South African, and a traveler across several countries, Coetzee embodies a profound ambiguity about identity and belonging—an unease that permeates his writing. This tension deeply influences both novels, which explore postcolonial themes intertwined with the search for home, identity, autonomy, and a sense of belonging.

These narratives unfold within landscapes scarred by war, colonial violence, and deep existential uncertainty, reflecting the broader crises of identity that emerge from imperial histories. For Michael K, home is not a given but something he must build for himself to ensure his identity, safety and belonging free from the unjust apartheid system. For the Magistrate, home is an ideological construct that collapses as he becomes aware of the brutality of the empire he once served. In both novels, home is elusive—sometimes found in nature, silence, or acts of quiet rebellion—and always shaped by the moral and political landscapes the characters inhabit. By comparing Michael K's physical struggle for autonomy with the Magistrate's moral and ideological awakening, this paper illustrates how home becomes unattainable under colonial domination, compelling characters to either return to imagined roots or create new forms of belonging in a fragmented world.

Home as a deconstructive and imaginary construct

Coetzee presents a deconstructive and imaginative construct of home under the post-colonial oppression, war, and the unjust apartheid system in both novels. His novels reflect how postcolonial force deconstructs the traditional site of home, compelling individuals to construct home both as a physical and psychological space in fluid and unattainable ways.

Postcolonial theorists argue that colonial rule disrupts the traditional notion of home, forcing individuals to secure a permanent sanctuary in spaces that are transient, fragmented, and often imagined. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi K. Bhabha conceptualizes home not as a fixed point of origin but as a hybrid and liminal space marked by cultural negotiation and displacement. He introduces the notion of the "unhomely" to illustrate the condition of those who, caught between cultures, feel alienated in their own land (1). This "unhomeliness" resonates deeply in Coetzee's narratives in *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where both Michael K and the Magistrate are estranged not only from the state but from their senses of self and space. Their experiences suggest that the colonial and postcolonial orders do not merely displace people physically, but also rupture their internal worldviews, making home a fragmented, imagined, and unattainable concept.

This deconstruction of home also intersects with existential philosophy. The existential philosophy of home elaborates the idea that home is not just a physical construct, but a deeply personal, psychological, and existential concept tied to one's identity, choices, and sense of belonging in the world. In J.M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the search for home serves as an existential metaphor for identity, self-creation, and moral responsibility, framed through the lenses of Sartre's existentialism and Heidegger's philosophy of dwelling. Jean-Paul Sartre's argument in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) that individuals must construct identity through freedom and choice, rather than through fixed roles or inherited structures (90). This is manifest in Michael K's withdrawal from society. K's refusal to participate in the political or institutional systems around him is a radical existential choice—an attempt to define himself and his space outside of imposed norms. Sartre's existential philosophy clearly reflects in *Life & Times of Michael K*, when Michael K chooses to leave the institutional structures of society and live in isolation, cultivating his own food in the wilderness. In the isolated farm of Prince Albert "He lived by the rising and setting of the sun, in a pocket outside time" (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* 60). He retreats into the heart of nature and silence, experiencing a fleeting sense of home, both physically and psychologically, which is later disrupted by postcolonial oppression. Similarly, Heidegger's idea of "dwelling" offers another dimension to the existential philosophy of home. In his *Poetry, Language, Thought*

(1971), Heidegger defines home not simply as a physical aspect, but also as a fundamental aspect of human existence which ensures peace with oneself and one's environment, creating a meaningful relationship with the world (147-148). Precisely, the Heideggerian definition of home reflects home is not merely a shelter, but a space where one's existence is grounded, peaceful, and reflective of one's true nature. Heidegger's existential philosophy of *home* aligns with the experience of the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, who, though initially living within the ideological walls of the Empire, finds himself unable to "dwell" once he begins to question its violence. His physical environment becomes morally uninhabitable, suggesting that, for Coetzee, the concept of *home* is inseparable from ethical consciousness.

The Magistrate's deep existential conflict—his longing to escape the oppressive moral landscape shaped by the Empire—is revealed in his words: "I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I wanted to live outside of history. I wanted to live in the time of the body" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 47). In Heideggerian terms, he can no longer dwell authentically in a world structured by violence and power, as "whatever future [he] had in this place is in ruins" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 47). His home, once a place of belonging, has become ethically uninhabitable, exposing the breakdown of true dwelling.

The traditional concept of home is a space of safety, identity, stability, and belonging that functions as a moral and emotional anchor within familial and cultural continuity. But in Coetzee's novels, this traditional concept of home is violated under colonial and postcolonial oppression. Several scholars have examined Coetzee's critique of colonialism through the theme of home. Derek Attridge and Sue Kossew offer their perspectives on the idea that Coetzee's narratives challenge traditional notions of home, revealing it as a complex, elusive, and unattainable entity under the postcolonial oppression. Derek Attridge, in *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004), argues that Coetzee presents the colonial home not as a site of belonging but as a contested space marked by colonial power and exclusion (45). This narrative is reflected in *Life & Times of Michael K*, where Michael K's repeated efforts to create a simple and self-sufficient home in Prince Albert are thwarted by the state's unjust apartheid system. The devastation of Michael K's self-made home shows how postcolonial power denies colonized people the basic right to a secure space. Similarly, Sue Kossew, in *Pen and Power: A Postcolonial Reading of JM Coetzee and Andre Brink* (1996), suggests that the Magistrate's longing for home represents an ethical dilemma as he is torn between the empire's oppressive structures and his pursuit of moral integrity (93). Magistrate's dwelling becomes uninhabitable not because of physical destruction but rather from an internal collapse of moral coherence. The alienation of Magistrate from the unjust Empire transfers his old orderly home into a space of guilt and disillusionment. By integrating the perspectives of both scholars, it becomes evident that in the postcolonial context, home is no longer a site of security, comfort, and stable identity, but rather a fragile, uncertain, and often unattainable space shaped by historical trauma, displacement, and ethical instability.

Diasporic Consciousness and the Fragility of Home

Coetzee explores the notion of home through diasporic perspectives in both novels, portraying it not as a fixed location but as a shifting, often unattainable state shaped by displacement, alienation, and power dynamics. The diasporic understanding of home aligns with Avtar Brah's concept of diasporic consciousness, in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (1996), and offers a profound framework for analyzing themes of displacement,

identity, and the fragility of home in postcolonial literature. She defines home in a diasporic perspective as an "intersection of the past and present, real and imagined" (Brah 192). This aligns with Michael K's experience, whose journey reflects an evolving concept of home—shaped as much by his mother's nostalgic longing to return to her birthplace as by his struggle for physical survival amid the socio-political turmoil of apartheid-era South Africa. His journey through a war-torn landscape, carrying his mother's ashes to her ancestral home, symbolizes a profound yearning for identity and belonging in the face of postcolonial displacement and domination. This physical and emotional detachment reflects the diasporic experience, often generating a crisis of identity and a sense of homelessness, which compels individuals to seek a stable and meaningful sense of home. Similarly, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate undergoes a crisis of identity and belonging, distancing himself from the imperial system he once served. His shifting consciousness and internal exile further echo Brah's claim that diaspora is less about geography than about the affective and political experience of dislocation (181). In both novels, "home" becomes a site of instability, immersed in longing, uncertainty, and resistance. Coetzee, through these narratives, constructs a metaphorical diaspora, where identity is fractured and home is not recovered but reimaged.

In *The Poetics of Space*, French philosopher Gaston Bachelard defines intimate spaces as "occasional shelters"—such as rooms, drawers, garrets, or caskets—which are not merely physical or architectural structures but also serve as repositories of memory, imagination, identity, and emotional experience (5). These spaces allow individuals to dream, dwell, and feel secure. Bachelard's notion of intimate space aligns with Coetzee's portrayal of home as both a physical and ideological construct—one that remains elusive within a postcolonial framework. In *Life & Times of Michael K*, Michael K is compelled to leave his birthplace, Cape Town, and journey to his mother's ancestral home in Prince Albert, in search of a space he can call home. When he manages to find temporary physical shelter in a cave and achieves a sense of psychological peace through self-sustained cultivation, this fragile sense of home is ultimately destroyed by the oppressive apartheid regime. Similarly, the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a loyal servant of the Empire, becomes psychologically uprooted after witnessing the Empire's brutal treatment of the so-called barbarians. His moral awakening distances him ideologically from the Empire, and he is subsequently punished by the very system he once served. The Magistrate attempts to reclaim a sense of home as an inner, psychological space within the Empire, but this too proves unattainable under the postcolonial order. Thus, Bachelard's concept of intimate space—as a temporary physical refuge that offers inner peace and security—resonates with Michael K's search for both physical and psychological home, and with the Magistrate's pursuit of ideological belonging. In both cases, home becomes an elusive and unattainable ideal in the postcolonial world.

Home as both physical and psychological construction

The novel *Life & Times of Michael K* is set in a fictitious civil war in South Africa during the apartheid era in 1970-1980, which mirrors its history of unjust apartheid, racial segregation, colonial oppression, etc. The apartheid era introduced racial segregation between the black majority and the white minority and several acts like the Pass Laws of 1852 and the Separate Amenities Act of 1953, which controlled the lives of the colonized. Within this context, the protagonist, Michael K, embarks on a poignant journey that encapsulates the search for "home"—not merely as a physical dwelling but as a psychological sanctuary characterized by autonomy, identity, and belonging.

Michael K's story is about his search for a home and a way of living. Born with a physical deformity, K is marked as different and suffers from malnutrition from the very beginning. Rejected by his mother and neglected by social institutions, he always feels deprived of affection and identity, suffering from a constant longing for belonging. This frustration originates from his childhood search for a home—a space for fulfillment and identity free from racial apartheid. Consequently, Michael K's quest begins in Cape Town, where, amidst bureaucratic restrictions and societal fragmentation, he endeavors to fulfill his ailing mother's wish to return to her birthplace in Prince Albert. Amidst political turmoil and war, K doesn't get a permit to leave the city, so he shifts his mother to a handmade trolley and heads for the hill to get his sick mother back to Prince Albert. Pathetically, his mother dies en route, but he continues his journey to Prince Albert with his mother's ash, witnessing obstacles and "evidence of neglect" (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* 39) everywhere. This journey underscores the interplay between physical displacement and psychological longing, as K seeks a space free from the constraints of apartheid and societal expectations.

Upon reaching Prince Albert, K finds the farm abandoned and begins living in a vacant house in search of solitude. "Being in the only comfortable ground he knows, the world of growing things, he begins an almost Robinson Crusoe type primitive life. He lives on birds that he can shoot with a slingshot he makes, and eats grubs and other insects" (Corbett 1). He also begins cultivating crops such as pumpkins to survive. On this isolated farm, K experiences a sense of freedom, peace, and belonging. The pumpkin, in this context, can be interpreted as a symbolic food of freedom. K finds warmth and comfort in the space, suggesting that his quest for home is not confined to a physical location like Prince Albert alone, but extends to a psychological realm—defined by autonomy, inner peace, and self-sufficiency. This period in his life reflects his pursuit of a psychological "home," where personal freedom prevails over the oppressive structures of society. However, K's sense of respite proves to be transient. Under the unjust social apartheid, he was tragically captured as an undocumented citizen and sent to the rehabilitation camp, Cape Town, a place "For taking other people's money" (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* 37), a place for alienation, identity crisis, and racial segregation. Consequently, Michael K becomes homeless again.

The Rehabilitation camp is the final institutional and colonial space where K makes silent protests against apartheid and post-colonial oppression by rejecting food. This rejection reflects the rejection of the post-colonial system, which deprives him of autonomy, belongings, and a true sense of home, asserting that self-chosen starvation is better than being controlled with facilities. In the rehabilitation camp, the Doctor becomes very sympathetic to K and he is the only person who understands the importance of freedom. Being concerned for K, he purchases a butternut squash from a hawker and offers it him. K accepts the food and answers Doctor's inquiry about K's rejection of Camp food and acceptance of the butternut squash, "No one was interested before in what I ate" (Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* 148). K's refusal to camp food and acceptance of the squash from the Doctor are closely linked to his search for home. Physically, he seeks a place where he isn't controlled, and psychologically, he yearns for a home where he can feel peace, solace and belonging. The refusal to camp food symbolizes his rejection to societal norms and imposed structures, whereas acceptance of a piece of butternut squash symbolizes his exercise of personal freedom of choice and his control over how and what he chooses to nourish himself with. Later on, he escapes the rehabilitation camp and embarks on a journey with a group of nomads to search for home not only as a piece of constructed physical

space but psychological entities like autonomy, freedom, and identity. Michael K escapes from the rehabilitation camp, and his fleeting journey with the nomads reflects his ongoing search for a secure home both physically and psychologically, which reveals the inherent uncertainty and fragility of the concept of traditional home in a fractured, war-torn society under the postcolonial oppressive regime.

Home only as a psychological space

Whereas Michael K searches for both physical and psychological spaces as home, the Magistrate—the protagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians*—searches solely for psychological space. The novel presents how colonization renders the indigenous people victims of injustice, torture, and death. Coetzee comments that this novel is about how the experience of the torture chamber profoundly influences the life and consciousness of a man (*Into the Dark Chamber*).

The Magistrate serves the Empire at a frontier settlement, where he governs the indigenous people under an assumed ideological peace. This fragile peace is disrupted by the arrival of Colonel Joll, who is sent from the capital to investigate rumors of a potential barbarian uprising. Although his mission is to uncover the truth, Joll refuses to acknowledge the actual reality—that the indigenous people are not planning any rebellion. His willful ignorance is symbolized by his sunglasses, described as a “new invention” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 1). While the glasses appear opaque from the outside, they allow vision from within, suggesting Joll's selective perception. Behind this symbolic veil, he deliberately misinterprets the intentions of the indigenous population, labeling them as the “enemy” and subjecting them to brutal torture to extract a fabricated truth. As the Magistrate witnesses these atrocities, he begins to see himself as both complicit and victimized by the Empire, and longs for a true sense of home—one founded on peace, ethical clarity, and identity. Although the Magistrate represents the Empire, he feels detachment from the colonizers, reflected by his revealed hatred for Colonel Joll, who trespasses his ideological space, by remarking, “I curse Colonel Joll for all the trouble he has brought me, and for the shame too” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 20). The Magistrate feels shame and broken by witnessing the slaughter of the innocent in the name of the Empire’s protection and feels suffocated to live amidst the injustice and brutality. Consequently, he embarks on a quest for home—a psychological space—which he sees as essential to human existence.

Displacement is an inseparable part of the post-colonial condition. A compassionate man who believes in morality and justice, the Magistrate feels alienated from the colonizers due to their brutality. His sense of non-belonging is evident when he says, after witnessing Captain Joll’s torture of the indigenous people, “but towards this man [Captain Joll] I discover no loyalty in my heart” (Coetzee *Waiting for the Barbarians* 17). Though technically he is part of the colonizing force, the Magistrate yearns for a home defined by ideological coherence.

Along with the sufferings of the indigenous people—torture, physical abuse, starvation, and so forth—the Magistrate also becomes a victim of the Empire for forming an empathetic relationship with the indigenous people, especially with a barbarian woman from a distant indigenous population, one of Colonel Joll's victims. The Magistrate’s empathetic relationship with the barbarian woman ultimately marks him as a traitor in the eyes of the Empire. After returning the barbarian woman to her people in the desert, he is arrested and accused of conspiring with the so-called barbarians. Stripped of his authority, he becomes a prisoner subjected to the same humiliations as those inflicted on the colonized by Colonel Mandel. Enduring inhuman treatments—humiliation, torture, starvation, and so forth—the Magistrate

questions not only the oppressive colonial process of eradicating indigenous people from existence, but also his existence. He longs for the old days full of peace, justice, and ideology which define home as a psychological space. Magistrate reflects, "I long for the old days when I was able to take refuge in the illusion that I was part of a just system, that the world was governed by laws and that the purpose of those laws was to bring justice" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 56). His sincere plea for justice reflects his unwillingness to accept unethical laws and righteousness in an unjust empire, and he wants to live a peaceful life in psychological space.

The experience of the Magistrate aligns with Rushdie's definition of home in *Imaginary Homelands*, where the home of one's childhood is often a place one yearns to return to—if not physically, then at least emotionally or in the imagination—in an attempt to unlock the gates of lost time (9). The Magistrate similarly wishes to restore his former ideological harmony with the indigenous people, which he defines as home. However, in the post-colonial context, such a home is unattainable. This is evident in the novel's ending. While other colonizers flee, the Magistrate remains, yet fails to find psychological refuge unlike Michael K who temporarily gets harmony and peace by withdrawing into the physical landscape. As he laments, "this is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else now a days I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 156).

Elusiveness of home in both novels

The concept of home is elusive in both *Life and Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* due to the effects of post-colonialism on identity and belonging. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, Michael K's journey reflects his quest for a peaceful home, with identity and belongings in both physical and psychological spaces, thwarted by the unjust apartheid system and racial segregation. Conversely, *Waiting for the Barbarians* reflects the Magistrate's struggle to secure a home in the psychological space of an unnamed frontier settlement, where ideology and belongingness are shaped by the oppressive colonial force known as the 'Empire.' By examining these two novels, it is clear that Coetzee meticulously represents the destructive power of postcolonialism, which robs individuals of their homes, both physically and psychologically, making the structure of home fragmented, unattainable, and elusive—as experienced by both protagonists, Michael K and the Magistrate.

V.S. Naipaul defines home in the postcolonial context as an unstable, elusive, and contested space shaped by displacement, identity crisis, and the stigma of imperialism. In his novel *A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961), Naipaul represents the elusiveness of home through the character of Mr. Biswas, who struggles throughout his life to obtain a house that symbolizes not just physical shelter but also psychological independence—ideas that are denied to the postcolonial subject. Throughout the novel, Mr. Biswas repeatedly attempts to build or buy a house, but each attempt ends in futility, reflecting the systematic obstacles faced by colonized and marginalized individuals in securing stability and self-ownership (279). Although he finally purchases a house—a 'mess'—it lacks completeness and peace, remaining marked by displacement, poverty, and social control (390-400). Precisely, Mr. Biswas desires to own a house to secure personal autonomy, free from the control of the Tulsi family; Michael K seeks to own a secure home in nature, both physically and psychologically, to escape the unjust apartheid laws; and the Magistrate longs for a home as a moral refuge, free from the brutality of the Empire. Though each character longs for a stable home, their homes remain unattainable under the force of

postcolonial law. Thus, securing a stable home within a postcolonial framework remains both elusive and illusory.

Conclusion

J.M. Coetzee redefines the traditional notion of home as a space of security, identity, and belonging in both *Life & Times of Michael K* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In these novels, home is presented as a complex, unstable, and often unreachable concept, shaped by political and existential violence. For Coetzee, home is not simply a physical space but also a psychological one, frequently disrupted by colonial violence, displacement, and moral decay. Through Michael K's silent resistance and retreat into the natural world to build a self-made home, Coetzee portrays home as a personal and existential construct, existing outside the reach of postcolonial power, yet still vulnerable to destruction by the state. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, home is defined as a space intricately tied to the empire's structures of power. When the Magistrate becomes morally estranged from the colonial system, his home becomes uninhabitable—not physically, but morally and spiritually. In both novels, Coetzee presents home not as a fixed location, but as a fragile and unattainable space, continually threatened by oppressive postcolonial forces.

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