

Women's Roles and Representation in Caitī Songs: A Textual and Performance and Cultural Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the literary aesthetics and performance dynamics of Caitī, a prominent genre of seasonal folk music native to the Bhōjpurī-speaking areas of Northern India, primarily Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh. Caitī, historically classified as R̥tu Gīt (seasonal songs), is customarily sung during the Hindu month of Cait (March–April), aligning with the spring harvest (Rabī crop). This work offers a critical feminist analysis of the textuality and performance contexts of Caitī, which is typically categorized by its Rāg-s or distinctive structural refrain (Hō Rāmā) in structural musicological studies. This article examines a selected collection of traditional Caitī lyrics and contemporary performance venues to delineate how women's roles, wants, agency and structural discrimination are expressed and challenged. The study indicates that Caitī functions as a dual-faceted cultural site: textually, it serves as a venue for psychological emancipation where women articulate subversive sexual desires and critique patriarchal neglect; structurally, its public performance is fiercely contested and significantly influenced by caste, class and patriarchal gatekeeping.

Keywords: Caitī, women, gender representation, folk song, Bhōjpurī, performance, North India

INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Aryan vernacular expressive traditions of Northern India encompass a vast repository of oral literature predominantly maintained by subaltern and rural people. In the Bhōjpurī cultural context, seasonal folk songs (R̥tu Gīt) function as emotional indicators of communal life, reflecting the changing dynamics of agricultural work, ecological rhythms, and familial connections (Tewari, 1977). Caitī occupies a unique place among these. Caitī, musically grounded in the semiclassical traditions of the region, frequently references Rāg Caitī Bhoopālī or Khamāj, is characterized textually by poignant yet festive yearning linked to the spring harvest, serving as a vital medium for emotional expression (Manuel, 1989).

Caitī songs are seasonal folk and semi-classical compositions from North India linked to the month of Chaitra, sometimes intertwining spiritual, amorous and emotional themes. Caitī is characterized in journalistic and scholarly discourse as a spring-linked tradition wherein the female protagonist or nāyikā frequently serves as the emotional nucleus of the song text, with performance practices potentially incorporating melodic and rhythmic embellishments, particularly in semi-classical contexts (Pradhan, 2015). Research on women's folk songs in North India indicates that these songs articulate women's experiences related to labor, marriage, separation, yearning, and domesticity (Jassal, 2012; Srivastava, 1991). This study analyzes women's roles and depiction in Caitī songs through textual, thematic, and performance analysis. It contends that women are depicted as lovers, spouses, daughters, devotees, and guardians of oral history. Caitī serves as a culturally sanctioned venue for women to articulate emotional profundity, social conflict, and individual autonomy (Jassal, 2012; Narayan, 1997; Srivastava, 1991). Despite its cultural significance, conventional ethnomusicological research has always favored the formalistic aspects of Caitī—such as its rhythmic cycles (Kaharvā or Dādrā talas) or its association with the semiclassical Thumrī and Dādrā styles that gained popularity in courts and urban salons. In contrast, the gendered dynamics inherent in its oral texts and live

performance situations have often been downplayed or idealized as mere representations of Viraha (marriage separation).

Caitī is part of the extensive expressive realm of North Indian seasonal song traditions. It is linked to Chaitra, the inaugural month of the Hindu calendar, and is performed in springtime settings with profound emotional and lyrical connotations. Caitī is characterized as a seasonal song tradition imbued with sensual and romantic nuances, featuring vivid allusions to flowers and fruits and a female protagonist frequently compelled to reunite with her beloved (Pradhan, 2015). The genre is also present in semi-classical performance, where it can be enhanced through melodic and rhythmic embellishment (Pradhan, 2015). Caitī's dual existence as both folk and semi-classical expression renders it particularly significant for analyzing the representation of women in both lyrics and performance.

Women are essential to the domain of North Indian traditional music. Ethnomusicological studies of Bhōjpurī and related traditions indicate that folk songs function as a medium for negotiating and recalling caste, gender, work, sexuality, and emotions (Jassal, 2012). Prior research on women's songs in North India demonstrates that female voices in folk traditions are not marginal but are deeply integrated into social life, often exploring themes of separation, family conflict, ritual, and desire (Srivastava, 1991). Caitī should be understood not merely as music, but also as a gendered cultural product that both represents and performs women's responsibilities.

Research Objectives

This study intends to assess women's representation in Caitī song texts, delineate the social and family duties ascribed to women within the genre, investigate the emotional significances generated by these depictions, and explore how performance practices reinforce or transform these representations. This research addresses these deficiencies through an interdisciplinary analysis of text and performance. The specific research objectives are:

1. To analyse the representation of women's responsibilities, household positions and emotional depth within conventional Caitī poetic frameworks.
2. To examine how subaltern women employ the thematic patterns of Caitī to express sexual agency, challenge patriarchal norms and navigate the trauma of seasonal male migration.
3. To examine the spatial politics of Caitī performances, identifying the transitions, exclusions, and power dynamics that arise when these songs go from domestic, female-exclusive environments (Āṅgana) to public, institutionalized venues (Mahōtsava-s).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative mixed-method approach that integrates feminist literary textual analysis with critical performance analysis. Field data and archive materials were collected over several years, with a strong emphasis on rural clusters in the Bhojpur, Buxar, and Rohtas districts of Bihar, as well as the Mirzapur and Varanasi districts of Uttar Pradesh. The research examines recurring lyrical imagery, the feminine narrative voice, seasonal symbolism, and the interplay between text and vocal performance. The methodological framework is segmented into two operational phases:

Phase I: Textual Corpus Selection and Decoding

A corpus of fifty (50) traditional Caitī song texts was compiled from oral transcriptions of folk singers, archival field recordings, and written anthologies of Bhōjpurī folk literature. The textual analysis focuses on unpacking structural linguistic markers, recurring metaphors, and narrative perspectives. Songs were coded according to three primary thematic axes:

- *Viraha and Labor Spatiality*: Expressions of loneliness juxtaposed against agrarian harvest chores.
- *Erotic Autonomy and Body Politics*: Lyrical assertions of female desire, pleasure, and bodily frustration.

- *Domestic Hierarchy and Critique*: Lyrical resistance directed at the conjugal family unit (specifically the *Sāsu* mother-in-law and *Nanad* sister-in-law).

Phase II: Performance and Spatial Mapping

To understand the socio-political dimensions of how *Caitī* is actualized, ethnographic field observations were conducted across diverse performance sites (Henry, 1988). These ranged from informal, non-commercial rural domestic gatherings to highly formalized, state-sponsored public folk festivals (*Mahōtsava-s*). Spatial mapping was used to document the physical position of female performers, audience demographics, instrumentation and the degree of institutional mediation present in each setting.

Textual Analysis: Lyrical Coding and Thematic Archetypes

The textual architecture of *Caitī* relies on an explicit narrative device: the employment of a female speaker (the *Nayika*), who articulates her worldview in the first person. Even when composed or sung by men, the narrative core of the *Caitī* remains profoundly feminine in its focus and emotional texture.

Thematic Axis 1: The Migrant Husband and Agrarian Solitude

The central narrative impetus in *Caitī* is the structural absence of the husband (*Pī* or *Balam*). The folk consciousness of the region is profoundly influenced by the historical dynamics of the colonial and post-colonial labor market, characterized by the migration of males from eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to metropolitan centers such as Calcutta, Assam or Mumbai for wage labor (Babu, 2012).

In *Caitī* songs, this estrangement becomes intolerable during the month of Chait. The spring season introduces flourishing mustard fields, blossoming mango trees (*Keōṛā*), and the alluring fragrance of the *Mahuā* flower. The natural setting starkly contrasts with the female protagonist's mental turmoil.

Consider the structural refrain of a classic *Caitī* text collected from Buxar:

Caitā māse agiyā lagēlī hō Rāmā,

Sējiyā biyākula jiyarā hamār hō Rāmā.

(In the month of Chait, a fire rages, Oh Rama,

The bed is agonized, and so is my soul, Oh Rama.)

The extensive use of *agiyā* (fire) operates on two functional levels. It symbolises both the genuine warmth of the encroaching summer and the inner turmoil of unsatisfied longing and solitude.

Thematic Axis 2: Subversion of Domestic Hierarchies

When the husband migrates, the wife is confined within the rigid, surveillance-intensive environment of the shared patriarchal family. The *Caitī* writings often depict the female protagonist in overt emotional rebellion against her in-laws, who serve as the direct enforcers of patriarchal authority. *Caitī* songs subtly challenge patriarchal domestic structures by giving women a voice to express their emotions, grievances, and desires. Through themes of marital dissatisfaction, longing, and resistance to family authority, women negotiate their social position and question traditional gender roles. Although not overtly revolutionary, these songs create a symbolic space for critiquing and reinterpreting domestic power relations.

DOMESTIC RELATION	LYRICAL REPRESENTATION / CONFLICT ARCHETYPE	NARRATIVE FUNCTION
Sāsu (Mother-in-law)	Punitive enforcer of labor; minimizes the protagonist's emotional and physical exhaustion.	Represents the internal policing mechanism of patriarchy.

Nanad (Sister-in-law)	Spy and antagonist; mocks the protagonist's longing and monitors her movements.	Generates domestic tension; highlights horizontal surveillance among women under patriarchy.
Devar (Brother-in-law)	Ambiguous figure; either an ally, a symbol of safety, or an unwelcome source of predatory sexual advances.	Highlights the vulnerability of the woman whose husband is absent.

Table1- Subversion of Domestic Hierarchies

The protagonist consistently repudiates domestic chores as a form of protest against her husband's absence. When instructed by her mother-in-law to harvest the wheat fields or mill the grain, the Nayika asserts her refusal, undermining the fundamental expectation of the obedient rural daughter-in-law:

Sāsu hamār Bōlī bōlē Tīkharī hō Rāmā,

Hama Nāhī jāba khētavā jīyārā udāsa hō Rāmā.

(My mother-in-law speaks sharp words, Oh Rama,

But I will not go to the fields; my heart is broken, Oh Rama.)

Thematic Axis 3: The Politics of Desire and Bodily Autonomy

In contrast to traditional literary forms that idealize or sanitize female desire, Caitī songs employ a candid and clear lexicon regarding the female body. The Nayika mourns the deterioration of her youthful form (Jōban bētā jāyē). Her jewelry (Nathuniyā [nose ring], Jhumakā [earrings]) and attire transform into tangible encumbrances in the absence of her partner.

This theme signifies a mode of psychological emancipation. In songs, women in conservative rural settings candidly express their sexuality, physical dissatisfaction, and resentment toward husbands who prioritize financial interests over marital intimacy.

Kauna kāmē āvē jaisan Rūpa baurāyal hō Rāmā,

Gavanā Karāikē balamū bāhar gailē hō Rāmā.

(What use is this intoxicating beauty of mine, Oh Rama,

When my husband left for distant lands right after our wedding night, Oh Rama.)

Performance Analysis: Spatial Politics and Mediations

The significance of Caitī is inextricably linked to its live performance. The evolution of the genre from its conventional rural origins to contemporary institutional phases illustrates an intricate history of class and caste inequality (Post, 1987). Performance is fundamental to the significance of Caitī. In semi-classical contexts, Caitī may encompass melodic embellishment and rhythmic extension, enabling vocalists to linger on emotive phrases and amplify the female protagonist's voice (Pradhan, 2015). This renders performance not merely a conduit for communication, but a creative interpretation of gendered feeling.

Comparative research on women's songs in North India indicates that these songs are acquired and conveyed within communal settings, frequently featuring recurring lines, repetitive melodic structures, and participatory singing that facilitates collective engagement in the performance (Narayan, 1997). This is particularly pertinent for Caitī, as the female voice in these contexts is not solitary; it is socially integrated, collectively recalled, and emotionally intensified through recurrent melodic structure. The outcome is a performance style in which the personal transforms into the communal, and the female speaker embodies both individuality and symbolism (Narayan, 1997).

Spatial Shift 1: The Domestic Āṅgana (Courtyard)

Caitī was initially presented in the non-commercial setting of the Āṅgana (house courtyard). These female-exclusive gatherings allowed women to sing without male supervision. In the Āṅgana, performance frameworks are distinctly collaborative and non-hierarchical. There is no clear distinction between the "performer" and the "audience." A lead vocalist initiates a line, and the other women happily join in the chorus (Ho Rama). The instrumentation is deliberately minimal, including the Dholak, a double-headed hand drum, and the Manjīrā, small finger cymbals. The provocative and evocative lyrics are expressed with complete emotional freedom, serving as a vital instrument for communal resilience and solidarity.

Spatial Shift 2: The Public Village Choupāl and Baiṭhak

When observing Caitī's transfer to the public village square (Choupāl) or formal sitting chambers (Baiṭhak), a significant gendered shift transpires. These locations have historically been controlled by men, especially those from dominant-caste landowning backgrounds.

In male-dominated performances, female agency is examined in one of two ways. It is either completely replaced by male vocalists employing a stylized female timbre (sometimes inspired by Lauṇḍā Nāch or traditional folk theater), or it is restricted to professional female folk singers from oppressed caste groups (such as the Mīrāsī, Ḍhārī, or Gandarv communities). These professional women navigate complex social dynamics; although they are celebrated for their musical abilities, they often face patriarchal scrutiny that diminishes public female performance (Grootenboer, 2012).

Spatial Shift 3: Modern Institutional and State Mahōtsavas

In modern cultural contexts, Caitī has moved onto prominent, government-sponsored festival stages (Mahōtsavas). This transition incorporates contemporary sound systems, commercial recordings, and middle-class audiences, significantly transforming the genre's presentation.

To render Caitī appealing to urban and middle-class listeners, official agencies and commercial record firms impose rigorous sanitization of the lyrical material. The unrefined, overt manifestations of female longing and corporeal discontent are methodically removed. Heavily devout overtones supplant them, transforming the Nayika's yearning for her spouse into the spiritual longing of Rādhā for Kṛṣṇa or Sitā for Rāma. This technique removes the genre's foundational subversion, converting a medium for female critique into a sanitized legacy product.

Quantitative Corpus Insights

The structural analysis of the examined corpus (N = 50) reveals clear thematic patterns in Caitī songs. The findings indicate that the corpus predominantly emphasizes experiences of separation (viraha), emotional longing, and the realities of domestic life, rather than exclusively devotional or spiritual themes. Songs frequently portray women's emotional struggles, familial relationships, and everyday social responsibilities, highlighting the intimate connection between personal experience and folk expression. The distribution of lyrical motifs thus demonstrates that Caitī functions not only as a medium of seasonal celebration but also as a significant repository of social memory, gendered experience, and rural cultural values.

Distribution Of Core Thematic Archetypes (N=50)

The physical context of the performance directly dictates who controls the music, what lyrics are allowed, and how the audience engages with the performance.

SL NO.	THEMATIC FOCUS	SONG COUNT	PERCENTAGE
1	Viraha & Male Migration	22	44%
2	Domestic/ In-Law Critique	13	26%

3	Erotic Desire & Body Politics	10	20%
4	Devotional Santification	5	10%

Table 2- Distribution of Core Thematic Archetypes

This table presents the thematic distribution of the Caitī songs analyzed in the study. It categorizes the songs according to their dominant themes and indicates the frequency and percentage of each thematic category within the total corpus. The thematic distribution reveals that Caitī songs primarily function as a medium for expressing women's experiences of separation, particularly those associated with male migration. At the same time, they serve as a platform for articulating domestic grievances, expressing female desire and conveying devotional sentiments. The predominance of *viraha* themes (44%) suggests that emotional separation is a defining feature of the Caitī repertoire, while the presence of domestic, erotic and devotional themes demonstrates the multidimensional nature of women's voices within this folk tradition. Together, these themes offer valuable insights into gender relations, family dynamics, migration, emotional life, and religious culture in North Indian society.

Comparative Structural Dynamics of Performance Spaces

The physical context of the performance directly dictates who controls the music, what lyrics are allowed, and how the audience engages with the performance.

PARAMETER	DOMESTIC ĀṄGANA (COURTYARD)	VILLAGE CHOUPĀL / BAIṬHAK	STATE MAHŌTSAVA / COMMERCIAL STAGE
Primary Performers	Non-professional rural women (Collective)	Male singers or professional caste-specific women	Professional soloists (Middle-class or highly commercialized artists)
Gender Dynamics	All-female; completely unmonitored	Dominantly male audience; female performers are heavily objectified or marginalized	Mixed audience; highly formalized and separated from the stage
Lyrical Integrity	High; unedited preservation of erotic, critical, and subversive texts	Moderate; tilted toward bravado, male perspectives, or comic relief	Low; highly sanitized, devotionalized, and scrubbed of explicit female desire
Primary Instrumentation	Dholak, Manjīrā, oral clapping	Harmonium, Tablā, Dholak, Kartāl	Synthesizers, Octapad, Tablā, Harmonium, amplified sound systems

Table 3-Comparative Structural Dynamics of Performance Spaces

This table illustrates how the performance environment shapes the presentation, meaning, and transmission of Caitī songs. It demonstrates that the same musical tradition can undergo significant transformation depending on whether it is performed in a domestic, community, or commercial setting. The performance space influences the performers, audience composition, lyrical content, gender relations and musical accompaniment. The table reveals a clear relationship between performance space and cultural representation. The domestic courtyard preserves Caitī as a living expression of women's voices and experiences. The village choupāl introduces public scrutiny and gendered mediation, resulting in partial modification of the tradition. The commercial stage, while increasing visibility and audience reach, often transforms the genre through professionalization, commercialization, and cultural sanitization. Thus, as Caitī moves from the private sphere to public and institutional platforms, it tends to lose some of its original female-centered narratives and subversive expressive power, even as it gains wider recognition and cultural legitimacy. This demonstrates that folk music is not a fixed tradition but a dynamic cultural practice continually shaped by its social and performance contexts.

Findings

The study reveals that women in Caitī songs are predominantly shown as the waiting lover or wife, the daughter transitioning between households, the devotee communicating with the divine, and the emotional speaker expressing longing and separation. This pattern mirrors the overarching framework of North Indian women's folk songs, wherein female vocalists express intimate emotions through widely disseminated formats (Narayan, 1997; Srivastava, 1991). Caitī positions women at the core of seasonal imagery, associating spring, romance and emotional anticipation with the inner world of the female heroine (Pradhan, 2015).

A secondary result is that Caitī not only mirrors women's social roles but also positions women as bearers of tradition. In oral performance contexts, women acquire, replicate, modify and convey song texts through generations, rendering the genre a significant medium of cultural memory (Narayan, 1997). This transmission is particularly significant in folk contexts because song performance is communal, participatory and socially relevant rather than solely individual (Narayan, 1997).

DISCUSSION

Women in Caitī songs are depicted through emotional depth and societal limitations. The songs consistently highlight patience, loyalty, devotion and longing, potentially reinforcing conventional gender norms. The female voice is endowed with distinctive expressive authority. The lady in Caitī frequently articulates her desires and conveys emotional states that are typically restricted in quotidian patriarchal existence. The equilibrium between restriction and expression aligns with extensive research on women's folk songs in North India, where music serves as a medium for voice, commentary and emotional negotiation (Jassal, 2012; Srivastava, 1991).

The portrayal of women as spouses and romantic partners is particularly noteworthy. In Caitī, love is seldom abstract; it is linked to separation, absence, and seasonal change. The emotional atmosphere of spring serves as a symbolic backdrop for longing and reconnection, while the female protagonist frequently bears the narrative weight of anticipation and recollection (Pradhan, 2015). This closely mirrors the overarching North Indian trend in which women's songs emphasize viraha, or the longing experienced in separation, as a primary emotional theme (Narayan, 1997; Srivastava, 1991). Caitī transforms women's inner experiences into public poetic articulation using this arrangement.

Women's Roles in Caitī Songs

Role of woman	Textual representation	Cultural meaning
Lover	Waiting, longing, desire, reunion	Emphasizes viraha and emotional intensity
Wife	Fidelity, absence of husband, domestic patience	Reflects marriage and migration-linked separation
Daughter/daughter-in-law	Transition between homes, adjustment, responsibility	Shows family structure and gendered mobility
Devotee	Prayer, invocation, surrender	Connects female emotion with religious expression
Custodian of tradition	Oral transmission, communal singing, memory	Preserves regional musical heritage

Table 4-Women's Roles in Caitī Songs

This table is a thematic synthesis based on Caitī and women's folk-song scholarship (Jassal, 2012; Narayan, 1997; Pradhan, 2015; Srivastava, 1991).

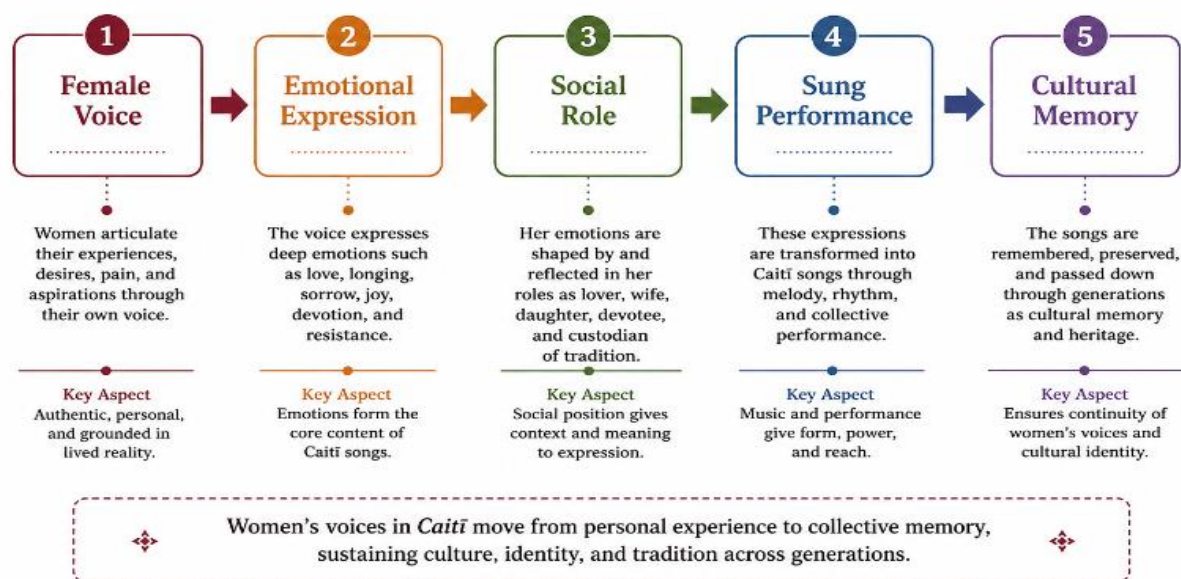
This table presents the different roles through which women are represented in Caitī songs and explains the cultural meanings associated with each role. Caitī, a seasonal folk song tradition of North India, particularly

prevalent in the Bhōjpurī-speaking region, portrays women not merely as individuals but as carriers of emotions, social values and cultural traditions.

The table demonstrates that women in Caitī songs occupy multiple interconnected roles—romantic, familial, spiritual, and cultural. These representations reveal not only women's emotional experiences but also their significant contributions to family life, religious practice, and the preservation of folk traditions. Through these diverse portrayals, Caitī songs become an important medium for understanding gender relations, social structures, migration experiences and cultural continuity within North Indian folk society.

Figure 1

Conceptual Illustration of Women's Representation in Caitī



CONCLUSION

The textual and performance analysis of Caitī folk songs uncovers a complex and profoundly gendered expressive history. Caitī functions as a radical repository of subaltern female introspection. By employing established frameworks of desire and estrangement, rural women effectively contest patriarchal constraints, articulate explicit criticisms of home exploitation, and demand autonomy over their emotional and erotic experiences.

Nonetheless, the performance analysis highlights that this creative agency is significantly reliant on the physical environment in which it operates. The domestic Āngana retains the rebellious essence of Caitī, although public and commercial platforms sometimes sanitize these songs to conform to prevailing middle-class standards. This persistent conflict between grassroots subversion and official sanitization underscores the critical necessity of conserving and examining traditional performances. They constitute a dynamic landscape in which gender, class and cultural identity are perpetually contested. Caitī songs present women as emotionally expressive, socially embedded and culturally significant figures. They appear as lovers, wives, daughters, devotees, and carriers of oral tradition, while the performance style of Caitī enhances the emotional force of these representations. The genre preserves both the realities of gendered life and the expressive possibilities available to women within folk culture. In this sense, Caitī is not only a musical form but also a gendered cultural archive in which women's voices are heard, repeated, and remembered (Jassal, 2012; Narayan, 1997; Pradhan, 2015; Srivastava, 1991).

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