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Reader-Response Analysis in *Snow Country*

A Novel by Yasunari Kawabata

by

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Abstrak: *Reader-Response* telah menjadi sebuah pendekatan yang populer untuk mencari makna sebuah karya sastra. Pendekatan ini tepat digunakan untuk menganalisis karya besar seperti novel *Snow Country* buah karya Yasunari Kawabata. *Snow Country* dianalisis dalam penelitian pustaka ini karena novel tersebut memperkenalkan banyak nilai lokal melalui berbagai simbol. Dengan menerapkan pendekatan *reader-response*, penulis mencoba untuk menelaah simbol-simbol tersebut. *Snow Country* merupakan data utama. Sementara itu, referensi dan sumber-sumber internet lainnya menjadi data pendukung. Penelitian ini menggunakan teknik dokumentasi dalam pengumpulan data. Adapun metode yang digunakan adalah: membaca secara intensif, mencatat, mengklasifikasi, menginterpretasi dan mendiskusikan data. Kemudian, dengan menggunakan *Content Analysis (CA)* atau kajian isi maka dapat disimpulkan bahwa simbol-simbol yang ditemukan mempunyai keterkaitan dengan feminisme, kisah asmara, alam dan budaya.

Kata-kata Kunci: *reader-response*, simbol, feminisme, kisah asmara, budaya

Background

Yasunari Kawabata, one of Japan's greatest novelists, got Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968. He was well-known for adding a sensual, more Japanese impressionism to the once fashionable naturalism imported from France. *Snow Country*, one of his excellent novels, is about the love affair of a country geisha with a Tokyo snob. Yasunari Kawabata began writing this novel in 1934 and he published it in 1956. He took 22 years to present it to the world. *Snow Country* is worth-reading, in which readers can see how the author is very smart in his efforts to denote his ideas, though, it is not thick. From the package, people feel comfortable to read more and more. The author tries to promote Japan where he puts his eyes on the traditional Japan. He puts culture, feminism and aspects of love in harmony. This becomes a valued source to us, to open our critical sights on the ideas of the story.

Before analyzing *Snow Country* by using Reader-response theory, the writer needs to investigate other readers' views. They are, then, significantly contribute to the writer's analysis since they can broaden her perspective. From the investigation, the writer tries to get the essence of the views then attempt to go through the novel. She endeavors to find the answers of why, where and when the important issues take place. Afterward, she expresses her own view based on the norms of language and literature.

Jessica Schneider notes that it is not easy to understand *Snow Country* since it presents the complexity of human relationships, isolation, loneliness, and even worse — when there are two people endeavor to unite but ultimately cannot, whether realizing or not. Scenes unfold at their own accord and not everything is explained. That is why; readers need to think hard and also to be patient in order to understand the message. Nature and landscape play as the characters themselves, and the mountainous terrain with its snow capped peaks become their own character.

Throughout the text, Kawabata sprinkles in bits of insight that add flavor to the narrative. Such as moments when noticing a girl's face, it is as if her beauty is appearing out from the landscape itself. She adds that Shimamura is a bored individual who "lives a life of idleness," and he is coming to the hot springs in order to revive himself and "recover" some of the "honesty" he feels he's lost (Retrieved November 13, 2010, from <http://blogcritics.org/books/article/book-review-snow-country-by-yasunari/#comments>).

Then, Tristan Solanas recognizes the characteristics of Japanese arts which combine aesthetics, beauty and sadness in *Snow Country*. Beauty is sadness: beauty is the light given-off by what passes away. The words "sad", "lonely", "alone" occur many times in *Snow Country*. Nature herself is seen as a manifestation of fascinating evanescence. Kawabata tries to emphasize that life is suffering and suffering is caused by desire. The ending of this work, Komako carrying Yoko through the fire---think of the Buddha's Fire Sermon: "All things are ON FIRE, on fire with lust, on fire with desire"---is beautiful...and SAD, a suggestion of the sorrow of life, the ambiguity because instability of all phenomena, including human beings and their longings. This realization grows in some sad lonely souls the seeds of compassion, which is what Komako shows for Yoko, even though she'd been jealous of her (Retrieved November 13, 2010, from <http://blogcritics.org/books/article/book-review-snow-country-by-yasunari/#comments>).

The background and the points presented by both readers encourage the writer to examine the symbols in *Snow Country*. The complexity of human relationship, nature, Shimamura's efforts to revive himself and recover something he has lost and the sorrow of life mentioned in the description above seem to be important. Then, the writer comes to a decision of knowing what symbols found in four aspects. They are feminism, love affair, nature and culture.

The Synopsis of *Snow Country*

Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* details the love affair between one such hot-spring geisha, a young woman named Komako, and a westernized upper-class gentleman of Tokyo named Shimamura. The story takes place in the mountainous west coast of Japan buried in snow for long winters. The novel begins with Shimamura's early December journey by train from Tokyo to the mountain resort at which he first met Komako the previous spring. Shimamura is taken by the girl's voice, which he says rings out clearly. The girl is accompanied by an ill gentleman. The man's name is Yukio and he is the son of a music teacher in the village where Shimamura is bound. The girl's name, he will later learn, is Yoko. He looks her as a beautiful young girl who is stealing his curiosity.

The mountain resort which Shimamura likes to visit not only attracts him but also other unaccompanied gentlemen. It provides about eighteen geisha who are ready to serve them. In Japan's hot-spring resorts, the distinction between the geisha and the prostitute is blurred; it depends solely upon the conduct of the particular woman involved.

Friendship is what Shimamura needs, at least at beginning, but it goes wilder into love affair. Being with Komako is a real comfort to Shimamura since he can talk about dances, movies, plays, short stories and novels. Since Komako loves Shimamura, she is very disappointed when Shimamura decides just to be her friend. She wants to have deeper relationship. To please Shimamura, she is willing to be a farmer after her contract is over.

Their closeness makes Komako always tries to see Shimamura whenever she has a chance. She enters Shimamura's room without being called. She also does not hesitate to initiate intimacy. Besides, she feels free to communicate her desire and hope. Even she dares to express

her anger towards him. Although Yoko has no close relationship with Shimamura, she is not afraid of sharing her opinions and dreams.

One evening Shimamura and Komako are together in the evening, admiring the beauty of the Milky Way in the clear night sky when they hear that a fire has broken out in the town. Everybody rushes to assist with putting the fire out and making whatever rescues are necessary. Shimamura and Komako are torn between following the codes of propriety (separating so that their relationship is undiscovered) and being together through the frightening event. In the midst of this excitement, they find out that Yoko was badly injured. Komako tries to save her but it is too late.

The novel, which is decorated with *haiku*, tiny seventeenth-syllable poems, is concluded with the death of Yoko in the fire, and scene culminates with Komako screaming. Shimamura is completely separated from Komako at this point, horrified by the scene: "He tried to move toward that half-mad voice, but he was pushed aside by the men who had come to take Yoko from her. As he caught his footing, his head feel back, and the Milky Way flowed down inside him with a roar".

Research Method

The approach of an analysis on the work of Kawabata might be observed through reader's perspective who acts as the analyst of any literary work. Thus, a compatible theory for this approach has been developing through decades, known as reader-response theory. A reader-oriented approach built up in the 1960s then, frequently known by some affiliated names, i.e., receptive theory, reader-response theory, or aesthetic reception. They are used almost synonymously to show the focal point of this approach. Furthermore, the term reader-response theory is used in this analysis. Klarer explains that reader-response theory focuses on the reader's point of view. The interpretation of texts might depends on the reader's education, age, gender and nationality. In other words, the possibility of meaning towards a text depends on the reader's own competence or experience. Since it depends on subjective-individual traits, the interaction is mainly between text and reader. Readers are considered as important as writer in terms of giving meaning toward a text, since the theory coveys no meaning conducted in any text before captured by readers (Klarer, 2004: 92-3; Habib, 2005: 732-3).

This research which aims to describe the symbols in Yasunari Kawabata's *Snow Country* is directed as a library research. The technique of this research is organized into procedure of data collection which integrates the information about the data. The main data are taken from *Snow Country*. The supporting data are taken from related sources which have close correlation with the main data. In addition, the collecting data method comprises intensive close reading, noting, classifying, interpreting and discussing the data. Content analysis (CA) assists this study with possibility to seek the details of the symbols related to feminism, love affair, nature and culture.

Research Discussion

The discussion part elaborates the symbols which are connected to four aspects. Those aspects are feminism, love affair, nature and culture.

Feminism

Related to feminism, there are four characters, Shimamura, Shimamura's wife, Yoko and Komako, are deemed as symbols. To elaborate these symbols, the writer analyzes the characters' remarks and actions (see McCallum, 1939: 591). Shimamura becomes the symbol of patriarchy. The three female characters symbolize three kinds of women. Shimamura's wife is a symbol of woman with no voices or actions to oppose patriarchy. Yoko is a symbol of woman who has voices but has no actions to oppose patriarchy. Meanwhile, Komako symbolizes woman who has either voices or actions to oppose patriarchy.

The trip of Shimamura to Snow Country alone is customary in Japan. The wife and the society can accept that since Japanese culture practices patriarchy that gives men special privilege. According to Kramarae (1993: 398), they have control of passion. It means that they have the right to satisfy their lusts. Bhasin and Khan (1995: 55) add that they also have more attention and freedom, including to express themselves. In this case, Shimamura has freedom to go anywhere he wants, to do whatever he wants, including getting sexual satisfaction from other women, with no time limit. He can go to pamper himself in the hot-springs in Snow Country which provide about eighteen geisha who are ready to serve unaccompanied gentlemen. His existence among his family is not demanded. As long as he can support his family financially, he can do whatever he wants. His wife and children have no right to protest.

Shimamura's wife is an anonymous character who symbolizes ordinary Japanese housewife with no courage at all to fight against her husband's oppression. As a full-time mother and housewife, she has to stay at home and raise her children (see Ayers, 1991: 312). Being left for a quite long time to take care of the children and household alone is not pleasant. It is more miserable when she knows that her husband is having fun with some geisha. She has no job so she has no income. Her protest will only put her and her children in danger. Her being submissive to her husband is the symbol of traditional Japanese wives. This type of women, no voices and actions, are abandoned, ignored and underestimated because they are considered unimportant.

The second female character, Yoko, has voice to express her opinions, hopes and desires. However, she fails to prove her passion that every woman has the same capability with man, in terms of running her life. For example, when Shimamura worries about her going to Tokyo alone, Yoko with full confidence replies, mentioned on page 136,

"A woman by herself can always get by."

She dares to voice her own belief that a woman can protect herself in a trip to Tokyo without man's help, but she does not go. She dares to talk not dares to act. At the end of the story, she is beaten by fire. It reflects that the voice without action is nonsense. Like Shimamura's wife, Yoko is also bounded to the existence of man.

The third female character, Komako, still exists and gets Shimamura's attention. She is still needed by this man. She can place herself at a certain point where she is needed by the man. In other words, she has power over Shimamura. It is because she does not only give her voice but also perform actions. She really understands that in order to become a subject, she has to communicate her own opinions, desires and hopes (see Hellwig, 1997: 15-6); as well as emphasizing her intention firmly. On page 20, Komako asserts her standpoints about the position of Geisha toward anybody in society, about independency and freedom to set life free.

"No one forces a geisha to do what she doesn't want to. It's entirely up to the geisha herself."

She adds

“It was up to the geisha whether she would stay the night or not.” (page 26).

These statements really reflect her strong desire to get respect and not to be treated as the target of man’s sexual forbidden leisure. Another example, Komako dares to say that she wants to have a deeper relationship, not just friendship (see page 21-2). This reflects how a woman may initiate an intimate relationship.

What is interesting here is that Komako does not only communicate her opinion, desire and hope but also share her knowledge. Since she has knowledge on the same area with Shimamura, she succeeds to grab his attention. That is why women should not stop to improve their knowledge. This is exactly what Djajaneegara suggests (2000: 5) that women need to upgrade themselves. If Komako does not equip herself with sufficient knowledge, the communication will not run smoothly and she will not get special attention from Shimamura (see page 21).

Beside the ability to communicate her opinion, desire, hope and knowledge, Komako also dares to conduct action necessarily. Entering Shimamura’s room without being called and initiating intimacy show how Komako refuses to be Shimamura’s sexual object all the time. She wants to take an active part in the relationship. As a geisha, she realizes that she cannot dominate her guests. However, whenever she sees the opportunity, she grasps it. The appearance of wildness in a woman, which is uncommon for any Japanese woman including Shimamura’s wife, really challenges Shimamura’s manhood. Even common geisha won’t exhibit this kind of action since they will enter the room after being invited and they won’t initiate intimacy. Komako is tired of just following what her guests want. She does not hesitate to enter Shimamura’s room anytime she wants without being called (see page 33,63,125,128) or initiate intimacy (see page 32,46,122, 146, 168). She believes that women also have the right to initiate intimacy (see Darma, 2000: 13). This proves that Komako does not want to be the passive part in the exploration of sexual desire between man and woman.

Her voices and actions make Komako get a better bargaining position than other geisha from Shimamura. She becomes an important individual with whom Shimamura is willing to spend his time. Even she happens to show her anger to Shimamura, she still wins Shimamura’s heart to be close to her (see page 79).

Communication is indeed very important here. Women or wives are not merely expected to be able to cook (*masak*), make up (*macak*) and have baby (*manak*) as in Javanese philosophy (Koentjaraningrat, 1994: 142, 145; Williams, 1991: 16, 33, 128) but also to communicate (*mangap*) to serve their men. Communication skill is needed so that wives can discuss anything with their husbands and know what their husbands want. In order to be able to *mangap*, wives ought to have enough knowledge, at least that of the same interest with their husbands. This is very important in order to keep wives and husbands in the same rhythm of life. That is why, women have to update their knowledge, no matter how old they are.

Manak in this context is not just delivering a baby, especially a baby boy, but also the ability to serve and satisfy husband in bed. It means women have to do whatever their husbands want to get orgasm. To achieve this purpose, even women need to learn the latest art of making love. Sometimes, women have to sacrifice herself by letting the leisure in her man’s side and end it without orgasm for herself. It is like an unwritten terms of conduct in a marriage, at least in the Eastern culture.

In this novel, Shimamura still needs to look for geisha because his wife might only be able to *macak*, *manak* and *masak* but not to *mangap*. She might still have the ability to make love

but she is not skillful in bed. Over a long period of marriage, Shimamura possibly needs a sophisticated service that cannot be given by his wife. Due to living in a society that men get female perfect service, Shimamura demands to get it. If he does not get it from his wife, he can get it from geisha which are legally provided in the hot springs. Komako may not be able to cook food as delicious as Shimamura's wife but she understands Shimamura's need.

Love Affair

Love affair found in *Snow Country* is the symbol of man's weakness, Shimamura's weaknesses. The first weakness is that as a married man, he cannot control himself from desire and passion to make contact with other women. He is easily attracted to beautiful young women as if he opens his heart to grow such feeling to any woman he meets. As a married man, he should not behave that way. Shimamura's split attention between Komako and Yoko has given stronger impression of his weakness. He cannot stand seeing Yoko's beauty as soon as he sees her at the first time in the train, as he stares on Yoko's reflection on window during the trip from Tokyo to Snow Country.

The second Shimamura's weakness is that he demonstrates critical confidence. He needs the recognition that he is still attractive and knowledgeable for any woman. Thus, he wants to prove that he can grab attention of any young woman, like what he gets from Komako. Very early, Shimamura indirectly looks through the window the other young woman, Yoko, as a beautiful young girl who is stealing his passion as a man. The appearances of the two young women indicate how Shimamura is not interested in woman at his age. He experiences the situation as supplementary energy pulling him back to become a young man. He wants to recreate himself to particular years in the past when he got his glorious moment. Those two women are the challenges that he has to conquer under his personal ambition to elevate his manhood.

In deeper sense, when a man at forties, he finds himself physically exhausted; he forces himself to prove that it will not influence his manhood. This is what Shimamura perceives about his natural order of being old. He tries to get agreement from his social environment, even from people in other places. He likes travelling to any place to show that he is still strong enough to go after places, to cope with surrounding condition including weather or landscape. He goes to mountain, snowy place, when sun is burning out or rain is pouring down, by himself. Above all, he seeks for respects and appreciation. He needs someone to hear his thoughts, then, he can share his knowledge of interests. He loves to learn about occidental ballet indicating his knowledgeable interests, and wants to share it to loyal audiences. Friendship is what he needs, at least at beginning, but it goes wilder into love affair. Komako is the person who can support him. Shimamura told Komako as it is written on page 21,

"When I want someone to talk to, I can talk to you."

He knows a lot about dance and she is very interested in it. He feels satisfied since someone finally appreciates his knowledge as stated in this following sentence

"It might be said that his knowledge was now for the first time in a very great while being put to use, since talk of the dance helped bring the woman nearer to him; ..." (page 25).

Besides dance, Komako is also interested in movies, plays, short stories and novels as it is written on page 41,

“... she had carefully catalogued every novel and short story she had read since she was fifteen or sixteen.”

and on page 42,

“She talked on happily too of movies and plays she had never seen.”

Since Komako can fulfill his needs, he feels comfortable with her. Hence, whenever he needs that fulfillment, he will go to snow country to meet her.

“Had she forgotten that a hundred and ninety-nine days earlier this sort of conversation had set off the impulse to throw herself at Shimamura? (page 42-43)”.

Unfortunately, he does not feel the same way with the woman he has married. Being with Komako is a real comfort to Shimamura, moments that he always expects in his present life. With her, he can fill up the emptiness in him. What Shimamura confronts with has been described by Daniel Levinson as a middle aged life crisis. Shimamura is between past and future. He tries to fill the gap which threatens his life continuity. Even, for a man who has this kind of crisis, sacrificing his respected social status and leaving his family for a young sexy woman with low social status is possible (see Santrock, 2002: 172).

Shimamura's love affair with Komako exists because both of them play significant roles. Shimamura has a special feeling for her, which is in the beginning as a friend to talk with. The relationship is getting broader where Shimamura starts to depend on her presence. He starts to feel uncomfortable when Komako talks about another man (see page 56). Shimamura wants to have her to share his days in the inn, the place where Komako works as a geisha. He can talk freely to Komako about whatever he wants to say, even something that very personal. Readers can see the closeness of their relationship from the interaction between them. Furthermore, Shimamura gets pleasure from how Komako behaves to him. He sees Komako as an aggressive woman that always willing to be with him, which in turn makes him to feel superior as a man. This is how Komako fills the gap in Shimamura's mental of state.

Nature

Symbols concerning nature are used to lead to the philosophy hold in this literary work. The author unconsciously puts his meaning of life he has been living, hibernating through his ages. Moments in his life left tracks to follow, nostalgia for him.

Snow symbolizes *purity* or *sincerity* and *calmness*. The white color represents the sincerity or purity. It is also denoting the feeling of peacefulness where no place for war and brutality. Moreover, snow refers to Komako who represents the pure hearted woman who dedicates her heart or true love to Shimamura while she gets nothing in return. From the other perspective, the cold temperature of snow represents the calmness, a conducive-situation of human beings' hearts appears in Shimamura. In coldness, Shimamura finds himself as a man with not much consideration on his wife, even Komako. He behaves himself to be the central of authority in any relationship he is dealing with.

Snow Country symbolizes *conservatism*. The old traditional thinking of the people and the physical performance of the villagers indicate the conservatism. They live in traditional neighborhood that shares pure values of living together. Snow Country comes to the story to signalize a peaceful and silent place, far away from the greedy of city. The place is built under the idea to serve any visitors, to make them feel the hospitality of the villagers wrapped by the nature.

Paradox appears as another essence of snow as a symbol in this Kawabata's work. He happens to show us the paradox of snow indicating purity or sincerity while geisha are created against this principle. Geisha are trained to please their guests. In other words, what the snow symbolizes here is contrasted with geisha who is accustomed to hypocrisy or falseness, at least on their front covers. They are wearing thick make up which hides their real face. Their response, smiles and attitude are artificial to please their guests. For example in response to Shimamura's idea to bring his family to the place, and both of them could all be friends, Komako said,

"I understand that well enough." Komako smiled, her voice falling, and a touch of the geisha's playfulness came out. Then she continued, 'I'd like that much better. It lasts longer if you're just friends'" (page 26).

Actually she wants more than friendship but she has to be professional by accepting her guest's wishes. Although, Komako as a geisha is fully covered by falseness, she still maintains honesty and purity inside her. It is obvious from how she wants to lead an honorable life one day (see page 168). Other indication of her pure hearted behavior is when she takes care of Yoko from bad injured (see page 75). She decides to take the responsibility although none will blame her for ignoring Yoko. In other words, she intends to help without an eye to the reward. One more thing about Komako, in doing and saying something, she expresses her feeling directly with no condition, she loves Shimamura for no reason other than love. It means that in the purity offered by snow country, there is a fake substance, a form of pretending that covers a true insight, love.

Culture

The Japanese culture is represented by haiku, tiny seventeenth-syllable poems. The following *haiku*, cited on page 30, conveys the beauty of nature.

From behind the rock,
the cedars threw up their trunks in perfectly straight lines,
so high that he could see the tops only by arching his back.

Through the lines, Kawabata applies *haiku* to illustrate the surrounding landscape where the scene is taken. His capability in using poetry to be fit within the story is so extraordinary, which creates a story constructed in flourishing constructions.

The dark needles blocked out the sky,
and the stillness seemed to be singing quietly.

Kawabata also makes use of haiku to synchronize Komako's beauty with the beauty of the nature

on page 30

It was a shrine grove.
The woman sat down on a flat rock beside the moss-covered shrine dogs.

To elaborate the female character, Komako. On Page 32

The high, thin nose was a little lonely, a little sad,
but the bud of her lips opened and closed smoothly,
like a beautiful little circle of leeches.

Another haiku to describe Komako's beauty can be found on the same page

Had they had wrinkles or cracks,
or had their color been less fresh,

they would have struck one as unwholesome,
but they were never anything but smooth and shining.

Even Komako's voice is depicted on page 155

He heard in his chest,
Like snow pilling up,

The sound of Komako,
An echo beating against empty walls.

The following *Haiku* which is inserted on page 31 portrays the round softness of the sound of running water and draws the total unity of shadows, mountain chasm and cedar branches.

Through the quiet, the sound of the rocky river
came up to them with a rounded softness.

Shadows were darkening in the mountain chasms
on the other side of the valley,
framed in the cedar branches.

The following haiku illustrate how Kawabata painted the different images of beauty his main character encountered with delicate words
Page 93

High up the mountain,
the *kaya* spread out silver in the sun,

like the autumn sunlight itself
pouring over the face of the mountain.

Page 101

The moonlight, so bright that the furrows
in the woman's ear were clearly shadowed,

struck deep into the room and seemed to turn the mats on the floor
a chilly green.

Page 116

There were children's voices in the chestnut trees.
A number of burrs lay in the grass at their feet.

Page 150

The cedars, under a thin coating of snow,
rose sheer from the white ground to the sky,
each cut off sharply from the rest.

Page 155

.. skillfully inlaid in silver with flowers and birds,
and from it came the sound of wind in the pines.

Yasunari Kawabata puts a lot of efforts to make readers understand the situation or context. He writes haiku to describe Komako's body language.

Page 155

Far away, where the bell tinkled on,
he suddenly saw Komako's feet,
tripping in time with the bell.

and even frightened situation

page 162

Suddenly a fire-alarm was ringing,
With the special fury that told of an emergency.

Conclusion

From the given analysis, it convincingly can be concluded how the symbols in *Snow Country* are mostly related to feminism, love affair, nature and culture. Yasunari Kawabata uses *Snow Country* to promote the beauty of the landscape in Japan, the Japanese culture and to lead the readers to reach an ultimate conclusion that nothing or no one in this universe is totally sincere, honest or pure and nothing or no one is completely false or fake. In other words, sincerity, honesty or purity, and falseness cannot be separated whenever and wherever in the world. The actions and remarks of the four characters – Shimamura and his wife, Komako and Yoko, clarify that patriarchy really affect the lifestyle of Japanese where men take more superior role than women. Another charm of this novel is *haiku*, the tiny seventeenth-syllable poems that is the unique property of Japanese literature. They are presented to enrich the readers' comprehension of the story by extending a sudden awareness of beauty. They give different nuance to make the readers focus on the story. For Japanese in the past, the existence of geisha becomes another evidence of men's domination, in which forbidden love affair becomes the part

of civilization of Japanese society. However, Kawabata succeeds to present the pictures of nature symbolized by the place called Snow Country. It represents the tenet in the Japanese society on how classical and traditional matters should never be extinguished from civilization will never set apart from Japanese people.

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