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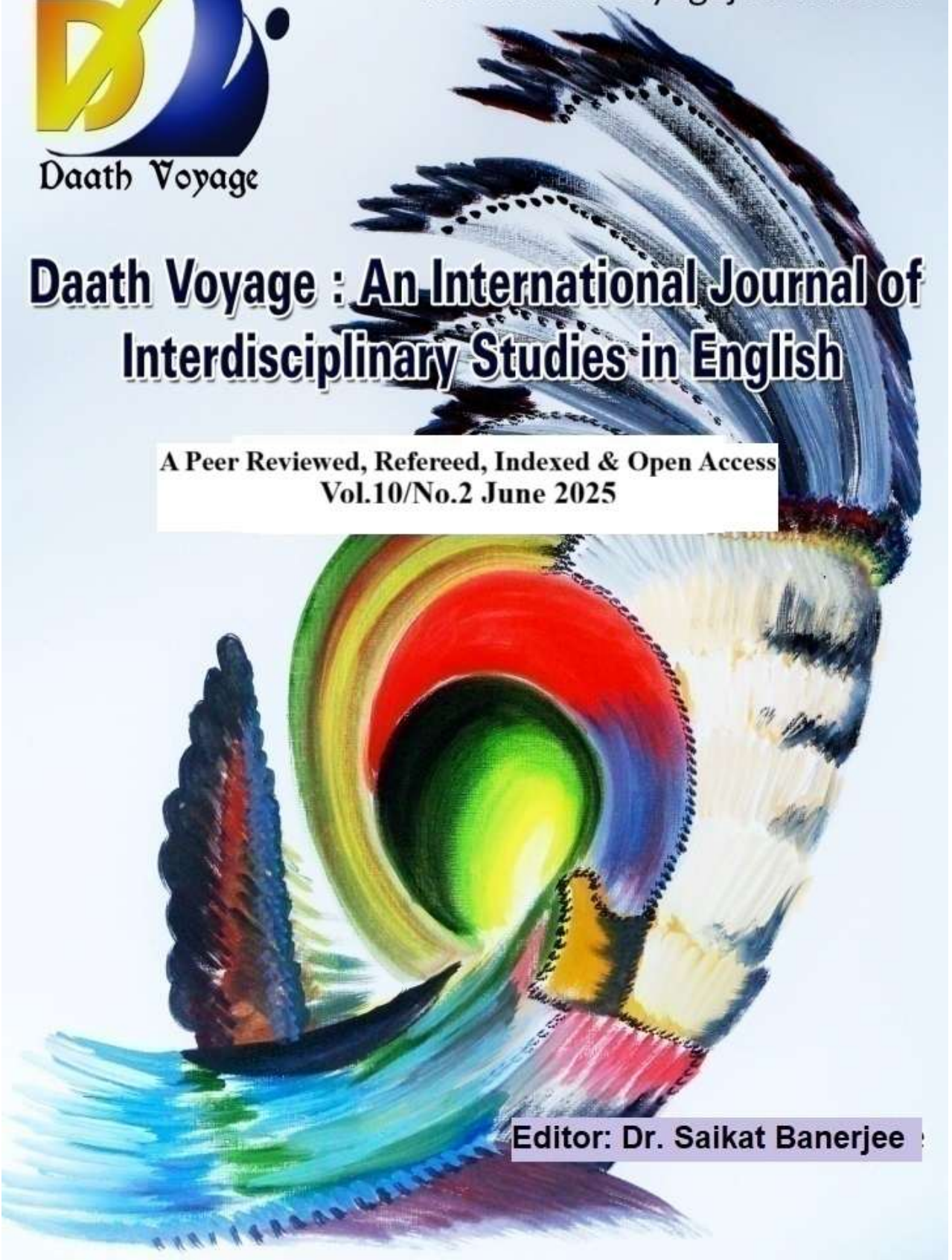

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Decoding Sense of Place and Cultures of Belonging: Narrativising 'Home' in Easterine Kire's When the River Sleeps

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Abstract: Easterine Kire, a representative Naga writer dwells on the cultures of belonging shaped by the political, economic and socio-cultural history of Nagaland fraught with multiple dislocations. The pre-independence Naga history is characterised by the onslaught of British Imperialism and the post-independence history is marked by complex and violent conflicts with the Nation. In the cultural discourse of the Nagas, 'home' does not evoke a viable space of familiarity as the political alliances provide only a semblance of order. As I propose to argue, Kire's novel When the River Sleeps, read against the backdrop of such muted historical echoes, is a representative text to concretise the idea of 'home' as a fluid, transitional and transformative space constantly evolving. A deep sense of territoriality and marginality is intrinsically woven into her narratives and the fictional representation of culture and belonging in the novel corroborates the pattern of spatio-historical displacement experienced by the people of the region, often underrepresented in national history. The paper aims to ruminate over the systemic patterns intrinsic to the production and sustenance of indigenous spaces and culture against the discursive and disruptive practices of the nation.

Key Words: Belonging, Space, Culture, Nation, Marginality.

"Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated and transformed through artistic and literary practice" (Hooks 19).

Bell Hook's imaginative articulation on the transformative poetics of spaces significantly attributes our investment on spatial feelings as the true supplement of being and belonging to our innate longing for intimacy. The poetics and politics of production of space is intrinsic to the philosophy of human attachment to intimate spaces. Easterine Kire, a Naga writer dwells on the cultures of belonging in terms of the political, cultural and psychological significance of the spaces we live in as the history of displacement and consequent loss of 'home' is unique to her deeply personal perspective on 'home' best understood in the larger context of

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the marginalisation and engineered violence experienced by the Nagas. The idea of penetrable, tentative and transgressive boundaries is crucial to the conceptualisation of Naga identity fraught with extreme sense of alienation, estrangement and marginalisation. Hence, in Easterine Kire's deeply emotional aesthetic lexicon, spaces-real and imaginary seamlessly merge, collate resistance, decode creative freedom as her aesthetic parameters valorise the latent and silent narratives of the community striving to create an alternative semiotics of 'home' where one "confronts and accepts dispersal, fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting" (Hooks 19). What we witness is a 'home' that is as intuitive as intentional, as visceral as visual.

The experience of spatial and historical marginality is integral to the relation between 'home' and neighbourhood as "imagining a home is as political an act as is imagining a nation. Establishing either is a display of hegemonic power" (George 6). The political, economic and socio-cultural history of Nagaland is fraught with multiple displacements and loss of 'home' runs as a constant reality in the narratives. Bell Hooks in her essay "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" rightly opines that the "exotic other" must create spaces within that culture of domination if they are to "survive whole" with their "souls intact" (19). The Naga attempt to assert aesthetic and critical presence within the territorial supremacy of the nation-state is, therefore, an act of "radical openness"; an act which situates 'home' as a site of radical and aesthetic possibilities and disruptive presence.

To elaborate, the major historical events in Naga history replete with the disruptive effects of battles and wars like the Battle of Khonoma (1879), Naga participation in World War I (1917-18) and the Battle of Kohima (1944) proclaim onslaught not only on their indigenous identity but also foreground the loss of indigenous and intimate spaces of belonging. The pre-independence history is characterised by the onslaught of British Imperialism when the "frequent and intermittent clashes between the British forces and hostile Naga villages" was the prevalent "order of the day" (Kire, Walking the Roadless Road 218).

What emerges from the complex history of troubled political equations with British annexation of the Naga hills is the British tendency to destabilise the exclusive space where the community manifests the 'self'. Burning the 'houses' was the British way of warning other rebellious villages and between January 1955 and July 1957 "the estimated damage, as a result of the conflict stood at 79,794 houses burnt, 26,550,00 mounds

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of paddy burnt" (Kire, Walking the Roadless Road 244). Moreover, the British prohibition on 'rebuilding' of the burnt villages threatened the community as the poignant memories of lost houses and burnt homes became integral part of their cultural imaginary.

The Nagas lost 'home' multiple times; the troubled political history is mediated by the loss of territory and the ideological struggles implicit in the construction of a stable 'home'. The desire of the Naga National Council (NNC) who "wished to continue their connection with India on all the broad issues" but "desired to live as a distinctive community enjoying home rule in their own country" (Kire, Walking the Roadless Road 241) began the violent conflict with the nation where 'home' is the site to stage everyday resistance.

In the cultural discourse of the Nagas, 'home' does not evoke a viable space of familiarity and safety; the political alliances provide only a semblance of order as the failure of their negotiations with various leaders of "the incoming Government of India, the Nagas declared their independence on 14 August 1947, a day before India marked its independence from British rule" (Kire, Walking the Roadless Road 243) unleashing violent conflicts. Open conflict between the Government of India and the Naga National Council began in 1956 eventually settling for a conflicting and conformist conceptualisation of homeland. The Naga struggle for self-governance underscores the crucial desire to enact the vibrant oppositional aesthetics and the necessity to invent alternative perspectives.

The fictional representation of 'home' in the literature of the region often corroborates the pattern of spatio-historical displacement. Easterine Kire takes recourse to such microhistories underrepresented in national discourse. Kire offers a philosophical perspective on the latent politics of dislocation as the community is "transformed, individually, collectively" as the members "make radical creative space which affirms and sustains" (Hooks 19) their ethnicity and subjectivity. Their marginality is best viewed as the site of and strategy for resistance "continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is" basically the "critical response to domination" (Hooks 23).

The textured and multilayered microhistories foreground and envision home not necessarily as a recognizable material structure; it is basically a strategic cultural reclamation of ethnic microhistories, comprehensible only to the insider. The projected 'fluidity' is a strategic trope to counter the nation-state's insistent attempt to render home a dysfunctional space. As I proceed to argue, the conceptualisation of 'home' in Naga history and

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community is often problematic, transcendental, defies material and spatial logic and imbued with muted echoes of cultural significance as peripheralization is a constant part of Naga experience of dislocation. A deep sense of territoriality and marginality is intrinsically woven into Kire's narratives distinguished by the nesting instincts of the community.

Strategically, all the characters, human and non-human register and realise their territorial claims through ambivalent participation in the constant process of spatio-spiritual configurations. They exemplify topophilia and practice what Gaston Bachelard proposes in Poetics of Space, 'topo-analysis' i.e. "the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" (8) as the spatial marker of cultural intimacy. Kire valorises a fluid construction of 'home' imbued with the connotations of spatial freedom; there exists no conflict over shared spaces and all the characters in the novel, human and non-human share a coherent spatial logic. Hence, Naga conceptualization of territoriality is inclusive and accommodative; without any iota of rigid boundary distinctions.

In a landscape torn apart by war and insurgency, the experience of space and location often escapes the mechanical obligations and Kire underscores a series of counter-hegemonic practices to situate the politics of location. According to Bell Hooks "as a radical standpoint, perspective, position, "the politics of location" necessarily calls those of us who would participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" (15). Such counter-hegemonic strategies of resistance are woven into the fabric of Kire's oeuvre and sustained by the politics of assigning the status of deviant subject to Nagas. The discourse of nation-state downplays the politics of location as Rosemary Marangoly George argues "the politics of location come into play in the attempt to weave together a subject-status that is sustained by the experience of the place one knows as Home or by resistance to places that are patently "not home" "(2).

When the River Sleeps is replete with liminal and transgressive spaces where the subjects constantly negotiate the modalities of being home and not being home echoing the struggle of their ancestors. The novel is the saga of the veteran forest dweller Vilie whose quest for the sleeping river and the heart-stone in reality becomes a detour through varied conceptualisation of 'home'; Vilie encounters a series of makeshift houses and homes in his journey and succeeds in inhabiting the spaces. Vilie's spiritual quest foregrounds a connective and intense

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awareness of dwelling spaces as he traverses through Nature to enjoy extensive territorial range, freedom and control. Vilie has no settlement preference; he literally lives on the margin and consequently each provisional shelter he lives in is metamorphosed into a home through his tenacious act of 'housewifely care' and innate instinct for nurturance. Series of makeshift and temporary homes, houses and shelters in the forest, wayside sheds, bamboo huts mark Kire's fictional world where the space of 'home' acts "as an exterior destiny to the interior being" (Bachelard 11) and each character, especially the protagonist indulge in intense 'topo-analysis'.

In the Naga culture of belonging, Nature is a place of extremities, possibilities and promises to escape the onslaught of racial discrimination and identity politics and resist oppositional culture. Hence, Vilie's self-reliance and self-determination is reflective of the will to self-governance, a contested dream of the Nagas. The intensely therapeutic journey to find the heart-stone is symbolic of the newer possibilities of belonging and being as the contiguous territory of the Nagas has always been rife with violent intrusions they survived only by consistently nurturing and sustaining the bonds with Nature. Nature, in the cultural imaginary of the Nagas, basically an agrarian economy, is not only a sanctuary, it is a place of survival and governance. The sublime trust in the healing power of Nature is a strategic necessity as land is identity for the Nagas; "the relationship that the Nagas have to land is very strong. To be landless is a terrible ignominy" (Kire, Walking the Roadless Road 2).

Vilie is rooted to his land; his nesting skills are manifestation of his innate familiarity with the land. Vilie's detour is symbolic in true sense of the term as it mirrors the plight of the Nagas beset with the anguish of forced homelessness. During World War II when the Naga villages were attacked by the Japanese army, their familiarity with the natural terrain ensured their safety. Most of the villagers hid and survived in the forest. The deep forest and difficult terrain shielded them from the effects of the war and taught how to be self-reliant. Their familiarity with Nature was useful for the British Army to defeat the Japanese as the Nagas served extensively during World War II as scouts, spies and stretcher-bearers.

Nature is the place of victory over the cultural domination and Vilie's journey through nature is representative of the cultural struggle of the community since ages. Vilie's expertise in preparing various types of beds with materials available in nature; elephant grass, straw and branches as well as the practice of

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sleeping on trees with close-knit branches is a repetitive act of mutual acceptance and nurturance. Moreover, the detailed and repetitive description of manipulating rations, adapting to forest diet of wild animals, making the fire in the forest and sheds he inhabits, feeding the fire repeatedly with twigs and small pieces of wood is replicative of the patterns of living the community valorise against dominant geo-political changes.

Nature, as argued and represented by Kire is the foundation of the counter-hegemonic strategy the Nagas adopt to contest and counter the absolute supremacy of the nation-state. The dominant culture cannot wield its absolute supremacy in nature. The forest is the best example of the space which escapes the categorisation of a mechanical space symbolic of Nature in general. The forest serves as the intimate space during violent upheavals and catastrophic wars and escape the normative categorisation of the cartographers. Vilie's dwelling in the forest is represented as a psychic anchor which is a creative getaway. Even after his prolonged 'absence', it retains its symbolic status as a symbol of coziness, warmth, nurturance, familiarity and permanence. Although Vilie is represented as a recluse, his dwelling in the forest is timeless; it is the pivot point of his journey towards selfhood.

With the intrusion of alien forces and enforced binarism, the traditional fluidity is challenged, lives uprooted and what remains is the extreme sense of alienation and estrangement. The quest for 'home' in Naga cultural imaginary traverses from 'filiation' to 'affiliation'; a journey from 'nature' to 'culture. In the words of Edward Said:

A filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority-involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict-the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transpersonal forms-such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture. The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and "life," whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society. (20)

The exclusivity of the Naga culture of belonging is marked by the resistance to such shift from filial ties to the affiliative markers as the community resists cultural affiliation and infiltration. The fluidity valorised in the filiative scheme is deliberately altered when the multilayered pattern of 'affiliation' intrudes. The Nagas as community have become border-conscious only when massive intrusion took place at various levels altering their conceptualization of 'home' as inclusive and accommodative as Nature is.

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The best example of such an inclusive 'home' is the forest, a space where binaries merge, boundaries melt and the filial relationship triumphs. Such 'home' is inclusive in real sense of the term; individual ownership is not allowed; each member of the community must adhere to the rules of shared responsibility, hospitality and forest etiquette. A traveller is also entitled to a sense of homeliness as evident in the practice of keeping essential items for the travellers. Vilie's forest is also 'home' to the Nepali woodcutter community as he sacrifices his prized possession to protect Krisna, the Nepali woodcutter and rescues his child. His 'home' is destabilized only when a 'stranger' with a gun symbolic of the dominant 'culture' intrudes.

The detailed description of Vilie's forest house after his mysterious disappearance foregrounds the filial commitment embodied in the dilapidated and abandoned structure which symbolises the mutual, natural and instinctual love and respect unique to the conceptualisation of 'home' the community adheres to. The house foregrounds the "intricacies of community living" (Kire, When the River Sleeps 226) as Vilie's presence still reverberates in the consciousness of the community; the house is an expression of the identity of the community. The house still underscores a warm and comforting presence as if Vilie, the guardian of the forest is still alive. Vilie's presence is felt in the house; the house serves as an anchoring structure eschewing the idea of protectiveness; a feeling more spiritual than corporeal.

The perfect marker of the filiative scheme is the forest home which the village council safeguards as an extension of the community. To privilege the filiative bonds, the village council ensures that the interconnectedness of the spaces must prevail in the imagination of the community as "the safety of the village was interconnected to the safety of all who made the forest their home" (Kire, When the River Sleeps 219). Such inclusive perspective and spatial imagination are unique to the schema of self-fashioning of the Nagas as the strategic necessity to counter and resist the attempt to render them as cultural aliens. Consequently, they articulate the feeling that goes beyond mere 'topophilia' i.e. "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (Tuan, Topophilia 4), a feeling intriguingly decolonising in nature. What Easterine Kire's resistance poetics affirms is the "ways of knowing reality which affirm continually not only the primacy of resistance but the necessity of a resistance that is sustained by remembrance of the past, which includes recollections of broken tongues giving us ways to speak that décolonisé our minds, our very beings" (Hooks 21).

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The chapter entitled 'The Border Village' is the best testimonial of the celebration of resistance poetics as it integrates and contextualises the core values of rootedness and belongingness. The border village "in reality, a small settlement of determined people who had made their dwellings in an impossible place" (Kire, When the River Sleeps 88) is literally and symbolically situated on the margin, an almost invisible settlement, hidden from man's view. This difficult terrain requires the art of manoeuvring the rocks as integral part of home-making and the description of the border village entails the everyday practice of complex spatial negotiations the villagers indulge in to preserve their 'impossible' home.

The fortress-like village is their only root; it concretizes their idea of 'home' as Subale, the village headman's wife passionately argues, "this is our home, do you understand? We cannot abandon it and try to live in another place, our umbilical cords are buried here, and we would always be restless if we tried to settle elsewhere" (Kire, When the River Sleeps 87-88). Unlike the young generation oriented more towards affiliation, the older generation is frantically preserving their roots, the natural bonds that define their being and belonging thereby translating the poetics of resistance into reality. They vehemently resist the cultural hegemony and dominant practice of moving away to the towns like Dimapur and Peren for a comfortable and viable living and willingly bear the toll of everyday hardship to make the impossible terrain their 'home'.

Easterine Kire's fiction is replete with the warmth, charm, character and timeless details of such diverse array of homes where each individual, human and non-human are equally valued and appreciated; together they create a space they could cherish and grow mastering the art of balance, the key to survival. Each character in the novel upholds such rhetoric of belonging as the nuances of 'home' traverses beyond the connotations of spatiality; when imbued with connotations of mutual inclusivity and shared responsibility, home is an experiential and spiritual continuum not always anthropocentric. For example, the territory of the sleeping river is jealously guarded by the spirit widow-women, the Kirhupfumias' avenge the loss of their ancestral home as even for spirits the most wrenching and poignant loss is the loss of 'home' and the pain of dislocation. Such anguished sense of innate spatiality is what governs their spirit of vengeance.

The series of unique, deviant and transitional home that defy the conventional structural logic in When the River Sleeps foregrounds the poetics of resistance as the characters inhabit spaces 'poetically'. Kire's 'home' is an inclusive and accomodative totality. The Naga community's investment in the notion of 'home' and

'territory' is often problematic; their ideologies of 'home' are fraught with extreme sense of alienation and estrangement, everyday imaginings of 'home' is replete with the trauma of ideological struggles. Easterine Kire's poetics of space is, therefore, deeply personal and unfolds a space tailored to fit the art of balanced cohabitation to contest the sense of estrangement and alienation.

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