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Motherhood and the Cave: A Search for the Mother's Story

Abstract

The mother's voice is underrepresented in literature. She has been a silent figure, always present, often near, featuring in the story of another, but rarely the focus of the story. The mother has been spoken for, about and around, but rarely has she been credited with the wherewithal to speak for herself.

This paper outlines a search for the mother's story, and offers "the cave" as a positive concept with which to view some experiences of mothering, which can be isolating and physically restricting, while at the same time personally transforming. The cave provides a tool to help negotiate creatively the blurred boundaries between the theory and lived realities of motherhood, informing both the reading and writing of motherhood.

Keywords

motherhood, mother, story, cave, literature, fiction,

Motherhood and the Cave: A Search for the Mother's Story

Motherhood is an ordinary experience. Many women become mothers (biologically and/or socially) in their lives. All human beings are affected by motherhood, and a mother's experience, along their human journey. Feminism has striven hard to free women from assumptions that motherhood solely defines the identity of all women, but some theorists still argue that its significance for women cannot be denied. Peta Bowden, for instance, claims that:

Whether we are mothers or not, the possibilities of our lives are inevitably touched by the deep cultural and biological relations that characteristically conspire to connect us, at least indirectly, with mothering practices ...

[motherhood] remains an unavoidable ... frame of reference for women's lives. Mothering is a realm of potentiality to which all women are in some way accountable. (1997, 23)

If it is true that all women are in some way accountable to motherhood, why is the mother's story scarcely found in literature? The mother has never been far away, but she is usually spoken for, about, and around. Rarely do we find stories about what mothers do and think, how they feel about themselves and their relationships with their children and others. What follows is an outline of one search for the mother's story.ⁱ It is rooted in personal experience, and engages theoretically and creatively with issues surrounding feminism and motherhood. This search is not separable from the legacy of harsh questioning about motherhood that began in the 1960s with writers such as Betty Friedan (1963) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) who claimed that women experienced unhappiness and lack of fulfillment in the narrow roles of housewife and mother that were imposed on them by patriarchy. Nor is it divorced from the re-thinking of some of those conclusions by writers such as Adrienne Rich (1976) and Sara Ruddick (1980), who drew a distinction between the oppressive *institution* of motherhood and the *experience* of bearing and caring for children, to which some women were deeply committed. More recent work by contemporary researchers such as Andrea O'Reilly (2004), who is interested in the diverse ways that feminists are redefining motherhood across a range of disciplines, is also influential. But the focus of this paper is the mother's story, or narrative representations of mother's subjective experiences. It suggests that new ways of listening to and describing mothering experiences may be necessary to increase our ability to understand motherhood in its widest sense.ⁱⁱ

To this end "the cave" is offered as a metaphor that, in a fresh reading, accommodates the complexities and ambiguities of motherhood, without judging them. This paper argues that western society has inherited, from representations of the cave such as Plato's allegory in *Republic* (c. 380 B.C.), a negative view of the cave that conveys images of oppressive darkness, deprivation and above all, ignorance. Rejecting these assumptions of the cave as a restricting experience, this alternative reading proposes that

motherhood is made up of many “cave encounters” that, if understood properly, can open our eyes to the transformative aspects of mothering.ⁱⁱⁱ This search for the mother’s story has resulted in my own research as a scholar, and as an author of fiction in the form of a small collection of stories that span fifteen years in the life of a mother, Jenny. In the discussion below, this perspective of the cave is applied to the reading of one mother’s story found in fiction. The latter part of this paper entails a discussion about my creative writing and some of the implications I experienced while navigating the shared terrain between creative and scholarly work.

The mother’s silence

The impetus for this research was triggered by my own experiences as a mother. Throughout my childbearing years in the 90s, I couldn’t read enough about pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. Reading assisted me through a remarkable period of my life, and deepened my understanding of what I was experiencing and what it meant to me. But beyond the baby years, the reality of the long-term impact of being responsible for children became more evident. The adjustments required in balancing the demands of both family and individual needs often jar against the expectations many women have about their lives beyond motherhood. In trying to make these adjustments, I fulfilled the role of primary caregiver for my children for long stretches of time. Without a separate professional identity, I felt, at times, excluded from the social and conversational world beyond mothering circles. Although I knew I was discovering new things about myself and acquiring new skills every day, the significance of my growth as a woman did not seem recognised or valued. As I experienced both the painful aspects of this invisibility, and the freedom it gave me to explore this new world with my children, I felt literary sources adequate to my needs dry up. The abundance and quality of writing about mothering children beyond the baby years just wasn’t at my fingertips. There was no shortage of parenting books (advice *to* mothers) but I tired of their self-assured tone and promises of success. It was much harder to find stories about the complex and ambiguous experiences of mothering, particularly beyond the stages of pregnancy and childbirth, exploring the way a mother feels about herself and her work as a mother, her aspirations and sense of fulfillment.

The silence around the mother has been explored in scholarly work. For instance, feminist theologian Carol Christ, in her study of women's stories thirty years ago, found that:

Women's stories have not been told. And without stories there is no articulation of experience. Without stories a woman is lost when it comes to make the important decisions of her life. She does not learn to value her struggles, to celebrate her strengths, to comprehend her pain. Without stories, she cannot understand herself. (1980, 1)

Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy were also asking questions about the mother's story in 1991:

... mother's voices continue to be ignored. Even in women's accounts of motherhood, maternal perspectives are strangely absent. We most often hear daughters' voices in both literary and theoretical texts about mothers, mothering and motherhood, even in those written by feminists who are mothers. (1)

E. Ann Kaplan, in her work on motherhood and representation, concurred, finding that the mother has generally been viewed as an *object* to be discussed: usually in the margins, figuring in the story of another. If she was in focus, she was 'the brunt of an attack, a criticism, a complaint, usually in the discourse of a child' (1992, 3).

Outside of the academy there is evidence that this paucity of story is still acutely felt today. Take these more recent comments from published author cum mother cum blogger, Andrea Buchanan:

What is a mother to do when the writing she wants to read isn't there? When the only discussion about maternal ambivalence is the one in the glossy magazine about whether to get the Bugaboo or the Frog stroller? (2006, n.p.)

She goes on to say that women are creating their own literature to:

make sense of the secret world we have discovered, where it turns out, in fact, that we can't have it all and do it all ... real mothers struggling to create a narrative out of the often disjointed, complex, and simultaneously occurring events of their lives. (2006, n.p.)

Specifically, this contemporary search for the mother's story seeks narratives that grapple with these very disjointed and complex events, where the mother's perspective is central, where her concerns, her relationships with her children and others, her sense of self, fuel the narrative. In the absence of stories that mirror all aspects of their lives, mothers are denied this opportunity for reflection, connection to others, and enjoyment.

The paucity of mothering stories may indicate that what is important occurs in the public sphere, and that the private, domestic side of a mother's work is uninteresting narrative content, or that, as a culture we are still struggling with ambiguity around mothering, and subtly deny women the right to explore complexity in their feelings and experiences as mothers. And it may indicate that we need new approaches to represent experiences that are so diverse.

Of course, any claims to represent a particular "experience" are problematic. In this paper, references to experience and representation are context specific. Mothers *do* experience mothering, in physical, emotional and intellectual ways. These experiences *are* subjective and *can* be shown (or represented) in story. But the empirical value of these experiences as universal has been widely contested. Post-structuralist theories question the autonomy of this *subject(ive)* experience, and show little interest in suggestions of "actual" or "lived" experiences that may purport to exist independent of language or ideology. This challenge, however, has been a site of opposition between poststructuralist feminists and their successors. For some, such as Nancy Hartsock, the challenge to subjecthood is problematic because it comes 'just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves ...'

(cited in Weedon, 2003, 128). Mothers are one group that have been silenced. To deny their right to speak of *their* experiences now seems incompatible with any theories of social justice.

Contemporary research reveals that, in spite of feminist awareness of the oppressive nature of the institution of motherhood, and opportunities that provide alternative choices for some women, most will still become mothers. Many will forestall or interrupt careers to do so (forgoing a personal income), will take on the bulk of child care duties and will feel undervalued for their labours (Boyd, 2000, 9; ABS, 2008).^{iv} There is a growing sense that women are saying, *I know mothers still get the raw end of the deal, but —*. Storying is one way to navigate the complexity and ambiguity around mothering, to affirm how women negotiate self-determination within the social and biological realities of motherhood that still fall short of ideals based on gender equality. (Hence the upsurge in ‘Mommy’ blogs?) Therefore, searching for the mother’s story can be viewed as one way to recognise women’s social agency. But new approaches to writing and reading about motherhood may be needed to open readers to this complexity. Here, “the cave” is offered as a metaphor for some aspects of motherhood because, like a new pair of glasses, it may assist in making sense of what mothers are actually saying when they describe their experiences.

“The cave”

In western, secular discourses, the cave has negative associations with restriction and ignorance, but in some religious discourses the cave is often viewed as a place of stillness that, although confining, can offer the inhabitant opportunities for greater self-reflection and self-awareness. Similarly, motherhood, which for some women can be a limiting experience, may also provide opportunities for unprecedented personal growth. Within this framework the notion that modern women, with the benefits of a feminist consciousness and new opportunities, may still find themselves in traditional roles as mothers and homemakers does not seem inconsistent.

In the allegory of the cave Plato tells the story of a group of people who have lived their whole lives chained in a cave. They face a blank wall onto which are projected shadows of figures walking in front of a fire outside the cave. Plato says that this is as close to reality as these “prisoners” get. The philosopher, on the other hand, the educated one, is free from the cave and can see things as they really are, can perceive the truth.^v This dominant view of the cave has pervaded our thinking about human life, and privileges experiences that are expansive, materially productive and public, over anything that is by contrast, perceived as closed, narrow and private. A full appreciation of women’s lives, and motherhood in particular, traditionally confined to the private sphere, has been hampered by this patriarchal and politically loaded perspective.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s study of female Victorian writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)—though written more than thirty years ago—is still regarded as an important twentieth century work of literary criticism. In it, they remark that ‘it is the man who knows the cave, who analyses its meaning, who (like Plato) authors its primary parables, and who even interprets its language ...’. Further, they ask, ‘how therefore, does any woman—but especially a literary woman, who thinks in images—reconcile the cave’s negative metaphoric potential with its positive mythic possibilities?’ (1979, 95-96). My reading of the cave, which gained significance in a very personal way, and its application to both reading and writing about motherhood, goes some way, I hope, to reconciling this image by refocusing the concept of the cave from an imposing, constraining one, to an enabling one.

More than ten years ago, during an extended period of time out of the workforce while caring fulltime for my three young sons, I read a newspaper review of Vicki Mackenzie’s *Cave in the Snow* (1999), the biography of Buddhist nun, Tenzin Palmo, who had lived alone for twelve years in a cave high in the Himalayas. While reading the descriptions of seclusion and isolation, and the ways in which the nun felt she had become a different woman, and a better one, through her retreat, I felt an unexpected connection. As a mother, I felt as though I had spent some time in a “cave” from which I could feel myself emerging. It did not seem a huge stretch of logic then to map Tenzin

Palmo's extreme circumstances against my very ordinary ones. I had forgone professional opportunities to take the traditional path of stay-at-home mum, where I dwelt without a personal income, superannuation or career status. And although I had a sense that the world had carried along without me while I was "away", I did not feel that I had been left behind. I felt renewed energy and enthusiasm for re-entering the paid workforce and broader community life.

I wish to make this connection between the cave, which I speak of as a time and place of constriction and scarcity, and personal growth. The ways in which the inhabitant is constricted are not necessarily material, and the gains are sometimes described as spiritual. Tenzin Palmo, for example, reflecting on her experiences, claims that:

‘The advantage of going to a cave is that it gives you time and space to be able to concentrate totally ... [a] time of silence and isolation to look within and to find out who [you] really are, when [you’re] not so busy playing roles ...’.
(Mackenzie, 1998, 198)

This alternative yet equally well-established perception of the cave can be found time and again in literature. Carol Christ draws on examples of women characters in literature, such as Martha in Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City* (1969), whose strength came from confronting the darkness within and without and then coming through to the other side (1980, xxx). In *The Orchard*, Drusilla Modjeska's unnamed narrator encounters a literal darkness when she begins going blind. Reflecting on this "cave encounter" she says, 'I wouldn't say that I came to like it, not at all; it remained dark down there in the tunnel, and damp [but] I began to find ways of existing there, that's all ... I came to see that what is required of us at such times is not performance, but the simple task of being' (1994, 118). In looking for ways of being, she says: 'the question that was put to me was how to live with any bigness of spirit when the soil from which it must flourish has shrunk to a small handful of loam' (1994, 119). And more recently, and with direct reference to mothering, Rachel Cusk, in her memoir, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, remarks that mothering has taught her to stand

still, and how to live ‘in the knowledge of what I have, so that I see happiness before it quite passes’ (2001, 212).

Mothering, for some women, can feel at times like a “small handful of loam”. But if women are allowed to explore their lives as mothers in the broadest and most personal sense, without fear of judgement, through the sharing of stories that reflect their experiences, they may discover themselves more highly skilled, and possessed of greater strength and insight than they had realised. Andrea O’Reilly says, of the personal narratives in the book *Redefining Motherhood*, that they ‘document the *everydayness* of life, and it is in this everyday space that much of [a mother’s] learning takes place and quietly turns into wisdom and self-understanding’ (Abbey & O’Reilly, 1998, 21). And yet narratives that centre mothers in the heart of the story are hard to find.

Motherhood, fiction and “the cave”

Personal narrative and fiction in particular should be ideal opportunities to explore motherhood, because of the occasion they provide to narrate subjective experience that is mostly absent in non-fiction/ scholarly work. Lidia Curti, in her work on women’s stories and identity, argues that fiction can even help to *hold together* the myriad contradictions in our lives, and re-shape them into something different. She claims that:

Fiction translates the overcoming of dichotomies—theory and politics, art and life, surface and depth, substance and appearance—into hybrid shapes and languages; its characters (sometimes monsters, sometimes shadows, sometimes ghosts) inhabit borders, intermediate spaces, and move in an indistinct zone at the intersection between the human and the animal, the natural and the supernatural, the beautiful and the horrid, the self and the many other selves (1998, 29).

And yet, in spite of the creative possibilities that fiction provides, few writers have used the medium to intimately explore motherhood from a mother’s perspective. Could it be that writers need a different language in order to free motherhood from the weighty

theoretical debates and cultural assumptions that have dominated mothering discourses over the past century? In the following discussion, this alternative reading of the cave is applied to a fictional story about a mother to demonstrate new ways of understanding the complexity and richness of the everyday, ordinary experiences of motherhood. This reading brings together both the possibilities of fiction and of the cave as productive metaphor.

Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003), is a rare example of a fictional text where a mother's relationships with her children and others, her perception of her role as a mother and how this impacts on her sense of self, and her struggle to balance her family's needs with her own, are all central concerns to the story. It must be acknowledged that the plot in this text is exceptional, and exploits dramatic elements that are far beyond the experiences of most mothers, but its inclusion in this discussion is justified because, as a mother's story, it explores the realities of reconciling conflicting ideologies and expectations—of mothering with a feminist consciousness in a socio-cultural, historical context where much of the child-rearing responsibilities are still undertaken by mothers. Permeating the story too, are elements of restriction and confinement (social, emotional and intellectual) suggesting cave experiences that enrich the reader's understanding of the mother's life.

In the novel, Eva Khatchadourian's teenage son, Kevin, is in a juvenile prison for the murder of several people at his high school two years previously. Through letters to her absent husband, Eva looks back over her life, tracing, in great detail, her relationship with her son and acknowledging both her ambivalence about her feelings towards him and towards motherhood, and his reticence to love and be loved. Reflecting on the brutality her son demonstrated in many small ways from a young age, and his lack of remorse for his behaviour, Eva asks herself the questions every parent does: to what extent am I responsible for my child, to what degree have I shaped him?^{vi}

Eva's reflections reveal complexity and ambivalence, and a persistent effort to readjust her thoughts and actions to create a better experience of motherhood. Most interesting

are the many small ways in which these adjustments cause Eva to further constrict her world. She goes deeper into *her* cave in an attempt to find her way out. For example, coming to terms with the fact that, so far, motherhood has not been enjoyable, Eva realises that

... so far my commitment to motherhood had been toe-in-the-water. In a funny way, I resolved, I had to remake that decision of 1982 and jump into parenthood with both feet. I had to get pregnant with Kevin all over again. Like his birth, raising our son could be a transporting experience, but only if I stopped fighting it (2003, 120).

The decision to stay at home full-time with four-year-old Kevin is not an easy one for Eva, who cherishes her independence, loves working and is passionate about her business. Shortly afterwards she is taken to see a house that her husband bought without consulting her and, as she thinks about how much she hates it, she reflects:

My fantasy house would be old ... full of nooks and crannies whose original purpose had grown obsolete ... [would be] cozy and [close] the world out ... these wide plate glass windows advertised eternal open house. (2003, 131)

Ironically, it is living in this airy, open house, alone with Kevin that proves most suffocating for Eva, who finds herself imprisoned, socially ostracised from her neighbours and community, and intellectually cut off from the vibrant workings of her business. In spite of her concentrated efforts, things do not improve, and in fact worsen. And yet, surprisingly, Eva makes an impulsive decision to have another child:

It was the oddest thing. I felt perfectly certain, and not in the fierce, clutching spirit that might have betrayed a crazy whim or frantic grab at a pat marital nostrum. I felt possessed and simple. This was the very unreserved resolve for which I had prayed during our protracted debate over parenthood, and whose absence had led us down tortuously abstract avenues ... (2003, 207)

Eva's decision illustrates the ways in which women, including mothers, take actions that are sometimes at odds with what others (concerned husbands, doctors, experts) would recommend. Further, Eva's decision is represented not as a desperate attempt to save a situation that is spiraling out of control, but as a step she believes necessary for her own spiritual growth as a woman. Eva tells her husband that she got pregnant again because she had 'to find something out ... about my soul' (2003, 215-16). Rather than seek escape, Eva intentionally journeys deeper into the restricting, confining aspects of motherhood in order to learn more about herself.

Although some parts of the storyline in *We need to Talk About Kevin* are not typical, and even extreme, Eva's experiences as she tries to make the most of motherhood echo elements of my own mothering experience—times of social withdrawal and economic dependence—when I swayed between desolation and joy; time in the home with young children, skirting the fringes of the world of work and money and status that seemed to go along without me and without noticing me. And yet I often felt more privileged than I ever had before to be so actively involved in my children's lives. These figuratively closed spaces, and the opportunity they can provide to benefit from a sustained experience (which is the purpose of hermitage) can be rich metaphors for the mothering experience.

Writing motherhood

Applying a metaphor to one's reading is one thing. Actively working with it creatively is another. In preparing to write fiction about mothers, I was aware of some problems I had to address in order to produce credible and meaningful stories. The need, for instance, to exercise subtlety when expressing my ideas about motherhood and the cave, so that they would remain just that—ideas, not theories. There was also the fear of communicating universality, or of essentialising women's experiences of motherhood, which highlighted even more the need for alternative representations of motherhood.

Norma Tilden claims that ‘the writer of creative nonfiction is fiercely attached to the *pursuit* of an idea resident in the facts of experience’ (2004, 709). This may be true for nonfiction, and may explain why some fiction writers, such as Rachel Cusk (2001), chose to explore motherhood in memoirs. Maybe her experiences produced strong and commanding ideas that had to be expressed. But fiction arouses different expectations in the reader. As children’s author, Katherine Paterson warns, ‘a person in a novel can certainly *have* ideas, but if the idea has the person, we are not looking at truth but at propaganda’ (2001, 190). In crafting my fiction, I felt cautioned then, to ensure my ideas didn’t override the characters, who had to be credible to the reader. West Australian novelist Liz Byrski also encountered this problem in her writing:

... when I first wrote *Gang of Four* ... the [publisher] said, “Is this polemic or is it fiction? Because it can’t be both, and at the moment it isn’t either.” That was so useful, because I could see I had stuck my feminist politics up front rather than letting the ideas emerge through the characters’. (cited in Hunn, 2009, 17)

When I began to write my collection of stories that peek into Jenny’s life at different intervals over fifteen years, I tried to ensure that the writing unfolded naturally, and was not self-consciously restrained by efforts to draw on overt “cave” imagery. Although the cave is a useful guiding tool for me as a writer, I needed to trust that if qualities of the cave were embedded in my view of these experiences of motherhood (isolation, times of emotional darkness *and* of clarity, stillness, and one-ness) then those qualities would come through the stories without explicit intervention on my part. I understood that it was the qualities of the concept rather than its specifications that were important to me. I have said that the metaphor of the cave is very strong for me in my reading of motherhood, but I do not assume that writers, like Shriver, were thinking in cave imagery when they wrote their texts. In the same way, while the cave may be a strong framework for me when I imagine motherhood and the world that my characters dwell in, it is not guaranteed, necessary or even desirable that all or any readers of my stories

should draw the same conclusions. Nevertheless, my intention was to communicate the mundane in unexpected ways.

Carol Christ's earlier work again provides a fitting example of this struggle to explore women's experiences in a new light. When she tried to write about women's spirituality in the early 1970s, she encountered a problem with language. She wanted to talk about women's connection to larger powers experienced in nature and sexuality and found she was without the words to use. She finally adopted terms from mystical traditions, ones reserved for so-called "higher" mystical experiences reached by people who engaged in flights from the mundane human condition—priests, monks, hermits—not ordinary men and women, mothers, wives and lovers. She found herself using the words *nothingness*, *awakening*, *insight* and *mysticism*, but in a different context than that of the mystical tradition. She says that she was engaging in the deconstructionist process of 'deforming' language, using 'traditional language, but in a context which gave it a different meaning' (1980, xiii). Language is not deformed in the sense of being corrupted or vulgarised, but is situated and used elsewhere to create a new meaning. It is a process of transformation. Rather than avoid these mystical terms because of their usual association with an elite religious experience, she claims the words to describe women's spiritual life.

I experienced the process of transforming language when I read the story of Tenzin Palmo and felt compelled to grab it and claim it as my own; to take something reserved for the highest order of spiritual experience—the cave—and draw it to myself: a housewife and mother in a suburban home in Perth. It was an empowering experience and formed the basis of the approach I wanted to take when writing about motherhood.

Conclusion

A thorough understanding of motherhood, its impact on women and the many ways in which it manifests, is necessary as a way of affirming women's lives and agency. Motherhood is not one thing to all women, nor is it everything to any woman. But many women *are* mothers, and their experiences need to be represented in all discourses. Any

silence around motherhood questions the value that we place on this important aspect of women's lives. And yet in literature, especially fiction, there exists a long and resounding silence that has been noted for some time in scholarly discourses and more recently in popular mediums. The mother's story is simply hard to find. It may be that fiction writers have found themselves without the language to describe experiences, like motherhood, that have proved to be too complex and ambiguous for the usual frameworks we have placed on them. Metaphors, like the cave, may provide fresh perspectives that assist readers and writers to explore motherhood in ways that can accommodate these contradictions and complexities. And through alternative representations, new meanings may also be created, opening up possibilities for talking and listening about motherhood, theoretically and creatively, in terms that accommodate contemporary understandings of women's lives.

Endnotes

ⁱ While the term "story" may generate various connotations in different theoretical contexts, for the purposes of this paper, story refers to a written account of human experience with a narrative element, and includes both fiction and non-fiction.

ⁱⁱ Sections of this paper are reworked from a Masters thesis currently under preparation at Murdoch University, titled "The cave: A search for the mother's story in narrative literature", which more fully contextualises this discussion about the mother's story within other feminist discourses around motherhood.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some research drawn on to support this reading of the cave (particularly the work of feminist theologian, Carol Christ) views this transformation in spiritual terms. For the purposes of this paper, spirituality is understood as a woman's growing understanding of herself and her place in a world that is constantly changing, and is not associated with any particular religious beliefs.

^{iv} In a media release for Mothers' Day the ABS reported that, in 2006, women spent nearly three times longer on primary child care activities than men.

^v A full discussion of The Cave, Plato's famous parable of the human condition, degraded and awaiting to be liberated by philosophy, can be read in Julia Annas (1981, 242-271).

^{vi} Shriver claims that she wanted the book to grant parents permission to have moments of ambivalence, to be able to acknowledge the disappointments that must come with parenting because, like all life experiences, not every moment matches up to our expectations (ABC, n.p.).

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