

Being: Latin American Women Writers and Their Quest of Their Inner Being

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Abstract: The abstract definition to the purpose in life has a long history. The essentialists devoted their studies to it, teaching that the essence of being was determined by something external of the human, whether it be God or DNA. The existentialists argued that the meaning of life did not lie outside of the person; rather meaning was determined by the individuals themselves. Modern philosophers take an iota from the essentialists and the existentialists, uniting the terms and studies of subjective and objective in an effort to elucidate the discussion on the meaning of life. They conceptualize that feelings and attitudes towards important projects of value invoke purpose of life. I discuss the loaded philosophical construct of the meaning of life for Latin American women writers. I argue that the Latin American women writers are dictated by institutions they are in that inhibit their beings. Rather than remain stagnant and absent, their dynamism in the inhibiting institutions includes their presence, thus their writing and meaning to life.

Key-words: Modern Philosophy. Subjectivism and Objectivism. Latin American Women Writers. Feminism. Latin American Literature. Deconstruction.

Resumen: La definición abstracta del significado de la vida tiene una larga historia. Los esencialistas dedicaron sus estudios a este tema, enseñando que la esencia del ser es determinada por algo externo al ser humano, ya sea por Dios o por el ADN. Por el contrario, los existencialistas argumentaron que el significado de la vida no se encuentra fuera de la persona, sino el sentido se determina por los propios individuos. Sin embargo, los filósofos modernos toman un poco de la teoría de los esencialistas y de los existencialistas, uniendo los términos y estudios de lo subjetivo y de lo objetivo con la expectativa de aclarar la larga discusión al sentido de la vida. Los filósofos modernos que estudian el sentido de la vida conceptualizan que los sentimientos hacia importantes proyectos de valor invocan sentido y propósito en la vida. En el presente trabajo, discuto que las instituciones en que se encuentran las escritoras latinoamericanas las limitan de expresar su ser. No obstante, en lugar de permanecer estancadas y ausentes, las escritoras latinoamericanas han dejado estupefactas a las instituciones que las han inhibido con su dinamismo para incluir su presencia. Por lo tanto la lucha que se revela en su escritura vis-a-vis su realidad es el significado de la vida.

Palabras-Clave: Filosofía moderna. Subjetivismo y objetivismo. Escritoras latinoamericanas. Femenismo. Literatura latinoamericana. Deconstrucción.

"Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get," states Forest Gump in the opening scene of the movie. Forest Gump is a mentally challenged man who is narrating his life to different strangers at a bus stop. His journey in life reveals how he experienced historical events and the significant influences he had on the historical cultural changes. Forest Gump's opening simile suggests that each person needs to manage life however it presents itself. Life's little surprises come in different forms that may be good or bad, harsh or fortunate, pretty or ugly, and so on. Therefore, the meaning of life for Forest is to handle the unexpected that is thrown in the path. Certainly, pursue and attempt to control destiny to the best, but accept that one can not change numerous situations.

During Forrest's young adult and adult journey through life, he is in love with Jenny, his childhood friend. Jenny sees Forrest as a friend and nothing more; however, Forrest never gives up in asking her to marry him. Forrest accepts the rejections every time, but is persistent because he is in love with her. Jenny is the passion in his life without any resentment after so many rejections. In order to move on with his life Forrest repeats, "My Mama always said you've got to put the past behind you before you can move on." Forrest implies there are no resentments or grudges because this is what will embitter each person. The embitterment is disabling a person to move on with life, causing stagnation. Stagnation is synonymous to lifeless.

Forest Gump's simile on life helps introduce the present article and the philosophical question, what is the meaning of life for Latin American women writers. The study employs Susan Wolf and John Kekes' ideas on the meaning of life. Their insightful thoughts explore the existential question of the importance of life from a nontheistic view. Wolf and Kekes are two philosophers who believe the meaning in life is objective; meaning is objective if it depends in part on facts independent of satisfaction of each individual's desires or goals. I will first summarize Wolf's and Keke's views and then proceed to examine five Latin American women writers: Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Julia de Burgos, Angeles Mastretta, Alejandra Pizarnik, and Cristina Peri Rossi. I will attempt to determine what the writing of these Latin American women writers conveys regarding the meaning of life.

In her article "Meaning in Life," Wolf talks about life being meaningful when people are engaged and active in projects worthwhile (232). A person is engaged in something if they are excited about it and involved by it. Thus, giving the sense of being alive. She argues that "opposites of active engagement are boredom and alienation" (232) and defines "projects of worth" as activities or projects that are satisfying and pleasurable. Though, these activities need to have a type of objective value that each individual places on them to contribute to meaningful. Wolf explains the second by pointing out that a person may be performing functions of worthwhile, such as a doctor, a mother, but they may not be enthused by them. The person may not be engaged or enthused by their work or anything else in their life; therefore, there is no reason to live. They are the living dead. At the same time: someone who is actively engaged may also live a meaningless life, if the objects of their involvement are utterly worthless (234). For the latter, she gives uncanny examples, such as pathological cases as someone memorizing the dictionary, or collecting rocks. These are projects of engagement, but are not projects "that make life worth living" (233).

In his article "The Meaning of Life," John Kekes uses the term pluralistic approach to define what life is, he gives seven conditions that he believes need to exist for significance to be upheld in life. The conditions are individually necessary and not jointly sufficient for a meaningful life. He gives the term plurality because meaningful lives "may take a plurality of forms" (257). These individual differences may take place in the different projects that each person will consider worthwhile. The seven conditions for lives to have meaning are:

1. They are not dominated by worthless, pointless, misdirected, trivial, or futile activities.
2. They are not vitiated by the belief that all human projects are absurd.
3. They involve the pursuit of projects with which the agents have genuinely identified; they thus exclude all forms of manipulation.
4. Their agents' genuine identification with their projects is based on their true belief that successful engagement in them will make their lives better by providing the satisfactions they seek; they thus exclude all projects in which the agents' subjective identification is not correlated with objective conditions.
5. Their objective conditions are located in the natural world, not outside of it; they thus exclude the religious answer.
6. Their agents' subjective identifications are based on the pursuit of projects that yield either morally good, or immoral, or nonmoral satisfactions; they thus exclude the moral answer.

7. Their agents' subjective identifications with their projects reflect individual differences; they thus exclude all general answers. (Kekes 256)

The purpose of life for Latin American women writers appears to be to expose the gender inequalities and gaps through their writings vis-à-vis reality: "They press for justice, and for the defense of the weakest elements of society: women, children, Indians, blacks, and the other classes" (Erro-Peralta 7). The essence of being, for the Latin American women writers is to rupture the center of the patriarchy world whether consciously or not. Their intent is to make themselves known and that they constitute part of the human structure and deserve their recognition as a present being and not as an absent being. To them the existence of life is naturally being, and this is in juxtaposition of nothingness or not being or being in silence or erased from writings as not being.

The task of defending their privileges as women writers and thinkers dates back to the 17th Century with Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's passion was writing, learning, and creating her poetry. Her misfortune was to have been born in 17th Century colonial New Spain (Mexico). A time when women had two acceptable choices in life: to marry and have children or join a convent. Sor Juana's passion for learning and writing lead her to "chose the convent as the only means to fulfill her hunger for knowledge" (Erro-Peralta 7). In her letter *Respuesta a Sor Filotea* (Reply to Sor Filotea), written in 1691, Sor Juana explains life for her is learning, reading, and writing; therefore, her choice was to enter the convent. Sor Juana viewed conditions in the natural world that prevented her passion; hence the preventions were objective and not subjective existence. Even though she was attacked by religious hierarchy for production of secular works to the detriment of religious subjects (Paz 413-414), she engaged in a self satisfactory task of writing and leaning until it was no longer possible. The attacks were subjective in which included a religious answering (Kekes 256).

In her letter *La Respuesta a Sor Silotea* (Reply to Sor Filotea), Sor Juana defends her right to pursue her endeavors as a woman in a world of traditional system where male dominated power ruled; ensuring all followed the patriarchal system.

Empecé a deprender gramática, en que creo no llegaron a veinte las lecciones que tomé...es tan apreciable el adorno natural del cabello, yo me cortaba de él cuatro o seis dedos, midiendo hasta dónde llegaba antes, e imponiéndome ley de que si cuando volviese a crecer hasta allí no sabía tal o tal cosa que me había propuesto deprender en tanto que crecía, me lo había de volver a cortar...el pelo crecía aprisa y yo aprendía despacio, y con efecto le cortaba en pena de la rudeza:...Entréme religiosa, porque aunque conocía que tenía el estado cosas...muchas repugnantes a mi genio, con todo, para la total negación que tenía al matrimonio, era lo menos desproporcionado y lo más decente que podía elegir en materia de la seguridad que deseaba de mi salvación; a cuyo primer respeto...cedieron y sujetaron la cerviz todas las impertinencias de mi genio, que eran de querer vivir sola; de no querer tener ocupación obligatoria que embarazase la libertad de mi estudio, ni rumor de comunidad

que impidiese el sosegado silencio de mis libros...Pensé yo que huía de mí misma, pero ¡miserable de mí! trájeme a mí conmigo y traje mi mayor enemigo en esta inclinación, que no sé determinar si por prenda o castigo me dio el Cielo, pues de apagarse o embarazarse con tanto ejercicio que la religión tiene, reventaba como pólvora, y se verificaba en mí el *privatio est causa appetitus*.

Volví (mal dije, pues nunca cesé); proseguí, digo, a la estudiosa tarea (que para mí era descanso en todos los ratos que sobraban a mi obligación) de leer y más leer, de estudiar y más estudiar, sin más maestro que los mismos libros. Ya se ve cuán duro es estudiar en aquellos caracteres sin alma, careciendo de la voz viva y explicación del maestro; pues todo este trabajo sufría yo muy gustosa por amor de las letras. ¡Oh, si hubiese sido por amor de Dios, que era lo acertado, cuánto hubiera merecido! Bien que yo procuraba elevarlo cuanto podía y dirigirlo a su servicio, porque el fin a que aspiraba era a estudiar Teología, pareciéndome menguada inhabilidad, siendo católica, no saber todo lo que en esta vida se puede alcanzar, por medios naturales, de los divinos misterios; y que siendo monja y no seglar, debía, por el estado eclesiástico, profesar letras; y más siendo hija de un San Jerónimo y de una Santa Paula, que era degenerar de tan doctos padres ser idiota la hija. Esto me proponía yo de mí misma y me parecía razón; si no es que era (y eso es lo más cierto) lisonjear y aplaudir a mi propia inclinación, proponiéndola como obligatorio su propio gusto. (14-18, my emphasis)

Sor Juana chose the convent to devote herself to the ecclesiastic world, which she hoped would allow her to foster her passion; however, she still was persecuted for her intellectuality. The church authorities demanded she abandon her passion, her studies, “her intellectual activities as researcher and writer altogether...[Sor Juana] eventually... gave up [defending her rights and the rights of women,] her studies and died at an early age” (Erro-Peralta 7). Her passion was extinguished, thus, life had no more meaning.

Latin American women writers appear to convey through their characters and fictional worlds their long time legitimacy as human beings other than being breeding entities. Their fictional worlds “[are] to deny the legitimacy of the patriarchal family as a model of values and virtues and demonstrate a search for “lateral relations” of equality in brothers, sisters, friends, and lovers” (Marting XIX). In doing so, Latin American writers exercise their inner freedom as a purpose of being. They launch themselves well equipped with their pen, paper and passion to write in support and in defense to their writings as legitimate writers because

[a]lthough it is now an indisputable fact that there is a rich and valuable body of fiction by Latin American women, female writers still face a traditional obstacle: the network which guarantees writers a place in literary history remains reluctant to register works by women and, in so doing, condemns to obscurity the experiences, contributions and existence of half of humanity. (Erro-Peralta 12)

In writing their existence and being translated and published, they transcend their beings. Thus, they destabilize the phallogocentric world.

Most all of Latin American women writers seem to write on the same themes such as sexuality, relationships: family, mother/daughter, and mothering, repression: regimes, husbands, society, and so on (Marting XXI). Though, the themes are constantly moving the rigid literary center, whether it is logocentric or phallogocentric, their voice seems to assert their inner being. The very fact of writing and having characters shifting the centers warrants that the purpose for their existence is to heighten their awareness. A project of worthiness for Wolf is one that one takes pleasure and is of preference, in addition it “answers to the needs [and] account [for] meaningfulness in life must meet” (234). Therefore, heightening women’s awareness is an engaging project of worthwhile and fulfilling for Latina American women writers according to Wolf. A project of worth for Latin American women writers is to stop the injustice, stop the discrimination, and stop the abuse of patriarchal institutions. They continually write about rupturing the structure; therefore, this is a categorical desire of active engagement that has a function of worth.

In her poem “A Julia de Burgos,” (To Julia de Burgos) Julia de Burgos’s poetic voice affirms women should not have to live a dual life and hide their true inner being. Burgos’s poem is powerful in that it speaks to woman to live life as their true selves. The meaning of life is not to live repressed due to societal inflexible norms that stifle: “Tú eres dama casera, resignada, sumisa,/ atada a los prejuicios de los hombres; yo no;/ que yo soy Rocinante corriendo desbocado/ olfateando horizontes de justicias de Dios” (34). Life for the poetic voice is living freely without subjugation. It is also not living a fragmented life and not belonging to anyone “yo [no soy] de naide” because “yo soy la vida, la fuerza, la mujer” (34).

Cuando las multitudes corran alborotadas
dejando atrás cenizas de injusticias
quemadas, y cuando con la tea de las siete virtudes,
tras los siete pecados, corran las multitudes,
contra ti, y contra todo lo injusto
y lo inhumano, yo iré en medio de
ellas con la tea en la mano. (34)

The last verses “...yo iré en medio de/ ellas con la tea en la mano” appear to signify as a calling to women, informing them that there will always be someone carrying the torch. The torch comes forth as a sign not to relinquish one’s subjective values to activities of external influences that poetic voice considers worthless, such as being a “fría muñeca de mentira social” only to please social norms. The poetic voice articulates to tackle the obstacles that prevent self expression, and in doing so, the struggle is what turns into the meaning of life for her and for women who seek self fulfillment. Burgos’s lyrical voice is echoed in Sor Juana’s Reply to Sor Filotea.

En *Arráncame la vida* (Tear This Heart Out) by Angeles Mastretta, the main character Catalina Guzmán finds the meaning of life searching for her freedom and her identity as a woman during one of Mexico’s defining eras: A time when traditional society values and roles were imposed on women. Young Catalina marries Andrés Ascencio, a political ambitions man twice her age. Andrés is a powerful and political corrupt husband who becomes the governor of Puebla, Mexico. Young Catalina confines to her womanly roles of wifely duties, and bearer of children, but soon is unhappy as she feels and becomes alienated from her husband. Her wifely projects

become futile and boring: “Andrés me tenía guardada como un juguete con el que platicaba de tonterías, al que se cogía tres veces a la semana y hacía feliz con rascarle la espalda y llevar al zócalo los domingos,” she states (28). Her realization of a sexual desire as a person and as a woman awakens. She recognizes that her marriage is meaningless, though she can not divorce because of the social norms of that time. Catalina decides to find affection and love elsewhere to create meaning in her life. She tip-toes around society and her husband to calm her inner desire with lovers, beginning with Pablo: “Esa tarde jugamos sobre el pasto como si fuéramos niños...Pablo se encargó de quitarme las ansias esos tres últimos meses de embarazo y yo me encargué de quitarle la virginidad que todavía no dejaba en ningún burdel” (32), states Catalina as she recalls her first encounter. She finds a relationship that satisfies her subjective needs in Pablo. Pablo invokes worthiness of love to satisfy Catalina; therefore, both subjective and objective attractions meet to engage in a worthy project, which are the clandestine encounters.

Catalina looks elsewhere for a sign of affection and human contact to feel needed and alive. During one of Catalina’s pregnancies, Andrés limits his contact with her because “Todo el embarazo fui un fraude. Andrés no volvió a tocarme dizque para no lastimar al niño y eso me puso más nerviosa...” (31). Life is monotonous for Catalina as wife and as mother even though she is performing meaningful projects as mother and wife. Though, they lack meaning to her because she is bored with what she spends her life doing. While Andrés ascends in his political career, her existence is consumed as a politician’s wife of an endless series of state dinners, public speeches and social obligations. Her own personal torch of being begins to extinguish; she loses her sense of what the meaning of life is. In this sense of a lost being, she finds herself and the meaning of life when she meets Carlos Vives. The orchestra leader, Carlos Vives walks into her life and becomes another lover. After a series of encounters of foreplay, Carlos and Catalina meet for the first time alone in a room:

-¿Qué quieres hacer? –preguntó [él, Carlos Vives]
-¿Cuándo?
-Ahora.
-Lo que tú quieras. ¿Tú qué quieres hacer? [dije]
-Yo, coger
-¿Conmigo? –dije. (135)

The process of recalling her sexual encounters increases openly in the novel, making and marking what is significant in her life; a freedom that she enjoyed and partook in secret from her husband and society once again: “Tengo 30, quiero mandarme, quiero vivir contigo...” (152). Marriage to Andrés was the correct social appearance; though, unknowingly she denied herself until after she was married because she was too young to know any better.

Later in the novel Andrés suspects Catalina’s infidelity with Carlos. The narration suggests that Andrés kills Carlos indirectly hiring hit men. Catalina’s meaning to exist is ripped from her. She purchases a house in Puebla, Mexico that overlooks the cemetery where Carlos Vives was buried. Carlos gave Catalina significance to her life, even though they met in covert from society and from her husband. Catalina’s stayed in her new home in Puebla because “Volver a México me asustaba...Ya no quería desafíos ni sorpresas” (181). In her new home in Puebla there were no memories of Carlos, but “Ahí berreaba yo hasta quedarme dormida en el suelo y cuando despertaba con los ojos hinchados volvía...lista para otra temporada de serenidad” (181). How to cope with the amputation that gave Catalina great meaning

and power to her life is her challenge from that point in the story. Eventually, Catalina transforms her pain into a resistance to live. Catalina chooses to help others remain true to themselves, to be their own subjectivity within the confines of the patriarchal time and space they find themselves. Catalina's actions are in alignment with the decisions she has made along the way, which was finding meaning, being true to herself. Finding meaning to produce happiness becomes her mission. As advisor she begins to help Lilia her stepdaughter transform her hopes into meaning.

As in the fictional character of Catalina finding meaning and viewing reality from another angle, many Latin American women writers attempt to articulate who they are as a person and how they view reality. Though, as being different in gender, class, nationality, history, and or race they

find new avenues of expression to articulate... differently... Woman's cultural model, based not only on gender determinants, but also on factors of class, race, nationality and history, is a valuable conduit to express difference in a balance statement that sees feminist endeavors as a vehicle to project the distinctive experiences in a feminine tradition (Medeiros-Lichem 5)

Latin American women writers may write from other perspectives and other thematics from the male centered literary power, but in doing so they create and explain the meaning of their existence. Even though, their writings stir-up disorder amongst the phallogocentric literary circles, they create and re-create new centers of writings with shared similar experiences.

Latin American women writers create their identities, beings, and legitimize their realities through their voices real and fictional. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Julia de Burgos, and Angeles Mastretta legitimize their nonexistence's to existence on paper; therefore, existence in reality. For them, the pursuit of their projects are not dominated by worthlessness, and they truly believe that engagement in them will fulfill their lives by providing satisfaction to what they seek (Kekes 256).

Latin American women writers go deep within themselves as viewed in their writings and self reflect in order to find the significance of life. Much of the realization of understanding and finding meaning for them start with a blank page. A blank page that is turned into writing that does not condemn but "urge[s them] to speak the unspeakable, to articulate the unsayable and to overcome the 'self-censorship' that prevents women from seeing beyond the socially constructed reality" (Medeiros-Lichem 2). This space allows them to express themselves and vis-à-vis understand their significance.

Alejandra Pizarnik's experimental writing leads her poetic voices to question the meaning of life and death. In her lyrical novel *La condesa sangrienta* (The Bloody Countess) the poetic voice states: "Pero, ¿quién es la Muerte? Es la Dama que asola y agosta cómo y dónde quiere. Sí, y además es una definición posible de la condesa Báthory. Nunca nadie no quiso de tal modo envejecer, esto es: morir. Por eso, tal vez, representaba y encarnaba a la Muerte. Porque, ¿cómo ha de morir la Muerte?" (7) The lyrical voice ponders the metaphysical meaning of death. The voice presents death as immortal by asking, "¿cómo ha de morir la Muerte?" yet juxtaposing old age with non-existence, dead.

In search for the meaning of life Pizarnik's poetic voice states "Vida, mi vida, ¿qué has hecho de mi vida?" in the poem "A plena pérdida" (Full Loss) . The poetic

voice urgently requests an answer from her own writing or being; though receives no answer (24). Although many of Pizarnik's poems reveal dissatisfaction with reality as in "La última inocencia" (Final Innocence), "He de partir/ no más inercia bajo el sol/ no más sangre anonadada/ no más formar fila para morir./ He de partir/ Pero arremete ¡viajera!" (29), her writing in itself suggests her purpose and significance during her life time. Pizarnik's purpose seemed to be a writer creating novel poetry even though she may not have realized it. Structurally, thematically and semantically, Pizarnik's poems shatter logocentrism with their brevity and experimentation of styles (Bassnett 39). The last verse "Pero arremete ¡viajera!" in Final Innocence gives the impression to explore the significance of the literary act itself of writing. Pizarnik's significance of life was an inspirational literary figure already anticipating post-modern readings of her time (Bassnett 40).

Cristina Peri Rossi's narrative and poetic world "break...with traditional generic modes and patterns of discourse" (Jehenson 93). Peri Rossi's poetic and narrative voices insinuate that the meaning of life for the author is freedom of expression, satirizing central institutions, such as capitalism and "breaking through sexual taboos, refusing to privilege or denigrate any form of eroticism" (Jehenson 94). In her poem "La suplicante" (The Supplicant), the poetic voice states,

- Desnúdame.
- Pronúnciame.
Cuando estás echada como una bañista
y yo arrojo al agua letras cebadas
Tú entonces abres la boca
en el agua van las vocales
palpas las letras
la mimas, las mojas,
coges una jota,
filtras una ele,
atrapas una consonante,
y, clavándote un verso en la garganta,
te tiro en el lecho,
te anclo en mi costado,
paso a paso te arranco la palabra que te tragaste
y cuando quedas muda,
todo ha terminado. (49)

The poetic voice reflects images that break out the erotic tone with "--Desnúdame. / -Pronúnciame." The poem continues to freely express the lyrical voice guilt free. The poetic voice articulates the unspeakable and unacceptable on paper; as if dangling a veil in front of the unsayable. Language and expression find their birth space on the white page.

Latin American women writers such as Peri Rossi want to demonstrate "they exist, that they are not just shadows, they want to make their presence felt on this earth; they don't want to pass through in silence and be forgotten" (Agosin et al. 2).

This article has attempted to define what the meaning of life is for Latin American women writers. In the study, I used the ideas of Susan Wolf and John Kekes to help explain what it means to have meaning in life. Both philosophers used the statement of to be engaged in projects of worth constitutes a meaning in life. It is

without a doubt that trying to define an abstract idea as the meaning of life is not without debate among centuries of philosophers.

Wolf and Kekes' views were then used to deduct and conclude what the significance of life is for Latin American women writers. First, the concept of life and meaning is not an easy one as this is an age old existential concept that people are still trying to understand and define. Nonetheless, in viewing five Latin American women writers and reflecting on many more, the meaning of life for Latin American women writers is their world view and how they express it: "each one [is] determined to write her own text that will be true to her own, life, and to all her interests and concerns" (Agosin et al. 4). They express themselves using their language and realities. Their language and realities within their creations fracture central establishments because the infrastructure views these women writers as "trespassing limits, of overstepping the bounds of the assigned space, and often of a political commitment" (Medeiros-Lichem 11).

Latin American women writers write about the world from their point of view. They are not shy or feel shameful, nor do they apologize for their writing. "They use themselves, their own bodies, minds and emotions, as the matrix for their writings" (Agosin et al. 2). For them, the significance of life is self expression of authenticity without fear of repression and they manifest this through their writing. The essence of life for Latin American women writers is the eternal power of within conveying their freedom of expression.

Forest Gump's philosophy was not to dwell in the past and take the present as it presented itself. However, Jenny had to break from the norm in order to express herself and find the meaning in her life. Forest remembers asking his mother what is his destiny, to which Mrs. Gump responds, "You're gonna have to figure that out for yourself." Just as Forest and Jenny had to find meaning in life for themselves, each person needs to find that which provides purpose in life for them.

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