

Revisiting the Concept of Sati in Contemporary India: A Study of Indu Sundaresan's *The Faithful Wife*

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ABSTRACT

In addition to her five critically acclaimed novels, Indu Sundaresan, a well-known figure in modern Indian English writing, enhances her creative environment with a gripping collection of short stories named *In the Convent of Little Flowers*. The nine moving stories in this anthology deftly examine various social, cultural, and psychological issues that are pervasive in contemporary Indian society. Even though each story explores a different topic, they are all connected by the actual experiences and hardships of Indian women. The stories highlight the systematic inequalities, cultural norms, and gender inequality that women still experience, which makes the collection a rich source for feminist study. Among these tales, "The Faithful Wife" is particularly noteworthy for its potent reflection on the continued significance of the *Sati* ritual that has historically been connected to the burning of widows. Even though *Sati* is illegal, Sundaresan shows its philosophy still influences society, where women are supposed to be devoted, frequently at the expense of their identity, agency, and independence. The narrative challenges the way that women's voices and wants are often suppressed while they are forced to adhere to repressive traditions by cultural and familial constraints. Although there are laws against practices like *Sati*, their uneven implementation reveals the underlying patriarchal structure of society and betrays a flimsy commitment to gender justice. By closely examining "The Faithful Wife", this paper explores the themes of sacrifice, devotion, and the tension between tradition and modernity. It emphasises how important it is to reconsider the dominant discourses of justice, liberty, and equality in India. Ultimately, Sundaresan's work exposes the fallacy of modern assertions of women's empowerment and advocates for a more sincere and persistent attempt to uphold women's rights and personal autonomy in a society that is changing quickly.

Key Words:

Sati, Tradition, Patriarchy, Modernity

Indian-American novelist Indu Sundaresan was born and brought up in India. She grew up with her father, Captain R. Sundaresan, a fighter pilot in the Indian Air Force. Sundaresan has written six books so far. Her books are *The Twentieth Wife* (2002), *The Feast of Roses* (2003), *The Splendor of Silence* (2006), *In the Convent of Little Flowers* (2008), *Shadow Princess* (2010) and *The Mountain of Light* (2015). Indu Sundaresan's fictional world is completed with the collection of short stories *In the Convent of Little Flowers*, in addition to the five novels. Unlike her Taj Trilogy, a collection of short stories set in historical settings and based on real events with historical characters, *The Splendour of Silence* and *The Mountain of Light* are not rewritings of history. Instead, the short stories are made up and show Indu Sundaresan's imaginative attempts to depict

the modern socio-cultural life that Indians lead today. They are a new weaving of her thoughts. She makes it clear in her 'Afterword' that every story in it is a fictionalised depiction of actual occurrences that either her friends told her about or she read about them in the newspapers.

Indu Sundaresan's moving short story "The Faithful Wife" explores the conflict between tradition and modernization. Sati, the protagonist of the story, is admired for her loyalty to her spouse. It draws inspiration from the ancient Hindu custom of *Sati*, in which a widow burns herself alive on her husband's funeral pyre, which is considered, traditionally, to be the pinnacle of a wife's devotion. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Sati is torn between her desires and the pressures of society. The demands of unwavering devotion and selflessness have moulded her life. However, we witness a silent but strong resistance as her inner voice becomes more audible. A woman's value is determined by how much she sacrifices for others, and the novel gently raises the question of whether true love requires such drastic sacrifice. "The Faithful Wife" is a moving indictment of patriarchy and tradition. It is presented with poise and restraint, which encourages the reader to consider the boundary between self-erasure and faithfulness.

Women writers are often better at portraying the real female psychology in their writings because they bring firsthand knowledge, deep emotional understanding, and an innate understanding of women's lives to their stories. In her short story, "The Faithful Wife", Indu Sundaresan, a gifted female writer, adeptly explores the intricacies of the feminine psyche. Even though the narrator of some of the stories is male, all the stories are women-centric, focussing on the actions and reactions of the women and presenting their point of view. This ultimately reveals her feminist interests as a writer, which permeates the way all the female characters are portrayed and how they respond to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Neeru Tandon in her *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* rightly says, "Most of the male writers view the woman as a fallen Eve or Mary. A few are successful in portraying the real female psyche in other fictional work. Credit really goes to female work and in fact to female authors for delineating the female psyche in the truer sense of the word. (Tandon, 22).

Indo-American writer, Indu Sundaresan, has the advantage of living overseas in Seattle and pursuing her passion for writing. She is one of the few Indian women who can observe India's transforming socio-economic and political-cultural landscape from a distance, both physically and emotionally, and the impact these changes have on Indian women. She also illustrates the traditional values of the Indian people, some of which are very rigid and others of which are progressively changing as modernisation progresses, by showcasing the various facets of Indian life and interpersonal connections in these stories. The stories are glimpses into the lives of Indian women who have long adhered to patriarchal norms and internalised a subservient mindset. Her works also show that women stand up for themselves when necessary. By showing the resistance and highlighting the elements that still contribute to the miserable lives of Indian women, her short stories reveal the genuine truth behind the image of a progressive India.

The term 'culture' describes the common values, beliefs, traditions, behaviours, and artefacts that define a community or group. It includes how individuals engage with one another, their surroundings, and the wider world. Culture is passed down from one generation to the next through education, communication, and socialisation, impacting how people view themselves and other

people. As societies adapt to both internal and external changes, culture is always changing and impacts identities, social conventions, and group dynamics.

“The Faithful Wife”, a short story by Indu Sundaresan, offers a profound analysis of the *Sati* tradition and shows how prevalent it is in modern Indian culture. Despite the fact that social reformers condemned it and laws were found to prohibit it, the ancient custom of widow self-immolation, known as *Sati*, still exists in some form throughout India. Although widow self-immolation, or *Sati*, has been mostly banned in India, its echoes can still be seen there in different forms. Even while the legal restrictions are important, the cultural ideas that support or romanticise this behaviour have not been destroyed. Sundaresan explores the intricacies of this custom in “The Faithful Wife”, highlighting the inconsistencies present in contemporary Indian society where the discourse of empowerment frequently collides with actuality.

The word “Sati” comes from the Sanskrit word “suttee”, used in ancient Indian epics and texts. The *Sati*’s exact origin is unknown, but according to experts, it must have arisen for two reasons. First, to make funerals for the upper classes more lavish, and second, to shield the women from the enemy’s attack on their territory. In Rajasthan, *Sati* was extremely common, especially among royal family women. There is a tradition that when a Rajput soldier dies in combat, his wife will burn herself alive on his funeral pyre to keep herself out of the Mughal’s hands. In India, only the people of the Rajput caste living in Rajasthan perform mass suicide called *Jauhar* when defeated in battles. For instance, Queen Padmini and her womenfolk killed themselves in large numbers to avoid being captured by Alauddin Khilji, the Muslim ruler of Delhi. Due to this incident, many people think that *Sati* was created solely to protect women from being taken by Muslims who entered India. People who travelled to India were aware of *Sati* because it was so well-known. Al Biruni is one such example (973-1048CE). In his book, he has made references to *Sati*.

The religion effectively contributed to the growth, development, and dissemination of *Sati*. Many people associate the story of Goddess Sati with the ancient practice of *Sati*. This relationship, however, is more like misrepresenting and misinterpreting mythology to fit a social norm. Goddess Sati was the first wife of Lord Shiva and the daughter of King Daksha. She was incredibly loyal to her husband. Sati, however, was ashamed when her father made fun of Shiva and failed to invite him to a great yajna (sacrifice). She protested by self-immolating in the fire of her yogic power because she could not stand the disrespect shown to her husband.

Widows were supposed to self-immolate on their husband’s funeral pyre as a sign of devotion and loyalty under the old *Sati* system. Some argued that widows should sacrifice their lives for their husband’s honour, just as *Sati* did voluntarily. A wife’s complete devotion to her husband is known as *Pati-vrata Dharma*, and *Sati*’s act was considered the pinnacle of devotion. The idea that a “true” wife shouldn’t survive the death of her husband was also the basis for the rise of *Sati* system. Some writings and customs incorrectly saw *Sati*’s self-immolation as a model for women to emulate. Eventually, this myth was utilised by priests and patriarchal society to promote *Sati* as a social obligation rather than a personal preference. Hinduism views marriage as an unbreakable relationship, and passing away along with one’s spouse is equivalent to staying together in the afterlife. According to Hinduism’s reincarnation theory, a soul takes on a new body after death and continues to exist there as a new life. Therefore, the bride’s pledge requires her to spend lifetimes

with her husband. Some people thought that by making such a drastic sacrifice, the wife may either help her husband's soul find salvation or perhaps use the power of the universe to bring him back to life. Simone de Beauvoir in her work *The Second Sex* opined that, "She determines and differentiates herself in relation to man, and he does not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other." (Beauvoir, 6).

During the Medieval period, *Sati* grew increasingly popular, especially as a result of the influence of specific kings and social customs. In India during the Mughal era, *Sati* was a social institution. The first Muslim ruler to publicly criticise *Sati* was Mohammed bin Tughlak. He was followed by Humayun, the Mughal emperor, who made the bold move to try to put an end to it completely. Even though women are willing to take pride in this act, he strictly prohibited it. Akbar banned the practice of forcing Hindu women to do *Sati* in his kingdom, stating that they should be stopped but not forced to do so. Jahangir made infanticide and *Sati* illegal for mothers with children to practice *Sati*. Following him, Aurangzeb abolished *Sati* in his kingdom. However, it could not be completely abolished; reports of *Sati* being performed despite its prohibition still exist.

Among the most well-known social reformers who vehemently opposed the *Sati* system was Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The misery of widows really affected him when he observed the Bengali tradition of *Sati*. He urged the British government to ban the practice in publications and petitions. As a result of his efforts, the Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829 was passed and put into effect by Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. The Bengal Sati Regulation Act of 1829 was among the first laws to outlaw *Sati* during that time. Formal attempts to end the practice were initiated at that time. *Sati* was condemned by numerous other reformers. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought for women's rights and supported widow remarriage. *Sati* was also rejected by Arya Samaj founder Dayanand Saraswati. In addition, Mahatma Gandhi opposed social ills including child marriage and *Sati*. Due to moral and humanitarian concerns, the British East India Company first tried to control *Sati* before aggressively working to outlaw it in the early 19th century. William Bentick, a British man, outlawed *Sati* in 1829, and by 1862, the British compelled the Indian kings to stop the practice. According to the Indian penal law, *Sati* is now considered a crime. In India, *Sati* was officially prohibited by law in 1987 with the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act. India continued to practice *Sati* even after it was prohibited. There have been a few examples reported in India even after the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, 1987, which rendered the practice of *Sati* unlawful and subject to legal penalties.

In Deorala, Rajasthan, 18-year-old widow Roop Kanwar was coerced into committing *Sati* in 1987. The incident was reportedly glorified by the thousands of people who gathered to watch it. This was the last officially recorded *Sati* incident in India. The tragedy sparked widespread demonstrations and strengthened anti-*Sati* legislation. The majority of those detained were acquitted due to a lack of evidence. Janakrani, a 70-year-old woman, is accused of jumping into her husband's cremation pyre in Chhattisgarh in 2008. Because there was no proof of societal enforcement or glorification, this occurrence was not legally classified as a *Sati* case, despite its resemblance. According to reports, a widow named Mukesh Devi attempted *Sati* in the Etah district in 2015 but was saved. The villagers who praised the gesture are said to have influenced her. In contrast to Roop Kanwar's 1987 case, this one was not a verified instance of *Sati*. Though

prohibited under the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act of 1987, the incident highlighted the continued prevalence of such detrimental practices in certain rural communities.

A story like “The Faithful Wife”, which is based on a true incident that stunned so-called modern India, which is supposed to be a great democracy and has equality for women as a fundamental right. It focuses on a twelve-year-old girl who is the victim of the ‘Sati’ practice. The custom that was common in ancient India and eradicated sometime ago still prevails in an Indian village, thus illustrating an unalterable attitude and thinking towards women. Despite measures for women’s empowerment and education, their objectification and subjugation persist unabated. Despite numerous attempts at reform, the influence of traditional Indian philosophy, which is upheld by the Dharmashastras, still restricts the lives of Indian women. The enduring grip of such misogynistic ideas is demonstrated by an epigraph at the start of the text which is taken from the Manu Smriti of 200 BC that claims that a devoted wife must continuously adore her husband as a God. A city journalist visits the village and attempts to halt the horrific event of a young widow being immolated on her husband’s funeral pyre. This is being planned covertly in the village and unfortunately approved by the entire population preparing for a holy celebration.

The novel brings to light the ongoing argument over tradition and modernity and their implications, which dominated all conversations in colonial India during the pivotal period of the Indian freedom movement. Whatever modernism we profess to have attained has been ancillary and has not affected our fundamental nature. Our long-standing customs, traditions, and beliefs continue to hold power just as strongly as they did before. Therefore, it is not easy to question India’s long-standing customs, no matter how useless and unfair they may be. Societies have taken advantage of the objectified lives of women, who have never been given a voice in the customs that affect them. Women have attempted to rebel in their ways, however, this is typically disregarded or brushed aside intentionally. All of these elements are highlighted in “The Faithful Wife”, which forces us to reconsider the patriarchal norms and cultural legacies that have undermined Indian women’s fundamental entitlement to a life of respect and well-being.

Most importantly, the story’s voiceless grandmother, ‘Nani’ who breaks her silence and is the first and only person to protest widow immolation in the village. She has secretly written a letter to her journalist grandson, ‘Ram’, who lives in the city, warning of the impending ‘Sati’ in their village, ‘Pathra’ in an effort to prevent it. Ram is also surprised by the letter since he didn’t realise his Nani could write until that day.

The author uses Ram, the main character, as a prism to examine India’s pervasive patriarchal customs and social hypocrisy. Ram is portrayed by Sundaresan as a Westernised man who has separated from the strict customs of his native land. However, upon his return, he is forced to face a harsh reality: the *Sati* ritual which requires widows to burn themselves alive to preserve family honour. The sharp contrast between contemporary ideals and antiquated customs is highlighted by Ram’s fear and powerlessness upon seeing the rite. Ram who has lived in the West, stands for a voice of morality and reason that contrasts with *Sati*’s social acceptance. Through his point of view, Sundaresan challenges the idea that unchallenged traditions can endure despite their inhumanity. Ram finds it hard to disagree with his grandfather because of his upbringing, which teaches him to be like the fabled Rama, who walked to the wilderness and gave up all his pleasures to follow his elders’ advice. This illustrates the predicament of a twelve-year-old widow who is prepared to

become 'Sati' on the funeral pyre of her sixty-three-year-old husband, given that a contemporary, educated journalist finds it difficult to offend his grandfather. What could she do to break the long-standing custom her family had forced upon her?

Ram has a very affectionate relationship with his Nana. He is unable to voice his opinions in front of him, even though modernisation has led to a critical re-evaluation of India's old customs. Surprisingly, Ram's Nana is not an ignorant, illiterate person from the past, as his good English suggests, but rather well-versed in contemporary ideas. Therefore, the story continuously emphasizes that all changes are external, using phrases like- "yet this is an outward change. Inside, in the people, the village lives in many ways like it did hundreds of years ago." (*CLF*, 52). Ram's failure to step in demonstrates how social institutions make even the most well-meaning people helpless. This echoes criticism of complicity, which holds that oppressive traditions continue to exist because educated and modernised people either ignore them or refuse to put an end to them.

When Ram asks his Nana why he is also permitting this cruel practice, he just responds that it is God's will. Ram, however, cannot stand the support of the entire community, which is occupied with gathering wooden logs to burn the girl. Ram now attempts to refute the practice from a legal, moral, ethical, and religious standpoint, but to no avail. He asks- "What god wills you to condemn a twelve year old child to her death for something she is not responsible for?" (*CLF*, 56). When Nana vouches for the custom because of its antiquity, of being a two thousand years old practice Ram tries to convince him, "It is against law, Nana. You know that, the villagers know that. And why is it no one else has heard of Sati? What are you all afraid of? If the police find out, the entire village will be arrested. By keeping quiet about it, all of you- yes, even you-are conspiring to murder a child." (*CLF*, 57). As they have chosen a willing scapegoat, he vehemently questions why such a heinous crime is necessary to connect with the past. Even though Ram opposes the ritual, he is caught up in a society where customs precede individual ethics. This conflict reflects a larger social struggle in which deeply ingrained cultural norms frequently prevent even individuals who want to oppose tyranny from doing so. In addition to the atrocities of *Sati*, his uneasiness, helplessness, and eventual failure to stop the catastrophe also highlight society's incapacity to safeguard its weakest people. Through Ram's viewpoint, Sundaresan reveals the brutality of patriarchal customs and how they are maintained in the name of duty and honour.

When Nani writes to Ram, it discreetly questions the ultimate authority that tradition has over women's lives, making her disobedience clear from the beginning. Despite her seeming adherence to tradition, her fairly straightforward action is a rejection of the deeply ingrained system. She has always complied with her husband's wishes, never voiced an opinion, and always obeyed the rules, but now she has astonished her grandson by writing to him. Even telling someone who might oppose *Sati* can be interpreted as a rebellion in a community where it is blindly adhered to. Even if she doesn't personally try to stop the rite, her letter starts the process that might save the young widow's life. She does not explicitly oppose *Sati*, but her behaviour indicates that she is not totally participating, which complicates her role beyond that of a passive upholder of tradition. As Ram reaches home, "he sees in her spine the strength his mother has, not just from her father who shows it more obviously, but also from her mother who quietly speaks when it is time to be heard." (*CLF*, 59).

Indu Sundaresan emphasises via Nani how even minor acts of disobedience have the capacity to bring about change. Neeru Tandon in her *Feminism: A Paradigm Shift* quotes Simone de Beauvoir's reiteration on how men fundamentally subjugate women. She says, "He extends out into the world to impose his will on the world whereas the woman is doomed to immanence or inwardness. He creates, acts, invents; she waits for him to save her." (Tandon, 91). Whether intentionally or inadvertently, Nani's actions provide Ram with an opportunity to defend himself. Thus, he is able to fight his grandfather because of his Nani's strength. Nana goes on to explain, however, that the girl would lead a shameful life as a widow and that her life would be unhappy without money or assistance. It is then that Ram says that "She will at least have a life. That is more valuable than honour, and prestige, and reputation." (CLF, 61).

The Faithful Wife's protagonist personifies the difficulties encountered by several women who are torn between tradition and their desire for independence. There is a beautiful interplay of devotion and duty. These two elements are expertly woven together by Sundaresan. The protagonist's dedication to her late husband is presented as both a sign of devotion and a social requirement. "She walked away from the crowd to the pyre in childlike strides, her glance unwavering. All morning she had waited for this moment in patience as the men stacked logs of wood in the center of the square." (CLF, 64). Sundaresan expertly captures the widow's mental struggle, illustrating how societal narratives suppress personal autonomy while exalting self-sacrifice. The strict social norms of her village also influence the protagonist's actions. In her society, a widow is supposed to stay in her mourning forever, wearing subdued clothing, skipping celebrations, and showing no signs of joy. She is following these rules without question, more to fulfill a socially prescribed duty than out of personal preference.

The notion that she should be the perfect widow is constantly reinforced by her neighbours and family. The obligation to live up to the ideal of the 'faithful wife' emphasizes how women's roles are defined by social conditioning. Women are under pressure to conform to these standards in spite of their desires for independence, which feeds the cycle of *Sati*. On one hand by dressing like a perfect widow the protagonist is living up to the rigid codes of the society and on the other she desires for independence which is visible in her looks. Sundaresan has beautifully written, "Clad in the white sari of widowhood, devoid of ornaments, her face pale under ebony hair, she walked to the pyre with a look of defiance." (CLF, 65). The story suggests an internal conflict between her personal desire for a life free from grief and the obligation imposed by custom. This conflict demonstrates how her identity is both externally limited by cultural standards and internally defined by her love. Rich symbolism is used by Sundaresan to highlight the significance of tradition. Both death and the cultural beliefs that support such behaviours are symbolised by the flames connected to *Sati*. "As the flames licked their way greedily upward, the girl twitched and pulled at the ropes which held her." (CLF, 65-66). This dichotomy highlights the flimsiness of claims to women's rights and justice and represents the continuous conflict between tradition and modernity. Because of this, the story also resurrects the long-standing argument about women's honour versus life. The claim that widowhood is the result of sin, that a widow is a burden on her family, and that she is a bad omen highlights that misogyny is ingrained in the traditions, reducing women from being seen solely from a utilitarian standpoint. Nana ultimately orders Ram to follow Nani's instructions as the argument comes to a close. The remainder of the narrative is then given as a press report that provides a visual depiction of the actual 'Sati' incident. Individuals of various

hues had assembled to observe the momentous occasion, their eyes blazing with a fervent radiance. Ironically, the title 'The Faithful Wife' refers to woman's willingness to die after her husband passes away, rather than love or loyalty. Ram's surprise at this assumption highlights the unavoidable oppression of women, who are treated as sovereign individuals but rather as status symbols.

The narrative as a whole highlights the tragedy of the circumstances and how an entire community participates in the crazed idea of sacrificing an innocent child. The people were dressed in their best clothes to witness this incident. "Finally, one by one, clad in their clothes- maroons, pinks, greens, and blues, mocking the widow's white- they crept into the square. Men, women, children, even babes cradled in mothers' arms, all gathered around. Faces gave away little; eyes burned with a fanatical light." (CLF, 65). No face was filled with regret. (CLF, 64). The story clearly portrays the victimisation of an innocent person who was pulled by the chains. They fastened her wrists to the wooden logs. (CLF, 65). But "she held herself with dignity and poise well beyond her years. There was much she did not comprehend, much she wanted to ask, but a fatality had numbed her mouth. (CLF, 65). Through the media, Nani's resistance at least brings the practice to the attention of the general public, sparking a new wave of criticism that would stop it from continuing to victimise other widows in India.

The anecdote emphasises that, even though *Sati* has been illegal in India since 1829, it continues to be practiced by innocent people over a century later, demonstrating once more that enacting laws to combat crimes against women is insufficient. It is necessary to undergo a mental shift that must originate internally and cannot be imposed from the outside. It is ironic that women's families do not support them, and that their families are typically the only ones that inflict brutality on them. In this case, the *Sati* family chooses to construct a shrine in their house, which will generate revenue. The story ends by bringing a harsh reality into focus- "The parents had already sold their daughter once to the highest bidder: the sixty-three-year-old man who married their child. Now they have sold her again." (CLF, 67). Thus the entire matter is viewed from an economic standpoint, as both the parents' and husband's families are well aware of the potential financial gain from the girl's sacrifice. Her biological family profits from the sale of her life once and her death for years to come, but her in-laws do not want to provide for her throughout her life, and her stepchildren do not want to share their possessions with her. Thus, with the approval of society, which acts as though it is unaware of these problems, 'Sati' is used as a convenient tool to eradicate her.

The idea that legal and educational changes have completely freed women is criticized in the narrative. Despite having access to education and the changed contemporary values, the protagonist's eventual fate highlights how flimsy these developments are. According to the narrative, a shallow embrace of contemporary ideals does not equate to true equality or justice. A disconcerting mismatch can be seen in the societal views depicted in the story; women are praised for their achievements in theory, yet this recognition frequently runs counter to the realities of their lives. Sundaresan draws attention to this discrepancy and shows how attempts to achieve full gender equality are still hampered by conventional beliefs.

Despite historical debates about *Sati* dating back to pre-colonial India, the subject is still relevant in the twenty-first century, with ardent supporters, which illustrates how superficial our views of justice, equality, and liberty for everyone are. The patriarchal narrative that says women's lives only have significance for their men still traps them. She immediately loses her significance and rights to life in general when she is separated from her spouse. These long-held ideas of womanhood as subsidiary and derivative are questioned in the current story, which also registers Nani's feminist consciousness and resistance. These ideas may seem insignificant, but they are important given the complex web of traditions and rituals that Indian women are enmeshed in.

"The Faithful Wife" by Indu Sundaresan challenges the narrative of progress typically associated with women's emancipation by powerfully illustrating the persistence of *Sati* in 21st-century India. The narrative reminds us that laws and educational programs cannot completely eradicate deeply rooted cultural customs. By drawing attention to the naive views on justice, liberty, and equality, Sundaresan urges a critical analysis of the social institutions that still marginalize women.

Abbreviation used:

In the Convent of Little Flowers- CLF

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