

## Patriarchy in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*: A Gynocentric Approach\*

Ashenafi Aboye<sup>†</sup>

### Abstract

*African literature has been dominated by male African writers. However, there are a number of female African writers who contributed to the literary landscape of the continent significantly. In line with this, researches that deal with issues of gender in African literature are increasing (Fonchingong, 2006; Salami-Boukari, 2012; Stratton, 1994). In this study, I aim to expose patriarchal oppression in two selected post-colonial African novels. I ask "How do postcolonial African female writers expose gender oppression and patriarchy in their novels?" I ask how the female characters in the selected novels resist patriarchal dominance and oppression. I seek to uncover any thematic patterns and/or overlaps that would emerge across the selected novels. To achieve this, I analyze two feminist Anglophone African novels by female writers of the continent, namely 'The Slave Girl' and 'A Question of Power'. Gynocentrism is used as an approach to achieve this purpose. The analyses of the novels make it feel that patriarchy is used as a tool to stabilize the discrimination of the feminine gender. The heroines in both novels are found to be patriarchal women with some attempt to reverse the gender order. The major female characters in the novels stand against the intersectional discrimination of the feminine from the male personhood, religion, as well as colonial culture. These discussions about patriarchy revive the vitality of African feminist novels to the present readers.*

**Keywords:** gender, patriarchy, gynocentrism, African literature, Anglophone

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<sup>†</sup>Sessional lecturer, Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, Email: [ashenafi.alemu@ubc.ca](mailto:ashenafi.alemu@ubc.ca), Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

## **Introduction**

There is a growing demand for a scrutiny of literary works by female writers of the continent (Fonchingong, 2006; Salami-Boukari, 2012; Stratton, 1994). A number of reasons are attributed to this surge in research on female authored African literary texts. For example, some scholars consider examining the portrayal of African females in literary works as an essential component of understanding society (Kumah, 2000). Others question the validity of Western gender epistemology in the African context, eventually leading to research in African literature and culture (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2009).

Chilisa and Ntseane (2009) contend that Western theories of gender undermine local knowledge production and establish themselves as universal while becoming hegemonic knowledge in distant places. Still others contend that African literature written by male African writers is characterized by its inadequacy to serve women and their causes (Fonchingong, 2006). Arguing in favor of the issue, literary and critical scholars of African literature argue that representation of gender and inclusion of female authored texts should be regarded as a sign of progress in the studies in African literature (Gikandi, 2003). Thus, it is essential to examine literary works written by female writers from the continent. All over the world, women have been suffering from the impositions of patriarchy though the level and context varies (Charnon-Deusch, 1990). Women in Africa face deeply inbuilt patriarchy and gender discrimination in different aspects of social and cultural life. The marginalization and discrimination in the real-life situation of women is also manifest in African literature as it has long been known for marginalizing the contribution of female writers of the continent (Arndt, 2002; Stratton, 1990). Thus, it is essential to look into the situation from the African women's perspective.

The purpose of this study is to unfold gender oppression and patriarchy in African feminist female aesthetics (thematically feminist and written by female writers of the continent). Specifically, the current study deals with an analysis of *The Slave Girl* and *A Question of Power* in comparative light. This helps to understand African female authors' contributions in challenging patriarchy. It uncovers gender discrimination as depicted in the selected works of art. The discussions in this study revitalize and reinstate post-colonial African female writers' perspectives which are relevant to the gender discourse.

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**Theoretical perspectives**

Literature portrays the reality of life in its own way. Gender, as an aspect of life, is portrayed in literature in many ways. One strategy to understand the representation of gender in literary studies is to analyze gendered aesthetics. Female-authored texts portray the experiences and challenges of women in multiple ways that address the oppression of the feminine. Beyond highlighting the notion of feminism as a social movement, female-authored texts have also discussed the exploitation of the female body as their primary preoccupation. In line with this, Wieringa (1995) argues that female authorship is both subversive and “subversive” (pp. 1-2). It is subversive in its desire to disrupt a male-dominated tradition and way of life. It is also “subversive” in the sense that it engages women in “circumventing, undoing, and denying the various, distinct, and multilayered verses in which their subjugation is described” (Wieringa, 1995, pp. 1-2).

Such perspectives and desires can be deciphered in literary works taking the notion of gender into account. The meaning of gender is often tricky and is mostly associated with the male-female binary and hierarchical relationships. However, the notion of gender is also expansive. “Gender is analogous to difference but contains with it notions of inequality. It is often viewed as a metaphor representing relations of power [...] restricted to male/female power relations only” (Steady, 2004, p. 48). The issue of gender is an essential aspect of our life as it is a part of literature. Feminist thinkers have been expressing their firm stand concerning these matters frequently. For instance, Haste (1993) states: “We inhabit an engendered world. Gender is the primary category of our social relationships” (p. 61). Thus, gender ought to be a focus of attention for researchers in humanities and other disciplines. The notion of gender in this study is focused on the male-female binary, hierarchical, and oppressive relationship as demonstrated in the narratives of the novel selected for analysis. A discussion about gender in this semantic realm relates with the notion of patriarchy.

A number of scholars have theorized the concept of patriarchy and generated outstanding publications on gender-related issues across the world. Kate Millet’s (1970) *Sexual Politics* provides readers with theoretical and analytical inputs concerning the different bases of patriarchy which are biological, sociological, anthropological, class, economic and so forth (Millet, 1970, p. 563). One of the effects of patriarchy is ‘the interiorization of patriarchy’, an effect produced on the psychology of both sexes (Millet, 1970, p. 575). Traditional gender roles that are assigned to both of the sexes (mis)represent the image of men as rational, assertive, strong and protective and that of women as having the polar extreme of these qualities. Furthermore, society assumes and takes it for granted that jobs and

professions that require physical fitness and intellectual capacity of high caliber are usually more appropriate for men than women.

As a result of such inbuilt, pervasive, patriarchal practices and mindsets in every corner of the world, we see a rather large number of scholars, managers, and political leaders to be men than women. By the same token, women rarely participate in activities that require much of physical strength. For this reason, women themselves are reduced to believe as appropriate such a patriarchal pattern of thought which actually marginalizes them from taking part in and having access to different careers and activities. Women become ‘conditioned’ to believe as rational the values that make part and parcel of patriarchy. Such a woman is called a patriarchal woman, a woman who “has internalized the norms and values of patriarchy” (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). Moreover, she is “socially programmed, as are most women and men, not to see the ways in which women are oppressed by traditional gender roles” (Tyson, 2006, p. 86). Tyson (2006) further states that patriarchy portrays females as the other, taking secondary positions, and having inferior role and significance in particular societies. Thus, patriarchy is the prime source of gender discrimination, and it should be given due consideration.

Despite the contribution of these perspectives to our understanding of the impacts of patriarchy and its relationship with gender, African feminist scholars argue that these perspectives are developed in Western context. As a result, these scholars question the relevance of such theoretical perspectives to our understanding of African gender issues in African context. It is customary to consider theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks in the analysis and discussion of social concepts both in the real as well as the literary realm. This is the normal in western epistemic traditions including gender studies. However, the notion of theory itself is challenged by African feminist scholars in studies related to gender in African life and literature. African feminist scholars and female writers argue that the Western understanding of a social phenomenon wouldn’t serve as an effective tool to analyze cultural experiences in African context. For instance, Boyce-Davies (1994) argues, “The language of theory is loaded with references to European male theorists accompanied by a certain ponderousness and linguistic and syntactic convolutedness” (p. 29).

Boyce-Davies (1994) dismantles the relevance of theory in gender studies. Similarly, Trinh Minh-ha argues that theory “perpetuates existing power relations” (as cited in Boyce-Davies, 1994, p. 31). Makgato, Chaka, and Mandede (2018) make use of *Africana womanism*, a concept developed as a substitute for Western feminism, in their studies of African women’s resistance to patriarchy in literature. They state that *Africana womanism* is “a stand-alone theory invented for every

woman of African lineage and founded on African culture with its attendant polymorphic geographies, struggles, experiences, desires, and needs” (Makgato, Chaka, & Mandede, 2018, p. 332). Despite such divided views about the relevance of theory in studies related to gender and the lived experiences of women in African literature, the theoretical perspectives engaged in this study are eclectic.

The analysis and discussions of the major characters and explanations in the current article are based on Tyson’s (2006) notion of patriarchy, specifically the internalization of patriarchy. This emanates from acknowledging the fact that ideas and concepts overlap and that, it is always difficult and sometimes a disservice to knowledge if we draw a hard and fast dividing line between theories and knowledge based on the geographical location they originate from. It benefits feminist readers and African gender scholars to focus on the end as a strategy that would justify the means and realize the liberation of the oppressed subject, in this case the feminine gender. In addition to Tyson’s (2006) notion of patriarchy, I also consider theoretical underpinnings by the famous African public intellectual, Ali Mazrui (1993).

Mazrui (1993) presents the notion of “benevolent sexism”, which refers to protection and generosity towards the unprivileged gender, and “malignant sexism”, a term he used to represent the “economic manipulation, sexual exploitation, and political marginalization” of women (Mazrui, 1993, p. 92). He further argues that Black African women had suffered for embracing the double identity of being Black and being woman simultaneously. He further discussed the exploitation of Black African women in the colonial as well post-colonial Africa because of this dual identity. Thus, it is essential to discuss the triads of oppression and their intersection with the dual identity of the African women in the analysis and study of gender in the African context.

### **Gynocentrism: An approach to study feminist literature**

This study relies on a close scrutiny of the novels under investigation. Because it attempts to explore the similarities and differences in the novels, the study is basically comparative (Bassnett, 1993). According to Bassnett (1993), it is a common practice to look into the similarities between authors or texts from different cultural contexts. Even though the novels selected for this study are basically the works of two female writers who belong to different cultural contexts, they are compared by making use of Gynocentrism as an approach and interpreting tool. Gynocentrism compares feminine texts to identify the experiences of women and how these experiences shaped the production and criticism of literature. It is focused on making the feminine literature at the center of literary landscape when

viewed in relation to the male-dominated writings. It views women's oppression as "the devaluation and repression of women's nature and female activity by the patriarchal culture" (Young, 1985, p. 177).

Gynocentric criticism unfolds "the devaluation of specifically feminine virtues" (Young, 1985, p. 180). It focuses on the resistance of women against domination. It also takes masculine values as exaltation of violence, selfishness and repression of sexuality, among others (Young, 1985, pp. 180-182). In addition, Jones (2005) states that Gynocentrism is a radical feminist discourse which attempts to identify the variation in women's writings as primary than marginal. According to Jones (2005), Gynocentrism provides us with the opportunity to identify and expose the impact of female literary tradition, as well as gain insight into how the psychodynamics of female writers help us capture the women writers' imagination and concerns.

### **A brief review of related studies**

There is abundant research which examines African aesthetics with a specific aim of exposing the deeply entrenched, gendered, stereotypical patriarchal perspectives of African novels (Bazin, 1989; Fisseha, 2009; Fonchingong, 2006; Ifechelobi, 2014; Jegede, 2014; Melakneh, 2008; Omonzejie, 2015; Salami-Boukari, 2012; Stratton, 1994). Some of these studies, namely Bazin (1989), Stratton (1994), Ifechelobi (2014), and Jegede (2014) deal with the issue of patriarchy in selected female-authored Anglophone-African texts.

Bazin (1989) explores literary works by female African writers, namely Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, and Mariama Ba. This work explores the feminist consciousness of the characters in the selected novels with a focus on the female characters in the light of their experience of patriarchy. Bazin (1989) states "All of these works depict moments of extreme suffering in the lives of these Black African women, but their resiliency, strength, and courage is also depicted" (p. 16). Likewise, Stratton (1994) explores literary works of art by African female writers, namely Grace Ogot, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, and Buchi Emecheta. Stratton (1994) argues that African women writers have to deal with the double standard of racial and gender discrimination in their literary works of art.

They have to dismantle the male dominated literary landscape which tends to affirm post-colonial male domination. Stratton (1994) not only argues as to how the function of the female literary works ought to be but also traces back the voicelessness of Black women in colonial texts such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and in the post-colonial African writers' representation of the colonial encounters in the continent such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Thus, it stresses

patriarchy as a determinant factor in the development of African literature. Unlike Bazin's (1989) comparative analysis which sounds more like a Gynocentric exercise, Stratton (1994) takes three of Emecheta's novels, namely *Joys of Motherhood*, *Destination Biafra*, and *Double Yoke*, and considers their intertextuality and linkage with Nwapa's *Efuru* so as to advance the aforementioned arguments. The concluding remarks of Stratton's (1994) argument place Emecheta as a female writer who makes the effort to "reduce the friction between men's and women's writings" (Stratton, 1994, p. 132).

Jegede (2014) advances a similar argument that it has been the concern of female writers to challenge the indefinite portrayal of female characters and androcentric temperament recurrent in many of the male authored texts in Africa. Being in this line of thought, Jegede (2014) explores the works of two female writers, Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* and Osummor's *The Triumph of the Water Lily*. Jegede (2014) concludes that the portrayal of women contrasts in the selected works of art. The study shows that Fall's *The Beggars' Strike* represents women in "less than positive light" so as to fan out the misrepresentation of women and female stereotypes. In contrast, Osummor presents "a positive picture of modern African womanhood" (Jegede, 2014, p. 31). The study also concludes that female African writers are "writing back" in an effort to exact the inaccurate representation of women and dismantle male dominance. Unlike works that are discussed above as comparative engagement, Ifechelobi (2014) explores the patriarchal and hegemonic systems of leadership in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. It is specifically focused on silence and voicelessness as manifestations of patriarchy in the novel under investigation. The study recognizes *Purple Hibiscus* for its portrayal of the stereotyped image of African women as subdued, victimized, voiceless and subservient.

Discussing both male authored and female authored African novels, and the themes of gender inequality, Fonchingong (2006) asserts that "the presentation of the female gender is mostly sloppy and biased" (p. 136). Embarking on earlier studies, Fonchingong (2006) also levels a heavy criticism on the institution of marriage as "an avenue for violence and plethora of injustices against women" (p. 140). Likewise, Fisseha (2009) and Melakneh (2008) discuss the issue of patriarchy in male authored Anglophone-African literary narratives. As a result, these works appear relevant to the current study and it would be unfair to leave them out of the discussion. Melakneh (2008) touches upon representation and patriarchy in some selected Anglophone African novels of the post-colonial period. Though Melakneh's (2008) study is not intended primarily to investigate the representation of gender by African female writers, his analysis shows that the

women in some of the novels by East African male writers such as Nuruddin Farah were represented as victims of patriarchy. In like manner, Fisseha (2009) points out that patriarchy is portrayed in Nuruddin Farah's *First Trilogy* and Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Petals of Blood*. Unlike Stratton (1994) whose work focuses more on the politics of gender, Melakneh (2008) and Fisseha (2009) do not consider female writers as their major focus. In contrast, they touch upon gender issues incidentally even when a particular gender is not the major intention of their studies.

Slightly different in its approach, Salami-Boukari (2012) provides in-depth analyses of both male authored canonical texts as well as female authored novels from the continent. The study finds that male authored literary texts such as the works of Achebe and Ngugi portray women as "patriarchal woman" who are continually contented in playing traditional roles expected of them by their society (Salami-Boukari, 2012, p. 142). It states that female authored texts such as Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and Mariam Ba's *So Long a Letter* portray educated African women as subjects facing the cross-roads of African cultural constraints and the ideals of modern way of living. Plamer (1968) recognizes the literary representation of African women as silencing these women, and solely left for the male writers of the continent until female pioneer literary figures came into picture (as cited in Salami-Boukari, 2012, p. 141). In a recent work, Makgato, Chaka, and Mandende (2018) investigated the life of Matlhodi, a woman protagonist, and her resistance to patriarchy in the novel, *Bogosi Kupe*. By making use of *Africana womanism* as their theoretical framework, Makgato, Chaka, and Mandende (2018) depict the patriarchal domination of women and how cultural and familial influences subject African females to patriarchal domination, eventually normalizing the culture of male dominance.

In general, there is thematic convergence in the studies reviewed above affirming the view that African literary landscape comprises of patriarchy as a significant theme (Bazin, 1989; Fisseha, 2009; Fonchingong, 2006; Ifechelobi, 2014; Jegede, 2014; Melakneh, 2008; Omonzejie, 2015; Salami-Boukari, 2012; Stratton, 1994). Female-authored Anglophone African literary works are primarily preoccupied with the issue of patriarchy and/or subverting the patriarchally dominated condition of women in the continent which is portrayed in the internalization of patriarchy, voicelessness of the feminine figure, and the dominance and oppressive traits of the male characters as depicted in the works by the female writers of the continent (Bazin, 1989; Ifechelobi, 2014; Jegede, 2014; Makgato, Chaka, & Mandende, 2018; Stratton, 1994). Moreover, literary works by male writers of the continent also appear in the same line of thought where patriarchy is an established system that favors male's dominance over female

agency and their body (Fisseha, 2009; Melakneh, 2008; Salami-Boukari, 2012). Last but not least, most of the studies also highlight the struggle of the African women as a double-layered battle where they grapple with the gendered-domination as well as their Blackness making it even harder for them to navigate their life calling.

The current study also explores patriarchy and gender discrimination with special emphasis on female-authored texts. The issue of authority and credibility is often contested in literary and cultural representation (Said, 1977). But the novels selected in this study are basically autobiographical. The writers foreground the representation of gender from the background of African history taking the form of slavery, racism, and their own personal experiences into account. Thus, approaching these literary works in the light of gender and patriarchy would provide readers with more credible description of gender discrimination, and patriarchy in the African context.

## **Analyses of the novels**

### **Synopses of the novels**

*The Slave Girl* is a story of a heroine named Ogwin Ojebeta who was sold into slavery to a businesswoman by her own brother and faced the gravest hardships in life and finally succeeded to free herself and get back to her birthplace. Ojebeta was born from her father Okwuekwo Oda, who was a court messenger, and her mother was named Umeadi. Umeadi had two sons, named Okolie and Oweziem. Though she gave birth to daughters, they die right after their birth. After many attempts, however, Umeadi succeeded to bear a daughter and she gave her the name Ogbanji Ojebeta.

By the time Ojebeta reached the age of six, her father passed away because he breathed in the poisonous gas that colonial masters, “the Germanis”, fired at their enemies, fellow colonial masters named “the British”. Soon, her mother also died of influenza and this opened the darkest days of Ojebeta’s life. As the story goes, Okolie, one of her brothers, sold her to Ma Plagada because he was running short of money for Uloko dance which is a very important event in his age group. At that time, Ojebeta was only seven years of age. Okolie came to terms with Ma Plagada to sell his dear sister only for eight pounds, and no more.

Clifford, a young boy of Misses Plagada, was interested to marry Ojebeta. Ma Plagada also told Ojebeta that she must marry Clifford. Soon, Ma Plagada departs this life. Ojebeta pondered over the issue of marrying Clifford and compared this situation with the possibility of going with Mrs. Victoria to nurse babies which she considered as slavery or going back home to her relatives at

Ibuza and declare her freedom. At this point, Ojebeta decided to go home and find her relatives before “somebody else inherits her”.

She was about sixteen years old when she returned back to Ibuza village. When she reached there, she found her distant relatives only. While attending church at her birthplace, Ojebeta was introduced to a man named Jacob who came from the place where her brothers dwell. As she frequently met with this gentleman, she fell in love with him. She wants to marry him. Her relatives were against her will. Because of this, she fled to Lagos and wedlock this gentleman. Despite readers’ expectation that Ojebeta would be fulfilled after escaping slavery and being into marriage, she compared her experience in slavery and in her marriage only as changing masters. Initially, her intention in the marriage was to have a life partner who believes and treats her on equal standing. Though she finally started living with the man of her choice, reading her comparison of her situation in slavery and in her marriage makes it feel like changing masters.

Unlike Emecheta’s (1977) *The Slave Girl*, Bessie Head’s (1974) *A Question of Power* is a novel about a heroine named Elizabeth who lives with her son in Botswana. The story presents Elizabeth’s hallucinations resulting from her nervous breakdown. The book is divided into two chapters. The first chapter is named after Sello who is a decent and “God-like” character in her hallucination. The second chapter, which is named after the other male character in her hallucination, Dan, takes the remaining half of the pages in the novel. The story has two layers: her own story and the gentlemen in Elizabeth’s hallucination. As a result, the story swings between the life of characters in the novel and in Elizabeth’s hallucination.

Elizabeth is a daughter of a Black man and a white woman. She grew up with a foster mother because her real mother passed away in an asylum in South Africa. As a female person, Elizabeth started to face grave challenges since her childhood. However, Elizabeth was so strong a woman that she pursued her studies further and moved to a place named Motabegn in Botswana where she was employed as a primary school teacher. Elizabeth used to hallucinate about the two gentlemen, Sello and Dan, to the extent that she lost her sanity. Her soul was divided between Sello’s marvelous life principles and Dan’s intense sexual lust.

She used to dream many frightening dreams. As the situations were worsening, Elizabeth experienced nervous breakdown and she had to stay in a hospital for three weeks. She lost her job at the school. But she was lucky enough that Eugene, her nearest neighbor, promised to find her a job. After some time, she was employed in a farm which was part of Eugene’s Cottage Industry Project. The second part of the novel presents Elizabeth’s life and her hallucinations about Dan.

Dan is a short, Black African gentleman and a friend of Sello. Attracted by his extreme masculinity, Elizabeth started a relationship with him. She knew that he is a man filled with every type of masculine evil. He used to date over seventy women all of whom were submissive to him. However, he found Elizabeth to be assertive and confident and was unable to win her heart. Thus, he made the effort to make her feel inferior by telling her that she was not as sexually excited as the other women whom he had spent nights with. As a result of this, she experienced mental breakdown and became unable to do her job for about four weeks. After getting out of the hospital, Elizabeth became one of the most diligent ladies working on the farm. Eventually, Elizabeth recovered from her illness totally, her endurance stood out, and she resumed her writing at home parallel to her work in the farm.

### **Patriarchy in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl***

*The Slave Girl* challenges the patriarchal structure by uncovering the systematic oppression of women. It discusses gender role assignment which promotes patriarchy. For instance, Ma Plagada runs both her family and their business. In contrast, her husband, Pa Plagada, stays at home the whole day and enjoys life to the full when his wife and the slaves are working the whole day at the Ontisha market. In the novel, Pa Plagada is also represented as a physically strong person. This seems to coincide with the justification of patriarchy as natural and biological than a social construction. In the novel, it says "Can you imagine what this place would be like if there were no Pa? Would Ma be able to control giant slaves like Jienuaka by herself? (Emecheta, 1977, p. 100). These statements show not only that Pa is physically fit to control giant slaves it also suggests that it is hardly possible for Ma Plagada to control such slaves simply because she is a woman. This implicates that women are physically weak and they are not able to perform certain roles because of their body. From these statements, it seems that the novel depicts males as physically capable and stronger than their female counterparts, suggesting male dominance in terms of physical characteristics. It also implicates the situation of Blackness and gender as it mentions slaves owned by Pa Plagada.

The patriarchal structure of African societies is the main source of oppression for the feminine figure in Africa. The dominance of the masculine gender is a frequently stated theme in *The Slave Girl*. For instance, in the novel it says "A girl was owned [...] by her father or someone in place of her father or her older brother, and then, in general, by her group or homestead (Emecheta, 1977, p. 165)". These statements represent men as dominant, high handed figures and

women as mere objects under the ownership of men. As can be seen in the words of Ojebeta, this situation is emphasized and recurrently appears in the novel.

Every woman, whether slave or free, must marry. All her life, a woman always belonged to some male. At birth, you were owned by your people, and when you were sold you belonged to a new master, when you grew up, your new master who had paid something for you would control you (Emecheta, 1977, p. 117).

The above statements show that a woman is just a property of her families and if they sell her into slavery, she becomes the property of the masters. What is more, if she is married to a man, then she is also owned by this person because he pays the bride price to own her. As a result, it is quite obvious that women are portrayed as objects, mere properties that one can possess if he has the financial capacity to pay. In addition, these statements also indicate that the very institution of marriage itself promotes patriarchy and prepares women for further oppression and willing submission to the male figure for the rest of their life. It is important to note that, in addition to marriage as an institute that promotes patriarchal domination of women, even the family as an institution is also another challenge for women because it normalizes the deeply entrenched evils of patriarchal domination of women.

In the novel, the heroine, Ojebeta, was sold into slavery by her own brother. But, after she freed herself from slavery, she goes back home and finds her aunt Uteh. They meet at Ibuza village and Uteh tells Ojebeta to forgive Okolie, the one who sold her into slavery. Here, what is surprising is not the "modest" proposal of forgiving Okolie as put forward by Uteh, but the logic behind. In the novel, Uteh tells to Ojebeta,

No woman is ever free. To be owned by a man is a great honor. So perhaps in a sense your brother was not too much in the wrong. He only took the money that by right belonged to the first son of the family, Owezim...So you must forgive Okolie (Emecheta, 1977, p. 166-67).

Uteh herself is a woman. But, Uteh has not only internalized and accepted patriarchal domination and gender oppression as normal she is also promoting it. She is exposing Ojebeta to the evils of patriarchy. Uteh, despite being a woman

who experiences the burdens from such oppressions, encourages Ojebeta to accept patriarchal domination and forgive the man who sold her into slavery. Uteh approves of the wrong deeds of Okolie to sell his sister. Here, Uteh appears to be what Tyson (2006) refers to as “a patriarchal woman” who has internalized specific patterns of thought that approve of the dominance of males as appropriate. As the story goes, we will also find Ojebeta being portrayed as a submissive woman, and becoming in the same line of thought with Uteh in this aspect.

With the potential of conjuring the image of the colonial master, a white man, the term “master”, also provokes the conception of patriarchy as a politics of domination and the legacy of colonization. As the story goes, we read, “She was happy in her husband, happy to be submissive even to accept an occasional beating, because that is what she has been brought up to believe a wife should expect” (Emecheta, 1977, p. 184). Such statements show the extent to which women are dominated. They explicitly present the level of ‘the interiorization of patriarchy’ (Millet, 1970, p. 576), showing to the reader that the woman who was able to stand for her right and engage in subverting patriarchal domination eventually becomes submissive.

Towards the end of the narration, Ojebeta emerges like what Tyson (2006) calls “a patriarchal woman.” In fact, this is not the only place in the novel to come across a point where this heroine appears to have internalized the patriarchal patterns of thought and considered her own condition as normal. To illustrate this, it is essential to consider the conversation of Ojebeta with Clifford, the son of her master, who is interested to marry her.

As the story goes, readers would find the fact that the heroine was forced to escape to Lagos where her beloved works. This is due to a pressure from her relatives who want her to marry another man who would pay the bride price for them. Sadly, even after she married the man whom she loved very much, Ojebeta was not satisfied with him and she says “I feel free in belonging to a new master from my very own town Ibuza” (Emecheta, 1977, p. 189). The statement not only challenges the oppression of women in marriage, which is a dominantly patriarchal institution that privileges men, it also provokes the notion of colonization by using the very word “master.”

Clifford smiled slightly again and nodded, still holding her, now by the wrist. ‘Not just work for me, but to live with me. Or don’t you want me to make you my wife when you grow up, in a year or two?’ ‘Me?’ Ojebeta asked again stupidly. Then she said, ‘But I am only your mother’s slave.’

‘Have you never heard of masters marrying their female slaves, then?’(Emecheta, 1977, p. 123)

Ojebeta’s statements in the above paragraphs are also reminiscent of Mazrui’s (1993) argument which states that Black African women had suffered for embracing the double identity of being Black and being woman. In the novel, wives are portrayed as slaves. The novel underscores the fact that marrying a husband and living in slavery are no different matters.

The reading of this novel also suggests that in Igbo society men have illimitable freedom to choose the girls they want to marry. This shows that the culture of the Igbo undermines the right of women and deprives girls of their right to choose their life partner.

In *The Slave Girl*, there are a number of instances in which the masculine gender is portrayed as dominant. To mention an example, it is the Mistress, Ma Plagada, who runs the business of selling clothes in the market and work hard. In contrast, her husband, Pa Plagada, stays at home and ‘fiddles with’ some of the slave girls at home. Likewise, the narrative about the situation of the slaves themselves shows that female slaves were buried alive so as to accompany their dead masters. One of the slave girls in this novel named Chiago states that this is the fate of every slave girl who attempts to run away from her master and/or mistress. As stated in the novel,

She had watched one such horrible burial when she had been about twelve and travelling with Ma Plagada in the Ibo interior. The chief wife of the master of the house had died, and it was necessary for her husband to send her to the land of the dead accompanied by a female slave. The one chosen was a particularly beautiful slave with smooth skin and Black closely cropped hair, who was said to be a princess captured in war from another Ibo village; she had made attempts to return to where she came from...” (Emecheta, 1977, p. 63)

In addition to this, the slave girls were compelled to do demanding chores which are not in their physical capability. For instance, one of the girls, Ijeoma, “was asked to take the bale of cloth from the sailor, and as the heavy bale was placed on her head, Ijeoma’s neck shrunk a little under the weight” (Emecheta, 1977, p. 111). As can be seen in this statement, the slave girls were exploited, they were required to engage in physically demanding chores. They were also expected to be working all day long even at home.

In addition, such descriptions like the situation of Ijeoma and her neck shrinking under the weight can be taken as a symbolic representation of the burden of the African woman as a female person as well as a Black enslaved person. In contrast to what is presented above, nothing is mentioned as to whether the male slaves were engaged in physically demanding chores. This would also be taken as an evidence for the disproportionate domination of gender in patriarchy. In general, whereas the female characters in *The Slave Girl* are portrayed as submissive, silenced, inferior, and physically incompetent, the male characters are portrayed as dominant, oppressive, and instinctively superior. The representation of gender in the novel also justifies the colonial and inbuilt system of inequality and the double oppression of the Black female characters (Mazrui, 1993). In line with this, it is also essential to highlight on the portrayal of White women in this novel. European women in this novel are portrayed in a positive light, frequently as individuals who are concerned about the patriarchal domination of the Black African women. For instance, they are portrayed as individuals who stood in solidarity with the oppressed Black African women.

They are depicted as individuals playing the role of liberating and raising the consciousness of the oppressed African women in their endeavor to free themselves from slavery and gender oppression. For instance, Mrs. Simpson, a white woman in the novel, shows the slave girls the picture of a woman whom Mrs. Simpson said have ruled England. In so doing, she strived to inspire the slave girls to liberate themselves and to break free from the internalized, oppressive, patriarchal world view.

In like manner, Mary Slessor- another European woman- is also portrayed in positive light as far as her cooperation is taken into account. The novel states “It is impossible to find baby girls being thrown away among the Efiks anymore, Clifford noted. ‘One missionary- Mary Slessor they call her- has saved many of them herself’” (Emecheta, 1977, p. 143). The novel doesn’t present much about the experience of the White woman in relation to patriarchy and gender oppression. However, the reading makes it feel that the White woman is presented as a savior of the Black African woman which might also be problematic in terms of our conception of patriarchal domination across contexts.

### **Patriarchy in Bessie Head’s (1974) *A Question of Power***

Similar to Emecheta’s (1977) *The Slave Girl*, Bessie Head’s (1974) *A Question of Power* also exposes patriarchal domination of the African women in a number of ways. For instance, Elizabeth, the major character in the novel, often hallucinates about two gentlemen named Sello and Dan. Sello is a man of decent character and

considerate personality, and Dan is portrayed as a sexually exploitative male partner. The narration presents Elizabeth, the heroine in the novel, as a submissive woman dominated by Sello, with whom she has fallen in love. For example, the novel says “She (Elizabeth) seemed to have no distinct face of her own, her face was always turned towards Sello, whom she had adored [...] She seemed to have only been a side attachment to Sello (Head, 1974, p. 25)”. In the novel, Elizabeth is represented as ‘a side attachment of Sello’, as a woman who is extremely dependent on him. The narrator says, “She was entirely dependent on Sello for directions and equally helpless, like a patient on his doctor for survival” (Head, 1974, p. 35).

Here, the representation favours Sello: lifting him up to the level of being a director like a doctor to his patient. Thus, Elizabeth takes inferior roles. Patriarchy is sexist in that it discriminates between both sexes and attempts to validate the innate inferiority of females. In patriarchy, the positive, rational, alluring attributes are usually associated with the masculine gender and weak, irrational, inhuman qualities are given to the feminine gender. This is quite frequent in *The Question of Power*. For instance, a character named Tom - a young Peace-corps volunteer from America - was in conversation with Elizabeth. Following this, he was forced to express his appreciation to Elizabeth’s mental capability. He says “The things you draw out of a man; you know, men do not really discuss the deep metaphysical profundities with women. Oh, they talk about love and things like that, but their deepest feelings they reserve for other men” (Head, 1974, p. 24). Tom discusses the attitude of men towards women in view of human insights and questions that matter. Despite Tom’s attitude about women as incapable of discussing philosophical ideas, which would be a typical example of masculine bias, Tom stands witness to Elizabeth’s intellectual excellence. His speech represents her as a unique woman which on the one hand acknowledges her intellectual competence and on the other signals that most women can hardly discuss philosophical ideas like Elizabeth does.

*A Question of Power* iterates gender discrimination time and again in its portrayal of characters. In the novel, Elizabeth comes across an Asian man in her hallucination who shows her the poor of Africa. The people in her hallucination speak to Elizabeth about her relationship with Sello by saying "There is an evil in your relationship with Sello. He knows he is controlling your life in the wrong way and he doesn't want to give it up" (Head, 1974, p. 32). Though it is in her hallucination, it seems logical to conclude that the above advice given to Elizabeth by the poor of African may hint at men’s domination of women. It shows the exploitative nature of the relationship between men and women as a universal

incident. It may also be a technique employed by the writer to allude to the situation of the African woman in general. Last but not the least, the advice given to Elizabeth by the poor of Africans about her sexual relationship implies the contested issues of Western feminist epistemologies, and their applications to the African context and their deficiencies to expose the double layers of oppression of the Black African woman.

In relation to this, the novel also alludes to the Greek Mythology where the situation of Medusa is highlighted. In Greek mythology, Medusa was a mortal woman who was slain by Perseus for having a love affair with the god Poseidon. It is essential to make a point here that it is not the god Poseidon that was slain but the woman, Medusa. She sacrificed her life only because she loved the god. This mythology makes part of Elizabeth's hallucination. On the one hand, this part of her hallucination suggests the universal feature of patriarchy as a structure of oppression, and as an oppressive system for women regardless of whether they are in Europe or in Africa. On the other hand, it may show the intention of the writer to hint at the situation of the African woman, specifically their sacrifice and life-threatening experiences in their love affairs with men. The women in Elizabeth's hallucination are oppressed. They were considered as individuals created to satisfy Dan's sexual lust. Dan confirms to this situation by saying "I am the king of sex. I go and go. I go with them all. They are created for my desire" (Head, 1974, p. 168).

The novel portrays Elizabeth repeatedly as a woman who is engaged in ongoing struggles in subverting patriarchy. For instance, while she was speaking with Sello, he keeps telling her that he is God. She challenges him and argues for equality. She says that she is also God. But he rejects the notion of equality and tells her "You are not God" (Head, 1974, p. 38). Similarly, Dan, the other male character in the novel, tells Elizabeth that he is God, too (Head, 1974, p. 110). He tells her his power and superiority as follows: "you nearly died over the past two days. I was holding your soul back. I am much bigger than you. My soul is too powerful" (Head, 1974, p. 115).

In the light of the above, it may sound quite logical to argue that the novel exposes disproportionate patriarchal oppression, exploitation of the female body, and the representation of women as sex objects, and the role of religious institution in sustaining patriarchal traditions. Another instance that may strengthen this claim would be the way Dan, another male character in the novel, nick-named his female sexual partners. He calls them by the following names: "Miss Wriggly-Bottom" (Head, 1974, p. 129), "Miss Body Beautiful" (Head, 1974, p. 146), and the like.

From this, one may infer that the women in this fictional world are worthless for Dan except satisfying his sexual desire. They were portrayed as sex objects.

As the story in *A Question of Power* unfolds, readers may find a striking similarity in basic components of the elements of fiction like that of *The Slave Girl*. For instance, there are European characters in the novel who are represented in different ways. In the story, when Elizabeth is laid off from the school where she used to work, she joins a farm project which was totally supported by the Danish government to assist the local Setswana people. There, she gets introduced to many foreigners such as Danes, Americans and Britons. One among the Danes is Camilla who is portrayed as a hysterical, racist white woman. Camilla is also represented as a woman who makes a fetish of her properties and wealth (Head, 1974, pp. 76-79). Elizabeth doesn't like Camilla. Elizabeth blames Camilla for her unfavorable actions and behavior. Elizabeth further states "She (Camilla) takes the inferiority of the Blackman so much for granted that she thinks nothing of telling us straight to our faces we are stupid and don't know anything. There is so many like her" (Head, 1974, p. 82).

In a sense, Elizabeth is calling to the attention of readers the issue of privilege. It is also essential to remember that this goes in the same line of thought with what Mazrui (1993) states the double oppression of the African woman as a female as well as a Black body. It seems that Elizabeth is hurt by the situation of Camilla or may be by the ways of her action. However, this is not Elizabeth's attitude towards all the foreigners at the farm. For example, Elizabeth has a very good relationship and affectionate contact with Brigettit, a girl in the novel. She also has a very good work relationship with Gunner, a White person who is portrayed in the novel positively as a co-operative, considerate and generous person (Head, 1974, p. 80).

In *A Question of Power*, the question of knowledge and being a knower is associated with the issue of power. It is discussed in a sense which seems like a strategy to challenge and reverse patriarchal modes of thinking about women as inferior, and marginalized from the knowledge sphere; for example, while working in a farm which was run by Danish families, there Elizabeth gets introduced to a woman named Kenosi who became her colleague and best friend in the course of time. In the novel, Kenosi is represented as decent, diligent, and kind woman. The following statements may substantiate this assertion: "She [Kenosi] was the sort of woman who simply ate up all the work in front of her, with a deep silence and concentration. There is a wonderful majesty and purposefulness about her" (Head, 1974, p. 88).

“.... ‘Once you make yourself a freak and special any bastard starts to use you. That is half of the fierce fight in Africa. The politicians first jump on the band wagon of past suffering. They ... sweep the crowd by weeping and wailing about the past. Then why do they steal and cheat people once they get into government?’” (Head, 1974, p. 132-33)

The above statement shows that Head’s (1974) critique of African politics goes in tandem with her critique of male dominance because African politics is predominantly male-dominated socio-political sphere.

To sum up, the notion of patriarchy is a recurrent theme in *A Question of Power*. As a result, it could hardly be exhausted in a single journal article. However, the above-mentioned selections would suffice to advance the argument that the novel is primarily concerned about reversing patriarchy. The major character in the novel, Elizabeth, is preoccupied with patriarchal subversion. The narration of her experience exposes the explicit and underlying exploitation of the female body in the social, political and personal spaces and life activities. Her experiences and challenges as a biracial woman also add a different dimension to the patriarchal burden she has to deal with, which might be of interest for other researchers.

### **A Gynocentric approach to reading the novels**

As discussed in the second section of this article, Gynocentrism is primarily concerned with the resistance of women against domination. It compares feminine texts to identify the experience of women. To this end, it tends to expose the impact of feminist literary tradition. It helps us capture the writers’ imagination and concerns. Mindful of these, the current section presents patriarchy in both novels. It then compares the two novels to reach at some conclusions which are critical to the understanding and appreciation of these works of art.

Both *The Slave Girl* and *A Question of Power* are quite similar for their in-depth treatment of patriarchy. They are similar in discussing the challenges that African women face in their everyday lives. In *The Slave Girl*, the heroine is used as a symbolic representation of the African woman whose life is full of domination and exploitation, especially, in family, society, and even marital relationships. In contrast, *A Question of Power* focuses more on sexual relationship of women and men outside marriage. Through presenting the experiences and worldview of Elizabeth, the heroine in the novel, it portrays how women are sexually exploited, and the extent to which they are treated as sex objects by some men. Unlike *The*

*Slave Girl, A Question of Power* appears to be quite carefully and logically crafted not to fall prone to hasty generalization that all men are phallic, androcentric, and sexually exploitative. This can be seen through the portrayal of the good and the bad men, Sello and Dan, respectively, and in the way they treat the heroine.

Both novels are autobiographical demonstrations of the struggle of women against layers of patriarchal oppression, such as sexual, social, cultural, familial and traditional structures and arrangements. In view of Gynocentric reading, language is used as a means to uncover the “sexual devaluation” of the feminine body more frequently and rather strongly in *A Question of Power* than in *The Slave Girl*. In *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta’s women relatives approve of masculine domination as normal and they have “accepted” the existing patriarchal structure, thus they are all “patriarchal women” (Tyson, 2006, p. 85). They put pressure on Ojebeta, the heroine, to admit to this oppressive structure and forgive males. In contrast, in *A Question of Power*, the women, especially the White characters are engaged in reversing patriarchy and they stood in solidarity with the major character.

*The Slave Girl* depicts Ojebeta’s view of marriage as slavery and how she compares marriage with her life in slavery. In contrast, *A Question of Power* presents an in-depth critique of the sexual relationship between Elizabeth and two male characters. Elizabeth’s relationship with Dan is clearly exploitative in nature. In contrast, her conversations with Sello shows that he is sometimes dominating her and at other times he appears to show what Mazrui (1993) calls “benevolent sexism,” which is the protection and generosity towards the unprivileged gender. As the story in *A Question of Power* unfolds, readers also find a lot more cooperation between other characters and the heroine, both men and women, supporting the heroine. This appears to be in contrast to the situation of the major character in *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta, whose relatives and individuals surrounding her stood against her endeavor to liberate herself from the patriarchal oppression.

For the heroine in *The Slave Girl*, family relations and cultural practices are the primary source of oppression and domination. In contrast, *A Question of Power* gives weight to the individual sexual relationships between Elizabeth and the male characters in her dream (Sello and Dan) as a source of severe oppression. Colonial practices and legacies make part of the novel to show gender discrimination and patriarchy. Both novels depict the Black African women’s experience of patriarchy and racial oppression as inseparable and intersectional. For instance, *The Slave Girl* presents the slave owning family, especially the male family members as oppressive. Similarly, *A Question of Power* presents sexual and racial exploitation of the African woman and its association with insanity both in the lives of

Elizabeth, the heroine, and her mother who were admitted to asylum at some point in their lives. In a sense, the stories in both novels are in the same line of thought with the assertion by Mazrui (1993) which states that Black African women had suffered for their double identity of being Black and at the same time, being woman. In *A Question of Power*, the skin color is the source of oppression for Elizabeth despite her being biracial. In contrast, slave trade is the major source of oppression for the Black heroine in *The Slave Girl* as she was sold into slavery.

Both novels present the issue of internalizing patriarchy, reversing patriarchy, and the “Patriarchal woman” as a subject of patriarchal oppression. In *The Slave Girl*, Ojebeta finally becomes aware of the fact that she lives in the dominated world where she only finds herself changing her master (i.e. she refers to her husband as her master and compares him with her real White master who bought her as a slave in her early life). Thus, she states that she feels better to have another ‘master’, her husband, after she is freed from her slave owner master. Both Ojebeta and her female relatives are portrayed as patriarchal women who eventually became submissive to the deeply engrained patriarchal social structure.

In contrast to this, the heroine in *A Question of Power* is engaged in an ongoing struggle to resist and reverse patriarchy. She rejects social arrangements and implicit dominations in her life. She is always engaged in challenging patriarchy. In most of her conversations with the male characters, she was vocal about her capabilities, leaving not an iota of room for oppression, both in her social and sexual relations. Moreover, she demonstrates her efficiency in a number of ways, from engagement in argument and philosophical debates to involvement in physical and intellectual activities. Unlike *The Slave Girl*, where all the slave girls are portrayed as submissive, and exploited, some of the female characters in *A Question of Power* are portrayed in a positive light. They were portrayed as generous, self-aware, committed to their work, and completely immersed in reversing and resisting patriarchy regardless of their race.

There are also some similarities in the representation of white men and women in these novels as generous characters. There is also significant difference in the portrayal of some of the White characters in these novels. In *The Slave Girl*, they are the slave owners. In *A Question of Power*, they are employed in non-governmental humanitarian organizations and foreign investments. In *The Slave Girl*, such characters are portrayed negatively, more often as exploitative of girls and women. In *A Question of Power*, they’re more frequently represented in a positive light. However, there are also instances where they are portrayed in *A Question of Power* unfavorably. For example, Camilla, a Danish woman in the

novel, is portrayed as a hysterical, racist white woman. She is also represented as a woman who makes a fetish of her properties and wealth (Head, 1974, pp. 76-79).

To sum up, both novels demonstrate the situation of women in Africa, the challenges they face and the struggles they undergo. Both novels can be further read from different theoretical perspectives of gender, patriarchy, and racialization of the Black African woman, among others. They can be taken as further evidence to substantiate the ideas raised in the related studies. The novels are vital to reclaim patriarchal and gendered dimensions of African females' domination in societies in African countries where gender inequality is prevalent. Thus, it is possible to say that African women writers are giving voice to the silenced gender and demonstrate the ongoing layers of oppression and the resistance of African women in reversing patriarchy.

### **Conclusions**

There is an upsurge in literary studies that focus on the works by female writers of the African continent (Fonchingong, 2006; Salami-Boukari, 2012; Stratton, 1994). Such increase in literary investigation of female writers of the African continent emanates not only from the desire to understand the African society (Kumah, 2000) but also from questioning the applicability and validity of Western gender epistemology into the African context (Chilisa & Ntseane, 2009). One area of interest in this regard is the issue of patriarchy and the representation of female characters in Anglophone African novels written by female African writers. In Likewise, Fonchingong (2006) argues that African literature written by male African writers is characterized by its inadequacy to serve women and their causes (Fonchingong, 2006). Mindful of this inadequacy, the current study is focused on two female authored texts, namely Buchi Emecehta's *The Slave Girl* and Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*.

As can be seen in the analyses of these novels, these post-colonial African female writers expose patriarchy by creating their heroines who constantly struggle to subvert patriarchy in different spheres of life such as marriage, sexual relationships, and religion. They depict patriarchy and its bearing on gender discrimination through the portrayal of their characters, specifically their female characters. The selected novels demonstrate the dominance of masculine gender over the feminine in a multiplicity of ways beginning from in-house domination. They demonstrate domination of African women in family relationships, house chores, and business ownerships. The novels also call to the attention of readers the sexual exploitation, racialization, and misrepresentation of the Black African

women. In both novels, patriarchy reinforced and assured discrimination of the feminine gender.

Gynocentric reading of the novels allows a kind of reading that help us articulate in what ways the novels are similar. It allows readers to understand the concerns of female African writers. Both novels can be taken as evidence to demonstrate the feminine perspective of colonialism and its legacies in African continent, at least in terms of patriarchy. Due to the situation of the characters and the contexts of the narration, the novels appear to portray their heroine slightly differently. They are also different in their orientation of the heroine characters in tackling patriarchy. The narration in both novels is in the same line of thought with earlier research by Bazin (1989) and Stratton (1994) which advances the argument that female African writers have to address the double standard of racial and gender discrimination in their literary works of art.

This study coincides with earlier claims that African female authorship is subversive of patriarchy (Bazin, 1989; Fisseha, 2009; Fonchingong, 2006; Ifechelobi, 2014; Jegede, 2014; Melakneh, 2008; Omonzejie, 2015; Salami-Boukari, 2012; Stratton, 1994). It is in line with findings from the analysis of male-authored texts which assert that female characters are represented as victims of patriarchy (Melakneh, 2008; Fisseha, 2009). The study reiterates the issue of institutional domination, such as in marriage, as a source of injustice against women (Bazin, 1989; Fonchingong, 2006). Like earlier studies, it also shows the Black African women's persistent struggle against patriarchy and racism, among others (Bazin, 1989; Mazrui, 1993; Stratton, 1994).

The novels contribute significantly towards understanding and exposing the totality, and depth of patriarchal oppression. They contribute to a lucid understanding of the ongoing multilayered patriarchal oppression of women and the objectification of the female body across social institutions in Africa such as family and marriage, among others. Such feminine aesthetics should be considered for their emphasis on patriarchy and the discrimination of the feminine gender. Scholars in the field of feminism and gender studies shouldn't neglect the inclusion of these novels in teaching and research related to African gender studies. Further research into each of these novels in areas of language and gender, gender stereotype, ideology and gender, post-colonial African literature, the role of global solidarity to dismantle patriarchy, as well as gender and decolonization of the mind would enhance readers understanding and appreciation of these and similar other works of art in post-colonial African literature. Re-claiming such works of art is vital for many of the African countries where patriarchy and gender oppression is still prevalent in many aspects of life.

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