

## A Bridge Between Fiction and Reality in History Teaching: The Role of Historical Novels

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### Abstract

Education is a process that lasts throughout the life of the individual, from the moment he/she opens his/her eyes to the world until his/her death, and that starts first in the family and then continues at school. This process, combined with cultural and social dimensions, is a concept that is with us throughout life. In short, it can be expressed as 'Education is life itself'. The development and maturation of the individual is only possible through education. Education is an important factor shaping the individual's mindset and behaviour. In the teaching of history lessons in Turkey, the use of historical novels plays a major role in the transfer of historical subjects. These novels are an important tool for teachers in transferring our deep-rooted history to new generations, enabling students to gain effective learning gains and gain permanent knowledge by instilling a love of history.

In this direction, History teachers in our country use various teaching methods and techniques in order for students to participate actively in the lesson and to realise meaningful learning. These methods aim to contribute to the cognitive development of students by developing their high-level thinking skills. Since history lessons generally contain abstract concepts, it is very important for teachers to use different materials in order to keep students' attention alive. In this context, especially historical novels appear as an important tool in history teaching today. Historical novels make it easier for students to understand the concepts of historical time and space by concretising them. In addition, these novels develop students' critical thinking skills by enabling them to distinguish between reality and fiction. In addition, historical novels help students to gain reading habits and thus make the learning process more permanent and comprehensive.

**Keywords:** Education, history teaching, historical novels, reality

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## Introduction

History is a discipline that seeks to make sense of the present and illuminate the future by tracing the remnants of the past. Yet, this pursuit goes beyond documents, archival materials, or chronological accounts. Human memory engages with historical realities not only as factual information but also through a process of meaning-making. In this regard, fictional narratives -particularly historical novels- are gaining increasing significance in the pedagogical dimension of history education. By narrating past events through the perspectives of individuals and communities, historical novels do more than convey information; they offer readers an empathetic gateway into the emotional landscape, mentalities, and socio-cultural atmosphere of the period (Levstik & Barton, 2008).

History education has, for many years, followed a line that prioritizes the transmission of objective knowledge; documents, historical chronologies, and political developments have been placed at the center. However, criticisms have increased suggesting that this approach has been insufficient in developing historical thinking skills, especially among younger generations, and has led to disinterest and alienation among students (Wineburg, 2001). At this point, historical novels come to the forefront as an alternative learning tool that is student-centered, encourages critical thinking, and fosters historical empathy. Historical novels also offer a multi-layered learning experience by opening historical events to discussion not only through the question "what happened?" but also through questions like "how did it feel?", "who experienced it, and under what conditions?"

However, how the boundaries between history and fiction should be drawn in a pedagogical context, to what extent novels can be used in history education, and the epistemological limits of this use are also important issues that need to be discussed. Do fictional narratives replace historical reality, or do they help us better understand it? These questions make it necessary to establish a theoretical framework regarding the place and function of historical novels in educational settings.

This article aims to examine the role of historical novels in history education, how they shape students' perceptions of historical knowledge and the past, and how the relationship between fiction and reality can be constructed in this process. In this regard, the potential and limits of fiction in the reproduction of historical narrative will be addressed by building a bridge between theoretical approaches in the literature and practice-oriented examples.

History is one of the fundamental elements of our cultural heritage; it contributes to the formation of shared values among individuals and thus enables social cohesion. At the same time, by supporting the strengthening of national consciousness, it lays the foundation for students—and therefore citizens—to grow up as individuals loyal to the state and the nation. History education equips individuals with the ability to adapt to life, thereby increasing both their self-confidence and their trust in society. Given the significance of these functions, it is crucial that students learn the discipline of history in an effective and accurate way. In this context, various debates arise regarding how history teaching should be carried out.

One of the focal points of these discussions is that the teaching methods and techniques used in schools are inadequate or flawed. Numerous academic studies on the subject indicate that history lessons are mostly teacher-centered, bound to textbooks, and carried out in a monotonous manner without benefiting from alternative sources. Research has shown that such practices reduce students' interest in history lessons and fail to sufficiently instill the intended learning outcomes. To address this problem, various studies have been conducted in university departments of History Education, and new approaches have been developed. In this context, constructivist education programs were created, initially implemented at the primary education level, and later planned to be gradually expanded into secondary schools.

Although changes in teaching methods have been discussed in our country since the Constitutional Era, history teachers have generally adhered to direct instruction and question-answer techniques, remaining faithful to textbook content and failing to incorporate methods that ensure active student

participation. This situation has prevented students from developing a research-oriented attitude and has limited opportunities for active learning (Safran, 2006).

Historical novels, as a literary genre, are the result of collaboration between History and Literature. These novels structurally differ from textbooks. In historical novels, emphasis is placed more on the consequences of events rather than their causes. In this respect, they offer readers the feeling of taking a journey into the past, almost as if visiting a historical setting (Ata, 2000).

Historical novels, while narrating events that have occurred in the past or are likely to occur, have contributed to the formation of collective memory. In this process, the author shapes the framework independently, determining the concepts of time and space. Without deviating from historical facts, the author reconstructs the past with various embellishments, making it possible for this knowledge to be passed on to future generations (İpçioğlu, 2014).

In the narration of history lessons, historical novels, which shift the focus from being solely teacher-centered to engaging students in a more compelling way, allow students to learn the subject more deeply. They also play an important role in summarizing details. History, as a broad field, requires students to focus their attention. At this point, using tools such as novels, stories, and reading materials can guide students into a planned learning process, allowing them to explore the period in a comprehensive manner. This approach also helps teachers manage the process more efficiently and easily (Safran & Ata, 2003).

Research indicates that students tend to favor historical novels enriched with fictional elements because of their narrative appeal. However, they view the information in textbooks as more realistic, due to the belief that textbook content is objective and accurate (Safran & Ata, 2003). Nevertheless, it would be more appropriate to use historical novels not as replacements for textbooks, but as engaging and educational tools in the classroom, with the potential to contribute to long-term learning retention.

## Method

This study employs a qualitative research method to investigate the role of historical novels in history education. The main objective of the research is to analyze how works of historical fiction function as a bridge in the educational process and to examine how these works contribute to the development of students' historical awareness. In this context:

- Academic articles, books, and theses addressing history education, the pedagogical value of historical novels, and the fiction-reality relationship have been reviewed.
- Research focusing on alternative methods in history teaching has been specifically evaluated.

The data collected were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis methods. The role of historical novels in education has been categorized thematically and interpreted in comparison with the existing literature. This methodology offers a systematic framework for understanding the interaction between fiction and reality in history education and for uncovering the pedagogical potential of historical novels.

## Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

History education is not merely a process of transmitting knowledge about the past; it constitutes a multifaceted learning environment where individuals acquire the ability to analyze historical events, establish cause-and-effect relationships, and develop historical empathy. In this context, theoretical debates on history teaching have been largely shaped by two dominant approaches: the traditional approach to history education and the constructivist approach. While the traditional approach treats history as an objective body of knowledge, the constructivist approach views it as a dynamic process in which individuals actively construct their understanding of the past, engaging with multiple perspectives (Seixas & Peck, 2004).

The constructivist approach has particularly gained prominence in the 21st-century learning paradigm, with an increasing recognition that the use of narratives, personal stories, and fictional elements can enhance historical thinking skills in students (Wineburg, 2001). Within this framework, historical novels have been acknowledged as a valuable pedagogical tool, fostering both historical empathy and critical thinking.

Research on the educational potential of historical novels underscores their ability to help students emotionally and intellectually connect with historical events, facilitate the concretization of abstract historical concepts, and allow for a deeper understanding of diverse historical perspectives (Foster & Yeager, 1999). For example, Levstik and Barton (2008) highlight that historical novels improve students' ability to engage with multiple voices from the past.

The pedagogical use of historical novels, however, has raised several critical questions. Notably, the tension between historical accuracy and fictional freedom has led to debates about the reliability of such texts within educational settings (Evans, 2004).

Recent research indicates that history teachers are showing an increasing interest in historical novels. However, uncertainties persist regarding the pedagogical competence needed to effectively incorporate these materials into teaching practices. Studies conducted within the Turkish context reveal that, particularly at the secondary education level, while history textbooks often lack narrative depth, historical novels serve as a powerful tool that not only captivates students' interest but also vividly brings historical events to life (Demircioğlu, 2003).

In this regard, the use of historical novels in history education should be understood as a multifaceted issue that encompasses pedagogical, epistemological, and ethical dimensions, rather than being seen solely as a practical matter. To ensure that students both accurately comprehend historical knowledge and develop their historical thinking skills, it is essential that historical novels be employed with a constructive yet critically reflective approach.

## Findings

### The Emergence of Historical Novel

Since the nineteenth century, one of the intellectual foundations prevalent in the scientific world has been positivism, which has played a crucial role in shaping scientific methods. Positivist thought has had a profound influence on the field of history, just as it has on other sciences, leading to history being positioned as a scientific discipline within this intellectual framework. Simultaneously, in the literary field, the novel genre had largely completed its formal development. However, it should be noted that the historical novel emerged later in comparison to the novel genre. While positivist thought influenced the birth of the historical novel, this genre often diverged from this intellectual line and evolved, especially under the influence of Romanticism in the nineteenth century.

The emergence of the historical novel occurred alongside the rise of the modern novel (Timur, 2002). The Enlightenment Era initially brought about a cultural and political independence movement in France, which was followed by the spread of national identity and movements across Europe. German idealism, reaching its peak with Hegel, served as a reaction to Germany's backwardness, and German literature shared this response. Subsequently, a movement for independence and unification emerged in Germany, which had been divided into small principalities and duchies. At the same time, in England, which had completed its industrialization and undergone its social revolution through negotiations among the ruling classes, the Glorious Revolution written by Walter Scott prompted deep and wide reflections on "national identity." According to many literary historians, Scott is regarded as the first author of the historical novel. Novels written before the nineteenth century should be seen as "novels that discuss history" (Değirmenci, 2020).

Epics, legends, gazavatnamas, and cenk'namas, which described legendary, imaginary events, have been replaced by historical novels in literature. Myths, heroic tales, epics, and fairy tales are both

historical and literary products, making them subjects of scientific study. These genres have contributed to the emergence of the historical novel, which has now largely replaced them (Düzgün, 2008).

Another important factor in the rise of the historical novel is the French Revolution (1789). With the profound changes it brought, the French Revolution left deep impacts first in Europe and then in surrounding regions. In particular, the spread of nationalism and ideas of independence played a key role in the disintegration of multinational empires and the formation of nation-states. In this context, the simultaneous rise of nation-states and the birth of the historical novel genre can be seen as a significant intersection (Düzgün, 2008).

Overall, historical novels written until the 1980s are seen to have been created with a focus on historical realities, or the historical narratives within these works reflect the official historical discourse and dominant ideologies, continuing traditional approaches (Yalçın-Çelik, 2005).

However, it is noteworthy that there was a significant shift in this perspective after the 1980s. From this point onwards, historical-themed novels have become an increasingly popular genre. They have been recognized both as an economically profitable sector and as a popular culture product consumed by wide audiences. With the influential role of the media, a broad market for historical novels developed, leading to a marked increase in the number of such works, especially in the 1990s. This rise also influenced the general reading habits of society; historical novels were no longer embraced solely by highly educated or elite groups but also by broader segments of the population.

In historical novels written during this period, the focus was not confined to narratives about Turkish heroes from the Ottoman period, nor was it limited to the portrayal of the idea that the neglect of Turkish identity led to the downfall of the Ottoman Empire. Instead, topics related to education, science, culture, social life, economy, and architecture within Ottoman history began to be explored. Moreover, the artistic and cultural fabric of the Ottoman Empire was no longer examined from a one-sided perspective, but through a more diverse and critical lens. This shift is particularly valuable in the context of history education. The incorporation of the Ottoman social and cultural structure in literary works can contribute to a deeper and more multifaceted understanding of historical events for students. Historical novels that stimulate critical thinking and present alternative viewpoints contribute significantly to the development of historical cognition. Conversely, works that are shaped solely by ideological concerns and offer one-dimensional narratives may have limited impact on history education, and at times, may even lead to misinterpretations (Düzgün, 2008).

### **The Place and Importance of Novels in History Teaching**

History teaching methods, when diversified considering individual differences from primary school onwards, and when not limited to traditional methods (such as narration or question-answer) but incorporating different and innovative techniques, may gradually change students' prejudices about history. In this way, students' interest and attitude towards the lesson can develop positively, leading to an increase in academic success. The most significant long-term impact of this goal is that it will contribute to history's greater alignment with its purpose in areas like society, the state, individuals, or world peace. Especially when history lessons, which are based on abstract and verbal narration, are not supported by appropriate teaching materials, the goals to be achieved may remain confined to the pages of the curriculum. Therefore, in addition to using appropriate tools and materials in formal education, continuing history education outside the school is crucial for the development of historical awareness starting from primary education and continuing in later educational stages (İskender Kılıç, 2011).

No branch of social sciences can encompass the entirety of human experience. Likewise, even an experienced historian can only engage deeply with a specific part of human history and must choose the topics they wish to research (Savage & Armstrong, 1987). It is not feasible to transfer all aspects of such a broad subject to educational curricula. Therefore, it is essential that students do not limit



their history education solely to textbooks but learn to reach human experiences from different sources. This diversity can increase students' interest in the subject and positively affect academic success. Jarolimek emphasizes the significant role of literary works in social studies teaching (Jarolimek, 1964). Creative teachers can contribute to students evaluating different perspectives, distinguishing between facts and opinions, and developing problem-solving skills by using literary works that offer much richer content than textbooks (Doğanay, 2006). For example, using Turkish legends and epics in history teaching not only positively affects children's mental, emotional, social, and moral development but is also seen as an effective approach beyond traditional methods (Şimşek, 2001). Stories, whether real or fictional, are the conveyance of events through language. A study by Pappas shows that children's text comprehension skills are more developed than previously thought (Levstik, 1995). Particularly at the elementary level, using historical stories as a method in teaching history has been found to enhance students' cognitive achievements. Şimşek's study concluded that storytelling in Social Studies lessons in 6th and 7th grades increased students' comprehension levels (Şimşek, 2004). Another study showed that history teaching through stories developed students' historical understanding skills, regardless of age, and also supported their ability to make historical interpretations through listening, reading, and explaining activities (Dilek & Soğucaklı Yapıcı, 2005).

Literature can be viewed as a form of reflecting one's inner world through language. Literary works, while bearing traces of the social and cultural environment in which they are written, also allow the author to present personal observations and imaginative designs regarding events and situations. A successful literary work can present excerpts of life, but this does not necessarily mean that reality is represented exactly as it is (Şirin, 1994).

Historical novels, as literary works, are considered an effective tool for instilling historical consciousness in high school and university students (Şimşek, 2006, p. 65). These types of novels present a particular historical period or event in a manner that is close to reality but artistically processed for the reader (Özcan, 2006). The relationship between novels and history appears in two fundamental approaches: In the first approach, historical events are conveyed with a didactic purpose within a fictional framework; here, the literary aspect is usually weak, and chronological narration is emphasized. Therefore, whether these types of novels can be truly considered as novels has been a topic of debate. In the second approach, the author reconstructs the topic from a historical element based on their perspective and, in the process, provides a new perspective on history and adds artistic value to the work (Coşkun, 2007).

Literature, which begins with the child exploring their environment through their native language, contributes not only to a deeper understanding of the surrounding world but also to the mental development of the child and the enrichment of their cognitive world as they begin to create a mental map of their own language. This process enhances not only the comprehension of the environment but also has positive effects on the child's intellectual development (Tekgöz, 2005).

In history teaching, books of this type hold significant importance in increasing students' interest in the lesson, directing them towards research and inquiry activities, and developing their ability to assess events from different perspectives. Additionally, by observing the attitudes and behaviors of the characters in these works, students have the opportunity to develop positive behavior patterns (Erden, 2000).

History, by its very nature based on fiction in its beginning, gains both an aesthetic dimension and a clearer identity when re-examined and restructured from different perspectives. Literature embraces the past, present, and future simultaneously, whereas history focuses solely on the past. In this context, literature can be thought of as a process of designing the future based on the past. In other words, literature is a vivid reflection of the past (Karaalioglu, 1980). In his article "As a Literary Genre, History," Mehmet Ali Kılıçbay emphasizes that "literature creates, interprets, and writes history; in doing so, it reflects its own perspective," underscoring that history is not only a documented reality but also a fiction that includes the writer's perspective (Doğan, 2000).

Historical reality is primarily subject to the interpretation and evaluation of the historian, the person who records the events. People must follow historical events according to the historian's interpretations. In this context, historical events have a subjective aspect. Initially, history undergoes

erosion, and in the historical novel stage, it undergoes a second transformation called fiction. The novel writer takes the data presented by the historian, shapes it in their imagination, creates fiction on the unknowns, and presents the historical material anew to the attention of readers. The author, in addition to historical reality, adds fictional elements and human factors within a non-historical environment to create their work. As a historian might express, "It is possible to make a selection among the facts in a certain direction and create an interpretation that suits him. Even if trying to be objective, the historian's ability to understand and explain past facts is dependent on their understanding of the society they belong to, their political and ideological attitudes," the historian first selects the information they acquire and then interprets it according to their thought structure and worldview. This can be exemplified by examining Carr and Fontana's differing views on the causes of the French Revolution (Carr & Fontana, 1992). Both historians approached this issue with opposing claims, and they accepted this as a necessity inherent in the nature of history. Similarly, the emergence of differing views regarding the founding date of the Ottoman Empire and the varying perspectives in novels related to the Ottoman period are examples reflecting this situation.

On the other hand, the limitations and negative aspects of historical novels should also be considered. Particularly, students may find it difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction in the events described in these novels. Additionally, the reflection of the author's personal perspective in historical novels may hinder the development of students' critical thinking skills (Ata, 2000). This situation may lead readers to see events from the author's perspective rather than forming their own evaluations. To prevent such issues in education, it is crucial to teach students to evaluate what they read with a critical eye and emphasize that these works are artistic creations containing historical elements. Moreover, history and literature teachers may find it useful to clarify the place of historical novels in young people's history learning and the difference between the novel and historical reality (Şimşek, 2006).

### **Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations**

History is a social science based on documents that examine the past experiences of human societies. Unlike natural sciences, the impossibility of the exact repetition of historical events and the absence of universal laws or rules place history in a unique position. An objective and impartial analysis of historical data is essential; therefore, documents should be evaluated from various perspectives and with a critical approach. Undoubtedly, historical novels are not scientific works; they contain elements of fiction and present events by blending them with the author's imagination. Therefore, it is incorrect to attribute the meaning of a 'historical document' or to suggest that everything presented in these novels is entirely true. Moreover, evaluating historical novels with such a function is methodologically incorrect. In this context, history teachers should avoid mindlessly recommending every novel that addresses a historical topic in history lessons. The works recommended to students should be those of qualified authors who base their narratives on historical events and scientific sources, offering a representation close to reality. This is an important responsibility for educators. Otherwise, students may form misconceptions and erroneous information that are difficult to correct.

In this framework, the rationale for recommending historical novels in history lessons should be discussed. In scientific historical studies, events are usually presented in an objective and impartial manner, so students' development of a sense of national unity, belonging, love for their nation, or an emotional connection to historical events is often limited through these narratives. This is because the scientific approach is based on facts and evidence rather than emotions. In contrast, another function of history teaching, unlike positive sciences, is to convey and shape political attitudes, values, citizenship awareness, and national identity through education. History education has been a significant tool in the construction of modern nation-states and the spread of nationalist ideologies (Ersanlı, 2003). In this context, historical novels emerge as an important literary genre that enables students to form emotional connections with historical events and strengthen their sense of national identity.

History is a treasure that every member of a nation should know and develop. Every subject related to a society's culture falls within the scope of history. In this context, history is generally the mental map

of a nation. Societies must constantly keep their historical knowledge alive. In addition to being taught as a subject in schools, history is also passed on from generation to generation through extracurricular activities. One of these activities is done through novels, which are a component of literature. Historical novels free history from boredom and monotony. Using historical novels during lessons makes the class both fun and increases retention. Historical novels take the reader on an imaginary journey through the past and introduce them to some real events that occurred in imagined, yet legitimized, settings. Historical novels help the reader form a perception of time and space. Therefore, it is very important to use historical novels as supplementary materials in history lessons. Not only do historical novels help establish a connection between the present and the past, but they also allow us to compare them. At the same time, historical novels shed light on the future. For this reason, they make a significant contribution to historic education.

In our study, the views of history teachers and high school students regarding historical novels and reality were gathered. According to the results of the survey, judgments were made regarding the impact of historical novels on lessons and the reality of their content. It was found from the statements of the history teachers that they use historical novels in their lessons, make their lessons more tangible through these novels, and believe that historical novels contribute to the reality of historical events. The participating teachers also agreed on the positive effects of historical novels, including their contribution to drawing lessons from the past, impacting personal development, transmitting societal memory to new generations, helping preserve civilization and cultural values, reinforcing the concepts of time and space, promoting positive behavior in human rights and democratic attitudes, and aiding in the formation of national identity.

It was observed that high school students enjoy reading historical novels and believe that they understand history lessons better with the help of these novels. Additionally, students found the characters in historical novels charismatic and thought that these characters were based on real historical figures. Considering all of this, historical novels are of immense importance in education, as they can contribute to students' critical thinking skills and enrich their mental and emotional perspectives. Based on the results of the teacher and student surveys, it is evident that historical novels make history lessons more effective and lasting.

The Ministry of National Education (MEB) should emphasize the educational aspect of historical novels, classify historical novels according to the secondary school history curriculum, and present them to teachers and students. Reading hours for historical novels should be incorporated into the curriculum to make reading easier, and attractive methods and techniques should be applied to students in this area. Furthermore, in-service training should be provided for teachers, where the importance of this issue and the application methods in lessons are conveyed by qualified experts.

While literary materials such as stories, anecdotes, poems, and epics have been known from the past to the present, they have not been sufficiently utilized as supplementary sources alongside textbooks in history education. Although these materials are known, they have not been used to the extent they should be. For example, a letter written by a soldier fighting at the front during the National Struggle, a poem written by a poet from that era, or the laments of mothers for their sons sent to the front, are all literary works that, when used as materials in history lessons, would certainly lead to more permanent and impactful learning for students. However, in our country, there has not been sufficient and necessary work done regarding the use of literary products in history lessons. In recent years, teachers have been advised, and example activities have been structured to illustrate this situation. Written materials, including legends, epics, fairy tales, and excerpts from historical novels, have started to be included.

Historical novels, as literary products, should be used in history lessons. They should be structured in a way that helps describe the everyday life elements of historical periods and narrates the heroic figures who have become role models for our society, thus contributing to the development of national values among young people. These novels should be included alongside textbooks in a well-structured and effective manner, serving as a valuable tool in education.

The purpose of historical novels is not to simply inform about a particular historical period or to present it artistically. Rather, their goal is to convey messages by establishing cause-and-effect



relationships related to historical events. Therefore, the lifestyle, customs, traditions, and the perspectives of the people in the nation concerned with history, as well as their ideals and the conditions of the time in which the events took place, should not be ignored. The primary goal should be the transmission of national values to future generations. Authors who embrace national values, as well as the national culture, will be the ones who can fulfill this mission. For this reason, authors should possess such a vision, and it is essential for them to have internalized this sense of national consciousness. In short, historical novels that draw their essence from our national culture undertake the important societal task of realizing national awareness and legitimizing our nation-state.

Using historical novels in history education, considering the relevant topics and the students' learning levels, can significantly enhance the effectiveness of the lesson. In this context, the impact of history education supported by historical novels can be scientifically examined through experimental research with larger sample groups. Teachers can use various teaching materials, including historical novels, to ensure lasting behavioral changes in students, eliminate the monotony of lessons, and encourage active student participation. However, before implementing this approach, it would be beneficial to prepare and present a selection of historical novels that are suitable for the students' interests, needs, cognitive levels, and abilities, while also considering the goals and learning outcomes of the lesson.

### Research and Publication

**Ethics** In this study, all rules specified in the "Directive on Scientific Research and Publication Ethics of Higher Education Institutions" were followed. None of the actions specified under the second section of the Directive, "Actions Contrary to Scientific Research and Publication Ethics", have been carried out.

### Disclosure Statements

1. Contribution rate statement of researchers: Author 100%.
2. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Lütfi BUDAK: Writing – review & editing, data collection, data analysis, methodology, conceptualization

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