

Original Research Paper

Mogul Mowgli: The Story of a Transnational Diaspora as Public Pedagogy

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Received: January 30, 2026

Revised: May 5, 2026

Accepted: July 14, 2026

DOI:<https://doi.org/10.66460/puj.v4i1.12>

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Abstract: South Asian diaspora is often represented through films by the transnational media. Since movies have always been considered an important mode of social communication, the social message and lessons learnt from them can never be denied. They work as public pedagogy as a mode to teach common people lessons of life. *Mogul Mowgli* is the representation of a diasporic persona who struggles between his identities and nature. My attempt in this study is to show how South Asian diasporic cinema constructs cultural knowledge and analyzes the dynamics of superdiversity, transnationalism and diaspora. The movie shows that identity, in this dynamic era is no longer static. The movie works pedagogically through its portrayal of intergenerational conflict, social distance and inner struggle to convey social messages to the public.

Keywords: Film, South Asia, Superdiversity, Transnationalism, Diaspora, Public pedagogy

Introduction

In the 21st century, Transnational media has presented and expanded the South Asian Diaspora. With the South Asian Diaspora, also came the global flows of labor, capital, and cultural and new structures of digital consumption. Hence the role of film - be it independent or commercial, within the scope of culture is of utmost importance for the diasporic representation of identities. Scholars of Cultural studies have defined the phenomenon as "Public Pedagogy" - where they consider media, in all its forms, popular and mainstream, as a form of teaching that takes place outside the walls of the classroom (Giroux, 2004).

Diasporic South Asian cinema serves the pedagogical purpose of shaping public perceptions of migration, racialization, and hybridity and their correlations within minority populations of North America and the UK, and beyond. These films go beyond representing life in a diaspora. They also train audiences on the particular ways of appreciating difference, envisioning community, and selecting moral questions regarding inclusion. These pedagogical functions are dialectical in nature, at once liberatory, commodifying, and always political.

My attempt in this study is to show how South Asian diasporic cinema constructs cultural knowledge and analyzes these dynamics. It presents the framework of public pedagogy, evaluates *Mogul Mowgli* as a cinematic portrayal of transnational identities, and reaches the conclusion that diasporic films are also educational texts that shape the ideas of the audience on the accepted views of race, citizenship, gender, and multiculturalism.



Public Pedagogy and Film

Public pedagogy consists of the educational influences and forces outside conventional schools, including media, popular culture, public engagement, and everyday activities (Giroux, 2004; Sandlin et al., 2011). Films, because of their ability to impact across borders and create unified cultural representations, represent public pedagogy very well. Giroux (2004) suggests that cinema teaches its viewers how to comprehend power, citizenship, and social identity by constructing and largely shaping the contour of the 'cultural imaginary'. Also, Hooks (1996) states that in cinema and other media, representation is where racialized actors, especially to be seen and learnt in the public sphere, emerge. Naficy (2001) discusses how films for the diasporic communities become cultural memory, belonging and displacement simultaneously. Through the representation of South Asian diasporas, films educate the audience in the following manners:

1. Through public narratives, the histories of migrants are documented and easily accessible.
2. Hybrid identities are made normal and new means of cultural negotiation are provided.
3. Race, gender and national belongingness are articulated.
4. The diasporic struggle is empathized, and emotion is mobilized through representation.
5. The imagination is transnationalized that is, identity is constructed through several nations.

This speculative framing provides the basis for analyzing how South Asian diasporic films teach their audiences to interpret South Asian identity, both within diaspora communities and globally.

The Structural Narrative of Migration

In films, "travelling" motif -physical, emotional, and cultural is employed to construct diasporic characteristics (Clifford, 1994). Works such as Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (both a novel and a film) use this migration journey as a metaphor for the quest for belonging. Who represents the diaspora and how remains the central question here. Bollywood frequently constructs an idealized national identity, and Western media exoticizes South Asians. Movie creators, being diaspora themselves, question and challenge those narratives with the experiences of their own lives (Hall 1990). This tension mediates the production as well as reception of cultural texts. Diasporic works tend to reach out audiences across borders. However, authors and filmmakers are forced to negotiate authenticity, market needs, and cultural adaptation. It produces a multilayered discourse influenced by the transnational circulation of culture (Appadurai, 1996).

For ages the depiction of South Asian communities in Western cinema alternated between exoticism and invisibility. Early portrayals in British and American films often reproduced colonial motifs or caricatured stereotypes (Shohat & Stam, 1994). South Asian diaspora centered cinema in the late 20th century represents a significant change. Filmmakers like Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, and Deepa Mehta began to build diasporic narratives, challenging the Orientalist frame, as well as engaging global audiences. Naficy's (2001) notion of "accented cinema" is enlightening at this stage. Accented cinema encompasses films from exilic, diasporic, or postcolonial subjects which express displacement through their themes and styles. Many South Asian diasporic films, in particular, manifest such "accents" in relation to cultural tension, displacement, generational conflict, and identity hybridity in their themes. This type of film grew in popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s because of transnational production networks (e.g., UK-India collaborations), multicultural policy discourses in the UK and North America and above all, the rise of diasporic consumption markets. This cultural backdrop then formed the pedagogical landscape of diasporic cinema that made film a public classroom for the instruction of new identity in the age of globalization. Netflix, Amazon Prime, and other platforms have expanded the international distribution of South Asian diasporic films. Streaming has facilitated transnational circulation, enabling films to reach the diaspora and home-country audiences at the same time. These platforms ensured new modes of audience engagement, including online discourse and community debate. Through shows like *Never Have I Ever* and *Patriot Act*, diasporic representation becomes a platform of pedagogical intervention in global conversations about race, caste, religion, and identity politics. Streaming platforms amplify the pedagogical role of diasporic cinema by breaking down geographical barriers and fostering global imaginaries of the South Asian diaspora.

A Hybrid and Cultural Third Space

Hybrid identity formation is commonly the subject of South Asian diasporic literature and films. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) describes the conflicting cultural expectations of second-generation immigrants. Gogol Ganguli represents a form of a transnational identity which reflects Bhabha's (1994) hybrid subjectivity with Bengali familial traditions and American social norms. Similarly, Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) has presented a British

Asian protagonist adjusting to the racial and cultural complexities of London in the 1970s. Karim's performative identity echoes the fluidity of the transnational self within a multicultural society. Diasporic writing tends to address nostalgia and memory as defining notions of self. Rushdie (1991) famously theorizes that migrants recast "imaginary homelands" made from fragments of memory. This is expressed in Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* (1989), in which the protagonist's sense of home changes according to each stage of migration, as well as in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), which examines how Bangladeshi immigrants living in London forge emotional and symbolic bonds with their homeland. The diasporic movie that I wish to talk about today is *Mogul Mowgli*. I happened to come across the movie while spending an afternoon on a movie date with my daughter. I will try to explain the movie through the theoretical lenses of Cultural Studies.

Mogul Mowgli

According to academic film theories, *Mogul Mowgli* is contemporary, and there is little written about it. The references in this case are more on the theories of migration and Cultural Studies. *Mogul Mowgli* seems to fit the theories of Superdiversity, Transnationalism, and Diaspora. Bassam Tariq and Riz Ahmed's *Mogul Mogul* (2020) is the best example in the case of studies focusing on contemporary expressions of British minority identities.

The Story and the Title

The story of *Mogul Mowgli* is of Zed or Zaheer, a British Pakistani rapper. His musical practice is as much influenced by the African American hip-hop tradition as by Islamic Qawwalis. He is a young singer about to emerge on the world stage. After two years abroad, he is about to start a potentially career-defining world tour and goes back to visit his family. He returns home and falls victim to an acute, autoimmune illness. This disease causes a barrier to his freedom of movement and his musical profession. This eventually has a deep impact on his soul. This illness can be defined as something not only physical but something beyond. This symbolizes the crisis of diaspora, memory, and inheritance. As Zed goes on being treated, the film makes the distinctions between reality and hallucination disappear. He meets spectral figures that resemble survivors of the partition between India and Pakistan, Sufi saints, and folkloric presences. These people contain the historical and intergenerational traumas of displacement in South Asian history. His uneasy relationship with his father, Bashir, formed by migration histories, unvoiced grief, and thwarted aspirations, situates generational conflicts within diasporic worlds. Bashir's memories of the partition of India and Pakistan and eventual migration to the UK resonate with what Hirsch (2012) calls "post memory", that is, the passing of traumatic events on to subsequent generations who inherit them intensely. Through flashbacks and symbolic visions (e.g. the apparition of Toba Tek Singh) we see how the trauma of Bashir's first displacement continues to haunt the next generation. Zed's sense of belonging is fragmented as a Muslim, as a British-born rapper, as someone negotiating Pakistani heritage and as a diasporic subject. The film shows him using a more "British/Western" name "Zed" for his musical career, distancing himself from "Zaheer," the name given by his family. The act reflects assimilation pressure and identity negotiation. Zed's cultural and artistic identities are at odds in the film. His identity as an international figure in hip-hop struggles against the South Asian cultural history around him. His rap lyrics, often infused with political critique, mirror the tensions of diasporic masculinity, authenticity, and cultural belonging.

The title, *Mogul Mowgli*, does important cultural work. Phonetically, the word "Mogul" is linked to "Mughal", invoking the grandeur of the South Asian empire while simultaneously referencing the modern notion of a successful, powerful figure, that is, a "mogul". "Mowgli", on the other hand, is derived from Kipling's colonial literature *Jungle Book*, evokes a "jungle boy", a figure historically embedded within imperial ideologies of savagery and civilization. The combination of these two contrasts generates a hybrid identity, a type that encapsulates Zed and his dilemma that he is both heir of imperial histories and a subject for racially oriented gazes today. Through the amalgamation of these terms, the film calls on the observer to rethink the core of diasporic identity. What does it mean to be both an imperial subject and a global cultural actor? What does it mean to inherit a colonial ancestry yet also present oneself in a globalized artistic ground? "The third space" as Bhabha (1994) terms it, is this metaphorical zone which helps bring out new cultural meanings through processes of negotiation and ambivalence. The hybridity in the title demonstrates a multilingualism and social fluidity that Bhabha (1994) identifies as one of the critical dimensions of diasporic identity. For the audience, the title functions pedagogically. It instructs us to notice the history contained in everyday language, the contradictions of diasporic subjectivity, and the need for critical understanding with cultural signifiers.

Superdiversity in *Mogul Mowgli*

The film is presented in a fragmented structure. We find the combination of a rap performance, a surreal interlude, and a simple domestic setting. Through all these we find the building of a layered and contradictory identity of our contemporary, globalized world. The film *Mogul Mowgli* responds to the complex migrations and intra-community differences. To illustrate this point, Vertovec (2007) uses the term superdiversity to explain the unprecedented “diversification of diversity” in a particular context. In this case, context refers to contemporary global migration. For Vertovec, contemporary migration is characterized by the absence of an ethno-national or ethno-centric identity. He contends that modern migration has led to levels of diversity on the part of those who migrate and those who belong to minority groups which are beyond the limit of ethnicity, and that it can include things like class, legal status, religion, language use, and transnational connectivity. We see this multidimensional layering in the complexities of social spaces when we no longer view identity as something that belongs to simply one segment. Instead, people are living between overlapping, at times contradictory, identities that define their everyday lives. *Mogul Mowgli* epitomizes that condition in its main character Zed, whose personal and art-making selves in every area have overlaid on the many axes of belonging. Zed’s cultural experience cannot be reduced to an unthinking diasporic story of origin and destination but speaks instead of the fragmented social realities Vertovec articulates. His art is influenced by global hip-hop culture, his family customs are influenced by South Asian Muslim traditions, and his social life is defined by current British racial politics. The film alternates between languages, memories, musical forms, and transnational histories in its narrative, illustrating how super-diversity operates not just on the demographic level but also in lived subjectivity. In addition, the disputes between Zed and his father foreground the internal differentiation within diasporic communities: an important part of Vertovec’s model. The generations and ideological differences between them are telling these are what appears to be the ‘Pakistani community’ from the outside; in fact, they reflect internally divergent identities, products of different migratory histories, aspirations, cultural orientations and so on. Thus, *Mogul Mowgli* highlights that diasporic identity in a super-diverse society is fragmented, plural, and dynamic, emphasizing Vertovec’s proposition that modern diversity should be considered as a dynamic interplay of diverse social variables rather than a standardized cultural signifier.

The Diasporic Representation of *Mogul Mowgli*

The film’s core tension comes from Zed’s struggle to unify his artist ambitions with his family and cultural legacy. This tension represents what Stuart Hall (1990) describes as the “production of identity” through continuous positioning rather than fixed essence (p. 225). Zed personifies this fluidity. He presents himself as an artist with boundaries on the stage, but when he comes back home, he is bombarded with reminders of a heritage he has tried to separate himself from. At the beginning of the movie, when he argues with his parents about how to navigate the trajectory of his music, Zed says to them, “I’m trying to build something new” to a response that his father gives, “You can’t build anything if you forget where you come from.” This moment crystallizes the dilemma of the diasporic, negotiating cultural roots with personal self-fashioning. The film likewise positions diaspora in the physical. Zed’s illness serves as a metaphor for the “embodied memory” that creates the structure of the diasporic situation (Brah, 1996, p. 193). As his body begins to rot, memories of his parents’ migration and the violence of Partition emerge with increasingly vivid hallucinations. In these sequences, Tariq, the director, offers what Gilroy (1993) calls the “haunting traces” of historical dislocation (p. 111). An ever-present apparition of a figure wearing a floral shalwar kameez, a form of ghostly ancestor, whispers to Zed, “Your body remembers what you choose to ignore.” Through such interludes, the film dramatizes that the migrant past is inscribed on the present, defining Zed’s identity and a place in it. Music is also another important pedagogical site for diaspora in the film. As a rapper, Zed presents hybrid narratives that combine South Asian rhythms and British hip-hop, epitomizing what Naficy (2001) terms the “accented style” of diasporic filmmakers and performers (p. 23). And his lyrics, “I was made from scattered pieces / borders burnt into my skin”, point back to the affective division that is part of a diasporic experience. These performances foreground the diaspora not only as a condition of displacement with its attendant alienation but also as a site for creativity and re-assembly and politics.

Zed’s autoimmune disease marks his body as the shrine of his conflicting inheritances. This is allegorical in its action and reflects Gilroy’s (2004) argument for the “convivial” but conflictual spaces of multicultural Britain. The disease is the clash of heritage, modernity, masculinity and artistic aspiration. The body, then, becomes an actual place of collision of superdiverse histories. As Zed’s ailment worsens, the insinuation becomes stronger that his own body, a symbol of his power and artistic freedom, is breaking down to its very limits. His journey becomes a meeting point of his own self, his ancestral values and culture, his disease, global systems and those of the contemporary diasporic world he lives in. Apart from Zed, other characters who represent young fans and other artists, also show yet another diasporic trait in their

portrayal of dealing with the street culture of London. The film's essential tension stems from Zed's attempt to reconcile his ambitions as an artist and his family and cultural legacy while struggling to produce his "identity". Zed embodies this fluidity: he emerges as an artist with boundaries on stage, but when he returns home, he's bombarded with images of a heritage he has sought to distance himself from. This forms the diasporic conundrum, as they negotiate cultural heritage with personal self-production.

The Transnational Identity in *Mogul Mowgli*

Mogul Mowgli illustrates the British Pakistani identity by rejecting any stereotypical portrayal of "British Pakistani" or "British Muslim" identity. Zed's world is built on a number of overlapping differences, second-generation artists negotiating urban cultural scenes in London, first-generation parents still informed and formed by memories of partition and traditional devotional practices and diasporic musicians and fans who meld global hip-hop with local South Asian and British influences. Alexander (2000) pointed to the internal diversity of South Asian communities in Britain and the movie corporealizes this academic nuance using its cross-cutting cultural registers.

As a collection of British, American, and Pakistani creative networks with the international talent of Riz Ahmed, the film represents what Higbee and Lim (2010) describe as "a cinema that crosses national boundaries in its production, circulation, and reception" (p.10). It is in these narrative, thematic concerns and formal strategies that there is a clear connection among the complex interweaving of identity, migration, and cultural hybridity that characterize transnational cinema. Zed, the British Pakistani rapper navigates the challenges of artistic ambition, diaspora heritage, and physical vulnerability. His experiences exemplify what Appadurai (1996) has termed the "conditions of deterritorialization," where people live at the intersection of various cultural and political spheres (p. 49). Zed's life is simultaneously shaped by the hip-hop world of London, the memory-worlds of his parents' immigration from Pakistan, and the global circuits of music production. This exchange embodies the transnational condition. Subjectivity is produced at the intersection of both local and global histories. Emphasis on migration histories grounds the film in the discourse of transnational memory. Zed's hallucinations, particularly those that include a spectral form modeled after characters in Partition literature, give the continued signal of displacement. Hall (1990) posits that postcolonial identities are constituted by "ruptures and discontinuities" that are transferred across generations (p. 226). These ruptures appear in *Mogul Mowgli* in the form of intrusive memories that disrupt Zed's sense of self, illustrating how transnational subjects typically dwell within "the in-between spaces of culture" (p. 227). What emerges from such sequences is that Tariq's film emphasizes that transnational identity itself is not only a matter of spatial mobility; it concerns the transfer of historical trauma that spans borders. This movie features characteristics of transnational cinema in an aesthetic manner. Its use of the combination of languages like English, Urdu, and Punjabi enacts the linguistic hybridity common to diasporic communities as well as global culture. Moreover, Tariq's combination of documentary-style camerawork with dreamlike montage recalls what Naficy (2001) denotes as the "accented style" of exilic and diasporic filmmakers, whose styles are characterized by fragmentation, reflexivity, and an obsession with displacement (p. 23). Blurring that line between reality and hallucination visually registers this instability of transnational identity.

The transnational aspect of *Mogul Mowgli* is also evident in the film's industrial setting. The film is produced with the help of Pulse Films, a London company that operates internationally, with the BBC backing it, and has been distributed across the world via American collaborators. This production path epitomizes Shain's (2005) argument that transnational films are produced through "interdependent production networks shaped by global flows of capital and talent" (p. 12). Riz Ahmed himself is a prime example of this dynamic: as a British Pakistani rapper and actor with global exposure, his star persona structures the way the film circulates internationally and locates it in broader debates about race, migration, and cultural belonging. Thematically, the film asks a global question of representation. Zed's career is reliant on a mediation of the ways in which South Asian, Muslim and diasporic identities are consumed in global music markets. He occasionally says, "They want my story, but only the version they can sell." This criticism underscores the commodification of cultural difference within transnational industries and parallels. Higbee and Lim (2010) insist that films made at the transnational level do not simply mirror global connectedness but also contest unequal power relations within it (p.12). In the end, *Mogul Mowgli* reads as a transnational film not only for its cross-border and multilingual production but for how it exposes the lived experience of cultural hybridity and global mobility. By dramatizing the ways that identities have been constructed through cycles of memory, music and migration, the film exemplifies the current state of being "at once rooted and routed," according to Gilroy's (1993) explanation. This process ultimately provides a nuanced contribution to the field of transnational cinema.

Global Hip-Hop as a Mode of Resistance

Mitchell's (2001) work on hip-hop beyond the United States provides a good perspective understanding Zed's relationship to rap. Hip-hop is becoming a language of articulation of diasporic stories that is serving as a weapon in resistance. This is his mode of identity making and global solidarity. The music that Zed has created is not derivative but transformative, fusing South Asian rhythms, Urdu poetry and political critique into something that is a unique British diasporic form. Appadurai's (1996) notion of "mediascapes" and "ethnoscapes" throughout the world provides a possible account for the way the film represents Zed's artistic world. A world of perpetual movement, cultural translation and digital connection. His music videos, worldwide audience and social media footprint illustrate the de-territorialized nature of contemporary culture. Decolonial aesthetics are woven through the film, too. Zed's confrontation with colonial narratives, especially those contained in Kipling's legacy, represents a dynamic reclamation of cultural agency. As Ganguly (2016) suggests, global cultural productions today act as forms of world-making; *Mogul Mowgli* is one contributing to this process by telling a diasporic story that counters colonial tropes and claims a new identity.

Mogul Mowgli as Public Pedagogy

Public pedagogy, according to Giroux (2004) is "the educational force of culture and public life" (p. 497). In its aesthetic tactics, political values, and intergenerational dialogue, *Mogul Mowgli* does not only represent diasporic identity, but it also actively teaches its audience about the complexities of racialized belonging, migration histories, and the psychological toll of cultural displacement. The film's focus, Zed or Zaheer's (Riz Ahmed) meteoric rise to prominence is shattered after being diagnosed with a degenerative autoimmune disease. His decline, as physical deterioration, serves as a site in which wider histories of violence i.e. colonial, familial and cultural history become visible. This public pedagogy happens here through the embodied representation of Zed's illness, a condition that expresses the 'slow trauma' of diaspora as a metaphor for what Ahmed (2015) calls "the accumulation of affective injuries across generations" (p. 82). In one, Zed's visions incorporate a masked ancestral figure, Toba Tek Singh, who says, "You cannot outrun the blood that shaped you." This cinematic technique serves as a pedagogical tool; asking audiences to investigate the ways individual suffering intercuts with communal memory. And *Mogul Mowgli* also foregrounds the pedagogical function of popular music as an apparatus through which to represent and articulate subaltern histories. Riz Ahmed's lyrics also serve as counter-narratives that subvert dominant British cultural scripts. Zed raps early on that "I'm the child of a thousand exiles, sewn together by borders I never crossed." Such lines exemplify Dimitriadis' (2001) claims of performative pedagogy; whereby cultural production generates alternative sites for producing knowledge (p. 47). Its mixture of rap wars and musical interludes, then, educates us to consider the political significance of artistic expressions within diasporic worlds.

The film also works pedagogically through its portrayal of intergenerational conflict. Zed's problematic relationship with his father, Bashir, creates a space to learn about the conflict between cultural preservation and assimilation. Bashir's stories of Partition, told in disjunct monologues, counter Zed's aspiration toward Western success. In one instance, Bashir declares, "What you call survival, I call forgetting." This conversation invites viewers to consider how migrant families negotiate "competing pedagogical imperatives", the imperative to remember and to move on (Nayak, 2019, p. 211). The fact that the film doesn't ultimately settle these tensions just goes to show that identity is not yet something to be settled for diasporic households. *Mogul Mowgli* lastly presents a model of public pedagogy in its critique of the politics of representation. Through the protagonist's British Pakistani identity, not constrained by the archetypal narratives of terror or conservative religion, the film destabilizes dominant forms of Muslim representation. As Malik (2020) contends, films that depict multifaceted Muslim human beings serve to "reshape the public imagination by unsettling the reductive frames of national discourse" (p. 63). Tariq (2020) and Ahmed (2015) consciously place the narrative in a culturally specific multilingual framework, making non-South Asian viewers sit with unfamiliarity rather than demand translation. This pedagogical strategy rejects the commodification of minority experiences and promotes cultural humility amongst the audience. Overall, *Mogul Mowgli* is also public pedagogy by turning cinema into a site of cultural learning. Through embodied metaphors, performative musical interventions, intergenerational dialogue, and representational critique, the film shows how viewers can engage with the complexities of diasporic identity and how historical trauma can continue to haunt us. That way, it shows us that contemporary film can function, not just as entertainment, but as a compelling mode of social education.

Conclusion

Mogul Moggli isn't just a story about a rapper who is in crisis. It is about being part of an age of superdiversity, in which identities are internally fractured; transnationalism, when cultural forms, people and histories move across borders; diaspora, in which belonging is always provisional and haunted by the past. Mixing realist drama with surreal imagery and musical performance, the film itself is thus a hybrid aesthetic object, a mirror and reflection of the hybrid identities it represents. In this sense, *Mogul Moggli* shows that, in the age of identity now, such a definition can neither be singular nor static, but rather is a dynamic interplay of inherited trauma, global cultural flows, and the personal quest for meaning.

Acknowledgement

I acknowledge the contribution of my Gen Z daughter who introduced me to the movie while I was going through my Cultural Studies course. A quick spark of understanding while watching the movie gave me the Aha... moment and encouraged me to do this qualitative study.

Funding Information

No funding was required to do the research.

Author's Contributions

This is the work of a single author and all the parts of it, starting from idea generation to consulting secondary sources and analysis, was done solely by the author based on existing literature.

Ethics

The movie is available in public domain and while writing the paper no human or animals or living beings were unethically treated and mentioned.

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