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## “Once Upon A Time”: The Efficiency of Storytelling in Shaping Drama Series, A Case Study on Bab El Hara

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### ABSTRACT

We all know the enigma that compels us to dive into the excitement and vivacity of a certain story we are reading or a series we are watching. The characters become a part of us and the streets, café shops, etc., design our thoughts and dreams as they display the ‘vitrines’ of our reality. All is triggered by a simple word “once upon a time.” In this article, we go in-depth by analyzing storytelling and by exploring the significant role of the character as positioned in a text. However, our main concern is the possibility of being able to decipher values transmitted by a text, where the character plays a major role in terms of reflecting empathy/sympathy towards audiences’ perceptions. We, therefore, came with the idea of designing an innovative value analysis framework – based on Pierre Glaudes’s and Yves Reuter’s grid analysis pattern for value depiction – where two studies that analyze the famous series Bab El Hara, are cross referenced. Then, in order to test the validity of the framework, an original qualitative analysis based on a focus group session is conducted on ten Lebanese respondents (aged between 35 and 45) who relate their personal opinions and beliefs in terms of what they perceive in Bab El Hara, giving, therefore, indication to what values they identify with the most. Effectively, the values which respondents did identify with seemed to correspond perfectly with the value analysis framework which has shown to be a suitable base for value depiction.

**Keywords:** Characters, drama series, qualitative analysis, storytelling, values.

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*“Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them!”*

*(Oscar Wilde, The Picture of Dorian Gray)*

### 1.0 Introduction

This article begins by analyzing the intriguing nature of storytelling which has been present ever since humanity was able to express itself. Storytelling is far more complex than just being a narrative text, and, although the triggering component is “once upon a time,” still, there is much more deepness than just

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the articulation of a story. Stories and tales are like dreams that dig deeply within our inner selves and within our subconscious in order to give flavor to our lives. They may transform us to live at other dimensions (von Franz, 1978). But the principal component in a story is, of course, the character (Yorke, 2014: (Sepulchre, 2011); (Fink, 2014); Wikham, 2007: 91). Basically, it is the character that portrays every possible human attitude and sensation which brings about an act of mirroring on behalf of the audience (Yorke, 2014: 3, 6, 9). Nonetheless, the creator that molds the subsistence of the character is no other than the writer himself/herself for it is through his/her mood and personality that the character takes form (Sepulchre, 2011, 114, 115). As readers of texts (be it a literary text, or drama series, etc.), the character touches our senses by reaching out to our profound and inhibited core values so as to reveal, through us, feelings of empathy or sympathy (Yorke, 2014: 6,9; Fink, 2014: 60). Such feelings towards the character and towards the narrative are only felt and understood when there is a clear design of value interpretation where both the writer and the reader fall under the same schema where the writer displays his/her own social context that corresponds to the ideologies of the reader whose aim is to understand and assimilate these values (as transmitted by the writer) (Sepulchre, 2011: 112-114). The extraction of values from within a text, however, is not an easy task, that is why, and in order to be more accurate, we adopted the grid analysis pattern designed Pierre Glaudes and Yves Reuter, that includes four criteria, which may be used as a blueprint for deciphering values. These four criteria are organized as such: clarity of the narrative; conformity with the doxa; the presence of a unifying thesis; and the facility of expression (Sepulchre, 2011: 111,112). Then, in order display tangible material in terms of value extraction, we constructed a value analysis framework based on Pierre Glaudes's and Yves Reuter's four criteria, where two studies, which have analyzed the famous Syrian drama series *Bab El Hara – Al-Ghazzi's* article (2013) titled: *Nation as neighborhood: how Bab al-Hara dramatized Syrian identity*; and Chamieh's article (2016) titled: *Arab Drama Series Content Analysis from a Transnational Arab Identity Perspective –* are incorporated within the framework for cross-referencing. Moreover, in order to test the validity of the value analysis framework, a focus group session of 10 Lebanese respondents (aged between 35 and 45) is conducted and analyzed in this article. As an outcome, the values that the respondents did identify with – *colonialism; men/women/children relation through paternalism; lineage; emotional/sentimental feelings; traditions; sympathy; honor; dignity and Ibadah* – seemed to match fully with the values displayed in the value analysis framework, making it, therefore, an effective base for value depiction.

## 2.0 What is storytelling?

“Once upon a time...,” a sentence that rings in the ears of every eager listener around the world. An archetype that has long hypnotized many civilizations, and until this moment, most stories begin, or at least have the same sense as, “Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened (Yorke, 2014: 3).” But in truth, why does storytelling play such an intriguing role in our lives. According to F. Saint René Taillandier (from the book of Marie -Louise Von Franz 1978), tales and stories are like dreams, they invite us to enter an adventure and find another dimension to our life, they even warn us that we may be at risk and might be devoured by the dragon of our unconsciousness (Von Franz, 1978: 23). Stories are told so that we may find traces of our being that are able to link us to characters and heroes who give us answers to what we are in search of within ourselves. That is the role of the protagonists who invite us to identify with them the experience of the story which we live through them, so: “when they're in jeopardy, [we]'re in jeopardy; when they're ecstatic, [we] are too (Yorke, 2014: 3).” In a narrative, the character appears as a complex formation that is both conscious in one part and unconscious in another, as he/she is issued from the imagination and fantasy of the writer. According to Freud, this fantasy that is engendered by the writer is not inscribed in one character only but in all characters represented in his/her narrative (Sepulchre, 2011: 114,115). Freud's theory is specifically exemplified by Hergé, the creator of 'Tintin,' who recounts to Bernard Pivot – presenter of the program *Apostrophe* – during an interview on 5 January 1979 that to him all characters in his comic strip book series, *Tintin*, are based on parts of his personality, for example, he tells Pivot that Tintin characterizes the part of him that likes being a hero as well as a reporter, that Capitain Haddock represents his moments of anger and that Dupont and Dupond, represent his times of folly (Hergé et les 50 ans de Tintin – Bernard Pivot “Apostrophe,” Archive video INA 5 January 1979).

### 3.0 Drama series: The personification of the character as part of storytelling

In this article, the pertinence in employing the notion of storytelling is to be able to introduce the origin of drama series which are an expansion of storytelling and which are constructed on the basis of a narrative where various characters personify the major purpose of the story. But why must a character be present in a narrative and why is he/she given much credit? According to Sepulchre (2011), all theorists who analyze ‘the character’ feel the need to justify his/her presence and utility. As addressed by Pierre Glaude and Yves Reuter in their answer to the question “why the character?” their response is that it is the character that permits the articulation of multiple dimensions found in a text, be it textual, cognitive, affective etc. (Sepulchre, 2011: 107). More accurately, the term ‘character’ is translated from the Greek word *ethos*, meaning: argument; ego; ethics; intentions; and manners (Fink, 2014: 44).

Character is the presentation of people by actors. It is “who the play is about.” The characters inhabit the conflicts that drive the dramatic plot. Character is often analyzed in terms of protagonist (a.k.a., heroes good guys,...), antagonists (a.k.a., villains, bad guys,...), other principals who have major roles in the main plot (“A” story), supporting characters who have essential but lesser roles (a.k.a., those in “B” stories or subplots), and functionaries (e.g., mentors, foils, messengers, confidants, *raisonneurs*, sidekicks, others who serve a function to move the story forward). Character is crucial in holding viewer interest. Our sympathies, or empathies, lie with the protagonist as he or she fights an antagonist (Fink, 2014: 44).

Therefore, it the character who holds the full dynamics of the text, be it a literary text or a drama series text. “The point of connection between ourselves and the text is, after all, primarily about people on the screen. We want to be like them, or we desire them or are amused or frightened by them; It is frequently [the] character that dictates the drama... (Wickham, 2007: 91).” Consequently, the character can have great effect on our actions and perceptions especially when there is empathy formed towards this certain character. “If empathy is about entering the mind of a fictional character, then it helps if that mind contains feelings similar to our own. When we watch Sarah Lund rejecting her bosses, we think, ‘I wish I could do that’... There is something immensely attractive in living through a character who does obtain, revenge, who is proved to have value or... is finally proved right (Yorke, 2014: 6). Other than empathy there should be desire and motivation, a character must have a purpose that should be actively pursued or then he/she would be simply dead and our quest for imitation would have no significance (Yorke, 2014:9). Nonetheless, a character must promote values that are similar to our own (as viewers) so that we may feel empathy towards him/her and be motivated and desirous of his/her achievements. Therefore, “Our favorite characters are the ones who, at some silent level, embody what we all want for ourselves: the good, the bad, the ugly too (Yorke, 2014: 6).” All depending on what we value most. For viewers to be attracted to a certain character, a hero for example, they must be able to identify with him/her, if not through empathy, they can identify with him/her through sympathy that is, if the hero has some sort of attraction and is able to hold the viewers’ interest. “The writer creates sympathy and empathy by unmasking *ethos* and *pathos* in the characters. **Ethos**, the word that Aristotle uses for “character” and the word from which “ethical” comes, refers to the moral standards of a character, and more broadly to his or her attitudes and habits (Fink, 2014: 60).” As for the word “**Pathos**, from which the word “pathetic” comes, refers to that quality in the protagonist that makes him or her worthy of the audience’s pity (Fink, 2014: 60).” However, for viewers to be able to recognize and absorb the personality and actions of their hero, and for them to feel either empathy or sympathy towards him/her so as to identify with his/her character there must be a table of reference that encompasses all basic human traits. These traits, which may be considered as universal themes of plot patterns, are represented in terms of the Seven Deadly Cardinal Sins versus the Seven Heavenly Cardinal Virtues (Fink, 2014: 76,77):

- Seven Deadly Sins: envy; gluttony; greed; lust; pride; sloth; wrath (Fink, 2014: 77).
- Seven Cardinal Virtues: faith, hope; love; courage; justice; prudence; temperance (Fink, 2014: 77).

Accordingly, the above typology of themes may serve as a basis for viewers to identify with the character(s)’ representation of the dramatic themes which they find closer to their values. However, it is important to note that values among societies differ, that is, what one viewer may consider as lust

another may consider as love (i.e. In western societies, premarital sex may be considered as an act of love while in Arab and Muslim societies, premarital sex is considered as an act of lust that is strictly forbidden and people may pay their lives for it), and what one may consider as pride another may consider as courage, etc. More specifically, as John Fiske says: “We are all different, and bring our own experiences and personalities to everything we see thus creating our own meanings (Wickham, 2007:59).” Also, it is important to note that our experiences and personalities that create our differences are mostly based on our inner chart of measurement that is constructed upon how we design and evaluate the measurement of our values.

#### 4.0 Value analysis framework as theorized by Pierre Glaudes’s and Yves Reuter’s pattern for value depiction

After having briefly presented the essence of storytelling and the role of the character, especially in drama series, we will now try to test the possibility of understanding societies by extracting values emitted through drama series. First of all, drama series are considered as TV fiction since TV texts are divided into two sections: TV fact, such as talk shows, reality TV, news, etc. and TV fiction, such as, sitcoms, soap operas, drama series, single dramas etc. (Wickham, 2007: 87-163). Nonetheless, according to Wickham (2007), “The series is perhaps the most purely televisual of all the forms, and traditionally one of the most successful in television history (Wickham, 2007: 108).” Moving to the aim of analyzing values transmitted through drama series, Pierre Glaudes and Yves Reuter consider the task quite complicated since ideologies are all scattered in texts and can hardly be specified in terms of their location so there must be a certain methodology that would structure the work. Consequently, they created a temporary pattern built upon a grid of analysis which encompasses four criteria listed as such: clarity of the narrative; conformity with the doxa; the presence of a unifying thesis; the facility of expression (Sepulchre, 2011: 111).

In order to grasp Pierre Glaudes’s and Yves Reuter’s pattern more distinctly, a value analysis framework has been constructed where the four criteria are used as a basic model for the apprehension of value extraction from within a narrative. Then, relevant information taken from two articles – Al-Ghazzi’s article (2013) titled: *Nation as neighborhood: how Bab al-Hara dramatized Syrian identity*; and Chamieh’s article (2016) titled: *Arab Drama Series Content Analysis from a Transnational Arab Identity Perspective* – that have explored the same narrative (*Bab El Hara* a popular Syrian drama series that counts eight seasons until now), have been carefully dissected and partitioned in parallel to the four criteria each exemplifying the criteria that is relevant to the proposed utility as shown in the value analysis framework here below.

Table 1: Value Analysis Framework

Pierre Glaudes’s and Yves Reuter’s four criteria for value analysis	Al-Ghazzi’s (2013) article representing <i>Bab El-Hara’s</i> analysis (where the underlined statements are used as an example for the interpretation of the four criteria developed by Pierre Glaudes and Yves Reuter).	Chamieh’s (2016) article representing <i>Bab El-Hara’s</i> content analysis (where the extracted values from the action model are used as an example for the interpretation of the four criteria developed by Pierre Glaudes and Yves Reuter).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Clarity of the narrative: We can speak of the clarity of the narrative when the actions are organized and hierarchal. When characters are clearly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “The script is full of popular idioms, exhortations, and situations that underscore traditional gender roles, in which male characters react with nobleness and chivalry, while women are portrayed as submissive and confined to the household. The suspense and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>“Men/women/children relation through paternalism.</b> ... Paternalism is an important value in Bab El Hara... as it defines the construction of the Arab society as represented in the Hara where husbands, fathers, and brothers rule and where wives, daughters and sisters</li> </ul>

distinguished, hierarchized and opposed. When the reader has no difficulty in following the story. Patterns of values can, therefore, be deciphered depending on the characters, their numbers, the clarity of their objectives, their hierarchy, their distinction in regards to their qualification, and their distribution in opposing camps (Sepulchre, 2011: 112).

entertainment relies on evil characters who instigate conflicts with the male-male conflicts depicted as dagger fights, and the female-female conflicts as bickering struggles (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 587)."

- "Another historical fallacy in *Bab al-Hara* is the character of the 'Aqid, which means the leader of the hara. 'Aqid represents the bravest, wisest, and most masculine man in the hara (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 594)."
- "Television dramas of this kind celebrate the relation between the individual and the nation by presenting patriotic characters as heroes, while shunning characters who exhibit lowly acts of treason (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 599)."

succumb. Women are also given the role of paternalism and control on their daughters, daughters in law and sons (Chamieh, 2016: 31)."

- "**Honor.** ... the value honor plays an enormous role at all levels and in all circumstances. It is what defines the men of the Hara and how women can preserve their honor... A man's honor in Arab society is everything, it is defined by his position, his bravery, his importance within society (Chamieh, 2016: 32)."
- "**Lineage.** ... In Bab El Hara... the value appears, at a macro level, in terms of interrelatedness and solidarity among the inhabitants of the Hara: "I and my brothers against my cousins; I and my cousins against the stranger... (Ayish, 1998: 36)," but also at a micro level in terms close blood relations as the Arab proverb says: "blood is thicker than water (Ayish, 1998: 36) (Chamieh, 2016: 32)."
- "**Sympathy.** ... In Bab El Hara..., the value exemplifies inherent Arab considerations that are performed in terms interrelationships among family members, friendships, and in gender support (women sympathize with each other since they). It characterizes the expression of true Arab compassion in terms of revealing in-depth personalization of Arab temperament (Chamieh, 2016: 32)."
- "**Dignity.** This value is... depicted in the series of Bab El Hara..., where it is represented more by women who tend to react emotionally to prove their value and self-esteem among each other and in reaction to male authority that has full power to subdue them. The value in this series is well articulated as it defines the way in which Arab women think and how they act accordingly (Chamieh, 2016: 33)."
- "**Individualism.** ... In Bab El Hara, the value is rarely present since the narrative is mainly built on the



- Conformity with the doxa: Is the amount of discourse that fits within the ideological background of a certain society. This causes the facilitation of reading due to the amount of recognition with the text, such as common places, common clichés and stereotypes. Therefore, the more the texts, the situations and the characters are built in conformity with the opinions and beliefs of the society, the more the reading would be facilitated (Sepulchre, 2011: 112).
- “Set in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Syria was under the French mandate, the series has created a wave of commercial nostalgia with people imitating the speech styles, costumes, and body language of characters in *Bab al-Hara* (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 587).”
- “Taking *Bab al-Hara* as a case study, this article explores the popularity and the development of the Damascene milieu genre over the past two decades, and analysis it as an example of how popular culture contributes to the imagination of national identities (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 587).”
- “In Syria, I argue, the popularity of series such as *Bab al-Hara* is based on their powerful construction of an essential national identity based on nostalgic imagination of the past at the local level, which is the *hara* or the neighborhood (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 591).”
- “The most consistent and basic unit of the dramatization of the past in this genre is the series’ setting, which is the idea of the *hara*. The *hara* is depicted as the realm that defines the identity of the inhabitants. It is this rooted sense of identity – enacted in the series – that is a central object of nostalgia in Syria (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 591).”
- “In *Bab al-Hara*, the portrayal of sovereignty was achieved by introducing the concept of the *bab* or gate of the *hara* (Al-Ghazzi, 2013:593).”
- essence of Arab collectivism. However, the discourse and character which portrays individualism is given a sense of negativity which gives rise to the problematic of the narrative that is counter-fought by the discourse of major protagonists in the series (who indicate opposition to individualism) who act in defense to its detrimental and destructive influence on Arab existentialism (Chamieh, 2016: 33).”
- “Traditions. In Bab El Hara... traditions are well integrated in the is series as they take form in everything we see or hear: the clothes, the houses, the streets, the mosque, the Qur’anic verses, the stories, the way women call their husbands and the way sons and daughters call their parents, etc. As a whole this series is a piece of ancient Arab traditions (Chamieh, 2016: 32).”
- “Ibadah: in Bab El Hara the value is represented at an overall level by all the inhabitants of the Hara who abide in their moment by moment behavior to the rules of Islam (i.e. the way they eat, the way they fast, the way they talk, the way they pray, the way they wear their clothes, the way men treat their wives and the way wives treat their husbands, etc.). Although the value, ibadah, is present methodically at small dozes in all the actions of the series (Chamieh, 2016: 33)[.]”

- “They celebrate community and local traditions from costumes to songs to foods in the way they portray the daily lives of people at the time (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 599).”
- The presence of a unifying thesis: Readability is even more favorable if a unifying thesis proposes or even imposes a dominant interpretation in the sense of a narrated story. In certain genres like fables, such thesis is explicitly present (Sepulchre, 2011: 112).
  - “In this way, the ruling structure of the *hara* is presented as a vibrant public sphere that is compatible with authoritarian rule. In other words, the imagination of a deliberative public sphere in the context of a Syrian *hara* incorporates Habermasian notions of the public sphere as a realm of social life in which “critical public discussion of matters of general interest” takes place (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 594).”
  - “The genre of the Damascene milieu (Arabic: *Al-Bi’at al-Shamiyah*) refers to television series set in an imaginary or an existing neighborhood (Arabic: *hara*) in the old city of Damascus, typically at an unidentified point during the late 19th or early 20th centuries when Syria was either ruled by the Ottoman Empire or the French mandate authority; and, in fact, a constant feature of the genre is the struggle against foreign occupation (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 587).”
- The facility of expression: Finally, the above mentioned terms and conditions can only be functional if the text is taken seriously. This concerns the facility of expression. Certain procedures, such as irony or detachment, which may prevent identification can endanger the confidence in the literature. The tonality of the script is, therefore, essential in its capability of transmitting ideas (Sepulchre, 2011: 112).
  - “The *Bab al-Hara* television series, as the most popular of the Damascene milieu genre, has dramatized national identity through its portrayal of an amalgam of symbols of the past and present (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 598).”
  - “Within this framework, series such as *Bab al-Hara* have contributed to the construction of a national identity that promotes the unity of the different communities within the current form of the Syrian nation-state (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 596).”
- “**Colonialism.** [anti-colonialism]: In Bab El Hara, it is found in one essential action where it is considered as a main value representing bravery that is shown among the inhabitants of the Hara who act against French colonialism and western supremacy, thus, strengthening the representation of Arabism (Chamieh, 2016: 31).”
- “**Western political and cultural supremacy.** [anti-western political and cultural supremacy]: In Bab El Hara..., it conveys the role of anti-colonialism and the resentment of the west that was represented as an instigator to corruption during the period of colonialism (Chamieh, 2016: 31).”
- “**Emotional sentimental feelings:** In Bab El Hara..., the value is well accentuated as it appears in all the actions of the series and is performed at a deep level by displaying, naturally, how the narrative is operating through the instigation of strong emotions. Moreover, all the characters in the narrative act in terms of their emotiveness, be it for cause of honor, dignity, traditions, colonialism, paternalism, etc. Arabs are usually driven by their emotions and this value is characterized as the main value for the comportment of the personalities in the series (Chamieh, 2016: 32).”

As seen in the above framework, both articles which have analyzed the drama series *Bab El Hara*, have served as a tangible description of what is proposed by Pierre Glaudes and Yves Reuter as material for their value analysis pattern. Moreover, it is important to mention that these two articles convey similar values found in the series and they both appear to be in conformity in terms of value extraction, where *Al-Ghazzi's (2013)* article interprets the values in a general manner at a macro level, whilst *Chamieh's (2016)* article goes more in-depth in depicting, more tangibly, the values transmitted by the series. Consequently, a qualitative analysis will be conducted, further on, through of a focus group session in order to test the validity of the framework in terms of the values deciphered by both articles. But first, it is imperative to identify the task of readers of the texts before progressing into analyzing how the audiences, through the focus group session, perceive the text of *Bab El Hara*.

### 5.0 Drama texts as identified by readers

What the analysts discover, whilst deciphering a text, cannot have any meaning without it being linked with the values present in a society. To have it as such, the values must correspond to the social group to which the writer belongs in addition to having the ideologies transmitted by the group to which the reader belongs so as to give significance to the text. Accordingly, textual analysts seem interested in both moments of construction that are invested in both the author and the reader of the text (*Sepulchre, 2011: 112*). So, when analyzing a text, it is imperative to establish certain links while exploring the types of characters, comparing narrative structures to those of the society, and relating fiction with social discourse that binds the characters of the narrative with the society through the discourse. One must also take into consideration the role of the reader in terms of how he/she apprehends the role of the character. Another important point is that the writer must classify the heroes of his/her text in accordance with values relevant to the society (*Sepulchre, 2011: 113-114*).

While taking into consideration the effect of texts on their readers, Sigmund Freud analyses the situation in terms of psychological effect. So, according to Freud, reading a text places the reader in a narcissistic position where all depends on his/her interest and enjoyment of the text. At that moment, the characters and the fictive situations enter in correspondence with the sensibility of the reader. Reading, therefore, incites effects of identification, idealization and projection (*Sepulchre, 2011:115*). Consequently, all three characteristics (identification, idealization and projection) that may be obtained by readers of texts can help in proving, somehow, that TV texts such as drama series can have an effect on their readers in terms of the assimilation of transmitted values.

As a final step, therefore, a focus group session is conducted, hereafter, in order to test the validity of the value analysis framework so as to identify if the readers of the text (*Bab al-Hara* drama series), are affected by the text and if they are in consistency with the values portrayed by both studies in the framework.

### 6.0 Introducing *Bab El Hara*

*Bab El Hara* (The Neighborhood Gate) is a Syrian drama series that is written by Marwan Qarouk, directed by Bassam El Mulla and produced by MBC group (a transnational Arab TV station based in UAE). As referenced by *Wikipedia*: “Bab el Hara is one of the most popular Arab TV drama series watched by tens and millions of people in the Arab world”, “the appeal is cross-generational, and viewership consists of all social demographics from Arab countries.” *Bab El Hara* had its début in Ramadan 2006. The series counts 8 seasons (around 31-32 episodes each) until now (the eight's season was transmitted in June 2016 during Ramadan), all of which were broadcasted during Ramadan seasons.

The series – which is a historical drama series – narrates the daily life of Syrian families in a Damascus neighborhood during the French colonialism (in the early 1940's). The values transmitted through *Bab El Hara* are traditional Arab values encompassing paternalism, religion (Islam), anti-colonialism, etc. that formulate the Arab identity as *Al-Ghazzi (2103)* explains:



The script is full of popular idioms, exhortations, and situations that underscore traditional gender roles, in which male characters react with nobleness and chivalry, while women are portrayed as submissive and confined to the household. The suspense and entertainment relies on evil characters who instigate conflicts with the male-male conflicts depicted as dagger fights, and the female-female conflicts as bickering struggles (Al-Ghazzi, 2013: 587).

Moreover, *Bab El Hara* was able to reach massive amounts of Arab audiences due to the high exposure and the strong liking of Syrian drama series in the Arab world. Although, long before, it was the Egyptian series that dominated the Arab world with their captivating themes (love, poverty, etc.) which enthralled huge masses of Arab audiences. However, in the beginnings of the 1990's, when Arab satellite TV stations expanded in the Arab world, there came a rush of drama series (*al-Fawra al-dramiyya*) where Syrian series took the lead (Dick, 2005: 178-179). "Syrian actors (and those acting in Syria) suddenly, became known around the Arab world, providing least anecdotal evidence of the *fawra* (Dick, 2005: 179)." Also, Syrian drama series presented a certain authenticity to the Arab public by displaying Arab traditional ways of living in addition to historic sceneries such as the old city of Damascus. This has made Arab people feel closer to Syrian series which gave them a purely Arab flavor that is not found in Egyptian series. Not to mention, also, that the Syrian dialect is the most well received and understood dialect among Arab people, especially the ones living in the gulf region (Dick, 2005: 179-180).

## 7.0 Methodology

In order to test the validity of the value analysis framework (which is based on Pierre Glaudes's and Yves Reuter's four criteria pattern and which includes two studies that have analyzed the series *Bab El Hara* in terms of value depiction) a focus group session is conducted – with the assistance of PARC (Pan Arab Research Center) – in Beirut on September 2, 2016, on ten Lebanese respondents, out of whom five are males and five are females. According to Doury (2011), it is always preferable that a focus group session does not to exceed the number of ten respondents so that the moderator does not find difficulty in keeping the respondents focused on the subject (Doury, 2011: 162,163).

Out of the ten respondents, four are Christian, three are Muslim Shiites and three are Muslim Sunnites. Their age bracket varies between 35 and 45. Two of the five males and three of the five females are married and with family. The respondents are from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds. During the focus group session, the respondents were asked questions (by the moderator) related to the drama series *Bab El Hara* in addition to their filling up to two forms (related to specific themes in the series) with close ended questions listed as such: absolutely suitable; somewhat suitable; somewhat unsuitable; totally unsuitable. According to Doury (2011), it is preferable that the procedure for the analysis of social issues through focus group sessions to take place face to face with the moderator at first and then through written answers as a second step. Moreover, the respondents must not be chosen hazardously, they must fulfill the required criteria in terms of their age, sex, socio-economic status and educational levels (Doury, 2011: 158, 159).

Although the respondents are familiar with *Bab El Hara* series, still, for better accuracy in the analysis of certain themes (represented in the close ended questions which respondents had to fill by hand) an episode of the series was distributed to them to be watched prior to the session.

## 8.0 Results of the focus group session

### General Perception of *Bab El Hara*

- *Bab El Hara* is classified by respondents as a new kind of TV series that reproduces a specific historical era in Syria. To them, the idea of *Bab El Hara* attracted a large base of viewership who were fascinated by the overall ambiance of this TV series.
- Some respondents believe that the first seasons of *Bab El Hara* (the first three or four seasons since *Bab El Hara* consists of eight seasons) are considered as the most enjoyable and delightful ones,

whereas, later on, in the following seasons, due to the repetition of scenes and due to the change of characters, respondents consider that it has led to the deterioration of the likeability of the series.

According to respondents' opinions, *Bab El Hara* focuses on the following main values:

- Decency and politeness of women which is presented in the restrictions imposed on females and the necessity of the veil in front of any outsider.
- Manhood and magnanimity that are based on courage and bravery for the defense of the country and to support others.
- Tight family bonding that is largely highlighted in their amiability and their continuous family gathering.

*"Bab El Hara gives an idea about how Arabs powerfully fight the West, they are conservative, they are very strict with women, they love their children and their family a lot ... the son should highly respect his father, the neighbor is important and should be helped, and when a problem occurs in the Hara, the elite in the Hara should resolve the problem wisely"* (Male- 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Sunnite)

- Some respondents consider that *Bab El Hara* seems to be appropriate to Lebanese society in terms of chivalry and tight family bonding. However, it is not suitable in terms of the extreme submission of women.

*"You watch Bab El Hara you feel surprised... you cannot imagine that people live this way"* (Female- 45 years old – Married – West Beirut - Sunnite)

Positive and negative aspects of *Bab El Hara*

After having assessed the overall aspects of *Bab El Hara*, respondents displayed both the positive and the negative aspects presented here below:

Positive Aspects:

- Respondents usually enjoy watching the old neighborhoods in Syria, the spacious traditional familial houses, the simple life, the amiability among people, the eagerness to help and support others (lots of sympathy), etc. These authentic specifications seem to be missed in our modern era where life has become full of complications and stress.

Negative Aspects

- *Bab El Hara* does not reflect neither the current nor the old authentic life in Syria or in the Arab world.
- The overall story and sceneries of the series show some exaggeration in the way they reflect Arab values which are represented in a highly pretentious manner: i.e. decency, honor, chivalry, manhood and magnanimity.
- The real Syrian society has many imperfections that are not seen or may be concealed in *Bab El Hara*.
- The series is trying to show viewers that Syria is a very decent society where females are veiled as they abide fully to religious ethics. This shows severe restrictions towards women which does not exist in our current times.
- The series shows that Syrians are tightly attached to their country; they are brave heroes who used to fight against French colonialism. They are characterized by their chivalry and magnanimity. Some respondents do not find that Syrians have all these characteristics, they believe that the series exaggerates these skills.

*"They lock the doors on females which is not good"* (Female- 45 years old – Married – West Beirut - Sunnite)

*"They are trying to show people how the Syrians live in Syria but what they are presenting in Bab El Hara is not similar to the life of Syrians in Syria"* (Male- 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Sunnite)

Impact of *Bab El Hara* on Viewers

- In general, every season of *Bab El Hara* is broadcasted during the Ramadan period and viewers are committed to watching it.
- Respondents mention that they enjoy watching the series as they feel nostalgic towards old traditional values and customs but some of them do not feel personally influenced by its message. Some affirm that *Bab El Hara* does not have impact on their personal life or values.

## 9.0 Analysis of specific scenes from *Bab El Hara*

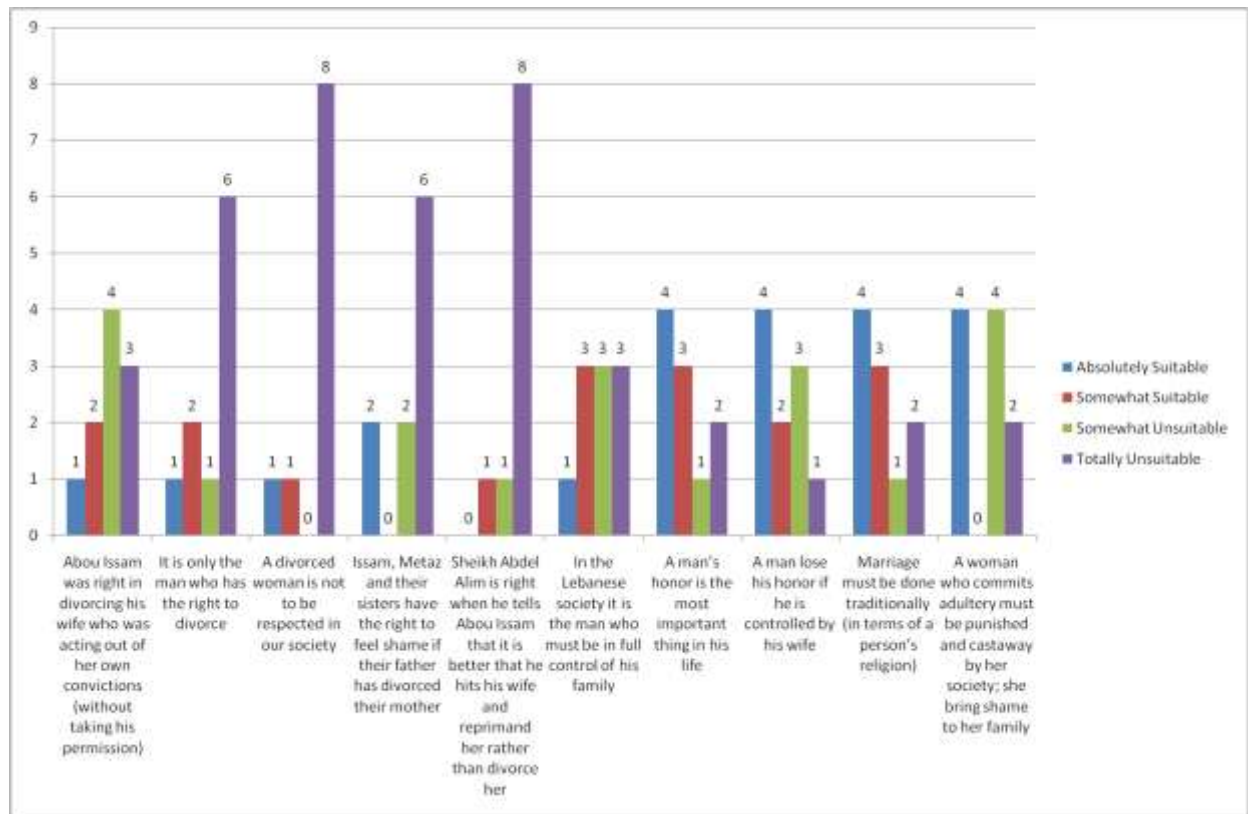


Chart n.1: Level of identification with the values conveyed in certain scenes in *Bab El Hara*

Analyzing the level of respondents' identification with the values promoted in certain scenes in *Bab El Hara* as shown in chart no.1

The most important values which respondents identify with are:

*Honor* in terms of the importance of a man's honor towards himself, society and his family. *Traditions and religious rituals (Ibadah)* in terms of abiding by religious marriages. *Men/women/children relation through paternalism* in terms of excessive strictness towards women committing adultery and in terms of the importance of a "man's" honor.

*Lineage and honor* in terms of how a woman who commits adultery brings shame to her family.

The values that are less accentuated by the respondents are:

*Dignity* in terms of the fate of a divorced woman in society; in addition to the feeling of shame felt by "Issam", "Metaz" and his sisters towards the divorce of their parents.

The values that show weak identification from respondents are:

*Religious authorities* in terms of what "Sheikh Abdel Alim" says about the divorce to "Abou Issam."

*Paternalism when taken at its extreme* in terms of a man's only right for divorce in addition to the example of "Abou Issam's" divorce; and in terms of the disrespect of a divorced woman in society.

- According to some respondents, the divorce scene between "Abou Issam" and his wife is not similar to the way the divorce happens in the Lebanese society where women have the right to ask for a divorce same as men.
- Some respondents agree that "Abou Issam's" wife was disrespectful with him by taking initiatives without consulting him. They also consider her to be wrong in shouting at him in front of her daughters and daughter in law by using inappropriate words. Yet, their opinions regarding the divorce due to these actions diverge as follows:

- Some believe that such conflict between husband and wife could not necessarily contribute to a divorce as “Abou Issam’s” wife was sorry to what she did or said and in such situations the problem could be resolved without a divorce.
- Others, and mainly few females and males from West Beirut, explain that “Abou Issam’s” wife was acting without her husband’s permission so she deserves to be divorced because she did not obey him, which is a mandatory religious matter. They explain that he has the right to divorce her and to marry another woman.
- Respondents consider that, in Lebanon, the respect of a divorced woman depends on her moral behavior, just like a non-divorced woman. Nonetheless, she is still perceived as ‘divorced’ with many question marks regarding the reasons of her divorce, but this does not necessarily contribute to her disrespect.

*“If a woman is respected before marriage, she will also be respected after her divorce but if she is disrespected in any case, whether married, not married or divorced, she will not be respected anyway” (Female - 35 years old – Single – West Beirut - Shiite).*

*“In my opinion, committing something wrong is more difficult for a married woman than a divorced one because the married woman will bring shame to her husband but the divorced woman will not” (Female - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut – Shiite).*

- Dignity and lineage in the divorce scene are not appropriate to the current Lebanese society. Respondents affirm that these values are tremendously accentuated in this TV series. They explain that in Lebanon, children do not feel shame, like “Issam,” “Metaz” and their sisters, if their parents were divorced, yet, they affirm that children would pass through certain psychological troubles and would not be amply relaxed as they will not be in a safe familial environment. In this context, respondents talk about children who ask their parents to get divorced instead of living in troubled relationships.

*“Any divorce has its impact on children but they will not live the same situation that Issam, Metaz and their sisters have lived” (Male - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Sunnite)*

- Concerning the advice of “Sheikh Abdel Alim” that a man should reprimand his wife and hit her rather than divorce her, respondents agree that this situation is absolutely inappropriate in the Lebanese society. However, their opinions came as follows:
  - Some respondents from West Beirut consider that the divorce is *Halal* (religiously accepted) but beating is *Haram* (religiously non-accepted) so it is better to divorce the wife rather than beat her.

*“God will not judge my husband if he divorced me but he will judge him if he beat me” (Female - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Shiite)*

- Other respondents, also from West Beirut, believe that the “Qur’an” allows the man to beat his wife on specific parts of her body, but not severely, in the aim of teaching her. This could be less critical than the divorce.
- As for the respondents from East Beirut, they do not agree with the concept of beating a woman, however, few of them consider that such a scenario may take place if a person is stressed or out of control.

#### The suitability of the values *paternalism, honor, tradition, and Ibadah.*

- According to some respondents, the man is the main pillar of the household, he has a certain position and status at home; he is the main decision maker.
- Respondents affirm that a man’s honor is one of the most important values in Lebanese society; the man should maintain his honor and he may lose it if he is controlled by his wife.

*“A woman does not like a man with a weak personality” (Female - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Shiite)*

- Few employed women from East and West Beirut and men from East Beirut disagree, to a certain extent, with the fact that a man may lose his honor if he is controlled by his wife.
- According to some respondents, marriage has to be performed traditionally, except for some males and females from East Beirut who consider that, in Lebanon, marriage could be done out of traditions.

“We have reached a time where a Muslim can get married in church and where a Christian can get married in the presence of a Sheikh, this is not a problem as long as traditions are still present.. so the importance is to have a religious marriage. But to go and have a civil marriage for the sake of women’s rights? No. There is no religion that accepts civil marriage. Marriage must take place either with a sheikh or in church” (Male - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Sunnite)

- The act of adultery committed by women is not accepted by all respondents. However, according to some, this does not mean that a woman who commits adultery is to be punished and castaway by her society. She is to be penalized by her father, her husband or her brother who have authority over her but people in her society do not interfere in this matter.

“A woman who commits adultery brings shame to her family” (Female - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Shiite)

### 10.0 Conformity with the values in Bab El Hara

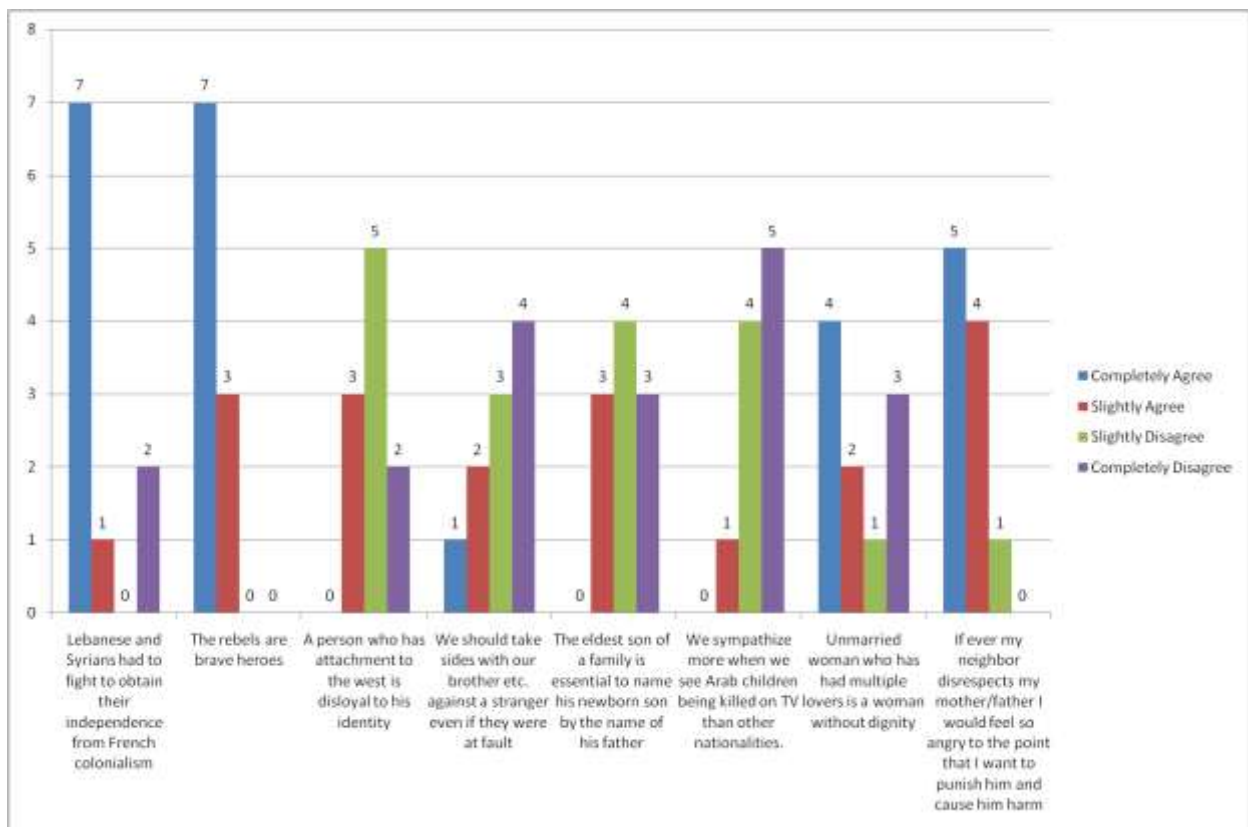


Chart n.2: Level of agreement with values conveyed by Bab El Hara

An analysis on the level of respondents’ agreement with respect to the values promoted by Bab El Hara as shown in Chart no.2:

- A large level of agreement and identification is noted among respondents in terms of the values:
  - Colonialism (meaning anti-colonialism): in terms fighting against French occupation and in terms of identifying the rebels in Bab El Hara as brave heroes.
  - Emotional/sentimental feelings and Lineage: expressed through a person’s anger towards someone who disrespects his/her parents.
  - Dignity: in terms of a woman who has multiple of lovers who is considered, by most respondents, as a woman without dignity .
- Less identification is given to the values:
  - Western political and cultural supremacy (meaning anti-Western political and cultural supremacy): an attachment to the Western does not show disloyalty to one’s (Arab) identity.



- *Extreme paternalism*: in terms of naming the newborn child by the name of his grandfather.
- Respondents from different social backgrounds praise their nation and believe that citizens should fight to gain their independence and freedom from any colonial rule. They sympathize with the rebels in the series and consider them as brave heroes.
- According to all respondents, parents are highly valued in the Lebanese society and must be highly respected. Many respondents consent that they feel angry to the point that they would punish or cause harm to the person who disrespects their parents.
- Concerning the dignity of a woman who has multiple lovers, the opinions of respondents diverge in this concern:
  - A considerable number of respondents agree that a woman with multiple lovers is of no dignity, however, to them, a man with multiple lovers represents masculinity. According to these respondents, a woman having multiple lovers has no possibility in finding a serious partner for marriage.

*“She is a dirty girl, this is obvious...” (Female - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Shiite)*

*“I can have 100 lovers ... I’m a man... think a little bit... why God created the hymen?...!” (Male - 35 years old – Single – West Beirut - Sunnite)*

- According to other respondents (who are mostly females and males specifically from East Beirut) they do not judge the dignity of woman having multiple lovers when she is not committed to a man. They consider that dignity is not assessed by the number of love relationships. Having multiple lovers is related to the personal freedom and the conviction of woman.

*“A man wants to have 1000 lovers and at the end he wants a girl who has never talked to anyone” (Male - 35 years old – Single – East Beirut - Christian)*

*“She is free to do what she wants if she is not in a relationship with a man” (Female - 45 years old – Married – West Beirut - Sunnite)*

- Few males from East Beirut consider that having multiple lovers is not healthy for both genders; they explain that this cannot be socially accepted since after having multiple lovers, an individual, whether it’s a male or female, may find it difficult in finding a convenient partner.
- With regards to people who have an attachment to the West, some respondents do not find them disloyal at all since they consider that, although they themselves are loyal to their identity, they have an attachment to the West as well. They explain that human beings are highly valued and respected there. Some even wish to live in Western societies.
- Concerning lineage, some respondents do not agree in supporting their relatives against a stranger when they are at fault. They mention that they take sides with the person who is right regardless of him/her being a family member or not. However, few female respondents claim that they support their close family members such as father, mother, brother and sister if they were wrong but this does not apply to all relatives.

*“If my cousin is wrong I do not take side with him” (Female - 35 years old – Married – East Beirut - Christian)*

*“If my cousin is wrong I do not take side with him but when it comes to my brother I have to support him.*

*This is my brother... this is my blood...” (Female - 42 years old – Married – West Beirut - Shiite)*

- Although some respondents have no trouble in naming their first newborn son in the name of his paternal grand-father (which is an old tradition), yet they do not consider it obligatory nowadays. While other respondents consider it a banality as it is unfair to name a newborn by an old-fashioned name.
- Respondents refuse the fact of having sympathy only towards Arab children killed on TV, they confirm that they sympathize with all children regardless of their identity.

*“The person who feels sympathy only towards Arab children is a criminal or inhuman” (Male - 35 years old – Single – East Beirut – Christian)*

On what basis do respondents find themselves in assimilation with the series in *Bab El Hara*

- It encompasses their social values.
- It delivers fruitful messages.
- It has good impact on them as viewers.
- It is close to the Arab identity and the Arab values

Concerning the actors that respondents identify with, the following names are mentioned:

- “Abou Issam” and “Meataz” for having strong personalities
- “Abou Issam’s” wife as she is powerful
- “Sheikh Abdel Alim” for having important status in the neighborhood, an attractive performance and wise thoughts.
- “Abou Issam’s” second daughter for being very calm and peaceful

## 11.0 Conclusion

In this article we shed the light on the power and efficiency of storytelling in drama series through their transmitting mode of social values by inferring the game of empathy and sympathy via the characters. Through the value analysis framework built upon Pierre Glaudes’s and Yves Reuter’s theoretical pattern, we were able to decipher the embedded social values of the famous Syrian drama series *Bab El Hara* by cross-referencing this framework with the analysis performed by Al-Ghazzi (2013) and Chamieh (2016) in their articles. The result of this operation proved fruitful as the analysis, in both articles, presented a similar set of conveyed values by *Bab El Hara*, allowing us to have a good level of confidence in the depicted values and to consider this theoretical analysis a good candidate to be validated with an experimental process based on the usage of a qualitative analysis through a focus group session. Effectively, our performed focus group methodology gave indication to the dynamics of the empathy/sympathy process with the characters along with a strong level of adherence by the focus group members with the transmitted values: *colonialism; men/women/children relation through paternalism; lineage; emotional/sentimental feelings; traditions; sympathy; honor; dignity and Ibadah*, whereas much less identification was shown towards *Western political and cultural supremacy and extreme paternalism*. It is important to mention, also, that although some values (*dignity and lineage*) did represent high identification in some situations, we did sense them to be less accentuated in other situations.

Through this experimental operation, we were able to measure the efficiency of storytelling in *Bab El Hara* by clearly observing the identification process of the focus group respondents towards the characters and by measuring their strong adherence to a certain set of values transmitted by the series. Moreover, by measuring a lower level of adherence to another set of values, we were able to validate that the absorption of values by storytelling is also dependent on the social and personal background of the viewers (Lebanese society is in measurable disagreement with certain values of the depicted Syrian society of the 1940’s such as total rejection of *Western political and cultural supremacy and extreme paternalism*).

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