

THE PRETEXT OF SUPERIORITY AND AFRICANS AS 'OTHERS': AN ORIENTALIST STUDY OF ABDULRAZAK GURNAH'S AFTERLIVES

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ABSTRACT

Current research study focuses on the interpretation of Afterlives as a narrative displaying colonial discourse of Germany against native/indigenous Africans. The novel is a postcolonial narrative which embodies colonial atrocities based on colonial discourse and decolonization of Tanzania, East Africa. It displays the themes of genocide, oppression, barbarism and war by colonial masters like British Empire and more primarily German Empire. However, researchers in this study have analyzed the novel from the perspective of colonial discourse considering native Africans as 'others' by German masters. It addresses a research question how German colonial masters developed the pretext of superiority over native Africans in Afterlives. For reaching comprehensive conclusions of research study, researchers have utilized theory of Orientalism by Edward W. Said. From the theory, the component of 'other' is more focused as a theoretical framework. Researchers have used Textual Analysis Method of research as a data analysis method. Data are textual generated from the selected novel with thematic and theoretical criteria. Analysis reveals that Afterlives is a narration considering natives as barbaric, brutal, strange, inferior and uncivilized as critiqued by Said. This colonial discourse justifies invasion of Germany as they fantasized themselves superior to native Africans in political and social spheres of life.

Keywords: *Afterlives, Africa, colonial discourse, Germany, orientalism, other.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Everyone holds a narrative in this subtly composed, yet grand, sweep through German-run colonial times, Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) is a postcolonial narrative which embodies colonial atrocities based on colonial discourse and decolonization of Tanzania, Africa. It emerges its storyline from colonial migration to postcolonial migration. Gurnah (2020) has evaluated genocide, oppression, barbarism and war by colonial masters like the British Empire and more primarily the German Empire. This subject of German colonialism in African literature is a less manifested literary discourse. Moreover, during the nineteenth-century German colonial power invaded

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present-day Tanzania, Namibia in East Africa, Africa. Colonial rule as per colonial regime remained brutal and caused a lot of genocide of African people (Gerst, 2016). Similarly, Gurnah's novel unfolds itself in the backdrop of colonial atrocities and violence caused by German rule. It is a unique literary narrative which falls into postcolonial narrative exploring German colonialism in Africa (Mengiste, 2020).

In this regard, this research study takes place against the backdrop of existing body of literature on Gurnah's *Afterlives*. It aims at exploring colonial discourse of German rulers to rule Africa in the context of politics, war, culture, language and social life. Researchers have utilized the concept of 'other' proposed by W. Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) as a theoretical framework to reach a comprehensive conclusion and answer research questions. It explores how colonial discourse justifies violence, atrocities, genocide and oppression caused by German masters in colonized Africa. It explores colonial discourse highlighted in the novel. It uncovers how colonial discourse as an orientalist fantasy works for German masters to rule Africa. Moreover, this study retains significance in terms of its postcolonial domain. It critically explores untouched historical subject of German imperialism/colonialism in Tanzania, Africa. The study is important to understand colonial discourse analyzed by W. Said (1978) not only in relation to the British Empire, but also the German Empire. Researchers have utilized the same concept to understand colonial discourse of the German Empire. Also, the study is purposeful to understand Gurnah's *Afterlives* as a narrative presenting German colonial discourse against Africa.

1.2 Significance of study

The study retains significance in terms of its postcolonial domain. It explores untouched historical subject of German imperialism/colonialism in Tanzania, Africa. The study is important to understand colonial discourse analyzed by W. Said (1978) in relation British Empire. Here, researcher have utilized the same concept to understand the German Empire. Also, the study is purposeful to understand Gurnah's *Afterlives* as a narrative presenting German colonial discourse against Africa from the orientalist perspective.

1.3 Research Question

The paper answers the following research question.

- How does Gurnah represent Germans as superiors and Africans as 'others' in the selected novel?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section consists of a related literature review of previous research conducted on the novel, reviews of the novel, and the theoretical application of orientalism in other related research studies.

2.1 Understanding Afterlives

Mengiste's (2020) review presents the novel as a postcolonial narrative dealing with the themes of violence, war, trauma, colonial brutalities, refugees and overall colonial discourse-based story. The reviewer in the Guardian international Review has put forth the context of novel like previous research conducted on the novel, reflecting the same issues in the realm of colonialism. To put it in a simple way, it retains postcolonial significance of dealing with colonial experience of Germany in East Africa. Moreover, *Afterlives* is a story about main characters revolving inside the land of East Africa colonized by German people. It tells the story of a forgotten land where people have psychological and social space generated by Empire. It narrates psychological effects on native people. The story is soothing; it informs audience about colonial German war with natives, and how they suffered from it psychologically. It evaluates colonial themes (Pilling, 2020). The reviews are not a complete analysis of the novel but only declarative comments on the storyline.

Moreover, Saxena (2021) has studied the novel from the perspective of colonialism and its atrocities in Africa. It deals with colonial power of Germany in present-day Tanzania. She discusses that *Afterlives* has dealt with the subject of derogatory colonial experience of war and psychological trauma. It evaluates the experience of migration, genocide, rebellion and colonial effect on the common masses of native Africa. Her findings have explored German colonial rule in East Africa during the early 20th century. The rule was brutal, based on genocide and colonial atrocities in the novel. The characters suffer from the power of colonialism concerning economy, social life, and political affairs regarding migration and its effects. It deals with the subject of war which German Nazis initiated as world war. Native Africans were utilized as soldiers to fight on behalf of German army which caused death, psychological trauma, migration, and displacement. The colonial power disturbed their lives in all spheres. Even after colonial power or decolonization of Africa, it placed displacement on natives. The son of Hamza becomes such diaspora who goes to Germany for academic purposes. Her study sheds light only on colonial atrocities, yet it gives a way to explore the novel with different perceptive.

Relatively, Branach-Kallas (2021) has studied the novel from a different perspective of military, colonial encounters and postcolonial commemoration

highlighted by Gurnah in his novel. Researcher has argued that war and colonialism are generally intersectional factors displayed in *Afterlives*. This research study analyzes it in the backdrop of a previous study as it is a commemoration of postcolonial war. Researcher argues that there is a motivation behind the soldiers who fight in war. Askari has an optional choice before, during and after the colonial rule and decolonization of Africa. There are two factors through two characters, Ilyas and Hamza. Hamza displays discontinuity of connection between colonizer and the colonized ones, whereas Hamza represents the factor of emotional stability between natives and colonial power. Further, the study also explores the trauma of war, the contested nature of postcolonial war commemoration and the complex ethics between both forces, the oppressor and the oppressed. However, this research also primarily deals with the similar subject of war, trauma, colonialism and postcolonial context, yet it deals with the subject differently, concerning theoretical understanding as it complies with war atrocities and postcolonial war commemoration, Askari and the connection between colonial hegemony and colonized innocence.

2.2 Orientalism in Literature

The concept of orientalism in existing body of literature has been utilized by a good number of researchers to analyze, understand and interpret literary texts in postcolonial domain. Therefore, the researchers here bring some related research concerning orientalism in literary sphere to provide validity to framework for analyzing the selected novel.

Chandio et al. (2021) have used the concept of orientalism in their research study to interpret and analyze Ayisha Malik's novel from the perspective of women as 'other' creatures of the world. They have evaluated the novel with textual analysis method of research concerning the theme of Muslim women as 'others' in western context. The research provides a narrative about the experiences of Sofia – a Muslim girl residing in Landon. Their study exposes the ways Sofia responds back to stereotype of being 'other' by western people against Muslim women in Landon. Women in western fantasy are deemed as meek and docile, which researchers break with theoretical assistance of orientalism. Their comprehensive conclusion results that Sofia in the novel deplores the western fantasy by staying positive, assertive, with a full confidence level, and independent authoritative woman in western society of Landon.

Additionally, colonial powers have always generated their discourses to justify and legitimize their expansion with some stereotypes and beliefs about colonized people. Literature has produced such sorts of discourses and

anti-discourses. Similarly, Forster's *A Passage to India* is a postcolonial novel which elaborates Indian culture, language, people, geography and politics from the orientalist perspective. The novel deals with discourses of colonialism where India and Indian people are deemed inferior to British people. The starting chapter of the novel presents India as 'other'. The Indian setting of Chandigarh is seen as inferior and backward. The representation of caves in the novel symbolically displays Indian culture as a cave age cultural structure. Also, the manifestation of the Ganga River in the novel shows an Indian image as mythical and inferior to west. This orientalist perspective of colonial people and discourse is deeply criticized by W. Said in *Orientalism*. This study of *A Passage to India* from the perspective of orient as others develops a broader understanding of the novel in postcolonial context. The application of orientalism as 'other' is a renowned framework in postcolonial domain of research (Jajja, 2013).

Importantly, Baker's (2006) research study examines difficult interaction amid the colonialists and the colonized in a colonial setting, as shown in E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*. Also this exposes the prejudices that are used to portray Asian people, as well as ongoing practice of 'configuring' or indoctrination that visitors are exposed to in attempt to produce colonial power that are all the very same. Furthermore, it addresses the idea of the country as unfriendly to colonization, battling them and exacerbating their emotions of isolation and isolation. The article focuses on Albert Memmi's beliefs in his book *The Colonizer and The Colonized*, as well as the ideas of other historical thinkers.

Saleem's (2017) paper examines workings of lowered, result demonstrates, and slanted portrayal in literary stories of Uzma Aslam Khan *Trespassing* and *Typhoon* by Qaisera Shahraz, trying to attract on Graham Huggans' *The Postcolonial Exotic* and Lisa Lau's *Re-Orientalism: The Perpetration and Development of Orientalism by Oriental*. Huggans and Lau both have spoken out against the overzealous advertising of several Asian authors by Western market analysts. Both of them believe that pieces which obtain global legitimacy stand as a good chance of garnering worldwide praise and they are generally those that quench Western desire for enigmatic and alluring Orient. Such literary writings are frequently divided into two halves. They not only show visuals that support the Western perception of the East as inexplicable. However, they effectively paired these with other, more vilifying cliches of East as inherently backward, rooted in poverty, corruption, and rigidity, a natural opposite of emancipated West. These are some of the static pictures that appear consistently from across borders. Pakistani English literature authors are similarly tasked with portraying a stereotyped and

homogenous image of the country. Using hermeneutic and exploratory research, researcher has tried to analyses functioning of such eroticizing tactics in the relevant literatures.

Relatively, many research studies have been carried out using this perspective point. In a critique of Said's *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981), Tehranian (1982) investigates how Europeans used "Orientalism" to identify themselves as civilized and higher nations, and hence "self" as distinct towards globe as a whole.. Eastern world is portrayed as exotic, ancient, misogynistic, and uncivilized, and hence as the "other." Said's theory broadened the phrase "Orientalism" in its correct sense. McCloud investigated the plight of Muslim women in 1995. Inside the USA, there is prejudice. She explains that they are dealing with an unusually veiled kind of exclusion. The Islamic habit of donning a scarf/veil affects Muslim women's life in one way or another other unacceptable. Because of the ethnocentric viewpoint that dominates in Western culture, Muslim women may struggle to adhere to traditional religious rituals in non-Muslim nations (McCloud, 1991).

However, in 2016, a contemporary and somewhat distinct research was done which totally undermines the mainstream paradigm. Piela (2016) investigates distinct populations' narratives on hijab in a research study of an account on photo-sharing platform. The investigation arose from the controversial rebuttals to the niqab (Hijab), which has been generally linked with unfavorable connections in European conventional media. She analyses some remarks on the images submitted by Leila (the fictitious title given by Piela) and sheds insight on considering a range of veils, as well as challenging the standards that are generally skeptical of hijab.

Lau and Mendes (2018) compare and contrast the reading of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, the book and the screenplay, examining how these works symbolize shifting Western popular attitudes of Pakistan and vice versa across the time axis 2001-2007-2012. Both literature and film are influenced by post-9/11 fear of the Muslim other. Mohsin Hamid's book was started before 9/11 and printed seven years later, in 2007. Mira Nair's film version was released in 2012, with premieres at the Venice Film Festival (as the opening film) and the Toronto Film Festival. Supposedly more sympathetic than Hamid's work, Nair's film adaption aims to create connections by emphasizing the misery of cultural skepticism and distrust that plagues Pakistan-US ties and attempting to open and enable communication. Notwithstanding using ambiguous areas to showcase the risks of black and white thinking, both novel and film inevitably illustrate that portrayals continue to be unable to flee the circuit of exoticism and re-orientalism, showcasing the suspense of how both

East and West remain restricted in this spherical method of interpersonal individuality.

Hence, related literature review manifests that a short number of researchers have studied the selected novel from the different perspectives of colonialism, trauma and postcolonial issues. Similarly, as a recent publication, it is less researched work in the field of literary research. Moreover, researchers have reviewed orientalism as a theoretical framework in postcolonial research domain. In the way, this review has assisted researchers to generate a research gap in studying the novel from orientalist perspective by proving theoretical justification. Therefore, researchers aim at analyzing the novel as a text of colonial discourse based on the pretext of superiority over Africans, to contribute in the mansion of research studies.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present study has performed a non-empirical textual analysis method of research and follows descriptive design. It is a design where analysis of the data is interpretive and descriptive. The analysis is descriptive in nature. It is explained and interpreted in details with reference to the proposed theoretical framework. Researchers have collected the selected thematic excerpts of text from Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) to analyze and answer the research question. The textual primary data has been collected from the novel *Afterlives* by Gurnah (2020). The researchers have collected the data with a close-reading technique. The researchers have read the novel, highlighted some relative and thematic lines of the novel which have been utilized as the data of analysis for reaching a comprehensive conclusion of the study. After collecting the data, the researchers have interpreted it according to the aimed themes with the help of textual analysis method of research. The text, as data, is interpreted in the light of theory. For conducting this literary textual analysis, the researchers have used orientalist perspective of 'other' proposed by W. Said (1978) as a theoretical framework in this study. The following section provides details about theoretical framework.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

3.1.2 Discourse of Orientalism as a Literary Approach

This study is carried out with the help of orientalism as a theoretical framework. The theory of Orientalism was proposed by Edward Said in his renowned book, *Orientalism* (1978). This theory in general discusses western fantasy, stereotypes, and legitimizing colonial discourses about eastern world (McLeod, 2000). The researchers have adopted the component of 'other' to analyze the selected text. Similarly, W. Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978)

argues that West has always seen eastern world as barbaric, timeless, strange, meek, manly man and inferior in totality. They have legitimized their discourses of expansion of eastern world. It is their fantasy and assumption to look at rest of the world as inferior. Through this assumption of inferiority as 'other' of eastern world, they have legitimized they are a superior, decent, peaceful, ethical and civilized nation, and this is their spiritual and biological responsibility to civilize rest of the world. This causes them to invade a world where uncivilized nations are waiting for them to teach. Additionally, W. Said (1978) justifies his argument from historical context that French and British Empire were based on this colonial discourse of 'other' where British Empire stepped into the land of India and Africa. They ruled half of the world based on this assumption. They were powerful and whatever discourse they produced became true knowledge. Similarly, he takes out this discourse from Rudyard Kipling's famous poem *The Ballad of East and West* in which the poet has shown attitude of western people presenting eastern world as barbaric and brutal (McLeod, 2000).

4. DISCUSSION

Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) is a literary manifestation of German colonial discourse against African people. German masters consider native Africans barbaric, brutal, violent and inferior always fighting back against their civilizing machine (German Empire). However, W. Said (1978) paid this argument of 'other' by British and French Empire, yet Gurnah's novel pays the same critique in its backdrop and in the context of German colonial Empire in Africa.

4.1 Orientalist Identities of Africans in *Afterlives*

A few novels are written from the perspective of German Colonialism. Gurnah's *Afterlives* (2020) is one of the true depictions of German Colonial discourses. It was Germans who exploited indigenous people of West Africa (Tanzania) not only through violence but hegemony, colonial narrative, colonial education and superiority complexion. Similarly, Said (1978) as a postcolonial literary critic retains a view that two parallels lay between East and West 'Orient' and 'Occident'. West like Germany is civilized and East like Africa are uncivilized nations. Similarly, Gurnah in his postcolonial narrative *Afterlives* (2020) presents "this is our Zivilisierungsmission," the officer said, and then gestured with his left arm towards the window at the boma outside, his lean creased in a sardonic smile. 'This is our cunning plot, which only a child could misunderstand. We have come here to civilize you.' (p.63). Occident has always pre-established assumptions about orients that they are uncivilized and

backwards. This displays how German masters, in the story, treat native Africans; they place them as others in their own land. The Natives do not receive that much deserved respect and importance. This is humiliation and provides a sense that they are uncivilized (inferior) people. That is how Germans (Occident/West) have assumptions regarding the People of Africa (Orients/East). This is how they ruled under the fake dogma of civilizing others; German masters attacked their education and culture as uncivilized ones pretending to civilize them. They came there and exploited them in the name of civilization (Wrigley, 2018).

However, German troops used violence on native villagers to follow their instructions without questioning anything. "When their unit joined a shauri mission for training, Hamza realized there was not much consultation involved. The manoeuvres were to discipline and terrify the stupid washenzi villagers and make them obey government instructions without questioning them." (Gurnah, 2020, p.61). This is the direct effect of Germans on villagers, their culture and the community's exploitation. To instruct is for masters while to obey is for slaves. In postcolonial interpretation of the novel, it pays the argument of slavery, inferiority and obliging the colonial masters. The novel represents natives as oriental others of Said (1978) as German masters retain superiority. They are bound to rule them by educating them. Their point of view and order are always at a higher position whereas natives are alive at the stake of opinion. In the fantasy of German masters, it is their duty to make natives be obliged to them for governing them. As Said (1978) argues that colonial masters have always hegemony over discourse, and their order, knowledge, and discourse are superior because of their power. As the notion of power by Foucault asserts (McHoul & Grace, 2015), their power also creates this knowledge of superiority. For this, natives own no significance in social and political spheres as Gurnah's (2020) novel depicts it. They are villagers and they have no knowledge of ethics, politics, society and administration; they are placed others as in the Pakistani context, the power of military and the rule considered native people as 'other' during the dictatorship era (Hussain & Ali, 2022). They are generally uncivilized and inferior to colonial German masters. They are placed as others (Said, 1978).

Furthermore, as characters are a vehicle for conveying and communicating the message of a writer, here Gurnah (2020) through the character of Hamza, has depicted the portrayal of German masters; their intention toward indigenous people of Tanzania, their discourse and the concept of Said's "Orientalism". "I have watched you from the beginning when they first brought you here. You were a dreamer." (Gurnah, 2010, p.82). One of the German officers passes comments on Hamza, when they hired him, he was

a dreamer, emotional and helpless. It was the Germans who gave a vision and educated him as a practical young man. This displays Said's (1978) concept of 'other' in the case of Hamza. The colonial masters unveil him as a dreamer which signifies his individuality as lazy, stagnant and undeveloped with respect to his job, career and military training. This reflects that colonial discourse of superiority is depicted in Gurnah's (2020) postcolonial discourse. He shades light on the atrocity of colonial discourse. It is a fake dogma to rule, to loot as the English did to India (Tharoor, 2016). This is to consider Hamza as 'other' that draws a binary relation between colonizers and colonized people. He, on emotional grounds, becomes 'other'. He is deemed inferior to German colonial masters ruling in Tanzania, East Africa.

Moreover, the Europeans almost captured many parts of Africa. They considered native people as "others". "That was how that part of the world was at the time. Every bit of it belonged to Europeans, at least on a map: British East Africa, Deutsch-Ostafrika, África Oriental Portuguesa, Congo Belge." (Gurnah, 2020, p.83). It is their agenda, as Gurnah depicts, to civilize East because they intend West to be civilized and East as uncivilized (Other) therefore it is their responsibility to utilize hegemony (justice, Ethics and Education) for colonizing East. The colonial powers, according to Gramsci, think of their language and education superior to those of the rest of the world (Bates, 1975 & Ives, 2004). However, their colonial discourse goes across world's geography. The expansion and invasion of colonial powers of the world once considered rest of the world inferior to them in all prime factors of life. They treated them as 'others' dominating themselves to legitimize the imperialist power and colonial expansion. Said (1978) argued that such colonial powers generally coined this fantasy of being superior to rest of the world and put themselves forward to expand their power to gain economic and political interests from colonized lands. To treat geographies as 'other' generally stood for them as a political tool to enhance their power, dominancy and rule over the world. (Gurnah, 2020) depicts them in a similar way and presents colonial powers as fantasy-based colonial discourse.

Additionally, the concept of 'other' by West is the construction as Said in *Orientalism* (1978) has defined in the sense that West created the notion of 'other' as a tool to colonize Africa. "The local Africans, who were neither citizens nor members of a nation nor enlightened." (Gurnah, 2020, p.100). Germans consider them as illiterate; they are unaware of society, even though they are not a nation. This is when their empire of superiority was created over Africa. Firstly, they thought of them as people of a darker continent, then they preached colonial education to think and realize them as Germans who wanted to make them. Similarly, Ilyas in the novel justifies colonial discourse about

Germans as superior to the natives and the British master "The Germans are gifted and clever people. They know how to organize.....they think of everything" (Gurnah, 2020, p.48). Gurnah (2020) represents this colonial parallel of British and German Empires. Ilyas highlights German as superior in administrative concern. He accepts their superiority and unconsciously considers his own native people and British inferior with respect to colonial policies and indigenous people. This appears as a colonial discourse of being natives as 'other' people and considering orientals superior to them. This presents them as others on the ground of politics and social life. The natives are not equal to the colonizers.

Furthermore, Gurnah (2020) displays the critique of colonial power and discourse as dealing with the exploitation of natives on the hands of colonial masters. Germans disvalue native Africans on the basis of being savage in their fantasy. The masters deemed the natives as uncivilized and barbaric, considering them as 'other' as argued by Said (1978) "This is the mzugu's camp. Everything is clean here. He does not want your shit inside his Boma. It is not allowed to follow your savage ways here" (Gurnah, 2020, p.92). Even their indigenous village is used against their own people by German masters. Here, it is a colonial attack on their way of living, their culture and livelihood in the village of Boma. Germans in their native land label them as others and uncivilized people that they do not let them allow to do their practices as per their customs and traditions. Natives have no right to conduct any code of their will when they are under the supervision of colonial masters. They become slaves on their hands and are considered savage. The colonized culture is thought to be inferior with respect to cultural argumentation about being so meek under colonial powers. This justifies colonialized culture and lifestyle as unclean. Their cleanliness is different from their masters. Gurnah (2020) portrays the frame of the colonial discourse of Germans against Africans. They are put forward as 'others' in every sphere of life. This regenerates how the colonized culture and lifestyle are under savagery even after the colonial rule. Germans colonized them based on being a superior force, and again re-colonized them on the same basis even under their own rule. They simply caught them as inferior and treated as 'other'.

5. CONCLUSION

This article discusses the concept of 'other' in the light of German discourse. It also highlighted the behaviors of Germans toward the native people of Colonized Tanzania. It is explored through the character of Hamza and the interaction of Masters. This research article has discussed the act of colonizing natives through violence and hegemony under the pretext of

superiority as well as 'other', the concept which was proposed Said (1978). As it was a textual analysis, the data became the written excerpts from the novel of Gurnah, *Afterlives* (2020). It has evaluated the lines with reference to the theoretical framework of Orientalism and its component of 'other'. The researchers have generated the gap to find the colonial discourse of superiority by considering the natives as 'others' as argued by W. Said (1978). The study has addressed how colonial discourse prevailed in the novel which justifies German's power, colonial rule, superiority, ethics and generally being a civilized creed. The researchers conclude the study by arguing that Gurnah's novel is a vivid manifestation of colonial hegemony, colonial discourse as their backbone, and the superiority of Germans over the nation. It manifests how Germans aimed at legitimizing their invasion of Africa. Moreover, researchers argue that *Afterlives* (2020) is a postcolonial narration displaying many postcolonial themes, but researchers only focused on colonial discourse against native Africans. For this, researchers justify *Afterlives* (2020) as a narration considering natives as barbaric, brutal, strange, inferior and uncivilized as argued by Said (1978). Furthermore, researchers welcome valid criticism and suggest that the other researchers can evaluate this subject more aptly.

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