

Marginalization of Lower-caste Christians in Mohammad Hanif's *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*

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ABSTRACT

Lower-caste Christians are mostly the converts from Dalits who converted to escape injustices based on caste (Banerjee, 2023). Although caste consciousness is not as noticeable in Pakistan as it prevails in India, Pakistani lower caste Christians still face discrimination because of their Dalit ancestry (Kamran, 2010). Also, being a religious minority and having Dalit ancestry exacerbates their marginalization and force them to live their lives as subalterns. This paper explores the manifestations of marginalization against lower caste Christians as subalterns in the text of Hanif's (2011) *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. The study uses Spivak's (1988) concept of subalternity and proposes that lower-caste Christians face marginalization not just for their religion but also for their Dalit ancestry in the text. It also establishes the notion that lower caste Christians are considered untouchables and impure because of their jobs as sweepers which makes them subalterns in the text. While analyzing the text, the study explores Spivak's (1988) concept of subalternity which she proposed in her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak (1988) declares that subalterns are the oppressed people who are living outside the periphery or cultural imperialism (Mostafae, 2016).

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature Pakistani Anglophone Literature (PAF). By studying the representation of lower-caste Christians as subalterns, it opens avenues for the on-going studies about Christians in PAF. In addition, it uses Spivak's (1988) to analyze the representation of lower caste Christians as subalterns, and explores that Christians face marginalization because of their religion, caste and degrading jobs in Pakistani society.

1. Introduction

Pakistan Anglophone Fiction has been praised for its variety of themes all over the world as it discusses themes such as extremism, identity crisis, women and minority rights which was noticed as a conspicuous shift from what had been discussed by the first generation of Pakistani Anglophone Fiction novelists (Kanwal & Aslam, 2019; Shamsie, 2011). Sidwa's (1982) *The Crow Eaters* is the first novel that highlights the problems faced by Parsee community, a minority, in Pakistan (Bhat, 2023). After Sidwa, writers like Mohammad Hanif, Nadeem Aslam, Mohsin Hamid and Kamila Shamsie are noteworthy as they have given space to the global themes in their works such as women rights and minority issues (Cilnao, 2013). Mohammad Hanif belongs to the second generation of the novelists of Pakistani Anglophone fiction. He has highlighted the themes of military rule, women, and minority issues. Hanif's (2011) *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* is a story of a nurse who belongs to the lower-caste Christians and lives her life as an untouchable suffering from marginalization and violence in an Islamic country. According to the novelist, Hanif (2011), she is existing as a despised Christian in an Islamic country. Mirza (2014) analyzes the status of Alice, the eponymous protagonist, as an untouchable who is trying to survive and surpass her subaltern status but dies a ruthless death. Also, her father is a sweeper, living his life as a Choorha, who can heal people from stomach ulcers by reading versus from the Quran.

As discussed earlier, Alice, the protagonist, belongs to the lower-caste Christians. According to Banerjee (2023), lower-caste Christians are the converts from Dalits who are still living their lives in periphery in post-independence India and Pakistan. She also adds that the conversion from Dalits to Christianity was an exit from caste oppression at the hands of upper-caste Hindus. Kamran (2010) opines that most of the Punjabi Christians in Pakistan are the offsprings of lower strata of the population, the untouchables or Choorhas who are living their lives as subalterns. They do the jobs of sweepers and shit-cleaners and face oppression and marginalization at the hands of Muslims and other Christians. He further says that these Christians were called sweepers and scavengers. Similarly, Jafri et al. (2022) highlights the discrimination against Hindu and Christian minorities and try to discover the fact how Pakistan is an unsuitable place for women and minorities. The study also tries to find out that a large number of Christians, especially lower caste Christians, take the jobs of street sweepers which Muslims are usually reluctant to do. Latif et al. (2023) reinforces the fact that lower Christians in Pakistan face discrimination and offered jobs such as sweepers and cleaners in public and private places.

This study examines the situation of lower caste Christians, who are further marginalized than peripheral citizens, as termed by Banerjee (2023), through Spivak's (1988) lenses of subalternity. Although the word subaltern literal meaning is someone of lower rank, the term was initially used by the Italian Communist, Antonio Gramsci (1881-1937), to represent the Italian downtrodden farmers and argued that question of culture and consciousness besides class needed to be taken seriously (Thomas, 2018; Ezzeldin, 2017; Gopal, 2006). Although the concept of subalternity was revived by Ranajit Guha, the leader of subaltern studies in the Indian perspective, in post-colonial era, it has been widely discussed in the works of writers around the globe. Gopal (2006) argues that the concept of subalternity is different from Marx' concept of class as it avoids the concept of 'economic reductionism'. Thus, it is the small voice of history against bourgeoisie-nationalist and colonist historiography. The word subaltern personifies inferior and marginalized groups of the third world countries although it is applied to the marginalized

groups in postcolonial scenario (Dutta, 21). Spivak (1988) defines subalterns as oppressed of the oppressed whose voice is unheard to the elite and hegemonic discourses. However, she does make it clear that all subalterns are oppressed whereas all oppressed are not subalterns. Oppression can occur in different ways such as marginalization, violence, cultural imperialism and gender inequality. Spivak (1988) says that subalterns suffer from both epistemic and physical violence. Marginalization is also a form of oppression which allows the hegemon and elite to suppress the subalterns (Riach, 2017). According to Spivak (1988), the moment suppressed or marginalized voices gain recognition, they are out of the circle of subalternity.

Spivak's (1988) concept of subalternity can be understood differently from other proponents of subaltern studies group as she says that the term subaltern can be applied to someone who is outside of cultural imperialism. In other words, for someone who is socially, politically marginalized and not given representation in the form of collective action. In other words, Subalternity is the form of marginalization and suppression where one community dominates the other culturally and politically using dominant discourses. Thus, a political or minority group can be taken as a subaltern group.

The location of subalterns has not been an easy task as Spivak (1988) says that subaltern is a position without identity. Owing to this, it is difficult to locate the subalterns. The location of subalterns remains anything but an easy task. Nonetheless, one of the ways to locate subalterns is to find them in relation to the dominant group. The identity of subalterns is more relational rather than ontological identity (Spivak, 1988).

Thus, the above discussion can be concluded that subalterns is someone who is outside the periphery of society which is not synonymous with Marx's idea of proletariat (Gopal, 2006) as proletariats are part of the society and there can be a possible change in their position or status. It is important to notice that subalterns are marginalized not because of one layer of marginalization or subjugation. As in the case of subaltern women who are duly subjugated or doubly marginalized. Lower caste-Christians could be an example of such a group who not only faces discrimination at the hands of dominant groups but also through their own people who also considers them marginalized people.

Can the Subaltern Speak? is an essay that begins with Spivak's (1988) critical analysis of the concept of subalternity. Scholars around the world have interpreted the themes in Spivak's (1988) essay in their own ways since the text of the essay is so dense that it opens avenues of myriad discussions and interpretations.

Although the title shows the inability of subaltern's speech, it is more engrossed in whether subalterns can be heard. "For me, the question 'Who should speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?'" (Spivak et al., 2022). Also, subalterns are not heard as they are never paid attention as their voice is never recognized. As Spivak et al. (2022) states "But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously; not with that kind of benevolent imperialism". In order to be a successful speech, it must be able to transmit the message. This, however, takes us back to the debate so thoroughly rehearsed by Spivak (1988) in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Most critics miss that the main question in that essay was not whether the subaltern can speak, but rather about the nature of representation itself. Spivak et al. (2022) deals thoroughly with issues of representation, focusing on representation as 'speaking for' i.e. vertreten as in politics and 're-presentation' i.e. darstellen as in art or philosophy.

Thus, in the context of colonial production the subalterns have no history and could not speak for themselves. The situation for subalterns in the post-colonial era has not much changed, for example, the subaltern women is in more deeply shadow as women are silenced both through patriarchy and subalternity.

1.1. Research Objectives

The above discussion depicts that Christians have been represented as a religious minority and their Dalit ancestry is overlooked by the previous research studies. As a result, there is inadequate representation of lower-caste Christians. This study specifically highlights the various forms of marginalization these lower-caste Christians face as subalterns in the fictional text.

2. Literature Review

Lower-caste Christians and untouchables as subalterns have been the focus in the novels of various fiction writers in India owing to the reason that caste system in India is deeply entrenched as compared to its neighboring countries in the subcontinent (Patras & Usman, 2019). Undoubtedly, caste is one of the main reasons for marginalization and suppression of the downtrodden group in the postcolonial Indian and Pakistani society (Saha, 2013; Dwivedi, 2010; Tamgadge, 2012). Besides, women under the patriarchal system have also been represented and discussed from different angles as 'female subalterns' which reinforces Spivak's (1988) idea of gendered subalternity) bear the brunt of male-dominant society in the Indian Sub-continent (Adkoli, 2018; Khan, 2019; Dwivedi, 2010). However, this part will review the representation of lower-caste Christians and untouchables as subalterns in the literary fiction.

Angelo (2020) analyses Spivak's reading of post-colonial novels of Mahasweta Devi and J.M. Coetzee to suggest that subalterns can speak in literature through a process of subjectivation where subalterns have the agency and engaged in act of self-narration. The study is exploratory in nature that it differentiates subalterns from marginal figures in literature where subalterns could tell their stories. The study claims that literature deals with the possibilities for the subaltern to speak more adequately than historiography. Here it is important to be noted that it confirms Spivak's (1988) message in her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that although subalterns can speak, they show resistance but that is not heard or noticed by the hegemon.

The theme of subalternity is not just confined to Asia although it was an Indian endeavor to rewrite the history from below. Postcolonial literature in Africa has made its imprints around the world as colonialism has far-reaching effects on the people in the African countries. One such example is Waghmare's (2020) study of Ngugi's novels. He uses Spivak's (1988) concept of subalternity to explore the themes of marginality in Ngugi's novel *Petals of Blood*. The study explores the postcolonial situation of Kenya where the elite, in the form bureaucrats and landowners, subjugate the poor and working class to the extent they are able to resist but that goes unnoticed and unheard. The study proves that the concept of subalternity is not just related to Asia, but it prevails all over the globe. Besides, it also discusses the marginalization of women in the third world and the ways they are doubly exploited by the patriarchal system and the hegemonic powers predominant in the postcolonial world in the form of European landowners. Also, Ezzeldin (2017) tries to find the traces of representation of subalterns in Victorian novels. The study tries to explore how subalterns express their resistance in the form of

'irrational behavior' in the text if they are not given space to express their feelings. Subaltern characters are dehumanized, associated with madness and savagery in the novel of Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte and Arthur Conan Doyle. The study is important because it uses [Spivak's \(1988\)](#) theme of subalternity and focuses on [Spivak's \(1988\)](#) renowned essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

The concept of untouchability is strongly attached to India due to its strict caste system ([Kamran, 2010](#); [Patras & Usman, 2019](#)). The representation of subalterns in the novels can be seen in *Untouchables* and *A Fine Balance*. [Saha \(2013\)](#) studies the comparison of 'subalterns' in both the texts and highlights their economic impoverishment. The writer attempts to display how far the writers of these two novels were successful in representing the world through subalterns' perspectives. These novels also discuss the agony and tension the subalterns experience and highlight that the situation has not changed much for the subalterns in modern India. The 're-contextualization' of untouchables in the text is an attempt to give voice to 'subalterns' which [Spivak \(1988\)](#) thought was the responsibility of postcolonial writers. The study highlights the factors, such as the role of religion, the imperial attitude, and poverty, which suppress the 'untouchables' in the texts. Consequently, these people still exist as subalterns owing to nationalization and cultural imperialism and India. Although a free nation, India is unable to guard the rights of these people. Similarly, [Dwivedi \(2010\)](#) explores the sorry plight of women and untouchables in the post-colonial India as they are still living their lives as subalterns despite the fact that India got Independence about a half century ago. The study discusses *The God of Small Things* which explores the physical and mental exploitation of untouchables in India. The untouchables in the novels are Christians who were low-caste Hindus and converted to Christianity in order to get some benefits and change their status, but even the conversion could not alter their sorry plight in the society. [Dwivedi \(2010\)](#) states that the writer, as a post-colonial writer, is speaking for the subalterns who can't speak for themselves.

In Pakistani Anglophone Fiction (PAF), the novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* has been the focus of several studies ([Fahim & Uzair, 2017](#); [Azhar, 2015](#); [Paul & Rai, 2018](#); [Siddique et al., 2020](#)) owing to its themes like Christian minority problems and the suppression of women. It can be said the first novel in PAF which blatantly raises and discusses these problems. [Fahim and Uzair \(2017\)](#) study the gendered discourse in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. They are of the view that studying discourse in the text is helpful to know how gender identities are constructed and represented. The paper opines that the positioning of genders is based on traditional notions. Their aim is to study gendered discourse in extracts from the novel using critical discourse analysis. The study concludes that concept of femininity and masculinity are still by and large informed by the discourses and representations that draw on what could be considered as 'traditional' images of Pakistani women and men. In their varied guises, patriarchal forces deeply embedded in social practices determine the ways and means of femininity and masculinity.

However, [Siddique et al. \(2020\)](#) explore how the concept of nationalism has been a contributing factor to the 'marginalization of the suppressed even after post-colonization'. They discuss the characters of Alice as a marginalized Christian in the independent state of Pakistan. The focus of the study is the salvation of subalterns which includes religious minorities and various caste categories. Also, the sorry plight of Christians and women in Pakistan is explored by some researchers. [Azhar \(2015\)](#) explores the interfaith dialogue in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. She explores the themes through 'intertextuality' and 'social identity'. She opines that we can create religious harmony between the interreligious

groups through interfaith dialogue. She discusses the social and economic exploitation of the Christian community in Pakistan. She says that inter-communication will pave the way to find a peaceful heterogeneous society. By using the Social Identity Theory as a framework, she depicts how the Christians in Pakistan are suffering from identity crises and are desperately trying to achieve the status of respectable citizens. She also focuses on how the author in the novels show that the majority in Pakistan considers the spirit of nationalism as proportional to the allegiance to Islam which is a majority faith. Also, she adds that law, educational institutions, and stereotypes widen the gulf and give birth to prejudice which leads to religious animosity. The ultimate result of such religious hostility is the marginalization of minorities such as Hindus, Christians and other minorities which make them second-grade citizens. [Paul and Rai \(2018\)](#) explore how the themes of sexual violence and sainthood are juxtaposed in *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti*. Choosing 'Alice' as his subject, he tries to show the sorry plight of working women in Pakistan and how they become victims of sexual violence. The paper also explores the prejudice against the Christian minority and female victimization in a patriarchal dominant society. He adds that Alice is a soldier of humanism and gives a concept of new humanistic dimension of religiosity and sainthood in an 'Islamist Society of Pakistan'.

[Fatima et al. \(2024\)](#) studies *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* to explore sexual harassment in the novel. The study uses the objectification theory to highlight the marginalization experienced by women in two different countries owing to gender, caste and religion. According to the study, the objectification of women is important as it results in the subordination of women and other oppressed groups. The study tries to prove how through objectification of female characters in the novel, the agency of women is constrained, and gender inequality is maintained. As a result, the protagonist was considered by people as a sexual object which gave birth to sexual harassment because she belonged to a Christian minority. The study concludes how this treatment towards women is the result of colonialism in the two societies which these fiction writers highlight in their novels.

3. Research Methods

The study uses close-reading technique for the selection of data and the method of discourse analysis has been used to analyze the text of *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by [Hanif \(2011\)](#). The analysis uses [Spivak's \(1988\)](#) concept of subalternity to examine the text. The selection of the novel for the study is based on the idea that lower-caste Christians are the main characters in the novel, and it shows ample examples to provide answers to the objectives which include that lower-caste Christians are represented as subalterns in the text of the novel and the different ways they face marginalization.

4. Results

The first part starts with a brief introduction of identity of Christians represented in the text which establishes the fact they are from the 'Choorha Christians' and such representation is the cause of their marginalization. Lower-caste Christians are represented as 'Choorhas' throughout the text of novel. The classification based on caste reflects the marginalization of lower caste Christians and leads to exclusionary marginalization. Such classification also results in prejudices against the lower caste Christians which categorize them as infidels and outsiders in the text. Joseph Bhatti, because of this discriminated attitude, considers himself 'a Choorha' as he knows that he is not accepted even by his own brother Christians as Choorha. As Joseph Bhatti is

sometimes proud of being Choorha because he is sure that he is doomed to be Choorha. *“Because he always maintained the swagger of a Choorha, an untouchable with an attitude”* (Hanif, 2011, p.50). However, Joseph Bhatti takes pride in his strong relationship with the land, and considers himself indigenous as compared to Muslims, Hindus and Christians. *“Choorhas were here before everything. Choorhas were here before the sacred was built, before the Yassoo was resurrected, before Muslas came on their horses, even before Hindus decided they were too exalted to clean up their own shit. Yes, when everything is finished, Choorhas will still be here, and cockroaches too”* (Hanif, 2011, p.52). Here the use of ‘cockroaches’ symbolizes filthiness and dirt on one hand, and meaninglessness of Choorhas’ lives on the other. Cockroaches, too, are associated with human waste and filth as the identity of Choorhas are associated with ‘shit-cleaning’ and ‘sweeping’.

The concept of purity and pollution, in the form high-caste Hindus and Dalits in India, manifests in Pakistan in the form of *Pak*(clean) and *napak* (unclean). As the very word ‘Pakistan’ suggests a place for ‘(pure)Pak people’. Thus, Choorha Christians have been going through adverse living conditions since they are considered untouchables(*napak*) by most Muslims. They are marginalized due to their physical appearance as the very word ‘Choorha’ refers to someone that is ‘dirty, filthy and impure. Although Alice Bhatti is a junior nurse, she is living her life as ‘untouchable’.

Choorha Christians or lower caste Christians are represented as sweepers in the text. Even the very word ‘Choorhas’ gives the sense of someone who is a shit-cleaner and the job has been specifically related to the lower-caste Christians in Pakistan. As a result, they are marginalized because of their degrading occupations. Kamran (2010) highlights the fact that dirtiest jobs such as ‘street sweepers’ reduce the Christians to lower caste, Choorhas and Bhangis. As Dr. Pereira, a middle-class Christian, says in the novel, *“He is too polite to point out that not all Christians are sweepers. He also fears the report: ‘But all sweepers are Christians”* (Hanif, 2011, p.8). It seems that this is the only job left for the lower caste Christians. Alice Bhatti is fully cognizant of the fact that people consider all lower-caste Christians as sweepers or janitors.

The second part focuses on the manifestations of violence in the text and discusses how it contributes to the marginalization of the subalterns. The violence in the text is in the form sexual violence which is experienced by the protagonist and the other lower caste Christian characters. Alice, the protagonist, go through sexual violence because she belongs to the lower-caste Christians. *“Lewd gestures, whispered suggestions, uninvited hands on her bottom are all part of Alice Bhatti’s daily experience”* (Hanif, 2011, p.9). Alice broods over such incidents, as part of her everyday routine, when she is being interviewed by the Ortho Doctor, Doctor Pereira and Sister Hina Alvi for the job of nurse at the Sacred. These are some of the examples which Seiler (2014) terms it as ‘harsh realities’ that Christian Women must experience in their day-today lives in Pakistani society. Although instances of acts sexual abuse are frequent against women, in general, in Pakistan, but it is more likely that Christian women specifically lower caste Christian go through such thing than any other race, caste or minority (Seiler, 2014). According to the study the most important reason behind such sexual abuse may be religion. The protagonist Alice is wondered at such acts of unwanted touching in the wonderland that although people consider her ‘an untouchable’ and they will not drink tea from the cup or eat a banana from the branch, but they will be ready to her body parts without her permission.

She can live with being untouchable, but she desperately hopes for the only privilege that comes with being one. That people won’t touch her without

her explicit permission. But the same people who would not drink from a tap that she has touched have no problem casually poking their elbows into her breast or contouring their own bodies to rub against her heathen bottom (Hanif, 2011, p.95).

The second instance is the death of Alice's mother who was killed at her work while she was working as cleaner in the house. The owner of the house to rape her and it was told to the family (Joseph and his daughter) that she fell from the stairs while working in the house. Physical and sexual violence against lower caste Christians is a common phenomenon in Pakistan (Seiler, 2014); therefore, sweepers and lower-caste Christians face marginalization because of the lower status in the society. *"Alice's mother died at work. You will accidentally scratch yourself on left breast with such violence that those who wash your body will see four parallel sharp gashes drawn with human nails Manage to spill someone's sperm on your thigh"* (Hanif, 2011, p.119).

The third part analyses the text which is related to the place where lower caste Christians live and shows how excluded they are from the mainstream population. The writer's placement the protagonist in the French colony emphasizes the fact they are extremely distanced from the mainstream. The epithet 'French' is intentional as it shows something foreign and open which is in opposition to 'the sacred' where Alice is doing the job. Also, it emphasizes the idea of Spivak's (1988) subalternity as someone living outside the periphery. Latif et al. (2023) finds out in their study that the converts (those who converted from lower castes to Christians) are still not allowed to reside among the dominant communities in Pakistan. When Alice responded to the sexual violence in VIP room in an aggressive way, people speculated about the incidence about the blood-stricken man who ran out of VIP room in a strange way. *"She had bitten him off in the heat of passion and then taken it home, one rumor went. He had chased her all the way to the edge of French Colony, but had to stop and turn back because you can't track anything down in French Colony. Even if someone has slashed your dick and disappeared, you don't go there"* (Hanif, 2011, p.74).

Thus, French colony has been presented by the writer as something alien where people avoid going and people living in that place are 'janitors' or working for the corporation. Alice is aware of the fact that people think that all the people living in the French colony are janitors. *"Alice Bhatti knows that people think everyone in French colony is a janitor and works for the corporation"* (Hanif, 2011, p.76).

Although 'the sacred' is a hospital but writers use as a microcosm to symbolize Pakistan. As the name Pakistan also means the land of pure people, the writer choice of the word sacred is intentional which shows a religious fervor and fanaticism which has increased in Pakistan for last some years. The sacred is a place around which all the actions revolve. Alice, the protagonist, was a student in the hostel of the sacred and then got a job as a nurse in the place where she had cleaned the floor many times. At her interview, the Ortho doctor questions her very identity asked her whether she was Alice or Bhatti as Bhatti was a respectable clan from Punjab, about Joseph he remarks wherever they are from. This shows the anonymity of their places which means they are from nowhere or Ortho sir never concerns about their place in and outside the sacred.

Spivak et al. (2022) explains in her revised version of the essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that by act of speaking she meant that subalterns are unheard and not understood by the hegemon. Despite their difficult lives and sufferings, they can't represent themselves

which involves both *vertreten* and *darstellen* i.e. representation for and representation of. The epilogue is important part of the novel where Jospheh Bhatti writes a letter to the municipal that her daughter, Alice, should be awarded the title of 'lady' based on what had happened in the scared. He claims that a lot of people witnessed that her daughter was taken up to the sky as an acknowledgement for her services to humanity, but he complains that all the witnesses were rejected to be accepted because of their religious affiliation. The letter can be termed as a complaint against the hegemon which is in the form of 'government' 'law' and 'institutions' and does accept their representation as true citizens of Pakistan. Thomas (2018) terms such subalterns as subaltern citizens who are promised to give all the benefits from the state in the post-colonial world.

5. Conclusion

The study endeavored to explore how Dalit factor along with religion plays a crucial role in the marginalization of lower-caste Christians in the text. Lower-caste Christian experience marginalization at the hands of dominant group and the elite. The findings show that they are spatially marginalized which force them to live outside cultural imperialism as Spivak (1988) claims them subalterns live outside the periphery. The study is an attempt to show that the role of caste and untouchability still plays a vital role in the marginalization of some group in the post-colonial Pakistan. Thus, it opens new avenues of research related to highlighting the injustices and discrimination and oppression of minority groups. Also, the lower caste Christians women marginalization can be explored from different perspectives. Also, it is an attempt to give voice to the marginalized group who are unable to represent themselves.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable

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