

Is it Gender Diversity or Gender Adversity? A Feministic analysis of Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions

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Abstract

Gender (dis)parity has, throughout the years, proven to be primal, with women, especially in African communities, continuing to be structurally repressed by the patriarchal establishments. These women strive to reclaim their rightful place in society through gender activism. They protest against this gender-based socio-economic deprivation that is ravaging both the world and the African continent through Feministic theoretical assumptions. This study is, therefore, underpinned by the Feminist theory which is guided by exploratory research design. Its aim is to critically explore gender issues in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (2004). It has, furthermore, employed qualitative research approach to endeavour to understand the nature of gender vulnerabilities in Africa through Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Purposive sampling was used to select the novel from the other literary works by the same author because of its appositeness to the study. Critical textual analysis was used as a data analysis technique to dissect the novel. The study has established that there is gender adversity which impedes development in Africa and the world. It, furthermore, recommends that African governments should strengthen consequence management instruments in their countries in order to subvert gender-based challenges for social justice and women empowerment.

Keywords: (dis)parity, gender activism, feminist, patriarchal, empowerment, subvert

Introduction

Contextualisation

Women experience gender inequality which tend to be a common problem the world over. According to Ahmed (2000: 48) gender inequality is "unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender". It often occurs in a society where women are exposed to few opportunities, limited personal choices and cultural patriarchy. They are confronted with a systematic denial of rights through institutional discrimination which renders them inferior to their male counterparts. Consequently, women globally lack a full realisation of their fundamental human rights (Maenetja, Mogoboya & Nkealah, 2021). In many African cultures, women are denied a chance to economic, socio-political opportunities. They are also afforded limited personal choices. Cultural and patriarchal stereotypes are among the notions that fuel the unfounded perception that African women as not intelligent enough to attain educational qualifications. This man-made gender adversity has led to the formation of feminism which advocates for women's suffrage, self-determination and individual liberty (Weedon, 2000: 04). It is concerned with gaining freedom through equality by putting an end to men's oppressive acts to women and gaining the freedom to opportunities in different spheres of life such as education, labour and politics.

Sewell (2001: 05) stresses the man-made nature of gender disparity when he states that "oppression of women did not always exist, in fact, it is a relatively new phenomenon in historical terms". He further avers that it arose with the division of society into classes and the emergence of class society

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thousands years ago. There was no domination of man over women and there was no exploitation, which only emerged with the development of the slave empires. In other words, there was gender parity in the beginning of time and man ruined it through convenient avarice for power. Feminists advocate for gender diversity through improvement and expansion of the role and rights of women in society. Feminism seeks to “highlight and fight against oppression through its theoretical structures that compose convictions about the nature, and the reasons for women`s mistreatment and imbalance and that propose techniques for killing abuse and securing gender parity” (Bouziani 2007:14). This study, therefore, strives to critically explore gender issues in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (2004).

Role of Theory in the Study

This study is undergirded by the Feminist literary theory whose primary aim is to empower women in the whole world with knowledge, skills and values. Malhota (2006: 17) defines women empowerment as the “increasing and improving of the social, economic, political and legal strength of the women, to ensure equal-rights to women and to make them confident enough to claim their rights”. Women need a conducive environment for them to make their own decisions for the benefit of society (Mogoboya, 2011). Showalter (2002) defines Feminist literary theory as a protraction of feminism into a theoretical discourse where female writers express their experiences; what they have really known, felt and suffered. It seeks to analyse gender inequality, socially and culturally, rather than the biological differences between male and female. Qualitative approach, which is supported by exploratory research design, was employed to guide this study. Purposive sampling was used to select *Nervous Conditions* from the other literary works by the same author because of its relevance to the study. Critical textual analysis was used as a data analysis technique to dissect the novel.

Critical Analysis of Dangarembga`s Nervous Conditions

Nervous Conditions, Dangarembga`s first novel, was written from a feminist perspective. For this reason, it was difficult for the author to have it published because it was perceived to be depicting a negative picture of the African society. African writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong`o write with the aim to change the way writers write about their former colonial masters because most post-colonial writings are about redefining the continent and its people. Similar to Ngugi, Dangarembga does not shy away from writing about African realities that affect women throughout. *Nervous conditions*, therefore, was not warmly received by many African people. However, it went on to win the Commonwealth writers prize in 1989. The title of the book is taken from the introduction of Fanon`s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), “The condition of native is a nervous condition” (Fanon, 1961:02). Dangarembga expands Fanon`s exploration of African people oppressed by a colonial regime by incorporating the gender specific role of black women, who are arguably, particularly oppressed. Women in particular, have been portrayed from a different perspective as compared to their portrayal in earlier African literature in English. Dangarembga`s voice in this novel is significantly feminist because she proudly advocates for African women`s emancipation. Broughton (2000:05) observes that *Nervous Conditions* “is a hopeful book, both in its sense of impending change...and in the scope and subtlety of its critique of gender relations within and beyond the boundaries of race and class”. Moreover, the women in the novel clearly undergo some struggle and they emerge as different people at the end. It is the nature of this struggle and change that Dangarembga is portraying in her work. The context of the novel is in Rhodesia, now called Zimbabwe, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It focuses on the themes of race, class and gender through the eyes of Tambudzai, in short Tambu, the young female protagonist. Dangarembga extensively fictionalises real life experiences in order for one to find something to identify with in the novel. Dangarembga (2004: 211) notes:

I like to think the novel's success might have encouraged other young African women to go out there and do their thing, whatever it might be. I hope I am not just flattering myself with this because the shortage of role models is a critical issue for young black women in my part of the world. This shortage of role models makes it seem as though realising one's ambition is too difficult, and girls give up, or settle for third if not fourth best. In the worst cases, ambition is completely lacking. So I hope my success has shown some young women here that with perseverance, much is possible.

Patriarchy: the presence of men

Patriarchy is the central issue in many post-colonial writings, *Nervous Conditions* being one among many. It is the general structure in which men have power over women. A patriarchal society consists of a male-dominated power structure throughout organised society and in individual relationships. Weedon (2000) maintains that patriarchy is the power relation in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests of men. Patriarchal power rests on the social meanings given to biological sexual difference. In patriarchal society, the nature and the social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male. This finds its clearest expression in the general use of the terms "man" and "he" to encompass all of humankind (Dwarkin, 2003).

All the men in *Nervous Conditions* are raised in a patriarchal society and do not take kindly to being challenged. The first male that we are told of in the novel is Nhamo, Tambu's brother. Tambu's reaction to his brother's death is very shocking, inhuman and unnatural. The first sentence that Tambu utters when he heard of his brother's passing is "I was not sorry when my brother died" (Dangarembga, 2004:1). This is a response from the heart of a woman who is troubled by patriarchy. Reactions such as these are anticipated, for the book continues:

As you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all. I feel many things these days, much more than I was able to feel in the days when I was young and my brother died. Therefore, I shall not apologise but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru entrapment; about Nyasha's rebellion...whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful (Dangarembga 2004:1).

Although Nhamo appears briefly in the novel, his character shows the readers that society teaches males, from a young age, the kind of behaviour that women are not pleased with (Bouziyani, 2007). The novel uncovers trends of patriarchy when Nhamo is given a chance to attend colonial school in the missionaries with Babamukuru, Tambu and Nhamo's uncle, offering to pay his educational fees. Nhamo finally starts schooling at the missionaries; Tambu asks for the same opportunity but she is denied the chance simply because she is a girl. Tambu asks her father why she, too, cannot be educated. He replies "can you cook books and feed them to your husband?" (Dangarembga 2004:13). What Dangarembga depicts through Tambu's father is that women in Africa, Zimbabwe being one among many, have been relegated to the backseat (Bouziyani, 2007). Women had no place in a patriarchal society that is preoccupied with notions of wealth, bravery and power. Traditionally, women were supposed to be unassertive but only to minister to their husbands' needs. Tambu contends "the needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate" (Dangarembga 2004:12).

Africa was built on manhood, a discursive space with many positive aspects but which many men reinterpreted to symbolise power to subjugate their women. Patriarchy, therefore, established a

solidarity among men for dominating women. Nhamo is rude his sister saying "why are you jealous anyway? Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school?" (Dangarembga, 2004:28). Looking back, Tambu realises that her brother was honest in his prejudicial ignorance, "...but in those days I took a rosy view of male nature" (Dangarembga, 2004:28). Tambu thought that he was just saying insulting things to hurt her when in reality it was not Nhamo, but society, that was determined to hold her back. In other words, Nhamo is a construct of his society.

African men were engaged in a struggle for the independence of their people against political, cultural and religious colonial pressure, but reduced women to silent supporters. D`Almeida (1997:33) posits that "silence presents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy". That form of social organisation in which males assume power, create inferiority in women (Vembe, 2000). The women around Babamukuru, Tambu`s uncle whom she describes as "a dignified figure and that was how I liked to imagine him" (Dangarembga 2004: 08) caused people to be fearful of expressing their opinions due to the superior position that Babamukuru was in. Another challenge was because traditional society expected women to be quiet in the presence of men as a sign of respect. This fear was most visible through Tambu and Babamukuru`s wife, Maiguru, who could not express her feelings freely in the presence of her husband.

After the death of Tambu`s brother, Nhamo, she (Tambu) gets an opportunity to start schooling at the missionaries; although if her brother did not die, Tambu would have not attained this opportunity. She starts to question patriarchy when she moves in with her uncle, Babamukuru, and family. Tambu had worshipped her uncle almost throughout her life until she started to interrogate his position as a male authority the day he beat his daughter, Nyasha, who is the same age as Tambu, because she was said to be disrespectful and was called a "whore" by staying out at night until late (Dangarembga, 2004:48). Tambu expressed her dissatisfaction when she said:

The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty; on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them...but what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (Dangarembga 2004:118).

Before Tambu lived at the mission, she always thought that the way her father behaved was due to poverty and lack of education. However, that night she saw that men in Zimbabwe and other parts of the world were all the same in the way that they treated women. Uwakweh (2008) points out that in various countries and cultures, many men expect to dominate and control women, accepting no opposition or refusal and are prepared to use violence. Another explanation could be that the violence that frequently occurs in other African countries such as South Africa, emanate from patriarchy.

The men in the novel, and others, have been shown to be part of the reasons for the behaviour and the way in which the women in their lives turn out, especially for Tambu and Nyasha. Their decisions were, at times, woven by the negativity that these men brought in the young women`s lives. As much as *Nervous Conditions* is about the struggles and oppression of women, it is also about the contributions that the men have made towards their struggles and daily lives, "...but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men..." (Dangarembga, 2004:208).

The Burden of Femininity

The colonial system renders Tambu and other African women oppressed in many ways. In the Zimbabwean colonial context, female subordination is maintained by the cultural practices that regard women as second-class citizens. Men fundamentally oppress women by characterising them, on every level, as the other, defined exclusively in opposition to men. Man occupies the role of the self, or subject; woman is the object, the other (Masha & Mogoboya, 2021). Tambu's mother, mostly referred to as Mainini or Ma`shingayi, is one of the entrapped women in the novel. She is bound both by the laws of her culture and the social perceptions of colonialism. Because of her gender, she is made to believe that she will never be seen as more than a possession of the men in her family even though it is through the fruits of her labour that her daughter is able to go to school and improve their financial situation. She believes that she will never reach an equal status with the whites or the educated Africans.

Ma`shingayi's character depicts that African women, including Zimbabwean women, have been socialised by the society and culture on who they are, what they should, and how they will forever be. When Tambu complained to her mother about her father saying she does not need to be educated, her mother replied:

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden...aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them (Dangarembga 2004: 16).

Mythical representations that women are socialised into, the bourgeois woman perform three major functions; wife, mother and entertainer. No matter how well-known the woman's household may be, these roles inevitably lead to immanence, incompleteness and profound frustration.

Wittig (2000: 07) contends that "one is not born a female, but rather becomes one". She further argues that the biological anatomy of being a woman does not make one a female; hence women are not born feminine but shaped by a thousand of external processes. A girl-child is conditioned into accepting passivity, dependence, repetition and inwardness. Every force in society conspires to deprive her of subjectivity and flatten her into an object. Denied the possibility of independent work or creative fulfillment, the woman must accept a dissatisfying life of housework, child-bearing and sexual slavishness.

Ma`Shingayi further told Tambu that learning to do household chores from an early age will perfect you in the eyes of your husband and in-laws.

The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one hand and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength (Dangarembga, 2004:16).

Babamukuru's wife, Maiguru, struggles with finding a balance between practising Shona beliefs of how to be an ideal wife and a family member versus practising her English values. She graduated with a Master's degree, just like her husband, while they were living in England. Even with her high educational qualifications, Maiguru remains passive and does her duties as a respectful wife. However, being the ideal wife as she was expected to be, made her sometimes feel trapped. When Tambu confronts Maiguru about her education, Maiguru opens up to her about how her life in England gave her many opportunities but turned them down for family. Maiguru continues by expressing that "no one ever thinks about the things I have given up on" (Dangarembga, 2004:103). She explains that her life could be very different if she stayed in England, but instead chose to

sacrifice it because 'when you have a good man and lovely children, it makes it all worthwhile' (Dangarembga, 2004:103).

In many cases women do not have equal control over the management and allocation of family income, especially if the income has been earned by men in the family. Maiguru earned her own money as an educator, but her income was entirely controlled by her husband, Babamukuru, by virtue of being the family head. In African communities, mainly Zimbabwe and surroundings such as South Africa, the father is the ultimate decision-maker for the family and women are expected to remain submissive. Maiguru's impotence prevails when she remarks to Tambu about her dissatisfaction with the manner in which Babamukuru handles household finances. She resents her husband's lavish support of his brother's family partly from her wages. But, her position as a wife prohibits her to act against her husband's will. On this submissive role of wifehood, the woman as a daughter or sister has greater status and more rights in her lineage; when she is married, she becomes a possession, voiceless and often right less in her husband's family.

Maiguru was Tambu's role model and she was obedient and loyal to her husband, until one day her depression drove her to rebel against her husband. She had enough of being docile to her husband's family. In fact, she had the audacity to stand up to her husband and say:

I am sick of it Babawa Chido; let me tell you I have had enough! And when I keep quite you think I am enjoying it, so today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy anymore in this house (Dangarembga, 2004:172).

When in the company of Maiguru's in-laws, she sat on the floor, as is customary for women as patriarchy is unchallengeable according to tradition. No matter how discomforting an instruction could be from her husband, she complied without questioning or grumbling. As Babamukuru's wife, her own potential and aspirations are completely submerged in the role of wife and mother prescribed by Shona patriarchy. Moreover, as the wife of the mission school headmaster, her submission is reinforced by the Christian ideal of the dutiful and obedient helpmate. Maiguru conceals her deep seated resentment and frustrations brought about by her husband's control of her life.

Colonisation did not only affect the politics and the land of the colonised, however, also the mindset. It was not usual for the colonised to aspire to be like the white colonialists, in particular, adopting western values may alienate African people from their traditional values. Those that endeavour to adopt the culture of the colonialists may end up being rejected by both cultures. Tambu's cousin, Nyasha the daughter of Maiguru and Babamukuru, is a portrait of the colonised African mind. When Nyasha's family returned from England, they were given a warmth welcome by their relatives. Nyasha arrived wearing a mini-skirt of which she was obviously conscious about as she kept pulling it down. This was the first indication of Nyasha's inappropriateness. In addition, she imitates the western lifestyle and fails to understand her true needs; the need to be decently attired according to Shona customs. Tambu's disapproval of Nyasha is evident when she states that "I would not give my approval...I turned away" (Dangarembga, 2004:37).

Nyasha is the rebellious female in the novel. She has had the benefit of a British education and knows first-hand what kind of lives women in Europe lead. She is ever aware of the differences in the way Shona women are treated compared with the treatment of British women. A polite way of demonstrating respect and appreciation is by kneeling. African women in traditional households are expected to kneel whenever entering a gathering, including men. Anna, a servant in Babamukuru's mission house, usually knelt when entering Nyasha's room. It is a habit that Nyasha finds irritating even though the sign was an act of obedience.

Nyasha and her brother, Chido, stayed with their parents in England where their parents obtained their Masters degrees. They became exposed to a different way of life, an English way of life. Now they

have returned to Zimbabwe where things are very different. Therefore, Nyasha has a difficult time making friends due to her English exposure, “she thinks she is white. They used to sneer and that was as bad as a curse. She is proud, pronounced others. She is loose, the most vicious condemned her” (Dangarembga, 2004:94). Many children do not understand the way Nyasha behaves because she is culturally English after spending many of her formative years in Europe. Nyasha’s parents expect her to behave like an African native with Shona customs. Babamukuru complains about her mimicry of the Englishness, saying “what will people say of me, when my daughter behaves like that?” (Dangarembga, 2004:100). Yet, Nyasha is a product of two cultures and the one in which she spent her formative years as an early adolescent is prevailing.

“It’s bad enough when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That’s the end, really that’s the end” (Dangarembga, 2004:150). This is Nyasha’s reaction when Tambu suggests that Christianity is evidence of the nature of progress from Shona traditions. Tambu’s father, Jeremiah, has suggested a cleansing with a witchdoctor and sacrificial ox to cure the family of its misfortunes, but Babamukuru has insisted that the source of their trouble is the fact that Tambu’s father and mother have been living in sin and are still not married officially, before God. Nyasha’s reaction demonstrates her awareness of the effects of colonialism; she is scolding Tambu for embracing the colonial mind-set that Christianity is a progress rather than an equally absurd replacement for the African traditions.

Women’s Emancipation

Emancipation is a term that appears again and again in *Nervous Conditions*. Similarly, the term is associated with being released from slavery or with a country freeing itself from the colonial power that once controlled it (Weedon, 2000). Tambu sees her life as a gradual process of being freed of the limitations that have previously affected her. When she first leaves for the mission school, she sees the move as a temporary emancipation. Her growing knowledge and evolving perceptions are a form of emancipation from her old ways of thinking. By the end of the novel, emancipation becomes more than simply a release from poverty or restriction. Emancipation is equated with freedom and an assertion of personal liberty.

Tambu was born a girl and thus faces a fundamental gender disadvantages since traditional African social practice dictates that the oldest male child is deemed the future head of the family. All of the family’s resources are poured into developing his abilities and preparing him to lead and provide for his clan. Tambu sees her brother’s death as the beginning of her own freedom. She steps in to the role of future provider, yet she is saddled with the prejudices and limitations that shackled most African girls of her generation. Her fight for an education and a better life is compounded by her gender. Hague and Thiara (2009) point out that gender inequality and sexual discrimination form the background of all of the women’s lives. In this novel, inequality is as infectious as a disease; a crippling attitude that kills ambition, crushes women’s spirits, and discourages them from supporting and rallying present and future generations. Despite Ma’shingayi’s strong objections about accepting the way tradition socialised women to be, Tambu knows the only hope she has of lifting her family out of poverty lies in education.

Tambu is constantly made to feel that the chosen standards for femininity are natural and so when she seems to resist conformity, she is labelled “unfeminine and unnatural” (Dangarembga, 2004:16) by her brother, Nhamo, and her father. Tambu, therefore, consciously refuses to be compartmentalised into this gender apartheid from an early age, which is why she escapes. She does so first, by questioning things and ideas where every other girl including her sister, Netsai, would conform and take things for granted, “...I was different. I wanted to find out the truth” (Dangarembga, 2004:05) by resisting oppression from patriarchy and trying unsuccessfully to conscientise her sister Netsai who is perhaps too young to understand. Tambu further resemble her escape by sending herself to school at a time when her parents say they can only afford Nhamo’s fees. Tambu reassured her father that she

will earn the fees so that she can go to school by starting her own garden plot to grow maize so that she can sell, "I will earn the fees...if you will give me some seed, I will clear my own field and grow my own maize. Not much, just enough for the fees" (Dangarembga, 2004:17).

Self-dependence and determination are what enabled Tambu to escape from the controlling patriarchal sexism. For a child of eight to work on her own plot determinedly and successfully, in spite of all the attendant problems and disruptions, to earn enough money to finance her whole primary education is an accomplishment few could achieve. Therefore, Dangarembga's approach in this novel is accurately feminist.

Gender is a constant burden in Tambu's life. While Tambu is a feminist character, fighting to get an education even when she is denied it. However, the only way she is allowed a proper one is when there is no male to compete with her for it. At that point, she falls back into fulfilling her expected roles in order to get by, vowing earnestly that she would be like her uncle, Babamukuru, "...straight as an arrow, as steely and true" (Dangarembga, 2004:89). In Tambu's education, Babamukuru wants her to also develop into a good woman, assuming she will take on a domestic role after her education is completed such as his wife, Maiguru. Nyasha on the other hand, does not want to buy into this. While Tambu thinks Maiguru had good reason to be content and deserved to be beatified, Nyasha is not easily satisfied by saying "you have to keep moving...otherwise you get trapped. Look at poor mum. Can you imagine anything worse?" (Dangarembga, 2004:98). Nyasha understands and is frustrated with Maiguru's position and despite the fact that Tambu's opportunities are opening up, her potential is still being very much limited by the men in her life and she should not consider Maiguru's life to be her ideal future.

Lucia, Tambu's aunt from her mother's side, does and says what she wants. She disciplines the men around her when they speak nonsense of her "she threatened terrible things. And we know what she is like. She would do them. Ehe! She would do them" (Dangarembga, 2004:146). Lucia asserts her rights without fear of anyone, even the most revered Babamukuru. She uses men to get what she wants in life, including Takesure whom her family wanted her to get married to. Lucia's final triumph is that she enrolls in grade one in order to fight illiteracy while working at the mission. Hence, she escapes from poverty and male dominance. Her future is certain to be bright; she too has not been static in the novel and perhaps it is significant that she remains unmarried. Through Lucia's character, the men around her are not changed or conscientised by her different attitude, with Takesure calling her "vicious and unnatural...uncontrollable" (Dangarembga, 2004:145) and Babamukuru applauding her in her absence saying, "that one, he chuckled to Maiguru, she is like a man herself" (Dangarembga 2004:171). It seems to be difficult for these men to acknowledge that Lucia is a different woman, compared to other women in the family, with her own good opinion and style of living her life independently. Therefore, they take her as a joke.

Conclusion

The study acknowledges that both men and women suffer at the hands of the patriarchal system part of which emanate from the effects of colonialism in Africa. However, women are impacted more as they are often abused and denigrated. Dangarembga singles out patriarchy as the main weapon of women's oppression by society. *Nervous Conditions* presents an insightful analysis of not only gender oppression but also the complex systems of colonisation, class and culture. All the female characters in this novel have their experiences illustrated through Tambu. The unequal power and gender relations in marriage compel one to see marriage as an oppressive entrapment. Male supremacy is valued above all else, since cultural traditional practices reinforce their power. Dangarembga portrays education in two ways; as a fundamental aspect in Tambu's life to escape oppression and poverty, and in Nyasha's life to see the truth behind oppression and male dominance which she unsuccessfully rebelled against. The study has, furthermore, established that there is gender adversity which impedes

development in Africa and the world. For this reason, it recommends that African governments should strengthen consequence management instruments in their countries in order to subvert gender-based challenges for social justice and women empowerment.

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