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Ironical Demythologization in Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*

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Abstract

This paper explores and analyses irony implied in Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*. The novel is set in Indian myth. The story has one woman and two men and they have a triangular relationship. The woman who lusts for two men: one who has beautiful mind and other who has beautiful body; and she shares bed with both men and dies with them. The novel turns out a battleground of the conflict between human emotion and intellect. It puts the binary of head and body on the horizontal line opposite to the existing vertical

line. Irony lies in this juxtaposition of the transposed heads-heads set in wrong bodies. The woman gets pleasure of body and head. Irony is here in revelation of the discrepancy between physical desire and spiritual desire. Mann reconciles the binary by leaning on the side of the body. He focuses on the practical human needs rather than the spiritual and theoretical. He subverts the definitions of pious and profane love.

Keywords: Mysticism, Psychological Repression, Intellectual Mind, Sensuous Body, Demythologization, Libidinous Unconscious

Introduction

Paul Thomas Mann was a German novelist, social critic, philanthropic essayist, and Nobel Prize laureate. He was lauded principally for a series of highly symbolic and ironic epic novels, mid-length stories and the psychology of the artist and intellectual. He is noted for his analysis and critique of the European and German soul in the beginning of the 20th century using modernized German and Biblical stories and also the ideas of Goethe, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer.

The genuine novel *The Transposed heads* (*Die Vertauschten Kopfe*) was published in 1940. It adopts an Indian parable. The novel has its sub-title 'An Indian Legend'. Probably, the lecture of German Indologist Heinrich Zimmer about the Goddess Kali inspired Thomas Mann to write the novel *The Transposed Heads*. Zimmer's source was a story in Sanskrit book of legend Vetal Panchavinsati. Thomas Mann's novels are always full of dichotomies of various kinds: feeling versus intellect, freedom versus authority, immorality (decadence) versus morality (respectability), artistic or religious pursuits versus participations in everyday life. Naturally, it is not surprising that he wrote a book about two people who represent opposite ways of living. One character lives by the dictates of the reasoning-head, while the other by the dictates of the sensual part-body.

Thomas Mann takes the Cartesian split-- that endless war between mind and body; Mann tilts on the side of the body. The novel deals with the problem of spirit (Geist) and nature (Nature); intellect and beauty are further terms that qualify the dichotomy Mann is concerned about. The novel illustrates the conflict using two characters; one character lives by the dictates of the reasoning head whereas the other by the dictates of sensual body. In this novel, an Indian legend has turned into a fantastical absurd tale. In Mann's mystical India, a wonderful accident allows for an interesting experiment. There are two young friends - Nanda is a cowherd and blacksmith, a strong, earthly youth rooted in his physical body while the contemplative Shridaman is a merchant's son with priestly Brahman blood in his lineage. Though the young men are polar opposites, they have a strong friendship built on mutual admiration and a hint of healthy envy. One spring, two friends are walking together through the country in connection with their respective occupations. They come upon a sight of a beautiful young woman at remote ritual bathing place. They watch the woman secretly as she bathes. Nanda enjoys without shame. Shridaman is embarrassed but inspired for love and marriage.

Mann launches the friends in the "hushed" philosophical discussion --a frequent attribute to the novel. Shridaman of *The Transposed heads* says that it is a crime not to feast upon beauty. And he promptly falls in love with the young woman, Sita. Sita and Shridaman are married with the help of Nanda. From this scenario springs one of most bizarre love triangles in literature. Six months after the marriage, the couple accompanied by Nanda goes on journey to Sita's family. Losing their way, they lead to a confrontation with Kali, the earth mother.

Obeying an impulse of his heart, Shridaman expresses a wish to honour the Goddess. He feels a strong urge to sacrifice himself and he severs himself there. Nanda too beheads himself later. Then Sita goes to the shrine and confronts the ghastly sight. Afraid of the accusation, she is about to commit suicide when the voice of Goddess is heard. She tells Sita to set the heads to the bodies. But in her excitement, she joins wrong heads to the wrong bodies. Now the question arises - who is the husband of Sita? For the right decision, they go to the ascetic holy man Kamandaman. The ascetic man gives his decision that the man who has the husband's head is her real husband. Sita and Shridaman go to their home and Nanda becomes hermit. Sita and Shridaman spend their days and nights in full enjoyment of the pleasures of the senses. They get a son Samadhi (Andhakha) who is nearsighted. But, unfortunately, Sita cannot reap the fruit of her "mistake" forever as Shridaman's body goes back to the original stage. She shares her couch with the man who is her husband's friend. Finally, all of the three enter into the funeral pyre.

Again and again the question is asked: Is it the head or body which is most closely linked to the beloved? The book attempts to unify all those oppositions once and for all but that is not an easy task. This novel has strong undercurrent of morality reflecting in principles and values, and authentic human beings. The story is placed in India, which adds mysticism to an already mysterious issue of sexual desire and marital responsibility between husband and wife. The woman who lusts for two men: one who has beautiful mind and other who has beautiful body; and shares bed with both men and dies with them.

Despite such milieu in which the story is set, the novel is truer to Schopenhauer's philosophy which was a constant influence on Mann, rather than Indian concepts and values. The dilemma between spirit and nature, as Thomas Mann expounds it, is alien to Indian thought. The novel is thus problematic in the sense that it creates a dilemmatic image of head and body, intelligence and sex.

The Transposed Heads has remained something of an enigma to the literary critics. Various critics have commented upon this novel from different perspectives. Anand Mahadevan, in his essay "Switching Heads and Cultures: Transformation of an Indian myth by Thomas Mann and Girish Karnad", shows two cultural civilizations Aryans and Dravidian elements mingling together. Despite the prevailing caste-distinction in Indian society, he presents the lack of distinction claiming that "the two cultures are so intertwined that the Aryans recognized its Dravidian elements to be just as sacred as their own elements" (34). That is why, after the transposition of the heads, Shridaman exclaims that "his new body makes it perfectly reasonable for him to advocate the worship of Bright peak" (35). Ananda further says that:

Mann proposes that interactions between Aryans and Dravidians to produce cohesive harmonious structures only when - - catalyzed by the female sexual energies represented by Sita - - they blend into each other so completely that their very duality is lost. Andhakha is not Shiva-Shava. He is not even two forms of one person. He is a unitary product containing the attributes of Shridaman, Nanda and Sita within himself. He is neither Aryan nor Dravidian. His condition is genuinely ambiguous, like that of Hindu society itself. (34)

Similarly, Ajoy Ranjan Biswas looks at the novel "in the light

of Freudian psychology and the metaphysical problematic of the dichotomous tension between <Natur> (nature) and <Geist> (intellect), vitality and spirituality of human life" (355). He goes ahead explaining the unconscious psyche behind the fact, and finds,

After the heads of the two men were transposed by her under the spell of her libidinous unconscious, she began to live conjugally with the man of her desire who combined vibrating vitality and penetrating intellect. But gradually both the men are transformed into their original shapes and the Nanda-Shridaman duality renews its unresolved tension. The last scene with gruesome, <suttee> committed by Sita on the funeral pyre of Nanda and Shridaman throws back the original problematic - implying that the apparent dualities, the dichotomies of the birth and death, good and bad, sacred and profane are all the ironical manifestations.....(355)

Irony, one of the significant anti-metaphorical devices, is a contrast between reality and appearance. Its origin comes from the Greek comedy where the character called *eironeia* meaning a "dissembler" characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less knowledgeable than he was. In modern critical uses "irony" remains there in the root sense of dissembling not in order to deceive but in order to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects. Irony, in the latest sense, is a way of writing designed to leave open the question of what the literal meaning might signify. In irony, there is a perpetual deferment of significance. The old definition of irony is now superseded. Irony is saying something in a way that activates not one but, an endless series of subversive interpretations. It is an opposition, vigorous, agile and is more closely related to more serious objective realities. M.H. Abrams defines irony as,

A term introduced by Friedrich Schlegel and other German writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to designate a mode of dramatic or narrative writing in which the author builds up the illusion of representing reality, only to shatter it by revealing that the author, as artist, is the arbitrary creator and the manipulator of the characters and their actions. (100)

Irony highlights the importance of perspective taking in interpreting content. With respect to verbal irony, ironic interpretation allows a speaker to take a perspective on what is said vis-à-vis opposing meaning. The binary oppositions in speaker's ironies are often realized as simple logical negation. The association of verbal irony with suppressed negation is commonplace. Since spoken language has an explicit negative operator and since any sentence or term automatically references a member of a complement set within the scope of this operator, implicit negation represents a travail way to construct a binary opposition. In addition to logical negations, the binary oppositions effective in speaker ironies may also be realized as psychological consistency oppositions.

Analysis

Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, a quintessence of

love triangles, uses biting irony to give a penetrating insight into love and humanity, and above, all Hindu attitude to sex and sexuality as opposed to spiritual purity. The novel turns out a battleground of the conflict between human emotion and intellect. Mann generates irony to deflate the desire of Sita -- the female protagonist -- for physical satisfaction. The more she attempts to be happy, the more disappointment overtakes her life. When she wants to find an alternative of one problem, she only is trapped in another problem. Finally, the story ends with the death of all three characters. We come to realize that spiritual dignity is nothing in front of the dissatisfaction of human desire. Thomas Mann, however, generates the irony in *The Transposed Heads* not just to subvert the opposition between head and the body but also to reveal the gap between the human desires for body and the emphasis on suppressing them for spiritual enlightenment. The transposition of Nanda's body into Shridaman's head and vice-versa exploits the main ironic mode in the novel and the happenings aftermath. Irony in the novel springs from a recognition of the socially constructed self as arbitrary and that demands revision of values and conventions. Even though Sita's desire for body is ironized, the irony takes on a ramified quality to deflate rigid Hindu attitude to sexual desire. The locus of Mann's irony comes from his liberal outlook, which mediates between the head and heart, between the spiritual need for restraint and the physical desire for satisfaction.

In this uniquely ironical story, the series of ironies peep out in different situations. One of the striking ironies appears when Sita mistakenly transposes Shridaman's, Sita's husband's, head into Nanda, her lover's body, in the abandoned temple of Kali. When Goddess Kali gives her power to make the both dead men alive by enchanting the name Kali or Devi or Durga, her happiness is par excellence and in her haste she joins wrong head to the wrong body. In fact, her mistaken acts are the spell of her libidinous unconscious. The whole action and situation in the novel imply the apparent dualities; the dichotomies of birth and death, good and bad, sacred and profane, male and female. All can be judged as ironical manifestations. The act of transposition itself is the main irony in the novel since it paves the way for the further ironies. Before the transposition Shridaman and Nanda are two individual selves just reflecting the other's self in one. But once the one's head gets attached to other, one's half part survives in the other half.

The contradictory love of Sita is another basic cause of such impending consequences. Sita, however, earlier is in love with two men -- one man for his intellect mind and the other man for his sensuous body. She loves Shridaman for his intellectuality; he is a philosopher-like-man. Nanda is dark, goat-nosed but sensuous and he has got his lucky calf-lock on his breast. He has strong arms which have already swung her to the sun at the feast of aid to the sun. How can a woman love two men at once for the fulfillment of her desire? The novel reveals the powerful female sexual desire which also dismantles the suppression presents in Hindu mythology. Sita loves Nanda's body. On the other hand, Shridaman is supremely intellect personality which makes Sita want him too. In fact, she seeks for integrity of head and body in natural perfect being which she can't find in one person and lusts for two. Later, when she gets both, the head and body are of different men.

In the ironic storehouse, most striking irony is used when beautiful Sita waits outside the temple in the cart for Nanda

to bring Shridaman. She supposes that stubborn Shridaman does not want to come out leaving his pray and Nanda might have been forcing him to come. But she is far away from what fate has stored for her. After waiting for a long time, she goes into the temple. Quite opposite to her thought, she has to face the most bizarre sight there. Here we observe God as the great ironist. How the people become puppet in the hand of God! Here thinking and happenings go to opposite directions and create cosmic irony. After getting power to revive the both men, she commits a blunder by switching the heads.

Likewise, Sita's strong repressed desire for sexuality is explicit again when Sita makes a mistake of transposing wrong head to the wrong body. Though explicitly, it is her mistake made in haste but the reality is something else. The mistake is, in fact, the manifestation of her real psychological repression. In a sense, the mistake is an opportunity to fulfill her desire to live with both intellectual mind of Shridaman and sensuous body of Nanda. Her mistake provides her advantage of living with both intellectual head and strong body.

Another genuine ironical question is -- who is the true husband of Sita? One who has husband's head or one who has husband's body? The body with which she has slept is now attached to the head of her husband's friend and the body which her husband has got now is of her husband's friend. This is the most ironical situation where none of them can take the decision of who her true husband is. Being unable to take decision all the three people go to the Kamadaman, the ascetic, who has risen from the gravity of sex and lives in Dankaka forest. Though Kamadaman's final decision goes in favour of Shridaman, his first inclination is to give Sita to Nanda. His first penchant is to give Sita to Nanda because he is now the bearer of hand that takes Sita as a wife: that is the body of the husband. But he changes his mind immediately after pronouncing this judgment and instead saying earlier inclination just a premise states that Shridaman is the rightful husband:

Husband is, who wears the husband's head.
Here lies no doubt at all, must it be said,
As woman is the highest bliss and bourne of songs,
So among limbs to head the highest rank belongs. (87)

This statement of Kamadaman carries verbal irony. It shows the supremacy of head in the Hindu society. He says that head rules all the limbs of the body. But it can't do if there is not integration between them. Through the words of Kamadaman, Mann shows the answer from the legend Vetala Panchavinsati in which king Vikramaditya gives the same answer. But death of all the major characters proves that the decision of Kamadaman is not correct. Through the tragic ending of characters, Mann wants to prove that the Hindu supremacy of head is just an illusion, not the reality. Making the binary horizontal opposite to the vertical binary of head and body, he is subverting the gap between the both.

Through the argument between Nanda and Shridaman about who should be the right Husband of Sita, Thomas Mann shows the existing dualism between head and body in the Hindu religion. And with the Kamadaman's decision to give the Sita to him who has got husband's head, he shows the supremacy of head in the Hindu religion. However, Sita's dissatisfaction in both situations and their tragic ending in the death of the three prove the disintegration of body and head that lies there. It shows that so-called spiritual dignity is

hollow in the realistic world which is full of human desires. Similarly, the ironical situation arises in the act of suicide of both Shridaman and Nanda. Shridaman beheads himself because of the illicit desires of Sita toward Nanda. Shridaman kills himself perhaps to clear the way between two lovers. Nanda too kills himself for the fear of accusation of killing the friend. Isn't it ironical when they kill themselves to escape from being guilty either physically or mentally, and adversely they are resurrected and have to face the further problem? Death does not bring remedy to them, birth ironically follows the death. Both the dead men are resurrected in new forms and the next ironical problem is of baptism- whom to call Shridaman and whom to call Nanda. But Sita simply solves the problem by addressing them according to the Hindu religiosity. Sita calls Nanda to the one who bears Nanda's head and Shridaman to one who has Shridaman's head. She addresses both the men according to the head that is attached to their bodies. She is not in confusion about whom to call Shridaman and whom to call Nanda. Thus, Hindu religion superiorizes head to body. Nevertheless, body matters most for both men because Shridaman becomes very much happy to lose earlier frail body and to get strong body of Nanda. At the same time, Nanda becomes unhappy to lose his strong body and to get frail body of Shridaman. Thus, with the presentation of the happiness and sadness at the achievement and loss of the body in the men Shridaman and Nanda respectively, Mann subverts the existing dichotomy between head and body; for human beings, not only the head, but body also matters.

The demythologization of Hindu religion by introducing Christianity in Hinduism is another significant aspect of the novel. It is very strange to us that Sita confesses in front of the Goddess Kali even though the confession is not practised in Hinduism. Situational irony involves in introducing the Christianity in the Hinduism. Sita says clearly that, in spite of being married with Shridaman, she is attracted toward Nanda. Through this confession, Mann merges Christianity with Hinduism. Though Hinduism stresses on the suppression of the desire of the body for the salvation of the soul or to make the way clear to heaven, Thomas Mann's focus is not the soul but is the body. By adjoining the mythology with the psychology and intermixing Eastern tradition with the European one, Mann is actually demythologizing the Hindu myth. The myth which is about the supremacy of the Gods and Goddesses has been subverted through the humanization of the Goddess Kali. This demythologization and humanization of powerful Goddess reveals the presence of human desires and wishes and repression in the Hindu myth. The attributes of the Goddess are humanly. She is the disguise of both order and disorder.

Presenting Kali with less power and reducing her to the caricatures, Mann reduces the value of Kali in the Hindu religion. The author's characterisation of the Goddess is very ironical and has nothing in common with serene depiction of the Indian mythology. Here, European irony and the Indian serenity stand opposed. Caricature is a means to achieve "demythologization". On the other hand, typification becomes a means to illustrate the problem- spirit versus body. Here, Mann has done the job of mediator – from the mythological figures, he creates living beings with virtues and weaknesses. In this case, he transfers Indian myth into the European intellectual world. In this way, Mann wants to find an answer to the question that body is important like spirit.

Kamadaman's behaviour is erratic, ambiguous at the best and perverted at the worst. When the three characters Sita, Shridaman, Nanda find Kamadaman completely absorbed in his austerities, Mann's enchantingly humorous description of this encounter is laced with deep cynicism about the ascetic way of life. The man, who has conquered all the desires brushes the path ahead of him to prevent squashing insects beneath his foot, raises the same broom as a weapon to attack three supplicants in his path. Characterizing Kamadaman with contradiction, Mann proves that body and spirit cannot be separated. The man who has gone through physical pains to lose the flesh so that he can get rid of the temptation of flesh himself appears very much weak in front of the flesh. He himself is remained bone and skin and becomes able to lose the flesh of the body but when he sees Sita beautiful in her full flesh, he passionately says to Sita:

But I am ready to bear with you and your vapours, particularly since I have observed from the first that among the three of you is a woman grown, whom the senses find glorious; slender as a vine, with soft thighs and full breasts, oh yea, oh fie! Her navel is beauteous, her face lovely with partridge eyes, and her breasts, I repeat, are full and upstanding. Goodday, O woman! When men look upon you, do not the hairs of their bodies rise up for lust? (81)

In these statements, Mann pokes fun at Kamadaman. Mann obviously makes no effort to conceal the excitement that Sita's presence arouses in the ascetic Kamadaman has fallen prey to the beauty of full-breasted Sita. Male does have at first male eyes to look at the body of female, then after only he has other qualities. Perhaps that is the reason he does not find any fault for being both the fall in love with her. By exposing his lack of sexual control, Mann undermines his asceticism and his ability to solve the moral dilemma.

Kamadaman is unable to solve the moral dilemma and provide Sita chance to live with the perfect being. It is so because, through the new husband of Sita, Mann shows that it is possible forcibly to harmonize the two aspects *Geist*-head and *Korper*-body of human nature. Fortunately, Sita gets the head that she loves for intellectuality and strong body that she loves. But unfortunately she does not become able to reap the fruit of her mistake forever. From the beginning to the end, there is a struggle for domination between the Shridaman's head and Nanda's body. The Nanda's body expresses itself first, forcing the refined Shridaman to speak like the simple Nanda, while in parallel fashion the Shridaman body intensifies Nanda's quest for further immerse himself in the Aryan idea of salvation, leading him to choose an ascetic way of life in the forest.

However, as the time passes, Nanda's body deprived of care begins to be increasingly dominated by the Shridaman's head, eventually degenerating to the frail condition of the old Shridaman body. Mann ironically states that even the calf's lock of hair on the breast thins in difference to the head. This is not, however, to complete victory for the Shridaman's head, as it, in turn, begins to lose its fine Aryan features and assumes Nanda's Dravidian goat-shaped nose and thick lips. The change also takes place in Shridaman's body which is now attached to Nanda's head. Nanda cares the frail body too as he used to do his earlier body. Because of the regular anointment with mustard oil, Nanda becomes able to turn it strong as earlier arms of blacksmith. Lucky calf-lock can also

be seen in his breast. Thus, instead of harmoniously combining to form a perfect being, the Shridaman head and Nanda body erode each other's distinctive advantages. As the Nanda body attached to the Shridaman's head deteriorates, however, the child also becomes the painful remainder to Sita and her quest for unified Shridaman-Nanda lover has failed. Another important irony is evident in the descent of Sita and Shridaman. It means while these gradual changes signifying the confusion in the head and body are taking place, Sita gives birth to Samadhi. The name appears incongruous because the term Samadhi refers not to a person, but to a state of being. It is a philosophical term used in Brahmanical Hinduism primarily to denote the dissolution of the individual soul into the absolute Brahma. Samadhi, the son, is the trinity of Shridaman's intellectuality, Sita's beauty and Nanda's calf-lock, but fails to be a complete state of being. Samadhi in Hindu mythology indicates the transcendental absolute state of being. But Samadhi can be judged as a result of mere dissatisfaction, basically, if we evaluate his nearsightedness. Samadhi is even called Andhaka which means a blind one. He represents such dissolution by possessing the fiery intellect of Shridaman, the beauty of Sita and the calf's lock of Nanda. As such, the child is Sita's longing and desire. Samadhi also means collection. Samadhi is no doubt born out of Sita and Shridaman; she always has longing for the body of Nanda and used to close her eyes to imagine as if Nanda strong arms are embracing her. In the ironical sense, this myopia is not the physical defect, rather the manifesto is psychological unconscious hidden in Sita. In this particular situation, the deterioration of Shridaman's and Nanda's bodies and child vision-defect function as the driving force to display Sita's psychological repression. She sleeps with Shridaman with her eyes closed, leading to the conception of partially blind boy. He becomes the repository of his mother's wish for unity, inheriting both physical beauty and intellectual ability. Thus, Andhaka is the true heir to the legacy of the Shridaman, Nanda, Sita trinity, and harmonizes for the first time between Geist and Korper. The beginning of the novel, however, is quiet, peaceful and orderly, but it ends with the noise, chaos and disorder. Novel is opened from the natural peace of forests and birds and is ended with the yelling of the conches and rolling of drums. Human beings console themselves with the thought that they shall live in peace after the death. Shridaman and Nanda die to escape the mental struggle between morality and physical desire. But the alternative of dying is living forever, in the same old way. But this is an ambition that has provoked many ironies in the line of "he that findeth his life shall lose it" (Enright 128). Nanda and Shridaman die but they are resurrected ironically and both have to live in the same old way. Though, Shridaman lives happily and in full enjoyment with Sita; happiness and enjoyment do not remain for them forever. This is the irony of love and death in the novel.

Conclusion

The Transposed Heads uses irony as a narrative tool to present the binary opposition between head and body and also to unfold the gap between the desires of body and suppressing them for the spiritual enlightenment in Hindu religion. His irony reconciles the binary, foregrounding a liberal view that upholds Hinduism, but not without deflating its rigidity towards sexual purity and restraint Mann uses irony of the situation to disclose the gaps in Hindu way of life. Irony is used as a weapon to shoot at the central contradiction of

Hinduism where the individuals are caught between their physical desire and spiritual thoughts. Sita, the female protagonist in the novel is married to the intelligent Shridaman. But to make the marriage successful, Nanda's effort of wooing her and convincing her parents are the main contributions. But the irony is that Sita is not sexually satisfied with her husband and but is attracted toward Nanda, her husband's friend. Shridaman and Nanda sacrifice themselves to the Goddess Kali. But they are resurrected in the new forms as their heads are transposed while making them alive by Sita. The novel subverts discrepancies between death and birth, and head and body. She is not satisfied by her husband. She can only be satisfied by breaking the oath that she has made to her husband. She is only trapped from one problem to another problem. Finally, they find death as the solution of their problem and it is also ironical that they find solution in death.

By the use of irony Thomas Mann subverts the discrepancy between body and head. The heroine Sita wanders from head – Shridaman to Nanda – body as she herself is in confused situation whether to go to the side of body or to head. In fact, she is in search of perfect being with intellect mind and sensual body. Mann finally leans on the side of the body because she finally goes to Nanda breaking the oath of marriage though she has to immolate into death with those two men. To prove the strong desire of body, she undermines the ascetic man's, Kamadman's, self-control. Kamadaman's admiration of Sita's physical beauty, when he sees her, throws him down from the peak. Through the ascetic man's lack of self-control, the novel shows the inherent sexual desire of mortal human beings. Mann, the liberalist, remains critical of a total disowning of physical needs and desires in Hinduism.

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