

A NEW IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORA: CHIKA UNIGWE'S *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET* AND MEG VANDERMERWE'S *ZEBRA CROSSING*

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Abstract

Diasporic literature centres on experiences of people who leave their homelands for various reasons and still retain ties with their home country. The diasporic journey has resulted in identity crisis as the migrants strive to assimilate the culture of the host country while still retaining attachments to their homelands. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines how identities of diasporic beings take on new dimensions in host environments using Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Meg Vandermerwe's *Zebra Crossing*. The paper places emphasis on the theme of identity crisis and identify formation that has been one of the major concerns of many postcolonial writers. This paper concludes that within the course of the characters dislocation, they grapple with the problem of alienation and will go on to form new identities known as diasporic identity while striving to be accepted into the mainstream culture.

Key words: diaspora, identity, postcolonial

Introduction

The history of the human race is incomplete without the aspect of migration and its attendant diasporic identity issues. By nature, man is designed to be mobile and he moves as the need arises in search of a variety of things like education, employment opportunities, peace, freedom and new worlds. His search may take him across parts of a nation, a continent or even across the globe. Sometimes, he does not voluntarily leave to another nation or globe but rather forced to leave.

Initially the word diaspora was largely and exclusively used to describe communities of Jews exiled from the homeland and dispersed throughout many lands. Back then, the term diaspora did not reflect the physical dispersal of the Jewsonly. It also carried religious and philosophical connotations. However in contemporary times, it has gained different meanings and no longer refers only to the plight of the Jews, but also to the situation of many other groups in exile who have experienced displacement.

One other early historical reference of diaspora is the Black African diaspora which began with slave trade. The first wave of migration in Africa saw Africans forced out of their native lands and dispersed to different European nations during the colonial era. These groups of African immigrants who were captured and shipped to other countries were almost viewed less than human beings and as such, were treated as properties and animals. The various forms of inhuman treatment meted out to them with the consciousness that they were

permanently dislocated from the homeland, forcefully fragmented and reconstructed their identities.

In the postcolonial era, due to political instability and failed leadership that have continued to plague African nations, many have been forced to abandon the homeland in search of greener pastures and better opportunities. Many characters in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Meg Vandermerwe's *Zebra Crossing* leave the mother nations for diaspora. In moving from one place to another and from one job or mode of existence to another, they break away from attachments, switch lifestyles while constantly reconstructing and negotiating their identities.

However, whether people migrated forcefully or willingly, living in diaspora is likely to bring with it complex challenges which include violation of human rights, lack of economic opportunity, multiculturalism and probably, forced integration. In addition to these problems, they are faced with the issue of reconciling the cultural and social differences between the old home and the new nation.

That is to say that once outside the shores of the motherland, naturally, the diasporic being is caught in a web of anxieties such as the language of communication, how to adapt to the cultural values of the new society and if he or she will be accepted by the host community. As though these problems are not enough, they are seen as the 'Other' and therefore are not fully integrated into the new system. As a result, they are suspended between numbers of seemingly apparent but yet illusory binary oppositions such as the known and the unknown, the old life and the new life. This conflict between the old and the new is properly articulated by Isidore Okpewho who states that:

Unfortunately, expatriation is never simply a physical matter; it also takes a psychological toll on the emigrants. However much they yearn to reconnect with the homeland, an extended removal from the familiar environment inevitably weakens their bonds with it and, conversely, increases their commitment to the body if not the spirit. (10)

Consequently, they try to assimilate into the host society with the notion that will improve their diasporic experiences. That is, they are compelled to undergo a ritual process of transformation and with time, the primary identity begins to give way to the Eurocentric mainstream norm. This makes Jennifer Thorington Springer note that "while the disconnect between home and migratory space occurs early in the migrant's life experiences, the migratory act creates yet another dimension: navigating the terrain of former home and new home space" (250). It is therefore not surprising that the experience and identity of a person in diaspora changes over time giving rise to a diasporic identity.

The Postcolonial Theory

Being that the already existing European theories cannot adequately reflect the complexities associated with postcolonial African society and its literature, postcolonial theory emerged to appropriate the different aspects of postcolonial society that African writers deal with. The suitability of postcolonial theory to exploring Africa diaspora is based on the notion that postcolonial theory interrogates unequal power relations and consequent identity crisis formed. According to Daphne Grace, "postcolonial has for decades been concerned with rethinking identity and posing questions about formulations of space, of identity and of power" (7). Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin agree with Grace's assertion and go on to argue that issues of identity are important features of postcolonial discourse:

The major feature of postcolonial literature is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special postcolonial crisis of identity comes into being; the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place. (8-9)

Indeed, postcolonial theory which is a discourse of the minorities, the marginalized, the 'othered', has emerged to counter the dominant colonial discourse of representation and it aims to undermine the colonial ideology while dealing with issues of history, race, culture and many more from the perspective of the formerly colonized. Edward W. Said's "Orientalism" plays a crucial role in the wide acceptance of postcolonial theory as he sought to dismantle the hegemonic discourse that constructed 'the Orient' as an inferior 'Other'. In applying Foucault's model of power and knowledge, Said identified the power relations which stereotyped and consciously portrayed the "third world" countries as the "Other". Ann Dobie while discussing Said's "Orientalism" notes that stereotypical classification of people by the western society is basically done to enable easy conquest as:

Their view of the "other" world – "orientalism" – is inevitably colored by their own cultural, political, and religious backgrounds, leading them to depict those unlike themselves as inferior and objectionable - for example, as lazy, deceitful and irrational. The self, by contrast, is defined as good, upright and moral. (207)

Failed National Identity in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

On Black Sisters' Street tells the story of four young ladies who are forced to seek new identities in faraway Belgium due to their displacement from African nations. Their tales of displacement range from stories of child abuse and incest, to gang rape and the brutality of war, to joblessness despite having gotten the coveted certificate. As a result of Nigerian government's failure and its despotic employment system, the four women come to view the European sex industry as an attractive alternative.

***On Black Sisters' Street* and Depictions of Diasporic Identities**

With the help of the pimp Dele, these four ladies find themselves in Belgium. Adapting in the host nation will, of course, involve significant changes in their identities. The first identity to be altered as a result of the diasporic experience is that of name. In African societies, names are not only integral part of identity which describes a person. It goes beyond that to hold aspects of the family history and as such, many will not want to exchange it for any other thing. Alek who was named after her grandmother because she had inherited the old woman's shiny blackness, her height and her legendary beauty, unwillingly takes on a new name when she is coerced into prostitution. Dele deems her name unsuitable. He tells Polycarp:

The name Alek has to go. Alek. Sound too much like Alex. Man's name. We no wan' men. *Otioo*. That man's name has to go, one time. Give am woman name. finefine name for fine gal like her... Make I see... Cecilia? Nicole? Joyce?... Joyce. Yes. Joyce. Dat one sound like name weydey always jolly. Jooooooyce! (230)

From that moment, the woman's identity was erased on different levels and a new being, Joyce Jacobs was created. Her identity change is not limited to the name change. It goes further than that as the national identity is easily discarded and the citizenship of another nation taken up. With the obliteration of the name and cultural identity, she is disconnected from her roots both physically and psychologically. Years later, when she gains her freedom

and returns to Nigeria, she will go on to name her school Sisi's International Primary School because the only cultural identity she retains is that formed by the four sisters on Zwarte Zusterstraat Street in faraway Belgium.

Again, Unigwe explores renaming as a vital part of diasporic experience using the character Chisom. Having realized how dehumanizing her new life and means of livelihood will be in the new nation, she decides to create a different identity by adopting a new name. From the moment she meets Dele, she takes a decision about her identity. Daria Tunca is of the opinion that "Chisom deliberately creates an alter ego for herself, whose supposed familiarity is suggested in the very meaning of her adopted name" (10). Thus, in a bid to separate and distance her real self from the stranger she has become, she renames herself Sisi:

She did not tell her family that 'she had decided already to adopt a name she would wear in her new life. Sisi. 'Sister' in Shona'... She would re-name herself. She would go through a baptism of fire and be reborn as Sisi: a stranger yet familiar. Chisom would be airbrushed out of existence, at least for a while, and in her place would be Sisi. She would earn money by using her *punani*. And once she hit it big, she would reincarnate as Chisom. (44)

From the moment she decides to take on a new name, her identity continues to alter such that each new day in diaspora brings about further psychological alienation from the known self. What she did not know when she embarked on her diasporic journey is that the new society will forcefully strip her of identity and will go on to ensure the old identity never resurface because even at the time she died, "Nobody [knew] Sisi's real name, never having used it" (36).

It is unfortunate that even though she never gains the financial independence that made her embark on the diasporic journey, her psyche is greatly scarred. Her sexuality becomes a tool for controlling her body and as a result, there was the constant hatred and dissatisfaction that gnawed at her inner being. She will come to despise her new identity as: "She could no longer bear to look at herself, not even when she was alone. When she took a bath, she sponged her body without once looking at it" (248).

Sisi's fragmented identity continually sought to understand and maintain a stable relationship with Chisom's identity. Consequently, it becomes imperative that Chisom exists in her private space as it was the only way she can reconnect with the known self. Thus when she wants to remove those aspects that do not conform to what she has come to conceive as the essence of self, she retreats in search of Chisom. At such moments, she escapes from the diasporic identity that has come to taunt her whole existence and she would lament, "This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me... God help me!" (181).

In addition to that, there is the struggle for psychic wholeness in a hostile world. Her perception of being ugly forms her identity and she wishes for a rebirth of identity. That makes it easy for her to assume the character of different people at different times. Some days, she plays the role of a wealthy married woman who is on vacation and on some days, she decides to be a professional single woman. As a person in virtual captivity and one in search of a wholesome identity, she is forced to create an illusory identity in place of her fragmented identity. She is able to maintain her sanity through the false identity created. According to Abiola Irele in the essay "In Praise of Alienation", Sisi's behavior is not out of place as:

We need a new determination, a new spirit of adventure filled by a modern imagination: a new state of mind that will enable us to come to terms with our state of alienation and to transform it from a passive condition we confusedly endure into an active collective existential project. We need to take charge of our objective alienation by assuming it as an intention so as to endow it with a positive significance. (601)

Sisi is not the only one who is repulsed at the diasporic identity formed and thus desire freedom. The other ladies also cringe at who they have become over the years. Etienne is that customer that reminds Joyce of her new life and identity change in diaspora. Even though she despises him, she forces herself to smile whenever she sees him. His presence constantly reminds her of an Alek that existed before her and the need to reconnect with that identity. For her, “Etienne is, more than any other customer, the motivation for her to leave the Vingerlingstraat. He makes her fear that she has forgotten the person that she used to be and if left for too long she may never find that person again” (179).

In addition to psychological alienation, there is also the case of physical alteration. Dress code which always marks out different societies provides another mark of lost identity. The first work clothes Sisi gets is something she would never put on if allowed to make her choice. She worries that the “blouse hugged her intimately, sequined in silver. A gold-coloured nylon skirt which showed her butt cheeks when she bent. Sisi wanted to ask for a longer skirt. She felt naked” (202). She knew better than to ask because she had no identity. She has become an anonymous and a faceless person who had no will of her own but rather a commodity in the hands of Madam and the pimp Dele. Later Sisi will come to understand the meaning of the words “this is a different world. This place changes you” (117). She indeed changes on different levels. In the essay “Migration and Identities in Chika Unigwe’s Novels”, Omolola A. Ladele and Adesumbo E. Omotayo are of the opinion that:

Daily on their job posts, they have to haggle constantly for fees to be paid by their prospective clients. The situation is so exasperating, it is a frustrated Sisi who laments that at times she does an average of fifteen men a day. For the four protagonists in this novel, the Belgian environment has rendered them without a genuine identity, they have become faceless, voiceless and as mere commodities to be traded in. (56)

In the same vein, Alex is given her own set of clothes and the new dress code symbolises her new identity in the new nation. Although she has been deceived into believing she would be babysitting, when Madam gives her a “blue bra sprinkled with glitter and a matching G-string, boots up to her thighs” (234), she is initially confused but later learns she is to earn her keep. Madam tells her about opening shop which means the woman views their bodies as mere shops that solely exists for the purpose of generating profit. With that, the woman “bullied her out of the house, into the car and to the Schipperskwartier. No passport. No money. What was she to do? (233). Being surrounded by lack of spatial freedom and armed with the knowledge that her life was in someone else’s hands, she distanced herself from the identity that existed prior to her diasporic journey.

With Sisi’s death, Joyce reconnects with her lost identity and so do the other sisters. Their friend’s death reinforces their existence as faceless beings without any real identity in Belgium and it creates more desire for home. They remember that at home, people are not allowed to mourn alone; they become overwhelmed with memories of their places of birth

and their minds wander from Belgium to the homeland. It is quite different in their new society as “their grief has to be contained within the four walls of their flat. No matter how much it becomes for them they must not let it swell and crack the walls” (95).

Yet, that experience will deepen their bond and turn them into sisters as they realize for the first time, how much they have been alienated from their roots and rediscover that hidden desire for a relationship with strong ties. When they share the experiences that forced them into sexual slavery, the gap between them is bridged and a deep sense of community formed. In that moment, their individual memory gives rise to the collective memory and they hope to reclaim their identities in the context of community. When Joyce tells the other sisters her story and her real name, Alek, it “sounds like a homecoming. Like the origin of life” (154). Thus, Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters Street* effectively balances postcolonial issues with identity questions. The story which is basically the tale of dislocation, displacement and alienation, shows that although people are lured to the diaspora with the promise of greener pastures, they have to adjust an already formed identity as to negotiate a new identity and may be destroyed within that process.

Abandoning National Identity in Meg Vandermerwe’s *Zebra Crossing*

The society depicted in *Zebra Crossing* is quite similar to the society depicted by Chika Unigwe in the novel *On Black Sisters’ Street*. *Zebra Crossing* centres on Chipo and her brother George, who are forced to grow under harsh economic and political crisis due to Zimbabwean government’s failure. They are sad to learn their dreams are destroyed by the very government that is meant to protect it. Consequently, they are forced to flee the mother nation to South Africa, in search of greener pastures. Their journey across the border is challenging as they hide under mattresses that smell of “sweat, beer and unwashed bodies” and they are bitten by lice (26). While crossing borders, they feel trapped and are treated like prisoners. This foregrounds the challenges they are going to encounter in the host country.

Diasporic Beings’ Search for New Identities in *Zebra Crossing*

On their arrival, Chipo sadly learns that their identities as African migrants have been greatly altered as they are received and depicted as illegals and criminals. For them to survive in the new nation, they need asylum-permit which is the only paper that will guarantee their new identity. Without this “all important” new identity, they become outlaws that can be arrested and deported at will. The officials are aware that these diasporic beings are without any true identity and are therefore disrespectful as they do not talk to but shout at Chipo. In her bewilderment, she wonders what temporary asylum seeker’s permit is and goes on to infer that:

It is a magic piece of paper. It grants you the permission to stay in South Africa while the government considers your permanent residence application. All foreign Africans must carry it. Once they have a permit, most are so afraid to lose it that they take it with them everywhere. When I eventually come by one, I stare at the magic piece of paper. It does not look so very important, but it is. (48)

Through this, Vandermerwe reveals the sovereign authority and exclusive nature of the new nation which assigns rights to certain individuals while others are denied such rights. George refers to his Home Affairs papers as a “pass book”. The use of the word pass book evokes the memory of colonial domination during apartheid wherein all the black citizens had to carry a pass book. The pass book law was a discriminatory regulation that was used to control black

South Africans and surprisingly the postcolonial society was not rid of such racial segregation. George points out that the Home Affairs papers are a means by which the present South African government redefines identities of the migrants since, “Without the permit paper, “the police will arrest you and deport you, no questions asked” (37). It therefore shows the permit is an essential part of new identity that will be required for any meaningful diasporic existence in South Africa. In a bid to get this all important identity, a young Zimbabwean mandies of starvation after waiting for weeks to be seen by Home Affairs and even after death he remains a fantôme that wanders around. Their loss of identity without the pass book further alienates them from the dominant culture.

Apart from being alienated, the host society continually made enslaving implications on their psyche. With constant threats and accusations, they are reminded they are liminal beings who need to go back to their own country. It is more appalling that this marginalisation and viewing of diasporic beings as the “Other” does not take place only in the west but also in another African nation. The level of discrimination and alienation is such that George is arrested simply because the ticket inspector has the impression that his girlfriend, Harmony, is a South African. George’s arrest affects their psychological identity greatly as they begin to live in fear, scared of every moment they live in South Africa. Their fear is heightened when they remember the inspector’s threat, “Just you wait. When the World Cup is finished, we will drive all your foreigners out! If you stay, you will burn” (105).

As people discriminated and seen as the “Other”, the hostility of the new nation has produced fragmented identities amongst the diasporic subjects. On arrival to South Africa, they realise it is difficult for African foreigners to find comfortable places to live as the landlords are making demands that are near impossible to fulfil. They are asked to provide such as a South African ID, proof of employment, bank account details and even make large deposit. This demand is placed on them to ensure they remain outsiders and not allowed to integrate into the dominant host society. As such, the only available accommodation is at President’s Heights where they are crammed in a room with Peter and David. When Chipo gets close to the building, she realises how ironical its name is: “This is not the sort of building that any president we know of will choose to reside. There is washing hanging from every window and the mismatched curtains flap like tattered flags in the wind” (37). Racial discrimination and othering process is taken to a new level as they were not allowed to rent the houses they wanted because they are diasporic subjects.

They are also denied access to health facilities as seen in the case of Jeremiah’s cousin who is denied access to health care after the nurse discovers he does not have Xhosa name. After waiting for eight hours, the young man died. With his death, Jeremiah becomes a total stranger to himself and his friends. He has panic attacks and worries every time. According to Chipo, “anxiety does not rhyme or sound like anything. It is unique and terrible” (46). Since the African diaspora community is seen as enemies and threats to the South Africans, they become victims of physical abuse and violence in addition to the isolation they are subjected to. The new diasporic identity formed seemed to be summarised in Chipo’s words thus:

Fear is a sharp word. It makes your tongue bleed. Anger is sour and fiery. Like acid indigestion. Hatred. Hatred is a word that gets stuck in your throat. Xenophobia. Xenophobia is a long word. Complicated, arrogant. It thinks it is smarter than other words. It is a bully. Anxiety is a terrible word. It is the ground turning to quicksand beneath you. (103)

Another site of identity split is the lack of employment or lack of suitable economic opportunities. Even though people like David, Jeremiah and Isaiah are lawyers, accountants and electrical engineers in their home country, they can only do menial jobs in South Africa. With each menial job they engage in, they lose a part of themselves. This makes Chipo and George start asking themselves, “Why did you leave your home country?” (45). It is a question that seeks to reclaim the known identity. George says, “I didn’t leave Zimbabwe to sleep on the street in South Africa like a stray dog” (45). He is forced to work like a maid, washing plates and mopping floors. George is even forced to sweep dead cockroaches and clean human faeces from the pavement. Unfortunately, they had fled the mother nation with the belief that it would change their financial status and thus bring an elevated self-image. Disappointment and disillusionment of many kinds become the everyday experience of the Zimbabweans that left the mother country. They are shocked and forced to adapt to the grub and depressing diaspora environ. For many, their experiences upon arrival in the host nation, breaks them to the point of no recovery as the host land becomes far more hostile than they had ever imagined. With many conflicts existing in the diasporic space, the characters become unsure of their fragmented identities.

On her own part, Chipo is greatly marginalised. As one living with albinism, Chipo is subjugated and called many derogatory names. Her physical appearance has great effects on her personal identity. She is isolated in the society and subject to psychological and physical victimisation. In South Africa, she is called ‘inakwu’ which means ape, ‘wit kaffir’, ‘spierwit’ or ‘wit Boer’ while the whites call her albino (15). Nobody refers to her by her real name. This makes her lament that “I also have a real name, though. My name is Chipo. In Shona it means ‘Gift’. When my mother gave it to me, I wonder, did she have a premonition about her daughter’s destiny” (15). Names are fundamental and are meant to connect people to their history and allow them dig into their roots. The different derogatory names with which she is addressed greatly attacks her identity and personality so that when she searches introspectively, she cannot find herself. It is like she has disappeared, and in her place, she finds many unrecognisable beings and identities.

The sense of loss of identity makes her search frantically for a wholesome identity. She appeals for recognition and a sense of community. The need for acceptance makes her desire to win David’s heart at all cost and drives her to seek the help of Dr Ongani who deceives her and later blackmails her into cooperating with him. Since there is the belief that people with albinism do possess certain superpowers, Doctor Onganigoes on to manipulate this belief as to gain a fortune. During this process, Chipo’s individuality and identity is totally overshadowed. She laments thus:

Very quickly, he lays down the law. I am not allowed to talk to, or even see, the customers. I must remain an enigma. My job will be to sit with the *muti* behind the purple curtain. The customers will be able to see my outline so that they can be assured I am there. (157).

Chipo becomes like the animals in the museum that are caged and frozen in time. During the gambling scheme, Chipo is prevented from cooking, running errands or even leaving the house. In fact, she does not communicate with anybody. Although she had initially embarked on this diasporic journey to find a new identity that will change her social status by becoming financially independent, she does not realise that dream. She becomes more dependent and with each denial of her basic needs, her identity becomes more fragmented. She has to stop requesting for new spectacles as she is constantly reminded that “spectacles are expensive,

Chipo. And now that David has lost his job and George has quit, we have many people depending on us. Obligations sounds like, sounds like, sounds like” (195).

She would later acknowledge that she feels out of place; she is certain she is not the only one who cannot find peace at President’s Heights. She “feels dizzy from all this newness. Dizzy rhymes with fizzy”(40). Yet, her case is made worse since she is a woman with an abnormal skin condition. Rosemary Marangoly George explains that “the association of home and the female has served to present them as mutual handicaps mutually disempowering”(19). The gendered disadvantage she faces in diaspora is illustrated during her stay in Cape Town wherein she continues to suffer from patriarchal constraints. She observes, “In Beitridge I cleaned for the General and his family, and cooked and cleaned at home for George and myself. In Cape Town I cook and clean for George, David and Peter” (42). While discussing the experiences of migrant women, Sharon Krunnel states that “their experiences as migrants may also shift; racism or xenophobia may be more evident in the country of settlement, or gendered expectation more pronounced in migrant communities strongly adhering to ‘traditional’ ways and structures” (3). This is true as she is expected to perform her gender roles without any complaint. The expectation of gender performance is further depicted when a frustrated George returns home to hear David praising Chipo. He retorts, “Grade A? Chipo? Ha ha. A good joke... Yes, A-grade for scrub, cook and clean. Speaking of which, why is the dinner not ready yet, hey? Can’t you even manage that, Tortoise? (39). The traditional roles of cooking, cleaning and ensuring everyone is happy she has to perform ensures she lives in the shadow of her brother and the other men in her life without an identity of her own. Being considered as an inferior other, she cannot assert herself. The only way of developing an identity that is not fragmented lay in her gaining freedom and throwing away the cumbersome weight saddled by patriarchy. However, without financial independence, that wholesome identity would never be gotten:

I have often imagined the day I would say goodbye to George and start out on my own. I would leave a letter on the table, propped against the bag of mealie meal. In the letter I would thank him, of course, for taking care of me for so many years. I would try not to hold the insults and names against him. I would wish him well and promise to be in touch. What then? My first steps on my own. (173).

Unfortunately, she never embarked on that journey of self-discovery and recreating of fractured identity as she is killed for her body parts at the end of the novel. Her body is decapitated so that the Tanzanians who believe in several myths and superstitions regarding albinism can supply her body parts for amulets. Again, Chipo is not the only character who desired to have self-identity as she notes that most people who visited Dr Onagani were illegal immigrants who desired to find a meaning and an identity.

Conclusion

Africans in diaspora are far from having any whole identity. Their experiences in the host land bring about identity fragmentation. Initially, they strive to understand the host communities and be accepted into its main cultural identities. However, the more they strive for acceptance, the more they are excluded and burdened with heightened identity crisis. With time, they abandon the quest to be accepted into the mainstream culture and strive to redefine and reclaim their identities. Unfortunately, Sisi and Chipo, the protagonists in the novels *On Black Sisters Street* and *Zebra Crossing* are made to pay the ultimate price of death in their bid to forge new identities.

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