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"Can a wild stream and a girl be one and the same?": An Ecofeminist Reading of Select Short Stories from Nandini Sahu's *Shedding the Metaphors*

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts an ecofeminist reading of select short stories from Nandini Sahu's *Shedding the Metaphors* (2023). The stories explore the complexities of human emotions, relationships, and experiences and are diverse in their themes of love, loss and self-discovery, where the personal frequently intersects with the political. They contain imagery and symbolism from the natural world to provide the setting and allegorize the distinct experience of being a woman in a patriarchal world and assert the interconnectedness of all beings. Most of the stories have female protagonists whose journey can be traced to draw attention to patriarchy's exploitation of women as well as nature. In some of them, gender intersects with issues like sexuality and class to demonstrate how systems of oppression mutually reinforce each other. While connecting feminism with ecology, ecofeminism contends that women's oppression and ecological degradation are outcomes of patriarchy and capitalism. However, ecofeminism is not restricted to connections between nature and women, but it is about the relationality and interconnectedness of all beings, hence arguing against all systems of domination. human beings. This paper will attempt an ecofeminist reading of select short stories from Sahu's collection. Close textual analysis will expose the underlying oppression of women and the environment and how they are intertwined. Such a reading will be geared towards making a call for dismantling all hierarchies and fostering universal sympathy for all beings, human or non-human.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, short stories, oppression, relationality, Nandini Sahu.*

Nandini Sahu's debut short story collection, *Shedding the Metaphors* (2023), is a compilation of twelve short stories that explore the complexities of human emotions, relationships, and experiences. The stories are diverse in their love, loss and self-discovery themes, where the personal frequently intersects with the political. The characters are complex, flawed, and relatable, and the stories narrate their inner lives – their hopes, fears, and dreams. They contain imagery and symbolism from the natural world to provide the setting and allegorize the distinct experience of being a woman in a patriarchal world and assert the interconnectedness of all

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beings. Most of the stories have female protagonists whose journey can be traced to draw attention to patriarchy's exploitation of women and nature. In some of them, gender intersects with issues like sexuality and class to demonstrate how systems of oppression mutually reinforce each other.

[1]Phrase taken from "The Wild Stream," a short story from Nandini Sahu's Shedding the Metaphors, the collection in consideration (pp. 235)

Nature acts as a literary device that reminds the readers of the global ecological crisis and their responsibility towards saving the planet. It is, therefore, apt to read Sahu's short stories for their ecofeminist concerns.

In 1974, French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne coined the term ecofeminism in her work Le Féminisme ou la mort. Ecology studies the interactions and relationships between organisms and their environment, and feminism is a movement against the oppression of women. Ecofeminists note how women are more vulnerable to the impact of environmental ills, as they are more closely connected to nature, especially through their involvement in activities like farming, gardening, and cooking. However, ecofeminism is not only about connections between nature and women but about the relationality and interconnectedness of all beings, and hence argues against all systems of domination. Ecofeminists use gender to understand the multiple relationships between humans and the natural world. While connecting feminism with ecology, ecofeminism contends that women's oppression and ecological degradation are outcomes of patriarchy and capitalism. Efforts towards achieving women empowerment and environmental conservation go hand-in-hand and one should not come at the expense of the other. Ecofeminism developed as a heterogeneous movement spearheaded by women with the participation of men to address issues of gender and preservation of human and non-human habitats (Murphy 1).

Analyzing literary works for their ecofeminist potential helps to critique hierarchical systems that support and promote any form of domination or control, draw attention to the global consequences of the patriarchal mindset, and pose a challenge to the imperialist mentality of human beings. This paper will attempt an ecofeminist reading of select short stories from Sahu's collection. Through a close textual analysis of "The Shadow of a Shadow," "That Elusive Orgasm," "The Quarantined," "Post-Quarantine," and "The Wild Stream," this paper will expose the underlying oppression of women and the environment, and how they are

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intertwined. While sometimes, the narrator or a character directly voices ecofeminist concerns, at other times, they are revealed through the story's plot and characterization. An ecofeminist reading will attempt to make a call for dismantling the hierarchy and fostering universal sympathy for all beings, human or non-human.

Ecofeminism argues that multiple systems of oppression mutually reinforce each other. Karen Warren explains how value dualisms conceptually organize the world in binaries where each side is seen as "exclusive" and "oppositional" while attributing higher value to one side (Warren 6). Val Plumwood critiques the "master model" of the Western culture that has long benefited from its superiority over nature. This master identity, as she argues, creates a "dualized structure of otherness and negation" (Plumwood 42). As Warren and Plumwood explain, a difference between self and other is constructed, and the assumed superiority of the self justifies the subordination of the other. Then, this subordination is reinforced by associating qualities of one oppressed group with another (Adams).

Scholars including Greta Gaard, Jessica Ison and Ariel Salleh have queered ecofeminism by challenging the idea of compulsory heterosexuality and deconstructing the notion of the 'natural.' Gaard demonstrates that ecofeminism and queer theory must consider the findings of each other in order to be "truly inclusive" (22). She points out that the "erotophobia" prevalent in Western culture permits only one form of sexuality (25). Drawing upon Warren and Plumwood, she argues that the oppression of the queer community results from the mutually reinforcing dualisms of heterosexual/queer, and reason/ the erotic. Ecofeminists reject the structure of duality and regard women and men as equal parts of nature and culture. Queer ecofeminism examines how queers are "feminized, animalized, eroticized, and naturalized in a culture that devalues women, nature, and sexuality" (Gaard 26).

Sahu introduces this idea of queer ecofeminism in her story, "Shadow of a Shadow." The story challenges societal conceptions of the 'natural' and the 'unnatural' by portraying two female friends in love, Ragini and Suni. To begin with, Ragini was inspired by the poetry of Sappho, the queer Greek poet, whose sexual desire for her female friends made her "a victim of the state-mandated management of compulsory heterosexuality" (Sahu 75). Ragini was tormented thinking about her sister Shalini who got married into an abusive family at a very young age, to fulfil her mother's expectations that she be 'settled' in life. She questioned the intense suffering women have to undergo when their emotions or thoughts are not acknowledged as "natural" by those around her while an unquestioning, diligent conformity to their beliefs and

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practices earns her the badge of a "respectable married woman" (Sahu 75). On the other hand, Suni, her friend and roommate, questioned the 'naturalness' of the relationship shared by her parents, who barely talked to or went out with each other and lived together for convenience, not out of love.

Suni's father attempted to recreate a love-less marriage, even for his daughter, by arranging her match with Mr. Samant, the son of an M.L.A., to further his own future as an industrialist. When she blatantly refused, he tried to force it on her with an abject disregard for her choice – an attitude characteristic of a patriarchal family: "once you marry, you would start liking him" (Sahu 89). However, it got difficult for Suni to fight the violence embedded in oppressive patriarchy: Under her father's nose, Samant took Suni to an unknown farmhouse and raped her. The incident is described in a language that reeks of nature's fury, as man futilely attempts to control it: "the world turned upside down…unlikely rain…landscape [of the Jurassic age] dotted with skyscraper ghettos and massive pylon…colonies of red ants encroached the unclaimed lands…her mind and body caught fire in the rain" (Sahu 89). The story thus demonstrates man's twin domination over women and nature to highlight a shared history of oppression. As Vandana Shiva has repeatedly noted in her works, rape of women and rape of the earth are interconnected. Suni's parents then accused her of not cooperating with Samant as he found her as "cold, repulsive and unsuitable to be his wife" (Sahu 90).

The story thus questions the forced naturalness of this incident and the hypocrisy embedded in the patriarchal mindset that allows a man to test women for his pleasure, but judges any woman who does so. The story immediately contrasts it with the felt naturalness of "pure love, true love" that Suni and Ragini found in being intimate with each other – "like two rivers flowing into each other and merging in the sea… like leaves coming to a tree, like flowers blooming in spring or migrating birds reaching their destination every winter, without fail" – and yet, is considered unnatural by the society (Sahu 91). As Gaard argues, queer sexualities are often perceived as closer to nature in the dualisms of the Western culture; yet, they are often devalued for being against nature (26).

Both Ragini and Suni tried to rebel against the natural behaviour expected of them in their own ways. Ragini insisted on qualifying for prestigious competitive exams to not suffer like her sister. On the other hand, Suni realized that she had nowhere to go after her college life, so she preferred to become one with nature by embracing the wild waters of the sea: "Come and grow in my restive soul, drown me in your blue eyes, mix my breath with your stormy breath" (Sahu

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97). Her suicide attempt becomes a means to escape the male-dominating world where she was seen as the Other. In this world, some beings and relationships are marginalized because of masculine notions of the natural and the unnatural, and yet it is the same world where nature is exploited and disrespected. Gaard demonstrates how this contradiction shows that sexuality itself is a constructed notion. Queer sexualities are charged with the transgression of natural order, while nature is also constructed as a force to be dominated for the culture to prevail. It shows how nature actually stands for the dominant paradigm of heterosexuality, indicating that the unnaturalness of queer sexualities is a construct (Gaard 27-28).

When Ragini and Suni's relationship became public, it was immediately shunned by the society. Their last moments of intimacy with each other became "the last time when they lived" (Sahu 99). Unless we consider the diversity of this world, there can be no liveliness in nature: "There was no wetness in the soil, no shower of light in the mornings. Only there was a rotten, musty, stinking wretched feeling as if they were in a bottomless pit" (Sahu 99).

Sahu's story signals that just as linkages among nature, women and the queer community have led to their parallel oppression, their liberation must also happen together. Ragini's and Suni's desire for each other was marked not only by sexual attraction but also by care. Their lives became smoother in each other's presence, although both of them had different pasts and future aspirations. Ragini offered Suni to stay with her in her room and Suni did all she could to make things easier for Ragini. Their love also united them for nature. Both took delight in the kitchen garden that Suni had maintained beside her room, where she grew tomato, spinach and green chilli to cook meals on weekends. Such an interconnected approach based on attention and responsiveness is what characterizes the ethics of care, which rejects the idea of dualistic relationships that are hierarchal in nature and proposes a more relational understanding of the world. An ethic of care contributes towards a feminist reconstruction of the exploitative relationship humans share with nature into an ecologically responsive one.

Ragini and Suni were courageous enough to rebel against heteronormativity; however, Sahu's stories also portray how resistance does not always come easy, especially when women have internalized patriarchal abuse. In "That Elusive Orgasm," the reader witnesses an incestuous father-daughter relationship fraught with complexities. The story is set in Sonagachi near Kolkata, the biggest red-light area in Asia, but the narrative of Jhumpa Chatterjee, a sixteen-year-old girl, exposes the prevalence of abuse within the confines of the home as well. Jhumpa is sexually abused by her father, Babai, and complicit in the act was her absent-present mother,

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Mai, who had paralysis in her lower limbs. Jhumpa's school visits transformed into bathroom visits with her father to "cleanse" her of "worldly sins" when her mother was apparently "sleeping in her room" (Sahu 105-6).

When Jhumpa expressed her unease, she was told by her father that he, as the devotee or sahdak offered her as the Prasada to the Goddess, so she "need not feel shy and should allow him to do it, by just closing [her] eyes in surrender to the Goddess" (Sahu 106). Once again, Sahu is trying to point out how patriarchal notions are internalized and sexual abuse is naturalized. After bathing her by touching her breasts and genitals, Babai "vigourously rushed into [her] when she bled so much" (Sahu 106). When she cried out of pain, he consoled her and put her to sleep, repeating the same "ritual" everyday (Sahu 106). However, what started as abuse slowly became a guilty pleasure for her as she confessed, "I don't mind it anymore. I like what he does to my body; in fact these days I don't get sleep unless Babai does it" (Sahu 106). When Jhumpa was freed from the shackles of her abusive home with the efforts of her friends, and was able to start a new life in America with Abraham, she could not feel sexually fulfilled and orgasm with him. The story speaks volumes about patriarchal conditioning. Both, Mai and Jhumpa are made to believe that abuse is 'normal' and 'natural,' and denied the agency to rebel: Mai becomes a mute presence dependent on her husband for survival, while Jhumpa is barred from leaving the house, or talking to anyone, and had to even abandon her dreams of becoming a doctor.

The story shows how women become mere objects for men's sexual pleasure, and have no agency in a patriarchal society. The narrator, Jhumpa's friend, wonders, "Did his wife's inability to have an intimate relationship give him the freedom to abuse his girl child and ruin her life?" (Sahu 109) Sahu once again brings intersectionality in this story. As a disabled woman, Mai not only loses her own agency but also allows her daughter to be abused at the hands of her husband: "Mai's physical paralysis [became] a metaphorical paralysis for Jhumpa's life" (Sahu 102). Sonagachi, where the story is set, thus becomes a paradox: "a place close to nature…untouched by city life" but also a place where sexual abuse is prevalent inside and outside the boundaries of home, through which the author provokes the readers to peacefully co-exist with nature (Sahu 101). It is a place where animals live in harmony, but humans are their own enemies.

"The Quarantined" and "Post-Quarantine," twin stories set during the period of Covid-19 pandemic, draw parallels between the suffering of women and the planet. "The Quarantined,"

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narrated by a third-person narrator, is a story about Joyita, a young ambitious woman, in a relationship with her neighbor Jayant, the elder son of Kamala, a dominating mother. Jayant used to meet Joyita sneakily, mostly on the pretext of the business work opportunities that Joyita offered him, as his family and Joyita did not get along well together, even though she was their tenant. Jayant's younger brother, Adarsh, was married to Sheela, but to the disappointment of Kamala, she could not conceive a baby. Sheela, however, had her eyes on Jayant, and even confessed her attraction to him later through a text message, which Joyita read. "Post-Quarantine" takes the reader five years later, but from Jayant's perspective, who looks back at his relationship with Joyita. Even though the narrator's tone is very matter-of-fact, the reader gets the author's obvious underlying sarcasm on how men often take women for granted in relationships and abuse their love and care. It exposes Jayant's fragile masculinity and disloyalty to Joyita, and Joyita's sheer generosity and patience. Regret came to him only when he realized that he and his family were cheated out of their property by Adarsh and Sheela. Even then, he did not so much miss her affection, but a place to live and a source of income. He stood penniless in front of her bungalow in Delhi where she lived as an IAS officer, at the mercy of a nomad bangle seller who offered him liquor, a sack to sleep on and company to spend the night with.

In the stories, Joyita and nature mirror each other, while Jayant stands for masculine domination. Joyita's patience with Jayant and his family is akin to nature's endurance of exploitation by humanity. Like the Coronavirus exposed the vulnerability of humanity to natural catastrophes, Joyita, the thoughtful woman protagonist of these stories, emerged victorious despite the people who came in her way. "Post-Quarantine" reveals the microaggressions Joyita received at the hands of Jayant and his family and her calm endurance of it all owing to her love for Jayant. Jayant instigated his family against her, exploiting her for his own purposes. While Joyita created work opportunities for him, cared for him, needlessly apologized, quickly forgave him, cooked his favourite dishes for him, and lent him money without questions, Jayant rarely reciprocated. Instead, he often found faults with her, body-shamed her, derived sadistic pleasure from hurting her, shouted at her, made her his last priority, was misogynistic and considered women empowerment a fiction. However, she warned Jayant about her exhausting patience, striking an analogy between herself and nature: "I put up with your non-sense, thinking you may change for better…But the day I am silent

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and stop reacting to your nonsense, it's all over. I know how to recede in a relationship; I can flow backward like the backwaters of Kerala" (Sahu 177).

Their ideologies completely differed. The narrator points to Joyita's concern towards Ecofeminist issues and his own irritation with them:

She said these are Ecofeminist issues – water preservation, livestock, challenging a culture of thrift, saving, preservation, conservation, archiving, documentation, challenging the culture of waste, environment, challenging capitalism, colonialism, climate change, issues of the girl child, education and food for all, issues of acceptance of all, protection to senior citizens, subaltern issues, masculinity studies, et al. (Sahu 166)

Her ecofeminist concerns are vocalized at other places too, where she asserts the interconnection of all beings. At one instance, she expresses her anger at Jayant's obsession with food when the world was facing a pandemic, only to be rebuked by him: "Do you even think about the beautiful planet earth? About the message coronavirus is sending us? Do you live to eat or eat to live?" (Sahu 168). In another instance, she underlines Jayant's hypocritical attitude towards non-vegetarian food as he abstained from it for two days in a week when he engaged in "elaborate pujas": "If you are an animal eater, you should eat animals any day… Else, you should be kind to animals every day and become a vegan" (Sahu 171). Joyita's views echo vegetarian ecofeminism, which argues against speciesism – the belief that members of one species are superior to and more important than members of another. Vegetarian ecofeminists like Carol Adams argue that the oppression of nonhuman animals is connected to the pressure of women through objectification in a patriarchal society, and both oppressions must be eradicated.

Covid-19 forced humans to stay home, while nonhuman animals could come out in the open and breathe, and greenery could flourish as pollution rates deteriorated. It served as a wake-up call for humans to remind them that the earth belongs to everyone, and anyone, irrespective of their wealth or status, could be impacted by the virus. The ways in which we fought the virus connected us all against the common enemy – it taught us to look out for each other in times of crisis and act together with vigilance.

The character of Kamala demonstrates why oppressive systems continue to exist. As victims of patriarchy, sometimes women become complicit in oppressive attitudes and perpetuate them. These "escalator hierarchies" become the reason why older women often exert power over the

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younger ones after years of being denied power (Papanek). When Sheela was unable to have a baby with Adarsh, Kamala pressurized her and made her pregnancy a "national issue at home," suggesting remedies like eating raw garlic thrice a day, even though she knew that the reason was her own son (Sahu 156). She was so desperate for a grandson that she facilitated a situation where Sheela could have intercourse with Jayant, oblivious to Sheela's existing attraction for him. In another instance, Sheela expressed her frustration to Joyita over managing house-work with a job that required long travel and her inability to study further when she had gone to her asking for a job: "My mother-in-law makes me work hard beyond my office hours. She says that maids should not clean the clothes and utensils, and I am forced to do everything" (Sahu 141). The family's apathy is further revealed when Sheela tested positive for Covid-19. When she was released after prolonged suffering at the hospital alone, Kamala refused to bring her home for the fear of contamination and sent her to her parent's house, where she had to be quarantined in their one room flat for a month. When Sheela had recovered, Kamala asked her to return because she needed her for household chores as there were no maids during the lockdown. Ecofeminists, including Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies have noted how environmental issues impact women more, who are closely related to the realm of home. During the pandemic, as existing household tasks intensified and new routine chores emerged, women's work – already undervalued and unpaid – increased.

In "The Wild Stream," Sahu shows how poverty intersects with gender, exposing the bitter truth about how politicians exploit the marginalized for their propaganda – in this case, poor young women. Sahu uses a natural setting and symbols to convey the connection between nature and women. Here, the story's title refers to a ten-year-old, poor girl, Mami Pradhan who had wild dreams in her eyes, and was used by the politicians to attract the mob and invite votes from them in the elections. Most politicians are opportunistic and know how to play with the emotions of poor people, who constitute a major vote bank for them in the elections. So, the Chief Minister of Odisha, Naveen Patnaik, chose to visit the town of Udayagiri and address the girls' high school students. The politicians were aware that young girls would be an easy target for their political manipulation. Moreover, it would have helped demonstrate their concern towards women's education.

Mami Pradhan, the protagonist of the story, was the daughter of Mami bou, who worked in the narrator's house as her Ma's maid and was helped by her daughter in some chores. Mami Pradhan studied with the narrator and her sisters in the same school and was given an off from

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work on the day of the CM's visit. Noticing her enthusiasm during the CM's address to the audience, one of the party workers of Biju Babu, the father of the then CM, grabbed the opportunity to exploit her for their political propaganda. Her status as a "below poverty line" "lanky girl" with "hands thin as a bird's legs, waving and hopping, in rags" made her the perfect material for "an eye-catching headline" (Sahu 225). So she was immediately lifted and brought to the stage, placed on the dais and asked her name. By comparing her with Sudama, the friend of Lord Krishna, Biju Baba identified her with "real India" and "the real face of Odisha," a poor girl with "a dream in her eyes" (Sahu 225). Suddenly, the young Mami Pradhan becomes a symbol for "a Utopian future" of poor people from Odisha, although she was oblivious to the contents of his speech or to their political affairs. But she received the attention she desired and started living by the one sentence that made sense to her "Mami Pradhan has a dream in her eyes" (Sahu 226). Instigating the emotions of the crowd, he urged everyone to pledge that the privileged would support "all Mami Pradhans" of the villages and work towards eradicating poverty. He immediately followed that up with a plea to "shower [their] love in the coming general elections" (Sahu 226).

This act won "thunderous applause" to the politician as well as to Mami, and occupied the first page of all newspapers the next day (Sahu 226). Mami was already a dreamer, and with the attention she received after this incident, her happiness knew no bounds. However, the narrator immediately contrasts it with the reality of her poor situation as her mother pushes her to do the household chores that she could not complete. The narrator's Ma iterated the reality of politicians when the journalists were after Mami: "Those politicians left. Now we shall see them again after five years… We have seen it all" (Sahu 228). Media too, after all, was primarily concerned with sensational content.

Mami, however, got so immersed in her dream world that she lost touch with reality. She stopped studying and was least concerned about failure. She did not want to take up work either. She had forgotten that there was no shortcut to success. Here, the narrator makes a women-nature connection again, comparing Mami to a bird: "Mami's dreams had become like a bird ensnared in the dreams of that man who had promised to open the kingdom of dreams to the trapped bird" (Sahu 229). Towards the very end, the story reasserts this connection, asking the question: "Are severing the wings of a bird and filching the dreams of a woman one and the same?" (Sahu 235) When Mami got married, life became too difficult for her to "nourish her dreams" with household chores, four kids, a husband, and a job. Exhausted, she left her

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house in the hope to meet the Chief Minister but the old newspaper photograph she innocently held as a proof of her "close[ness]" to him got torn in a mockery scene with the rickshaw pullers who refused to take her to the CM's office (Sahu 234).

The tearing of the photograph symbolizes her shattered dreams, showing that there's hardly any hope for poor people to rise unless the rich politicians stop exploiting them and start thinking about their welfare. The story exemplifies how certain communities like the poor are more vulnerable to exploitation and often lack the means to resist and fight back. At the end of the story, the narrator asks "can a wild stream and a girl be one and the same?" (Sahu 235) The comparison of Mami to a wild stream that flows directionless conveys that having wild dreams is not enough for women to rise; they must make active, concrete efforts to dismantle the patriarchy. Otherwise, it is easy to get lost like Mami "in the darkness of the blackish green forest" among the complacent, common men and women (Sahu 235).

Sahu's stories are infused with social issues that intertwine women and nature. An ecofeminist reading of these stories reveals the intersecting systems of domination – androcentrism and anthropocentrism – and how they reinforce each other. The female protagonists act as a projection of nature at the mercy of humans: sometimes they resist and rebel, and serve as precautionary tales for humanity; sometimes, they simply highlight the reality of the oppressed and expect the readers to empathize with them. However, each time, they compel the reader to think. Stories like these are all the more important in current times when many of our resources are on the brink of exhaustion and climate catastrophes are taking lives. However, as Mies notes, most of us live in a "double-think" state where we are aware of rising environmental degradation and the contribution of our growth mindset in the same, and yet we fail to do anything about it (57). Violence against women is intensifying as traditional patriarchy meets capitalist patriarchy. Sahu's stories serve as cues to the readers to end this violence by prompting them to shift towards a sustainable, peaceful economy which respects women and the earth. For life to be preserved on the planet, it is imperative that we must recognize the sacredness of all forms of life and practice an ecological ethics of care.

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