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Indian Ethos in the Selected Writings of Bharati Mukherjee and Uma Parameswaran

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Abstract:
This research paper endeavours to examine the diasporic consciousness of the immigrant characters in diasporic writings, where Indianness can be seen as a metaphor for the ability to adapt. The members of diasporic communities maintain solidarity with their motherland. They create a collective memory of their homeland. Diasporic communities feel alienated in the host country and share diasporic consciousness. Diasporic consciousness refers to the mental flight of people trying to reconstruct their present from a past that is lost to them. Today, however, the term has gained different meanings. Instead of viewing it as a condition of terminal loss; it is seen as a positive place of multiple existences. By creating a homeland in the hostland, they attempt to bridge the gap between two different cultures. As suggested by Uma Parameswaran, by viewing the Ganga in the Assiniboine the nostalgic longing for the homeland could be satiated. Strong ethnic group consciousness acts as a driving force for the migrants who struggle with the idea of Home. The ethnicity and the sense of togetherness make it easy to combat the challenges posed by the alien land. The strong ties to their roots provide a viable solution to the identity crisis that they encounter in the host land.

Keywords: Expatriate, Psychic imaginary, Immigrant, Nostalgia, Longing, Homeland.

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Introduction

In the works of diasporic writers Indian ethos and sensibilities are profoundly portrayed. The concern for the creation of "quality of Indianness" is quite distinctively revealed in their writings. Srinivas Iyenger rightly asserts, "What makes Indo-Anglian literature an Indian literature and not just an overflow of English literature, is the quality of Indianness in the choice of subject, in the texture of thought and play of sentiment, in the organisation of material in terms of "form" and in the creative use of language." (Iyenger 698)

The immigrant characters when they try to adjust to the alien environment to bridge the gap between two different cultures; are unable to completely separate themselves from their Indianness. They strongly hold their Indian values and culture and also preserve their beliefs and values. The nostalgic longing for the past troubles the expatriate and thus the idea of motherland appears significantly in the "psychic imaginary of diasporas.'' They do not want to return to their native land. Their homeland, as Vijay Mishra explains, "… is a series of objects, fragments of narratives that they keep in their heads or in their suitcases" (Mishra 70).

Even Salman Rushdie supports the same view, as is evident from his description of the feelings of the expatriates in "Imaginary Homelands": "Exiles or emigrants or expatriates are hunted by some sense of loss, some usage to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge… that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, India of the mind." (Rushdie 10)

A person of Indian origin living abroad would work to maintain Indianness abroad by trying to keep his language alive, celebrating Independence Day and

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cooking Indian dishes etc. Therefore the attempt is to maintain the idea of the homeland and not the homeland as a physical entity. For the first time, Safran tried to manage the propagation of the use of the term "diaspora." He initiated the idea that immigrants display an attachment to their roots by maintaining a collective memory of the homeland. Many critics have reacted to the assumption made by Safran that their ancestral homeland is a place where they or their descendants want to return. For instance, Vijay Mishra in his essay "New Lamps for Old" says, "One of the overriding characteristics of diaspora is diasporas do not as a general rule, return. This is not to be confused with the symbols of the return or the invocations."(Mishra 75). Instead of returning to their homeland, immigrants form an image of their country and culture which they recall.

The expatriate writer faces the dilemma of choosing the language and landscapes, myths and images. Uma Parameswaran observes that though the immigrants are willing to learn the Anglo-Saxon names and idioms, the similar reciprocation is not visible from the other side. The writer faces personal agony when he is forced to choose the language that would best kindle his creative process. The immigrant writer is familiar with the landscape of his homeland, which is reflected in his writing. Parameswaran observes, "Though the landscape around me has been cedar and spruce for the last twenty-five years, the landscape I am most familiar with is the trees with mango and jasmine" (Parameswaran 40).

In an introduction to her collection, "Sons Must Die and Other Plays", she reveals the pressures that a diasporic writer undergoes. She observes that humour is absent in much of her published writings, partly "because Canadian editors just don't seem interested in humour when it comes from a non-white immigrant who is, needless to say, expected to write of pain and discrimination etc" (Parameswaran 1). Citable here in this context is Parmeswaran's observation about the experience of immigrants on an alien land:

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> "Every immigrant transplants part of his native land in the new country and the transplant may be said to have taken root once the immigrant figuratively sees the river that runs in the adopted place, not the Ganga or the Assiniboine as the Ganga, both of which imply a transference or substitution – the confluence of any two rivers is sacred" (Parameswaran 80).

The suggestion is that Ganga and Assiniboine cannot be substituted for each other but can exist as correlative. The visualisation of her experience in fact, is a process towards the transfer of the immigrant's identity. The world presented is not a fantasy that cancels out the reality of the past, but rather on the contrary, it is a readjustment, adaptation, involvement, and fulfilment.

Diane Mc Gifford aptly comments on the theme of reconciliation and the range of experience in Trishanku:

> "This theme of reconciliation is enriched by Uma Parameswaran's adeptness in transforming the everyday voice into poetry and ordinary activities into mythic experiences. She pushes the reader to see that time and space are artificial constructs that can be overcome when we carry our gods within us. Like the characters in Trishanku, the reader comes to understand why a Hindu temple can arise at the confluence of Red and Assiniboine rivers and how the Ganga can be brought here. Trishanku assures us that when the sacred infuses the profane, all times and spaces are equal." (Gifford 306-7)

Parameswaran in the text "*The Door I Shut Behind Me"* depicts the sense of wonder and fear in the immigrant Chander Agarwal at the new world around himself

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and nostalgia for the motherland left behind. In the story, he carries with him 'a stack of record albums' 'packets of paan-beedas' (Parameswaran 98) and translated copies of The Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita from India to Canada.

Chander has also a book of Chander Sekhar's Radioactive Transfer, with him, though the book was not from his area of study and not even a book meant to be read while travelling. The book for him is meant to "open a world of ambition and inspiration." (Parameswaran 105). He finds that Indian families in Canada not only create "Little India" around them but also prefer to live in the memories of India of their childhood. He comes to know that, "When we leave our country we shut many doors behind ourselves, though we are not aware of it at the time. At the same time, being optimistic, he feels that there are many doors ahead of us" (Parameswaran 105). By cherishing the memories of the motherland and recreating India, the immigrant characters easily cope with the trauma of displacement.

There are frequent parties where the people of South-Asian origin meet in the writings of Parameswaran. These meetings become a way of sharing their 'common' past. There is a reference to such parties in stories like '*The Door I Shut Behind Me'* and '*Freeze Frame.'* These are signs to reclaim the past, to stay in it. Occasional use of the Hindi language can be seen both as an indication of intimacy and as an attempt to retain a link with the homeland. In '*Cycle* of the Moon', Chander notices that though Agarwal has brought with him the latest record albums, the people in the party have more interest in Saigal, a singer of forties, "They [the people in the party] spoke of old films, while Saigal sang on in the background. There was a deep nostalgia in the air. What astounded Chander was that they spoke of a distant past" (Parameswaran100).

Tara's mother-in-law in "Trishanku'' is disgusted when she finds "no rangoli design on porch steps / to say please come in" (Parameswaran 66). For an elderly

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woman like Tara, rangoli is part of her life and cultural heritage which seems absurd in Canada. The processed food in Canada is unpalatable to her so she usually cooks Indian food and tells her son about:

"The leaping aromas
Of turmeric and green coriander
And mustard seeds popped in hot oil
That flavour of food,
Not stink up the air"(Parameswaran 66)

She complains that Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and health, will not bless them if they have stale and stored foods in cans. She complains thus:

"The lotus-seated consort
Of him who reposes
On the primeval ocean of milk
Do you think they'll bless this food
Three days old
You store in cans and ice-cupboard? "(Parameswaran 66)

Uma Parameswaran in her works has aptly presented the diasporic consciousness in the psyche of her characters by using Indian myths. They are portrayed as 'Trishanku', who long for their real home as they are caught between the two worlds. Parameswaran's symbol Trishanku is a metaphor used for immigrants. Trishanku is a man from Indian mythology who, by the efforts of the 'sages', was pushed to heaven when he was still alive. However, he was denied entry into heaven by the gods. With both forces working on it simultaneously – one pushing him upwards from the earth and the other in the opposite direction from heaven – he could not belong to any place and lived in between two worlds.

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The members of the diaspora are like Trishanku who live in a state of in-betweenness. In Canada they are Indians and in India they are Canadians. The poet raises this issue in "Trishanku: A Cycle of Voices" (Trishanku and Other Writings): “Born under one law, to another And what? Shall I hang myself in the sky? As Trishanku did of, old?” (Parameswaran 15)

Parameswaran in her first story *The Door I Shut Behind Me* (1990) depicts the sense of wonder and fear in the immigrant Chander Agarwal at the new world around him and his concern for the motherland left behind. In the story, he carries with him a stack of record albums and packets of paan-beedas (Parameswaran 98) from India to Canada. Even Chander carries translated copies of The Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita. Carrying Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita probably is "a metaphor for the great epics Uma Parameswaran always carried in her heart and in the springs of her creativity" (Parameswaran 177).

He finds the Indian families in Canada not only to create "Little Indians" around them but also to live in the memories of India of their childhood. There are frequent parties where the people of South- Asian origin meet. These meetings become a way of sharing their 'common' past. There is a reference to such parties in stories like “The Door I Shut Behind Me’’ and “Freeze Frame.” These are signs to reclaim the past, to stay in it. Occasional use of the Hindi language can be seen both as an indication of intimacy and as an attempt to retain a link with the homeland.

In ‘Cycle of the Moon’, Chander notices that though Agarwal has brought with him the latest record albums, the people in the party have more interest in Saigal, a singer of forties, "They [the people in the party] spoke of old films, while Saigal sang on in the background. There was a deep nostalgia in the air. What astounded Chander was that they spoke of a distant past" As Robin Cohen in “Global Diasporas: An

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Introduction'' has remarked the immigrants "acknowledge that the old country – a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom of folklore-always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions" (Cohen ix).

Chander describes the diaspora identities, thus: "What were they? Not Indians anymore, nor were they Canadians; they were a close-knit group; they seemed to have kept their own identity and did not seem to have any affinity with the people or places around them. The women had not changed their costumes and none had changed their food habits if one were to judge by the food on the table. But they shied away from all talk of return. They hoped to go back, they said, but [he]... felt that their hope was for a time as far into the abstract future as their memory was for an abstract past. Like the mythological king, Trishanku, they stood suspended between two worlds, unable to enter either, and making a heaven of their own." (Parameswaran 96)

In "Freeze Frame" also there are references to India i.e. samosas, chutney, memories of Diwali and an embroidered Kashmiri kafatan. Meera in her memory recalls the romance between Sunda and Mahesh in India. "… She with her hennaed hands around his neck, her saree pallav off her shoulder and he buries his face in her jasmine hair" (Parameswaran 21).

By reciting Meera bhajan, Savitri finds solace in her Indian culture and tradition. When Veejala's stand of leaving the children occurs, Savitri is of the view that when an essentially moral person takes a decision that decision is always based on morality. The reason behind leaving her children given by Veejala is that her presence is not required for the kids as they grow naturally like flowers.

The story of a poor widow with a cowherd son named Gopala after Lord Krishna was narrated by Savitri to console Veejala as follows : "The school was on the other side of a dark grove of trees and little Gopala was afraid, but his mother

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prayed to Krishna and then told her son that his older brother, Gopala the flute-playing cowherd, would take him through the grove. Krishna played on his flute and related stories as daily he walked the boy to school and back through the woods. One day, the teacher asked every pupil to bring something from home for a potluck party and the poor widow didn't have anything. She told her son to ask his brother while they walked through the woods and Krishna gave the boy a little bowl of sweet dahi when the teacher poured it into a bigger bowl, the little bowl filled up again and again and everyone enjoyed the sweetest yoghurt they had ever tasted." (Parameswaran 148)

Siv in "Maru and the M.M Syndrome'' regularly chants the Gayatri mantra. He wants to chant a hundred thousand Gayatri mantras motivated by his faith that at the end of its completion would bring him "an effluence, a spiritual Tejas, a power" (Parameswaran 69). Thus, Indianness is presented as a driving force as it relieves and provides comfort to the troubled souls of immigrant characters. Parameswaran quotes Kalidasa when writing about the plight of immigrants:

"Despair. A dull despair as at some inevitability. A primal feeling. A deer nimbly ran towards the lake, but the breaking of a sudden, sensing a tiger near then moving forward again, driven not by its parching thirst but by a sense of inevitability. Kalidasa must have described it somewhere, for they had a way, the Old Masters, of combining breathtaking tenderness with nightmarish violence. Infinitely more moving than those who showed the violence of life through violent images. Separation, blindfolded walk into the forest, the circumcision blade; Shakuntala's deer, blue water and tiger." (Parameswaran 9) Shobha Shinde pertinently sheds light on this yearning of immigrant characters as, "An immigrant away from home idealizes his home country and cherishes nostalgic memories of it" (Shinde 58)

Both Parameswaran and Mukherjee make very significant use of Indian myths in their works. Parameswaran uses Indian myths, music and dance in her dance

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dramas, Meera and Sita's Promise. The myth of Krishna is at the centre of the story of Meera. Her "Sita's Promise" links epic India with modern Canada through myth and dance. The story in the play successfully transports the audience to the mythical world of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Indian deities like Goddess Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu, Sri Narayana, Shakti, Shiva, Jatayu, King Himavant, Parvati, Krishna, Panchali and Ganesh have been repeatedly referred to in this play with a view to acquaint the Westerners, particularly Canadians, with India's culture and mythology. In 'Mangoes on the Maple Tree', the author makes Jyoti think of the myth of Narada when she completely surrenders herself to premarital sex with Pierre. Sharad would narrate, Panchali's spoon story during dinner time with his children. In 'Maru and the M.M. Syndrome', there is a reference to a story from Hindu lore.

Some immigrants make an effort to reinvent through their memory the life of the native community through the use of rituals. The immigrants refer back to old Indian myths; and tell and retell many versions of the stories from the great epics. The second-generation immigrants in '*Mangoes on the Maple Tree'* hear the story from the *Mahabharata* where Krishna visits the Pandavas and Panchali in the forest and asks for some food. Jayant in '*Mangoes on the Maple Tree'* recalls the nights of full moon, known as Sharad Poornima in his homeland and the grandmother who used to sit in the courtyard of the ancestral house. He remembers the bakul tree, jasmine, raat ki rani, neem and curry leaves and wonders how "Hinduism has a place for everyone and everything" (Parameswaran 103).

Maru in '*Maru and the M.M.Syndrome'* recalls a story from Hindu lore about God teaching a proud Brahmin how to get out of the stranglehold of caste. The immigrants often nostalgically recall their homeland. Jayant tells Vithal "...Our summer in India... that was the best time I've ever had" (Parameswaran 88).

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The immigrants stick to their roots, which Cohen would call a "strong ethnic group consciousness". They insist on maintaining their culture and traditions and getting connected to their homeland by cooking Indian food. The Bhave family is shown to have Indian dishes like pulav, mutter paneer, raita and puries. The characters in "*Mangoes on the Maple Tree''* enjoy Indian food much more than Canadian food.

In the short story "Maru and the M.M. Syndrome", Maru cooks idli, sambhar, aviyal and delicious masala dosa for their guests. They also remain connected to their native language and life. The first-generation migrants in "*Mangoes on the Maple Tree"* use a lot of words like beta, poories. In "*Maru and the M.M. Syndrome"* words like Namaskaram, Amma, Rashika, and PallanKuzhi have been used. Whereas in "*Mangoes on the Maple Tree",* words like Vilayati baba, rakhi, jamun, charpai, dhobi, raat ki rani, chunam, kabaddi, tulsi and shehnai have their presence. The first-generation immigrants in *Mangoes on the Maple Tree* speak in their native language Marathi. Veejala sings a song from an old Hindi movie when massaging Jayant's head: "Sir jo tera chakraye, ya dil dooba jaye,...(Parameswaran 34). Savitri repeats an old Hindi proverb: "Daane daane pe likha hai khane wale ka naam"(Parameswaran 112). Thus, this way the migrants remember their homeland and get connected to it.

Bharati Mukherjee in her works presents those diasporic characters who are moored in their Indian origins as they reflect their pride in the heritage of their country. In their customs, habits, and mannerisms; they show their Indianness. She identifies with these victims of racial discrimination and their traumatic sense of entrapment and claustrophobia while living in Canada.

In '*The Tiger's Daughter'*, Tara's sense of discrimination intensifies if her roommate does not share her mango chutney. Due to her loneliness, she vehemently takes out all her silk scarves and hangs them around to give the apartment a more Indian look; her attempt to stick to Indian ways by praying to Kali for strength so that

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she would not break down before the Americans. Her acts portray the cultural resistance forward by an innocent immigrant who refused to completely adapt to the alien land. It persisted in the belief that all hesitations, all shadowy fears of the time spent abroad would be erased if she could just return home. Even her habit of retaining her maiden surname after her marriage symbolically reflects her subconscious need to be rooted in her native land.

At such moments when she thinks like breaking off, she even prays to goddess Kali for strength when at the end of May, her first year abroad, the girls around her prepare to go home she is seized by a vision of terror: "She saw herself sleeping in a large carton on a sidewalk while hating men made impious remarks to her. Headless monsters winked at her from eyes embedded in pudgy shoulders….. She suffered fainting spells, headaches and nightmares. She complained of homesickness in letters to her mother, who promptly prayed to Kali to save Tara's conscience, chastity and complexion." (Mukherjee 13)

On reaching America, the female protagonist in '*Jasmine'* is taken to a remote motel in Florida by the ugly and defaced captain of the ship, Half-face from Vietnam, and raped and ravished brutally. Defilement of her widowed chastity opens the floodgates to her irrepressible outrage consequent upon the cold-blooded murder of that captain by her while he is asleep after promising her more sexual excitement later in the night. In a fit of rage, she slices up subsequently the frontal part of her tongue and assuming the role of the goddess Kali murders the Vietnamese captain in revenge for her ravished chastity. In this manner, the diasporic characters seek solace and gain strength in the deities of their homeland i.e. India.

When Jasmine works as a caregiver to the adopted daughter, Duff of Taylor in Manhattan. Here, in the new surroundings, her instinctive Indian values surface now and then. For instance, when she comes to know that Duff is not a natural child,

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but an adopted one, her reactions are culturally revealing: "I could not imagine a non-genetic child. A child that was not my own, or my husband and struck me as a monstrous idea. Adoption was as foreign to me as the idea of widow remarriage." (Mukherjee 170) "Her Indian sense of values cannot tolerate the sight of naked bodies combing their hair in front of dresser mirrors." (Mukherjee 171).

The sense of astonishment and bewilderment can be seen in Jasmine's reaction to the new world's culture. The cultural conflict troubles her and makes it difficult to adapt to the new environment. Adoption and nakedness are distant dreams in Indian culture and when she encounters these in her hostland, it is inevitable for her to get stunned at it.

She records her disgust: "Truly there was no concept of shame in this society. I'd die before a Sob Sister asked me about Half-Face" (Mukherjee 171).

She again feels outwitted at Wylie's decision to leave Taylor for economist Stuart in search of real happiness." (Mukherjee181). She feels defeated as she admits:

"America had thrown me again. There was no word I could learn, no one I could consult, to understand, what Wylie was saying or why she had done it." (Mukherjee 181-82)

The spirit of migration changes Padma's identity in 'Desirable Daughters', which has finally made New York her home, the land of her choice. But his inseparable attachment to his home makes him the custodian of the Bengali tradition in America. Bharati Mukherjee sees India through the lens of a third-world writer and an immigrant. India is recorded in the novel as a land that can be remembered in memory as its own. In the novel, India is presented as a mental reality. Though far away from India, Parvati is still conscious of her tradition. This is what she writes in her letter to Tara: "We Indians don't run to psychiatrists for every problem. Come to

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think of it. I don't know a single psychiatrist… I hope you aren't doing bad things to yourself like taking Prozac and having cosmetic surgery. Please, please, don't become that Americanized." (Mukherjee 104-105)

In a letter to Tara, Parvati alludes to Aunt Bandana's love of the Bengali tradition and the laws of Manu. Aunt Bandana wants a suitable Bengali girl for her fourth son from a good Hindu Brahmin family settled in California, a good family indeed but not an Indian citizen. Aunt Bandana's two main requirements are: "The girl should be an American citizen or green card holder who can legally sponsor her husband's immigration to the United States and that she be a Brahmin (Mukherjee 107).

She is of an old tradition. Referring to Manu, Parvati says, " I think it comes from the laws of
Manu... if you sow the wrong kind of seed in the wrong kind of soil, you are bound to end up with an unhealthy sapling. That means no inter-caste alliances." (Mukherjee 107).

Parvati's identity crisis is not as serious as Tara's case. Her torn self-desires for the motherland are hard to forget. Parvati is a static type of identity. Divorced, her lifestyle is completely different from her other sisters. As she is, she lives in San Francisco. The promises of the American dream are to her utter despair. She finds that life fails to fulfil these promises. The surroundings leave him dissatisfied and frustrated. She feels a longing for the past:

"It is a happy landscape, I like to think, reaching from the shallow depression of Golden Gate Park and climbing to the communication towers atop Twin Peaks. The area is given to summer fogs that make conversational gardening impossible, but that reminds me, not unhappily, of mountain resorts in India. I almost expect the

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chattering of monkeys, corn and peanuts smoking on open braziers,
the tinkling of women's bangles and Buddhist prayer wheels." (Mukherjee 24)

By incorporating Indian myths and culture, Mukherjee brings forth the idea that Indian texts are at par with the canonical Anglo-American works and it also indicates that she intends to create a harmonious bond between the two nations. In "Jasmine'', there is a reference to goddess Kali and in "The Holder of the World'' to Sita's mythical foundling. The novel "The Desirable Daughters" begins with a mythical story of the tree bride. In "Jasmine", there is a reference to goddess Kali and in "The Holder of the World" to Sita's mythical foundling. The female characters can be seen as gaining internal strength and courage through Indian female deities on their voyage in an alien land.

Both Parameswaran and Mukherjee make a significant use of Indian myths in their works. The works of Bharati Mukherjee and Uma Parameswaran reveal Indian consciousness. Indian culture and traditions are given profound significance in their works. Their works reveal Indian sensibilities and their attempt to preserve their ethnic identities is a manifestation of their survival instincts. Indian ethos is deftly portrayed and also the attempts of immigrant characters to preserve their ethnic identities are projected profoundly in their works. The passionate desire and existential need to transfer the philosophy and vision of the motherland among foreign cultures is one of the characteristics of expatriate writers. As William Safran has rightly affirmed, 'the retention of a collective memory, vision or myths about the original homeland, its physical location, history etc' (Safran 83) is one of the features of the migrant writer. Through the reworking of their myths, the migrant writers find solutions to the tensions found in the host society.

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