

## A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RACISM IN OTHELLO AND THE BLUEST EYE: A CRITICAL RACE THEORY ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

Race is a complex social phenomenon that undermines an individual and community based on their skin colour. The current study attempts to analyse racism in Othello (1965) and The Bluest Eye (2007) critically. The theoretical framework utilized for this study is the Critical Race Theory (CRT), developed in the latter half of the 20th century, which holds that race is not a natural or biological construction, rather race is a social construction. The application of CRT on Shakespeare's Othello and Morrison's The Bluest Eye reveals the downsides of racism. The nature of this study is qualitative and descriptive. The relevant passages from Othello (1965) and The Bluest Eye (2007) have been highlighted and subsequently analysed from the framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), offering a nuanced examination of themes related to race and power dynamics. The study finds internalized racism in both works. Additionally, this study also finds the presence of individual, institutional and internalized racism in both works. Similarly, this study highlights that racism can turn a sane person into a monster by examining the behaviours of the protagonist of Othello (1965) and Cholly in The Bluest Eye (2007). In addition, it underscores that individual and institutional racism pave the way for internalised racism, which makes the affected community accept all the negative stereotypes about them.

Keywords: Racism, Othello, The Bluest Eye, Critical Race Theory

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Racism is one of the prevalent issues across the globe. It is a complex phenomenon that cannot be easily understood without taking scholarly, historical, psychological, social and institutional dimensions. Racism is a social construct which is created and given meaning through social processes (Hall, 1996). Allport in his The Nature of Prejudice (1954), notes that one of the types of racism is individual racism, this form of racism is rooted in personal prejudices and biases that promote discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. According to Carmichael et al. (2008) institutions are equally responsible for promoting racism, these include the judicial system, education system and labour markets. These practices can lead to a systematic disadvantage for racial minorities.

Furthermore, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva in Racism Without Racists (2003) emphasises the presence of racial bias in society which is the result of social, cultural, institutional and historical preconceptions which privilege some and disenfranchise others.

In addition, Frantz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks (1952) draws attention towards internalized racism, where members of marginalised racial groups internalise the stereotypes and negative discourse about their abilities, drawbacks and nature. This type of racism is explored at length in The Bluest Eye (2007) and Othello (1965).

Racism has a long history; it is not natural but a human creation. The ruling classes throughout history, to maintain their dominance and influence, have perpetuated racial divisions in society. For

instance, the Aryans established racial hierarchies within the Hindu societies. Europeans brought black Africans to America as slaves, even after America gained independence. The blacks continued to endure the oppression, and living in the harsher conditions in the independent America. The African Americans suffered severe racism and prejudices at the hands of white Americans (Harari, 2011).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) originated in the latter half of the 20th century in America to critically examine the intersection of race, law and power. The key CRT figures Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, and Richard Delgado emphasise the importance of recognizing the presence of racial inequality and the means through which this inequality or racism is sustained and legalised in society through social and legal systems (Crenshaw, 1989; Bell, 1980).

CRT is closely connected with numerous fields such as philosophy, sociology, law and history. In its infancy, CRT scholars traced the roots of racism in America by focusing on the legacy of slavery in the USA and particularly paying attention to various events such as the Civil Rights Movement, Montgomery bus boycott and recent events. CRT scholars take arguments from writers like Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. Du Bois, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others working in the fields of sociology, politics, literature and philosophy. CRT developed into its current form in the 1970s due to the weak progress of African Americans after the 1960s Civil Rights Movement in America.

Kimberlé Crenshaw stressed at the importance of recognising racism as an everyday occurrence in America. She asserts that recognizing this reality will lead to confronting those beliefs and practices that enable racism in society. CRT does not only focus on individual racial identity but also focuses on his or her class, gender, sexual orientation and gender. They try to locate instances where they can find traces of institutionalized racism. CRT does not only focus on individual racial identity but also focuses on the subject class, gender, sexual orientation and gender. They try to locate instances where they can find traces of institutionalized racism.

In a short span of time, CRT gathered numerous successes, becoming a tool for researchers in the field of education, to examine the traces of racism

in education, school climate and pedagogy. It has become a methodological and epistemological tool for the analysis of historically discriminated and marginalised people. However, CRT has been criticised by some scholars including Richard Posner who posit that CRT is a farce which is aiming for legal egalitarianism. Despite criticism, CRT has been accepted in various disciplines and fields, such as education, sociology, ethnic studies, and many more. Kimberlé Crenshaw examines intersectionality to reveal how various forms of social stratification such as sexism, ableism and classism overlap to create a unique experience of oppression.

*Othello* (1603-04), a tragedy by written by William Shakespeare written in 1603-04, and published in 1622. The story revolves around two major characters, Othello, the protagonist of the play and Iago, the antagonist. Othello is a Moor, having an Arab or Berber descent, and he is black. By creating a character like Othello, Shakespeare has opened an avenue to deal with racism in his play. It was an early modern period when *Othello* (1603-04) was written, this period was marked by increased contact with other cultures and an initiation of imperialism. The discourse of “us” and “other” was common, as pointed out by Edward Said (1972) and Harari (2011). Moreover, Blackness was associated with otherness and inferiority, which was propagated through language and literature (Op. cit.).

The story begins when Othello, a black general in Venice, appoints a beautiful boy named Cassio as his chief lieutenant, thereby infuriating Iago, who in jealousy, plots to take revenge on both Othello and Cassio. Iago takes revenge on Othello by brainwashing him against Desdemona, his wife, and Cassio, by telling him that Desdemona has an extramarital affair with Cassio. The theme of racism is prevalent throughout this play. Iago uses racist remarks towards his beautiful wife, leading to her murder; in the end, Othello takes his own life.

*The Bluest Eye* (1940) is a debut novel by Toni Morrison which was published in 1947, set in Lorain, Ohio, 1940-41. This novel highlights the poor condition of African Americans after the great depression. Racism is still prevalent during the period in which this novel is set. Toni Morrison tries to highlight racism in her novel *The Bluest Eyes*. She adopts a unique approach by using black

characters and showing their miserable life. She portrays how racism, discrimination and prejudice ruin the lives of people. It makes people alienated, and insecure; makes them commit heinous crimes or lose consciousness.

The *Bluest Eye* (2007) revolves around the life of a black African American girl named Pecola Breedlove. She bears various hardships in her life because she is discriminated against based on her skin colour. She suffers from Racism in her community, the whole family remains the victim of racism. The tragic incident that happened with her father made him an animal. He rapes Pecola, his daughter, and impregnates her. Pecola thinks she would not be discriminated against if she had blue eyes. She considers herself ugly and bad. Her new born baby dies after a premature birth, and Pecola becomes mad. She roams around the town with her hands open. The tragedy of Pecola's life shows that racial discrimination shatters people's life.

Although, *Othello* (1965) and *The Bluest Eye* (2007) are written in different periods, but both highlight the issue of racism. In both of these works, racism is prevalent, and it is used as a tool of subjugation. This means that it is important to address the issue of racism since it is a long-standing issue of humanity. The researcher will try to comparatively analyse racism in both of these works by using the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT).

### **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Racism is one of the prevalent issues across the globe. It is a complex phenomenon that can not be easily understood without taking scholarly, historical, psychological, social and institutional dimensions. Racism is prevalent in both the works, *Othello* (1965) and *The Bluest Eye* (2007). This shows that even though these works are written in different periods, still they revolve around the theme of racism. The researcher will explore how racism is prevalent in both the works and what are the consequences of racism.

### **1.3 Delimitation**

Although, both works explore myriad themes, however, the present study will focus on racism in these works. In addition, Critical Race Theory encapsulates many concepts such as the critique of colour blindness and intersectionality. the present

study will utilize the basic tenets of CRT to analyse these texts.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

This research will reveal the pattern of racism in both works, which belong to different eras and geography. It will also highlight how Critical Race Theory can be used to analyse racism in literary works.

### **1.5 Objectives**

To investigate racism in *Othello* and *The Bluest Eye*.

To explore racism from the perspective of CRT in *Othello* and *The Bluest Eye*

### **1.6 Research Question**

In what manner does racism operate in *Othello* and *The Bluest Eye*?

What are the consequences of racism in *Othello* and *The Bluest Eye*?

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Delgado et al. in their work *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* explores CRT at length. They argue that racism is common for people of colour and it is embedded in the very fabric of the society. Furthermore, they argue that civil advancement only occurs when the white or dominant class have their interests in line with it. In addition, they reinforce the idea that race is a social construct and that an individual has multiple identities that cannot be understood in isolation. Similarly, they note that CRT critics expose traditional liberal approaches to meritocracy. They reveal that CRT is revisionist, seeking to unfold racism in historical and contemporary times.

Ledesma & Calderón (2015) have examined the development of Critical Race theory in K-12 and higher education. They tried to study how CRT has been used in education against racism. They found the CRT is not only limited to race but rather delves into the wider picture keeping intersectionality: sexism, classism, and gender, which are important aspects of discrimination. CRT has evolved to a greater extent which now tries to unfold racist discourses, aiming to unfold this notion of white man's supremacy. The success of CRT in this regard is inevitable. The researchers found that CRT has helped identify institutional racism. The

researchers quite effectively highlight the role of CRT in education at various levels.

Additionally, Bowman et al. analysed three personal stories using CRT. Bowman et al. think that racism is commonplace in society and all those who are in power are involved in racism in one way or the other. Similarly, they explore that racism is in the interest of white elites and the underlings or working-class people are involved too due to interest convergence. They further note that even the American dream could not stop racism. Through their analysis, they expound that racism has become commonplace in American society and the victims have internalized it too. The real stories that they highlighted reveal the menace of racism and the damage it has done.

Shakespeare's tragedy Othello has been explored from multiple perspectives by different scholars and racism has been one such perspective. Neill, 1989 explores racism in Shakespeare's Othello. Neil reveals and quotes various scholars to prove that racist ideology was beginning to evolve into imperialism in Elizabethan England. The racist discourse becomes evident through Iago's language when he uses words like "barbery horse" or "black ram" to describe Othello. Iago uses the concept of otherness which is rooted in Christianity as well to beguile Othello. This paper also explores the link of racism with sex and social status.

Similarly, Adelman (1997) investigates the role of racism in the tragedy of Othello. The researcher reveals that Iago's plan was successful due to racism. He achieves success by instilling monstrosity in Othello by convincing him of his blackness. Adelman further reveals that racism alienates people from society and that is what happens with Othello. Iago's actions are based on the Western idea of binary opposition. Iago calls himself white, who is superior, and Othello a monster, who is considered inferior. The researcher highlights that what Iago wants to inculcate in Othello is found in him.

Hassan Khan & Rahman (2014) study the role of internalized racism in *The Bluest Eye*. They also expose the role of capitalism in propagating racism. Similarly, the American beauty standard has set witness as standard and beautiful thereby making blacks hate themselves which leads to internalized racism. They highlight that internalised racism leads to people negating their ego and subjectivity.

Similarly, Bump (2010), studies the language and narrative voice in *The Bluest Eye*, to create a connection between language and racism. The researcher found that Morrisons' use of multiple voices in the story creates a profound effect upon the reader, furthermore, it shows that Pecola has no voice of her own. In addition, Bump's criticism reveals the negative role of capitalism in supporting racism. Additionally, the researcher expounds a link between alienation and racism which ultimately leads to internalized racism. The writer concludes that education plays a very important in coping with the issue of racism in society.

The above literature shows that racism is a negative component of human society. The two works, *Othello* (1965) and *The Bluest Eye* (2007) explore the theme of racism, and it has been explored from the perspective of racism as well. However, the present undertakes to explore racism in these two works from the perspective of Critical Race Theory.

### **3.0 Theoretical Framework**

The "Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education" notes that CRT is an analytical framework that examines racism in education. It unfolds and brings to light the issues of racial inequality in educational settings. In a short span, CRT gathered numerous successes, becoming a tool for researchers in education to examine the traces of racism in education, school climate and pedagogy. It has become a methodological and epistemological tool for the analysis of historically discriminated and marginalized people.

Delgado and Stephenie (2001) claim that CRT is based on the following premises: 1. Racism is ordinary and not infrequent. 2. It serves an important purpose. 3. Racism is a social construct. In addition, Bonilla-Silva (2015: 74), thinks that racism is embedded in the very structure of society. Similarly, Bonilla-Silva argues that racism has a material foundation as well. Silva notes that racism manifests itself differently in different times. Additionally, according to Silva racism has been ascribed to a degree of rationality.

### **3.1 Methodology**

The study undertaken is qualitative. The researcher has performed textual analysis of the primary texts of both *Othello* (1965) and *The Bluest Eye* (2007).



After highlighting the relevant passages and quotes, the researcher then analysed these from the perspective of Critical Race Theory. The writer has also stressed the comparative analysis of both texts to investigate the role of racism in different periods and different cultures.

### 3.2 Research Design

This study employs quantitative research method in this study. The quantitative research method is aided by the textual analysis of *Othello* (1965) and *The Bluest Eye* (2007). The researcher has performed textual analysis of both the text. The relevant passages have been highlighted and analysed through the lens of Critical Race Theory.

### 4.0 Analysis and Discussion

In the tragedy, *Othello* (1965) the theme of racism is present at great length. In the play, one can find institutional racism, internalized racism and social racism as well. The setting of the play is Venice and Cyprus. It is the time of imperialism and colonization. The West is fighting against “the general enemy” (Shakespeare, 1965, I. 3.382) Ottomans. The racist and prejudiced discourse is prevalent in society. Bonilla-Silva (2003) discusses how racism is present in society through colour-blind practices. It is observed that when the state officials deal with Othello, they refer to him by his previous name. Iago and Roderigo do so to remind him that he is still an inferior person. They use names like “Moorship” and then “the Moor”. The use of such language reveals that Venetians, at that time, considered themselves superior and others inferior.

Similarly, *The Bluest Eye* (2007) has adopted a unique approach toward Racism. The author argues that her purpose was to construct an anti-racist narrative and to do so she used Black African American characters which enabled her to utilize her narrative more effectively (Morrison, 2008). Toni Morrison through her work exposes the menacing impact of racism. Morrison claims that racism at a broader level (Inter-community-racism) leads to racism within the community (intra-community- racism) or to put it simply internalized racism. According to Delgado & Stefanic (2001) racism is ordinary and it is initiated by those who are in power. In *The Bluest Eye* (2007), the powerful are the whites who are running the country and thus are involved in racism

against the blacks. Furthermore, the whites are in this position because they have control of materials and resources.

According to Delgado & Stefanic (2001), racism is ordinary, and it is initiated by those who are in power. In *The Bluest Eye* (2007), the powerful are the whites who are running the country and thus are involved in racism against the blacks. Furthermore, the whites are in this position because they have control of materials and resources. That is why Iago is using such demeaning and dehumanising language against Othello. For instance, he instigates Brabantio, Desdemona’s father, against Othello by describing him as a monster. Iago says: “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise!” (Shakespeare, 1965, I.1.91)

Shakespeare (1965) highlights that Western beauty standards are based on whiteness. Iago is a representation of typical English people. His prejudice is exposed when he becomes envious of Cassio’s beauty: “He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly.” (Shakespeare, 1965, V.1.3147) Allport’s (1954) calls this type of racism as individual racism. The racism in this case is only individual racism, but it is institutional racism as well as discussed by Carmichael and Hamilton (1967)

In the same manner, the character of Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye* (2007), lives in a society where blacks are considered ugly. This compels the people of colour to feel inferior. Hooks (1992) argues that as a result of racism, they lose their subjectivity and ego, In such a society blue eyes, blond hair, and light skin are the standards of beauty: “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 21)

Crenshaw (1989) argues that racism is initiated by the powerful, and its practical example is observed in *Othello* (1965), where the Venetians are racist against the Turks. However, it is interesting to note that Othello is in a powerful position therefore he does not face outright racism, but there is indirect racism against him. Often times, the characters use racist language against him. They use degrading terms for him. Roderigo calls him “thick-lips”. Similarly, Iago makes him a rapist and a monster when speaks to Brabantio. He refers to Othello’s love with Desdemona as a process that will create

monsters: "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter / and the Moor are making the beast with two backs" (Shakespeare, 1965, I.1.126)

Witt (2005) suggests that racism is ordinary in American society. Morrison reiterates the same when Cholly, Pauline and Pecola experience racism everywhere, they are reminded of the same thing over and over. Movies, advertisement and people would display their contempt for black-skinned people and admiration for fair-skinned. The whole social prejudice and bias against black-skinned people resulted in blacks calling themselves ugly. Pecola and her family became the victims of the same problem. They started calling themselves ugly.

"It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, You are ugly people." ...You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly" (Morrison, 2007, p. 35)

Additionally, Iago also uses religion to prove the otherness of Othello. He raises doubts about Othello's marriage to Desdemona due to his race. That is why he describes Othello's relationship with Desdemona as horrific. His intentions are clear in the lines when he says "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe." (Shakespeare, 1965, p. 9) The expression "white ewe" foregrounds the idea that they are superior and the others are ugly and do not deserve love.

Furthermore, Morrison claims that ugliness is subjective, a saying goes "beauty is in the eyes of the beholder". The Breedlove were not ugly but it was what people had made them believe that they were not beautiful. One of the horrible effects of racism is that it makes you insecure. Such a thing happens with Pecola, who feels that if she gets blue eyes then people would start accepting her. She would get the attention and importance she wants. She prays for blue eyes and she eats candies the wrapper of which bears a picture of a beautiful girl having blue eyes. Derrick Bell suggests that racism has crept into every corner of our society. As a result, it has become ordinary and commonplace in American society.

"If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We

mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (Morrison, 2007, p. 41)

The anger in Pecola's father was the result of the incident that happened to him when he was having an affair with a girl and two white men saw him. Cholly did not want to show anger towards white men as they were more powerful and they had the power. As a reaction he started hating the girl he was having an affair with. Morrison, according to the tenets of CRT is giving voice to the marginalized group. Cholly was not bad rather he was made sinful: "Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless." (Morrison, 2007, p. 118)

The negative effect of racism turns Cholly into a monster. Cholly even rapes his daughter, Pecola, twice and impregnates her. The people start blaming her and even her mother does not believe in her when she tells her what has happened to her. Pecola child dies and her wish for blue eyes is not granted. She becomes delusional and loses consciousness. It appears that all the blacks are vicious like Cholly, however, CRT explains that this is not the case. Similarly, it compels Othello to kill his wife. According to FBI statistics in Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund (2004), hate crimes against blacks are twice as compared to crimes against whites. This shows how much of a menace racism is.

In a similar fashion, Othello also suffers racism and he feels inferior due to his colour. Iago tries to corner Othello by using racism as a tool. He convinces Othello that his wife is indifferent to him and assures him that Cassio is beautiful, and he is ugly. Thus, Othello becomes suspicious of him and Iago achieves his aim by making Othello hate his wife. This way, Othello starts trusting Iago. Othello tells him to send over his wife to spy on Desdemona: "Set on thy wife to observe. Leave me, Iago." (Shakespeare, 1965, II.3.1523).

One of the major instances of internalized racism in *The Bluest Eye* (2007) is when Pecola's mother Pauline ignores her. She does not give any attention to Pecola which makes her feel neglected. She even scolds her in front of the blue-eyed white girl. Pecola thinks that she is not beautiful which is why her parents are not loving her. She wishes to be beautiful by having blue eyes. Furthermore,

Crenshaw (1991) expounds on the role of racism with race, class, and gender. Pecola suffers more racism due to her gender. That is the reason black female characters in the novel appear in a miserable state.

“More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more Lovely.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 100)

The end of *Othello* (1965) is tragic. Othello kills his wife under Iago’s influence and then commits suicide, “I kiss’d thee ere I kill’d thee: no way but this; Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.” (Shakespeare, 1965, V.2.3727). The end of *The Bluest Eye* (2007) is also tragic, when Pecola becomes mad she starts talking with an imaginary friend. This dialogue between her and the imaginary friend is harsh. She is not going to the school any more. This conversation further reveals that her insecurity does not end here after getting blue eyes but it expands. She is convinced that she has blue eyes but her blue eyes are not the bluest of all: “Yes. Now she does. Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she’s jealous too? Could be. They are pretty, you know.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 150)

Crenshaw (1989) reveals how race is a social construction. *Othello* (1965) and *The Bluest Eye* (1965) both revolve around the theme of racism. According to CRT, race is social and both works successfully highlight that. The powerful, in this case, the whites, have created a discourse that they are superior and beautiful, and the others are ugly. In *The Bluest Eye* (2007) Pecola and her community suffer racism at the hands of whites. Similarly, in *Othello* the Europeans are dominant and they consider others “the Turks” barbarous and ugly. Othello who is a moor also suffers racism but due to interest convergence, he becomes an indirect victim.

Furthermore, CRT also points to institutionalised and internalised racism. These have been reiterated by Crenshaw (1989) and Carmichael et al. (1967), describe institutionalized and internalized racism and both types are present in both of the works. *Othello* (1965) reveals institutionalised racism. When state officials call Othello “Moor” and in *The Bluest Eye* institutionalized racism is revealed

through the media and advertisements which consider whiteness as the standard of beauty. Similarly, Iago uses racism to instil monstrosity in Othello, he becomes the victim of internalized racism, as a result he murders his wife. Similarly, in *The Bluest Eye* Pecola’s community is suffering from internalized racism. That is why Pecola’s mother becomes angry when Pecola is born.

The difference between both works is present at the tenet of “interest convergence” There is no indication of interest convergence in *The Bluest Eye* (2007), however, interest convergence is present in *Othello* (1965) as Othello is an army general, therefore, he is treated with respect and he is called a “noble moor”. Additionally, another difference in both works is the exposure of the role of capitalism. In *The Bluest Eye* (2007) Morrison reveals how much capitalism is involved in racism. It is foregrounded through media and movies. Meanwhile, there is no such discussion in *Othello* (1965).

In addition, Shakespeare in *Othello* (1965) provides a solution to end racism. At the end of the tragedy, when Othello stabs himself, then he kisses Desdemona and dies. It is symbolic of reconciliation between the Orient and the Occident, East and West and black and white. Shakespeare wants to highlight that the only solution is to embrace diversity, and this is also the underlying message of CRT.

### Conclusion:

Racism is a menace that destroys the personal and social lives of people. It is used by the superior class to portray their dominance. The Critical Race Theory has undertaken the task of exposing racism as a social construct. The CRT highlights how racism is prevalent in society and who is behind it. The application of CRT in *The Bluest Eye* (2007) and *Othello* (1965) reveals the menace of racism. *The Bluest Eye* (2007) highlights that excessive institutional and social racism can be internalized in a community which will make their life worse. Similarly, *Othello* (1965) discusses that even those at a higher level are not immune from racism. The application of CRT in these works fully satisfies all the tenets of CRT: racism is ordinary, it is a social construct, racism is individual as well as institutional and it intersects with other forms of identity. The only way to end racism is the acceptance of diversity and multiculturalism.

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