

## Devilish Dames and Damsels: Witches, Demoneesses and Supernatural Women in Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder's *Thakurmar Jhuli*

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### Abstract

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Every fairy-tale needs a good old-fashioned villain. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder's 1907 seminal collection of fantasy folklore titled *Thakurmar Jhuli* or *Grandma's Satchel (of Local Legends)*, aims to embody the campfire-story/lullaby essence of Bengali grandmothers' storytelling their young wards to sleep, or to awaken companionable interest. Preliminary readings may categorize all villainesses in the stories, firstly, as cut from the same cloth (species), and secondly, as unequivocally evil, which is emphasized by each tale ending with their inevitable death at the hands of the human protagonists. However, the tales represent a diverse queue of comprehensively characterized paranormal entities. The paper examines their comparability to feminist theorist Barbara Creed's 'monstrous feminine' archetypes for otherized women in fantasy horrors. The antagonists range from old sisters spinning destinies out of wheels of fortune, to witches exhibiting retributive powers who rule both seas and lands, to flesh-eating wives and mothers who traverse the spectrum of twisted maternal instincts from cannibalizing their own progeny in revenge, to capturing and adopting live prey. In addition to exploring possible folkloric and mythological origins and parallels of each discernible kind of supernatural women, the paper aims to identify those that possess abilities drawn from amalgamating multiple types. The paper will further look into the terminology used to denote the supernatural in the Bengali version versus the English translation, and possible mistranslation and retainment. For the purpose of the paper, Sutapa Basu's English translation of Majumder's anthology, titled *Thakurmar Jhuli: Princesses, Monsters and Magical Creatures* (2021) has been consulted as the primary text, supplemented by the original Bengali version.

**Keywords:** Witches, Monsters, Supernatural, Fairy tale, Villainess

Folklore, developed over centuries of conceptualization, would describe generationally accumulated and disseminated traditions and knowledge,

especially verbal, poignant to the respective source-communities. However, India's multiculturalism and cultural exchange broadens the scope of fusing miscellaneous representations of the fantastical in the most popularly recognizable fairy-tales which are often inclusive of both European and pan-Asian fairy-tale conventions. The present paper aims to scrutinize the portrayal of the supernatural, specifically female, in one of the most prominent literary artifacts of Bengali society. Fairy-tales which are curated from local, rural Bengali legends by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumder in *Thakurmar Jhuli* present a curious blend of inhumanly deviant feminine stereotypes. In Majumder's world, and in extension the world of the Bengali supernatural, demonesses fly and mutate weather like witches, and witches control destinies like the Fates, punish like the Furies, and even correspond to benevolent goddesses, depending on how they use their abilities. The human heroines are almost always the epitome of docility and inertia; they are usually turned into a plot device and a prize to be won after the assertion/re-assertion of masculine authority in the narrative. On the contrary, Majumder's multifariously gifted supernatural women - whether negatively, positively or ambivalently portrayed - go toe-to-toe with the male heroes in terms of strategizing capacity, resolve and strength, making up some of the most memorable characters in the collection.

The tale of 'Princess Kalavati' kick-starts Majumder's perpetuation and representation of a folkloric trend of what I would call the composite-monster. Kalavati's lands could only be reached by sailing across several horrors, the first being the "Land of the Three Crones" (Basu 30). Majumder uses the ambiguous "Tin Buri" (Majumder 41) that directly translates to 'three old women', who could simply be interpreted as being fairly human and earthly unless reinforced by the tale's immediate context of their sole subsistence on human flesh. While Sukhendu Ray and his O.U.P translation keep it globally accessible to predominantly English-speaking audiences with his use of "three old witches" (Ray 104) like a Macbeth analogue, independent translator Sutapa Basu's attempt keeps closer to the actual contextual meaning. The three crones rule their lands with "giant ogre" (Basu 30) guards who bring the whole entourage of the five human princes to their mistresses for a three-day banquet:

Opening the mouth of the sack, the three crones, who were very, very old, squinted into it. [...] The captives squirmed away [...] But somebody did get caught. The unlucky man was popped into the crone's toothless mouth [...] One by one, all the captives from the small cabin boy to the eldest prince were swallowed by the crones. (Basu 30)

The crone, while etymologically meaning 'disagreeable old woman', has oscillated between several interpretations. Her original association to ancient wise figureheads of knowledge and experience later degrades into ageist readings (Ott 15), despite being tied to the Classical tripartite goddesses (Lewis 68). Traditionally considered to be malevolently and paranormally powerful in traditional cross-cultural witch-lore rife with ageism, crones appear in this tale

with typical age markers: “toothless grins” (Basu 30) and “grey heads with wrinkled faces” (Basu 32). They are not deified, but endowed with features that lean more towards the mythical Rakshasi (“Rakshasa” n.p.) than the Dakini which both Majumder and Ray’s phraseology attempts to point towards. While both kinds would subsist on raw flesh, specifically human, the Dakini were believed to be spectral handmaidens serving Goddess Kali (Loar 45) and elsewhere regarded as an alternative term for wisdom-centric goddesses in Puranic and Tantric (O’Brien n.p.) literature. Majumder’s Tin Buri mirror more localized, culture-specific legends of the Daayan or the Daini who are patriarchally modified, malicious versions of Dakini who are stripped off of their divine associations (Nag 408). The three crones further seem to serve as a parody of the Hindu trinity of male gods, namely Brahma-Vishnu-Shiva, and are comparable to the popular Western depiction of witches and other supernatural creatures in threes as a mockery of the Christian Holy Trinity. Furthermore, the princes’ fateful encounter with the three old women seems to parallel the three Classical Moirai sisters (Hard 27), presiding over the fortune of humankind. Although not immediately evident, the consequences of killing the crones snowball into multiple punishments kept in store for the princes who, almost unnaturally at every further step, make the error of trying to kill the two saviours who pulled them out whole and alive from the stomach of the crones. The actual heroes of Kalavati’s tale are the Aesopian animal/anthropomorph or Potter-esque ‘animagi’ (Kirk 12) princes Buddhu and Bhutum, one a monkey, the other an owl, both humans in magical disguise. Their outward appearance is reviled by their human brothers who on multiple occasions attempt to murder them despite being rescued over and over, and curiously have to face immediate almost divine retribution each time via drowning, imprisonment and live burial.

Just as the Moirai would weave destinies with their yarn, Majumder’s magical old women would often turn fate with their magic-infused tapestries. ‘Princess Kalavati’ includes a centennially old woman stitching a blanket on the riverbed, bearing the translator’s moniker “old hag” (Basu 35) which is rooted in Western folklore. The “ragged quilt” (Basu 35) that she throws on Buddhu is immediately followed by thousands of soldiers to appear and capture him, only to unintentionally bring him to the other princes and his fated bride Kalavati- all of whom he manages to free and thus continue to fulfill his authorial destiny as the heroic male protagonist. The quilt could be considered a trap that stupefies Buddhu, or simply one that even without magic might render him motionless if sturdy enough, and it could be paralleled with sleep paralysis associated with old hags in European fairy-tales (Alexander 30). Although within the bounds of this story, it perhaps is a signaling and teleportation device- often a preferred locomotory power for magic users in general (Mitchell and Rickard 11)- for the huge number of people who instantly materialized out of thin air. The Moirai imagery continues in ‘Snake Princess Manimala’, in the figure of “Panchu’s mother” (Basu 165). “Hobbled [and] limping” (Basu 166) with “straggly hair” (Basu 170), she spins cotton and chants psychokinetic spells: “Wheel! Wheel!

Spin like mad/ Cure the prince who is sad. Chinook boat, I command. Fly to Manimala's land (Basu 166). Her ability to swindle the king into promising his kingdom and his daughter for her son Panchu, in return for the favour of curing the prince, embodies Creed's description of the witch: "Dangerous and wily [...] scheming, evil" (Creed 76). In both Kalavati and Manimala's stories, the witch figure strives to create chaos, especially rendering the socio-politically and discursively dominant class of the monarchy (to which coincidentally every protagonist/hero belongs) completely useless, until plot armour allows the central character(s) to defeat them and restore order.

Comparatively clearer denominations of what species the antagonists of a story are going to be are straightaway mentioned in the stories under the section titled "Land of Monsters" (as translated by Basu). One could argue Basu's attempt unfortunately extinguished the essence of the original Roop-Tarashi, which roughly means Ones with Frightening Countenances, where Tarashi (Majumder's neologist verb-fication of the Bengali term tarash, meaning fear) is pointedly feminine. 'Neelkamal and Lalkamal' and 'Gold Wand, Silver Wand' present arguably the strongest and most maleficent female supernatural presence coupled with instances of cannibalism, vampirism and filicide. Neelkamal and Lalkamal's (originally Ajit and Kirit respectively) story relies on the positive and affectionate sibling relationship between two half-brothers, one born to the "sweet and kind human queen" (Basu 114) and the other to the "she-demon [...] rakhoshi queen who was wicked and cruel" (Basu 114) masquerading as a human. An immediate moral judgment has been made on behalf of the readers based on species even before the tale begins. The recurrent theme of non-human entities (especially female) camouflaged as humans firmly establishes them as the predatory group and humankind as the prey from the get-go, and is reminiscent of Valmiki's *Ramayana* (7th-4th century BCE) and its portrayal of Surpanakha-in-disguise. The ancient Hindu Sanskrit epic's impact had already been inextricably embedded for thousands of years in majority of North, West and Eastern Indian cultures and influenced subsequent mythopoeic activity by the time of Majumder's publication. The evil stepmother trope is played up in Majumder's stories and is a step ahead in Ajit and Kirit's tale: the queen is literally (species-wise) the devil stepmother, desiring her stepson's death to free her own from his influence and to also not let his human flesh go to waste:

[The] great love between the brothers made the rakhoshi queen boil with anger. Her black soul was evil, and she only wanted to harm Prince Kirit. Besides, her tongue drooled to make a meal of the boy. How she longed to cook little boy's tender flesh into curries, grill his liver, and mash his bones into sauces! But her son, Ajit always stuck to Kirit. (Basu 115)

It is further interesting how the rakshasa blood coursing through her male child's veins could not sway him from fiercely loving his human brother. In fact, Ajit found his inheritance of superhuman strength and resilience useful in protecting Kirit while also exploiting his bloodline privilege to manipulate his demoness

grandmother later in the story. It is almost as if the human side of him was powerful enough to completely neutralize his natural bloodlust, while strategically keeping intact the more palatable traits (i.e. useful for humans) that his ancestry endowed him.

On the contrary, Ajit's mother is described in animalized terms, and her powers, without the human dampener, are vilified and directed purely towards evil. Her responses, especially the sounds made by her in reaction to Ajit and Kirit's bond are theatrically canid beast-like: "Angrily, the rakhoshi queen gnashed her teeth...grrunch, grrunch, grrunch! Furiously, her nails clawed her skin...skcratch, skcratch, skcratch!" (Basu 115). She epitomizes the "non-human animal" (Creed 1) side of the monstrous feminine, wherein "horror emerges from the fact that woman has broken with her proper feminine role – she has 'made a spectacle of herself'" (Creed 42) by ostentatiously deviating from the socially ascribed and prescribed traditionally placid and nurturing behavior one expects of a human woman, specifically a mother. The queen's appetite could only be satiated by human flesh, which she could not procure. Unable to consume Kirit, she decided to make-do with the human queen's life instead to slake her thirst:

The rakhoshi could not bear being starved of human flesh for long. She had to satisfy her greed in some way or the other. She eyed the kind, harmless human queen and decided to suck her blood [...] At night, when everyone was sleeping and the palace was quiet, the rakhoshi queen crept to the kind queen's chamber. Standing at the door, she let her large, red eyes fall on the sleeping queen. Her eyes drilled holes in the queen's body. The rakhoshi snapped out her tongue that became long and thin like a gecko's. It pushed into the holes in the queen's body and sucked her blood..., ssiisss...ssiiisss...ssooosh! Before dawn broke, she went back to her own chamber; her red, dripping tongue hidden under her veil. (115, emphasis mine)

Every culture has its own nocturnal blood-drinker equivalents, sometimes multiple of them. The creatures in South Asian folklore closest to Ajit's mother in characteristics would be the Tamil Pey and the Peymakilir duo, the Hindu mythical Pishacha and the Filipino Aswang. Often called "vampires of battlegrounds" (Mathew n.p.), the Pey and Peymakilir exsanguinate dying soldiers almost in an act of mercy, very different from the motivations of the Rakhoshi queen in this case. She shares certain physical markers with the Pishacha (Bane 115) in her act of draining blood, including large, bulging red eyes and ability to shape-shift and hide her true appearance under human skin: "Now the rakhosh or demon have extraordinary powers. They can change their forms as they want or command their bodies to obey their will" (Basu 115). Her proboscis-like tongue used as an appendage to siphon blood and life-energy is a direct parallel to the vampire bat-anteater hybrid Aswang's "long, pointed hollow tongue [...] rope-like" (Curran 37) which it uses to prey on sleeping victims at night. The penetrative act is akin to rape in its nonconsensual and violent nature,

and for patriarchal societies that associate sexual aggression as standard for men (Campbell 116) and unthinkable for women, the Rakhosi queen's behavior is doubly transgressive in her animality and distorted femininity. She is, as Creed argues about female vampires, "driven by her lust for blood [and] she does not respect the dictates of the law which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct" (Creed 61). Ajit's mother fears the connection between the two brothers to the extent she cannibalizes her own son to rid her household of what she considers her tainted offspring who directly antagonizes her by injuring the rakshasa assassin she hired to eat Kirit.

[Ajit's] sight fell on the huge rakhosh guzzling the last of Kirit. [...] Horror and anger clashed in his heart as Ajit pounced on the rakhosh. With an iron fist, Ajit struck him a hard blow [...] Shrieking in pain [...] howling and screeching, the terrible creature took to its heels [...] When her own son did not allow the rakhoshi queen to fulfill her dearest desire, she became mad with fury. She changed into the she-demon that was her real form and felt neither motherly love nor pity. Stretching one long arm, she grabbed Ajit. Crunching his head between her huge jaws, she gnawed the meat from his bones and ate up her own son. (Basu 117-119)

The queen's anthropophagic punishment for her own child is a perversion of her life-giving, life-nurturing role as a mother. It subverts the psychoanalytic reading of children themselves as the more cannibalistic/vampiric entities (Pizzato 120) in fetal state and infancy, being nourished by the mother's placental blood and later her colostrum. The rakhoshi queen's actions rob her of the traditional maternal identity, posing her as the ultimate threat for children who see mothers as the primary and most powerful source of safety. Her powers also include petrification and she is described in Medusa-like, serpentine terms when she stupefies her human husband to prevent him from saving his son.

She quickly plucked two strands of hair from her head and flung them at the king. Like fangs of venomous snakes, the black hairs swooped on him. When they touched the king, he froze on the spot. His hands, feet, neck refused to move. He was as still as a rock. Eyes wide in horror, the helpless king watched the giant rakhosh chew on Kirit's body. (Basu 117)

The king is crippled and weakened, powerless to move or speak for the entirety of the story, with the demoness ruling his kingdom on his behalf only until she is slain by her stepson. Her obstruction of the king's literal and narrative voice, his movements and in extension his authoritative agency as father figure and male monarch exemplifies the "femme castrice" (Creed 153) in horrors, which is Creed's interpretation of the castrating phallic woman (Braid 268) and the male anxiety surrounding her, with specific connection to Medusa and the gorgons of Classical myth.

The story instantiates another form of twisted femininity, namely through the queen's demoness mother who reigns over the race of rakshasa. Her approval of Kirit as her own grandson betrays her natural instincts as humankind's apex predator. She prevents her subjects from attacking the brothers when they set foot in her land, once Neelkamal (Ajit) announces his identity: "Rakhoshi Granny took Neelkamal into her lap. When his demon scent filled the gaping holes of her nostrils, she began to pet him, saying, 'Neelu! My dearest grandson!'" (Basu 132). Interestingly, her "foul demon stench" (Basu 132) was off-putting to Neelkamal despite being her direct descendant, further connoting his human side is strong enough to suppress his demonic nature unless the latter has to perform as the protector of his human brother. The grandmother tests Lalkamal (Kirit) by instructing him to ingest iron pellets, a feat highly difficult for the weaker human species. Once Lalkamal tricks her into thinking he ate them with ease by surreptitiously exchanging them with edible nuts, he is happily accepted by the demoness as her kin. She ignores her sense of smell ringing alarm bells and inciting her hunger, which is testament to her general civility and kindness and evinces the ambivalence of her character:

Lalkamal's human scent troubled Rakhoshi Granny! Her eyes flashed, her tongue lolled, and her mouth drooled with greed. But how could she eat her own grandson? Rakhoshi Granny swallowed buckets of drool in her mouth and took her grandsons home. (Basu 134)

Her reaction is in stark contrast to that of her daughter. Granny considers Lalkamal's purported act of strength proof enough of his worth as a demon and her blood-family. Indicators of his human DNA were redundant to her. Although there is a possibility she could have doubted herself, attributing the human scent to a false impression due to her old age and failing senses. Nevertheless, she becomes a more traditionally nurturing maternal figure (with the images of coddling and providing food) despite her own demonic nature. Her daughter on the contrary has been trying to kill her own son she birthed even if it is damnable within her species: "I don't care for my poisoned seed. For seven lives I shall bleed. If [her henchmen] don't find a way to kill. And make their royal blood spill" (Basu 130).

Rakhoshi Granny is presented as more ambivalent and sympathetic, but still formulaically lumped in with the irredeemable evil lot by dint of her species. The trust she placed on the brothers is broken and she is killed along with the annihilation of the entire "rakhosh tribe" (Basu 137). The same fate befalls another Rakhoshi Granny in 'Gold Wand, Silver Wand'. She is shown to be nearly twinning the previous incarnation in her characteristics: she is the ruler of hordes of rakshasa, with a soft spot for her adoptive human child. Her army destroys an entire kingdom and eats everyone but the king's daughter that the old demoness takes "a fancy to" (Basu 182). Her yearning for children is obvious in the gently patronizing way she speaks and acts towards the girl: "Loving granddaughter [...] Come here and sit by me. Look! What delicious food I have

brought for you! Sit down, my child and let me feed you” (Basu 183). It is also worth mentioning how she trusts the princess enough to allow her to attend to her hair while she sleeps, although that could be chalked up to the fact that the human girl poses zero threat to the demoness. Her powerlessness is stressed even more when she reveals how she is, without active consent, magically sedated by Rakhoshi Granny “into a death-sleep” (Basu 183) regularly before the demons go hunting, and is woken up whenever her ministrations are desired. Ultimately, the princess is less a child or an individual, but more of a pet or a plaything the demoness dotes on. However, it is her fondness that the princess manipulates to draw out the method of ending her and her army. In both cases of the two Rakhoshi Grannies, the only way their death was possible for a mere handful of humans to carry out was to destroy something which housed their souls but was external to their actual bodies. Neelkamal’s grandmother, her army and her rakhoshi queen daughter had their life energy housed inside two bees, and the foster-parent grandmother and her army died after the seven-hooded water snake from the palace courtyard was killed by the protagonist prince. *Thakurmar Jhuli* sees a recurrent motif of encasing someone’s soul inside external objects and/or other living creatures which is akin to how horcruxes would work in the Harry Potter saga. It has its origin in much earlier predecessors in folklore that talk of the external soul, life-index or life-token and the “arrangers of such states of being always have contact of one kind or another with power of the world of the supernatural” (Walker 91). J.G. Frazer connected the ancient system to witches, giants and other “fairyland” (Frazer 775) entities that become invulnerable and immortal in Indo-European folklore, while N.M. Penzer searches for its representation in South Asian tales in his notes to Somadeva’s 11<sup>th</sup> century AD collection of stories in *Kathasaritsagar*. About the motif’s genesis, he argues:

We find that [the belief] has entered not only into the folk-tales, but into the custom and superstition of a very wide variety of countries. [...] The Eastern story-teller, always ready to exaggerate and embroider, introduced the idea of making the soul as hard to find as possible, thus he encases it in a series of various articles or animals and puts it in some apparently inaccessible place [...] It is this form of life-index motif that has spread all over India and slowly migrated to Europe. (Bhatta 130)

Penzer proceeds to quote the exact rakshasa story with the serpentine life-token from ‘Gold Wand, Silver Wand’ that Majumder himself had gleaned from L.B. Dey’s *Folk-tales of Bengal* (1883). He sums up: “In the great majority of the tales there is a captive princess, or an ogre’s daughter, who falls in love with the hero and tells him the way in which the obstacles to the destruction of the demon, or Raksasa, may be overcome” (Bhatta 181).

So, the Rakshasis and witches embodying the monstrous feminine meet their end. Contrarily, the sacred feminine does not. Non-aberrant, culturally desirable mothering temperament of the Moon Lady from the story ‘Sukhu and Dukhu’ sets up the foregone conclusion that she would survive. This is one out of only two



times that a supernaturally powerful woman has been presented in a positive light in this collection<sup>1</sup>. Dukhu is self-sacrificing and compliant; and is abused by her step-sister and stepmother. She undertakes the journey to find cotton yarn to help her mother make clothes to sell so that they do not die from starvation. Following the wind which blew away her cotton to push her towards her destiny, Dukhu exits Earth and happens upon the palace of the mother of the moon. Framed by “silver moonlight [and] halo of snowy-white hair” (Basu 209), the old woman with “wrinkles zigzagged across her face” sat spinning at her wheel and produced clothes out of a loom in a blink. While her introduction connects her immediately to the previous iterations of the witch figure in Kalavati and Manimala’s tales, there’s an added significance to the mother of the moon. The moon and the old woman on it are ubiquitous in Bengali folk lullabies as personified family members (Shahed 153), but she would particularly remind the Western audience of the figure of the beneficent white witch (Lewis 376) who helps the unfortunate to achieve their wishes via magic. The connection to the moon enhances her station as one who peruses magic. The moon is a blessed symbol in witchcraft, and the maternal side of the Moon Lady can be interpreted as tying her to the maiden-mother-crone aspects of the Dianic triad ruling over the moon (Underwood 228). The ever-changing phases of the moon symbolize transformation, which is the major ability exhibited by the Moon Lady when she instructs Dukhu to bathe in her magical pool which clothes her in expensive garments, jewels and gives her a glamorous make-over (dermatological treatments included) with a peachy complexion, red lips and wide dark eyes. Now that she has been changed to fit the cultural standard of feminine beauty, Dukhu’s fortune transforms as well, having been gifted a princely husband by the Moon Lady and enough riches to last a lifetime. Moon Lady, who I would argue may be allowed the epithet of Moon Goddess, also has divinely retributive powers like the Moirai-adjacent witches from that come to play over the older sister Sukhu. She is boorish and disrespectful towards the old woman, her behaviour “terrible [and] violent” (Basu 214). She verbally degrades her, physically attacks her, destroys the magical loom, and pays no heed to warnings. Consequently, her greed turns her into a “hideous [...] frightful, ugly monster” (Basu 216) who is later eaten by her serpent-husband: a very Creedian punishment for socially unacceptable conduct of a woman. In essence, the human Sukhu becomes the wicked witch of the fairy-tale: the grotesque female monster, regardless of the fact she never possessed any supernatural agency but only the intimidation tactics of a bully.

The tales thus present an assortment of entities whose depiction is the sign of the times: namely, the patriarchal fear of powerful women, especially figures that are considered aberrant in their negotiation with social mores of femininity. Now, one can argue that modern feminist retellings of myths and evolution and re-modification of the original oral narratives strengthen the voice and perspective of the female characters, especially in revamped versions of Western fairy-tales with villainous supernatural women being revisited as the wronged and

justifiably vindictive. However, in the case of Indian folklore, it is mostly the human women who are at the forefront of the revisionist trend, as evinced in examples like Divakaruni's Sita and Draupadi (Singh n.p.), and not the supernatural ones. Re-imagined supernatural women (like Surpanakha in Kavita Kane's *Lanka's Princess*) are still few and far between. In *Thakurmar Jhuli*, several traits of different existing supernatural figures have been merged together to create women whose powers and characteristics become stronger and more diversified. Finding counterparts in other cultures, manifestations of the composite-monster and the monstrous feminine in *Thakurmar Jhuli* become unique in their multifaceted composition, but simultaneously universal in their familiarity for an international readership.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The other instance is the incorporation of folk goddess Shashthi disguised as a disabled old woman in 'Finger and Half', who blesses her devotee with the boon of children. This, coupled with her veneration in the Bengali community as the overseer of childbirth and reproductive fertility, is telling.

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