

Alimentary Politics and Gendered Power in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy*

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Abstract— This paper is a close literary and socio-cultural analysis of food, hunger, and power in Easterine Kire's *A Terrible Matriarchy* (2013). It explores how alimentary practices such as the preparation of food, its distribution, withholding, and symbolism function as a mode of domination within the domestic sphere of Angami Naga society. Drawing upon feminist food studies, postcolonial theory, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus and social capital, the paper argues that Kire deploys the politics of the kitchen and dining not merely as indigenous cultural backdrop but also as the very site where patriarchal authority is conceived, reproduced, internalized, and enforced—paradoxically by women themselves. The central irony of the novel is that the household, which is run by a "grandmother," constitutes a "terrible matriarchy" and is shown to rest fundamentally on economies of hunger: who gets to eat first, who receives the big pieces of meat, and who labors to feed others while depriving herself. The protagonist Dielieno's navigation of this hierarchy reflects how food scarcity or abundance are not merely material conditions but also mechanisms of gender formation in a deeply biased and unequal society. By placing Kire's text in dialogue with theories of culinary capital and nutritional inequality, this paper attempts to examine food in *A Terrible Matriarchy* as a simultaneous weapon of control, a site of resistance, and an embodiment of indigenous women's subjectivity.

Keywords— *Alimentary Politics, Feminist Food Studies, Postcolonial Feminism, Culinary Capital, Hunger.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Few practices in everyday life appear as mundane as the serving of a regular meal. Yet in the novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, Kire makes the act of ladling food into bowls the opening image of an entire narrative of subjugation. The novel's first chapter opens with the grandmother Vibano distributing meat to her grandchildren and serving the choicest portion to Dielieno's brother, making explicit that "there are different portions for boys and girls." This scene, positioned at the very threshold of the narrative, functions as a synecdoche for everything that follows: the division of a household along the lines of gender, the reproduction of hierarchy through a living being's most basic need, and the mechanism by which women become the agents of their own devaluation.

The novel's opening line sets the emotional architecture that food will sustain throughout. "My grandmother didn't like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half" (Kire 1). This declarative statement of the child's rejected personhood is first confirmed not through words of cruelty but through the daily act of the table. It is in the biased distribution of food—where the best piece of meat goes to the boys and the girl receives less—that Dielieno learns her place in the household's moral economy. Through these daily rituals, Dielieno learns her place in the household's moral economy. Food, here, becomes the medium through which love and its contingencies are communicated before language is adequate to name them.

Kire's novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*, first published by Zubaan in 2007 and republished in 2013, occupies a significant position in Indian English Literature as the first novel in English by a Naga writer to foreground the lived, domestic realities of Naga women and their shared experiences. While the critical conversation around the text has productively addressed its

Bildungsroman structure, its negotiation of tradition and modernity, and the concept of internalized patriarchy, one dimension that deserves critical attention is the specific role of food—right from its preparation to distribution, denial, and its symbolism as an apparatus of power. This paper aims to explore that gap as its starting point.

The concept of "culinary capital," developed within feminist food studies and given added force by Bourdieu's framework of "cultural capital," refers to the social and symbolic value conferred through control over food production, distribution, and consumption. In this framework, the power to determine who eats first and what they eat is never merely practical—access to nourishment is access to social recognition. Denial of food, whether overt or structural, is a form of social death enacted repeatedly, domestically, and in Kire's novel, at the hands of another woman.

II. CONTEXTUALIZING THE TEXT: NAGA SOCIETY, GENDER, AND ANGAMI WORLDVIEW

Easterine Kire, born in 1959 in Kohima, Nagaland, is not only the first published novelist from the Naga community but also a foundational figure in the emergence of a distinctly northeastern Indian literary voice. Her works consist of novels, poetry, fiction, children's literature, and cultural documentation. Kire's works clearly reflect her desire to protect, interrogate, and preserve the indigenous oral traditions, histories, and social realities of the Naga community. Writing from what Kire has described as triple marginalization—as Naga, as woman, and as tribal indigenous person—Kire maps this intersection into her fictions with extraordinary precision.

A Terrible Matriarchy is set among the Angami Naga, the group to which Kire herself belongs. The Angami are patrilineal, which means property and social authority are inherited by the male heir. This male inheritance bars women from inheriting land or money, a structural reality that is the ground from which gendered alimentary hierarchies grow. In such a society, the worth of women is primarily measured through domestic labor and their reproductive capability. This makes the control over food and its distribution one of the few domains of power available to older women, and this power, paradoxically, is exercised in favor of the very patriarchal order that subjugates them.

In the novel, Dielieno is sent to live with her grandmother at the age of five so that she can be raised properly. "You are not raising her properly. She will leave tomorrow for Mother's house and I don't want to hear any more arguments about this" (Kire 10). The name Dielieno itself in Angami refers to errand girl, which means that her identity is inscribed from birth as one of duties and function. Vibano's stated function in taking Lieno is to mould her into a good Naga wife and mother, and the kitchen is the main site of that moulding. The title's bitter irony resides precisely here: the household is matriarchal in the sense that its dominant personality is a female, yet it is terrible because that female authority is entirely devoted to the reproduction of patriarchal values with food as one of its primary instruments.

III. MEAT, MASCULINITY, AND THE LANGUAGE OF THE TABLE

Kire depicts food as the nutritional and symbolic economy of the Naga household and not merely as a foodstuff. It is a marker of social value and a language through which gender roles and hierarchies are communicated and consolidated. The novel's opening meat-distribution scene establishes the notion that food distribution is governed not by need but by whether the receiver is a girl or a boy. According to this notion, the body of the male child is understood to deserve more, to warrant more, and to be more valuable in its claim upon the household's resources.

This language of food is made explicit in Vibano's direct edicts throughout the novel. Her maxim that "a male child is to be brought up very carefully. When he is grown, he will take care of all of us" (Kire 238) operates as ideological justification for the food inequality in the house. It runs on the belief that boys are the future of the household; they are its heirs, its protectors, and its economic agents. Their bodies and needs are privileged in the distribution of food. The girl's body, however, is seen as a future wife's body, and she is destined to leave; investment in it is, therefore, not worth the household's best resources.

What makes Kire's treatment particularly acute is her attention to how Dielieno receives this learning not as an abstract teaching but through daily lived experiences. She is not directly taught that her brothers are more valuable; she feels it, in the inferior piece of meat on her plate, in the empty lap of her grandmother which is only meant for her grandsons, and in the money that is only given to her brothers as a token of love. Dielieno's body learns its subordination before her mind can articulate it.

Traditionally, in Angami houses, meat was associated with feasting, as a representation of communal hospitality, and as a matter of prestige signifying the economy of the village. The significance of meat extended beyond everyday household chores. These traditional aspects do not disappear in the domestic sphere Kire portrays; they are confined and domesticated within the grandmother's kitchen, where the hierarchy of pieces at the family table is a small replication of the hierarchy of prestige that

structures Angami society. When the grandmother, Vibano, gives her grandson the choicest cut, she is in some sense enacting a larger social cosmology.

Kire also draws attention to how the categorization of food extends beyond the binary of meat and no meat to function as a moral taxonomy. A critical distinction in the novel falls between women who can cook food and women who brew rice beer. Those who cook food are seen as respectable, whereas those who brew the rice for beer are considered despicable. This categorization makes the chore of making food a measure of feminine virtue, adding another layer to the alimentary structure of the household. Women are not differentiated from men through food alone; they are also compared and differentiated from each other, sorted into hierarchies of respectability that further fragment any potential collective solidarity.

IV. THE KITCHEN AS CLASSROOM: FOOD, DISCIPLINE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY

If the dining table functions as the site where unequal patterns of consumption are enacted, the kitchen becomes the space in which the ideology sustaining those inequalities is cultivated. Vibano leaves little room for ambiguity when she insists that girls are expected to "marry and have children and be able to cook and weave clothes and look after the household." Rather than presenting these responsibilities as one possible life trajectory, the novel frames them as the only socially acceptable future available to a girl. Kire places this prescription in devastating juxtaposition with Lieno's internal aspiration: "I could not fall asleep for a long time. I thought about school and how nice it would be to learn to write and sing and draw as my brothers did" (Kire 25). This contrast exposes the gulf between the life imposed upon Lieno through patriarchal expectations and the life she quietly desires for herself. The grandmother's vision of domestic womanhood thus stands in direct opposition to Lieno's yearning for education, creativity, and self-determination.

The kitchen is thus a pedagogical institution at the household scale. Borrowing from Althusser (1971), it can be understood as a miniature ideological apparatus where dominant social values are reproduced through everyday domestic practices. Within this space, Lieno undergoes a continuous process of instruction in cooking, weaving, and household management. These activities are not presented merely as practical competencies but as natural extensions of femininity and essential preparation for her prescribed future. Bourdieu's notion of habitus, which refers to the deeply ingrained habits, dispositions, and perceptions that individuals acquire through socialization within a particular social context, is particularly relevant in explaining this process. Through repeated domestic practices, Lieno gradually internalizes a gendered habitus that shapes her perceptions of what is normal, what is desirable, and what is socially acceptable. Consequently, long before she is capable of questioning these expectations, the domestic sphere has already disciplined her body and consciousness into accepting patriarchal norms as natural.

What gives the kitchen its particular power is that it is also the site of the most essential form of human care: the preparation of nourishment. Lieno is taught that cooking is love, that feeding the family is the highest form of female virtue. By equating domestic work with affection, the novel reveals how patriarchal culture transforms unpaid household labor into a moral obligation rather than a social expectation. This emotional framing discourages resistance, as any rejection of domestic responsibilities can easily be interpreted as rejection of love itself, inviting accusations of selfishness and a failure to be an ideal woman. This dimension of food labor is, thus, recruited into the service of women's unpaid and unacknowledged domestic labor.

The contrast between Dielieno's access to school and her own confinement to the domestic sphere dramatizes the zero-sum quality of this system: every hour spent in the kitchen is an hour not spent at school. The allocation of time in the house mirrors its allocation of food: boys receive more valuable resources such as education and better pieces of meat, whereas girls receive what is left of them. Kire shows this not as exceptional cruelty but as the unremarkable functioning of a system that has normalized the extortion of female labor and denied their development.

V. VIBANO AND THE TERRIBLE LOGIC OF INTERNALIZED PATRIARCHY

The most provocative element of Kire's novel lies in the bitter irony of its title—*A Terrible Matriarchy*. The primary agent of Dielieno's subjugation is not a man but a woman, her own grandmother Vibano. Vibano, in the domestic sphere, is an absolute authority. She decides who cooks, who cleans, who eats what, and who is allowed to go to school. Her authority within the domestic domain is primary and immediate. Yet every decision she makes reinforces, instead of challenging, the patriarchal order that subordinates women. As Elwin observes, the first wife in a Naga household traditionally occupies the position of domestic head and exercises considerable authority over everyday family affairs (Elwin 450). Kire complicates this cultural

reality by showing how Vibano's authority, rather than questioning patriarchal norms, becomes the very mechanism through which they are preserved and transmitted across generations. Her power exemplifies the workings of internalized patriarchy, where female authority reinforces, rather than resists, structures of gendered subordination.

Dielieno's mother illuminates the structural roots of Vibano's worldview. Vibano's ideals were formed in a system in which "a woman without a male heir would receive shelter from her in-laws, yet her daughter was ineligible to inherit the father's property or status." Vibano's domestic tyranny is born not of malice but, as the text suggests, of a belief in the absolute necessity of preserving traditions that she experienced as a girl child, endured as a woman, and now administers as an elder. She aims to pass on the same patriarchal norms in the name of tradition when she ladles the best piece of meat into her grandson's bowl. She is not consciously against any woman but rather acting in accordance with a social system she herself has internalized.

This is the phenomenon that scholars have termed "internalized patriarchy," or in Bourdieu's framing, the symbolic violence through which the dominated come to participate in their own domination. Vibano does not see herself as an agent of oppression but rather as a guardian of tradition. She believes that she is equipping Lieno for the only life that this society will let a woman live peacefully. Her control of the kitchen and the table is, as per the novel, not simply power but compensatory power, as the household is the only domain of authority she has ever been permitted. This power is then exercised with the ferocity of someone who has had everything else taken away.

Kire's narrative makes it clear that Vibano's own suffering as a woman in a patriarchal society has not produced solidarity with Dielieno, but its opposite. Vibano's internalization of the system's values is so deep that the onset of menstruation in the young girls of the house is called a curse. This is perhaps the most devastating fragment of the novel: the grandmother who dispenses lesser portions of meat is also the grandmother who has come to see female life itself as a deficiency, a curse, a problem to be managed rather than an individual life to be nourished.

Kire does not let the reader resort to blaming men for Dielieno's suffering, nor does she allow the comfort of exonerating Vibano on the basis of her own victimization. Instead, the novel holds both truths simultaneously. Vibano is a product of the oppression of the system and also becomes the agent of that oppression. Her power over food is real, and its effects are excruciating. Kire's treatment of both angles and her refusal to simplify is one of the novel's greatest literary achievements.

VI. HUNGER AS CONSCIOUSNESS: RESISTANCE, REFUSAL, AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE BODY

Food in *A Terrible Matriarchy* is primarily a weapon of control as well as the site of resistance. Dielieno's hunger—her unsatisfied appetite due to insufficient food, her figurative hunger for education, for freedom, for a life more than just the domestic sphere—becomes the novel's primary catalyst for conscious awareness. Dielieno does not just want more meat or more time at the table; she wants the right to be a full subject rather than living a deprived life of fragments. This is evident from Dielieno's words: "Well I don't care to be a good woman. I shan't ever be a good woman, whatever that is" (Kire 37).

The novel's most poignant image of this doubled hunger comes in Dielieno's childhood inability to sleep after Vibano's statements about girls' proper destiny. Lying awake, Dielieno thinks not of food but of school, of learning to write and sing and draw like her brothers. The hunger for knowledge and freedom runs parallel with the hunger for food and nourishment. Food and education are the prime necessities of Dielieno, and she is denied adequate resources in both.

Kire's treatment of resistance through food is notably unsentimental. Dielieno does not go for dramatic confrontations at the dining table; she does not refuse to eat in protest or try to oppose the hierarchy through a single act of defiance. Her resistance is incremental, almost invisible, enacted through persistence in attending school, through the interior life of her consciousness as rendered by the novel, and through the small acts of non-compliance that do not hint at overt rebellion. This reflects the reality of resistance within patriarchal domestic structures: it is more often a matter of small refusals and persistent presence than heroic confrontations.

The novel also deploys moments of collective female food preparation as quiet forms of solidarity that challenge the grandmother's control over food. When women cook together, share meals during community events, or support each other outside the strict hierarchy of the household, they create an alternative social space based on mutual care rather than authority. Kire does not idealize these moments or suggest that they completely overcome patriarchal dominance. Instead, she portrays them with warmth and sincerity, showing that even small acts of cooperation and shared nourishment can become meaningful and can be a limited, small act of resistance.

The novel's engagement with the spiritual world adds another dimension to this hunger. Dielieno observes, "Isn't it strange that dreams always come true especially if they are dreams of death in the family?" (Kire 143). This sensitivity to the spirit world, to the communications that arrive through channels outside the physical world, suggests that the spiritual realm is a place where Vibano cannot control or ration. In her dreams, Dielieno receives what the dinner table withholds: a sense of her own place in a larger order and a connection to the ancestors and the invisible world that does not pass through the grandmother's hands.

VII. HUNTING PATRIARCHY: DEATH, SPIRITS, AND THE POLITICS OF UNFULFILLED HUNGER

One of the novel's most striking ideas is that patriarchal power extends beyond the living world into the realm of the dead. Kire writes, "and the most feared of spirits were those of old women" (Kire). This arresting sentence performs several functions simultaneously. It confirms the oral and cosmological world in which the novel is embedded. It suggests that women's power—the capacity to disturb and disrupt—is recognized precisely in the form of a feared ghost. And, most pointedly in the context of food politics, it implies that the authority, recognition, and power over their own nourishment denied to women in life returns in death as something terrible and uncontrollable.

The figure of the feared old woman's spirit can be read as the return of the repressed. The power that the system denied Vibano and women like her during their lifetimes—the power to refuse, to demand, to take the best choice of meat cuts for themselves—re-emerges after death in a form that cannot be managed by the household's food-dispensing rituals. In many indigenous cultures, feeding the ancestors is a way of placating them, of extending the economy of nourishment beyond the boundary of the living. That the most feared spirits are of old women suggests that the ancestors most in need of placation, most likely to be unsatisfied, are those who spent their lives dispensing sustenance they were themselves denied.

This reading is reinforced by the novel's broader treatment of death and memory. The spirit that returns, unsatisfied, is the spirit of one who could not live out their life to the fullest. The women of Kire's Nagaland, cut short not by premature death but by the premature death of aspirations that the grandmother's domestic regime enforces, are in a spiritual sense already haunting the household. This signifies that their unfed hunger persists.

VIII. POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES: SITUATING KIRE IN CRITICAL DISCOURSE

Placing *A Terrible Matriarchy* within the broader field of postcolonial feminist writing on food and power illuminates both its specificity and its connections to a global archive of women's literary engagement with alimentary politics. Across South Asian women's fiction, the kitchen has long served as a site where gender, class, caste, and colonial legacies intersect. Kire's intervention is distinguished by its specific grounding in the indigenous Naga experience, at a triple remove from the dominant Indian literary mainstream: tribal, northeastern, and feminine.

Sachdeva and Rani (2023) rightly invoke Virginia Woolf's observation in *A Room of One's Own* that writers seldom spare a word for what was eaten, and trace how food mediates gender discrimination from Woolf's luncheon parties to Vibano's kitchen. The present paper builds on this foundation by extending the analysis to the specifically Bourdieuan dynamics of habitus formation: the grandmother's kitchen does not merely reflect existing inequality but actively produces the gendered subject through daily alimentary ritual.

Reading Kire alongside Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational question "Can the subaltern speak?" raises a subsidiary question particularly pertinent to *A Terrible Matriarchy*: can the subaltern eat? Spivak argues that the subaltern subject is systematically denied the epistemic conditions under which she can make herself heard within dominant discourses (Spivak 271–313). Kire's novel asks a more material version of the same inquiry: under what conditions does the gendered and marginalized subject receive adequate sustenance—physical, intellectual, emotional—to sustain a fully human life? The answer is grim within the patriarchal household as Vibano administers it: the girl child does not eat enough, in either the literal or the figurative sense. She cannot speak, and she cannot eat, and these two deprivations, Kire's novel suggests, are aspects of the same structural exclusion.

The concept of culinary capital is particularly relevant here. Vibano's mastery of the kitchen, her authority over the household's food supply, is real but bounded: it operates within and for the patrilineal order, not against it. Her culinary capital is the capital of the warden, not the liberated subject. It confirms the system even as it gives her a form of power within it. As Counihan argues, food is both a means of differentiation and a channel of connection (Counihan 12), and in Vibano's household, differentiation overwhelmingly dominates, with connection offered only to male grandchildren as a mechanism of securing their future loyalty.

IX. THREE GENERATIONS, THREE HUNGERS: NINO, VIBANO, AND DIELIENO

One of the structural achievements of Kire's novel is its multi-generational scope. The novel is not only Dielieno's story but the story of three generations of Naga women, each shaped by the same alimentary and patriarchal order but positioned differently within it. Reading the three women together—Vibano the grandmother, Nino the mother, and Dielieno the granddaughter—reveals how the food politics of the household are reproduced, mutated, and tentatively challenged across time.

Nino, Dielieno's mother, occupies the most passive position in the household's alimentary hierarchy. She has no name of her own in the novel's social fabric beyond her relational identity as wife and mother. She is thoroughly defined by her function, so much so that her individuality is only seen in fragments. The fear she carries in Vibano's presence, her careful management of her own behavior so as not to invite her mother-in-law's disapproval, reflects the full internalization of a system in which a woman's continued access to the household's resources—including food and shelter—depends on her compliance with gender norms.

Vibano, as we have seen, exercises the only form of power available to her through the administration of the household's food resources. But Kire is careful to show that this kind of power is ultimately hollow. Vibano's preferred grandson becomes an alcoholic; the family's male heirs do not, in fact, take care of everyone as her ideology promised; and the women who survive and flourish at the novel's end—Dielieno and Vimenuo—are the very women who refused to be entirely contained by the politics of kitchen and patriarchy.

Dielieno's partial victory at the novel's end, when she becomes a teacher, fulfilling the education that the kitchen's curriculum tried to replace, is framed not as a triumph over tradition but as a persistence through it. She has been fed inadequately at the grandmother's table, but she found alternative sources of nourishment and sustained herself through school and her own stubborn will. Her decision to forgive Vibano on her deathbed reflects not an acceptance of her grandmother's actions but a refusal to inherit the bitterness produced by an oppressive system. Through this act, Kire suggests that breaking the cycle of resentment is itself a meaningful form of resistance.

X. KIRE'S LITERARY CONTRIBUTION: A TERRIBLE MATRIARCHY AS AN ALIMENTARY ARCHIVE

The enduring significance of *A Terrible Matriarchy* lies in its ability to foreground the experiences of Naga women as an important body of cultural and literary knowledge. By bringing these experiences into critical discourse, Kire makes them accessible for scholarly interpretation and broader literary engagement. The novel argues that the lives of Naga women are not marginal but fundamental to the preservation of Naga society, the shaping of cultural identity, and a meaningful understanding of how gender inequality operates within a particular socio-cultural context.

By making food the central framework of her narrative, Kire aligns herself with a feminist literary tradition that views the domestic sphere as a crucial site for understanding social power. The novel demonstrates that food is far more than a basic necessity—it is a means through which hierarchies, values, and identities are created and maintained. Decisions about who receives nourishment and in what measure reflect broader questions of dignity, belonging, and human worth. Thus, when the grandmother consistently reserves the choicest pieces of meat for her grandsons, she is not simply expressing personal preference but reinforcing a patriarchal worldview that shapes the values and consciousness of the next generation.

As an archive, the novel preserves details of Naga domestic food culture—such as the specific cuts of meat, the preparation of rice, the brewing of rice beer, and the ceremonial meals that mark life transitions—with the meticulous care of a writer who understands that these details are at risk of being lost. In this sense, Kire's food writing performs a conservationist function alongside its critical one. The very alimentary practices that the novel critiques as vehicles of inequality are also the practices through which indigenous Naga identity is enacted, and Kire documents them with the precision of someone who wants them to be remembered even as she insists on their transformation.

XI. CONCLUSION: CONSUMING AND BEING CONSUMED

The politics of food in *A Terrible Matriarchy* ultimately reveal a fundamental paradox at the heart of women's experience in patriarchal domestic structures. The person who produces the food does not eat as well as the person who merely receives it. This paradox—that those who feed others are themselves hungry—runs through the entire novel as both material fact and metaphor. Vibano's kitchen becomes a space where meals ensure the family's survival, yet their unequal distribution strengthens

gendered hierarchies. In this sense, women are not only the producers of food but are also consumed by the unpaid labor, expectations, and domestic roles that reduce them to function rather than acknowledging their individuality.

Kire's novel does not end in liberation. It ends in a provisional, hard-earned opening toward a different future for Dielieno. The Bildungsroman does not resolve into easy feminist triumph. What it offers instead is something more concrete: a precise and honest account of what it costs to grow up as a female in a domestic economy organized around the differential worth of male and female bodies, and what it means to keep going, in the face of that cost, to want something more than what the household table has to offer. Dielieno's childhood insight, "My grandmother didn't like me. I knew this when I was about four and a half" (Kire 1), becomes, as the novel proceeds, not a wound but a knowledge. She realizes that the world's arrangement of nourishment is unjust and that this injustice can be survived, named, and refused.

By approaching food as a central literary and analytical framework, this study has demonstrated that *A Terrible Matriarchy* by Easterine Kire deserves an important place not only in the canon of Northeast Indian English literature but in broader conversations about feminist food studies, postcolonial domestic fiction, and the literary representation of indigenous women's experience. Kire's novel illustrates that a chore as simple as the distribution of food within a household can reflect deeper social values concerning power, belonging, and human worth. Through the everyday rituals of the Naga kitchen, Kire exposes the structure of inequality that shapes the lives of Naga women. Thus, we can conclude that in Dielieno's persistent, aching hunger for something more, Kire writes one of her most quietly devastating critiques.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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