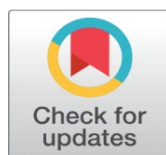
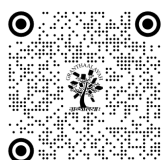


EXAMINING ABLEIST NARRATIVES: MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF DISABILITY AND CONTROVERSIES IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

The concepts such as 'normal', 'normalcy' and 'able-bodied' set the parameter in an able-society to evaluate a person's ability and disability. The ableist conscious inherent in the representation of the disabled in Malayalam cinema has been celebrated in the early 1990s to the end of 2010s, and the auteurs of the film themselves claim that their films support the community through these representations. Disability depictions often vacillate between a comic interlude, underplayed heroism, liability and burden (Menon, Neelima 1). There has always been a conflict between the representation of the disabled through the ableist lens and their question of identity. Even when the representations occur, it connotes the successful life of the able-body. The climax sequence of *Athbhutha Dweepu* (2005) and the disabled protagonist's soliloquy is one such of a kind. There have been many stigmas and stereotypes associated with disability that are inherent in the ableist consciousness; they are portrayed in several television programs that tend to promote charity model of disability and often blends it with inspiration-porn. The film *Kaduva* (2022) was scrutinized highly in recent times, due to its insensitive comment on the birth of the disabled children and deeds of their parents. The continued discussions on the online platforms and several posts from the parents of the disabled forced the aforementioned film's team to appear before the public to apologize for the comment. The profound implications of the prevalence of normalcy have a significant impact on the very essence of cultural production. Characters with disabilities consistently carry ideological significance, as do instances of illness or accidents that alter these characters. The paper aims to examine ableist memes disseminated through social media platforms, distinguishing between ableism and disablism. It broadly investigates the media's handling of the *Kaduva* issue and various instances in television programs to analyse the perpetuation of stigma and the construction of normalcy.

Keywords: Ableism, Disablism, Stigma, Charity Model, Inspiration-Porn

1. INTRODUCTION

Media performs a crucial role in bringing forward the untold narratives about the marginalized or under-represented. The screen with glamorous images and stylized life stories that has populous conviction tend to inject 'normalities' in the realm of race, sex, gender in hetero-normative culture. The media culture often presupposes the status of the marginalized and constructs their images based on those presuppositions. The constructions of underrepresented identities by media often reject their autonomy and rather mould perception about them through the mentioned process. Media instills ableism by the projection of the disabled at exceptional circumstances, as in while they achieve something 'despite being disabled' or comes across tragic moments. Thus their disability becomes a

sensationalized baiting content than their achievements. The concepts such as 'normal', 'normalcy' and 'able-bodied' set the parameters in an 'able-society' to determine a person's abilities and disabilities. The ideological bias of the media towards disabled always calls for the accommodation feature in an ableist society. The dominance of medical model of disability often disregards social construction of disability and treats the disabled through a patient centred lens with their experiences framed as illness narratives. Primarily, scholars seem to have discussions regarding the 'healthy' population and 'unhealthy' population in the circle of disability and also for the welfare of the people. This epistemological development towards disability stem from understanding disability through multiple misconceptions. Disability in Indian perspective, like homosexuality holds a pathologizing history. Later it droops to mythical concerns as disability is viewed as punishment and misdeeds of previous birth. With the advent of disability studies, the social oppression is questioned and their fights for dignity, accessibility, education and equal opportunities gives rise to the formation of The Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation Act 1995, and then widens the definitions of disability, increased reservation quotas for education in The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016. The Kerala programme on disability studies is basically guided by the doctrine that 'disability is primarily a developmental and rights-based issue; hence its multi-faceted aspects must be approached from an interdisciplinary paradigm (G. N. Karna 2010). The total disability population in Kerala scenario comprises about 2.6% (NSS Socio Economic Survey, 2018). Specifically, among males, the prevalence was 2.7%, whereas among females, it was 2.5%. The developments in the social media networks and discussion forums addressed the rights of the people with disabilities and social oppression they face, but both print and visual media such as films and television seem to sustain the ableist language and tries to accommodate disability in the ableist society through the trope of 'inspiration porn'. The achievements, the life struggles comes in the backdrop of their disability. Media portrayals of disabled people have been criticized within the scholarship of disability studies for the misrepresentation or lack of accuracy in illustrating their mundane experiences. Rather than focusing on the societal barriers that put forward challenges to the disabled community in socially accommodating themselves in an able-bodied society, the media narratives often focus impairment as the primary obstacle (Berger 2008) Newspapers and magazines represent the disabled as either unfortunate or brave for the everyday struggles but often seem to be reluctant about the causes for the struggle and ill treatment. The language often takes the pathways of impersonal, neutral or derogatory. Impersonal headlines often cover the emotional lens of being disabled and derogatory language employs disability often as metaphors for dilemma in the society. As well, the disabled is expressed in terms such as retarded, crippled etc. The neutral language for describing both the achievements and mundane experiences of the disabled are used very rarely because it retrieves only scant attention from the readers, thus the hyperbolic headlines or features comes into existence with bold letters. The tendency to visualize the issue of disability as essentially a medical problem has proved to be quite counter-productive (Karna, 2001: 239–86; 2007: 15–8). It is not any different in Malayalam films, when it comes to representing disability. Disability depictions often vacillate between a comic interlude, underplayed heroism, liability and burden (Menon, Neelima 1). This paper analyses the recent occurrences in disability depictions and controversies in the context of Kerala and thereby attempts to trace the trajectory of the mentioned phenomena. Specifically, from mythical films to dramas to comedies, it examines how disability is employed to inculcate multiple

facets and assumptions that satisfy popular culture conceptions. In addition, the paper also scrutinizes how the Malayalam television channels embody disabled body in family shows and comedy programmes.

2. MYTH AND DISABILITY IN MALAYALAM CINEMA

Disability mythology encompasses the collection of cultural narratives and beliefs centred on disabled people in society. In Malayalam cinema's mythical genre, there has been a history of prevalent theme that register transformations of able-bodied to disabled as mostly due to the punishments of their evil deeds either by god or by anybody possessing magical powers.

The folk heroes of disability and chronic disease have not been the millions who came to terms with their problems but those few who were so successful that they passed: the polio victim who broke track records, the one-legged pitcher who played major league baseball, the great composer who was deaf, and the famous singer who had a colostomy. They were all so successful that no one knew of their disability, and therein lays their glory. (Zola, 1983)

In *Nagamadathu Thampuratty* (1982) directed by J Sasikumar, Jayadevan (Prem Nazir) has his transformation from able-body to disabled body due to a curse from Chakshugi (Unny Mary) for stealing the *nagamanikyam*¹. She curses him that his vision will fade, his graceful nose will deform, his pristine teeth will transform into monstrous. Also, she adds that his posture will turn to that of a hunch back, his noble attire of a warrior will tatter into rags and his sword will become a mere crutch to support his 'distorted' body. Jayadevan's transformation into a disabled person marks a critical juncture in the film, but that doesn't make a conclusion. Despite being disabled, he facilitates the King in recovering his eyesight by using *nagamanikyam*. This recurring pattern in the mythical genre reinforces stereotypes regarding the lives of disabled individuals, portraying their experiences as a combination of abnormalities, hardships and adversities. The templates used in the narrative can be analysed with the feature of universal hero's journey mentioned by Joseph Campbell in his seminal article, *The Hero's Adventure*,

The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society. This person then takes off on a series of adventures beyond the ordinary, either to recover what has been lost or to discover some life-giving elixir. It's usually a cycle, a going and a returning (172)

These motifs can be interpreted through the lens of Carl Jung's concepts of archetypes and collective unconscious. Collective unconscious is —a psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals (43). Several mythical texts address disability as metaphorical like curse, personal tragedy due to their evil deeds etc. Characters such as Gandhari, Ashtavakra, Manthara, Dritharashtra depicts the same phenomenon. Gandhari masks her vision as a sign of protest and choice for her husband Dritharashtra of Kuru Dynasty, who is visually-impaired by birth. His 'blindness' is also used metaphorically to signify his unwavering affection towards his children despite their transgressions. Manthara's hunchback is a symbol of her wickedness and Ashtavakra's disability is a result of curse from his father. Also, disability is viewed as an aftermath of his/ her own evil deeds in the previous birth or due to his/her own parents. Thus the disability of the characters in mythical texts offers a reason for their condition and these beliefs have thereby influenced the societal conceptions about the nature of

¹ Mythical gem or jewel possessed by snakes or serpents which is believed to have magical powers in Hindu mythology

disability and the disabled people. When the able-bodied actor himself appears on the screen as a disabled character, the narrative is moulded in terms with the collective unconscious. When it comes to representation, it is the production of meaning through language (Stuart Hall 1997).

The popular culture films tend to inculcate these images and sustain the consumer market either by re-establishing these tropes or by implanting positive stereotypes. The representation of the disabled points toward the fashioned lives of the 'normal' and tries to establish the culturally-fixed 'truths'. In both cases, it is important that, far from the body being denied or left out of account, there is deliberate investment in it (Baudrillard 1998). The cultural narratives are built in a way to perpetuate desires that sustain consumerist culture and distort the perceptions of reality among people. The consumer culture structures bodily images and advertises it by constructing the dominant and the other. While viewing it through the lens of mythological genre films, the disabled body defines moralistic deeds and karmic effects. Malayalam film industry flourished with the mythological films like *Kodungallooramma* (1968) that revolves around the mythology, and traditions of *Kodungalloor Bhagavathy*² and *Sree Guruvayoorappan* (1972), and narrates the story of the incarnation of Lord Krishna as *guruvayoorappan*³ and his devotees. The characteristic feature of these films is that it not only set the narratives confined to villains, gods and demons but also sets a powerful moral imagination in which good triumphs over the evil. Later, the narratives developed with mythical characters in the social milieu of Kerala. Naradan⁴ in *Naradan Keralathil* (1987) comes to Kerala and provides his commentary for the multitude of events happening in the place, and thereby falls into the banner of social satire. The film seeks to influence the modern times projecting the triumph of moral righteousness over wickedness. The different genres existing in the Malayalam cinema adopted the disability tropes and ensured box-office success by satisfying the consumer culture. Balamani (Navya Nair) in *Nandanam* (2002) is portrayed as Lord Krishna's devout follower. The film incorporates mythical sub-plot that Balamani can't speak until her three years of age, but later a sage gives her sacred ash, after which she starts to speak. Vinayan's *Athbhutha Dweepu* (2005) tells the story of an island *Vamanapuri*⁵ constituting dwarf population. Their stature is reduced to dwarfs as a result of a 'curse' inflicted by *Gandharva*, which leads to their physical appearance are 'deformed'. In the climax of the film, Gajendran (Guinness Pakru), the dwarf prince of *Vamanapuri* enunciate dialogues of his 'self-realization', that he had always considered himself as the strongest man in the world until he encountered Hari (Prithviraj) and his friends, who have 'normal bodies' on the island. The actors who have acted in the film are dwarfs in real life and at the same time, the film has received an entry to Guinness Book for casting the maximum number of dwarfs. While considering the narrative, the actors have succeeded in effectively utilizing the prejudices against them in an able-bodied society.

Controversies regarding the film *Kaduva* (2022) arose due contentious dialogue exchange between the lead character Kaduvakunnel Kuriyachan (Prithviraj) and villain Joseph Chandy IPS (Vivek Oberoi) that Down syndrome of the villain's son is because he is bearing the sins of his father. The ego-driven battle of the lead actor and villain contains the over the top machismo and fashioned star image with slow motions and punch dialogues. When the film enters into an intense confrontation between them, the derogatory statement about the birth of the

² Incarnation of Goddess Bhadrakali at Kodungalloor Temple in Kerala

³ Incarnation of Lord Krishna in Guruvayoor Temple of Kerala

⁴ Divine sage in Hindu mythology in the role of messenger of Gods

⁵ Vamanan is considered as the dwarf incarnation of Lord Vishnu, thus vamanapuri can be translated as land of dwarfs

disabled is inserted here as one among the punch dialogues, which in itself is sadistic in approach. The film faced a huge backlash from the disabled community, critics and wider audience. Additionally, Parivaar an association of parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities had lodged a complaint with the State Commission for Persons with Disabilities against the dialogue. Subsequently, State Commission asked for an explanation from the auteur of the film and his entire crew. Later they were forced to conduct a press meet and thereby apologize to the disabled community and the parents of the disabled who were affected by the same. The auteur of the film also shared a Facebook post conveying his apology to the disabled community along with the crew, adding that neither he nor the crew wanted to offend or discriminate the disabled. He also provides a 'justification' that portrayal of disability in the film was intended to highlight the extent of villainism perpetrated by the villain. Moreover, he validates the statement with 'culturally-validated truth' that the existing generations bear the fruits of ancestor's success as well as their sins. The human tendency to compare with one another gave rise to the concepts such as 'normal', 'abnormal', 'normality', 'disability', etc. The able-bodied society that considers 'normal' body as operative suppresses the 'disabled body as deviants'. (Davis 1995). The comparative analysis between the social model and personal tragedy model of disability comprehends two standpoints. The former emphasizes social oppression as the fundamental cause of disablement whereas the latter identifies disability as an individual phenomenon. At the same time, it is evident that models intersect through the mythical presumptions related with disabled bodies. The ableist ideology along with the existing historical as well as fictional mythological narratives dictates the conception and functioning of disabled body in society. It thus also plays a key role in shaping the collective consciousness towards the disabled people. Through the derogatory dialogue and representation of the disabled, the myth of 'normal' body comes into spotlight. The portrayal of the disabled body often serves as an allegory for the 'normal body' and also disabled body becomes a potent site which is either equated with divineness or cursed body. This tendency enforces that the existing naturalised or 'cultural truths' in representations sets a premise that the disabled body in the religious context is in need of purification. Through the Facebook post, the auteur quotes Bible, "in those days they shall say no more: the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge (Jeremiah 31:29)", to justify the derogatory dialogue delivered by the lead character Kaduvakunnel Kuriyachan, a Syrian Christian planter in Pala region. He adds that the scene just conveyed the 'humanly consciousness' regarding the 'karma' of ancestors and fate of present generation, and also requests the audience to identify the scene as emotional agitations between Kuriyachan and the villain. The internalised ableist conception about the disabled body results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert disablism and favours the non-disabled through unequal treatment of disabled people. The film sets a template that can be treated as one among many global set of reactions towards the disabled people. The stereotypical beliefs about the disabled body and the ableist ideologies confined within the society formulate the prejudices against the disabled community. The ableist conceptualization about disabled body ranges from inspiration, sympathy and pity. Here, the Down syndrome of the child is used to symbolize the sins of his father or the effect of villainism that either of the parents or the ancestors had committed. Even when disability challenges the myth of 'normal' body, the film tries to challenge the 'disabled body' through the perpetuated notions of ableism.

...people with disabilities have been the object of representational treatments, but rather that their function in literary discourse is primarily twofold: disability pervades literary narrative, first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second,

as an opportunistic metaphorical device. We term this perpetual discursive dependency upon disability narrative prosthesis. Disability lends a distinctive idiosyncrasy to any character that differentiates the character from the anonymous background of the “norm.” (Mitchell and Synder 1997)

The film juxtaposes a moral judgement over the normalcy and disabled body. The disabled people were historically excluded from the philosophical understanding of having a good life and their body of ‘lack’ is not evaluated as capable or potent in an able-bodied society.

3. TERRAINS OF INSPIRATION-PORN IN ONLINE MEDIA AND TELEVISION

The representations of disabled people in online media and television are often used for objectification. Their presence often comes under the category of charity model, which objectifies them for evoking pity and sympathy in an able-bodied society. The fictional programmes often utilize disability or disabled as ‘monsters’, disability as a loss of one’s humanity, disability as total dependency and a lack of self-determination, the image of the disabled as a maladjusted person, disability as compensation or the idea of the substitute gift (Longmore 1978). After the growth of contemporary online media, the interviews of disabled are often tagged as ‘the brave’, ‘the inspiration’, ‘brave lady’ etc. This method of representations conveniently ignores the societal oppression faced by the disabled and the historically oppressed dynamics of disability. Media showcases the ‘physical limitations’ of the disabled as the ‘tragic figure’ who aspires to live in an able-bodied society through the ‘special skills’ they have. The disabled people thus become a body of ‘click-baits’ that often make use of the curiosity of the able-bodied to know about the everyday lives of disabled. In broader terms, the media assumes the larger audience as able-bodied and positions itself as an aiding factor for the disability community by representing them. These ‘positive images’ often pose high demand in media which tries to establish a conformist agenda on the distinction between disabled and non-disabled. Additionally, the media connotes the idea that charity model is essential for the disabled community through which the able-bodied ‘protect and serve’ them for their welfare. Malayalam television channels have certain templates to attract the family audience which includes serials, reality shows, comedy programs, etc. Fetishizing the extraordinary and defamiliarizing the ordinary are the two kinds of inspiration porn that exists in the realm. Inspiration porn perpetuates ideological mechanisms that contribute to the misconceptions about impairment and disability. According to Stella Young, a disability activist, this process can lead to the objectification, devaluation, mystification and individualization of disability.

Taking into consideration the span of five years, the media and television has incorporated disability to target multiple audiences. Initially, let us consider one of the popular television channels in Malayalam, Flowers’ coveted comedy program titled *Comedy Utsavam* which highlights the talents of individuals worldwide, preferably natives from Kerala. In one of its episodes, the program features the remarkable life story of Nayan earning Incredible Book of Records as a young child philosopher. The introductory description provided for the video sequence of Nayan states; that he has ‘survived with autism’ through the acquirement of special skills such as studying foreign languages. Secondly, Surya TV’s popular program *Aram plus Aram Kinnaram* presents an emotional narrative featuring Keerthi, a disabled woman and her care-taking woman Indira in the ‘I am Strong’ round. The program has invited one of the superstars in Malayalam cinema as the guest for the episode.

Later, the suspense or reason behind their invitation to the program at this particular moment is unveiled with highly an emotional background score and tearful reactions of the participants and audience, stating that the superstar has built home for them in the past. Thirdly, the interview of Elizabeth S Mathew with rare disease called Tourette syndrome aired in Behindwoods Ice, YouTube channel holds the description that she symbolizes 'the final word of confidence'. She talks to the anchor/interviewer with sudden blinking, head jerking and shoulder shrugging. The interviewer continues to ask her whether she has the same confidence even when the syndrome becomes increasingly challenging to cope with.

Disability blends perfectly with the genre's emphasis on overcoming narratives, and provides the perfect opportunity to lean into 'inspirational' stories that document triumph over adversity (Thorneycroft 2023). Theorisation of disability in the media often highlights the significance of understanding how societal constructions, cultural understandings and systemic confinements impact the lives of disabled individuals beyond their physical impairments. Considering the above mentioned three cases, the disability representation is used as a trope that expediently blurs their complexity and humanity as well as the confinements within the ableist society. The contents assembled in twentieth century digital cultures and programs in television are often extracted, replicated, and distributed widely in a global marketplace. The disabled being the historically oppressed community holds a past, which chronicles the persistent struggles for gaining equality rights, agency, accessibility, etc. But when it comes to the media, the agency of the disabled are often controlled and moulded. As a result of this, the disabled people become cultural displays that affirm the able-bodied that they are out of threat. The case of Nayan is promoted as an extraordinarily normal category juxtaposed with the 'overcoming of disability' narrative. However, the program tends to celebrate the achievements of the person despite being autistic. The anchor of the show introduces him as the 'gifted child' with many special abilities. Here autism is seen as an individual defect that restricts the person in exploring the opportunities and having a good life. The mother of the child says that the child was 'normal' till his one and half years of age and the consulted doctor said that the autistic people will have the capability to acquire certain 'special skills' that are often not seen or unthinkable in the 'normal' people. The judges of the program assert that 'he is not an autistic person, but the gift of God'. Even when the exhibitions of his skills are programmed in the episode, the focus of the ableist gaze is shifted to mythical misconceptions. His disability becomes a spectacle and his experiences of achievements become inspiration porn, as his special skills are considered caused from heavenly bountiful graces in this context.

The poignant narrative of Keerthi and Indira primarily serves to elevate the star image and reputation of the superstar. As their emotional tale unfolds, the camera pans towards the reactions of the audience; the stage becomes solemn, accompanied by melodramatic music and teary eyes of participants, judges as well as of audience. Keerthi's and Indira's inclusion in the program is not to shift the audience's concentration towards the barriers they face in the society, but to stress the importance of charity model agendas set in the premises of ableism. Both of them emphasize the role of a superstar in their lives, as he has helped them to live comfortably under the well-built home. The episode concludes with all participants expressing gratitude and admiration for the star's acts of kindness towards them. We cannot completely neglect the gratitude they possess towards the actor, but the program in which they were invited tries to enhance the star image through the representation of the experiences of the disabled. In his seminal text *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes states that society shapes and moulds several myths for

opportunistic agendas. The sequence confined within the charity model identifies the star as their saviour who has put an end to one of their major concerns, where to live. The case neglects the state power and concerned authorities such as Kerala State Handicapped Persons Welfare Corporation Limited which serves for the disabled community that ensure proper housing, education, accessibility and employment opportunities. The representations of disability and disabled people are “potentially allegorical in the sense that the act of characterization encourages readers or viewers to search for a larger concept, experience, or population” (Snyder and Mitchell 2000). The interview of Elizabeth aired on the YouTube channel places a considerable focus on Tourette syndrome, thereby presenting it to the audience in a manner akin to introducing a novel disability paradigm. The questions asked to her try to confine the disability within the medical model that defines her as a patient and the disability as something to be cured. The consciousness of the disabled person is also ableist in itself, tending to internalize the misconceptions and stereotypes about the deviants in an able-bodied society. Elizabeth defines her life with terms like fate, sacrifice, and also adds that the disability she carries may be ‘for the betterment of the others’. She expresses her desire to pursue a career as a singer, but acknowledges that the syndrome she grapples acts as a barrier from attaining this goal. She mentions that her confidence will only be entirely diminished when her voice is permanently silenced by the syndrome. The disability she carries is objectified in this context and evoked for pity and sympathy. The camera focuses more onto the helplessness of the disabled body in aspiring the desired career and the limitations of the medical model that fails in curing the syndrome. Elizabeth herself subscribes to the mythological perspectives of disability as mentioned earlier, which symbolize disability as a form of punishment, suffering for the good of others, etc.

4. CONCLUSION

The representations of the disabled in media, film and television often fluctuates from super-crip, tragic and inspiration. Malayalam cinema has incorporated disability in multiple narratives as metaphors to reflect certain misconceptions and stereotypes about the disabled community. Mythological films establish disability as a trope that accomplishes disability as a curse to the individuals who have committed deadly sins, and curing of disability is attributed to the people who have atoned about the deadly sins committed by them. Disability studies in its essence challenges the myth of ‘normal’ body, but the film *Kaduva* through utilizing the derogatory dialogue affirms that the disabled are the ‘other’ and ‘deviants’ of the able-bodied. In addition, the narrative is controlled by the misconceptions and stereotypes embedded in the mythical texts and society. The affirmation model of disability that tends to reject the personal/tragedy model establishes mystifying euphemisms like ‘differently-abled’; such valorisation of the disability happens to be the core idea behind the creation of inspiration-porn. Thus television programs asserts that the able-bodied individuals who support and serve the disabled act as exemplary representatives, demonstrating the significance of the disabled in an able-bodied society and thereby providing scant attention to the misery and oppressive attitudes the disabled have faced. By subjecting Nayan to the banner of inspiration porn, the channel markets his life experiences by portraying his disability and special skills as a spectacle under the tagline of inspiration. Thus, he becomes ‘extraordinarily normal’. While taking Keerthi’s and Indira’s story into account, the focus is more on the superstar who has helped them in the crisis. The channel markets the disability experiences of the disabled and the facilitation

provided by the actor. Through this process, the actor becomes an exemplary representative of the society who works for the welfare of the marginalized. Elizabeth's interview becomes a spectacle that highlights the rare syndrome and her personal experiences which in turn serves as an irresistible click-bait for viewers. These tendencies continue to exist as 'positive images', which are actual positive stereotypes that serve to maintain the ableist misconceptions and aid to positioning themselves with a glorious image in an able-bodied world.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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