

REVOLUTIONARY CONSCIOUSNESS IN NIGERIAN FEMINIST DRAMA: A STUDY OF IRENE ISOKEN SALAMI-AGUNLOYE'S MORE THAN DANCING AND SWEET REVENGE

Prof. Jude Aigbe Agho

*Department of English,
Ambrose Alli University, Ekpoma*

&

Ezechine, Augustine Obiajulu

College of Education, Agbor

Abstract

*Drama is a vital medium for articulating and interpreting the realities and aspirations of the society. It is used to portray and interpret the historical, sociological, political, economic and cultural issues of the day. Thus, the playwright does not operate in a vacuum but mirrors the needs of his society in his works. Feminist drama, on the other hand, is seen as a radical aspect of the theatre which seeks to protest against the customary relegation of women to the background. This type of theatre advocates for the emancipation of women and the total dismantling of patriarchal oppression. Some playwrights in Nigeria focus their artistry on the issues of women's empowerment and the need to rekindle the revolutionary consciousness of women to their socio-cultural and political plights in the society. These issues are amplified in Irene Salami-Agunloye's works as presented in **More Than Dancing** and **Sweet Revenge**. This paper, therefore, calls for women's cooperation towards the revolutionary mandate advocated by women.*

Introduction

The Nigerian theatre is alive to the social realities of its time: a theatre where socio-political and cultural issues are evaluated and possibly judged in order to bring about a better society. The playwrights are, therefore, vanguards of society, keeping watchful eyes and attentive ears to the happenings in the society.

Feminist theatre is committed to raising the feminist consciousness of women to their social, cultural and political plights in the society. Since the dramatist recognizes that the theatre can be

used to resist or support a prevailing circumstance, feminist drama has been employed as a weapon to protest against centuries of oppression, subjugation and discrimination which have placed the women folk in a subservient state in our male-dominated society. As Jude Agho (2011:19) puts it:

Feminist drama protests the customary relegation of the African woman to the background in the patriarchal traditional society of Africa where generally the voice of the woman is heard but she is never seen, since she is tucked away in the kitchen to handle cooking and other domestic chores in the home.

Feminist consciousness, in the words of Osita Ezenwanebe (2006:4), "is the awareness of social and cultural oppression of women and their consequent struggle for liberation". Irene Salami Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* and *Sweet Revenge* are intended to raise the consciousness of women towards their social, cultural, and political plights.

Conceptual Framework

The issue of women's struggle for empowerment dates back to the history of feminism. The history of feminism itself is the history of women's resistance and opposition to patriarchy. It is an ideology in art and life that resists patriarchy and challenges "the female essence." Feminism as an organized political struggle started in the West and spread to other parts of the world. Kate Millet (1970:25; 118) in her book, *Sexual Politics* contends that patriarchy "consists of the most pervasive ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of power". Patriarchal oppression consist, therefore, in the obnoxious concept of "female essence" by which certain social standards of femininity are imposed on all biological women to make it seem as if the oppressive conditions are natural.

Judith Lorber (1998:9-10) identifies three types of feminist movement and these include, gender reform, gender resistance, and gender rebellion feminist movement. These movements have given birth to a series of women liberation movements all over the world. In Nigeria, women's emancipation struggle dates back to the colonial period, with the activities of Chief Mrs Margaret Ekpo who with women of like minds mobilized the 1929 Aba Women's Riot. These revolutionary women became self-conscious and took steps

to challenge oppression and emancipate women through very severe and harsh conditions. This paper focuses on Irene Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* and *Sweet Revenge*, two plays in which she furthers a special brand of feminism that is not vulgar in presenting the need for gender empowerment

Revolutionary Imperatives in the Plays

Irene Salami's *More Than Dancing* is the playwright's attempt to rekindle the revolutionary consciousness of Nigerian women to rise up to the challenges of their time. The playwright makes a political statement with the play, namely, that Nigerian women are capable of doing greater things than merely dancing at party rallies. The play opens with Madam Bisi, the leader of the women wing of the United People's Liberation Party, protesting against the marginalization of women. When the women dance troop is invited to perform, she rebukes them thus.

Bisi: *Stop drumming! Stop dancing! Stop immediately! Stop! Stop, I say!!! Enough of dancing! Enough! Enough! Year in year out, primaries come and party elections go, all we do is dance. Is dancing all we can do? Is that all we are known for?.... Look at the high table (points at the top row where dignitaries are seated). How many women do you see up there? ... Look at us.... Dancing and collecting two bags of rice, one bag of salt, one carton of magi cubes and two wrappers to be shared among thirty-five women! Women, these are distractions. (1)*

She disperses the dancers and the party elders are angry with her. The women later meet to appraise the action of the previous day and most women support her and a few are skeptical about the radical nature of their action. They go ahead to select Professor Nona Odaro as their presidential candidate with a promise to support her in the election. Professor Nona goes home and critically considers the decision of her fellow women and suddenly falls into a trance in which the past Nigerian heroines appear to her and encourage her to lead the women. Suddenly she wakes up and resolves to carry on the struggle. She declares:

Nona: *I am ready! Here am I. I am ready to go all the way. (29)*

The action of the women has caused some concern to men. They also meet to re-strategize. They begin to complain thus:

Balat: *The women have carried out their threat. They have gone ahead to present their own presidential candidate to the chairman.*

Sonsare: *They say they are tired of dancing. They claim they have being marginalized. (30-31)*

They also make fun of the women's demands. Hakeem advises them to allow the women a chance to rule since they have also come of age, but his advice is not taken seriously by the men.

In the next scene, Nona is in her office and her husband comes but he is denied entry. He fumes and finally barges into the office. Nona again contemplates dumping the women's mandate. At this point, she falls into a trance again and as usual foremothers who were historical heroines appear to her and encourage her to fight on. The men, disturbed by the sudden unity of women invite Madam Ebele, a top female member of their party and leader of the market women, for a peaceful negotiation. She arrives but insists that any presidential candidate other than professor Nona will not be supported by the women. She says:

Ebele: *The national Association of market women have asked me to tell you that the only candidate they are ready to vote for is Nona Odaro. (72)*

The men offer her two million naira with a promise to add another five million naira later, yet Madam Ebele turns down the offer. The men are bent on dividing the women so that they lose focus.

At another meeting, the men announce that they have accepted to consider Nona for the position of Vice president but the women still do not accept the offer. They insist that it is either Nona for president or nobody at all. The women go ahead to paste their candidate's posters all over the place. Finally, some men join professor Nona's campaign train. Voting takes place and Nona, the female presidential candidate, emerges as the winner with a very wide margin. In the words of Tse Andera Paul (2010:118), "this is a clear indication that no matter how long it takes, no matter how rough the road is, Nigerian women will one day have cause to smile and as such should not give up".

As a propagandist playwright, Salami-Agunloye's *More Than Dancing* seeks to elicit action. As rightly observed in the introduction to the play by Ekpe Monday (2003:xiii), "it is intended to make women detest obscurity and walk into the limelight and power". Salami-Agunloye has employed a good dramatic strategy by causing Nona to fall asleep any time she contemplates dumping the women's mandate. At such instances, past Nigerian heroines appear to her and dramatize what they passed through before they could save their societies. These legends are brought on board in the play to spur and encourage Nona, the icon of the Nigerian women to pick up the challenge when she is conscientiously nominated by the women as their flag bearer for the presidential election. Nona claims to be a novice in politics, and coupled with her love for her home and her career, she almost opts to withdraw from the race but for the remembrance of the vision about the past Nigerian female legends, who in the past distinguished themselves in order to liberate their respective societies. Nona, the central character, openly confesses her love for her country and her distaste for politics:

The mantle of leadership has fallen on me. As the women's candidate, I cannot fail them. I love politics but I am inexperienced in political intrigues. I hate the intrigues in politics. I am not a smooth talker. I'm not crafty in any way. How can I cope?... I love my home. I love my career and I love my husband... In spite of all these I love my country. (16)

However, Nona is able to forge ahead with the women's mandate having been inspired by the magnificent ways of the past Nigerian heroines as moderated by Mama Nigeria.

***More Than Dancing* and Nigerian Women's Political Participation**

This play, according to Tse (2010:119), is "a reflection of the political situation in Nigeria", where patriarchy reigns supreme. In Nigeria, only the men control all the resources available. Women are also under the control of men. Nigerian men do not believe that women too have the potential to rule. In the fifty-two years of Nigerian independence, in as much as women constitute more than half of the entire population of the country, their participation in politics and governance has been inconsequential (Tse, 2010:119). Nigerian men feel that leadership, governance and politics are reserved for

them while women are supposed to be perpetually restricted to the kitchen. Madu states this clearly in the play when he says:

Madu: *Women have no right being in politics. They are our wives. Let them remain at home. That is their duty post. (54)*

In another instance, Madu and Sani clearly speak out men's mind when they observe:

Madu: *You see, all women are good for is to dance at party rallies, not to rule! They have no place in politics. Not in African politics or the decision-making process! We will fight them with our last drop of blood.*

Sani: *When America produces a female leader, then Nigeria will be ready to produce one. Until then, tell professor Nona Odaro to go home and cook for her husband, period! (30)*

Since independence, such beliefs and views have been held or expressed by Nigerian men and they have used them as a basis to suppress and dominate the women politically and otherwise. In the play as well as in the Nigerian society, as Tse (2010:119) rightly observes, "the participation of women in politics is limited to dancing at party rallies to please men, as well as voting for them". Women groups are usually hired with paltry sum of money to dance under the hot sun while men sit under the shadow of trees or canopies and watch them, after which a few bags of salt, yards of wrappers, packets of magi cubes are given to them to share in their multitude. All these are intended to distract women from thinking about their constitutional rights.

The truth, however, is that most Nigerian men are not prepared to allow women equal participation in politics as the men still feel that leadership is their exclusive right. Sani in the play speaks the minds of Nigerian men when he questions:

Sani: *Who will give the presidential seat to a woman? In this country? Wa la hi ta la hi, the day a women becomes the president of this country, I will cross over to chad. A woman will not rule me, Allah forbid. (38)*

Tse (2010:120) contends that "the exclusion of women from politics and decision-making process in Nigeria has caused the nation more harm than good". He further argues that the Nigerian men who have ruled the country in the past fifty-two years have not

in any way bettered the lot of ordinary Nigerians. To him, it is possible that if women were allowed to partake in the decision-making process, perhaps Nigeria would have been better today. It is worthy to note, as rightly pointed out by Emmanuel Ebo (2009:403), that Hakeem is one of the progressive men that are highly placed in the party hierarchy who understand this need for change, for the proper representation of women and their inclusion in the decision making process in politics. He (Hakeem) observes further:

Hakeem: *Democracy must include the opinions and perceptions of men as well as women. This is important because women constitute half of the nation's population. (37)*

According to Justine Tijime (2009:340), "*More Than Dancing*, from the liberal feminist perspective sees women as a strong and active set of human race and not passive objects of social change." In the play, Irene Salami -Agunloye shows women as an important social group agitating to remove themselves from the socio-political, economic and cultural subjugation they face in a patriarchal society. She demonstrates in the play that socio-political and economic empowerment are requisite conditions for peaceful and equal co-existence of both genders in a male-dominated society. Nona agrees to this:

Nona: *UPLP is for all of us, male and female, remove the women from it, the men will be stranded, remove the men and the women will be no more too... We cannot stand on our own, the same goes for the men. We need one another. (7)*

The playwright also makes us to understand that empowerment is not achieved through violence but through dialogue, negotiations and understanding. The playwright shows that while the women revolt or protest against the men, they carry out their actions through non-violent means, keeping to their normal roles as women, but touching on the consciousness of the men for the need to empower women and make for equality in the social milieu of our polity.

Sweet Revenge

Salami-Agunloye's *Sweet Revenge* revolves around Sota and Aisosa who are both educated couple. Sota, Aisosa's husband, leaves Nigeria for a four-year Ph.D programme in London, leaving her in Nigeria with a juicy promise of sending her a monthly allowance of forty

thousand naira (40,000). However, events take a twist as Sota leaves Nigeria for London, abandoning his wife and three children. Rather than the supposed N40,000 monthly allowance, Sota sends a paltry sum of N10,000, barely enough to feed the children talk less of other domestic, educational and medical challenges in the family. Sota worsens the situation by engaging in an extra Marital affair with Cheryl, a Briton whom he eventually raises children with. Sota stretches the four years' sojourn to eight and would not have returned had he not been called home by his people who want him to represent them in the senate.

Life becomes unbearable for Aisosa who after being persuaded by her husband to quit her job as a consultant gynaecologist in a hospital, finds it difficult to cope with the stipends he sends for the eight dreary years. Cheryl, Sota's pregnant concubine in London, refuses to allow Sota travel but later consents as Sota gets Regie, his friend and confidant, to convince her of the necessity of sustaining their nascent democracy and lead the people to the path of total freedom, greatness and nationhood after many years of military rule.

Sota arrives home to meet his wife, Aisosa, remarkably aged, ugly and flabby because of the stress she and her children have been subjected to as a result of Sota's marital irresponsibility. Despite Sota's incessant damning criticisms against Aisosa, she still mobilizes the women who vote for him during the election. However, after his success at the polls as a senator, Sota decides to do away with Aisosa and bring in Cheryl, his white wife. Sota further throws all caution to the wind and perpetrates the worst degree of wickedness against Aisosa despite the warnings of Nosa, Sosa's friend. He complains that Aisosa's degeneration over the years in all aspect of her life makes her unfit for his new status as he says:

Sota: ... Look at you; from your head to your toes, you are ugly. You nauseate me. Your hair is always hidden in scarves. You tie wrappers all the time like a village woman... Sosa, I must be frank with you, you no longer excite me. You are too dull and drab. The spark that used to be in your life is no longer there. (25-26)

As a result of this, he sends her packing from the house she built with the money she inherited from her parents. Aisosa and her children become despondent, roaming the streets of Benin helplessly.

She would have been suffering continually were it not for the timely intervention of Ede, her friend and her husband Nosa who take her and her children to Abuja. While there, she starts to pick up the scattered pieces of her life. Sota Ojo, on the other hand, becomes so power drunk that he entirely forgets the mandate of his people. He is recalled home when it is proven beyond every reasonable doubt that he is incompetent to hold on to the people's mandate. At this point, events take a sudden twist as life closes in on Sota. He loses everything he has acquired. Even Cheryl, his British wife, discovers he is legally married to Aisosa, jilts him and returns to London. On the other hand, fortune smiles back on Aisosa as she gets a new job and also receives various national and international honours and awards to her credit. She thus becomes a celebrity and she is requested to replace the vacant senatorial seat of their constituency, which her husband had been recalled from. Thus, Aisosa does not only become a senator but also the senate president for two consecutive tenures. The unrepentant Sota still enveloped in his pride and ego accuses his wife and Nosa of being the agents of his misery. He however later seeks forgiveness and restoration from Aisosa when it dawns on him that his world in the words of Ebo (2009:406) has "crashed and crumbled". Aisosa is also quick to remind him that she had long forgiven him, but that accepting him back as a husband is impossible.

In *Sweet Revenge*, Salami-Agunloye explores how the collaborative efforts of both men and women can help foster national development. The play advocates for the involvement of women in the mainstream of affairs, thereby moving them from the margin to the centre. Agunloye has been able to knit two settings, London and Nigeria to create an effect. London, on one hand represents the developed countries where democracy has thrived for decades and women fully absorbed into the scheme of things, while Nigeria, on the other hand, exemplifies a developing country set back by military coups as well as female gender marginalization. According to Ebo (2009:406), the playwright "meticulously juxtaposes such burning issues like "nationalism against unpatriotism, fidelity against debauchery, democracy against meritocracy, gender equality against gender marginalization in her socio-political crusade".

The playwright clearly focuses on the virtues of self-sacrifice, self-denial and patriotism. These virtues are juxtaposed with such vices as self-aggrandizement, deceit, cheat and looting of the

national treasury. In the beginning of the play, Sota's people in Nigeria call him back from London for the service of his father land. With the attainment of Nigeria's democracy, his people acknowledge him as the best candidate to represent them in governance. Here, the playwright informs us that to participate in politics is a well deserving honour not towards self-enrichment but a call to duty and selfless service towards societal transformation. Sota reiterates this view when he says:

Sota: *My people call and no doubt, I must respond to it... I cannot turn down their offer, I must respond... I cannot fail my people. No, I will not turn down their invitation. They have reposed their confidence in me and I will not fail them. I cannot let them down. Together we shall transform our land. (1-2)*

What Agunloye tries to reconcile in this play, according to Ebo (2009:407), "is the inter-mingling forces between family/parental responsibility and national leadership". This indeed is evident in the characters of Sota Ojo and Aisosa, his Nigerian wife. While Aisosa is struggling tirelessly, contributing her best towards raising a healthy family, Sota is in London enjoying himself with, among other things, an extra-marital affair with a British woman and an extension of his four-year stay to eight.

Being a failure at the family level, it is obvious that Sota cannot lead his people out of the clutches of the oppressors. Sota could not have won the election in the first place were it not for the women who exercised their power by coming out in their great numbers to vote him just because of Aisosa, the great mother and wife, who despite her husband's eight long and silent years of absence, comported herself properly. The following dialogue affirm this:

Sota: *... I was overwhelmed when I saw these women come out in their thousands to vote for me even though it rained cats and dogs.*

Nosa: *Vote for you? No, they didn't vote for you, they voted for Aisosa. Our people have deep respect for Aisosa. They admire the way she comported herself in your absence. Some other women would have abandoned their responsibility and run off with another man. She has been a good wife and mother, to you and your children made a lot of sacrifices and the women wanted to reward her, encourage and honour her by*

coming out to vote for you, hoping that her lot will improve from now on. (18)

This quickly reminds us of the power and influence of women in contemporary issues like politics today. Politics is metaphorically used in the play for evaluating women's empowerment in a developing country like Nigeria. In developed countries like Britain, women have been fully absorbed into the mainstream of politics and governance. Therefore, Cheryl as a Briton frowns at the luke warm attitude of the likes of Sota who feel reluctant in accepting women as team members of this great game. Disgusted at this type of attitude, Cheryl speaks:

Cheryl: *It seems your country is made up of only men; women are Nowhere in your national agenda. They are at the margin, nowhere near the centre. Good luck to you all. (11)*

In the present world of the play, Nigerian women no more play a second fiddle but are absorbed in the mainstream. Their integration in governance is necessitated by labour rather than favour. Their actions, though non-violent, yield great positive results due to their persistence and resolution even in the valley of death as Regie comments:

Regie: *Oh! Our dear mothers, they put in all they could. They held rallies, pleaded with the wives of military leaders, led protest marches; in fact, one woman who strongly opposed them was shot dead one early morning. She paid dearly with her life. (9)*

Women are the true heroines of the present democracy existing in the play hence the men have no other option than recognizing and giving them their pride of place. However, Sota fails to recognize and accept this recent development. This is portrayed in the dialogue that ensues thus:

Cheryl: *And what role will the women play in this now Nigeria?*

Sota: *Relax, don't be too hasty Cheryl. We have just commenced. All that will be worked out later. As soon as things are sorted out, they will be duly compensated.*

Cheryl: *Did I hear you say "compensated"?*

Sota: *Yes, what about that?*

Cheryl: *You talk as if they are not part of the system. They should be involved right from the start.*

Sota: *Well, things don't work that way in Africa. We take a lot of things in to consideration.*

Regie: *That is why you are going there. Sota you are going there to join others to change things. Change activities, change values positively. You are going there for change Sota. (10)*

Right from the outset, Sota undermines the power of women and declines seeing women as partners in progress. He hardly appreciates efforts made by women, including his wife in improving his life and that of the society. He returns home after his unplanned eight years' stay in London to insult and accuse Aisosa of so many offences. Although Aisosa has sacrificed so much in improving his lot in all aspects, he finally throws her into the street. He becomes more headstrong and refuses to recognize women as a force to reckon with. Immediately after his election, he begins his wicked scheming against them in spite of Nosa's warning:

Nosa: *Sosa, I hope you realized that the women voted you in to power.*

Sota: *So what?*

Nosa: *They can also pull the carpet off your feet.*

Sota: *They won't dare. What can women do in Nigeria?*

Nosa: *You are a JJC. The women have become very powerful over the years. They are a strong political force now. (20)*

The ideology of revolt or protest in Salami-Agunloye's play, in the words of Ebo (2009), "is not against men per se but rather against obnoxious practices against women by men" (411). Therefore, the playwright presents Regie and Sota as the majority of the Nigerian men both at home and in the Diaspora who join forces in advocating for women's empowerment. Regie reminds Sota of the ideals they fought for:

Regie: *Sota, remember the ideals we fought for: dignity, unity and honour for all, a new Nigeria, where no one is oppressed. (13).*

On the other hand, Sota represents a sect of Nigerian men who in spite of being educated do not have the belief that partnership

with women works. They are yet to appreciate women as colleagues, not slaves or a means of sexual gratification. They do not even consider education as a medium for raising stronger and more competent women they can collaborate with. They at times discourage women from engaging in such worthwhile and lucrative ventures for the fear that women will climb the social ladder fast. This perhaps explains the reason why Sota persuades Aisosa to give up her job as a consultant gynaecologist in the hospital under the pretext that he wants her to have enough time to give their children the best attention:

Sota: *You should have been doing something to make up.*

Aisosa: *Like what Dr Sota Ojo? Do what? When you asked me to resign my job as a consultant gynaecologist so I could give your children the best care they needed, did you not realize the implication? (16)*

Ebo (2009) notes that "this is a ploy to make Aisosa fully financially dependent on him" (412). Men like Sota often have broken homes occasioned by their greed and selfishness. Senator Sota Ojo and his counterpart in the House of Representatives, Hon. Abel Nigie do not fulfill any of their promises to their people for the years they spend in office. Nigie's ineffectiveness is because of his protracted illness, while Sota's is due to his quest for self fulfillment.

When women politicians send delegates to the duo reminding them of their mandates, Hon. Nigie apologizes for his protracted ineffectiveness but Senator Sota chooses to arrest the women "charging them with disturbance of peace and trespass of private property" (47- 48) . Double tragedy strikes as his British wife discovers he has a legally married wife in Nigeria. Cheryl upon this discovery becomes furious. She apologizes to Aisosa who now experiences glorious life as her long years of selfless services to humanity yield good results. Cheryl surrenders the 10 million pounds Sota looted back to the Nigerian government and runs back to her country. This is the last straw to Sota's tragedy.

The play is sufficiently embellished and artistically ornamented with dramatic and figurative elements. The playwright uses irony of situations to depict the uncertainty of life, parody of social change and the dangers of under- estimation of people's capabilities. Thus,

the combined decisions and actions of women completely wreck Sota's life. However, the play, just like every other work of art, has its own shortcomings. For instance, Aisosa, the heroine, is almost a perfect woman without any flaw. She performs excellently and even becomes a senate president for two terms in an unopposed contest. She thereby gets to the stage where she is deified and consequently unchallengeable. However, in real life, the evidence of inimitability is your ability to surmount challenges and oppositions. It is obvious here that the playwright has fallen under the spell of over romanticization of her heroines as no real human being can be said to be perfect.

Salami- Agunloye's ideology of revolt in *Sweet Revenge* is a departure from the ideology of revolt in other gender plays like J.P Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* and Tracy Utoh-Ezeajugh's *Nneora: An African Doll's House* and similar plays that portray the use of sex as a powerful weapon of women's revolt. However, in this contemporary society, Irene Salami-Agunloye steps further to introduce other means of revolt. Women in the play are portrayed as competent and efficient in government politics as they are in the family.

The play also treats culture as an important aspect of the people's lives. Though the playwright preaches against acculturation, she also condemns some aspects of the African culture that are inimical to the growth of the society. The playwright believes that culture is a very important aspect of a people's lives. Culture is not static but dynamic. Therefore, the playwright warns that no one should hide under the pretext of culture to exploit and or deceive others. In *Sweet Revenge*, therefore, Salami- Agunloye condemns every negative act of men such as betrayal, breach of trust, ill treatment, neglect or abandonment, harassment, deprivation of rights, insult, ingratitude, seizure of property, among many other assaults, that society inflicts on women.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, we have seen that Salami-Agunloye's plays reveal cultural and political assumptions of the society to identify those practices that are impediments to women's progress and empowerment. The playwright also highlights the importance of change or transformation of existing socio-cultural and political

traditions and beliefs with the vision of creating an equitable environment where women enjoy equal rights with men. The playwright presents women as recognizing the importance of cooperation towards the revolutionary changes which the women advocate for. Like Tess Onwueme, Salami-Agunloye also advocates the adoption of the non violent approach of peaceful protest, dialogue and co-operation in finding solutions to the problems that bedevil the country.

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