International Journal of Global Research Innovations & Technology (IJGRIT)
ISSN : 2583-8717, Impact Factor: 6.972, Volume 03, No. 02(II), April-June, 2025, pp 166-172

Redefining Womanhood: Women's Journey of Empowerment in *Glass Bead Curtain*

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DOI: 10.62823/IJGRIT/03.2(II).7753

ABSTRACT

Many writers have long portrayed their female protagonists as agents of resistance, striving to redefine their identities within patriarchal frameworks. Lakshmi Kannan, a notable Indian novelist, contributes to this tradition by exploring the complexities of womanhood in early 20th-century Tamil society in her novel Glass Bead Curtain (2016). Through the lives of characters like Athai and Kalyani, the narrative illustrates how women, though constrained by conservative social norms, gradually reclaim their agency and autonomy. Their empowerment is neither sudden nor overtly radical but emerges through resilience, inner strength, mentorship, and quiet defiance. This paper examines how Kannan presents womanhood as a dynamic and evolving concept, emphasising the role of personal determination and supportive relationships in fostering self-reliance and empowerment.

***Keywords**: Women's empowerment, Womanhood, Self-reliance, Resilience, Agency.*

Introduction

Literature has long reflected the changing dynamics of society, offering powerful insights into the construction, reinforcement, and transformation of gender roles. In Indian fiction, the portrayal of female protagonists has evolved from passive figures to assertive agents of change who challenge patriarchal constraints and redefine identity. Lakshmi Kannan's *The Glass Bead Curtain* (2016) stands as a significant contribution to this tradition, offering a nuanced portrayal of the lives of Tamil Brahmin women during the early 20th century. Kannan, a bilingual writer who writes in both Tamil and English, is recognised for her critical engagement with socio-cultural traditions and her strong feminist perspective. As a founding member of the Poetry Society of India and a juror for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, her work bridges literary excellence and social commitment. In *The Glass Bead Curtain*, her debut English novel, Kannan explores the psychological, social, and historical dimensions of womanhood through a multigenerational narrative that spans the colonial era in Tamil Nadu. Set between the 1920s and 1940s, a time of political reform and social flux, the novel centres on women negotiating identity, autonomy, and tradition within a rigid patriarchal framework. Through characters such as Athai, Kalyani, and Shailaja, Kannan critiques orthodox customs while illuminating the subtle forms of resistance women employ to reclaim agency.

This paper focuses particularly on Kalyani, whose transformation from a voiceless child bride to an empowered badminton coach represents a quiet but radical redefinition of feminine strength. Rather than overt rebellion, Kalyani's empowerment is marked by inner clarity, strategic silence, and the support of both female and male mentors. Through symbolic imagery, layered storytelling, and intergenerational connections, Kannan reclaims the domestic space as a site of resistance and transformation. As Santosh Gupta notes, Kannan "goes against the tide" by turning her focus inward, towards the domestic and social struggles of Tamil Brahmin women, rather than diasporic themes or mythological retellings (200). Similarly, K. Mugeshpillai and M. Soundhararajan observe that the novel effectively blends historical realism with feminist insight to present women's inner lives and social challenges with striking authenticity (193–94). This paper situates *The Glass Bead Curtain* within the broader context of Indian feminist literature, analysing how womanhood is redefined through themes of education, bodily autonomy,

intergenerational bonding, and narrative reclamation. Kalyani's journey reflects a larger vision of empowerment rooted in resilience, memory, and collective strength, offering a compelling feminist reimagination of Indian womanhood.

Colonial Rule and Patriarchy: Reform, Resistance, and Gendered Tensions

Set in the British-ruled Madras Presidency, the novel vividly captures a period of political upheaval and socio-cultural reform. Against the larger backdrop of India's nationalist movement, the novel explores how reformist discourse on women's rights—such as female education, widow remarriage, and the abolition of child marriage—intersected with deeply rooted patriarchal traditions. However, within Tamil upper-caste, middle-class households, women continued to be idealised as self-sacrificing figures modelled after Sita and Parvati. Kannan deftly captures this paradox, where nationalist reform coexisted with entrenched domestic orthodoxy. The Tamil Brahmin home becomes not just a physical space but a contested terrain, where inherited customs are both enforced and quietly renegotiated. The pressures of caste, class, and gender converge here, shaping the trajectories of women like Kalyani and Athai. As Geraldine Forbes observes, the nationalist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries not only sought political freedom but also brought critical attention to women's issues such as education, widow remarriage, and child marriage, prompting reform and public debate (96).

Kalyani's life reflects the contradictory nature of colonial rule, which, though oppressive, inadvertently created opportunities for female empowerment. Kalyani's formal education was disrupted by superstitions associating literacy with widowhood. Yet she receives informal education from the Irishwoman Susan O'Leary, who nurtures her intellectual and athletic potential, encouraged by a progressive father. Kalyani evolves into a self-reliant badminton coach, symbolising a new model of feminine autonomy enabled by familial support. Similarly, Athai, a widow marginalised by custom, channels her imposed isolation into intellectual creation, secretly writing under male pseudonyms like 'Faguni' and 'Agastya'. Her hidden literary achievements, discovered only after her death, confront her family with the quiet resistance that had flourished within the confines of domesticity. These layered histories are uncovered by Shailaja, a contemporary writer, whose narrative lens offers a meta-commentary on the evolution of gender roles across generations.

In an interview, Lakshmi Kannan reflects on the contradictions of this transitional period: "The men were educated, liberal, and many of them were exposed to the West for their study and professional training… far more supportive to women than their female counterparts, who lacked education or even basic literacy and were mindless agents of patriarchy" ("Changing Hats"). Her observation underscores a central tension in the novel—that patriarchy is not only enforced by men but also internalised and perpetuated by uneducated women. Characters like Ambujam and Parvati exemplify how social conditioning can turn women into custodians of their subjugation. For Kannan, meaningful reform requires both structural change and emotional awakening.

By referencing historical figures such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rukhmabai, Harbilas Sarda, and Mahatma Gandhi, Kannan situates her narrative within a broader continuum of social reform. Kannan portrays the tension between orthodoxy and reform within Tamil Brahmin households, where national debates on women's rights echo in private spaces. The novel highlights quiet yet powerful resistance against oppressive customs through domestic dialogue (Gupta 202). *The Glass Bead Curtain* presents the nationalist era not only as a time of public upheaval but also as a moment of intimate, domestic reckoning. Kannan captures the layered nature of gender reform, illustrating how women's lives became the ground upon which the contradictions between modernity and tradition, nationalism and orthodoxy, were negotiated and reimagined.

Domestic Space, Subtle Resistance, and Strategic Agency

In *The Glass Bead Curtain*, Lakshmi Kannan redefines the domestic sphere not merely as a site of female confinement but as a complex terrain of negotiation, subtle resistance, and quiet empowerment. While the home imposes patriarchal expectations, it simultaneously allows women like Kalyani to assert agency through silence, adaptability, and intellectual pursuit. As Santosh Gupta observes:

Kalyani's personal journey through the domestic spaces that she inhabits subjects her to contradictory forces, represented by the upholders of 'tradition' and those pleading for a modern outlook and treatment. When her mother-in-law, Ambujam, and sister-in-law, Karpagam, supported by other woman relatives, mock her for her education and her skill in speaking English, they express the hatred many men and women felt for the new learning. (Gupta 201)

Within this tension, Kalyani faces ridicule from her mother-in-law and sister-in-law for her education and fluency in English, reflecting the resistance many harboured toward modern learning. However, her husband's eventual respect for her intellect signals a shift in household dynamics, illustrating how traditional power structures within the home can be questioned and redefined.

Kannan presents domestic spaces—drawing rooms, kitchens, and prayer areas—as arenas where patriarchal control operates intimately. Kalyani is instructed to remain quiet and appear shy: "You mustn't talk much. Keep your head lowered and look shy" and warned, "You mustn't mention his name, it'll shorten his life span" (Kannan 54). These instructions highlight the everyday ways in which women's behaviour is controlled. As Sheila Kumar points out, even "seemingly trivial issues like a girl's height or complexion [are] used as a weapon against her," underscoring how deeply patriarchy penetrates the personal sphere ("Feminine Grace").

Despite these restrictions, Kalyani finds support in two key figures: Miss Susan O'Leary, her Irish tutor, and Athai, her widowed aunt. O'Leary introduces her to literature and the concept of self-worth, urging her to "learn to respect your own body, and yourself" (Kannan 73). Athai, confined by the social strictures of widowhood, nurtures Kalyani with songs, stories, and Tamil literature. As Kumar writes, Athai "offered music like a waterfall, bathing Kalyani in its clear, sparkling notes," even as she locked the door to conceal this quiet defiance ("Feminine Grace"). Later, Athai devotes herself to serving child widows at Ice House, revealing a continued commitment to feminist compassion and care.

The politics of the female body also plays a central role. Kalyani is shamed for her height, but Miss O'Leary's affirmation that her body is a "temple" helps her reclaim her dignity (Kannan 73). Her memory of playing badminton in a saree—"I wore skirts and a top for a long time until I got married… and later… played badminton in a saree" (Kannan 26)—links bodily freedom with self-expression. Similarly, Ponni misinterprets girls in sarees as grown women before realising "they're all children!" (Kannan 26). It poignantly illustrates the premature domestication of girlhood. The titular glass bead curtain becomes a powerful metaphor for this paradox. Described as "splintering sunlight… catching the sunshine in a jewelled glitter like gems with fine, cunning cuts" (Kannan 75–76), it represents the simultaneous beauty and constraint of domestic life. The curtain dazzles with its appearance, yet fragments light, suggesting that what appears open and free is subtly controlling.

Athai's hidden writings under male pseudonyms, Faguni and Agastya, align with what Tharu and Lalita describe as the historical necessity for women to conceal authorship to access public discourse (67). Her diary, discovered after her death, challenges conventional ideas about widowhood and women's creativity. Similarly, Karpagam's return to her husband after acquiring English skills is not a submissive act but a quiet assertion of agency. As Kumar notes, she returns after "mastering English as best as she can," reclaiming dignity through language once used to shame her ("Feminine Grace").

Characters like Angachi Patti, "a feisty progressive woman who does not hesitate to stand up for Kalyani", and Kadambari Rao, a child widow who becomes a badminton coach, reinforce a generational continuum of feminist resistance (Kumar). Even liberal men are not spared critique. When Miss O'Leary confronts Mr. Aaeyar—"How could someone like you violate what was soon going to be the law of your country?"—she exposes the hypocrisy of progressive men who uphold patriarchy when it suits them (Kannan 80).

English, initially used to humiliate Kalyani, transforms into a tool of empowerment. Her mastery of the language positions her as "the 'saviour'" in moments of familial crisis (Gupta 201). Shailaja, the narrator, documents these voices of resistance, noting how "tensions are built up… only to be defused through the husband's humour and tolerance, self-awareness and respect for Kalyani's mental qualities" (Gupta 201). Silence, too, is reimagined as strength. Kalyani's refusal to respond to humiliation becomes a silent but powerful form of resistance. Athai's silence finds expression in her writing, with her diary becoming a posthumous testimony to a life of quiet rebellion. Kalyani's obedience is revealed as strategic rather than submissive. In one instance, when her mother-in-law sends her to the roof to watch over pickle jars, she hides a book under her saree pleats. So engrossed is she in reading that she does not notice her mother-in-law's arrival, who, enraged, snatches the book and throws it away (Kannan 153–156). This moment reflects how performative compliance protects Kalyani's intellectual independence within a restrictive environment.

The glass bead curtain thus symbolises the contradictions of womanhood—ornamental, seemingly open, yet controlling. As Jasbir Jain remarks, domesticity functions as "a mechanism of subtle surveillance… through both ornamentation and erasure" (76). It is both a barrier and a threshold, concealing the quiet power of the women within. *The Glass Bead Curtain*honours layered forms of female

resilience—obedience, silence, creativity, and endurance—as tools of rebellion. Through nuanced portrayals of women who navigate patriarchal spaces with intelligence and strength, Kannan reimagines the domestic realm not as a prison but as a powerful site of feminist transformation.

Education, Language, and Self-Assertion: Empowerment through Learning and Mentorship

In *The Glass Bead Curtain*, Lakshmi Kannan presents education as a vital force of feminist self-assertion, enabling women to challenge patriarchal control and reclaim autonomy. While formal education is often denied, particularly to married girls, alternative modes—mentorship, storytelling, and personal reading—emerge as transformative tools. Figures like Angachi Patti, the outspoken grandmother, and Athai, the widowed aunt, offer nurturing, subversive guidance. Susan O'Leary, Kalyani's Irish tutor, affirms her bodily and intellectual self-worth. As Sheila Kumar notes, women in the novel mentor through care, fostering resilience and awakening feminist consciousness ("Feminine Grace"). Kalyani's evolution from silenced child bride to badminton coach reflects how education reclaims public space for women. Her decision to coach is, as Jasbir Jain argues, a "deeply political gesture", asserting bodily autonomy and transgressing gender norms (102). Kannan affirms that "to help women rise, you have to challenge patriarchy" and actively "sponsor transgression" (Unit 3, p. 18).

Language, especially English, operates both as a barrier and a means of empowerment. Kalyani is mocked for her fluency, yet later becomes a mentor to Karpagam, whose inability to speak English had resulted in her marginalisation. She was scolded, beaten, and not accepted by her husband. By teaching Karpagam, Kalyani transforms a tool of exclusion into one of solidarity and liberation. Gupta notes that women who speak English are seen as threatening because it "challenges the established gender hierarchy" (Gupta 201). Kannan critiques how patriarchy offers conditional acceptance. Karpagam's return to her husband is not framed as submission but as a quiet act of empowerment made possible by education and female support, not male forgiveness. The novel also explores hidden authorship as a form of resistance. Vishalakshi (Athai) writes under the male pseudonyms Falguni and Agastya. As Gupta observes, Kannan "removes some of these curtains that concealed the identity of a host of women writers" (Gupta 203), restoring erased voices to literary and social history. *The Glass Bead Curtain* portrays education—both formal and clandestine—as a radical tool for self-definition. Through learning, mentorship, and authorship, women reclaim their voices and identities, transforming the domestic realm into a space of feminist resistance.

Bodily Autonomy: Widowhood, Gendered Oppression, Superstition, and Patriarchal Control

In *The Glass Bead Curtain*, Lakshmi Kannan exposes how patriarchal ideologies regulate women's bodies through superstition, social conditioning, and ritualised control. Female autonomy is curtailed from an early age, especially through marriage, widowhood, and enforced ideals of physical appearance. Kalyani's withdrawal from school, prompted by the belief that education leads married girls to widowhood, reveals how irrational fears are weaponised to deny women knowledge. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita argue, patriarchal cultures "systematically obstruct women's access to knowledge", fearing its liberatory potential (67). Gupta similarly notes that the novel exposes "grievous and grim aspects of the society's ill-treatment of women", particularly through the eyes of young Kalyani grieving over Athai's silencing as a widow (Gupta 202).

Control extends to Kalyani's physical development. When she grows taller than her husband, elders instruct her to fast: "If she continued to grow tall, she might bring misfortune to her husband" (Kannan 47). Her body becomes a site of anxiety, requiring regulation. She is also taught to perform submissiveness, reducing her identity to a posture of obedience. These strictures reflect the policing of female visibility and autonomy. Kannan echoes these themes in her poem "Don't Wash", which honours women like Rassundari Devi, who learnt to read in secret. Like Rassundari, Kalyani must navigate an environment that seeks to erase her intellect and personhood (Unit 3, 18). Her eventual reclamation of the body—through reading, sport, and feminist mentorship—marks a shift from passive endurance to embodied resistance.

Athai's widowhood, often viewed as a living death in patriarchal cultures, becomes a space of quiet rebellion. Forbidden to sing or dress like other women, she becomes a source of moral authority for Kalyani. "Let them all rot in hell," Kalyani exclaims, condemning the cruelty that crippled Athai's joy (Gupta 202). Yet Athai refuses to embody victimhood—she educates girls. writes under male pseudonyms, and later works at Ice House, redefining widowhood as a site of resilience and reform. Kannan critiques internalised patriarchy through characters like Ambujam, who enforce regressive norms while simultaneously revealing their inconsistencies. Beauty and colourism become further means of control. Poni face demeaning comments about their skin tone, revealing how colonial beauty standards

persist. In Britain, Poni is insulted by her husband: "You must seriously try to lighten your complexion" (Kannan 364). Even educated men like Mani embody colonial hangovers, showing that true transformation demands decolonial awareness. The novel aligns with movements like #UnfairAndLovely that reject Eurocentric ideals and celebrate dark skin (Pandey). Until such hierarchies are dismantled, beauty remains a tool of subjugation. *The Glass Bead Curtain* calls for a cultural reckoning with practices that deny women their rights to bodily autonomy, dignity, and voice. Through characters like Kalyani, Athai, and Poni, Kannan critiques oppressive customs surrounding widowhood, superstition, and beauty, offering instead a vision of feminist resilience and liberation.

Narrative Power, Hidden Voices, and Feminist Irony

In *The Glass Bead Curtain*, Lakshmi Kannan employs a multivocal narrative to foreground the complex realities of women's lives across caste, class, and generation in colonial India. This polyphonic structure—what Santosh Gupta describes as the use of "diverse registers: personal, emotional, rhetorical and pedagogic, journalistic, legal discussions and public speaking" (Gupta 203)—enables a nuanced feminist critique to unfold organically from lived experience. Kannan's use of feminist irony highlights the absurdity of gendered expectations. Kalyani is mocked for speaking English or growing "so rebelliously" (Kannan 195), exposing how natural development is reframed as disobedience under patriarchal logic. Humour and satire become subtle tools to dismantle oppressive customs.

The novel's meta-narrative, where Shailaja, a contemporary writer, records Kalyani's recollections, builds a bridge between past and present. At the heart of this narrative layering is Vishalakshi (Athai), who secretly writes essays, poems, and translations under the pseudonyms Falguni and Agastya. Her concealed authorship recalls the strategies of early women writers like the Brontë sisters or George Eliot, who navigated gendered censorship through anonymity. As Tharu and Lalita observe, such "veiled forms of articulation" reflect systemic barriers that silenced women's voices (67). Her posthumously discovered writings force the family—and the reader—to reconsider widowhood not as renunciation but as resistance.

These hidden voices echo historical realities. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid note, many reform-era women wrote anonymously in vernacular journals, quietly redefining social norms from the margins. Vishalakshi's intellectual legacy becomes a metaphor for female creativity buried beneath domestic expectations. Kalyani's evolution is similarly shaped by care and mentorship. Susan O'Leary, her Irish tutor, embodies transnational feminist solidarity, one who "opens up the world through books for a small girl trapped at home" (Kumar). Kalyani's later role as a badminton coach is a political act of reclaiming space and bodily autonomy. As Jasbir Jain observes, for women in restrictive societies, "claiming public space through sport can be deeply political" (102). Kannan also challenges essentialist gender binaries by including supportive male characters like Kalyani's husband and father-in-law, showing that feminist change can arise from collaborative engagement.

The glass bead curtain—shimmering yet restrictive—remains a central metaphor. Both decorative and confining, it reflects the paradox of domestic femininity: women are visible but unheard. Kalyani and Vishalakshi's silent defiance behind this barrier exemplifies Kannan's portrayal of everyday resilience as feminist action. Through the interplay of memory, irony, and layered voices, *The Glass Bead Curtain* dismantles the myth of passive womanhood. It aligns with the feminist legacy of writers like Tagore, Premchand, and later scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Tanika Sarkar. Kannan's empathetic realism and narrative complexity recover the silenced stories of Indian women, illuminating the quiet revolutions rooted in language, solidarity, and everyday courage.

Intergenerational Solidarity and the Feminist Continuum

In *The Glass Bead Curtain*, Lakshmi Kannan crafts a tapestry of intergenerational feminist solidarity, where resistance is not isolated or episodic but sustained through lineage, mentorship, and memory. Domestic and familial spaces, often seen as strongholds of patriarchy, are reimagined as sites where enduring forms of resistance are cultivated across generations. Women like Vishalakshi (Athai), Kalyani, Karpagam, and Angachi Patti exemplify this continuum. Athai outwardly conforms to the austerity of widowhood but secretly writes under male pseudonyms, her posthumous writings serving as proof of a life lived in secret defiance. Her legacy is revived by Shailaja, the contemporary narrator, whose act of documenting women's suppressed histories mirrors what Susie Tharu and K. Lalita describe as a radical feminist disruption of patriarchal historiography (25).

Kalyani's feminist awakening, shaped by mentors like Athai and Susan O'Leary, represents a visible assertion of agency. Though denied formal schooling, she evolves into a badminton coach and mentor, bridging generational divides. Susan, who "gave her the permission to dream" (Kannan 88),

plays a crucial role in this transformation, exemplifying transnational feminist mentorship. Karpagam, once ridiculed for her lack of English, reclaims her dignity through Kalyani's guidance. Her journey affirms how education—especially when shared among women—functions as a tool of liberation and resistance to linguistic and gendered hierarchies. Kannan also complicates stereotypes of elderly women by portraying them as allies in quiet defiance. Characters like Angachi Patti and the grandmother-in-law, though shaped by tradition, support progressive change. Kadambari Rao, a remarried child widow turned badminton coach (Kumar), stands as a generational precursor to Kalyani, embodying feminist rupture within tradition.

Feminist resistance in the novel is relational and cumulative, passed through care, storytelling, and everyday mentorship. The narrative-within-a-narrative structure, where Shailaja writes Kalyani's story, underscores this transmission of agency. Santosh Gupta responds by highlighting the novel's embrace of shared memory and collective authorship (Gupta 204). *The Glass Bead Curtain* affirms that feminist agency is not only individual but genealogical—nurtured in kitchens, classrooms, and diaries, and carried forward in stories that bind generations of women together in resilience and resistance.

Conclusion

Lakshmi Kannan's *The Glass Bead Curtain* emerges as a vital feminist narrative that blends historical realism, nuanced characterisation, and gentle irony to interrogate the lived realities of Tamil Brahmin women under colonial and patriarchal regimes. As Santosh Gupta rightly observes, the novel is "as thought-provoking and informative as it is engaging and entertaining" (Gupta 200). Kannan weaves together aesthetic elegance with socio-cultural critique, offering a compelling portrait of women's gradual journey from silence to self-reliance. Throughout the novel, Kannan reclaims the herstories of women long ignored by mainstream historiography. Her characters—particularly Kalyani and Athai—do not rebel in overt, dramatic ways; instead, they assert agency through education, emotional strength, and intellectual creativity. Their resistance is quiet but deeply transformative. In this respect, *The Glass Bead Curtain* contributes to a distinctly Indian feminist sensibility—one grounded not in ideological abstraction but in lived, contextual experience.

The climax of the novel, which reveals the pseudonymous literary identities of Athai and other hidden female authors, is particularly significant. Kalyani's evolution underscores Kannan's feminist vision. From a child bride restricted by superstition to a badminton coach with authority and public presence, Kalyani represents a grounded model of empowerment. Her mastery of English—a colonial inheritance—becomes both a tool for mobility and a critique of internalised hierarchies that undermine vernacular identities. At the same time, characters like Athai subvert expectations by engaging in clandestine literary activism, complicating binary categories of submission and resistance. Kannan highlights the power of intergenerational and cross-cultural support in challenging patriarchy. Characters like Miss Susan O'Leary and Kalyani's progressive husband enable women's empowerment, reflecting Kannan's belief in empathetic alliances across gender, age, and culture.

The titular metaphor of the *glass bead curtain* encapsulates the contradictions of women's domestic realities—it is ornamental yet confining, transparent yet impenetrable. The curtain serves as a powerful symbol of the social expectations that simultaneously decorate and imprison women, reinforcing Kannan's thematic focus on visibility, silence, and containment. As Shailja's closing question—"So whose story was it in the end?" (Kannan 373). *The Glass Bead Curtain* is not a singular narrative but a collective one. It is a tapestry of women's voices, stitched together across generations and cultures. Kannan's narrative affirms that feminism is not episodic but genealogical—an inheritance passed down through stories, mentorship, and shared struggle.

The novel redefines womanhood by portraying the many strategies women employ to negotiate power within constraining systems. Whether through silence, storytelling, pedagogy, or sport, the women in Kannan's world resist, endure, and transform. *The Glass Bead Curtain* enriches feminist literary discourse by offering a vision of empowerment rooted in Indian socio-historical specificity yet resonant with global movements for gender justice. It stands as a landmark text in modern Indian literature, celebrating women's resilience while demanding a more inclusive, just, and empathetic world.

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