

## Representing Exploitation: A Semiotic Study of Ecofeminist Perspective in The Machinist (2012) Documentary Film

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### Abstract:

Environmental issues and gender equality remain pressing topics in media discussions. These two issues are reflected in the documentary film *The Machinist* (2012). Based on the Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and focused on ecofeminist perspective, this film contains many symbols that reflect the exploitation of women and the environment by decoding visuals supported by textual elements and the interactions between symbols with characters and plots. The author found that sewing machines, clothing, polluted environment and exhausted workers become symbols of injustice under the global capitalist system. Bangladeshi women in the documentary endure daily struggles as they strive to support themselves and their families by working in garment factories that feed the global fashion industry. Despite their relentless efforts, the grueling demands of their work far outweigh the wages they earn. In addition to the strenuous work, they are subjected to harsh, unsafe working conditions in environments that further erode their health and well-being. These five symbols collectively highlight the intersection of gendered exploitation and environmental degradation within global capitalism. This research contributes to a broader discussion of gender, labor, and environmental justice in the fashion industry.

**Keywords:** Semiotics; ecofeminist; exploitation; fast fashion; documentary film

### Abstrak:

Isu lingkungan dan kesetaraan gender tetap menjadi topik penting dalam diskusi media. Kedua isu ini tercermin dalam film dokumenter *The Machinist* (2012). Berdasarkan teori semiotik Roland Barthes dan perspektif ecofeminism, film ini mengandung banyak simbol yang mencerminkan eksploitasi terhadap perempuan dan lingkungan dengan mendekode visual yang didukung oleh elemen tekstual serta interaksi antara simbol-simbol dengan karakter dan plot. Penulis menemukan bahwa mesin jahit, pakaian, lingkungan yang terpolusi dan pekerja yang kelelahan menjadi simbol ketidakadilan di bawah sistem kapitalis global. Perempuan Bangladesh dalam dokumenter ini menghadapi perjuangan sehari-hari untuk mendukung diri mereka dan keluarga mereka dengan bekerja di pabrik garmen yang memasok industri fashion global. Meskipun upaya mereka tidak kenal lelah, tuntutan berat dari pekerjaan mereka jauh melebihi upah yang mereka terima. Selain kerja yang melelahkan, mereka juga dihadapkan pada kondisi kerja yang keras dan tidak aman di lingkungan yang semakin merusak kesehatan dan kesejahteraan mereka. Kelima simbol ini secara kolektif menyoroti pertemuan antara eksploitasi gender dan degradasi lingkungan dalam konteks kapitalisme global. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada diskusi yang lebih luas mengenai gender, tenaga kerja, dan keadilan lingkungan dalam industri fashion.

**Kata kunci:** Semiotika; ekofeminisme; eksploitasi; fashion cepat; film dokumenter

## INTRODUCTION

Environmental pollution and gender inequality are pressing issues that affect communities and ecosystems everywhere. Environmental degradation happens when natural resources decline due to activities like climate change, deforestation, mining, and expanding agriculture. These activities drive intense industrial growth, which often leads to air, water, and soil pollution. Unfortunately, marginalized communities, especially women, tend to be the ones hit hardest by these environmental changes (Shamsuddoha et al., 2024).

Gender inequality, on the other hand, is a barrier that holds many women back from accessing the same opportunities as men in education, voting, and work. This unfairness widens social gaps, stifles sustainable progress, and makes poverty worse. Women who live in poverty are particularly at risk because they often depend on natural resources for daily needs, so any damage to the environment affects them deeply (Scarborough et al., 2019).

One major player in this problem is the fast fashion industry. With its massive production scale and high consumption rates, fast fashion contributes significantly to environmental pollution. This includes the use of harmful chemicals and the creation of waste that doesn't easily break down. Out of all textile waste, only about 15% is recycled, while nearly 20% is burned for energy; the rest ends up in landfills. Fast fashion is also responsible for around 10% of global carbon emissions (10 Concerning Fast Fashion Waste Statistics, 2023). A study titled *Brand Addiction in the Contexts of Luxury and Fast-Fashion Brands* revealed that consumers often buy fast fashion for self-expression, social identity, status, and a range of affordable designs. In places like Bangladesh, this industry often exploits women as low-paid workers in unsafe conditions (Mrad et al., 2020).

To really make a difference, we need sustainability efforts that focus on both environmental protection and gender equality. Different media, like documentary films, can help raise awareness about these injustices. Documentaries are powerful because they tell stories in a way people can see and feel, which makes complex issues easier to understand. For example, *The Machinist* (2012) is a documentary that shows the lives of female garment workers in Bangladesh. It illustrates how women in developing countries are exploited under industrial capitalism and how fast fashion impacts the environment.

Yet, many studies on fast fashion only focus on one aspect either labor exploitation or environmental harm without linking the two. Research that combines semiotics with ecofeminism is still rare. This study aims to bridge that gap by using these approaches to analyze fast fashion documentaries.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, ecofeminism has become a crucial framework for examining the interconnected exploitation of women and the environment within patriarchal systems. Patriarchal ideologies reinforce dichotomies between human/nature and male/female, perpetuating the systemic dominance over both. These frameworks suggest that women and nature are often positioned as resources to be exploited for labor and environmental contributions (Khairiyah et al., 2024). Ecofeminism sheds light on broader discussions about gender and environmental degradation and reveals how industries like fast fashion worth trillions globally reflect these exploitative dynamics (Details, 2024). Studies have shown that fast fashion in developing countries, such as Bangladesh, relies heavily on a primarily female workforce, exposing them to poor labor conditions and environmental risks (Mamun & Hoque, 2022). While this economic analysis contextualizes exploitation in quantitative terms, (Fahimah, 2017) expands this perspective by suggesting that ecofeminism reveals a cyclical pattern of exploitation affecting both nature and marginalized female workers. However, Fahimah's study is broad and does not explore how ecofeminist critiques are presented in media, emphasizing the need for focused analysis on how documentary films highlight these socio-environmental injustices.

Media studies contribute to this conversation by exploring how ecofeminist ideas are portrayed in visual media. Documentaries, in particular, can powerfully capture these injustices, using vivid visuals to advance ecofeminist narratives. However, while these studies effectively illustrate ecofeminist themes in media, they do not address media representations specific to fast fashion (Khairiyah et al., 2024). This research seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the documentary *The Machinist*, focusing on how its visual symbols critique the exploitation of both women and the environment in the fashion industry.

This review brings together a diverse range of relevant studies, organized thematically to underscore the interconnected issues of gender and environmental

exploitation from an ecofeminist perspective. Each source offers a unique viewpoint, collectively deepening our understanding of fast fashion's socio-environmental impacts and the role of documentary media in raising awareness.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative design, aiming to explore the deeper meanings within the documentary film *The Machinist* (2012). This approach was chosen to uncover the implicit, symbolic, and contextual elements embedded in the film's visual and verbal language. A case study approach was adopted, focusing specifically on *The Machinist* as the primary data source. This method allows for an in-depth analysis of themes related to gender and environmental exploitation as they intersect in symbolic representations.

The data was collected through frame-by-frame analysis and textual examination of the film's visuals, encompassing staging, dialogue, and narrative. The preparation phase included a literature review on ecofeminism, semiotics, and fast fashion to contextualize the study within existing research frameworks. Subsequently, the film was reviewed to identify key scenes where visual and verbal symbols of exploitation appear.

Scenes in *The Machinist* were carefully selected and categorized based on themes such as labor, environmental degradation, and socio-economic inequality. This selection was then further refined to include only the scenes that strongly represent these themes.

Data analysis was conducted using semiotic analysis to identify signs, symbols, and myths within the film. Roland Barthes' theory assisted in breaking down denotation and connotation, identifying how certain symbols convey layered meanings related to ecofeminist themes (Garlitz, 2015). Examples include analyzing the sewing machine as a symbol of mechanized labor, clothing as a form of commodified female labor, and the polluted environment as a sign of environmental degradation within a capitalist system.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The documentary *The Machinist* (2012) presents a profound critique of the interconnected exploitation of gender and the environment within the fast fashion industry. Through a semiotic lens, the documentary highlights the experiences of female workers, depicting them not merely as laborers but as symbols of the devaluation and dehumanization faced by many women in low-wage sectors. The film portrays harsh, overcrowded, and often unsanitary factory conditions, underscoring the lack of concern

for worker safety standards and highlighting the environmental damage caused by irresponsible production processes. This serves as a powerful metaphor for capitalist exploitation, where substantial profits are prioritized over human welfare and environmental health, benefitting private owners.

In this analysis, the visual symbols in *The Machinist* reinforce these themes. The film focuses on the lives of several female workers, with two central female characters standing out. Additionally, there are two male characters who share the same perspective on the issues. All four characters believe that the industry's production practices are solely driven by resource exploitation. These four characters are:

No	Name	Role in the film
1	Amirul Al Haq Amin	<b>President of National Garment Worker's Federation</b>
2	Nargis	<b>Garment Worker</b>
3	Ratna	<b>Garment Worker</b>
4	Mohammed	<b>Garment Worker</b>

Ultimately, *The Machinist* presents a reality that prompts reflection on the true costs of industrial practices and consumerism in the fashion world. Through ecofeminist themes, the film critiques the exploitation of marginalized communities and natural resources by the industry, revealing the connection between gender-based labor oppression and ecological degradation under capitalism. This approach calls for an urgent reassessment of industrial policies, advocating for ethical reforms that safeguard both people and the planet. The narrative and character interactions reveal an underlying message about how gender-based and environmental exploitation are closely intertwined within the industry's structures depicted in the film.

### **Sewing Machines as Tools of Exploitation**



### ***Dialogue of Nargis (4:28 - 5:51)***

"I work on the machines. I started when I was 11 or 12. It was difficult. I really struggled to handle the workload. People like us have nothing back in the village. We come here hoping for something better. There are not any other jobs for girls like us. We aren't educated so how could we get a decent job? Without the garment factories we'd have nothing. That's how our lives have been written."

Denotation Literally, Nargis recounts that she started working in the factory at a very young age, around 11 or 12 years old. Her statements explain the physical difficulties she faced while trying to adapt to the heavy workload.

Connotation On a connotative level, this dialogue highlights Nargis's feelings of alienation and helplessness living under the shadow of poverty. The sewing machine symbolizes a constraining chain of work, serving as the only tool that connects Nargis's hopes for a better life. She, along with other workers, is trapped in a cycle where low education and lack of job options force them to accept these jobs, despite facing physical and mental suffering. The phrase "how our lives have been written" suggests that Nargis feels trapped in a predetermined fate, as if her life choices have been dictated without any room for change.

Myth The myth in Nargis's dialogue represents the narrative considered "normal" in rural society that women without higher education are only fit to work in factories as laborers. This myth reinforces the notion that low-income communities, particularly women, cannot escape the cycles of poverty and exploitation. It also creates the perception that the garment industry is a form of "salvation" for workers living in poverty, when in reality, it exploits their limitations.

### ***Dialogue of Ratna (8:45 - 10:50)***

"I started working in garments when I was 9 years old. I started as a helper, I got paid 700 taka (\$12) a month. My mum lives in the village, I'm all alone here. I feel so lonely. I can't do anything about it, but I find it so hard to struggle through life alone."

Denotation Literally, Ratna reveals that she began working in the garment factory at the age of 9 as an assistant, earning a very low wage of 700 taka, or \$12, per month. She also expresses feelings of loneliness due to being separated from her family, who still live in the village.

Connotation On a connotative level, this dialogue expresses profound feelings of isolation and alienation. Ratna experiences not only physical separation but also significant emotional burdens, as she faces the harsh realities of urban life without familial support. Her low earnings reflect the low value placed on labor within the industry. This meager income becomes a symbol of economic injustice, where child labor is exploited by offering minimal wages. Furthermore, this dialogue illustrates how the fast fashion industry neglects the emotional well-being of its workers.

Myth The myth depicted here is the perception that child laborers are a cheap and "normal" source of labor within the garment industry, particularly in developing countries. Ratna's dialogue portrays a situation where challenging work, both physically and emotionally, is seen as acceptable for children from impoverished families. This myth obscures the reality of exploitation within the garment industry, portraying it as the only available alternative for underprivileged children, even if it means living in isolation and loneliness.

#### ***Description of Factory Conditions (17:56 - 18:30)***

Description: The scene depicts a dark factory with workers not using safety gear, such as gloves, during the fabric printing process. A male worker is seen covering only his nose with his shirt while in a room filled with chemicals.

Denotation This depiction shows a factory environment with poor lighting and inadequate safety standards. Workers are not provided with basic protective equipment, such as gloves or masks, despite working with potentially hazardous chemicals.

Connotation Connotatively, this condition illustrates a neglect of the workers' health and well-being. The unsafe environment reflects that workers are viewed merely as "production machines" by the industry, without regard for their safety or comfort. The lack of safety equipment indicates a disregard for the long-term health risks that may arise. The dark and dreary factory space also portrays an inhumane and oppressive work atmosphere, where workers are forced to labor under conditions far from acceptable.

Myth The myth that emerges here is that health and safety risks are an "inseparable part" of working in the garment industry. This reinforces the perception that workers in this industry must accept physical dangers as a consequence of their low economic status. Consequently, conditions that should be deemed unacceptable are instead viewed as a reasonable reality for the working class.

### ***Worker Death Statistics (7:59)***

Source: According to NGWF/Maquila Solidarity: "400 garment workers have died and 5,000 were injured in factory fires since 1990."

Denotation Literally, this data indicates the high number of deaths and injuries suffered by workers due to garment factory fires since 1990.

Connotation The connotation of this statistic is that the garment industry neglects worker safety, even in the face of repeatedly occurring tragic events. This statistic provides a stark reality of how vulnerable factory workers are to workplace accidents due to a lack of safety regulations. The tragedy of these fires emphasizes how companies prioritize production efficiency over worker protection, treating them as expendable parts in the production cycle.

Myth The myth that arises is that these death and injury figures are a "natural consequence" of working in a high-risk industry. This myth creates a false understanding that workplace accidents are inevitable for factory workers. In reality, these incidents result from the industry's negligence in providing a safe working environment.

### **Clothing as a Symbol of Fast Fashion and Capitalism**



### ***Economic Exploitation in Fast Fashion (3:12)***

Description: The scene shows packed clothing ready for export, while Amirul explains that 85% of garment workers in Bangladesh are women. Despite these garments being exported to developed countries for much higher prices than workers' wages, their welfare remains unprioritized.

**Symbolic Analysis** This visualization represents the alienation of workers from their products. Female workers, like Ratna, are directly involved in producing garments that will be sold in developed countries for prices far exceeding their wages. In Barthes' semiotics, these cheaply produced but expensively sold clothes reflect how capitalism creates an illusion of economic value in objects, while disregarding the human value behind production.

**Myth** The myth presented here is that mass production creates vast economic opportunities for developing countries like Bangladesh. However, this myth hides the reality that the workers generating this wealth continue to live in poverty. Global capitalism normalizes the exploitation of cheap labor as part of a “productive” economic cycle without regard for the human welfare behind it.

#### ***Injustice in Wages and Working Conditions (8:45 - 10:50)***

“Our wage is not enough. The jeans we make get sold for up to 3000 taka (\$45), but we only get paid 3000 taka (\$45) for a month's work...”

**Denotation** Ratna explains that the jeans they produce sell for as much as 3000 taka, equivalent to her monthly wage. This highlights the stark injustice between her hard work and the value of the product created.

**Connotation** This dialogue implies that the seemingly affordable global fast-fashion items mask the harsh reality of garment workers forced to survive on low wages. Ratna's statement shows that their earnings barely cover basic needs, trapping them in a cycle of poverty despite daily labor. Here, clothing becomes a symbol of alienation and exploitation, where workers produce items they can't afford for themselves.

**Myth** The myth is that fast fashion provides affordable clothing for everyone, but this obscures the reality that low prices are achieved by exploiting labor. The industry promotes a narrative that consumer access to affordable clothing is more important than worker welfare, ultimately cementing norms of injustice in the global economy.

#### ***Living Standards and High Costs (11:10)***

Dialogue between Ratna and Cameraman about Rent Costs: “You pay 1000 taka (\$16) per month for this room?” Ratna: “Yes. They charge that much because I guess the landlord thinks that's how much it's worth...”

**Denotation** Ratna reveals that she has to pay 1000 taka (\$16) for a modest room, highlighting that her wages barely cover the cost of basic housing.

**Connotation** This suggests that garment workers like Ratna are forced to live in poor conditions due to the high cost of living compared to their wages. This shows their inability to meet basic needs, with the clothing they produce symbolizing a deep economic disparity.

**Myth** The myth reinforced here is that industrialization and urbanization create better economic opportunities. However, the film shows that garment workers in big cities remain impoverished despite contributing to a major economic sector. Their existence is used to sustain the supply of cheap clothing in the international market while their own welfare is overlooked.

### ***Pressure from Global Brands (39:06)***

Amirul's Dialogue on Major Brands: "Like you see Walmart from the USA, H&M, Carrefour, Tesco, Marks and Spencer... These multinationals are sourcing from Bangladesh; they are putting pressure on these local factory owners to decrease their prices."

**Denotation** Amirul explains how large companies, like Walmart and H&M, force Bangladeshi factories to lower production costs, directly impacting workers' wages.

**Connotation** This dialogue shows that global brands use their financial power to enforce low pricing standards, ultimately reducing workers' wages and welfare. The clothing produced under these economic pressures symbolizes injustice, with profits benefiting large corporations while workers face low wages and poor working conditions.

**Economic Dominance Myth** The myth is that large brands "support" developing economies by providing jobs and market access. However, the film reveals that these brands use their economic dominance to enforce low prices at the expense of workers' rights in developing countries. This myth conceals the reality that global market access often sacrifices workers' basic rights.

### **Exhausted Workers as Victims of Systematic Exploitation**



### ***Forced Labor and Extreme Fatigue (43:09)***

#### *Film Note*

In 2005, a labor law was passed to make overtime voluntary for workers. However, many factories still force employees to work up to 90 hours per week with mandatory overtime.

#### *Symbolic Analysis*

This note underscores the ineffectiveness of labor laws in protecting workers. The workers are forced to work overtime to meet inhumane production targets. Long hours symbolize capitalist greed that uses labor as a tool to maximize profits without regard for worker welfare.

#### *Connotation*

Forced overtime in many factories shows that workers are viewed merely as production machines. This reveals systematic injustice in the industry, draining workers physically and mentally.

### ***Cycle of Powerlessness and Loss of Hope (4:28–5:51)***

"I feel sad that my whole family ended up working in the garment factory. This is not the ending I hoped for. But that's how it is. Both my sisters are in the same position. I've been working in garments for 8 years. I started when I was 11 or 12. It's really hard. I truly struggle with this workload."

#### *Symbolic Analysis*

Nargis's dialogue reflects the poverty cycle that forces women into the garment industry. Starting work at a young age and being trapped in hard labor symbolizes the lack of choices for women in certain social strata.

#### *Myth*

In Barthes' semiotics, Nargis's dialogue reflects the capitalist myth of exploitation of women. Female workers, especially those with limited education, are often trapped in a hopeless cycle of labor, forced to sacrifice their future for current survival.

### ***Feeling Trapped in Draining Work (7:03–7:30)***

"Once you start working in garments, you're trapped, it's no different from being in prison. My child lives with my mother while I work. I only get to see him at night. At work, I'm always thinking about my child. I'm worried something will happen when I'm not around."

### *Symbolic Analysis*

Life in the garment factory is equated to being in prison, symbolizing the loss of freedom and opportunity for a better life for workers. Like being behind bars, they are bound to their work with no option to escape the system.

This dialogue shows how female workers must endure the loss of personal life and interaction with their children. Capitalism in this industry disregards family bonds, prioritizing production over basic human needs like family time.

### ***Wage Fraud and Managerial Tyranny (32:00)***

"I wish all factory owners would look at their workers. They are the ones who make money for them. They should care about us. Remember I mentioned my salary was cut? I went to the treasurer to ask about it. He said I was absent for two days. That's a lie; I wasn't even absent for a single day."

### *Symbolic Analysis*

Unjust wage cuts reflect the unilateral power held by management over workers. Ratna's powerlessness symbolizes structural injustice in an industry that dominates and exploits workers.

### *Economic Exploitation Myth*

In Barthes' theory, this exploitation is a myth of economic profit achieved by taking away workers' rights. Managers and factory owners prioritize profits over fair wages, creating social inequality.

### ***Failure to Achieve Personal Aspirations and Family Sacrifice (13:46–15:50)***

"With both of us working in the garment factory, we can survive for our family. But it's always a struggle for us. I feel ashamed that I can't provide what I want for my child's education."

### *Symbolic Analysis*

Mohamed's sacrifice is a symbol of lost hope. Despite working hard, his low income makes it impossible to provide a decent life for his family. This reveals how capitalism in this industry exploits labor to the point where workers feel ashamed of their inability to meet basic family needs.

### *Myth*

In Barthes' theory, the inability to support one's family is a myth of capitalism that places economic value over family life. With enforced low wages, workers struggle in poverty, ultimately disadvantaging families and future generations.

### **Polluted Environment as a Consequence of Capitalist Practices**



#### ***Air Pollution and Its Impact on Society (0:00–0:37)***

##### *Visual Description*

The film opens with scenes of Dhaka, Bangladesh, a densely populated city enveloped in air pollution. This scene highlights how environmental pollution has become an inseparable part of daily life for people living near fashion industry hubs.

##### *Symbolic Analysis*

The polluted environment in Dhaka symbolizes harmful industrial practices. The smog-covered city represents how industrial pollution has deteriorated the quality of life. In Barthes' semiotic context, this polluted city becomes a capitalist myth, where economic progress often comes at a high cost to both the environment and local communities.

##### *Connotation*

The constant pollution and unhealthy air become a burden, especially for women and their families, who are more vulnerable to long-term health effects. This scene shows how environmental degradation is often overlooked for profit in a capitalist system, leaving local communities to bear the harmful impact.

#### ***Impact of Climate Change and Discomfort from High Temperatures (28:41)***

Mohammed: "Wow, it's so hot today."

Ratna: "This is the communal bathroom. I am going to wash my face to cool down."

### *Visual Description*

Mohammed, a garment worker, arrives at his rented home after a full day at the factory, commenting on the intense heat, which hints at climate change due to the fashion industry's effects. Ratna, also experiencing extreme heat, washes her face and hands to cool off.

### *Symbolic Analysis*

The heat felt by Mohammed and Ratna represents climate change as a side effect of the industry. This illustrates that fast fashion practices not only damage the environment but also exacerbate climate change, impacting the comfort of daily life.

### *Connotation*

The uncomfortable temperatures symbolize the long-term environmental impact of the industry. The lives of local communities are increasingly strained by natural conditions worsened by this industry, depicting an unsustainable economic system focused on short-term profits at the expense of local well-being and the environment.

### ***Contrast Between City and Countryside***

#### *Visual Description*

The scene shifts to Ratna's hometown, surrounded by green trees and wide fields. The serene village landscape starkly contrasts with the congested and polluted city of Dhaka. Ratna expresses her desire to live in a clean and natural village, far from the polluted city where she works.

#### *Symbolic Analysis*

The stark contrast between Ratna's green and serene village and the congested, polluted city symbolizes the ecological impact of industrialization. The village represents harmony with nature, while the polluted city symbolizes environmental degradation due to capitalism. This contrast shows that while villages are often seen as "backward," they offer a better quality of life.

#### *Myth*

The countryside in Ratna's hometown symbolizes the myth of simplicity and purity, whereas the city with its factories represents modernization, often bringing negative environmental consequences. Ratna's preference for the village over the city reflects a

desire for a quality of life free from pollution and extreme temperatures, indicating that industrialization does not always improve local living conditions.

## CONCLUSION(S)

The documentary *The Machinist* (2012) illustrates the interconnected exploitation of women and the environment in the fast fashion industry, exposing a system where both are undervalued for profit. Through semiotic and ecofeminist lenses, this analysis reveals how the struggles of female garment workers, symbolized by characters like Nargis and Ratna, reflect a larger pattern of normalized economic exploitation and environmental degradation. Symbols such as sewing machines and hazardous factory conditions emphasize a cycle of exploitation, prioritizing profit over human and ecological welfare. By shedding light on these hidden realities, *The Machinist* challenges viewers to consider the true costs of unsustainable practices, urging for industry reform that ensures fair wages, safe working conditions, and environmentally conscious production. Through this lens, the film encourages reflection on the ties between gender-based labor exploitation and environmental harm, advocating for a fairer and more sustainable fashion industry.

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