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THE HAUNTED BORDER: TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND NEO-IMPERIAL VIOLENCE IN NADEEM ASLAM'S *THE WASTED VIGIL*

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Abstract

This article examines Nadeem Aslam's The Wasted Vigil (2008) as a literary intervention that subverts the racialised, securitised US discourse surrounding the Pak-Afghan border in the post-9/11 era. Drawing on trauma studies, border poetics, and postcolonial theory, it argues that the novel constructs a bottom-up, Janus-faced borderscape that refuses the reductive frames of terrorism, extremism, and pathology imposed by imperial knowledge systems. Through its haunted architectural setting, fragmented narrative structure, and ethically complex character arcs, The Wasted Vigil foregrounds erased histories and unmourned lives—particularly those of women, children, and the disappeared—excluded from both state archives and Western trauma narratives. The article analyses key figures such as Marcus, Qatrina, David, Zameen, Casa, and Dunia, reading their stories as affective residues of empire, Cold War violence, and neocolonial militarisation. In rejecting narrative closure and aesthetic redemption, Aslam offers a literary counter-archive: one that grieves without spectacle, remembers without mastery, and unsettles the imperial grammar of the Af-Pak frontier. Ultimately, the novel reclaims the border as a site not of threat, but of memory, mourning, and resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, the Pak-Afghan border has occupied a central place in Western security imaginaries as an ungovernable, lawless zone—a breeding ground of extremism and a threat to global stability. Cast as "the most dangerous place in the world," the region has been discursively constructed through what Manchanda (2020) terms a "post-9/11 discursive regime": a matrix of knowledge production that racialises the border and pathologises its inhabitants, while effacing the long history of imperial entanglement that shaped its volatility. Yet, as postcolonial theorists and cultural border scholars have increasingly argued, such securitised framings obscure more than they reveal. They suppress local memory, flatten complexity, and render the border as an abstract threshold of danger rather than a lived geography of grief, survival, and resistance.[11]

Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) offers a powerful literary subversion of this regime. Set in the shadow of war, in a crumbling house on the Afghan side of the frontier, the novel excavates layers of violence—British colonialism, Soviet invasion, CIA manipulation, Taliban fundamentalism—while attending to the affective residues left behind: broken bodies, vanishing archives, and shattered lineages. Through its narrative structure, symbolic architecture, and fragmentary character histories, *The Wasted Vigil* constructs what I argue is a bottom-up, Janus-faced borderscape: a representational space that not only looks both ways—towards empire and subaltern—but also gathers voices from below, staging an ethical confrontation with the ghosted histories that imperial powers prefer to forget.

This article positions *The Wasted Vigil* as a literary counter-discourse that challenges the dominant Anglo-American framing of the border. In place of the binaries—civilisation/barbarism, democracy/terrorism, freedom/fundamentalism—circulating in post-9/11 policy and media discourse, Aslam offers a haunted, palimpsestic border that is saturated with historical trauma. Crucially, this trauma is not merely individual or psychological; it is

[1] This notion of the border as a "dangerous zone" was repeatedly invoked in US policy discourse post-9/11, including by Barack Obama and General Petraeus. See Manchanda (2020, pp. 15–20) for a detailed discussion.

structural, spatial, and intergenerational. The novel resists narrative closure and historical amnesia by foregrounding the ruins of empire not as mute artefacts, but as speaking wounds.[2] To illuminate this argument, the article brings together insights from trauma studies (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001; Craps, 2013), border poetics (Schimanski, 2006; Wilson & Donnan, 2012), and postcolonial theory. While Caruth's concept of "unclaimed experience" and LaCapra's "acting out versus working through" provide a framework for analysing the novel's engagement with memory, Craps's postcolonial critique foregrounds the racial exclusions of dominant trauma paradigms.[3] Border theory helps situate Aslam's spatial imagination within a field that treats the border not merely as a site of control, but as a zone of aesthetic and political struggle.

The article unfolds in four parts. The first examines Marcus's house as a symbolic architecture of layered violence—an archive of British, Soviet, and American imperial debris. The second explores Qatrina's fragmentary resistance through art, pedagogy, and bodily sacrifice, arguing that her life forms a gendered subaltern counter-history. The third section turns to the entangled personal-political stories of David, Zameen, and Lara to trace how memory and love are disrupted by Cold War and post-9/11 violence. Finally, the article considers how characters like Casa and Dunia embody ungrievable lives, refusing the narrative closure sought by both empire and humanitarian sentiment. Ultimately, *The Wasted Vigil* does not offer a redemptive view of the border; instead, it restores to it the complexity, pain, and memory that the US discursive regime cannot accommodate.

THE HOUSE AS HAUNTED BORDERSCAPE

In *The Wasted Vigil*, Marcus's house—formerly a perfume factory, later an illegal school, and finally a makeshift mausoleum—becomes the symbolic centre of Aslam's borderscape. Situated near the porous frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the house serves not as a static setting but as a multi-layered, spectral space where personal grief intersects with the traumas of empire. In this ruin, history is sedimented rather than archived, and the architecture itself testifies to the complicity of British colonialism, Soviet intervention, and American neocolonialism in shaping the border's violence (Aslam, 2008, pp. 17–21). Through this

[2] On "ghosted histories," see Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* (2008), which articulates haunting as a sociopolitical condition, not simply a spectral metaphor.

structure, Aslam constructs a Janus-faced, bottom-up borderscape, where memory surfaces not in coherent narrative, but in fractured symbols, suppressed artefacts, and spectral residue.[3]

The most striking of these symbols are the books nailed to the ceiling, their pages closed, their spines facing downwards. The novels, histories, and poetry volumes hovering above the room defy conventional reading; their orientation makes engagement impossible, turning literacy itself into a memorial act. Aslam writes, "The words are nailed into silence" (2008, p. 22). This silencing is not the product of neglect but of deliberate protection—a counter-iconoclastic gesture that preserves literature from Taliban destruction and from the instrumentalisation of imperial knowledge regimes. In this image, the house stages what Craps (2013) calls "postcolonial witnessing"—a poetics of refusal that privileges marginalised traumas without aestheticising suffering (p. 33).[4]

The walls of the house, like its ceiling, are covered in layered erasures. Beneath the surface paint lie Buddhist murals, obscured during the Taliban period and partially restored later. The imagery resurfaces hesitantly, as if haunted by its own illegibility. Aslam (2008) describes how "the original paint… bled through" (p. 26), suggesting that history, even when suppressed, insists on returning. This is not simply symbolic. It is, as LaCapra (2001) notes, the mode in which trauma returns—disjointed, deferred, and ghosted rather than fully re-integrated into consciousness (p. 70).[5]

The house thus functions as what Schimanski (2006) terms a border aesthetic structure: a space of narrative and political crossing that resists fixity. Rather than offering a panoramic or state-sanctioned account of the border's history, Marcus's house holds its memory in fragments. Each room contains residual evidence of the British empire, Soviet occupation, CIA interference, and Taliban tyranny—not as timelines but as *overlapping presences*. Marcus's personal archive, too, is implicated: an Englishman married to an Afghan woman, father to a daughter disappeared by soldiers, and host to characters entangled with conflicting regimes, he lives amid a self-curated ruin that renders empire both intimate and unbearable (Aslam, 2008,

[3] The "Janus-faced" border concept refers to borders that face inward and outward simultaneously—towards sovereignty and exclusion, but also towards entanglement and continuity. See Wilson & Donnan (2012, pp. 7–9).
[4] The Taliban's destruction of books and cultural artefacts is well-documented. Aslam's response here is layered: the act of preservation is mournful, protective, and resistant—less archival than funereal.
[5] The concept of "bleeding through" is key to trauma poetics. It implies not revelation but recurrence. The mural's partial return mirrors the novel's resistance to narrative closure.

pp. 19–32). The house does not impose order on these histories; it shelters their contradiction.[6]

This makes the house not only a symbol of memory but a site of trauma aesthetics. Caruth (1996) emphasises that trauma resists integration into coherent narrative; it "returns belatedly," often in silences or repetitions (p. 11). Marcus's house is full of such returns. Ghosts are whispered about; the walls are said to "refuse to stay quiet" (Aslam, 2008, p. 34). The structure is not haunted in the Gothic sense but in what Gordon (2008) calls the sociological one: "Haunting is the result of violations that are buried but not forgotten" (p. xvi). This is particularly true of the Pak-Afghan border, which is haunted not only by its own casualties but by those produced by others in its name.[7]

Finally, the house stands as a counterpoint to the infrastructural imagination of the US post-9/11 security regime. Where drone optics, satellite imagery, and counterterrorism maps render the region legible only through the lens of surveillance, Marcus's house insists on opacity. It shelters loss that cannot be tabulated, voices that are not "actionable," and stories that do not resolve. In this sense, the house itself becomes a counter-archive—not a repository of official memory, but a living space of ethical witnessing. Its hauntedness is not a detour from realism; it is a *critique* of realism—of the realist epistemologies that flatten border histories into coordinates of danger. Through the house, Aslam reclaims the border as a site where past and present bleed into each other, refusing the imperial grammar of closure.

QATRINA AND AESTHETICS OF RESISTANCE

If Marcus's house constitutes the architectural memory of empire, Qatrina's character embodies its psychic and aesthetic refusal. A painter and underground educator, Qatrina resists both Taliban authoritarianism and imperial erasure not through weapons or political rhetoric, but through embodied gestures—nailing books to ceilings, teaching girls in secret, painting images that dissolve as they are made. Though she is already dead by the novel's outset, her presence animates the text's emotional and conceptual structure. Her story, fragmented and dispersed, becomes central to Aslam's effort to construct a bottom-up, Janus-faced borderscape

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that defies imperial simplification and mourns with complexity (Aslam, 2008, pp. 22–25, 91–93).

The act of nailing books to the ceiling—an image both surreal and deeply symbolic—originates with Qatrina, though Marcus later preserves it. This gesture literalises preservation under siege: the books cannot be read, but neither can they be destroyed. Suspended, unreachable, they resist obliteration while refusing mastery. As Craps (2013) notes, postcolonial trauma narratives often refuse closure and coherence, instead emphasising "affective residues" that linger at the edge of representation (p. 45). The books become such residues—artefacts of a suppressed archive, memorialising what both Taliban theocracy and imperial counterinsurgency sought to erase.

Qatrina's role as an educator further marks her defiance. Teaching girls under Taliban rule is rendered in the novel not as a mere act of courage, but as a mode of cultural continuity and border insurgency. In a context where female literacy is framed as threat, her clandestine school constitutes a radical act of emplacement—rooting knowledge in local soil against efforts to militarise or dehistoricise the region. As Schimanski (2006) argues, borderscapes become literary when they foreground crossings not just of territory, but of epistemic authority and imaginative worlds. Qatrina's pedagogy, then, forms part of a gendered counter-archive, preserving continuity beneath the rubble of both local tyranny and foreign intervention.

Her visual art underscores this aesthetic of fragility. She paints with watercolours that dissolve too quickly, or whose lines are blurred before they dry. One work is described as fading even as she finishes it: "as if the image refused to be contained" (Aslam, 2008, p. 91). These vanishing images resist archival legibility; they refuse to offer the clear lines and moral certainties that underpin the post-9/11 security discourse. This refusal mirrors what LaCapra (2001) identifies as the ethical imperative of post-traumatic testimony: to remain open to loss, uncertainty, and incompleteness (p. 186). In this sense, Qatrina's art performs the very kind of mourning the West fails to allow the Afghan subject—one that resists spectacle and embraces opacity.

Her body, too, becomes a terrain of contested memory. The discovery of her severed hand—preserved in a drawer in Marcus's house—constitutes one of the novel's most haunting moments (Aslam, 2008, p. 102). The Taliban's mutilation of her painting hand is both symbolic and literal: it severs not only flesh but the means by which memory is visually

preserved. Yet its storage, hidden yet protected, affirms what Judith Butler (2004) calls "precarious life"—a life rendered unintelligible by dominant frames, but made grievable through alternate rituals of care (p. 24). The hand becomes a relic not of martyrdom but of resistance: evidence that the body itself may become an archive when language and art are outlawed.

Qatrina's life, fragmented and remembered through space, art, and speech, resists incorporation into either Taliban martyrdom or US feminist interventionism. She is not a token of victimhood to be "saved" by imperial feminism, nor an emblem of traditional piety to be honoured by religious nationalists. Rather, she enacts what Mohanty (2003) calls "oppositional agency"—emerging from below, historically situated, and marked by epistemic struggle (p. 42). In this sense, Qatrina exemplifies the Janus-faced nature of Aslam's borderscape: rooted in local resistance while turned outward against global narratives that would erase her complexity.

EMPIRE, LOVE, AND MEMORY: DAVID, LARA, AND ZAMEEN

Where Marcus's house embodies a haunted archive and Qatrina's body testifies to aesthetic resistance, the triad of David, Lara, and Zameen evokes the lingering entanglements of empire across generational, emotional, and ideological lines. Their narratives—spanning Cold War espionage, lost familial bonds, and failed redemption—move across multiple imperial frontiers. Yet these crossings, rather than offering catharsis, produce only deeper wounds. *The Wasted Vigil* embeds these characters within a broader critique of the geopolitical scripts that have rendered the Pak-Afghan border legible only through the lens of danger, thereby refusing to acknowledge the complex textures of personal grief and historical complicity (Aslam, 2008, pp. 66–85, 110–121).

David, a former CIA operative, arrives in Afghanistan searching not for political resolution but for Zameen—the daughter of Marcus and Qatrina, with whom he once shared an illicit Cold War romance. His presence recalls an earlier moment of imperial intrusion: the covert US support for the mujahideen during the Soviet invasion. This period, often celebrated in American political memory as a successful intervention, is rendered here in deeply personal and traumatic terms. David is not a figure of power, but of loss. His covert actions failed to protect the woman he loved, and his nation's policies ultimately contributed to the destruction of the world she inhabited. As Aslam notes, David had "played his part, then stepped away, but

the fire he helped light had not extinguished" (2008, p. 71). His story reframes the CIA not as a shadowy executor of global strategy, but as an affective actor entangled in unacknowledged grief.[8]

Zameen, meanwhile, is the novel's absent centre. Her disappearance—likely at the hands of Soviet soldiers—becomes a generative trauma for both Marcus and David, but also for the text itself, which circles around her memory without ever reclaiming her voice. She remains nameless in the mouths of strangers, hidden in the archives of empire, unrecognised by the regimes that produced her loss. Her erasure is both literal and symbolic: she represents those whom empire forgets because it cannot commodify their suffering or instrumentalise their memory. As Craps (2013) argues, "postcolonial subjects often suffer from forms of historical trauma that are not afforded recognition within dominant trauma discourse" (p. 67). Zameen's silence exemplifies this occlusion.

Aslam's refusal to resolve her fate is not a narrative flaw but an ethical stance. Unlike Western trauma fictions that often move toward recovery, *The Wasted Vigil* lingers in uncertainty. Marcus continues to write letters to Zameen, never knowing if they will reach her. These letters, filled with mythological references and political reflections, perform what LaCapra (2001) calls the "work of mourning": not the closure of grief, but the ongoing labour of remembering without resolution (p. 142).[9] The novel mourns her not as a disappeared daughter, but as a figure of borderland subjectivity—both local and imperial, intimate and geopolitical.

The final figure in this entangled triad is Lara, a Russian woman who travels to Afghanistan in search of her missing brother, a Soviet soldier last seen during the invasion. Like David, she carries her own burden of imperial guilt and familial loss. Her journey is shaped not by ideology, but by memory—by the need to honour her brother's humanity outside the frames of militarised nationalism. Her presence in Marcus's house creates a counter-archive

[8] The novel critiques the Cold War not just for its political binaries but for its psychic residues. David's return to Afghanistan is prompted not by ideology but by a desire to reconcile with personal guilt—a rare motivation in representations of intelligence operatives.

[9] The letters Marcus writes to Zameen are not simply acts of mourning but epistemological acts. They represent his refusal to allow state archives to become the sole custodians of memory.

of witness: Russian, American, British, and Afghan figures forced into proximity, all bound by a history none can narrate alone.[10]

Lara's discovery of Soviet atrocities committed by her brother shatters the illusion of familial innocence. The photograph she finds—depicting her brother standing beside a woman later executed—does not provide resolution, but introduces moral rupture. "She had come to find him," Aslam writes, "but now must decide if she can live with what he was" (2008, p. 115). This dilemma underscores the novel's central ethic: *knowing is not redemptive*. The problem is not ignorance, but the impossibility of making sense of atrocity within the grammar of nationhood or kinship.[11]

Together, David, Lara, and Zameen form a triangulated narrative of inter-imperial intimacy. Their stories unfold across the Cold War's ideological lines, but within *The Wasted Vigil*, they are stripped of nationalist purpose. Instead, they reveal the long, often subterranean, afterlife of empire—how decisions made in the name of strategy become scars etched into personal memory. These characters also help stage the novel's Janus-faced borderscape: each comes from a different side of imperial history, yet each bears its costs. They do not speak for their states; they grieve in spite of them.

By foregrounding these interwoven losses, Aslam resists the US discourse that casts the Pak-Afghan border as a site of one-directional threat. Rather than an ungoverned frontier, the border here is a zone of affective complexity, shaped by multiple imperialisms and haunted by forgotten attachments. In this way, *The Wasted Vigil* transforms personal longing into political critique, revealing that at the heart of empire's machinery lie ungrieved losses—bodies, loves, and futures—rendered disposable by power.

THE UNMOURNED AND UNGRIEVED: CASA AND DUNIA

If Marcus, Qatrina, David, Lara, and Zameen illustrate how personal loss is entangled with imperial memory, Casa and Dunia represent the ungrieved lives that fall entirely outside the scope of memorialisation. Their stories, muted and elliptical, offer no redemptive arc, no

[10] This gathering of imperial and subaltern figures in a single domestic space recalls Edward Said's (1993) critique of "intertwined histories"—the insistence that coloniser and colonised cannot be cleanly separated.

[11] Lara's moral reckoning also destabilises the idea of the soldier as hero or victim. Her brother is neither; he is both loved and implicated, creating an ethical grey zone rarely acknowledged in war fiction.

cathartic closure. Instead, they form what Butler (2004) terms "precarious lives"—existences denied legitimacy within dominant narratives of grief and political value. Casa, a Taliban child soldier, and Dunia, a woman abducted and erased, are not simply casualties of war; they are figures of radical disposability, whose deaths *do not count* within the frameworks of state mourning, humanitarian intervention, or even familial remembrance.

Casa's trajectory is particularly stark. Introduced as a boy raised in the debris of war, indoctrinated by jihadist rhetoric, and trained to kill, he is both a product and a perpetrator of violence. But Aslam (2008) refuses to render him as a mere terrorist. Instead, Casa is portrayed as "not yet old enough to shave" (p. 147), a child whose moral world has been warped by an endless sequence of traumas. He kills without hesitation, but he also grieves—privately, almost shamefully—for the few scraps of tenderness that punctuate his life. This paradox underscores the novel's refusal to essentialise violence as inherent to Pashtun or Muslim identity.

Casa's death is neither heroic nor narratively framed. He is shot after a failed operation, and his body is discarded unceremoniously. No one mourns him. No one records his name. His life remains uninscribed in any state archive, whether Taliban or American. In this sense, Casa becomes an embodiment of the border's sacrificial logic—where young, racialised, postcolonial bodies are rendered into data points in counterinsurgency reports or framed as threats to be neutralised. His death exemplifies what Puar (2007) describes as the "terrorist assemblage"—a biopolitical category in which masculinity, Islam, and violence are collapsed into a single disposable figure (pp. 204–207). [2]

Dunia's fate, though less explicitly violent, is equally obliterating. She is abducted early in the novel, likely by Taliban-affiliated men, and never seen again. While characters speak of her, no one knows her precise fate. Marcus speculates; others deflect. Aslam (2008) withholds narrative resolution, writing simply, "Dunia was gone" (p. 162). Her disappearance functions as a textual vanishing—an erasure that mirrors the fate of countless women who go missing along the Pak-Afghan frontier, caught between tribal patriarchy, religious militancy, and state indifference.

What makes Dunia's loss particularly resonant is the *novel's silence*. Unlike Zameen, who is mourned privately by her father and David, Dunia receives no letters, no imagined afterlife. Her absence is acknowledged but not grieved, noted but not sanctified. This is not narrative negligence. It is Aslam's deliberate aesthetic strategy to show how certain deaths fail to become

events—they pass unrecorded in the eyes of power, and even in those of the community. As Gordon (2008) argues, "The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure who refuses to be forgotten" (p. 16). Dunia's disappearance defies this, pointing to the brutal efficacy of systems that erase even the ghost.

Both Casa and Dunia challenge the ethics of legibility in trauma fiction. The novel refuses to frame them as martyrs, victims, or heroes. They remain on the periphery of the narrative, not due to authorial neglect, but as a reflection of the social and geopolitical neglect they embody. Their stories expose the limits of humanitarian visibility: they are not grievable in the Butlerian sense because they were never considered fully human in the first place—neither by state power, nor by insurgent violence, nor by the global media that trades in spectacular suffering.

In presenting these two characters with such sparse detail and narrative fragmentation, Aslam enacts a politics of refusal. He denies the reader the satisfaction of closure, justice, or narrative redemption. This denial is part of the novel's broader project of constructing a bottom-up, Janus-faced borderscape that resists incorporation into imperial epistemologies. Casa and Dunia are not symbols; they are wounds. Their truncated stories indict the entire structure of geopolitical abandonment that underpins the post-9/11 discourse on the region. In Aslam's aesthetic vision, it is not the visible that demands our attention, but the deliberately forgotten.

CONCLUSION: SUBVERSION FROM BELOW

Nadeem Aslam's *The Wasted Vigil* offers no grand pronouncements, no straightforward solutions, and no moral victories. Instead, it crafts a haunting literary terrain where memory persists in silence, where history resurfaces in ruins, and where trauma inhabits not only the individual psyche but entire spaces and geographies. In doing so, the novel constructs what may be called a bottom-up, Janus-faced borderscape—one that unsettles both Western discourses of security and nationalist myths of purity by foregrounding the entanglements, hauntings, and losses that lie at the heart of the Pak-Afghan frontier.

Throughout the novel, Aslam renders the border not as a fixed or securable line, but as a traumatised and layered space where the afterlives of empire remain unresolved. The house with its nailed books, the mutilated murals, and the rooms filled with spectral absence becomes a counter-archive of imperial violence—one that resists erasure while also refusing clarity.

Marcus's grief, Qatrina's resistance, David's Cold War guilt, and Zameen's disappearance all inscribe the border with alternative histories that contest the dominant framing of the region as simply a theatre of terrorism (Aslam, 2008, pp. 19–91).

Importantly, Aslam's refusal to centre white Western subjects—despite their presence—marks a political and aesthetic departure from conventional trauma fiction. While David and Lara carry their own burdens, they are not the locus of moral weight. That position belongs instead to characters like Qatrina, Casa, Dunia, and Zameen: subjects who exist at the border's underside, whose suffering is not recognised by global institutions or media, and whose deaths are neither mourned nor archived.[2] This repositioning resists the affective hierarchy that often structures post-9/11 narratives, where Western grief is foregrounded while others are rendered voiceless or instrumentalised (Butler, 2004, pp. 20–23).

In its structure, too, the novel enacts this subversion. There is no linear progression toward healing; time loops, fragments, and breaks. Trauma is not resolved, but borne. Letters go unanswered. Paintings fade before they dry. Lives vanish without names. This is not nihilism; it is a formal strategy that exposes the limitations of Western narrative expectations—particularly the redemptive arc so often imposed on "foreign" suffering in humanitarian literature (LaCapra, 2001, pp. 188–190).

To read *The Wasted Vigil* as a novel of post-9/11 geopolitics is to miss its deeper intervention: it is a novel about what borders forget, and what literature must remember. Against the discourse that sees the Af-Pak frontier as a void to be filled with military logic and exceptionalist policy, Aslam presents it as a saturated space—of memory, loss, love, and resistance. His is a literary ethics that insists on complexity, refuses closure, and subverts the epistemologies of power from below. Through its trauma aesthetics, its refusal of narrative resolution, and its intimate attention to the ungrieved, the novel reclaims the border not for the state, but for the dead. It becomes, finally, not a map to be governed, but a ghost story to be heard.

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