



GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S POWER IN AMERICAN INDIAN TRADITIONAL CULTURE IN ZITKALA-SA'S SHORT STORIES

KESETARAAN GENDER DAN KUASA PEREMPUAN DALAM BUDAYA TRADISIONAL INDIAN AMERIKA DALAM CERITA-CERITA PENDEK ZITKALA-SA

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Abstract

This article intends to reveal gender equality and women's power in American Indian traditional culture before they were assimilated in white American society in the late nineteenth century as reflected in Zitkala-Sa's short stories, *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, *The Soft Hearted Sioux* and *A Warrior Daughter*. This study is a qualitative research that applies feminist literary approach which uses liberal feminist theory for the data analysis. This study shows that American Indian women enjoyed gender equality in traditional American Indian culture that had complementary gender relation. American Indian women had power and equal rights to be warriors and leaders in their society.

Keywords: *gender role, American Indian women, complimentary relation.*

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan kesetaraan gender dan kuasa perempuan Indian Amerika dalam budaya tradisional masyarakat Indian Amerika sebelum mereka mengalami program asimilasi yang bertujuan untuk menyatukan masyarakat Indian Amerika dengan masyarakat kulit putih di akhir abad ke-19 seperti yang terefleksi dalam cerita pendek Zitkala-Sa, *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, *The Soft Hearted Sioux* dan *A Warrior Daughter*. Artikel ini ditulis dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif dan menerapkan pendekatan kajian feminisme sastra dengan teori feminisme liberal. Hasil dari analisa ini menunjukkan bahwa perempuan Indian Amerika telah menikmati kesetaraan gender dalam budaya tradisional Indian Amerika yang memiliki relasi gender yang saling melengkapi dan mereka memiliki kuasa dan hak yang setara dengan laki laki Indian Amerika untuk menjadi prajurit dan pemimpin dalam masyarakat Indian Amerika.

Kata kunci: *peran gender, Perempuan Indian Amerika, relasi setara*



Introduction

This article examines Zitkala-Sa's short stories to reveal gender equality and American Indian women's power in their traditional culture before American Indian society was assimilated to white American society and before white women's movement struggled to gain gender equality in the nineteenth century. In other words, this article tries to show the power of American Indian women's role from the perspective of American Indian culture which is different from white American culture. Zitkala-Sa is an American Indian female writer who is well known also as Getrude Simmons, the name which is given by white American people. Enoch (2002) stated that Zitkala-Sa was one of American Indian women who experienced assimilation program through education and was taken away from her family to be educated in the boarding school for American Indian children in the late nineteenth century. Her literary works reflect her experience during her school in the white institution. In addition, after reading Zitkala-Sa's short stories, the writer assumes that her works do not only reflect her experiences during her life in the white school, but also show her perspective concerning gender in American Indian traditional culture, specifically, in terms of the power of American Indian women's role.

There are some articles that deal with American Indian women's role and Zitkala-Sa's literary works. Strong (1996) in the research by using feminist approach, *Feminist Theory and the "Invasion of the Heart" in North America*, shows that the economic role of American Indian women was weakened because of colonization and capitalism. Moreover, Bales (1997) wrote the power of American Indian women in relationship with the environment by using feminist approach. In this case, it is revealed that American Indian women played an important role in preserving the nature for the survival of their society. Another study dealing with Zitkala-Sa's short stories was done by Spack (1997). It shows that Zitkala-Sa confronted white dominant culture and tried to keep the identity of American Indian women and to strengthen American Indian traditional culture based on her perspective as an American Indian woman. Devens (1992) studied historically about the involvement of missionaries in assimilation of American Indian women through educating American Indian women in order to be like white women in white culture. Ramirez (2004) in the article, *Healing, Violence, and Native American Women*, by using cultural approach states that there is a correlation between violence on American Indian women and the stereotypes in colonial period. Traditional spritual practices become ways in healing process for Native American women. Moreover, Kuncle (2006) in the article, *Fire of Eden: Zitkala-Sa's Bitter Apple* by using literary approach reveals the impact of missionary education to Native American children, including Zitkala-Sa. Based on the above explanation dealing with the previous writings, the writer may state that this article is different from the previous articles by trying to see from different object formal, namely gender equality and the power of American women in their traditional culture, and different object material, namely, Zitkala-Sa's short stories, *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, *The Soft Hearted Sioux* and *A Warrior Daughter* by applying feminist literary approach based on feminist liberal perspective. In short, this article tries to fill the gap which was not studied in previous articles by showing clearly that it is different from object formal, object material and the approach used in this study.

Literature reflects human experiences and pictures a certain phenomenon in a society. Barten (2001) mentions that literary works reflect social issues in a certain

period. In this case, Zitkala-Sa's short stories have a connection to the cultural, historical and social background of American Indian society in the nineteenth century before they were assimilated to American society. Hirschfelder (2000) asserts that American government tried to assimilate American Indians in order to end their culture and adopt white culture. This fact refers to the perception that white American culture was superior. Al Hafiz (2016) states that the belief of superior race of white American positioned other races, in this case American Indian as inferior. That perception became one of the reasons to assimilate American Indian society to follow white American culture. In other words, assimilation program forced American Indians to leave their traditional culture to follow white American culture. Oshana (1981) states that in the past, white American society viewed that American Indian society was an uncivilized and inferior society. Thus, the writer may say that the perception influence white society's view of the role of American Indian women as inferior. Weist in Spack (1997) states that white people believed that the role of American Indian women as *beast of burden, slaves, brutes, degraded and savage*. The previous statement means that American Indian women's role in their society was inferior. These perceptions influence the representation of American Indian women in America today. As Shoemakers (1995) asserts that American Indian women are still marginalized in the mainstream American society now. In other words, the wrong perception of American Indian women's role in the past still influences their existence in American society today.

Dyke (2005) mentioned that Zitkala-Sa belonged to the nineteenth-century female writers who tried to change the stereotypes that undermines women's role in American society and raised the importance of women's role in traditional American Indian society. In other words, Zitkala-Sa's short stories aim to straighten out the wrong perception of the role of American Indian women in American society and at the same time indicates the construction of American Indian women's role in traditional American Indian culture which is different from white American culture. Green (1980) asserted that Zitkala-Sa reinforced the traditional American Indian cultural perspectives on the role of women and men and rejected white people outlook on roles that emphasize male domination. The author argues that through her works, Zitkala-Sa was about to break the wrong view of white people dealing with the role of American Indian women and to show the position of women as the crucial part for the survival of American Indian society. In this case, Zitkala-Sa showed the power of American Indian women who could actualize themselves on a part with American Indian men in the public sphere as warriors and leaders in traditional American Indian society.

The writer hopes that this article can give significant contribution to enrich the knowledge of the role of American Indian women and to enhance the awareness of gender equality universally and to motivate women to empower themselves for the betterment for women's life and their society. This article aims to reveal gender equality in American Indian society and the power of American Indian women's role in traditional American Indian culture. In connection to the previous aim, this research tries to answer the following problem: How was gender equality in traditional American Indian society reflected in Zitkala-Sa's short stories? How was the power of American Indian women's role as seen in Zitkala-Sa's short stories, *Impressions of an Indian Childhood, The Soft Hearted Sioux* and *A Warrior Daughter*?

Method

Endraswara (2013) in Al-Hafizh (2016) mentioned that method refers to operational ways in conducting a research. This study is a qualitative research which collecting qualitative data by doing library research. There are two kinds of data in this study. First, the primary data are taken from Zitkala-Sa's short stories in the collection of her short stories, *American Indian Stories*, (1921) which consists of 10 short stories. The writer chooses three short stories, *Impressions of Indian Childhood*, *The Soft Hearted Sioux* and *A Warrior Daughter* as the purposive sampling of Zitkala-Sa's short stories which reflect the aim of this study. Second, the secondary data are data taken from other sources such as journals and books which support the primary data. In conducting this study, the writer follows several steps namely, preparation, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and presenting the result of the analyzing.

This study applies literary feminist approach. Bartens (2001) states that feminist criticism deals with the role of female characters in literary works. This means that feminist literary approach deals with women's roles in a certain society as reflected in literary works. Feminist literary approach uses feminist theory in understanding the role of women (Meyer, 1997). In this case, the writer applies feminist liberal theory that claims gender equality in a society. Bonvillain (2007) states that gender equality refers to the same rights for men and women in their communities. Furthermore, Bryson (1992) feminist liberal refuses gender discrimination and believes that women should have freedom and autonomy to participate in all aspects of life in a society.

Result and Discussion

Gender Equality in American Indian Traditional Culture

Basow (1986) states that gender refers to "sex role" or social and cultural expectation of men or women that should be performed in a certain society. This means that gender role of men and women would be different from a society to another one. In this case, the perspective of gender between white American society and American Indian society are different. For instance, white people believe that American Indian women's role is inferior by referring them using the insulting term such as *squaw*. Dyke (2005) mentions that American Indian women was represented by "*squaw*" or "*princess*" referred to the imagery that demeans American Indian women because the words mean that American Indian women were "*violent, degraded, and filthy creature*". In other words, American Indian women were worthless in the view of white society. The false image of the role of American Indian women was established through the perspective of white male authors. Fulford (2006) stated that white male authors see that American Indian women were different from white women. American Indian women were controlled and regulated by American Indian men and they concluded that American Indian society was a patriarchal society. Based on the previous statements the researcher can affirm that in the view of white male authors, American Indian society was also a patriarchal society like white society that positions the role of women as inferior in unequal gender relation. That perception gave the wrong meaning of the role of American Indian women in traditional American Indian culture. The false perception of the role of American Indian women was criticized by Zitkala-Sa and she tried to reposition it according to traditional American Indian culture as following discussion.

Firstly, the writer finds out that gender equality was bestowed by supernatural power. Thus, they believed that gender construction in American Indian society was sacred because it was a part of their belief.

On this night my old grandmother began her talk about me. Filling the bowl of her red stone pipe with dry willow bark, she looked across at me.... "My grandchild, when are you going to bring here a handsome young woman?"....Turning to my mother, she offered her the pipe...."Hoh!" I said, pulling at my blanket in confusion. "Not yet!" Here my mother passed the pipe over the fire to my father. Then, she, too, began speaking of what I should do. "My son be always active. Do not dislike a long hunt. Learn to provide much buffalo meat and many buckskins before you bring home a wife (Zitkala-Sa, 1921,p. 110-111).

The above statements mention that one of the obligations of a grown-up boy in traditional American Indian society was to marry a girl as a wife. So, it indirectly says that as adult men or women, their role in American Indian society had been culturally and socially constructed to form a household and act as a husband and wife. The discussion of the son's role in an American Indian family as mentioned above was done while burning and smoking cigars. It was a hint that the talk of gender in American Indian society was essential to the survival of American Indian society and a sacred part in American Indian belief. In other words, Zitkala-Sa, in her work, *The Soft-Hearted Sioux* (1921) pointed out that discussing gender in traditional American Indian society was sacred. It was a part of their belief showing the roles of men and women were arranged supernaturally.

The sacredness in discussing the role of men and women was symbolized by burning or smoking cigars. Gagnon (2011) explained the importance of ceremonies using cigars was related to the belief of Sioux Indians who believed that a sacred woman called White Buffalo Calf Woman had instructed pipe ceremony as a ceremonial form to communicate with supernatural powers. This began with the arrival of a holy woman in a starving Indian society. Two young men took the initiative to go to the higher hill to see another place where there was food. As they approached the hill a beautiful white-dressed woman came out of the clouds and walked toward the two young men. One of the youths looked at her passionately, then died immediately. The other boy looked at her with great respect and offered to help. The holy woman sent him back to his community and ordered them to gather in a circle because the holy woman would tell them knowledge.

Bales (1997) explained that *White Buffalo Woman* instructed Sioux Indians to use the sacred cigars in religious ceremonies to connect the sacred power of the earth and the sacred power of the sky through the smoke that came out of the cigar. At the same time, she reminded Sioux Indians community to keep and appreciate life on earth and all the creatures on it. *White Buffalo Calf Woman's* instruction to connect forces from the earth with the sky had the meaning that Sioux Indians had to keep the balance. It also implied for the balance of gender relation between men and women. The gender relation between women and men which had been instructed by the holy woman was an equal gender relation because they were interconnected with one another to maintain a balance in the nature. More specifically, the sacred woman, *White Buffalo Calf Woman*, suggested that women should be appreciated and respected in American

Indian society. This is apparent in the earlier statement, when one of the man looked at the beauty of the holy woman with passion, then he died instantly.

The concept of gender balance was also reflected in the beliefs of American Indian society about the creation of this world. American Indian society believed that the creation of this world was done by The Great Spirit as its sole creator. Some Indians believed that the creator, The Great Spirit was a gender-neutral creator that was neither female nor male but had the power to create a world and all that. Yet others believe that the Creator (Wakan Tanka) had two characteristics of male and female (Garrett M. and Garrett, J.T, 2003). The belief in a Creator who had two characteristics, male and female or gender neutral was closely related to the status of women and men in American Indian society. Sanday (1981) in Bonvillain (2007) stated that the concept about the gender neutral Creator as a woman and a man is a characteristic of a society that has egalitarian gender relations. Thus, it can be concluded that American Indian society belongs to an egalitarian society with complementary gender relations.

Moreover, the strength of women's power for the survival of American Indian society is reflected in American Indian folklore and is given different names such as Corn Woman, Serpent Woman, Earth Woman, Sky Woman, Grandmother Spider and others. All the folklores depict the power of women in the tradition of American Indian society and the role they must bear (Bales, 1997). In addition, Bales (1997) asserts that the importance of American Indian women's role in American folklores have similarities among American Indian tribes such as Iroquois, California, Plain, Lakota, the tribes in Northeast and Southwest. Thus, it can be concluded that although American Indian society is composed of various tribes, yet they have a common belief about the importance of women's role in American Indian society and see women's power as a sacred part in maintaining the life of American Indian society. The researcher asserts that the view of white society that perceived American Indian society as a patriarchal society and degraded American Indian women's roles as previously mentioned were inconsistent with the perspective of American Indians who believed in the complementary gender relation.

Secondly, the researcher asserts that the concept of complementary gender relation in traditional American Indian society was intended for the survival of the society. The division of labor between men and women did not indicate which one was more important than the other one, but the duties of men and women were to preserve the life of American Indian society. The roles of men and women had been set to complement each other because of the belief that the whole of nature, including men and women, were interconnected with each other. Bataille in Culley (1992) mentioned that the roles of men and women had the same goal for the survival of American Indian society in balance and harmony. In other words, the researcher can say that the complementary gender relation provided autonomy for American Indian men and women to organize their respective duties and responsibilities to maintain the survival of American Indian society.

Hernandez (1994) cited the statement of Hungry Wolf (1982) which stated that in the complementary gender relation, American Indian men appreciated and respected the role of women because they knew that they could not live without American Indian women. That statement affirms that the strength of women role became one of the key survival of American Indian society. In this respect, American Indian society valued equally the contributions and responsibilities of men and women as important parts of

the survival of their communities. Associated with the division of work between American Indian men and women, Kuhlmann (1992) in his writing on various American Indian tribes, among them are Apache, Sioux, Iroquois, Pownee, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara concluded that in American Indian society, the division of work between men and women was very clear. Men oversaw hunting, fishing, trading, and dealing with war, conversely, women played roles in agriculture, collecting food and other domestic affairs. Women's duties in agriculture were done together with other women. Thus, the comprehension of complementary gender relation in American Indian society contrasted with the hierarchical understanding of white society in the nineteenth-century that saw the relationship of women and men in a binary relationship that positioned white women as subordinated to men.

The writer asserts that complementary gender relation in American Indian culture gave power for American Indian women to participate actively in their society. As Lajimodiere (2011) stated that American Indian women act as spiritual, political and economic forces in their respective communities in equal relations with men.

Native American women's roles were more powerful, important,....than European men would have expected or understood, and their roles were as diverse as the tribes of North America....the role of each woman was unique to her own tribe....In many tribes, Native American women had spiritual, political, and economic power, not more than men, but at least equal to men. Women's and men's roles were different, but neither was less important than other (Lajimodiere, 2011, p. 58-59).

The above statement is in the line with Mihesuah's opinion (1996) which highlights that the role of American Indian women is equivalent to American Indian men and complementary to the survival of American Indian society. Thus, it can be said that there was no gender discrimination in traditional American Indian culture because women and men have equal rights which were rewarded equally.

American Indian Women's Power as Warriors and Leaders

The writer believes the concept of gender balance in traditional American Indian culture enabled American Indian women to empower themselves to participate in public sphere. They had freedom and rights as men had in their culture. They enjoyed similar opportunity to empower themselves and to actualize their power in traditional American Indian society. This means also American Indian women had experienced gender equality as being claimed by feminist liberal. In this case, Zitkala-Sa points out that American Indian women were respected equally to play roles in public sphere as men did such as warriors and leaders in traditional American Indian society.

Zitkala-Sa brings up the story of the male and female warriors in her work, *A Warrior Daughter* (1921). The story tells about Tusee's courage as a female warrior and her lover, a warrior who lost on the battlefield. The researcher argues that Zitkala-Sa elevates male and female warriors in traditional American Indian societies to show that, first, both men and women have equal rights to prove themselves as true warriors for American Indian society. Second, Zitkala-Sa underlines the importance of gender equality in the traditional culture of American Indian communities which awarded the roles of men and women equally.

Zitkala-Sa's work, *A Warrior's Daughter*, talks about a girl named Tusee, the son of a warrior. Tusee is a pretty girl like her mother but has a character like her daring and

tough father. When her lover becomes a prisoner of war, Tusee secretly goes to the enemies, defeats them and frees her lover.

Her right hand rests on a long knife in her belt....With a panther's tread and pace she climbs the high ridge beyond the low ravine. From thence she spies the enemy's camp-fires. Tusee beckons the stars to witness. With impassioned voice and uplifted face she pleads:"Great Spirits, speed me to my lovers's rescue!....All-Powerful Spirit, grant me my warrior-father's heart, strong to slay a foe and mighty to save a friend! (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p.146).

Through the character of Tusee, Zitkala-Sa showed that women get the same honor as men to show their courage and toughness to be warriors in American Indian society. The courage of women as warriors in their youth remained remembered and respected until they became elderly. Zitkala-Sa in her *Impressions of an Indian Childhood* showed that the American Indians' respect for elderly women warrior in the celebration of newly awarded young warriors when they returned home from the battlefield for the first time.

They overtook and passed by the bend old grandmothers who were trudging along with crooked canes toward the centre of excitement. Most of the young braves galloped hither on their ponies. Toothless warriors, like the old women, came more slowly, though mounted on lively ponies. They sat proudly erect on their horses. They wore their eagle plumes and waved their various trophies of former wars (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p.30).

The above statement shows that the elderly women warriors were paraded along with young and valiant warriors, carrying marks of appreciation for their success on the battlefield in the past. Celebrations to reward warriors who have just returned from the battlefield were a tradition in American Indian society. Gagnon (2011) stated that upon the return of the warriors from the battlefield, all the people celebrate their victories, while weeping for the dead on the battlefield. The celebration was marked by dancing and banqueting events and the warriors received an award for their success. Thus, it is clear that American Indian women warriors were highly respected because of their courage and braveness in war to defend their society. Furthermore, Gagnon (2011) gave an example that in the Sioux Indian community, women have the same right to gain the honor of being a warrior.

The same honor was rewarded to women warriors in the Apache community. Buchanan (1986) gives an example of a female warrior named Losen who became a warrior for her courage and valor. Her brother Chief Victorio admitted her strength and braveness in war. So, it can be said that women in American Indian society were given the right to actualize themselves and could perform the role commonly seen as the role of men. However, American Indian women warriors were invisible in white American society. The writer assumes that American women warriors were not admitted in white society because they were considered breaking their fate as women who should do their domestic jobs. Moore (2001) states that in the history of white society, American Indian women engaged in wars against American government troops were often not mentioned. If it is mentioned in the white American history, they were seen as lowly women. For example, Losen was referred to as "*squaw*" (a degrading term for American Indian women's dignity). In Apache's history, Lozen was one of women warriors who advanced on the battlefield against American government troops that attacked Apache community in the 19th century (Moore, 2001). Moreover, Mathes

(1975) mentions some names of American Indian women who were famous for their bravery and valor in the battlefields such as Yellow head Woman and Pine Leaf, g from the Crow tribe who fought against General George Crook in the battle at Rosebud in 1876. Pine Leaf vowed not to marry before avenging him for the death of her twin brother. She proved her oath by killing many of her enemies.

American Indian women who participated in war had many responsibilities such as caring the wounded warriors and preparing food. As Buchanan (1986) mentioned that in American Indian history, women also participated in warfare following their husbands as warriors or they assisted in caring for the wounded and preparing food for their warriors. According to Mathes (1975), women who participated in wars to accompany their warriors, they had to participate in the assault at dawn and be in charge of stealing the enemy's horses. They had to stand for their safety when attacked by the enemy. Zitkala-Sa's *A Warrior's Daughter*, recounts the brave woman who accompany the warriors going to war.

At early dawn the round camp-ground awakes into song. Men and women sing of bravery and triumph. They inspire the swelling breasts of the painted warriors mounted on prancing ponies bedecked with the green branches of trees....All having made the circuit, the singing war party gallops away southward. Astride their ponies laden with food and deerskins, brave elderly women follow after their warriors. Among the foremost rides a young woman in elaborately beaded buckskin dress, proudly mounted, she curbs with the single rawhide loop a wild-eyed pony. It is Tusee on her father's warhorse. Thus, the war party of the Indian men and their faithful women vanish beyond the southern skyline (Zitkala-Sa, 1921, p.144).

The above quotation explains that when there was a war, brave and tough women participated in the group along with American Indian male warriors. Zitkala-Sa affirmed that women played a very important role in tribal warfare and were always part of the brave people who went to wars to defend their tribal dignity.

It is found also that American women warriors were respected not only for their courage in the war but also for their ability to become leaders in their community. Lajimodiere (2011) stated that American Indian women warriors were honored and called war women or pretty women. However, they were rewarded not only for their ability on the battlefield, but also because of their ability to become leaders in American Indian society. According to Mathes (1975), women who had the honor of being warriors because of their achievements on the battlefield could achieve the position of leaders in their community. The Crow woman who achieved the position as a chief, was Woman Chief, who managed her own battle and went against the Blackfeet. Thus, warrior women could attain the status of leaders or chiefs in American Indian society with respect to their courage and success on the battlefield. For example, women as warriors and political leaders in American Indian society were seen in Iroquois Indian society. Mathes (1975) stated that in the political field, American Indian women played an important role especially in the Iroquois tribe. Women held the supreme political power with *Council of Clan mothers*. The highest council consisted of elderly women who decided the affairs among tribes. They proposed or elected a chief and made decisions on important issues related with community affairs. Furthermore, McGowan (2006) stated that in the Cherokee community, women had the right to declare war and determined the fate of prisoners of war. The fate of the

prisoners of war was determined by women who were members of the Women's Council. The Women's Council was very influential in making decisions and its spokespersons served as War Woman and Peace woman. Thus, it can be underlined that American Indian women played a great power in American Indian society. Their role as warriors and leaders proved that American Indian women could achieved high status in American Indian society who appreciated and honored women's role equally.

Zitkala-Sa, an American Indian writer, claimed through her literary works that American Indian women had power and already enjoyed gender equality in their traditional society before white women strived to achieve equal rights for women in the nineteenth century America. Zitkala-Sa raised the potential and role of American Indian women as warriors and leaders in her works aiming at breaking down the white society's perception that American Indian women were inferior in American Indian society. Zitkala-Sa viewed that the heroism of American Indian women was not only visible in their physical strength and courage but also in their intellectual ability to govern American Indian society. In short, before white women movement showed an attempt to have freedom to participate in public sphere and to come out from the domestic culture in the late 19th century, American Indian women had enjoyed gender equality by having opportunities to actualize themselves in public sphere as warriors and leaders that seen as male roles in the perspective of white American society.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals that American Indian women had enjoyed gender equality in their traditional society before being assimilated into mainstream American white society. Zitkala-Sa's short stories reflect the power of American Indian women in the traditional culture of American Indian and their highest achievement to be warriors and leaders in American Indian society. Thus, the finding of this study namely gender equality is American Indian traditional culture that provides similar power for American Indian women to be involved in leadership as warriors and leaders in public domain as reflected in Zitkala-Sa's literary works.

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