

# Can the Scarred Speak?: A Study of Acid Violence in Feryal Gauhar's *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* (2002)

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**ABSTRACT:** *Scars caused by accident or acid attack can negatively affect body image and self-confidence. Scarring is stigmatised in our society because of the premium placed on beauty. This essay on contemporary Pakistani novelist Feryal Ali Gauhar's *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* (2002) explores and explicates the social and psychological repercussions of acid violence on the life of a child victim. Through a portrayal of the lived experience of the female protagonist Fatimah, Gauhar problematizes the exclusionary attitude of the mainstream society towards acid survivors. Using textual analysis as a research method, the article exposes and questions the social discourse with respect to the scarred women who are represented as vulnerable, disposable and speechless objects in the public discourse. It, further, explores the challenges, dilemmas and stigmas that mark the life of acid survivors amidst a scenario in which very little legal, financial, educational or moral support is provided by the government or human rights organizations. The novel is analysed in terms of the key discursive formations that Gauhar contends with: the role of chemical attacks in reinforcing a male-dominated society and the possibility of a literary intervention capable of countering such patriarchal attitudes. Scarcity of available research on the implications of acid violence in literary studies makes this article a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on South Asian fiction. The research hopes to open up an avenue towards a better understanding of the needs and feelings of acid victims in our society.*

**Keywords:** Acid attack, violence, Feryal Ali Gauhar, vitriolage.

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Physical and psychological violence on the basis of class, gender and race is common in our highly dichotomized world. Women are the most frequent victims of all types of violence. The United Nations recognizes that gender based violence “is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women” resulting in “the prevention of the full advancement of women.” Moreover, it is also considered “one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position” (Rauschnig, Wiesbrock, Lailach, 1997:355). Acid assaults are one of the most frightful acts of violence against the body of the victim. It is a manifestation of the attempt to force women into submission through pain and disfigurement. Scholars consider disfigurement a “social disability,” or the inability to meet the behaviour standards of a group and the resulting exclusion from aspects of normal life (Ruesch, Brodsky, 1968). Writing about women’s experiences and their bodies is always a challenging task especially in the Global South dominated by masculine modes of representation. The pervasiveness of acid violence has led many academics, researchers, and activists to analyze the causes and ramifications of this phenomenon from the perspective of the victims as well as the perpetrators.

### **Literature Review**

The occurrence of acid attacks in South Asia is one of the highest in the world. There are almost a 100 reported cases of acid attacks in the country every year (Junge, Obaid-Chinoy, Coombe, Greenberg, Sumar, 2012). In the national context of Pakistan, this phenomenon needs to be understood not only from existing gender relations perspective but also in its complex and shifting socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes. Most of the vitriolage victims are women and children, and the most frequently targeted body parts are head and face leading to maiming, disfigurement, blindness and other types of disability. Often, a perpetrator’s purpose is not to kill but to cause severe physical and psychological scars. In many cases, the victimized women’s “lack of financial resources make(s) them particularly vulnerable to both the state and criminals alike” (Jackson, 2007: 210). More often than not, victimized women “are cast out by their family and forced to live in isolation without any legal recourse” (Patel, 2014). The NGOs like Depilex Smile Again in Pakistan “are doing great work tackling the crisis and helping survivors” (Chambers, 2017, 154). The Government of Pakistan passed a law in 2011, acknowledging acid attacks as a crime. Acid Crime Prevention Bill 2010 and The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices (Criminal Law Amendment Bill 2008) have termed acid throwing a “crime against the state”, with a penalty of 14

years of imprisonment and a minimum fine of Rs.1 million. In October, 2012, Atiya Inayat-Ullah presented Acid and Burn Crime Bill to the National Assembly for detailed discussion. It was submitted after being co-signed by 11 parliamentarians. It was an important step towards the criminalization of acid violence in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the bill has not been approved yet at the federal and the provincial levels.

Despite chemical assault being a recurrent phenomenon in Pakistan, it has attracted very little attention in the literary and the visual discourses. In 2019, a TV drama entitled *Surkh Chandni* (Red Moonlight) ran on ARY Digital that dealt with the social and psychological impacts of acid attacks. The play centres on the social and psychological challenges of a female acid victim, and highlights many loopholes in Pakistan's legal system that allow perpetrators of such a heinous crime to roam free. However, there is a dearth of literary scholarship on the representation of acid violence in Pakistani literature and soap operas. This article aims to fill this gap by analysing the feelings and experiences of a young girl who is the victim of an acid attack. Though the novel was written prior to the pertinent legislation on acid violence in Pakistan, the persistence of the crime, even after the legislation, questions the government's ability to grapple with the issue.

Feryal Ali Gauhar is an acclaimed Pakistani actor, director, environmentalist, social activist and novelist. To date, she has two novels to her credit. In her fiction, Gauhar tends to foreground the marginalized voices—children, women, transgender, and the downtrodden—the voices which go unheard and unattended in the society. Her first novel *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* (2002) is based on her film *Tibbi Galli* and focuses on the lives of the marginalized sections of the society living in the red-light area of Lahore. It is “a remarkable blend of Feryal's filmmaking sensibilities, consciousness of the other and her knowledge of animal behaviour” (Rumi). The novel highlights how “the traditional co-existence of fantasy, cruelty, and power play alongside piety” (Shamsie, 2017:432). Her second novel *No Space for Further Burials* (2007) is set in the post-9/11 Afghanistan ravished by the neo-imperialist hubris of USA, and the greed and lust of the local warlords. The novel “aims to highlight the impact on Afghanistan of the 2001 World Trade Tower attacks and subsequent ‘war on terror’ rhetoric” (Kanwal, 2015:61). Both of Gauhar's novels have characters whose lives have been ravished by acid attacks. Sabir, in *No Place for Further Burials*, is attacked with acid by a cleric on the charges of blasphemy.

Gauhar's writings are part of the counter-narrative to the epistemic violence and engage in what Cixous (1976) terms *écriture féminine*. In Cixous' opinion, "[w]oman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (875). *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* is part of the campaign to generate awareness about the physical and psychological fallout of the acid assaults on women and children. Moreover, she breaks free of what Saeed (2002) considers "the taboo associated with the area and the profession" (1) as the novel is set in the red-light area of Lahore.

### **Research Methodology**

This research employs textual analysis as the research method. Furthermore, it draws on the social model to study the representation of acid survivors in the public consciousness with a special focus on the barriers and challenges faced by them. According to Barnes, "the social model is a deliberate attempt to shift attention away from the functional limitations of individuals with impairments onto the problems caused by disabling environments, barriers and cultures" (11).

### **Analysis**

The action of *The Scent of Wet Earth in August* is set in Kucha Miran Shah, a neighbourhood in Shahi Mohallah in the heart of the Old Lahore. Three aging courtesans Shamshad, Piyari and Raunaq live in a dilapidated haveli in the famous red-light area of Lahore. A teenager Fatimah, the daughter of a prostitute Mumtaz, lives under the guardianship of the three women. As a suckling baby, Fatimah's face was disfigured when her mother was splashed with acid by her disgruntled lover. The old ladies' economic prospects are attached to Fatimah as they want her to grow up to become a courtesan. The novel foregrounds the abject lives of the castaway people with disfigured or scarred bodies and great tales of the past. Mumtaz and her daughter Fatimah are the survivors of an acid attack; Parveen got her nose chopped off by her husband; Gogi, the hermaphrodite, was sodomized by a powerful politician; Aaliya Aatishbaaz, a woman from the land of the Euphrates, has suffered both physical and psychological wounds; Shabbir, the young apprentice of Moulvi Basharat, carries the physical and psychological scars of sexual assaults by his own teacher. The only binding factor for this bunch of castaways and the immoral, living "at the edge of existence" (179), is the squalor and filth in the street. The family projected in the novel is non-

nuclear and non-linear, arising out of a bond of prostitution that ripped apart the traditional concepts of family. The bodily theme of hunger, disease and lust allows us a window into relationships complicated by space and profession.

The novel brings into visibility how the perceived notions of male ego and ownership of the female body help the perpetrators feel justified in committing the heinous crimes like acid attacks and honour-based violence. Fatimah, the mute teenager, is the illegitimate daughter of an old prostitute Mumtaz Bano, and the prayer leader of a nearby mosque, Moulvi Basharat. One of Mumtaz's lovers, a producer by profession, threw a "bottle of sulfuric acid on her bewitching face, that face he had promised to launch, that face which mesmerized him with the power of a slithering, evil snake" (14). As female body is considered a property to be possessed, the producer cannot digest the idea that Mumtaz has physical relationship with some other person whose child, he thinks, she has begotten. Unable to put up with this act of perceived betrayal, he considers Mumtaz's disruptive body in need of judgment and direction. To avenge this perceived wrong, he resorts to the inhuman act of acid assault which not only disfigures Mumtaz but also her suckling daughter. The chemical "burned her face and then poured down onto the baby nestled against her bosom, crying" (14).

Gauhar questions the ability of the current legal system and the public at large in Pakistan to provide support to acid victims and to bring perpetrators to justice. Attackers know that they can escape punishment through bribes or pressurizing the victims' families into remaining silent. According to Zia (2002), the scope of acid violence in Pakistan is hard to gauge "because of underreporting and misreporting due to fear of retribution and social stigma" (13). Besides, victims' distrust in the legal system aggravates the situation. After going through the tortures of an acid attack, Mumtaz does not report it to police. Being a poor prostitute, she feels she has no financial or moral support to get her attacker punished. The mother and the daughter are provided no legal or medical support by the government or NGOs. The ravisher disappears soon after the attack, leaving the mother and the daughter disfigured and scarred for life.

Through Fatimah's character, Gauhar underscores the disposability of the children with acid scars. Such children often remain financially and socially dependent on others, with little chance of emotional and

personality growth. Fatimah loses her ability to speak when acid doused on her mother's face also spills into Fatimah's open mouth, burning "the inside of her gullet" (27). Being disfigured, she carries no financial prospects to her mother. So, Mumtaz heartlessly leaves her at the Begum Haveli with the three aging courtesans. The three old women alternate "between loving her and wishing her dead rested" (39). Fatimah is frequently taunted for being discarded by her own mother after the "horrible accident with the acid" (66). Raunaq believes that the old courtesans of Begum Haveli have done Mumtaz a great favour by bringing up her mute girl "whom no one wanted" (95). Raunaq is of the view that "a mute and scarred girl" (66) offers no financial prospects in the red-light area where only beautiful and able-bodied girls can be successful. Hence, Fatimah is considered a burden on the meagre budget of the old women. She has to run errands for her guardians all day. When Fatimah gets pregnant of her clandestine relationship with Shabbir, the old ladies curse her. Later, they hope that Fatimah may bear a female child who would grow up to have "sensuous limbs and seductive ways" (221).

This is their only hope amidst the dismal scenario of old age and unending penury. They desperately want a "girl who would grow up into a sought after woman in this bazaar, and who would care for them and for her stricken mother" (221). But when Fatimah gives birth to a boy, their hopes are dashed to the ground. Seeing the boy, Shamshad is overwhelmed with grief, "weeping like a child" (257). She curses Fatimah and her baby. Raunaq throws the baby on the premises of a nearby shrine, the same place where Shabbir and Fatimah consummated their relationship. Fatimah has to bear all this inhuman treatment of the society because her acid scars have made her an outsider in her own community.

The novelist is critical of the way the scarred or disabled are treated reductively by the able-bodied society. There is a visible paucity of empathy for the acid victims on the part of people. At most, the acid survivors are seen with pity or sympathy. The narrative provides a detailed description of Fatimah's life at Begum Haveli to reveal how living with the consequences of acid violence is more painful than the incident itself. She lives with the physical as well as psychological symptoms as she is frequently reminded of her facial scars and disability. She is kept under strict surveillance by her guardians. Though she is "scarred and wordless" (44), she has to perform a lot of duties in the large Begum Haveli. She is often subjected to verbal violence for shirking her

assigned duties. Raunaq is the most vocal of all in criticizing Fatimah. She calls Fatimah a “nuisance” (66) when the latter forgets to perform some of her daily chores. The words like “wretched mute” (67) gnaw at Fatimah’s mind. In response to this insult, she sheds tears of helplessness. Then she vents her fury by shredding the old cards that she has hidden in the dark room. Even Shamshad gets “weary of the manner in which Raunaq would get after Fatimah” (95), but no one dares to contradict Raunaq as she is owner of Begum Haveli. Shamshad thinks that Fatimah should learn to read the Holy Quran as “an abandoned, damaged child who had no words needed the word of God more than anyone else in the world” (96). Being mute, Fatimah cannot share her feelings with anyone. The attitude of Raunaq is reflective of the societal apathy to the traumatized life of the acid survivors. Fatimah literally finds herself on the periphery of a dominantly able-bodied society. Her own mother, who was the co-victim of the acid attack, continuously ignores her.

Public perceptions towards acid survivors play an important role in the construction of self on the part of victims. The noticeability of bodily scars to others has a great impact on the feelings and personality of the person with disfigurement. (Rumsey & Harcourt, 2004). Challenging and changing these perceptions is vital to ensuring the well-being of the acid victims. Raunaq calls Mumtaz a woman with a “grotesque scar on her ugly face” (35). People’s views about her make Fatimah cognizant of her inferior position in the society. Fatimah’s scarred face stands for the scarred existence of the red-light area in the public perception. Her silence and the public perception about her reveal how the public constructs narratives about the red-light area in the near absence of the narratives of the people from this locality. Fatimah’s disability becomes a curse for her as she is often ridiculed for her looks and speech deficiency by the children and the adults alike. She has to live and toil in an environment “where the ritual of abuse and remorse and affection played itself out with regularity” (4). The stigma surrounding facial disfigurement is disabling for Fatimah. The novel also highlights how scarred women are gradually made to accept themselves as nonpersons with no rights and privileges to claim. The matriarchs at the haveli do not want Fatimah to love or marry anyone. The moments it is revealed to them that Fatimah is pregnant, they lock her up in a narrow room. Fatimah’s inability to speak correctly often leads to her concealing her feelings and desires. Even the three elderly ladies at the haveli make fun of her muteness.

So many times, she had wanted to ask Shamshad or Raunaq or even Pyari Begum to get her a length of plastic hosepipe which she could attach to the tap so that she wouldn't have to drag the hamaam halfway across the courtyard. But each time the words seemed to come out wrong, and then the three women would laugh at her, like the children in the lane outside who had called her Gungi Baji, Gungi the Mute One, calling her kano jali gungi, the mute one with burnt out ears. (4)

Fatimah's lover Shabbir often wonders "how this young girl had ended up living with the old, disreputable women -- a rose amongst three thorns" (29). Aatish-baaz Aaliya is the only woman in the neighbourhood who sincerely tries to understand the feelings of the "mute girl with the scarred cheek" (73). She has a motherly affection for Fatimah. Owing to her own history of being assaulted and abandoned, she finds "comfort in the company of one who endured misfortune almost as uncompromisingly as she had once done." She touches Fatimah's cheek gently, "outlining the scar on her face." Fatimah is always surprised by this gentle touch because "gentleness was unfamiliar to her" (73). In her will, Aaliya gifts some of her possessions to Fatimah.

Women with facial disabilities often do not fit the standards of beauty. They have poor body image leading to low self-esteem. Manifold psychological repercussions of acid violence are severe in nature. Chambers (2017) elaborates the psychological state of acid victims:

Suffering psychological as well as physical scars, they report feelings of fear and exhibit traumatic symptoms. They also endure victim-blaming and ostracism. Forced by their disfigurement into self- or socially-imposed purdah, they are likely to become dependants. Some are ashamed and view themselves as a drain on their innocent families. (153) The novel manifests how acid victims with facial disfigurement are often exposed to visual and verbal assaults, pity and ridicule from the society, leading to their isolation and outrage. This negative public perception leads Fatimah to construct a faulty image of her body and personality. Gauhar brings into the foreground how the victims of chemical violence have the tendency to depreciate themselves and how they are in need of some source of love. Through appreciation, they can be brought to normal life. Fatimah's self-perception is also constructed by public perceptions about her face and body. She is extremely conscious of her bodily scars that have rendered her an imperfect human being. Various mirror images in the novel reinforce Fatimah's encounters with the traumatic effects of



vitriolage on her face. They bring to the fore the psychological effects of the scarring. Fatimah compares her mirror image with the pictures on the magazines that reinforce her inferiority. She looks at her image from the public perspective.

Picking up the mirror she looked at herself and then placed one hand against the cheek with the scarred skin. With one free hand she flipped the pages of a magazine with many pictures of glamorous film stars. She stopped at the picture of the one with the blonde hair and eyes the color of aubergine that has been cut and left out in the dry air of December. (39) Fatimah's secret love affair with Shabbir intensifies her feelings of shame for her disfigurement. During her first meeting with Shabbir, she lets him caress her body, and "the terrible mysteries of her life" (128) start getting revealed to Shabbir. He encounters the acid burns on Fatimah's neck and face, and his first reaction is that of horror:

Shabbir let his fingers slide on her skin. Till he touched something that felt like an old wound, a scab, the skin coarse and ruptured and rippled like the hide of a tortured animal. He pulled his hands back as if he had been bitten. Fatimah gasped and looked up at him with hurt and shame burning her eyes. She put her own hand where his had been just a moment ago, and stroked the spot where the acid had scarred her the worst. (127-28).

Though he knew that Fatimah was a different girl, he did not expect to find such terrible marks on her body. Fatimah too is devoured by fear and shame when her acid scars come into Shabbir's noticeability. On this proximity, Fatimah fears the contempt and disgust of the boy she has started loving. Shabbir's encounter with Fatimah's facial scars builds proximity with shared history. Reading the scars on Fatimah's body allows Shabbir to reclaim his own assaulted body. In no time, his acceptability of the scars overtakes his disgust. He feels no more disgust for the "knot of scarred flesh which had repulsed him the moment his fingers had discovered it". The discovery of her terrible secret makes "her even more unique in a neighbourhood where anything beautiful could be bought and used and then thrown aside" (129). He holds her hands and wipes her tears, assuring her of his unwavering love.

The novel highlights how the girls with acid scars are more likely to fall prey to sexual advances and exploitation from different people they come across. Bobby runs a video shop near Begum Haveli. Fatimah often visits

his shop during her daily errands. As she can be an easy prey for Bobby, he does not care “that her childhood accident had rendered her wordless” (27). Bobby wants to exploit Fatimah sexually as he knows that she, being mute, cannot tell anyone. He watches her “with amusement, with desire, with the comfort of knowing that she would be easy; easy to take, easy to shed, easy to forget” (42). However, Bobby’s friend Billu thinks that there is no point in loving a girl with “bad skin” (86) and no words. While Fatimah goes to Bobby’s shop to give him a love note, she spots another girl in the shop. She fears that this new girl has made her place in “Bobby’s heart, a beautiful woman who spoke with words, a smooth skinned woman groomed with dangerous intent” (62). She even sees Bobby kissing that girl. Dilawar, a street vendor in Kucha Miran Shah, also tries to make sexual advances to Fatimah whenever she visits his cart. He makes lewd remarks to her, the remarks that annoy Shabbir who listens from a distance. He touches her hair in a seemingly casual manner. Whenever there is a rush of female customers around his cart, lust can be seen in his eyes. Fatimah does not feel comfortable whenever she passes by Dilawar’s cart. She hates this “slimy worm of a man, always lusting after women in the bazaar, fondling his crotch, mouth drooling and eyes gleaming” (32).

The recurrent entomological and creatural imagery in the novel underscores the vulnerability of the people like Shabbir and Fatimah. In Fatimah’s dark room, termites have “consumed the door to the almirah; there were still traces of it hanging on to rusty hinges bent in resignation along the edges of this empty space” (38). The door eaten by termites is indicative of Fatimah’s neck and gullet eaten by acid. It also stands for Fatimah’s life after her body became the site of acid violence. Frequent references to spiders and cobwebs serve double symbolic purpose. The webs stand for the vulnerability of the acid victims. Moreover, spiders are suggestive of the predators in the locality who want to exploit the mute girl. The people like Moulvi Basharat, Bobby, Dilawar and Moulvi Muzaffar spin the web of deception to exploit the innocent.

Fatimah’s muteness is indicative of many narratives of the acid victims that are silenced and kept out of the public gaze. Gauhar employs pertinent metaphors to convey the female protagonist’s deprivations and desires. Fatimah feels that there are “no words which could tell this story” (163). The hostile attitude of the patriarchal society to the visibility of the female sufferers manifests itself in hiding the name of the perpetrator. The suppression of her feelings at home orients Fatimah towards an

alternative means of giving vent to her emotions. The novel employs the metaphor of pictures and posters to figure the assaulted girl's emotions and psyche. The cards and magazines found in Fatimah's possession externalize her own unfulfilled desires. She spends her free time looking at the pictures of the models in the magazines given to her by her admirer Bobby. She wants to express her love for Bobby, but she has no words to so. Sometimes, she thinks that it is "better to be without words", for no one could understand "the anguish" (97) she goes through. The glamorous pictures of models highlight Fatimah's own deprivation in contrast. Her secret relationship with Shabbir offers her opportunity to articulate her feelings. Whenever he comes across Fatimah, he feels that she speaks with "her soft brown eyes" (51). He wants to take her "away from the unholy filth" and "misery" (130) of Shahi Mohallah to some other place "where birds sang and flowers bloomed and love was sacred" (98). Their relationship is consummated during one of their secret meetings. But Shabbir provides a weak emotional support to Fatimah as he is not brave enough to admit his relationship with her and her new-born son, landing Fatimah in more trouble. After Raunaq has secretly thrown Fatimah's newborn baby on the premises of the nearby mosque, Fatimah runs to the mosque and holds her child up in full view of the questioning mob.

Through Fatimah's character, Gauhar challenges the patriarchal as well as matriarchal practices with a view to dismantling them through acts of freedom. The novel gives voice to the perspectives of the acid-burnt women whose voices mainly go unheard. The birth of the baby on the night of Friday 14th August is significant as it is the day of the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Through Fatimah's acceptance of her child on the Independence Day of the country, Gauhar re-writes the concept of freedom in Pakistan. It is the fictional birth of a new Pakistan in which the victims of physical violence like Fatimah and Shabbir have the freedom to speak. Gauhar goes beyond portraying Fatimah as a passive recipient of sympathy and sustenance. The portrayal of an acid survivor as capable of making choices is an important step towards independence and self-actualization of such people. The voice of the new woman moves from periphery to the centre. By owning and taking possession of her baby, Fatimah effectively articulates herself and dismantles the patriarchal images of woman. The novel is equally critical of the matriarchal culture represented by the three aging courtesans in Begum Haveli. While in the patriarchal modes of power, the birth of a girl is considered inauspicious for the family, the three women treat the birth of a boy to Fatimah in the same manner.

## **Conclusion**

This essay has highlighted the experiences, struggles and challenges of an acid attack victim in Feryal Ali Gauhar's *The Scent of Wet Earth* in August (2002). Fatimah serves as a representative of the Pakistani women with facial disfigurement and disabilities resulting from vitriolage. The article has attempted to add to the scholarly discourse on the phenomenon of acid violence in Pakistan in literary studies with a view to foregrounding the physical and psychological repercussions of it. The novel is an important step towards constructing a narrative of the survivors of acid attacks and the people with disability. It offers a way of confronting the issue of the use of acid as a tool of power and its ramifications on victims' lives. The research underscores the fears and misconceptions which lead to prejudice and discrimination against acid victims. It further emphasizes that the narratives of acid violence need to be disinterred and encountered. The novel makes a strong case for taking the life of the acid victims seriously so that they can get rid of their inferiority complex. It emphasizes the need for interventions on the part of the government in terms of medical, psychiatric and legal support, education facilities, and vocational support for the victims of acid attacks. It also presses for stringent laws against acid violence so that no life is devastated by this very inhuman practice. Gauhar has successfully communicated a desire, on the part of chemical attack victims, for respect and acceptance as individuals, not to be objects of curiosity or pity. Works such as these should enable the readers to talk more freely about acceptability of the acid survivors. They should try to gain a better understanding of the feelings of acid victims, and to see them as full vital human beings. The research has shed light on an issue that warrants more detailed investigations especially in literary scholarship. The future researchers are encouraged to probe other dynamics of the phenomenon of acid violence.

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