

## Scrutinizing the Concept of "Sociolinguistic Situation" in Nadine Gordimer's *The House Gun*

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**Abstract:** Putting the social imaginary into text is understood as an ideal for better understanding the process of textualisation of the social in the sense that the writer uses it to promote values and meanings. It is from this perspective that Jean Paul Sartre, in *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature* (1948: 17) writes: ["the writer, on the contrary, deals with meanings"<sup>2</sup>our translation]. This means that the writer's literary text remains the site of the manifestation of various arguments and mediations, hence the meaning of "the sociolinguistic situation" of South African writer Nadine Gordimer. Indeed, South African society is the site of a variety of phenomena whose premise is both social and linguistic. In this case, the literary text, from a syntactic, semantic, lexical and narrative approach, is understood as a polemical encounter between languages. In this perspective Gordimer's text does not only give itself the right to evoke and expose social topics, but it also relies on an aesthetic of exposing social cleavages. For that reason, this contribution takes as a method the sociocritical approach of Pierre Vaclav Zima (2000: 9). For Zima, the social and the historical issues could be grasped at the level of language. This study therefore focuses on the socio-discursive construction of some social wrongs in the post-apartheid South African social environment in order to mediate meaningfully between society and text.

**Keywords:** Sociocriticism, sociolinguistic situation, literature, society.

### INTRODUCTION

Human societies are the seat of various manifestations and ills that eat away at the smooth running of social environment. Indeed, the dysfunctioning of norms, meaning that the crises which govern the social structure, give rise to contemporary concerns about the painful divisions that plague African societies. Since the 1960s, when most African countries gained their independence, it must be admitted that the majority of African societies have been faced with various types of phenomena. And these different crises are political, economic, social and environmental. South Africa is no exception to these social metamorphoses, as it is facing a long apartheid crisis that has disfigured and destructured this multicultural society. When these dysfunctions become a reality, literature, as a canon of discernment, will seize upon these phenomena to make a representation. This social fictional reflection is clearly perceived in the role of language and words in giving birth to a new form of writing, a suitable aesthetic of linguistic shock. That is why Sery Bailly (2014: 7) would rather talk of the "power of words". Indeed, in social context, language remains the bridge between the contradicts of society and literature. So what are the socio-historical fields in Gordimer's work? In other words, how does verbal activity manifest itself, and what are its meanings in a South African society facing crisis? This contribution is based on Pierre Vaclav Zima's concept of the "sociolinguistic situation" (2000: 125). For him, the relationship to social life in a

literary text works through its linguistic aspect. From this perspective, the analysis focuses firstly on the sociolinguistic situation and its socio-historical context. Secondly, it unveils the manifestations of verbal activity in a South African society in crisis.

### I-Understanding the Sociolinguistic Situation and the Socio-Historical Context of South African Society

In any given human society, ideologies are at the edge of social languages. This conceptual point of view enables social discourse to be structured within society in the form of a linguistic paradigm. Bring to the fore, the apprehensions of groups and individuals within a society are, in a lot of ways, dependent on a verbal postulate whose pragmatic criteria is articulated around social interests. To this end, language as an heterogeneous discourse goes with literature in a linguistic relationship and in a social situation. Therefore, this approach focuses on understanding the "sociolinguistic situation" and the socio-historical field of South African society.

#### 1.1. Understanding the Sociolinguistic Situation

In Yuri Tyrianov's analysis (in Vaclav Zima, 2011: 4), literature and society have a close relationship insofar as they base their relationship on language content. In this respect, Tyrianov emphasizes the linguistic aspect of the dialogue between literature and society. Far more important, he insists on the fact that the social environment, without denying it, is a kind of reflection that dialogues with

literature on the basis of its verbal predicate. Put differently, the comprehension of social facts in the literary text, should be asked for clarification through linguistic paradigms. Thus, as social languages, the concept of *sociolinguistic situation* is clarified at the level of the discursive and linguistic standpoint.

In his book named *Manuel de Sociocritique* (2000:125-130), Pierre Vaclav Zima, when making reference to the apparatus of “*sociolinguistic situation*”, suggests at least three levels of understanding. The first highlights the literary text and its social context. Literature is intended to be a representation of the social environment insofar as it presents a set of social events that are perceived at the textual level. This implies observing the syntactic, narrative and semantic levels. As far as the syntactic aspect is concerned, Zima (*Idem*, 125-130) admits that they are “*social facts*”. As a result, the interests and problems of certain social communities emanate from the arrangement of words in sentences evoked by characters in the text itself. In much else, the lexicon is a cardinal insight to comprehend the relationship between a given fiction and its social context.

It is precisely at this level that the author gives primacy to her characters so that they denounce the defects of their respective societies through well-chosen lexicons. As for the narrative paradigm, it teaches textual facts in detail from a narrative. Thus, the characters in the narrative are called upon to develop and expose discourses and certain situations within society. This tendency cannot be achieved without the emergence of a discursive pattern attached to a linguistic activity that is related to social phenomena. When one analyses the semantic level, it might be fruitful to realize that a fictional book is best understood on the basis of the meaning and significance of the linguistic units. In other words, a literary text is the product of a set of lexicons set in a historical and social context. That said, the content of a literary text is necessarily linked to the motif of language.

The second refers to language as a mediating function (*Ibidem*, 126). In this regard, without contradiction, the linguistic fact remains this cardinal point linked to society. Indeed, it is through its services that one can better interrogate the ills of society. Consequently, language, whether jargon or vernacular, in many ways implies a narrative that brings to light social problems whose style is adapted to the structure of a given literary text. That is why Mukarovsky

(quoted in Zima, *Ibidem*, 126) admits the following: [...] “thanks to the mediating function of language, the poetic work is closely linked to society” [researcher’s translation]<sup>1</sup>. On the basis of this comprehension, it is clear that linguistic paradigm remains a strong tool of the literary text so as to well identify the structures of human society.

The third level of reading is structured around a scrutinizing of the scale of understanding of the institutional aspect of language (*Ibid.*, 129). It needs to recognize here that language in addition to its collective aspect, is an effective discursive structure through which all the actions of a social group require deep reflection. In this case, institutional language has to be structured because if it is authorized, it necessarily means that society is an emanation of linguistic and historical paradigms. This state of affairs can be seen in Zima’s words (*Ibid.*, 130): “[to take account of the historical (changing) and social nature of language, I speak of the *sociolinguistic situation*” [our translation]<sup>2</sup>. It is easy to understand that in the sociology of text, the linguistic tool is grasped as an organizational principle whose lexical, semantic and syntactic concepts are closely linked to social facts. So how could one perceive the socio-historical field of post-apartheid South African society?

## ***1.2. Critical Literature in the South African Socio-Historical Field***

At the core of social discourse, literature appears to semantise a critical field by its own. In this case, the novel as a narrative schema carries within it a set of sociological paradigmatic networks. The latter outputs represent society in the past, present and future. From a diachronic view, the work of fiction questions the interests of social groups through a heterogeneous language, both theoretical and pragmatic. In this perspective, critical literature successively takes into account the social context of the apartheid regime and the post-apartheid social environment.

### ***1.2.1. The Social Context of the Apartheid Regime***

<sup>1</sup> Original quotation « [...] « grâce à la fonction médiatrice du langage, l’œuvre poétique est étroitement liée à la société ».

<sup>2</sup> Original citation « pour tenir compte du caractère historique (changeant) et social de la langue, je parle de la *situation sociolinguistique* »

The era of Apartheid was largely marked by a total disintegration of South African society. To go on more explanation, the social environment gave way to an unprecedented division, which was itself modelled on an injustice that a political, economic and social crisis was about to call into problematisation. Without dwelling on the genesis of this system, it must be admitted that its justification was focused on the fact that it was a social system and a development policy that severely marginalized the majority population according to ethnic and racial categorization. During that period, the policy of apartheid, led by a white minority, established an institutional system centered on a policy of racial segregation. At this stage, nationality, social status and the right to be attached to a territory were subordinated to an individual's racial status. To open up other views, society was administered by rigid laws established by the minority in order to control the majority. This was possible because the Afrikaners<sup>3</sup> had a historic fear of being overrun by the black population.

Such mistrust will certainly establish a South African society in decay, where social distance and racial segregation go hand in hand. In any case, it is witnessing a society with a cold, a sickness, and eaten away by a lightning social cancer. From an analysis by M. Sathya (2017), it is easy to understand the approach taken by the South African writer Nadine Gordimer who, in her novel *July's People*, brings to light the hideous face of Apartheid politics. Such prophecy of Sathya's study tends to disavow the undivided reign of the white race in the South African political, social and economic arena. The author does only reveal the economic and social shortcomings of the Apartheid system, but also she protests against the disintegration of the social environment at every level.

### 1.2.2. *The Post-Apartheid Social Environment*

Locating the study of Nadine Gordimer's, *The House Gun* in a socio-historical context, means looking at the changing social structures of post-apartheid South African society. In other words, it means taking a diachronic look at to the changes that have taken place in this society. In fact, decolonizing thoughts and international criticism

<sup>3</sup> Afrikaners are South African person whose family was originally Dutch and whose first language is Afrikaans" definition from Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, Cambridge University Press, online.

of Apartheid regime are beginning to emerge all over the world, calling for a fairer and more equitable society. The Soweto riots<sup>4</sup> in 1976 were the catalyst for these new developments, which led to the imposition of binding international sanctions<sup>5</sup> by the United Nations. In addition, the strong decisions and reforms<sup>6</sup> undertaken by Pieter Botha's<sup>7</sup> government breathed new life into the social, economic and political environment. To paraphrase Catalin TECUCIANU (2014), the post-apartheid context was a period of profound political and social transformation for South Africa.

One of the most perceptible apparatuses of this social upheaval remains the quest for a fairer and more balance society. In fact, a certain balance has begun to emerge with the promotion of freedom of expression, inclusive participation in elections and the fighting against racism. In this respect, the old political order, it means the reign of the white race which represents the minority, has now given way to the management of the State by the black race. So, the black race symbolizes the social majority through which a large proportion of the South African people recognize themselves. Put differently, it is the struggle to establish social stability. This indicator has the firm intention to put South Africans on an equal footing. It is true that the post-apartheid period shows a South African society with a different aspect from that during the system itself. However, it must not overlook the fact that, even today, the rule of law remains fragile insofar as the history of this social,

<sup>4</sup> The 1976 Soweto riots were a series of demonstrations by black students in South Africa's public secondary schools, supported by other liberation movements. These demonstrations in the streets of Soweto were against the introduction of Afrikaans as the official language of education alongside English in local schools. To disperse the demonstrations, the police fired live ammunition, resulting in several deaths. For this reason, in 1994, 16 June became a public holiday dedicated to young people.

<sup>5</sup> Diplomatic restrictions, embargo on arms sales, etc.

<sup>6</sup> These included reforms such as the authorisation of non-white and then mixed trade unions, new constitutions restoring political rights to coloureds and Indians, the law banning mixed marriages, passes, and the opening up of public places to all communities. Pieter Willem Botha was a South African statesman. He was Minister of Defence from 1966 to 1980. Prime Minister from 1978 to 1980. He was President of the Republic from 1984 to 1989.

<sup>7</sup> He was a South African politician as prime minister and also the first state president.

economic and political policy has exacerbated its psychological trauma on the majority of the population. It is herein that one needs to better understand the meaning of the concept of *sociolinguistic situation* in order to unmask the flaws and prospects of this unsociable regime.

### I- The Dynamics of the Post-Apartheid Sociolinguistic Situation

Fiction is a representation of social facts in the sense that it informs, educates and entertains about values. In this general assertion, literary works become the seat of truths and realities. Focusing upon the argument that there is a relationship between the text and the social tissue and cultural values, it might be grasped that social contradictions and linguistic developments converge to make all kinds of syntactic and semantic paradigms possible. For that reason, this study section will look successively at the communicative barriers link to a multicultural society, the metaphor of characters and the output of reconciliation.

#### 2.1. The metaphor of Semantic Overlap

To read Gordimer's *House Gun* closely, is to put in mind that the violence in the author's narrative fiction is an analogy for the oppression of the Apartheid regime. Despite the black majority government's quest for political power, most of South Africans still suffered the horrors of social life. In the fictional text, the murder of Carl Jespersen, an adopted child of Mr and Mrs Lindgard by the latter's only son (Duncan), bears witness to the racial tensions and inequalities that exist in South Africa. Duncan's state of mind vis-à-vis this murder is undoubtedly the result of the indelible legacies that social violence has left in the psychology of a wandering population. In other words, government policy and society itself have given the population no chance. The recurrence of the Lindgard family to justice is sufficient to say that the State is responsible for the negative transformation of the inhabitants. The social atmosphere has simply fashioned murderers: it is the case with Duncan Lindgard. To corroborate this, it needs to look at this textual clue:

The girl materializes; the one. She was the one on the sofa with her pants down, who may be seen: the other is out of reach of anyone's gaze, underground along with all the others who are knifed or strangled or shot in the violence that is the city's, the way of death. Three ores were killed in the rivalry between minibus taxi owners at a rank round the corner this morning. But Duncan,

when he was awaiting trial, had been wrong when he thought that what happened to him would be lost in random violence and of no public interest. It is the street killings that are of no interest, happening every day (pp.184-185).

Herein, the analysis can be read on at least two levels: beyond the schema of an erotic scene in the narrative such as "one on the sofa; with her pants down", the first refers to the crime scene of one of the protagonists. The use of the lexical field of criminal brutality like "knifed; strangled; shot; violence; death; killed" unveil a dehumanizing language for the paradigms of violence are devalued and manipulated. It portrays what Pierre Zima, in *Manuel de Sociocritique* (2000: 145) calls ["soiled words», *our translation*<sup>8</sup>]. The word "tainted" shows that the post-apartheid regime matches with a total collapse. And when social language is at its climax, it goes without saying that human attitude is going to be extremely abhorrent. Beyond that, these different expressions in the novel bear witness to what one calls here the metaphor of violence.

The second line of underpinning focuses on social disintegration, even with the advent of black majority government. In fact, a description of the present situation shows that the distinction between the Apartheid and post-apartheid periods is difficult to draw. The new order of social management is a continuation of the old one whereby the brutality of the people is established as a mode of governance. And the expression that highlights this, is the state's sociolect "no public interest". The use of the negation "no" is tantamount to nothing has really changed as far as the management of the State is concerned. Much more, the public disorder perceives through the use of the phrase "street killings", suggests a language that is stifling, degraded and shrouded in extreme brutality. From this point of view, words lose their outside meaning what is capitalized by Zima (*Ibid.*, 154) as ["semantic thickness", *the researcher's translation*]<sup>9</sup>. In a very real sense, indecent words and unhealthy practices become the main motivation for violence, whether verbal or physical. Alongside what is mentioned above, it is useful to study the linguistic challenges and misunderstandings.

#### 2.2. Communicative Barriers in A Multicultural Society

<sup>8</sup> Original citation « les mots souillés ».

<sup>9</sup> Original quotation « l'épaisseur sémantique ».

It is interesting to note that in *The House Gun*, the challenges of racial co-existence and the quest for identity in South African society are much to the extent that the exchanges between the various characters hint at linguistic and racial tensions. The throes of the various misunderstandings have made one realize that reconciliation remains a non-negotiable asset if people want to build a more peaceful nation. This dialogue process between linguistic diversity and discursive incomprehension should be read on at least two levels.

The first idea stems from the fact that no one can deny that post-apartheid South Africa goes with a quest for justice and reconciliation. This ideal of a society united around the values of the Republic is reflected in judicious language choices. During Apartheid, English and Afrikaans languages were the dominant ones. That is why, in Gordimer's narrative fiction *The House Gun*, although English remains the essential script of the text, it is worth noting that multilingualism is seen as the pillar of a rainbow society where the values of plurality are key point to establish a peaceful nation. In the text, there is a pervasiveness of languages such as French "*Nous sommes tous [sic] créatures mêlées d'amour et du mal*" (183), Spanish "*basta*" (187), Portuguese "*L'Agulhas*" (285), Italian "*flagrante delicto*" (195), German "*doppelganger*" (229). Alongside these foreign languages, it is also found African languages such as Zulu "*UNGEKE UDLIWE UMZWANGEDWA SISEKHONA*" (249), and Afrikaans "*klaar*" (128). In addition to being a literary poetic of linguistic heterogeneity, these textual extracts from several languages better illustrate the understanding of social dynamics. They also educate reader about the challenges of true and sincere reconciliation<sup>10</sup> in post-apartheid South Africa. From another perspective, this linguistic polyphony invites people to unity because they have been long time divided and wounded in their souls. This multilingualism is intended to reflect linguistic and cultural diversity. Such a fraternal union can be understood as a metaphor for living together, which might be labeled in South African linguistic environment *ubuntu*<sup>11</sup>. To do so, each language used in the

fiction tends to express a discourse and a linguistic reality that restore the appeasement of value judgements. Moreover, multilingualism is the image of the complex identity of the Gordimerian characters.

Contrary to the argument of reconciliation through the discourse of language diversity, the second critical concern shows that the post-apartheid period matches with communicative incomprehension. Indeed, the majority of the characters in the fiction demonstrate through their ways of communication that the situation in post-apartheid South Africa is hardly glowing. Even if some of the media and most of the international community would have believed that everything was going quietly. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the overlaps and language misunderstandings between the characters create barriers between the different linguistic communities. In much else, this is not conducive to a harmonious society. Far more, it is clear that people are having great difficulty ridding themselves from the legacy of the Apartheid system. Faced with such a subverting narrative, reader could realize that the division is bitter in terms of language differences. This social distance and unease are seized by Pierre Zima (*op. cit.*, 2000: 173) as a ["disintegration of semantic relevance", *our translation*<sup>12</sup>]. Indeed, when words are no longer able of conveying a positive meaning, and when they move towards denial and disfigurement, it is clear that the relationships that used to put people together undoubtedly undergo changes, as the following paragraph shows:

When it is Hamilton's Motsamai's turn, the three become separate attentions again, each listening with a different silent accompaniment, out of different ideas of what Duncan is, to every word, detail, nuance in what Motsamai is saying. [...]. Equalling the force of a blow to the head, psychiatric evidence bears out, such shock has the effect of producing blackout. An interruption from one the two presences, [...]. The white one asks, What is that? You used that word before. You mean a blackout? what is a blackout? A blackout is not a blackout, a state when the individual loses consciousness. A blackout is the state in which the individual suffers loss of self-control, a loss in which there is inability to act in accordance with appreciation of wrongfulness, a state of criminal incapacity. It was in a state that, as a result of

<sup>10</sup> It is worth mentioning here that during the TRC hearings, some of the testimonies were very often given (translated) in several languages. This seems to be one approach to overcoming divisions within society.

<sup>11</sup> This term refers to one of the languages of South Africa and advocates living together and human brotherhood.

<sup>12</sup> Original citation « une désintégration de la pertinence sémantique »

provocation and severe emotional stress, Duncan Lindgard picked up the gun that was lying there and silenced his tormentor with a shot (pp. 246-247).

In the above paragraph, the statement sheds light on a conversation between the characters of Hamilton Motsamai and Harald Lindgard whereby the omniscient narrator is trying to highlight. In the introductory sentence, it is admitted that the Lindgards', a white South African family, have some misunderstandings to guess what the black lawyer Hamilton Motsamai, is saying. These linguistic disagreements are illustrated by the noun phrase "(listening with a different silent...to every word, detail, nuance)". When analyzing this textual clue, one bears in mind that the expressions "every word; detail, nuance", immediately admit that there is a communicative malaise when it comes to understanding. Here the textual comprehension might be pinpointed at least from two stands. The first is lexical for there is a linguistic disagreement between the lawyer Motsamai and Father Harald Lindgard over the words "blackout" and "blankout". In their spelling, there is a difference that gives a clear perception even if it does not refer to the content of the speech. It is this lexical dysfunction would give right to Pierre Zima (*Ibid.*, 167) to talk about ["linguistic crisis", *researcher's translation*<sup>13</sup>]. It is due to the fact that society itself is sick of its social distortions.

The second orientation is a semantic approach because there is an overlap of meaning that Harald has difficulty to grasp. As a result, the word "blankout" used by Hamilton, the lawyer, is pregnant with meaning, but Harald has trouble to understanding the nuances. It is as if a part of the meaning of these words is attended in a cultural signification. Beyond such a lexical and semantic analysis, it might be emphasized that there is a metaphor for the communicative misunderstanding of a violent, fragmented, sick and cold post-apartheid South African society that Viola André (1984: 1) names ["metaphors of transgressions", *our translation*<sup>14</sup>]. To explain it differently, this representation of linguistic misunderstandings (transgressions) testifies an analogy of the difficult cohabitation between races in South Africa, even after the end of Apartheid rule. But what about the use of power through language?

### 2.3. Language and Power in Society

While it is true that in a previous analysis, it has been demonstrated that linguistic polyphony asserts a society with complex and plural identities, it must be acknowledged that language is also grasped as a symbol of authority and domination. In other words, it (language) is a path through which power and social hierarchy are acquired in South Africa. In Gordimer's novel, white characters such as Harald Lindgard and his wife Claudia regard the English language as prestigious tool. During and after the Apartheid system, it (English) was the language of the country's elite, the white minority. It is also important to stress that a part of the black majority got access to it. In fact, the way these white characters use the English language, and the descriptions they give, testify that this medium of communication remains an instrument of power in this multicultural nation. From this perspective, African languages are often marginalized. From this point of view, it might be said that the power wielded by the English language teaches the reader about the inequalities that persist in an already beleaguered society. This aspect is illustrated by the highly expressive passage:

[...] with the wisp of beard just under the point of his chin that asserted a specific traditional African style, another order of dignity and distinction. His staccato and fluent English were strongly accented, he retained the drawn-out rounded vowels of African languages and established the right of the reverberating bass murmurs customary to their discourse, in dismissal of those other wordless conjunctions, the ums and ahs of white speakers (pp. 39-40).

A close reading of this textual illustration shows that the English language remains a vector of domination, authority and prestige at a given time in the South African microcosm. Contextually, the narrator portrays the prestigious black lawyer Hamilton Motsamai. He has been appointed in advance to defend Duncan Peter Lindgard, who has been charged with murder. Reading the argumentation, it becomes clear that the English language wields extreme power in this society. To prove this, it needs only referring to the adjectival phrase "fluent English was strongly accented". This statement is intended as a language of supremacy and exceptional reputation. As such, the discourse creates a kind of distance and social differentiation, insofar as having access to the English language and knowing how to manipulate it, remains a feat and a heroic deed. When the

<sup>13</sup> Original citation « crise linguistique ».

<sup>14</sup> Original citation « métaphores de la transgression »

narrator unveils what Pierre Zima, in his book entitled *L'Ambivalence Romanesque* (2002: 232), calls ["phonetic association", *our translation*<sup>15</sup>] through the use of a lexical field of phonetic logic such as "ums; ahs", and the idea of racial comparison, like "white speakers", it goes without saying that the power held by the English language has ended up creating tension and distance between the nation's inhabitants. Once again, it had to be admitted that language and power call into question the domination, inequalities and marginalization of other languages. To reflect upon, it is safe to say that Gordimer's fiction is uncovering the crises undermining in most African societies.

## CONCLUSION

The study that has just been completed, set out to read the paradigms and meanings of the sociolinguistic situation in the narrative fiction *The House Gun* by the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer. The studying of the concept of sociolinguistic situation, the social context of the Apartheid regime, the post-apartheid social environment, the communicational hindrances, and the problematic of language and power are irrefutable evidence of the manifestation and significance of *sociolinguistic situation* in the fictional text written by the South African author. Such an approach, in connection with sociocriticism conceptualization, allows the reader to understand that the concept of sociolinguistic situation, as a heterogeneous discourse, makes it clear that the economic, political and social crises have only increased the degree of violence. This configuration means that, in reality, there is not enough change between the old Apartheid regime and its end. That is why the concept of sociolinguistic situation lays bare the distance, the social disintegration through linguistic and semantic clash to open up to pluralism, the symbol of a South Africa called the "rainbow nation". Here, it sees that the end of the Apartheid regime remains an opportunity for the author to explore new themes that continue to be topical in South African society. From this standpoint, Nadine Gordimer dispels M. Kunene's concern (quoted by Jean Sévry, 1993: 38) when he asserts: "The trouble with South African writing about apartheid is that people write about apartheid and one day it won't exist and they'll have nothing". On the contrary, Gordimer's writing unfolds to rule new

social revolutions through a language proper to her writing style.

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<sup>15</sup> Original quotation : « association phonétique »

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