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Migration in German-Language Children's Literature after 1945

Abstract: How is migration dealt with in German-language children's and young adult literature? This article focuses on the development of West German children's and young adult literature since the 1960s. During this period, the first labor migrants came to West Germany and children's and young adult literature also turned to this topic. The question of who tells these stories also comes into focus. Selected key texts will be used to illustrate the changes in relation to migration in West German children's and young adult literature.

Keywords: migration, German children's and young adult literature after 1945, childhood

„Wir sind laut, wir sind wütend, und wir lassen uns nicht mehr unterdrücken. Wir wollen nie mehr leise sein,“¹ writes Betiel Berhe in her book *Nie mehr leise* (engl. *Never Quiet Again*), published in 2023, in which she uses her own biography to show the connection between racism and classism. She calls for different voices from different communities to be united to work together for a pluralistic and just society. Her demands also have something to do with children's and young adult literature, without her mentioning it. After all, the voices also include accepting the different perspectives of a post-migrant society and giving everyone a voice. This also applies to children's and young adult literature. However, an examination of German-language children's and young adult literature reveals that themes of migration, flight and leaving familiar surroundings are not currently prevalent in contemporary children's literature. Instead, there is a rich historical tradition of such themes in (Western) German-speaking countries. In the 20th century, particularly after 1933, several narratives emerged that focused on children and their parents fleeing the country due to the rise of the National Socialists (cf. the works of Erika Mann,

¹ English Translation: "We are loud, we are angry, and we will no longer be suppressed. We never want to be quiet again."

1990 or Lisa Tetzner, 2005; 2004; 1992). In the immediate post-war period (1945), literature began to portray refugees from the East who sought refuge in the West. Since the 1960s, children's and young adult literature has been dominated by labor migration, but also by various escapes to West Germany. However, a paradigm shift became evident after the year 2000, with the emergence of literature by authors with a migrant background. This new body of writing eschewed mere description in favor of allowing the experiences of migrant characters to be articulated. This article employs seminal texts of German-language children's and young adult literature, as defined by the introduction of novel themes, narrative strategies, and discourse surrounding the subjects addressed, to illustrate the historical progression and developmental phases of the genre. The period under scrutiny encompasses the years from 1945 to 1989, during which time the literary landscape of children's and young adult literature in both East Germany and West Germany was distinctly delineated. The article focuses on West German children's and young adult literature, with a particular emphasis on the depiction of migration.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIGRANT/POST-MIGRANT CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Foreignness, the encounter of literary characters from different cultures, nations, or ethnicities is one of the „am häufigsten verarbeiteten Alteritätserfahrungen“ (Büker, Kammler 2003: 13)² in children's and young adult literature. In relation to content, the experiences of alterity depicted in children's and young adult literature following 1945 predominantly address the subjects of flight, migration, arrival, and travelling or moving from a rural to an urban environment, and vice versa. The depiction of migration is intricately linked to the portrayal of foreignness and otherness. Until the 2000s, "foreignness" could be categorized as follows: 1) The "foreigner" as a guest; (2) the cultural "foreigner;" (3) the outsider type; (4) the fantastic "foreigner" (Büker, Kammer, 2003). They tell of their arrival in the new country, of language problems and the sometimes-difficult integration. The theme is still developed through friendships, which, however, are hierarchical, as will be shown. Important topics such as language loss and growing up in multilingual contexts play a subordinate role. Children with migrant experiences are in the background, are not active players in the plot, and their origins are often criticized. It was only after 2000 that this categorization was slowly dissolved, and more and more primary works appeared in which there were migrant voices. This dichotomy is gradually shifting toward a perspective that accentuates the plurality of the German migration society and seeks to reflect the diversity of life plans in children's and

² English Translation: "most frequently processed experiences of alterity."

young adult literature (Karimé 2016). Following the year 2000, a growing number of primary works have emerged featuring migrant voices (see also Hodaie, 2020 and 2024: 155–176). A notable development in children's and young adult literature is the increased representation of a migrant society. The theoretical debates on interculturality and migration/postmigration have been subject to a shift from intercultural pedagogy to intercultural communication since the 1960s. The children's novel has also been characterized by the debates since the 1960s, as the following remarks show, and is changing. Until the 1990s, children's literary texts were characterized by paternalistic narratives (Haas, 1998a; Kliewer, 2004), and friendships between children with and without a migration background were often guided by the principles of tolerance and empathy toward the foreigner. However, it was not until the 1990s that significant changes began to emerge, largely influenced by translations, particularly from English (Weinkauff, 2013: 45). In the late 20th and early 21st century, an intercultural society was considered the norm, and democratic coexistence was a part of children's everyday lives. Consequently, the concept of cultural hybridity became particularly popular in children's literature, with child and adolescent characters moving in a world where they repeatedly gain different cultural experiences. However, this togetherness was not idealized.

1960S AND 1970S IN WEST GERMANY: LABOR MIGRATION IN CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

The recruitment of foreign labor at the end of the 1950s gave rise to a new scope of migration processes, and Weinkauff differentiated between "new and autochthonous minorities" (Weinkauff, 2006: 660) in West German children's and young adult literature. In the ensuing decades, a new genre of text came to the fore, which has come to be termed "migrant literature." This category of problem-oriented children's and young adult literature has been the subject of considerable research. The first children's literary texts appear in which child protagonists meet children with a migration background who have come to Germany, Switzerland, or Austria with their parents. The texts were written by authors without a migrant background. Weinkauff (2013: 38) differentiates between two patterns of representation for the late 1960s and early 1970s:

- (1) guest worker problem
- (2) multicultural society

She describes Pepino from the children's novel *Komm wieder, Pepino* (1967) by Eveline Hasler as the "erste Gastarbeiterkind der deutschsprachigen KL" (Weinkauff, 2013: 13).³ The plot is set in Switzerland and tells the story of Pepino, who is allowed to travel to his parents who work in Switzerland, after a long

³ English translation: "first guest worker child in the German-speaking KL."

separation, and misses both his home and his grandfather on the island of Elba. With the help of a friend, he finally finds a home in Switzerland. The texts from the 1970s focus on children from Italian and Turkish families who must settle in Germany. Weinkauff rightly notes that the genre spectrum is broad – from picture books to texts for older teenagers, but that certain motives pervade. These include friendship and a wrongly accused child with experience of migration (see also Weinkauff, 2006: 665ff).

The children's novel *Benvenuto heißt willkommen* (1973) by Hans-Georg Noack will be presented as an example. It is about saying goodbye, leaving home, and settling into a new home. The child characters are accompanied by friends who support them. At the centre is the boy Benvenuto, whose name means "the welcome one" (Noack, 1973: 5). He was born in Brelone, a small village in Italy. The poverty is great, there are hardly any jobs, and because of its location, the village has not yet been developed for tourism. Benvenuto's father decides to go to Germany and earn money there. He dreams of opening a hotel in his home village. Several men follow them, but the women and children stay behind. After a few months, the father decides to bring his family to Germany. The home he left behind plays a subordinate role; instead, the focus is on life in the new city. The novel can be categorized as part of the problem-oriented children's and young adult literature of the 1970s, as new themes are included.

A heterodiegetic narrator guides us through the story, only occasionally providing insights into the character's inner life and focussing on the plot. At the same time, the narrator evaluates and comments. He portrays the family as hard-working, friendly, and ambitious and repeatedly tells of their failures. Homesickness, language loss, and learning a new language characterize the family's everyday life; Benvenuto slowly gets used to the new country but repeatedly experiences everyday racism and encounters prejudice. But Noack does not tell a story of friendship between a boy with and a boy without migration experience, instead focussing on the Italian family and their situation in West Germany. Noack develops a contrast between Benvenuto's childhood in Brelone and his arrival in Wolfsburg. The narrative commences in the hometown of Brelone, which is portrayed as impoverished yet characterized by amiable and accommodating individuals. Benvenuto's childhood is initially happy, but this changes because of the increasing poverty conditions, eventually forcing the family to migrate. The initial impact of this migration is evident in the shift in climate, with the initial warmth giving way to the harshness of German winter. The changes are initially felt in the climate: the weather is warm, while the arrival in Germany is in winter. The boy does not feel welcome, experiences (everyday) racism, and realizes how difficult it is to make friends. His childhood home becomes a paradise in the memories he has irretrievably lost. Because even the dream of the hotel that was to be built in the Italian village bursts in the Federal Republic. We do learn something

about Benvenuto's feelings, but it is not told from his perspective. Benvenuto and Roberto's speechlessness is hinted at in dialogues; they speak grammatically incorrectly, but Italian phrases or neologisms that unite the two languages are absent from the novel. It ends with an outlook: Benvenuto will not return to Italy, if then only as a tourist, because "[s]icher wird er hier nicht mehr leben wollen"⁴ (Noack, 1973: 142), but he may want to visit the place of his childhood. Thus the narrator implies that Benvenuto has decided in favor of a life in West Germany. The boy initially experiences Germany as a place of transit, living in a confined space and hoping to return soon. However, eventually the place becomes a new home, and he returns to his childhood home as a guest.

In these texts, characters with a migration background are reduced to their experiences of migration and are developed as the "others" who must be helped by characters without migration experience. Since the 1960s, there have been changes and demands for (children's and young adult) literature from the global South, as well as for dialogue-based storytelling in encounters between people from the global North and South.

1980S AND 1990S IN THE WEST GERMAN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN

It is evident that a significant number of children's novels published since the 1980s have focused on the depiction of friendships. However, these literary works have been critiqued for their tendency to perpetuate stereotypes. As Dagmar Grenz observed in 1992, these novels have been unsuccessful in effectively portraying Turkey as a foreign entity or in acknowledging the nuances of German culture from an external perspective (Grenz, 1992: 37). Based on this criticism, authors with a migrant background began to write children's novels in the 1980s. The initiators were Rafik Schami and Eleni Torossi with their contribution *Den Trägern der Zukunft erzählen, ein Plädoyer für Kinderliteratur in der Fremde* (1985/86):

Die Zugehörigkeit eines Autors zur Minderheit ist eine unentbehrliche Voraussetzung einer glaubwürdigen Literatur der Minderheit. [...] Das technische Handwerk ist nicht im Stande, die fehlende Zugehörigkeit zur Minderheit zu ersetzen. (Schami, Torossi 1985/86: 26)⁵

They complained about the lack of literature by authors with a migrant background and criticized the depiction of children's lives.

⁴ English translation: "he will no longer want to live here."

⁵ English Translation: "An author's belonging to the minority is an indispensable prerequisite for credible minority literature. [...] The technical craft is not able to replace the lack of belonging to the minority" (Schami, Torossi, 1985/86: 26).

Until the 1990s, there were children's literature texts with paternalistic narratives (Haas, 1998a, Kliewer, 2004) and friendships between children with and without a migration background, which were criticized for their portrayal of migrant characters. It is not the children with experience of migration who become active players in the plot, but they are helped by child characters without any experience of migration. These are often guided by the principles of tolerance and empathy toward foreigners, which creates an imbalance, especially as migrant actors must prove themselves, for example through hard work.

In addition to texts dealing with labor migration, children's literature is also published that depicts the arrival of immigrants of German descent from the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. The children's novel *Ben liebt Anna* by Peter Härtling, which has since become a classic, was published as early as 1979 and, according to Weinkauff, is also one of the „innovativsten [...] deutschsprachigen Kinderromane der vergangenen dreißig Jahre“⁶ (Weinkauff, 673). She sees a further difference in the fact that the arrival of the repatriates is described from their perspective, while the texts that talk about migration usually look at the events from an outside perspective.

In the 1990s, there were further changes and children, and young adult literature set new trends. The author Zoran Drvenkar was born in Krizevci (Yugoslavia) in 1967, but moved with his family to Berlin at the age of three, where he spent his childhood and youth. He described his childhood and youth in his two novels *Niemand so stark wie wir* (1998), which was also his first novel and won the Oldenburg Children's and Young People's Book Prize, and *Im Regen stehen* (2000), with which he was nominated for the German Youth Literature Prize. The story *Niemand so stark wie wir* (1998) centers on Zoran, who grows up in 1970s Berlin and is about 12 years old. He is friends with Adrian, Eli, and Karim, who spend their free time together and only occasionally think about their origins. His real life takes place in the children's group. Family and school, on the other hand, are less important and are sometimes even perceived as disruptive. Zoran's family looks like this: his mother continues to cook Yugoslavian food and rants in Serbo-Croatian; his father misses his homeland and at the same time tries to give his family a good life in Germany. The family would like to go to Yugoslavia every year, but due to a lack of money they must stay in Berlin. Zoran enjoys spending his summer holidays in Berlin with his friends and hardly misses his former homeland. But far more important than everyday Yugoslavian life at home is Zoran's immediate environment in Berlin: he is out and about on the streets with his friends, they play football together, talk about girls and growing up. Although the boys grow up in different families and with different languages, they speak German with each other and then speak their mother tongue at home. To put it simply, Zoran experiences a socialization

⁶ English translation: "most innovative [...] German-language children's novels of the past thirty years."

in the boys' group that certainly shapes him just as much, if not more, than his family and thus his Yugoslavian origins. According to Annette Kliewer in her article *Pädagogik der Vielfalt: Zoran Drvenkar: Niemand so stark wie wir* (2004), Drvenkar has broken new ground with his novels and paved the way for a new migrant literature, but also developed a different approach to interculturality within children's and young adult literature (Kliewer, 2004).

According to Gina Weinkauff, translations from English in particular set new trends in the 1990s. There are also children's literature texts that react to the attacks by right-wing extremists and take a clear stance against racism. The best-known text, which is still read in schools today, is probably *Milchkaffee und Streuselkuchen* (1996) by Carolin Philipps, which must be critically analyzed due to its stereotypical and racist portrayal. For example, Sammy, the son of Eritrean parents, is reduced almost exclusively to his appearance, knowledge about his origins and culture is avoided, and instead his adaptation to the majority society is praised. Therefore, Becker rightly states that intercultural communication in Byram's sense does not take place (Becker, 2020: 125). Interest in Sammy's parents and their life in Eritrea is not demanded.

CHILDREN'S AND YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE SINCE 2000

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, the notion of a post-migrant society has become a prevailing concept, and democratic coexistence has become an integral part of children's daily lives. Consequently, the concept of a multicultural society has gained significant popularity in children's literature. However, rather than idealizing coexistence, these texts address challenges such as right-wing radicalism and exclusion. It is noteworthy that there are still texts authored by individuals without a migration background. These children's novels are distinguished by the presence of friendships, diverse groups of children, and a de-hierarchical approach to interpersonal interactions. The child protagonists exhibit a positive acceptance of their respective cultures and a favorable view of linguistic diversity. However, an examination of these texts reveals the continued utilization of binary modes of representation, suggesting a persistent perception of migration as a problematic phenomenon.

In 2012, Kirsten Boie published the crime novel *Der Junge, der Gedanken lesen konnte* (2012), which is modelled on Andreas Steinhöfel in terms of genre but also represents a significant development within the field of intercultural children's and young adult literature. The narrative is presented from the viewpoint of the protagonist, Valentin, who immigrated to Germany from Kazakhstan with his mother. The narrative is set in a new city following a move, during the summer holidays, and centers on the protagonist Valentin's exploration of his new surroundings. Through his interactions with the character Mesut, whose parents hail from Turkey, Valentin becomes

involved in the resolution of a criminal case. A notable aspect of the narrative is the shift in perspective, as it is an account narrated by a child with a migratory background. This offers readers a divergent perspective. In the sequel *Gangsters must be clever* (2022), Kirsten Boie employs multi-perspective storytelling, depicting the events from the perspective of Valentin on one hand and Jamie Lee (from Abduction with a hunting leopard) on the other. The author successfully navigates the intricacies of combining multiple markers, thereby ensuring a multifaceted narrative. Valentin, who hails from a migrant background, is acquainted with Jamie-Lee and her mother only superficially, yet he astonishes both Jamie-Lee and her brother by displaying a profound knowledge of their lives. However, it is noteworthy that the multilingual polyphony, the interweaving of new languages, and the emotional world of migrant children are depicted, despite the migrant perspectives. The character of Mesut, who oscillates between two cultures, is employed by Boie to illustrate the experiences of the third generation.

After 2000, titles by other writers with and without experience of migration began to appear. Slowly, children's and young adult literature also developed that is characterized by representatives of the second and third generation of labor migration and can be described in part as post-migrant. Post-migrant does not refer to a newly created genre, as the texts are too diverse in terms of content and form. Erol Yildiz suggests thinking of the term "postmigration" as analogous to post-colonialism/post-colonial studies:

In Analogie zu dieser Auffassung des Postkolonialismus bedeutet die Idee der ‚Postmigration‘ zunächst, die Geschichte der Migration neu zu erzählen und das gesamte Feld der Migration radikal neu zu denken, und zwar indem die Perspektiven derer eingenommen werden, die Migrationsprozesse direkt oder indirekt erlebt haben. Im Gegensatz zu gängigen nationalen Narrativen wird im postmigrantischen Diskurs nicht nach integrativen Leistungen von (Post-) Migranten gefragt, es rücken vielmehr Prozesse von Entortung und Neuverortung, Mehrdeutigkeit und Grenzbiographien ins Blickfeld. (Yildiz, 2014: 21)⁷

Therefore, post-migrant does not mean overcoming migration, but rather the "associated discrimination, marginalization, etc. of migrants and the demand for recognition of diversity in a migration society" (Rösch, 2017: 78) and, according to Yildiz, post-migrant strategies can also be understood as

⁷ English Translation: "In analogy to this view of postcolonialism, the idea of 'postmigration' initially means retelling the history of migration and radically rethinking the entire field of migration by adopting the perspectives of those who have directly or indirectly experienced migration processes. In contrast to common national narratives, the post-migrant discourse does not ask about the integrative achievements of (post-) migrants, but rather focuses on processes of dislocation and re-localisation, ambiguity and borderline biographies" (Yildiz, 2014: 21).

cultural learning processes (Yildiz, 2014, Rösch, 2017). Questions of belonging and exclusion from the dominant society also play an important role, which are discussed in the context of a concept of home. Experiences of migration, exclusion, multilingualism, racism, and thus marginalized knowledge are also made visible in children's and young adult literature and call into question common narratives, including those about migration. In the current children's and young adult novels, it is primarily the children and grandchildren of labor migrants who have their say and tell another view of the last decades in the Federal Republic of Germany. This generation of children and grandchildren have different experiences to their parents and grandparents but are often reduced to their status as people with a migration background. However, new themes also flow into the primary works and the discourse. The authors, who are the third or fourth generation to live in Germany, ask about the meaning of life in a post-migrant society and talk about oscillating between cultures/nations. Ultimately, it is about the question of what home means. However, the search for a home of one's own, the inner turmoil and disorientation characterizes not only those who came to Germany either as labor migrants or refugees, but also their descendants. It appears to be a „generationenübergreifendes Bedürfnis [zu handeln], das soziale Dynamiken und Prozesse in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft maßgeblich beeinflusst“ (Behrendt, 2022: 8).⁸ Heimat in literature, Heimat in migrant and post-migrant texts for adult readers is widely received in research and the media. At the same time, these works also make it clear how topical and multifaceted the term Heimat is. It is an open and polyvalent term that should no longer be used in the singular, but in the plural. Homeland summarizes what is reflected in society and in the media: experiences of homelessness and the search for a home. In the current discourse, more and more voices are being heard, individual experiences are being told, and thus different meanings are being attributed to homelands. This makes it clear that stories, narratives, and experiences about flight and migration share universal experiences on the one hand, but on the other hand each story is also individual and thus one cannot speak of homogeneous migration experiences. It is evident that narratives concerning flight and migration encompass both universal and individual experiences. Consequently, it is inaccurate to assert the existence of homogeneous migratory experiences. The texts avoid simplistic positions and depict the characters not only as victims, helpers, or perpetrators. The characters are not merely reduced to their experiences as migrants and are narrated from the perspective of marginalized voices.

Nevertheless, in the children's novel *Pembo. Halb und halb macht doppelt glücklich* (2020) by Ayşe Bosse and illustrated by Ceylan Beyoglu, Dimitrova

⁸ English translation: "cross-generational need [that] significantly influences social dynamics and processes in post-migrant society."

plays with Bosse's title, because while Bosse already refers to a happy dual identity in the subtitle, in *Kanak kids* the girl Desi is half adapted and fully in between. This allows for a more complex examination of one's own identity and thus also one's homelands. Pembo and her parents, who hail from Turkey and Germany respectively, have been compelled to relocate from their previous domicile in Turkey to Germany. Her father has acquired a hairdressing salon in Hamburg, thereby achieving a long-standing aspiration. The family's relocation was accompanied by significant emotional upheaval, particularly for Pembo, who experienced a sense of loss as she parted ways with her extended family and social circle. The family's subsequent arrival in Hamburg stands in stark contrast to their previous life in a coastal village, where they were greeted by a frigid and dimly lit environment. The novel incorporates Turkish vocabulary, with a vocabulary list comprising Turkish words and their translations at the commencement of each chapter. These words pertain to domains such as food, family, and other elements that are integral to everyday life. These Turkish words are imbued with positive connotations, presenting a loving image of the country that serves to contrast the descriptions found in children's and young adult literature of the 1980s (see also Bjegac, Simon, 2024: 169; Weinkauff, 2013). Author Andrea Karimé (2016) is in favour of a different form and, in line with author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's postulate of not telling a "single story," calls for counter-stories for younger readers. In her children's books, she shows diversity as a matter of course, has characters with and without a migration background, and, above all, uses different languages in the characters' speech. The childlike characters in her works – *Tee mit Onkel Mustafa*, *Nuri und der Geschichtentepich*, *Sterne im Kopf und ein unglaublicher Plan*, *Kaugummi und Verflixungen*, *Antennenkind* or *Der Wörterhimmel des Fräulein Dill* – move between the European and Arabic worlds. They are not victims even when they are being bullied. They act and become active. For example, Nuri from *Nuri and the Story Carpet*, who tells her story in the style of Scheherazade and receives recognition. Karimé's characters do not want pity, but are full of imagination, full of stories and want to tell them. She doesn't reduce her heroes to what they can't do but shows them with strengths. For example, even if they still must learn the new language, they are not deficient. Your characters may be new to a country, but they may also have parents from different cultural backgrounds. In the hybrid identities, she skilfully interweaves both cultures and shows above all that multilingualism is an important asset for the formation of one's identity. This includes, for example, the tapestry of stories reminiscent of fairy tales from the Arabian Nights and the telling of stories, but also the use of Arabic words, phrases, and sentences. She shows children who do not hide their hybrid identity. In Karimé's literary works, the form

of multilingualism assumes a pivotal role, manifesting in various ways. Her novels and poems are replete with a multitude of languages, underscoring the intricate nature of linguistic diversity. At times, individual words are integrated into the sentence without undergoing translation, while at other times they manifest as complete sentences necessitating interpretation within the context of the text. Furthermore, Karimé employs a playful approach to language, incorporating neologisms and engaging with linguistic creativity. Other authors talk about their childhood experiences and, like Christian Duda in his novel *Gar nichts von allem* (2017), depict violence in families alongside everyday racism. There are still texts written by authors without a migration background. These children's novels are still characterized by friendships, diverse groups of children, and a de-hierarchization of their interactions. The child protagonists accept the respective culture and take a positive view of linguistic diversity.

Children's literature is replete with examples of narratives that deal with the themes of flight and arrival. Indeed, the subject of flight has a long-standing tradition in the realm of children's and young adult literature. For example, in German-speaking countries, there has been a prolific production of literary works concerning the flight and arrival of various minority groups over the past three decades. The focus of these narratives is on the present, and they encompass both works by authors with no personal experience of flight and those with such experiences.

CONCLUSION

The examples presented tell of different experiences of migration. The characters have similar experiences of loss, speechlessness, and arrival in a distant place. However, while the early works after 1945 tell of children with migration experiences, the view of the inner lives of the child protagonists is slowly changing. Authors with and without migration experience change the main characters and tell their stories from the perspective of the migrant child. What migrant authors have in common is the change of languages, multilingualism, and the multiplicity of identitarian affiliations. Even though children's and young adult literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries develop different concepts of migration, these are initially described in terms of content, and it is only the migrant authors who succeed in tracing the various facets.

In children's and young adult literature, migration is thus used as a discursive and dialogical concept and in the post-migrant texts, the "previously hidden, marginalized stories and types of knowledge become visible" (Hill, Yildiz, 2018: 7).

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