



# Freedom from Nausea: An Existential Reading of *Nausea* in Sartrean Ethics

Dr. Savita Rani

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shaheed Udham Singh Government College, Matak Majri, Indri (Karnal), Haryana, India

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**Abstract**— *The present paper aims to elucidate the notion of freedom in Sartrean ethics. Jean-Paul Sartre is as much a philosopher as a novelist, a rare synthesis of philosophy and literature that, otherwise, are said to be two different disciplines. In this regard, He is closer to Jacques Derrida, who sought to bring about a play and thereby refused to privilege one discipline over the other, and Matthew Arnold, in his essay, The Function of Criticism at the Present Times, said that literary genius does not principally show itself in new ideas, that is, rather the business of a philosopher. It is because Sartre's existential psychoanalysis reveals to him that values are not written in things, but created by man. Nausea is a story of Antoine Roquentin, a French writer who is frightened at his own existence: viscous, slimy, to be precise. The novel is an impressionistic diary wherein he records date-wise details of his confrontation with the nausea of the time, which, having corrupted him, is now at the receiving end, as Roquentin spreads it further. Thus, by fusing the philosopher and the artist in him, Sartre paved the way for the moral agent to be born, the being by whom values exist (Sartre's italics). That is why he aligns existentialism with humanism. It is in this context that we can appreciate his freedom of nausea as an expression of self-loathing. Sartre seems to ask why man should not resist being sucked up by the slimy, i.e., the world.*



**Keywords**— *Existentialism, Humanism, psychoanalysis, repugnance, self-loathing, seriousness.*

Jean-Paul Sartre is as much of a philosopher as a novelist, a rare synthesis of philosophy and literature, which otherwise are said to be two different disciplines. In this regard, He is closer to Jacques Derrida, who sought to bring about a play and thereby refused to privilege one discipline over the other, and Matthew Arnold, in his essay, *The Function of Criticism at the Present Times* said that literary genius does not principally show itself in new ideas, that is rather the business of a philosopher. Sartre also hits at the spirit of seriousness by saying that "all human activities are equivalent, and all are doomed to failure..." (*Critical Theory Since Plato*, 585) precisely because they suffer from some lack or the other. It is because Sartre's existential psychoanalysis reveals to him that values are not written in things, but created by man. Thus, by fusing the philosopher and the artist in him, Sartre paved the way for the moral agent to be born, the *being by whom values exist* (Sartre's italics). That is why he aligns existentialism with

humanism. It is in this context that we can appreciate his freedom of nausea as an expression of self-loathing. Sartre seems to ask why man should not resist being sucked up by the slimy, i.e., the world. Nausea, as the hero of the novel says,

...spreads the bottom of the viscous puddle, at the bottom of our time, the time of purple suspenders and broken chair seats, it is made of wide: soft instants, like the oil stains. No sooner than born, it is already old. It seems as though I have known it for twenty years. (Nausea, 21)

Nausea is a story of Antoine Roquentin, a French writer who is horrified at his own existence: viscous, slimy, to be precise. The novel is an impressionistic diary wherein he records date-wise details of his confrontation with the nausea of the time, which, having corrupted him, is now at the receiving end, as Roquentin spreads it further. As a

child, for example, he and his fellows would see a retired schoolmaster as if he were a crab "shaping thoughts of crab or lobster in his head..." (9) Nausea seizes him under multiple conditions, in things obnoxious, in things that he lacks, in things full and dense, sickly, in short, the entire world, including himself. Indeed, Roquentin says, "The Nausea is not inside me,"(19) but outside him, in the world surrounding him. It catches him, for example, when he looks at Adolphe in the café wearing his blue shirt against the backdrop of the chocolate coloured wall. He feels out there in the wall, in the suspenders, everywhere around him. It makes him one with the café, he is the one, as he says, "who is within it."(20)

Nausea is what sucks Roquentin in, anything for that matter-- people spending their "time happily, exploring, realizing happily that they agree with each other,"(8) talking about the same things altogether, a boy seeing together in the head of the retired schoolmaster a crab or a lobster, or when the waitress of the cafe asks him; What will you have, Monsier Antoine? (18)She holds his overcoat and smiles. "A handshake..., a smile, a thought, a feeling, for that matter, can be slimy," (*Being and Nothingness*, 70) says Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. He adds, certainly for the European adult it signifies a host of human and moral characteristics which can be easily reduced to relation of being. All relationships, even a casual glance, could be slimy; they could be symbols of a whole class of human feelings and attitudes. However, there may be nothing slimy in them but what we project upon them. The slimy is not originally charged with an affective meaning, nor does it enrich our experience of human baseness. All the same, sliminess, according to Sartre, when considered "in its isolated state, will appear to be harmful in practical (because slimy substances stick to the hands, and clothes, and because they stain), but sliminess then is not repugnant."(771) In fact, as Sartre adds; "the disgust which it inspires can be explained only by the combination of the physical quality and moral qualities,"(70) for example, even young children show evidence of repulsion, or taught so by adults in the presence of something slimy, such as ugly, smelly, flabby and so on.

There are, of course, many things that leave Roquentin terribly, deeply bored, including his own odd dress, his lack of passion, leaving him empty. Nevertheless, he was not the worst for them. It's rather good that ideas no longer enthuse him. He has changed a lot. This is what he records in his first diary entry, "undated pages." This shows his progression towards the Sartrean ethical position, because to be passionately attached to things and ideas is not only to possess, but also to be possessed by them.

The second entry dated Monday, 29 January 1932, Roquentin further records sudden changes in him, as for example. He could not understand why he was in Indo-China. People argued that it was his whim that made him leave France, and again it was his whim that brought him back. In Sartre's contingent world, there is no reason for being and not being. However, since Roquentin is the protagonist of a novel, we should suppose him to be above human weaknesses. That is why he could not understand the changes within himself. He is equally afraid of what will take hold of his life and drag him and that he will, in that happens, we have to abandon his research. All the same, he would like to see how it turns out, though we know that in Sartre, there is no teleology, finality. The end is yet to come.

Roquentin, however, has enough insight in this regard, though his thoughts are still nebulous most of the time, as he writes in the diary, dated Tuesday, 30 January, 1932. He, for one, lives alone, without much attachment, except a casual handshake or a smile, though he remains close to the people, on the surface of solitude. His solitude among people around is part of his philosophy of nothingness. He cannot be like other young men who avoid nothingness, for it lies like a hole in his being. A glass of beer on his table means nothing to him. "Almost nothing,"(Nausea, 8) he says. He cannot take up the glass and drink. Others may find him queer, and though he also cannot explain, he knows that the slimy reveals to for-itself, Sartre says, as a project of appropriation:

It (appropriation) compels the slimy to reveal to being, since the upsurge of the for-itself into being is appropriative; the slimy, when perceived, is "a slimy to be possessed," that is, the original bond between the slimy and myself is that I form the project of being the foundation of its being, since it is myself ideally. (*Being and Nothingness*, 772)

Roquentin's nausea, the sense of sliminess and his disgust on account of it, is nothing but his aversion to possessing, of appropriating things, even persons, as if the latter were also things. Objects of appropriation bear psychic and symbolic things; excreta, for instance, are nauseating. He, on the other hand, feels nauseated when things touch him. That is what is unbearable. It could be a stone that he picked up one day at the seashore, as he wrote on 30 January, just because he held it in his hand. It was a simple act of appropriation. It is, as Sartre says, "precisely within the limits of this appropriative project that the slimy reveals itself and develops to sliminess." (773)

Roquentin is so afraid of the project of appropriation that he has lost even the direction of his face.

He cannot even decide whether it is handsome or ugly. At heart, as he says, he feels shocked that "anyone can attribute qualities of this kind to it..." (Nausea, 16) Except for his hair, he finds nothing firm about his face, nor his nose, nor his eyes, nor even his mouth; none of them make sense. In fact, there is not even an expression. This has made him so unstable, stranded, coupled with this is his nausea of seeing, as Charles Darwin did, the monkey and the jellyfish behind his human free — nothing strong, nothing new; soft, flaccid, stale. According to Sartre, Slimy lets itself be apprehended as something which he lacks. Roquentin is not happy with himself, with what he is. Nausea seizes him when he was expecting to make love, but is told the patronne, the owner of the café, was not there. Sartre has told us, as per his view of phenomenology, that consciousness is consciousness of something. To illustrate this, he says that he went searching for his friend at a café, and finding him not there, said, 'Peter is not there.' However, one cannot announce any other negative judgment without a situation. Peter's absence haunts a particular café. It comes into being when we expect to see a friend in the café. It is for Sartre that Peter is absent. In all our judgements, however, we annihilate. But it should be a felt judgment, not an abstraction. It lies at the heart of being.

Roquentin writes in his next entry of 31 January: "I am beginning to believe that nothing can ever be proved." (13) But instead of taking nothingness positively as freedom, as Sartre would like him to take, he develops self-repugnance, self-loathing. Sartre perhaps began writing this novel with the view that his hero, if one may call him one, suffers from not the contempt of others so much as from his self-contempt; he suffers far more tragic-comic and disabling consequences of accepting his rejection as legitimate, as self-evident. Sartre probably knew that some victims of powerful self-loathing turn out to be despicable in their own eyes, blaming the time and space they inhabit. Roquentin's problem is that he finds himself sucked into the viscous world, i.e., he is not able to come out of the adhesiveness of the world. As John Passmore put it, "If Wittgenstein hopes to show the fly the way out of the bottle into which it has flown, Sartre hopes to release him from the fly-paper." (*A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 505) Elaborating this analogy, Passmore says that sliminess is a characteristic not only of things, but also of human beings, of that handshake or smile which entices into friendship and which turns out to be a deadly entanglement—of our own thoughts, even in so far as they strictly hold us to the past. This is exactly the situation of Roquentin, and though he is not entangled in any serious affair, according to Sartre, Roquentin's absorption in the life of Rollebon was enough of an entanglement. What he got involved in was whether Rollebon murdered Paul I. He found it absurd to believe that

Rollebon disguised himself as a midwife to get as far as the place, though he was not at home on the night of the assassination. This is the hole in the history of Rollebon which he tries to fill. But he attempts to fill up gaps in the life of Rollebon, disgusts him. The man now possessed him.

Nevertheless, he knows that "Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, some people come and go, that's all." (Nausea, 39) This is the beginning or end. All places are alike. There are moments—rarely—when one makes a march. It is only a flash. In the rest of life, we go on adding up hours and days. These abortive attempts, as Sartre would say, stifle freedom, which coincides with nothingness. Nothingness comes in the rupture of being-for-itself. From being-in-itself, i.e. for-itself simply finds itself there, separated and at a distance from the absolute fullness of the in-itself. Roquentin has an awareness of this rupture, that life, when questioned in fullness and fixity, turns out to be vacuous, characterized by incompleteness and lack of determinate structure. It is no more solidified world of objectified reality; one gets conscious that life and the world have nothingness lying coiled in the heart of being, like a worm. Roquentin finds nothing firm about himself. "Human reality", as Sartre says, "is free because it is not enough," (*Being and Nothingness*, 568) which "made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human reality to make itself instead to be." (568) However, to be is mostly taken *to have*. It is thus that the slimy enters our life; *to be, albeit to have*, becomes appropriative, i.e., to possess and to be possessed. Both give birth to certain moral attitudes, which displease us, and we condemn ourselves. This possessing-possessed relationship is nauseating. At heart, Roquentin at times feels inflated after having gone drunk. It pleases him, as he records, but then soon he feels sick as if he "had awakened a bed full of vomit." (Nausea, 56) He had chosen to be drunk. For Sartre, human reality is free to the exact extent that it has to be its own nothingness, and a choice is free of it is such that it could have been other than what it is; to choose is to nihilate ourselves, that is, "to cause a future to make known to us what we are by conferring a meaning on our part. Thus, there is a succession of instants by nothingness." (*Being and Nothingness*, 549)

Roquentin is conscious of the nothingness of passing time. He knows that there is nothing in the world to cling to. He takes it as an adventure. In fact, he is on his way to recovery from nausea. Nevertheless, he still feels that such moments of grasping nothingness and freedom are short-lived, giving him the feeling that he has wasted his life. (Nausea, 56) However, short-lived, the feeling of adventure of growing old, i.e., the irreversibility of time, is good because it frees one from the slimy. Roquentin's association with Anny was another entanglement he had, next to his passion for writing the history of Rollebon. But it was

always Anny who started the game, while he had to shake himself out of it. In one instance, when both of them were together, Anny holding his hand, he got up as soon as she let go of his hand, as it was the time for his departure, he "got up and left without saying a word to her."(57) That was a good job, he said.

Rollebon also annoys him, particularly when Roquentin finds him "mysterious in small things."(57) In Sartre, the mysterious and the ambiguous are forms of the slimy; they also suck us in, as holes do. They are in-between forms of liquids and solids, a possible fusion of the for-itself as pure temporality and the in-itself as pure eternity," (*Being and Nothingness* 774) says Sartre. There is a kind of stick thickness in liquidity in the mysterious and the ambiguous. They inhibit human freedom, in addition to giving a bad feeling of nausea. About Rollebon, Roquentin asks: "What could he have been doing in the Ukraine in 1804? He tells of his trip in veiled words."(*Nausea* 57) Roquentin lets himself be caught. He lost a month verifying Rollebon's assertions. However, in the end, our historian found out that Rollebon impregnated the daughter of one of his tenant farmers. In Roquentin's view, Rollebon was nothing more than a lowly comedian. The word 'low' is one among such words as 'soft', 'dull', having psychic meaning "which renders them repugnant, horrifying, alluring, etc."(57)

After learning about Rollebon's treachery, Roquentin developed repugnance for him. He, as he wrote, "feels full of ill-will towards this lying little fop; perhaps it is spite... I don't have a high enough opinion of historical research to lose my time over a dead man whose hand, if he were alive, I would not deign to touch..."(*Being and Nothingness* 772) This was enough to disenchant Roquentin with Rollebon. It is thus that Roquentin seeks his form, slowly though, but steadily. His reflections, even in times of thick entanglement, show sparks of his quest for freedom, of course, through nothingness. If he still pursues his research, it is because it got mixed up with existence. He has to gather enough strength to break away from Rollebon. As for his attachment to Anny, he knew that it was also fragile, marred by nothingness. But he should "not be afraid anymore," (*Nausea*, 81) he wrote. The world weighs heavily upon human beings; nonetheless, the world of attachment to duties caught Roquentin alike. They are between facts and the contingency of life. But if, like our hero, we face it courageously, there is room for us to breathe. Roquentin not only recognizes the contingency of the world, but also, as Passmore put it, "his disconnectedness with the past" (*A Hundred Years of Philosophy* 504). Roquentin gave up, finding fault with people he is casually in contact with. Not contact, not even sexual relationships, can bind people together. Passmore's remarks on human relationships in the Sartrean context are pertinent:

Again and again, as Sartre writes, we feel ourselves forced into Freudian interpretations of his metaphysics... But Sartre has forestalled us... if the Freudians see sexual symbolism everywhere in Sartre's ontology, this is only because Sartre suggests that the Freudian is trying to disguise his ontological loneliness - the loneliness of a self which exists only in free acts, in an obscene, contingent, godless world, with no values, except those which he himself creates. (510)

Roquentin knew Freudian psychology, which he said is written in books, a psychology that not only disguises ontological loneliness, but also avoids mentioning nothingness, i.e., which questions our right to exist, including his right. And it was true, as he records, "I had always realized it; I hadn't the right to exist. I had appeared by chance, I existed like a stone, a plant, or a microbe..."(*Nausea* 84) Existence in Sartre, as we have noted, is contingent, *de trop*, superfluous. It is not a possession by right, encompassing all other rights and duties. It is seldom, Sartre says, that "play is pure of all appropriation tendency." (*Being and Nothingness* 742) Our play could be for achieving a good name, beating a record, or possessing a handsome body. In reality, as Sartre adds, "... there is always in sport, an appropriative component."(742) That is what traps us, some adhesive, giving sickness, boredom.

That is why Roquentin had a bare existence, or tried to have one. He was neither a father, nor a grandfather, nor even a husband. He did not have a vote. He hardly paid any taxes. He wondered whether he was a simple spectre. There is nothing dismal in his philosophy, nor that of his creator. Unfortunately, Sartre's emphasis upon such unpalatable features of the world as sliminess has won him the reputation of being dismal and depressing. But it is the bourgeois, he replies, who is gloomy. What could be more dismal, he asks in *Existentialism and Humanism*, published in 1946, than such bourgeois aphorisms as 'charity begins at home?'

Sartre's attack on the bourgeois is taken by many critics as his leap of faith, in the writing of Emmanuel Kant's *Critique de la Raison Pure* (1960), but doubted whether it was good or bad faith. Mary Warmock doubted whether the later book was moral or political, for not only *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's *magnum opus*, but also *Nausea* refuted politics, and looked forward to his writing on ethics, as per his promise in the last sentence of *Being and*

*Nothingness*: we shall devote to them (questions of ethics) in a future work.

The ethics of choice indeed involve our responsibility for what we choose for ourselves; we also choose for others, and Sartre's experience with the French Resistance left him, as Passmore also speculates, with a feeling for human solidarity, postulated by Marx. It does not mean that Sartre's earlier philosophy was devoid of ethics and politics. We can trace within *Being and Nothingness* and even in *Nausea* Sartre's unsaid premises for founding ethics. For instance, Roquentin has all along been urging upon himself, as upon us, to accept nothingness, which, as he finds, is key to ethics. But he also knew, as he feels, "we have so much difficulty in imagining nothingness" (*Nausea* 95) and speaking straight in Sartrean language, he adds: "things are entirely what they appear to be—and behind... there is nothing." (1)

In Sartre's phenomenological ontology, there is nothing concealed behind the phenomena or the appearances. The appearances embody full reality. In that case, we find we should not look for a transcendental ago; instead, we should see what happens right before our eyes—the changes as we grow old and die, friends part, never to return, etc. Roquentin resorted to diary-writing, not simply arbitrarily but as a technique, as he stated on the first page, "I must determine the exact extent and nature of this change" (1) so that "more of the nuances or small happenings escape even though they seem to mean nothing. (1) Small or big, changes bring home to him that nothing remains of the parts. "Each event, when it has played its part, puts itself politely into a box and becomes an honorary' event." (96) In such an event, there is nothing to stick to—neither holding others, nor being held captive by others by temptation or force. Such a companionable world is always on the way; it is always to come. No political form, not communism. and in essence, not even the best of democracy is short of this genuine communication, precisely in the context of radical freedom threatened first by bad faith, secondly by sense of shame in the presence of other giving way to conflicting relation and through the difficulty in realizing that the slimy, a relationship of sucking and being sucked with persons or things of the world is always being neither solid nor liquid, is always sliding, slipping out of fingers, besides giving nausea. Even a thought, like the one we quoted above, about things entirely being appearance, so absorbed him that "sickness flooded" (46) over Roquentin, and the pen fell from his hand. "What happened?" "Did I have nausea?" he asked. No, it was not nausea, because nausea is sticky, when this thought was liberating in the context of Rollebon, whose history he was searching.

The historical figure was no longer a mystery. He was a mystery. He was a murderer and a betrayer. The latter fact brought about his second death in the eyes of Roquentin. He realizes that it was his fault for keeping Rollebon alive as a mysterious figure. Once he realizes this, "Rollebon returns to his nothingness." (1) The great Rollebon affair was over for Roquentin, like the great passion. Man himself, according to Sartre, is a useless passion. Roquentin needed Rollebon to exist, and vice versa. Rollebin was his mainstay, his whole life: he was Roquentin's reason for living. Now that the passion is over, he does not know what to do. This freedom now weighs on him. He needs someone to replace Rollebon: he needs some passion to exist. He thinks of Anny, whom he will meet in four days. But suppose as it is very likely. He hopes she will not leave him, though he knows that people play with one another, as does the Self-Taught Man. He tries to befriend people, but at heart, Roquentin says, the fellow is as lonely as he himself is. He does not realize it. The Self-Taught Man tries to be a humanist and even asks Roquentin to love people. "Men are admirable," (Ibid., 122) he says. But Roquentin likes to vomit—and "suddenly there is: the Nausea." (122) Roquentin would like to be free from nausea. Indeed, the novel itself is an exercise in seeking freedom from nausea. What gives him nausea besides his entanglement with people, things—things as insignificant as a knife on the table. The knife is also slimy. Why should he touch it? "Objects, as Sartre put it, are 'mute demands'" (*Being and Nothingness* 796) and man "is nothing in himself but the passive obedience of these demands." (798) Nausea is part of our existence, as of Roquentin, with the difference that while he knows its source, we pursue life blindly by hiding from ourselves our free project. The Self-Taught Man is one of us. Nausea originates when we play ducks and drakes in life, as Roquentin would say. Such a play is seldom pure, as we have already noted, for it is not free from appropriative tendency. It becomes creative when sports is "a free transformation of the worldly environment into the supporting element of the action." (742) Short of this is egoism and utilitarianism, or even disinterestedness or so-called detachment. According to Sartre, "man making himself in order to be God" (742), and all these variants — egoism, utilitarianism, and disinterestedness from this point of view appear to be an egoism, he precisely because there is no common measure between human reality and man's attempt to become God, his self-cause, to put it in Sartrean language.

Human reality, on the other hand, and indeed all things are silently passing out, whether they will or not. There is no room for will-power and struggle for life. Take, for example, trees as they keep on existing, against the

grain, simply because they were weak to die...carry their own death within themselves like an internal necessity; only they don't exist." (*Nausea* 133) Sartre's preoccupation with death should not be misunderstood; it is the ultimate vision of nothingness, which provides Roquentin a foundation for freedom. To quote him, "You couldn't even wonder where all that sprang from, or how it was that a world came into existence, rather than nothingness. (134) He finds no reason for the world to exist or not to exist: it holds him fast, though — "sticky filth," (134) or what should he call it? He decides to pack up and leave for Paris, leaving behind his project of writing the history of Rollebon. He must go to Paris. She, of course, receives him with open arms, but retains her distance. They meet as strangers do. Nevertheless, he still thinks he will be in his ministry, his polestar fixed. It is his mistake, his bad faith, that she is the same person he left four years ago. He is being trapped by his own weakness, not by her sliminess. He is mistaken to think that while he has changed, she is still the same, waiting for him. However, he soon wakes up, as he realizes that there is no good in holding her in his arms, for she was as solitary as he was. Still, he is not as desperate as she was because he did not expect much. She was going with a German painter. She told Roquentin to go, as she was expecting the fellow. She even refused to oblige him with a meeting between Saturday and next Friday, the day of leaving Paris, as she said, she had a lot to do. She said that she would write to him, but he knew she would not. It was a play. And yet she could not resist the temptation of eavesdropping, whether she was really going or it was merely a trick to put him off. He went to the railway station only to find them boarding the train.

This was enough to clutch at his freedom. Could he start it again - some entanglement or the other? What forgiveness after this knowledge? He declares his part as dead — Anny is dead, so is Rollebon. But the past retains itself. In Sartre, the past is still real, existentially real. The past remains bound to Roquentin's present, but he is always already separated from it. This is what he has been learning right from the first page of the diary, i.e., the change. Nothing stays; however, we clutch at it, i.e., the it-self. In contrast to the past, which has become the it-self, the present remains a full-embodied for, the in-itself. Roquentin's present, his coming to the Railway station, seeing her depart, is a flight from being that he was toward the being that he will be. His future is a lack which is constitutive of his subjectivity. As his past provides the foundation for his factivity, so his future provides the foundation for his possibility.

## CONCLUSION

By the end of the novel, He comes back from the Railway station and goes to sleep. On waking, he decided to go back to Bouville from where he came, not of course to stay there, but to pack up and come back to Paris. But he knew that he would gain nothing by this change. Paris, for him, is the same city, full of smelly odours and deafening noises. All cities are alike, he says, without vegetation. They suck one in. Bouville, in this regard, is better than Paris. Back in Bouville, Roquentin feels free. But the question, as noted above, is: can he start his life again? He had counted on Anny to save him. He lost the game, besides learning a lesson that one always loses. Now onward, he would live like Anny—vegetate, eat, sleep, sleep, eat. But this is also nauseating, though this thought gives him a breathing spell. At least, it is better than the life of the Bourgeois, performing customary actions; they feel at home. Sartre's critique of the bourgeoisie is well-known. All that Roquentin desired was to be. It was his error to make Rollebon come alive, i.e., to write another kind of book, not so much for Rollebon, but for himself, so that he could remember himself, his life without repugnance, his past. This would be "accepting himself" (*Ibid.*, 178) to save himself from self-loathing.

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