

The Girl Child's Resilience and Agency in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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Summary

Zimbabwean children's literature has witnessed considerable expansion since the attainment of independence in 1980. It has addressed numerous themes, although it has tended to avoid overtly political issues. This article examines new developments in this literary genre. It focuses on one creative work that employs the perspectives of girl children to describe challenging experiences. The article analyses NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) to understand the resilience of the girl child in Zimbabwe. It examines this literary work as part of Zimbabwean children's literature. It contends that the author provides an effective account of how Zimbabwean children demonstrate resilience and deploy agency to negotiate a very difficult context. However, the article also argues that Bulawayo's approach to the theme has some weaknesses.

Opsomming

Zimbabweese kinderliteratuur het sedert onafhanklikwording in 1980 aansienlik uitgebrei. Dit handel oor talryke temas, maar is geneig om openlik politieke vraagstukke te vermy. Hierdie artikel ondersoek nuwe ontwikkelings in dié literêre genre. Dit fokus op een kreatiewe werk wat die perspektiewe van meisietjies inspan om uitdagende ervarings te beskryf. Die artikel ontleed NoViolet Bulawayo se *We Need New Names* (2013) om die veerkragtigheid van meisietjies in Zimbabwe te verstaan. Dit ondersoek hierdie literêre werk as deel van Zimbabweese kinderliteratuur. Dit voer aan dat die skrywer 'n doeltreffende weergawe gee van hoe Zimbabweese kinders veerkragtigheid toon en bemiddeling gebruik om 'n baie moeilike konteks te hanteer. Die artikel voer egter ook aan dat Bulawayo se benadering tot die tema enkele swakhede toon.

Introduction

The struggle to ensure that the girl child enjoys a quality life is on-going. This struggle recognises that the girl child has to negotiate multiple negative forces if she is to thrive. These negative forces are sponsored by culture, religion, politics, economics and others. In particular, patriarchy socialises the boy child to dominate (Chitando 2012), while relegating the girl child to

the periphery. Although girls and women have refused to take their domination lying down, the odds remain heavily stacked against them. Efforts to promote the emancipation of the girl child in Zimbabwe include the transformation of the education curriculum to remove the gender bias (Gudhlanga, Chirimuuta & Bhukuvhani 2012), to remove religious and cultural ideologies that prevent the girl child from full participation in sport (Manyonganise 2010), and to highlight the potential of the girl child in children's literature (Muwati, Gwekwerere & Gambahaya 2010).

This article analyses NoViolet Bulawayo's novel, *We Need New Names*, to bring out the resilience of the girl child in Zimbabwe. It appreciates the courage and artistic abilities of the author, while highlighting some challenges in the approaches that were deployed. It argues that Bulawayo has broadened the scope of Zimbabwean children's literature by adopting overtly political stances. She has employed a subversive strategy by utilising the view point of "innocent" girls. Since the dominant discourse is around the vulnerability of the girl child, the author has exploited this ideology. She articulates very sensitive political issues through the perspective of the most marginalised members of Zimbabwean society. Such subversion is consistent with the notion that the subaltern can indeed speak (Spivak 1995). In relation to gender ideologies in Zimbabwean children's literature, Bulawayo is in agreement with earlier authors such as Stephen Alumenda, who sought to provide positive images of the girl child in his children's writing. Reflecting on Alumenda's work, Jairos Kangira (2009: 187) contends that, "[T]he girl child is portrayed as active, assertive, wise and independent."

The Girl Child in *We Need New Names*

Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* is a stimulating and revolutionary literary work which lays bare the crisis in Zimbabwe. The work was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2013. It was the winner of the Etisalat Prize 2014, Hemmingway Foundation/PEN Prize 2014 and a Betty Trask Award 2014. The narrator, Darling, a girl aged 10, is an intelligent and highly observant individual. As she plays with her friends, Bastard, Chipso, Godknows, Sbhoo and Stina, in a shanty town ironically called Paradise, she clinically brings out the social decay that now grips the "Beautiful Zimbabwe" that the freedom fighters had celebrated in their mobilisation songs (Pongweni 1982). Darling is candid in her description of the urban poverty, the devastation wrought by HIV and AIDS, and the dramatic collapse of the moral fabric of society.

Paradise is hell on earth. Where the liberators and nationalists had promised "health for all" and "education for all," the reality now was "poverty for most". Darling and her friend live in squalid conditions. However, across, in another suburb called Budapest that is dominated by

whites and rich Africans, life is worth living. The playful invasion of Budapest by Darling's gang in search of guavas is a massive political statement. The poor will not continue to marvel at the extravagance of the rich, whatever their race. One day, the poor will come to the doors of Budapest and "share". Darling's gang prefigures the occupation by blacks of farms, farm houses and factories that were owned by whites during Zimbabwe's fast-track land reform programme in the 1990s.

Paradise has not always existed. It was created when the homes that Darling and her gang previously lived in were destroyed by the state's paramilitary police. Here the author is alluding to the controversial Operation Murambatsvina/Restore Order that was carried out in 2005. This episode in Zimbabwe's postcolonial history has been explored in Maurice T Vambe's (2008) edited volume on Operation Murambatsvina. The ironic name, "Paradise", mirrors that of a block of flats in Harare's Mbare high density suburb that is named, "*Tagarika*" (We are now rich/settled/comfortable). The flats are over-crowded and characterised by poor sanitary conditions. The name, Paradise, evokes a desire, an aspiration and a longing to graduate to a suburb that offers all the amenities and dignity, such as Budapest. Nonetheless, the Budapest that is physically close to Paradise is in reality as far away as the city of Budapest in Hungary for the likes of Darling and their families.

Since her father is away in economic exile in South Africa, her mother now has a male friend. The male friend quenches her sexual appetite and most likely supports her financially. However, Darling has to contend with their sexual escapades as their survival partly depends on the financial support of her mother's lover. Poverty eliminates choices and censures shame. The quest for survival tends to override all social conventions. As a result, life in Paradise tramples on the cherished values of decency, mutual support and respect for elders. A dehumanised people struggles to uphold dignity for self and others. Paradise is lost in Paradise.

Multiple factors threaten the well-being of the girl child in *We Need New Names*. One such challenge, unwanted teenage pregnancy, features in the narrative. Chipso, one of Darling's friends, discovers that she is pregnant. She was raped by her own grandfather. The gang tries to perform a back-street abortion by trying to pull out the foetus. In addition, the socio-economic situation has deteriorated to an extent where, after they initially run away from the corpse of a person who has committed suicide, they summon up the courage to return and "liberate" the shoes that the dead woman was wearing. Furthermore, the girl child has to constantly negotiate the hazardous terrain of drunken men, patriarchal ideologies and a vicious state as she seeks to find her place in independent Zimbabwe.

Through Darling, Bulawayo expresses her disapproval of the new forms of religious expression. One prophet, provocatively named Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro (the last name is suggestive of the male sexual organ in

Shona) is at the forefront of abusing women in his church. Here, Bulawayo's art of naming is subversive in Shona cultural terms: "Prophet Revelation Bitchington's surname is the unmentionable Shona term for the male phallic symbol In Shona culture, such naming is not only a transgression, but deliberate spite to a people's taboos, translating into Bulawayo's sacrilegious transgression," (Magosvongwe & Nyamende 2014). The very weird name that the prophet carries and the fact that it is always used in full when reference is made to him suggests that he is fake. New churches are emerging at a time when citizens are worried about their future. The prophets have stepped in to substitute politicians who should be providing hope to the citizens. Unfortunately, they provide false hope. This aspect of new churches that oppress their members has been sharply criticised by another creative writer, Shimmer Chinodya (Chitando 2013). Girls and young women are vulnerable to abuse by prophets and Darling's vivid descriptions of the prophet's activities highlight the extent to which the prophet is dangerous. He actually performs a sexual act on a woman, right in front of the members of his congregation and the woman's relative.

Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro prays for the woman like that, pinning her down and calling to Jesus and screaming Bible verses. He places his hands on her stomach, on her thighs, then he puts his hands on her thing and starts rubbing and praying hard for it, like there's something wrong with it. His face is alight, glowing. The pretty woman just looks like a rag now, the prettiness gone, her strength gone.

(Bulawayo 2013: 40)

One of the most striking aspects of *We Need New Names* is the extent to which men have been disempowered. Although patriarchy presents men as protectors of women, the men in the novel have lost their status. They have been rendered effeminate by an economy that forces them to leave home and come back to die (Darling's father), or have been reduced to crying in private. Their masculinity has been compromised by their failure to be bread-winners. They have been castrated by both the economy and the state. They are now merely performing masculinity, but without the attendant power and force. However, women and children have managed to identify that the men are bluffing. This is expressed in the following quotation:

And when they returned ... they stuck hands deep inside torn pockets until they felt their dry thighs, kicked little stones out of the way and erected themselves like walls again, but the women, who knew all the ways of weeping and all there was to know about falling apart, would not be deceived; they gently rose from their hearths, beat dust off their skirts, and planted themselves like rocks in front of their men and children and shacks, and only then did all appear almost tolerable.

(Bulawayo 2013: 76-77)

The emasculation of Zimbabwean men is also dealt with by Tendai Huchu (2014) in *The Maestro, the Magistrate and the Mathematician*. He highlights how masculinity is fractured when men are unable to perform their socially prescribed roles of being “the main person”, particularly through demonstrating financial power. As the emerging field of masculinities in African literature (Mugambi & Allan 2010) is showing, there is merit in shifting the gaze to how men are portrayed in African literature. In *We Need New Names*, men are no longer protectors of women and girls. They have been so beaten and humbled that they are preoccupied with their own survival issues. The resilience of the girl child comes to the fore when it is discerned that she is able to navigate the treacherous terrain better than grown up men.

How does a ten-year-old girl negotiate a list of things that are all disturbing? She basically has to dig deep into herself to find the emotional resources to survive her father’s AIDS-related sickness and the disabling environment. With her gang, they employ humour and youthful realism to negotiate a very difficult setting. Darling survives because she deploys her youth to laugh at the oppressive situation. She exudes resilience in that when everything else appears to be falling around her, and her own father is succumbing to AIDS, she is still standing. Her survival, as well as that of other female characters in the narrative, confirms the observation by Nelson Mlambo in his study of Zimbabwean fiction during the crisis years. He writes that, “... the women characters as presented through the fiction are better able to cope with dystopian and crisis times than their male counterparts” (Mlambo 2013: iv).

Resilience of the Girl Child in a Foreign Land

Faced with an ever-deteriorating situation, Darling takes the option that millions of her compatriots took: leaving the motherland. The period between 2000 and 2009 saw many Zimbabweans seeking economic refuge in neighbouring countries and further afield. This has been captured in creative works such as Brian Chikwava (2009) and Nyota, Manyarara, Chiedza and Moyana (2010). Zimbabwe’s leading musician, Oliver Mtukudzi, questions the benefits of joining the Diaspora in his song, *Izere Mhepo* (Empty Hunting Pouch). Mtukudzi suggests that it is futile to venture into the Diaspora. He advises that the myth of foreign lands dripping with milk and honey needs to be further explored.

Despite the challenges associated with the Diaspora, especially for young people, Darling leaves her gang behind and proceeds to join her aunt, Fostalina, in the United States of America. Although the narrative loses something of its poignancy with the transition to the Diaspora, it maintains its thrust of highlighting the girl child’s resilience. Whereas many male

characters are destabilised by relocation, Darling remains as observant and malleable as ever. The Diaspora experience is often shocking to the body system, as well as to value systems that were held dear prior to migration. Although Darling is susceptible to culture shock, she retains her composure and strives to keep in touch with members of her gang. However, all other members of the gang, except Chipo, have deserted the motherland.

Although gradually coming to the realisation that the United States of America is not the new Paradise that she had imagined, she retains a sense of painful realism that is quite striking. Whereas the assumption by most people in the Diaspora is that they are only away from “home” for a short while and will then return, Darling is perceptive. She recognises that the evolving situation might suggest the need for a more realistic approach. A new sense of “home” might need to be embraced, painful as this might be.

And then our children were born. We held their American birth certificates tight. We did not name our children after our parents, after ourselves; we feared if we did they would not be able to say their own names We gave them names that would make them belong in America, names that did not mean anything to us: Aaron, Josh, Dana, Corey, Jack, Kathleen. When our children were borne, we did not bury their umbilical cords under the earth to bind them to the land because we had no land to call ours.

(Bulawayo 2013: 247)

According to African spiritual beliefs, the place where one's umbilical cord is buried is central to the individual's identity. The Diaspora is no longer some faraway place where some individuals went to “hunt” for a short period, but returned “home”. As Bulawayo expresses it through the issue of names, “children of the Diaspora” may no longer have any spiritual connection to their ancestral homes. They now have new names, new locations and, therefore, new identities. However, they can never assume full citizenship in the new place.

Look at them leaving in droves despite knowing they will be welcomed with restraint in those strange lands because they do not belong, knowing they will have to sit on one buttock because they must not sit comfortably lest they be asked to rise and leave, knowing they will speak in dampened whispers because they must not let their voices drown those of the owners of the land, knowing they will have to walk on their toes because they must not leave footprints on the new earth lest they be mistaken for those who want to claim the land as theirs. Look at them leaving in droves, arm in arm with loss and lost, look at them leaving in droves.

(Bulawayo 2013:146)

The Girl Child and Political Literacy

One of the assumptions of children's literature is that the area wrestles with largely "innocent" issues, and that it does not delve into political issues in depth as these are deemed to be outside the major concerns of the field. Although emerging literature has begun to critique the images of African children, there has been a general understanding that it is adult literature that should or can have an overt political outlook. However, in *We Need New Names*, Darling is a perceptive political commentator. Critics might question whether a child might possess such political consciousness, but the forthright way in which she expresses her opinion is believable.

We Need New Names is a political commentary on postcolonial Zimbabwe. The destruction of livelihoods and a collapsing currency receive attention in the narrative. Paradise is a shanty town that is located next to a cemetery. Consequently, the living and the dead are in close proximity to each other. While the dead are physically dead, the living are also dead metaphorically. Their dreams and hopes have been killed. Young people such as Darling can only yearn for yesterday, when schools were still open and they lived in decent houses. Now their future has been sacrificed and they have stopped dreaming about a better tomorrow. Bulawayo questions the choices that have been made by the political elite and her conclusion is that they have stolen the future.

While the adults in *We Need New Names* seek to change their political fortunes by joining the "change" chant, it is clear to Darling and her friends that the adults are engaging in a futile exercise. They might vote and agitate, but, unfortunately, things will get worse. Adults have been dehumanised to the extent that they no longer mind being photographed by white people from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). These NGOs are at the forefront of beaming images of total decay and destruction in Zimbabwe. However, Darling exercises her agency and political astuteness, recognising that poverty must not be allowed to rob one of his or her dignity and human rights. Challenging the notion of subservience and silence, she speaks in English to one of the NGO workers, thereby expressing her being and agency. Among the adults, only MotherLove retains her dignity by refusing to join the stampede for goods from the NGO people: "She turns and strides away, head held high, the bangles on her arms jingling, the stars on her dress shining, her scent of lemon staying in the air even after she is gone" (Bulawayo 2013: 56).

Darling's friend questions citizens who abandon Zimbabwe, hoping that "someone else" will fix the country. She asks, "Tell me, do you abandon your house because it's burning or do you find water to put out the fire? And if you left it burning, do you expect the flames to turn into water and put themselves out?" (Bulawayo 2013: 286). Bulawayo's children are painfully aware of the political responsibility that all citizens have to reconstruct their

country. It is a task that they should not run away from, or sub-contract to NGOs or foreigners. It is Zimbabweans who must “find the water to put out the fire” that has engulfed their home. The girls in *We Need New Names* demonstrate a high level of political consciousness and patriotism. Although patriotism tends to be associated with men, this is challenged in the narrative. The young girls express critical patriotism by showing their awareness of failures of leadership, but without writing off their country completely.

While the political leadership in Zimbabwe has adopted the “Look East” policy and has embraced the Chinese as the country’s “all-weather friends”, the children are more critical. They question if China is a real friend, or it is just interested in feathering its own nest. They observe that the Chinese presence has become more visible and there is now even talk that Chinese has become the country’s new national language. They have built shopping malls, but Darling and her gang are not impressed.

We are booing and yelling when we walk out of Shanghai. If it weren't for the noisy machines, the Chinese would hear us telling them to leave our country and go and build wherever they come from, that we don't need their kaka mall, that they are not even our friends.

(Bulawayo 2013: 47)

We Need New Names does not evade the thorny issue of violence in Zimbabwe. As Lloyd Sachikonye (2011) has described, the history of Zimbabwe has been characterised by episodes of violence. The Change people, such as Bornfree, are getting killed. Bulawayo (2013: 139) writes, “The sign on Bornfree’s grave says BORNFREE LIZWE TAPERA, 1983-2008, RIP OUR HERO. DIED FOR CHANGE.” Young political activists, who should contribute to the country’s revitalisation, are dying young. It would seem that the anticipated change will not come and citizens must prepare themselves for a long and hard period of suffering.

***We Need New Names* and its Contribution to Zimbabwean Children's Literature**

Bulawayo’s debut novel is quite effective in addressing aspects of the Zimbabwean crisis, the resilience of the girl child and the challenges posed by the Diaspora. Darling emerges as a very sensitive and conscious girl who has clear ideas regarding how the world must be organised. She is also aware of the political decisions that have deepened poverty in her country. The emergence of Paradise as a shanty town is a result of the destruction of people’s homes and livelihoods by the political elite. As Bulawayo acknowledges, *We Need New Names* emerges from the background of

Operation Murambatsvina. Further, she indicates how the focus on children is central to her story-telling.

My protagonist, Darling, was inspired by a photograph of this kid sitting on the rubble that was his bulldozed home after the Zimbabwean government carried out Operation Murambatsvina, a clean-up campaign in 2005 that saw some people in informal settlements lose their homes. As I looked at image after haunting image, I became obsessed with where the people would go, what their stories were, and how these stories would develop – and more importantly what would happen to the kid in the first picture I saw. The writing project essentially became about finding out. The country was the backdrop, and of course it was at a time when it was unravelling due to failure of leadership. Still, I was also inspired by what children can stand for, by their innocence, their resilience, humanity and humour, and what they tell us about our world. I think this is where *We Need New Names* gets its pulse.

(www.theguardian.com/books/2013/nov/15/we-need-new-names-NoViolet-bulawayo-guardian-first-book-award)

Although there is debate regarding whether children's literature includes images of children in literature for adults, it is sustainable to argue that Bulawayo has contributed towards the expansion of children's literature in Zimbabwe. In her narrative, children and young adults, particularly girls, emerge as perceptive social commentators who are imbued with resilience. With resilience comes agency. The girl child is not the object of pity; an image that most NGOs are keen to present. Instead, the girl child is actively involved in the transformation of her own situation, as well as that of her community and country. This emphasis on the agency of the girl child challenges the notion of children's suffering in Zimbabwe during the crisis period. Nonetheless, this is not to deny that children in Zimbabwe have not experienced suffering. It is to shift attention to the fact that they have not been ill-fated victims of the situation. One could argue that even the act of stealing guavas in Budapest represents agency and demonstrates their willingness to do something about their situation.

By utilising the perspective of children, Bulawayo communicates children's largely playful approach to life. Many citizens deployed humour to navigate the crisis. Adopting a serious approach to the crisis had health implications. Bulawayo's use of children's humour carries the story line forward, protecting the reader from trauma. Darling and her gang are experts at generating humour and survival in a stifling environment. They laugh at themselves, prophets, politicians and ordinary citizens. They refuse to drown in negativity and self-pity. As a result, *We Need New Names* does not depress the reader. It exposes the reader to children's creativity, innocence and an optimistic approach to life.

Bulawayo has also introduced the theme of the survival of young Zimbabweans in the Diaspora to children's literature. Darling's migration to

the United States of America affords the author an opportunity to interrogate the challenges and adjustments that young Zimbabweans have to make when they find themselves in new locations. Although the work done on the welfare of children who remain in the country when their parents migrate is useful, it tends to overlook the fact that many children themselves have left Zimbabwe. Earlier work by JoAnn McGregor (2008) concentrated on children who still need care. *We Need New Names* explores the theme of young Zimbabwean adults in the Diaspora in an enlightening way, drawing attention to the culture shock, adjustment and questioning of the value of relocating.

Bulawayo has also addressed the theme of religion in a stimulating manner. The tendency in children's literature is to promote religion, especially missionary Christianity. However, in the face of the crisis, the old people are held captive by religion and superstition. This has seen fake prophets and traditional healers flourishing; charging for their services in foreign currency in the wake of the worthless local currency. For example, one healer, Vodloza, regards himself as the "BESTEST HEALER IN ALL OF THIS PARADISE" (Bulawayo 2013: 27). He claims to deliver clients from, among others, "childrenlessness, small penises, marriagelessness, bad luck with getting visas especially to USA and Britain, nonsensical people in your life" and others (Bulawayo 2013: 27). Children, on the other hand, approach life with a befitting degree of scepticism and even an element of atheism. This enables them to adopt a more balanced perspective on issues and to avoid imposing supernatural interpretations on events.

Critical Reflections on *We Need New Names*

Despite the strengths of the narrative and its contribution to Zimbabwean children's literature, there are some noticeable challenges. One of the major challenges relates to how Darling and her gang seek to transform their situation. Bulawayo's approach towards the resilience and agency of the children and young adults is not penetrating and radical enough. For example, they do not initiate programmes or ideas that will take either them or Zimbabwe forward in any remarkable manner. Redmond (2009), as cited in Clark-Kuzak (2014: 3) identifies strategies that children deploy in situations of poverty. These include "getting by" (small acts of survival), "getting back at" (rebellious behaviour to respond to felt/perceived injustice), "getting out" (longer-term strategic acts to effect change of the individual child's circumstances) and "getting organised" (collective action to press for social change).

Darling and her gang are involved in a number of the survival strategies outlined above. They "get by" by undertaking daily activities to survive. They "get back" by stealing guavas from Budapest. Darling and others "get

out” by getting out of Zimbabwe in search of better living environments. However, they do not “get organised”, which is the most important step in social transformation. Failing to invest in radical social transformation compromises the resilience and agency of the children. Bulawayo could have seized the opportunity to map out her vision of Zimbabwe beyond the crisis. As it is, she does not even begin to provide insights into how Darling and her gang can contribute towards a new Zimbabwe.

Suggesting that *We Need New Names* is quite creative, one can appreciate the longing for the “before” that Darling and her gang have. They mirror the nostalgia that many Zimbabweans have of the years just after independence; the days of “the jewel of Africa”, “the breadbasket of the region” and other empowering labels. Darling and her gang now only have to find their way in a poverty-stricken Zimbabwe, whose men have been emasculated by the crisis. However, realism demands that citizens come to terms with the new reality. Renaming or multiplying new names, while communicating the quest to come out of the crisis, might be necessary but not adequate.

In a number of instances, it does become apparent to the reader that Bulawayo’s political sensibilities are being communicated through Darling.

As a “born free” (one born after 1980 when Zimbabwe gained independence), Bulawayo appears to question the narrative of a heroic people who took up arms to liberate themselves from oppression by white people. The scepticism expressed by Darling and her gang, while understandable in the given circumstances, sometimes threatens to rubbish the story of the liberation struggle.

Bulawayo’s approach to religion and spirituality for children is also controversial. In line with other creative writers such as Shimmer Chinodya and Charles Mungoshi, she is critical of the role of the new churches. She caricatures prophets, projecting them as swindlers who take advantage of the suffering of the masses to enrich themselves. The children in her narrative thrive on the use of reason, scheming and humour to negotiate the demands of life. The main challenge with this kind of an approach is that it portrays all religion as false and misleading. Perhaps the author needed to strike a balance and show some positive aspects of religion in the lives of children and adults.

Conclusion

We Need New Names is a captivating account that makes use of the point of view of children to examine the Zimbabwean crisis. Demonstrating the fact that the crisis affected all those who were not members of the elite class, irrespective of ethnic affiliation, Bulawayo highlights how citizens sought to remain afloat amid a devastating flood. Her work represents an important contribution to children’s literature in Zimbabwe. It avoids the popular

stereotype of women and girls as passive victims in times of crises. In *We Need New Names*, the girl child emerges as an intelligent survivor who is able to interpret her circumstances meaningfully and adjust in the face of incapacitating situations. Darling endears herself to the reader by refusing to collapse when things fall apart all around her. Exhibiting high levels of resilience and agency, she anticipates getting a new name in a new Zimbabwe.

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