The Rebellion of Mariang Sinukuan, or Why We Need to Discuss Place Mutualism

Rina Garcia Chua

Behind the picturesque extinct volcano known as Mount Arayat in Pampanga, Luzon, is the story of Mariang Sinukuan. Known for her naturally curly long black hair that reaches down to her ankles, she also has long eyelashes, arched eyebrows, and a finely chiseled nose. Her skin is a pristine brown, in stark contrast to the white flowing robe that she is said to be wearing at all times. Often, she is compared to her more popular contemporary diwata[1] and neighbor, Mariang Makiling.

Yet, unlike the benevolent, quiet Mariang Makiling, Mariang Sinukuan is known as a wily goddess. The locals have said that she would come down from Arayat on Sundays, when she knew that local commerce was thriving. Here, she would sell produce from the mountain as well as buy products from the people. However, no one truly knew what she looked like for she always came down disguised as an ugly old farmer with protruding lips and crooked teeth.

She has also been known to be very gracious to the people of Arayat. She regularly left fruits and animals at the doorsteps of locals who were hard up. Unfortunately, this generosity was soon abused by some greedy townspeople.

One day, a group of young men marched up the mountain to demand from Mariang Sinukuan more than what they needed. She allowed them to get what they desired, with a warning not to pick the fruits from

1 This is the Filipino term for "fairy."

the forests without her permission. The men shrugged this off, since they thought that the goddess had so much for herself that it was impossible for her to notice anything amiss. But she did. As they picked more and more, their packs started to feel so heavy. Looking inside, they discovered that the fruits they picked had turned into rocks! They left their packs behind in fright and started to run down the mountain, but Mariang Sinukuan reappeared to curse them and turn them into swine for the rest of their lives.

This did not stop the other locals from becoming greedier though. As more people came up the mountain to take what they wanted without any permission, Mariang Sinukuan stopped leaving food on their doorsteps and vanished, bringing with her the abundance of fruits and animals in the forests. It is also said that she left a curse on Mount Arayat: whoever wanders in it with ill intentions will be enchanted by music so beautiful that the stranger will have to search for its source until s/he is lost in the wilderness forever.

The myth of Mariang Sinukuan is a stark example of the affinity we Filipinos have with our land. It is a mutual respect: Sinukuan shared the mountain with the people, while they respected and tolerated her. No one ever tried investigating whether she was real or not; they just accepted that she was a part of their lives as they were part of hers. Sinukuan allowed the people to live at the foot of Mount Arayat and she showered them with kindness every now and then, while the residents did not overstep their spatial boundaries and asked for permission before they took something from her place.

Her sudden disappearance and the curse she left behind makes anyone wonder: What could have appeased Sinukuan? It is a big question that cannot be answered by simple folklore or myth.

Nowadays, we are aware of the steps being taken to preserve Mount Arayat. Under Proclamation No. 203, 10 hectares of the area are protected as the Mount Arayat National Park land reserve. More recently, President Benigno Aquino has pledged one billion pesos to the rehabilitation of this National Park. We are aware also that declaring a land area a reserve means that it is protected against exploitation or any kind of hunting; however, these forms of exploitation are still rampant, and, nowadays, no one seems to be frightened by the curse Sinukuan has left behind. This has prompted the government to intervene and replace the natural kinship between

Mariang Sinukuan's land and the people with a series of proclamations, executive orders, and republic acts.

The way this particular Philippine myth explains our affinity with the land encapsulates the problems of "place" in ecocriticism: *what is it?* Does it refer to our still pristine provinces or the urbanized city that most of us live in? Is it the forests that we have declared as reserves or the buildings we continue to build for economic growth? Is it, like Mariang Sinukuan, something we have lost and need to find again?

To answer these questions, I have explored the idea of *place* in this essay. First, I have discussed the importance of establishing a place-based discourse by clarifying the concept of "place" in ecocriticism. Then, I have differentiated two important contexts of this discourse: dualism and mutualism. Through this differentiation, I have talked about how mutualism is analyzed in ecological poetry through the interdependent discussion of north and south places. The establishment of this idea enables me to ecocritique poems which are thematically about our relationship with a particular place. These poems are "Flood Musicale" by Herminio S. Beltran, Jr.; "Views from the High Rise" by Abercio V. Rotor, and "Hidden Lakes, Secret Rivers (The World of an Oregon Poet)" by Myrna Peña-Reyes. These poems allow me to speculate on the probable ecological stand brought about by ecopoems' mutualism. Finally, place mutualism as an ecocritical concept addresses why the issue must be continually discussed in Philippine literary discourse.

The Place of "Place"

Ecocriticism is a theoretical framework that merges two different disciplines—science and literature—to come up with ways to address the present ecological situation. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryl Glotfeltly writes the first widely accepted definition of ecocriticism:

> [...] ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies; ... (xix)

With this, Greg Garrard (16) says that Glotfeltly answers questions that have been hounding ecocritics since the start of their movement—ranging from "How is nature represented in this sonnet?" to "What cross-fertilization is possible between literary studies and environmental discourse in related disciplines such as history, philosophy, psychology, art history, and ethics?" Most ecocritics ask for the ecological texts to 'take a stand' on the growing environmental problems; though what kind of stand and how to make it are still vague—a vagueness common to most of the issues under this framework. One of the most basic issues is the often disputed idea of "place."

"Place," though dense in its composition, is an unequivocal part of ecocriticism. In ecology, "place" is the earth itself—where the ecosystems thrive and survive. In Fritjof Capra's pedagogy of ecological literacy, "place" is the "homeland" of the ecological self[2]. These two definitions see place as both our physical *and* emotional space. Furthermore, Sandra Wooltorn (2) says that a strong sense of place can revitalize connectedness with not only the environment, but also with one's culture, history, and organic community. If so, unifying the physical and emotional aspect of our spaces contributes to the holistic awareness of the environment.

Yet, it needs to be more than mere holistic awareness: David Orr (93) recommends a "place-based" pedagogy to supplement education for it can undo the habits of dependency and wastefulness which wreck one's "place." In other words, sustainability can keep one's place alive. For Orr, 'place' is defined as the human being's direct organic environment. There is no exclusion here—'organic place' simply means whichever environment you find yourself in at the moment or one that you are most familiar with. Aside from this, place is a systematic whole which cannot be fully understood by only analyzing its constituent parts; hence, it supports all kinds of environment. Thus, in this ecocritique and as a literary terminology, the definitive physical environmental location of the persona shall be referred to as *place*.

2 Sandra Wooltorn (in 2004) explains the ecological self as a person who "experiences the sense of interconnectedness with the cycle of life on the basis of care and comparison, expansiveness of soul and respect for other on the basis of respect for difference." She also affirms the ecological self as one of the key connected elements of ecological literacy or a crucial factor in attaining the goal of sustainability.

Now that place has been defined, what kind of place do we analyze in Philippine ecopoetry? There are many misunderstandings in a singular place-based critique like the following: If we use only one place as our definitive physical environment, what about the other places? What if, in sustaining our place, we forget other places and simply delegate these as casualties in our fight for survival?

Val Plumwood attempts to shatter the stoicism of the place-based discourse by bringing place back to interrelationship. She says that communities must always be imagined in relationship with others, particularly downstream communities, rather than as singular and self-sufficient. There are numerous misinterpretations of the place-based critique, which she attributes to dematerialization, for literature treats attachments to place as an emotional pedestal—the be all and end all of our relationship with our direct environment. According to her, we have the tendency to put the natural places on a stage and worship them, which can circumvent sustainability for it aims to save only these beautiful places that we have relationships with.

She further argues that in order for literature to convey a clear ecological stand, we must look beyond mind/body dualism and aim for north/south mutualism.

North and South Mutualism

Plumwood, in her 1993 book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature,* defines dualism as "a logic of presence and absence, in which the other is specified as the absence of the condition specified …, rather than as an independent other." Everything that is *aside from* or *in relation to* human beings is expressed as 'the environment.' Furthermore, this dualism promotes a radical exclusion of the environment, turning it into something to be dominated and controlled by superior reason for utilization or service. Mind (as rational human beings) dominates the body (as environment) in dualism. There is a total break between human beings and nature, which insinuates that human beings are more vital and superior to everything else. This is different from what the myth of Mariang Sinukuan tells us: from the beginning, Sinukuan was respected by the people and she allowed them to live at the foot of her mountain. This kind of relationship, symbiotic at its best, mirrors the ideas of mutualism.

Plumwood's subsequent essay for the 2008 *Australian Humanities Review*, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," defines two imperative concepts in the place-based discourse. She introduces the terminologies of north and south places. The north places are the spaces which are beloved, admired, and nice to look at; the south places, also known as the "shadow places," are the ones which are shunned, ugly, and environmentally degraded. Plumwood reiterates the importance of recognizing the north and south places alike for they are both parts of the environment. Unlike dualism which makes the choice between one or the other, or allows one to dominate the other, in mutualism, no choices are made—the idea is to look at how both places can benefit each other, whether for good or bad. For example, the north places become nice because of the sacrifices made by the south places. At the same time, the south places are recognized and preserved by the advancements of the north places[3]. They co-exist within the same area for they continue to affect each other. This is mutualism: the process of locating our ecological thought through which we can view both north and south places equally to find ways of sustaining them both, so we can preserve the places that supply us with the comforts of life and the places that we have affinity with.

It is no surprise that many Filipino poets have chosen to write about the unique landscape of the country and used it as a common metaphor for, say, their feelings or experiences. Yet, few have been brave enough to concretize their idea of place in their poetry, and even fewer have discussed the changing geography of the Philippines. The issue of place is a contradictory idea in the Philippines, as it oftentimes is in a Third World country, because of the constant developments and degradations both happening at the same time in a given environment. This shifting geography merits more than a discussion—the urban landscape has steadily taken over the rural areas of the country, an occurrence more common in the capital cities than in the provinces. In DENR's[4] Forest

3 Considering economics, the north places or the economically-advanced places usually are built over the south places. These are prolific in Manila, wherein condominiums and/or malls are built over former vacant lots/forests to accommodate businesses. However, the south places are also preserved by the advancement of the north places; this is apparent, once again, in the Mt. Makiling preservation efforts. As facilities and technology improve, so does the capability to preserve environmentally-protected areas like Mt. Makiling through CCTV cameras or electric wires.

4 Department of Energy and Natural Resources

Management Bureau's annual Philippine forestry statistics, there is a one million-hectare difference between the total forest cover area of the years 2011 and 2012[5]. Data from Global Forest Watch further says that our country has lost more than 600,000 hectares of forest from the years 2001 up to 2013, which is roughly two percent of our total land area. These statistics do not reflect how many of these forest cover areas have been given up for urban planning, or why the numbers have shrunk between 2011 and 2012 or 2001 and 2013, yet the evidence surrounds us. In Metro Manila alone, buildings have overtaken the remaining forest areas in the city. One example is the densely forested land facing the old Baclaran Church in Pasay City; now, it is highly urbanized with hotels, an international school, and fast food areas. The harsh changes in the geography of the Philippines relate back to place mutualism, in which a visible struggle is evident between the north and south places of our country. The question is: how has ecopoetry translated this struggle? More importantly, what do ecopoets suggest we do about them?

Our links with the past, present and future in a particular place are important in mutualism. These links may be the unwelcome modernization of place, or they may also be about the more abrupt changes brought about by unexpected occurrences—in that sense, the links do not only join the north and south places together, but also humanity with disasters.

A more literal and physical link can be found in the mutualism of Herminio S. Beltran, Jr.'s "Flood Musicale[6]." The persona in the poem perceives the common floods in the country like a guest who comes in uninvited and forces you to listen to what he or she has to say through music. In Beltran's poem, the floods are musical in nature and easily engulf the north places (gutters, streets, gardens, patios) by "the staccato of voluminous swelling." The floods quickly go out of control like "an acid rock concert," invading the "salas and rooms" until it reaches the second floor of the house. It ravages everything—books, magazines, piano pieces—and does not stop there:

5 The total forest cover of the country shrank from 7,168,400 hectares in 2011 to 6,839,718 hectares in 2012. The data for the years 2013 and 2014 have not been released as of writing.

6 This poem was taken from the *Ani* publication on "Disaster and Survival" for 2010-2011. See bibliography for further details.

As the sea continues to swell far outside
And inside you, finally drowning
You in a symphonic crescendo
Of thick water rushing, stressing
A reverberating musical theme. ("Flood Musicale" 22-26)

The poem links with the reader by tapping on prior experiences of flooding that are all too common in the country. It reminds you of what you have been through, and how you have to go through all the panic, confusion, and devastation of flooding *repeatedly* during the monsoon season. The assault of the floods (quickly turning the north into south places) is physical and brutal, not even sparing human beings from the surging waters. As the flood links with the structures of modern living, everything is lost and the human person is left with nothing but him/herself to save. It is an apocalyptic poem, denoting the dangers of our place's ecological degradation if this "theme" is not amended. In this light, the poem assaults the reader by attacking his/her subconscious memories of prior flooding—Ondoy, Frank, Sendong, Yolanda—to revive past emotions. The last few lines that state the ordeal of flooding as "stressing a reverberating musical theme" invokes mutualism by unifying the safe place and dangerous flood as a theme that reoccurs every now and then. The reader, after being assaulted by the ecopoem, is now left with the following question: *Will you let this happen again?* From here on, ecological thoughts can flourish, making this particular link an effective reminder of the past, urging us to understand the place we are living in, and coming up with sustainable ideas as an ecological stand to protect our future.

This particular link can also allow us to look into the present status of our place more critically: In Metro Manila alone, the high-rise boom has transformed the skyline. According to the website of real estate service provider *Colliers International*[7] in its third quarter of 2012 report, at the end of 2011, an average of roughly five thousand five hundred (5,500) units are to be completed annually, leading to a growth in total stock of thirty percent (30%) in the Philippine residential sector by 2013[8]. The demand is

7 Taken from http://www.colliers.com/~/media/files/apac/philippines/market%20reports/realestatemarketreport_2q12.ashx (accessed on 6 Aug 2013)

8 In addition to this, Metro Manila project launches reached over nineteen thousand (19,000) units in the first half of 2012, with an interesting side note that reservation sales exceeded the total project launches by five thousand (5,000).

there and, interestingly enough, the supply cannot keep up. As the demand continues to increase in the Third World and investors see the opportunity to build more high-rises, the changes seem inevitable. Yet, once we permeate these structures and allow ourselves to build our lives in them, we again are given a new place to settle in—a new place to critique. The view from these high-rises is certainly breathtaking and awe-inspiring, but at the same time, they offer instances when we can see our place from a different point-of-view (than what we have been used to), and determine the impact of this condominium boom on our environment.

Rotor tackles the effects of these changing perspectives on our relationship with our place through "Views from a High Rise." Here, the persona sees the view change through the window of a high-rise building. He feels awed by the beauty of earlier views, but later on is saddened by the poor sight as the "new world" takes over. A first reading reveals the imagery of the poem is timely enough to catch the attention of most urban residents. This title alone is mutualistic, since the persona finds himself between both places—in the high rise (north place) with a view of the land below (south place). Yet to establish these places, the poem undergoes a constant shift from one view to another to affix the persona's focal point of being within the high-rise and seeing changes from there. These constant shifts of view are: first, of the persona being in the high rise and looking at the beautiful view below; second, of the persona seeing the changes occurring from the high-rise; and third, of the persona thinking that the high-rise's window gives a "poor sight." As the views degenerate, we see a mutualistic tendency in these shifts for they show that the north place that we revere so much can quickly become the south place we abhor now. The poem takes us to the persona's focal point and situates us within the high-rise to see for ourselves how we allow the south place to take over the north place, and how—incidentally—we are instrumental in making this happen since we are *within* the high-rise, a development which itself has occupied place. It is an apathetic position to take, a position which many choose to occupy when it comes to environmentalism. Within the high-rise, we do not choose to go down and act on the occurring environmental degradation; within the high-rise, we instead choose to watch from afar and contemplate what has happened. Two lines in the ecopoem summarize these sentiments:

Through the veil of the window
Creation's wonder is brief. ("Views from a High Rise" 15-16)

Though it seems apathetic, we still latch on to the idea that the impression of seeing the view change through a window in a high-rise condominium is a profound moment of ecological consciousness. Thoughts like these may occur in the reader: Why does the view change so fast? What has happened to the beauty that the persona used to see before? What has taken the place of the beautiful view now? These questions can be springboards for sustainable ideas leading to an ecological stand, especially if the reader is in the same situation as the persona: s/he lives in the north place and is able to observe and reflect on the ever-changing places below. The unity of both north and south places in the persona's thoughts and in the reader's minds is enough to stimulate ecological consciousness. The room for reflection on the changes that come and go is already a significant stirring toward an ecological awakening. It may be possible that the reader, who finds him/herself in the same position as the persona, can ask: *What do I do about this?* It can also be possible that the reader may not choose to utilize the apathetic position and actually go ahead and commit to action about the changing view. The overall poetic stratagem of putting the persona in the middle of both places is openness to ecological reflection. The persona sees the view change and does not loath it, but reflects on the emotions felt while gazing out of the high-rise. Who knows what the persona will do next? Will he step out of the high-rise and meet with the south place? Will he take a step toward stopping the changes? These ecological thoughts are best answered not by the poem but by us readers—and this is where the poem allows us to take our own ecological stand for our place.

These linkages, so imperative to place mutualism, also allow us to use the past in order to procure a different view of the present. The merging presented by these linkages may also extend beyond our country, and can bring together two entirely different continents. This is oftentimes the case with Filipino-American writers who have experienced two different terrains: the First and Third Worlds. In postcolonial ecocriticism, Graham Huggan and Hellen Tiffin (110) say that former colonies like the Philippines have used pastoral extensively as a "lens" through which to view

the native landscape that defies the imported vocabulary mapped onto it. The English language itself, again a mark of past colonization, is oftentimes seen as inadequate to describe the intricate biodiversity of our country. Yet, Filipino-American ecopoets like Myrna Peña- Reyes have used this language to challenge the First World terrain using the lens of Third World landscape. In turn, it reveals how Filipinos are oftentimes intrinsically merged with their environments—we discover the ocean, forests, valleys, rivers, lakes, and other landscapes while discovering our own identities at the same time. It may also be a challenge to the First World to understand their place well enough to actually form a relationship with it, as Peña-Reyes demonstrates in her ecopoem, "Hidden Lakes, Secret Rivers (The World of an Oregon Poet)." The persona in the poem begins by musing on how an Oregonian who is surrounded by forests chooses not to write about the lake and river, despite living closely with nature. The persona then describes how Oregonian men "dismember mammoth trees" and "fight flaming ridges on fir-strung mountains" to mine underground. The challenge comes in the last few stanzas of the poem, where the persona begins by mentioning famous lakes and rivers to remind the Oregonian poet that these still exist. Then, the persona compares how the Third World interrelates with its environment:

> We learn our landscapes early.
> Who knows what parts we mine with memory,
> the slate we quarry to polish
> to show a moment's whimsy? ("Hidden Lakes, Secret Rivers," 18- 21)

In defiance, the persona immediately declares that it is different in her country. Here, the idea of mining is acquainting one's self with the landscape; that there is no other motive in knowing the land other than to learn about it. In the last two stanzas the challenge is further explored:

> My world was shaped by island water,
> Spilling warm seas and rivers
> as sure as jungle and palm trees
> edge the tropical shore.

And you, where ancient mountains roll
their endless forests to the clouds,
fish and hunt the fugitive quarry.
Guarding your sources well,
Deep in hemlock, pine, spruce, and fir,
you stoke that campfire by the water –
the hidden lake, the unnamed falls,
that secret river. ("Hidden Lakes, Secret Rivers," 22- 33)

It is in this defiance that the interrelationship between the two different landscapes is shown—whereas in the First World the sources are guarded well against other invaders and they are cultivated by the locals themselves, in the Third World there is a freedom in learning landscapes early and defining one's world with nature. There are no secrets to the Third World's environment for the words "spill," "sure," and "edge" used to describe the local environment are sharp contrasts to "fugitive," "guarding," "deep," "hidden," "unnamed," and "secret" of the First World. It is in this defiance, characterized by the need to contrast the interrelationship of the Filipinos with their environment and the Americans and theirs, that the ecopoem reaches mutualism. Here, how the Third World deals with their closeness with place is clearly described—and how there is openness in dealing with land resources. Mutualism is also merging ourselves with nature; in this case, accepting that we grow up with island water and the tropical shore. This shows that we Filipinos do not define place; we let our place define us.

Yet, what we also see here is that there is no shadow place in any part of the earth, whether in the First or the Third World. All of the world's citizens have their own mutualism and ways of manifesting this. Mutualism also teaches us to view all corners of the world and their respective places as equals. No one is above the other, and as such, all must be sustained.

Place Mutualism in Ecocriticism

The imagery in the Filipino ecopoets' poems is clear: place, though at times multiple and misleading, is well-established. There can be a surfeit of metaphors in some poems, but they do give us a clear picture of

a mutualistic, unified place. These images can range from changing views from a high-rise to the comparison of different natural forms.

One of the important themes of these ecopoems is uneasiness. The discomfiture that accompanies the persona or that which the persona hands over to the reader is unnerving. This is because, rather than simply blaming the north places for the changes in the place, the different personae in these poems suggest the idea of environmental justice. Elizabeth Ammons (55) defines this as "a movement [that] concerns itself with protection of the natural world." Plumwood (11) further situates environmental justice in the place discourse as "an injunction to cherish and care for your places, but without in the process destroying or degrading any other places, where 'other places' include other human places, but also other species' places." Environmental justice is evident in the different treatments of place in these poems: in "Views from a High Rise," Rotor situates the persona and the reader in a high-rise looking down to provoke ecological thoughts about the shadow places below; in "Flood Musicale," Beltran's imagery of familiar household objects turning against the inhabitants of a house—all because of the flood's intrusion—instills fear and promotes sustainable thoughts; and in Peña-Reyes' "Hidden Lakes, Secret Rivers," the persona's taunting of how the West affiliates with their place (as compared to how the Global South affiliates with theirs) is a manifestation of how two different landscapes treat and operationalize environmental justice.

I have mentioned before that the natural kinship of Mariang Sinukuan's land and the people has been replaced by environmental laws. This is how environmental justice operates as the epitome of mutualism. It is what the place discourse intends to reach in the context of ecological literature. According to *The Center for Ecological Literacy* (as qtd. in "Ecological Literacy"):

> A truly sustainable community is alive—fresh, vital, evolving, diverse, dynamic. It supports the health and quality of life of present and future generations while living within the limits of its social and natural systems. It recognizes the need for justice, and for physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural, and spiritual sustenance. (3)

In order for sustainable ideas to become actions, there is a need for environmental justice to become an integral part of our paradigm. Place, as I have mentioned, does not discriminate. All places are needed for our sustenance. It is now a matter of understanding that these places are here at the moment and of determining how we can incorporate them toward the future without any additional harm to both north and south places.

Poetry can be the perfect vehicle for the discussion of place in ecocriticism and literature. This is because poetry has concrete imagery that encapsulates a diversity of places within a few lines; in other words, the power of poetry lies in *showing*. Paul Englemann (as qtd. in Mualem 293) says that poetry is most effective when it shows "the picture of life"—our feelings, cultures, situations, nature, etc. More importantly, it illustrates direct experiences that we all can easily relate with. Ecopoetry does not only allow us to see the concept of place through the persona's eyes, but also to provoke our emotions toward making an ecological stand (not provide it).

That said, why do we *need* to discuss place mutualism in Philippine literature? Simply because if we want the ground we take from, live on, and commune with to survive along with us, we need to raise the issues of place in our physical and literary society. There is an educational imperative to the marriage of science and literature in texts, through which the readers can be provided with information, notions, theories, and social criticism regarding our current ecological environment. This is one way for literature to actively contribute to the ongoing environmental debate, where there is an ongoing clamor for all fields of knowledge to come up with ideas concerning sustainability.

Perhaps, it is also in literature that we can rebel against the dualistic preconceived notions of society. It is here, in the ecopoems, that we are roused with this burning question: *What can you do?* We are left conscious of the fact that place has never been lost—these places are in front of us, and it is up to us to do what we can to preserve them. Maybe we can also learn from Mariang Sinukuan's rebellion—Do we go along with dualism and watch our places diminish in front of us or do we abandon this mode of thinking and do something to reverse the damage? Do we keep on waiting for Mariang Sinukuan to return to us or do we try to find her? Maybe the answers to these questions, as shown in mutualism, have been right in front of us all along.

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