



# The Unbearable Weight of the Male Gaze: Kundera's Biasness for Masculinity in The Unbearable Lightness of Being

Mst Sabrina Moktar Arju<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Department of English, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Bangladesh.

\* Corresponding author.

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## Abstract

This study addresses the gender bias and reflections on the masculinity of Milan Kundera in his novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* from Laura Mulvey's iconic male gaze theory. The study uses qualitative methodology, including close textual reading and critical discourse analysis. As the study focuses on the differences in Kundera's use of linguistic dichotomy for Tereza and Tomas and demonstrates how Kundera's portrayal of infidelity and its acceptance in male characters perpetuates patriarchal norms and contributes to the systemic objectification and oppression of women, the research reveals that Kundera's narrative techniques, his word choice, and characterizations align with patriarchal norms. Kundera portrays men as a decisive, dominating force through the character Tomas, whereas Tereza is shown as emotionally reliant and docile. Moreover, Tomas's infidelities are depicted as natural extensions of his masculinity, whereas female infidelity is stigmatized which highlights the double standards of Kundera in the portrayal of gender and sexuality. Sabina's identity is still often framed concerning men, particularly Tomas and Franz. The language used to describe her also reflects the male gaze and objectification. This research serves as a helpful reminder of the necessity to identify and evaluate the male gaze in literature while promoting more inclusive and powerful stories that subvert patriarchal power structures and conventional gender norms.

**Key words:** Masculinity; Male gaze; Kundera; Misogyny; Patriarchy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The term "male gaze," is credited to feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. This claims that visual arts and literature depict women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective by presenting women as objects of male pleasure and desire. This concept serves as a tool in examining the dynamics of power and control in gender relations. The *Unbearable Lightness of Being*, a 1984 novel by Milan Kundera, tells the lives of two women, two men, a dog, and the 1968 Prague Spring period in Czechoslovak history.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera shows the complexities of human relationships through themes of love, fidelity, freedom, and the search for meaning. The female protagonists of the novel, particularly Tereza and Sabina, epitomize the struggle against objectification and oppression. Tereza's journey is marked by her desire for authentic love and recognition, and Sabina's rebellion against societal conventions illustrates the multifaceted impacts of the male gaze on women's lives. This research aims to explore how Kundera's depiction of his female characters mirrors more generalized patterns of objectification and oppression in society. This study focuses on the interactions and internal monologues of these characters and seeks to reveal that the male gaze shapes female identities and experiences in the novel.

### 1.1 Rationale of the study

*Unbearable Lightness of Being* highlights masculine perceptions of women and the separation of gender

roles created in the mindsets of men and women. This study seeks to contribute to ongoing conversations about gender representation, power dynamics, and reader reception in literature. By critically examining the novel through a feminist lens, this research aims to shed light on how the male gaze operates within literary texts and its implications on discussions of gender, sexuality, and representation. This paper also highlights the novel's relevance to contemporary debates on feminism and gender equality as it sheds light on the enduring challenges women face in their quest for liberation and self-empowerment.

## 1.2 Literature Review

Numerous studies on this novel from various angles have been done. STAN examined cultural identity in "*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*," and the impact of Soviet influence on Czechoslovakia and the struggle to maintain cultural identity. This paper explored the novel's characters' use of love as a refuge from political oppression and the obsession with totalitarianism. Kundera's narrative merges philosophical speculation with storytelling, presenting a rich examination of the human condition and political issues. The novel employs polyphony and counterpoint to intertwine personal and political dramas and tension between individual freedom and totalitarianism. (STAN, 2018) A study titled "The Treatment of Kitsch and Love in the Novel: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*" analyzed how kitsch could be an attitude or behavior influencing the character's lives and how the theme of love and kitsch contribute to the narrative fabric and fictional world of various characters. Javad Momeni conducted a study from a psychological perspective by drawing on two Lacanian concepts, the big Other and object petit a. According to him, Kundera's characters get entangled in suspension as their encounters with their reified big Other and object petit lead them to different trends of subjectivities. Tomas's search for object petit a in women goes deeper than this, as he reveals the virtual essence or odor that is truly constitutive of object petit a in them. (Momeni, 2016, p.1624) Gregory Kimbrell argues that Kundera seems to believe that either submission to totalitarianism or reaction against it involves a loss of authenticity, leaving self-exile as the only possible choice for an individual wishing to retain his authenticity. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, all of the characters are forced to abandon their homes at one point or another, but it is only for Tomas and Sabina that this abandonment takes on the characteristics of authentic self-exile. (Kimbrell, p.78) Saran et al. revealed that, having a (un)resolved Oedipus complex, the female characters of the novel are suppressed, and the male characters exploit women sexually as well as psychologically. They have the potential to control the psyche of the characters, and the (un)resolved Oedipus

shapes the patriarchal behavior of males. They assert that the novel portrays "the malevolence in the characters of males under the influence of their (un)resolved Oedipus complex" (Saran et al., 2023, p.145) Barnard analyzed how Kundera uses repetition as a narrative device and a philosophical theme, highlighting the interplay between critical intelligence and the autonomy of fictional characters. Kundera's novel persistently draws attention to its fictiveness and uses a repetitive structure to explore the idea of eternal return. By revisiting events from different perspectives, the novel creates a complex, layered narrative that challenges the notion of linear storytelling and emphasizes the philosophical inquiries about the meaning of human experiences. (Barnard, 2003, p.72)

## 1.3 Research Gap

Following a thorough analysis of all relevant work, it is clear that previous studies have concentrated on various facets of the novel, such as narrative strategies, social critique, psychoanalysis, and character development. However, there is a noticeable gap that persists regarding the portrayal of masculinity. This study aims to fill this void by examining how Kundera constructs male characters, their desires shaping the narrative, and the potential presence of a male gaze.

## 1.4 Objectives of the study

The main objective of this paper is to identify how the novel reflects a bias towards masculinity through the lens of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze.

Secondary Objectives:

- To focus on the differences in Kundera's use of linguistic dichotomy for Tereza and Tomas which highlights the passive vs. active dichotomy often attributed to women and men.
- To demonstrate how Kundera's depiction of infidelity and the acceptance of it in male characters upholds patriarchal standards and helps in the systemic objectification and subjugation of women.

## 1.5 Research Question

- How does Kundera's language create a passive vs. active dichotomy between Tereza and Tomas?
- How does Kundera's characterization and narrative structure align with Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze?
- How does Kundera's depicted male infidelity support the objectification of women and patriarchal norms?

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## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out using a qualitative method, grounded in Laura Mulvey's feminist theory of the "male gaze," and involved close textual reading. The novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) itself serves as the primary data source by offering rich material for analysis

through its narrative, character development, and thematic content. Not only that, academic journals, books, and articles on feminist literary criticism, gender studies and other sources provided the secondary data. Moreover, critical discourse analysis is employed as data analysis techniques that allow a structured exploration of themes, language use, and character behaviors. Critical Discourse Analysis means analyzing speech patterns, word choices, and narrative voice to uncover how power dynamics are maintained and challenged within the text.

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Laura Mulvey's Theory of the Male Gaze provides a critical lens through which to analyze the novel. Mulvey's seminal work in feminist film theory has been widely applied to literature. It offers insights into the ways in which narrative perspectives, character representations, and power dynamics are constructed and perpetuated within literary texts.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" has been influential in feminist film theory. It was first introduced by Mulvey in her 1975 essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*." It suggests that traditional cinematic and literary narratives are often constructed from a heterosexual male perspective, and this perspective shapes how women are portrayed and perceived within these narratives.

In literature, the male gaze can manifest in various ways. For example, the narrative perspective often aligns with the male protagonist or the author's viewpoint, shaping the portrayal of female characters according to male desires or perceptions. Female characters may be objectified or simplified to fit into stereotypical roles defined by male fantasies or expectations. Female characters are often described in terms of their physical appearance or attractiveness, emphasizing their beauty or desirability from a male perspective. Their inner thoughts, desires, and agency may be overshadowed or ignored in favor of their visual appeal to male characters or readers. The male gaze reflects power imbalances between men and women, where men are positioned as the active subjects who gaze upon passive female objects. Women are often depicted as objects of desire or admiration, lacking agency or autonomy in shaping their own narratives.

The male gaze can also influence how readers interpret and engage with literary texts. Male readers may unconsciously adopt the perspective of the male gaze, viewing female characters through a lens of objectification or sexualization. Female readers may feel alienated or marginalized by narratives that prioritize male perspectives and fail to represent their experiences authentically. By recognizing and critiquing the male gaze in literature, scholars and writers can work towards creating more inclusive and empowering narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and representations.

This can involve adopting alternative narrative perspectives, giving voice to marginalized characters, and subverting patriarchal norms and expectations.

## 3. DISCUSSION

In the novel, Kundera's use of language creates a clear dichotomy between the active Tomas and the passive Tereza. Through their characterizations, interactions, and internal monologues, Tomas is portrayed as a decisive, controlling figure, while Tereza is depicted as emotionally dependent and reactive.

### 3.1 Differences in Kundera's use of linguistic dichotomy for Tereza and Tomas: passive vs. active dichotomy

When describing Tomas, Kundera frequently uses active verbs and language that highlights his decisiveness and agency. Tomas is portrayed as someone who pursues his desires with confidence and autonomy. When Kundera states, "He made love to women, but he was always careful not to let his feelings get involved" (Kundera, 1984, p.15), with the use of "made love" and "careful" he provides a feeling to the reader that Tomas has his control over his actions and emotions. On the other hand, Tereza is often depicted through language that emphasizes her passivity and submissiveness. Her thoughts and actions frequently revolve around her reactions to Tomas, "She clung to him desperately, trembling with fear that he might leave her" (p. 51). Kundera's use of this type of words like "clung" and "trembling" indicates to the reader about her dependence and vulnerability.

Tomas has been given sexual Freedom by Kundera. His numerous affairs are depicted as a series of deliberate choices. His sexual freedom is described in a way that emphasizes his active role: "He had never thought of their nights together as anything but 'etudes' in preparation for the grand composition" (p. 231). Here, the metaphor of practicing for a grand composition conveys a sense of purpose and mastery. Moreover, Kundera posits Tereza as an emotionally dependent character. Tereza's inner life is dominated by her emotional attachment to Tomas. Her passivity is further accentuated by her struggle to assert her own identity separate from him: "She wanted him to carry her off, away from her life, into a new one" (p. 23). This desire to be "carried off" portrays her as reliant on Tomas for change and fulfillment. Tereza's emotional responses to Tomas's actions further illustrate her passivity. Her jealousy and insecurity are central themes, showcasing her internal struggle and lack of control: "She saw herself... as a sentry guarding the border between their two bodies" (p. 49). This metaphor of a sentry suggests a defensive, reactive stance. Furthermore, Tereza's dreams often reflect her passive role and her fears regarding Tomas. She dreams of Tomas abandoning her which symbolizes her deep-seated insecurities and

lack of agency in their relationship: “She dreamed that she had fallen into a river and was being swept away” (p. 63). The imagery of being swept away indicates her feeling of powerlessness.

Kundera’s bias for masculinity is also evident in terms of sexual dynamics. The language used to describe their sexual relationship often places Tomas in an active role and Tereza in a passive one. Tomas views their sexual encounters as opportunities for his pleasure and exploration, “To take possession of a woman is not a difficult task but to penetrate her soul, to open the very essence of her being” (p. 73). This description shows Tomas’s active role in their sexual interactions. Tomas’s Dominance is visible in the novel. In case of decision-making, Tomas often makes decisions that affect both his and Tereza’s lives without much regard for her input. His dominance in their relationship is portrayed through his actions and the narrative’s focus on his perspective, “He was the engineer of their fates” (p. 97), “engineer” implies a level of control and manipulation.

The internal monologues also represent Kundera’s bias for Masculinity. Tomas’s internal monologues are characterized by a detached and analytical tone. He reflects on his actions and relationships with a sense of control and rationality: “He found the concept of fidelity to be futile” (p. 15). This reflects his active approach to life, where he consciously rejects societal norms. On the contrary, Tereza’s internal monologues provides a feeling of more introspective and dependent tone. Tereza’s internal monologues reveal her emotional depth and dependence on Tomas. Her thoughts are often filled with doubt and longing: “She imagined herself in Tomas’s arms, begging him not to leave” (p. 29). This introspective and emotional language demonstrates her passive stance.

### **3.2 Kundera’s portrayal of male infidelity perpetuates patriarchal norms and contribution to the objectification of women**

#### **3.2.1 Normalization of Male Infidelity**

Kundera depicts male infidelity, particularly through the character of Tomas, as a normative behavior within the context of a patriarchal society. Tomas’s numerous affairs are portrayed as a natural expression of his masculinity and desire for freedom. This normalization of male infidelity reinforces the idea that men are entitled to pursue sexual gratification outside of committed relationships, while women are expected to remain faithful and monogamous. “He loved his wife. And yet he had to get away from her. Away from the single spot on earth that was his home. He was gripped by an irresistible longing to wander the world, to discover the unknown, to see if there was something better elsewhere” (Kundera, 1984, p.15). This highlights Tomas’s desire for freedom and exploration, which he associates with pursuing affairs outside of his marriage. It normalizes male infidelity as an expression of masculine autonomy and independence.

#### **3.2.2 Objectification of Women**

Tomas’s infidelities contribute to the objectification of women by reducing them to mere instruments of his pleasure and self-discovery. Women in Tomas’s life are often described in terms of their physical attributes and sexual availability, underscoring their role as objects rather than subjects. For example, Tomas refers to his affairs as “etudes” (p. 231), likening them to musical practice sessions, which dehumanizes his partners and strips them of their individuality. Sabina is depicted as a seductive and enigmatic figure whose main purpose in the narrative is to fulfill Tomas’s sexual desires. This reduction of women to objects of male desire reinforces patriarchal notions of women as passive recipients of male attention and pleasure. “And then there was Sabina, whom he made love to when he wanted, however, he wanted, wherever he wanted. They made love in a meadow, in the forest, in a field of maize, on the banks of a river, on a fur coat in a hotel room overlooking a castle, in a bungalow at the foot of the Tatra Mountains” (Kundera, 1984, p.18). This depicts Sabina as a passive object of Tomas’s desires, emphasizing the variety of locations where they have had sexual encounters. Sabina is valued primarily for her physical availability to Tomas, reinforcing her objectification. Although Sabina is depicted as more independent and sexually liberated than Tereza, her character is still defined in relation to the men in her life, particularly Tomas. Sabina’s relationships and her rebellion against societal norms are framed through her sexuality, suggesting that her value and identity are closely tied to her sexual freedom. This reinforces the notion that women’s worth is measured by their relationships with men: “She sought adventure not in the company of men but in the struggle against them” (p. 89). Even in her independence, Sabina’s actions are contextualized within a patriarchal framework.

“He was obsessed with what in each of them is unimaginable, obsessed, in other words, with the one-millionth part that makes women dissimilar to others of her sex” (Kundera, p.200). “take possession of something inside them, he needed to slit them open” (Kundera, p.200). Tomas moves into the territory of purely objectifying these women when he uses sex as his way of finding these “one-millionth part differences” (Kundera, p.200) between women. The diction Kundera uses to describe Tomas/ use of sex is all about “conquering”, “taking possession of”, and “capturing” women’s selves (p.200). In the novel it states that Tomas chooses sex because “the millionth part dissimilarity becomes precious, because, it is not accessible in public, it must be conquered” (Kundera p.200). As a man Tomas sees sex as an act to conquer women, he hunts for their dissimilarity to other women, but is not content with what is open and easy to find through conversation. He is obsessed with the sexual aspect because it creates a challenge; it makes



him feel powerful once he has conquered these women through using his body.

### 3.2.3 Power Imbalance in Relationships by Kundera

The portrayal of male infidelity in the novel perpetuates power imbalances in heterosexual relationships. Tomas's infidelity is depicted as a manifestation of his power and autonomy, while his female partners, such as Tereza and Sabina, are depicted as emotionally vulnerable and dependent on him. This power dynamic reinforces patriarchal norms where men are positioned as dominant and women as submissive. "He had never thought of their nights together as anything but 'études' in preparation for the grand composition: his life's work, the translation of the Ode to Joy into action" (Kundera, 1984, p.231). This illustrates Tomas's perception of his relationships with women as instrumental to his personal fulfillment and artistic aspirations. It highlights his sense of control and dominance in his interactions with his female partners, contributing to power imbalances in their relationships.

In the novel, Kundera writes that the term women has different significances to Franz and Sabina. Sabina comes to the realization that when Franz says to her "Sabina, you are a woman" he is doing so because "it represented a value" to Franz "Not every woman was worthy of being called woman" (Kundera, 1984, p.89). Franz places different values on the people he labels as females and the people he labels as women. For a female to be labeled as a woman by Franz, they have to meet standards he had created as a man. Franz's decision on who is deserving of the label of woman is inherently misogynistic. Women should not have to meet a standard created by a man or have to earn the label by proving themselves to be called a term they inherently are by existing. Kundera is showcasing patriarchal constructs by offering an example of the belief that men determine the value of a woman based on how gender normative and appeasing she is to men. Franz's belief in the label of woman having some type of ulterior value and commodifying the label so that women have to work to gain the label is an example of misogyny.

Kundera divided gender roles in his characters in the novel. It actually conforms to the universal concept the system sets in towards males and females in the society. For example, He demonstrated how society and the patriarchal force within it would always be able to prescribe what stage a woman should be in her life when he described Tereza's mother's early years.

"Then came the time for her to marry. She had nine suitors. They all knelt round her in a circle. Standing in the middle like a princess, she did not know which one to choose: one was the handsomest, another the wittiest, the third was the richest, the fourth the most athletic, the fifth from the best family, the sixth recited verse, the seventh traveled widely, the eighth played the violin, and the ninth was the manliest. But they all knelt in the same way, they

all had the same calluses on their knees." (Kundera, p.42).

Remarkably, he used the idea that a woman should have a predetermined period of time to get married as a means of limiting her autonomy and her freedom to make her own decisions. It truly seems as though a woman's life may only be regarded successful or acceptable by society if she has been able to live up to the expectations placed on her by her culture.

Also, the depiction of the character given to Tereza's mother embodies how the patriarchal society can dominate the minds of other women into what women should be like in the society:

"Tereza's mother never stopped reminding her that being a mother meant sacrificing everything. Her words had the ring of truth, backed as they were by the experience of a woman who had lost everything because of her child. Tereza would listen and believe that being a mother was the highest value in life and that being a mother was a great sacrifice. If a mother was Sacrifice personified, then a daughter was guilt, with no possibility of redress." (Kundera, p.44).

For most of the text, Tereza's character is greatly influenced by her mother. When Tereza was younger, her mother was her role model and source of inspiration. The idea that motherhood is the pinnacle of femininity and that all other considerations are secondary is conveyed by Tereza's mother in the excerpt above. Even if Tereza's mother doesn't explicitly suggest to her daughter that being a mother is the greatest thing in the world, the fact that she never stopped reminding her of all the sacrifices she had made for her daughter had the same impact as the former.

Despite not being a male and not displaying any masculine traits, Tereza's mother has had a significant influence on her daughter. She believes that being a mother is the ultimate accomplishment for a woman in this world because she allows herself to be influenced by the patriarchal society.

In contrast to how women are portrayed in the story, males are portrayed in the text in a totally different and cruder way. It is clear that women's lives are regulated in society, whereas men's acts are accepted (if a particular lady disobeys this, she may be viewed as an outcast in the community).

### 3.2.4 Double Standards in Kundera

Kundera's portrayal of male infidelity also highlights double standards regarding gender and sexuality. While Tomas's infidelity is largely accepted and even romanticized within the narrative, female infidelity is portrayed more negatively. For example, when Tereza considers having an affair with a stranger, it is depicted as a betrayal of Tomas and a sign of her emotional instability. This double standard reinforces patriarchal norms that privilege male sexuality while stigmatizing female sexuality. "For a while Tereza felt as if she were

in a dream; she had never seen the man before. Then she remembered: Yes, she had seen him before, once, a few days earlier, in a bar. He had been staring at her for a long time, and then he had approached and asked her to dance” (Kundera, 1984, p.91).

Thus, Kundera depicts Tereza as a betrayal of Tomas considering an affair with a stranger and a sign of her emotional instability. In contrast, Tomas’s infidelity is often romanticized within the narrative, highlighting double standards regarding gender and sexuality. “Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite: love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep” (Kundera, 1984, p.15). This passage reinforces traditional gender roles by presenting Tomas’s perspective on love and sexuality, which prioritizes emotional intimacy and companionship over physical desire. It positions men as seeking emotional fulfillment through relationships, while women are expected to provide emotional support and stability. The portrayal of male infidelity in “*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*” reinforces traditional gender roles that position men as sexually assertive and adventurous, while women are expected to be faithful and emotionally supportive. This perpetuation of gender roles contributes to the marginalization of women’s experiences and agency within the narrative, reinforcing patriarchal power structures

Milan Kundera’s portrayal of male infidelity in “*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*” contributes to the perpetuation of patriarchal norms by normalizing male entitlement to sexual freedom, objectifying women, reinforcing power imbalances in relationships, highlighting double standards regarding gender and sexuality, and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

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#### 4. FINDINGS

From the above discussion, it is evident that Milan Kundera shapes the female character from the masculine point of view. Kundera’s narrative techniques, his word choice and characterizations align with patriarchal norms. Kundera sketches Tomas as a decisive, controlling figure, while Tereza is portrayed as emotionally dependent and passive. Moreover, Tomas’s infidelities are depicted as natural extensions of his masculinity, whereas female infidelity is stigmatized which highlights double standards in the portrayal of gender and sexuality. Laura Mulvey focused her conceptual analysis on classic Hollywood films, but her theory can be applied to other media forms. For example, in advertising, Fowles (1996) said “males gaze and females are gazed at” and Messaris (1997) wrote how “female models addressed to women... appear to imply a male point of view”. Laura Mulvey, in

“*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*”, explored how mainstream films appealed to a “male-gaze” because the industry was dominated by men who, inevitably, constructed representations of women from a masculine point of view. In light of Mulvey’s theory, Kundera’s work is an example of how literature can perpetuate the male gaze, positioning men as active subjects and women as passive objects.

This analysis sheds light on the need to recognize and critique the male gaze in literature, advocates for more inclusive and empowering narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and patriarchal power structure.

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#### 5. CONCLUSION

Kundera’s novel reflects patriarchal dynamics through its portrayal of characters, narrative structure, and thematic content. Through a qualitative analysis grounded in Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze, this study has revealed how Kundera’s language creates a dichotomy between the active Tomas and the passive Tereza. It reflects a bias towards masculinity. Tomas’s character, depicted through active and decisive language, contrasts sharply with Tereza’s passive and dependent portrayal, which highlights the gendered power imbalance inherent in their relationship.

Kundera’s normalization of male infidelity, particularly through Tomas, perpetuates patriarchal norms and contributes to the objectification of women. Tomas’s numerous affairs, depicted as natural extensions of his masculinity and autonomy that establishing the idea that men are entitled to pursue sexual gratification without emotional involvement. This portrayal reduces women to mere instruments of male pleasure and self-discovery, as seen in the characterizations of Tereza and Sabina. The narrative frames Sabina’s sexual liberation and independence through her relationships with men, further underscoring the objectification and marginalization of female characters.

This research serves as a helpful reminder of the necessity to identify and evaluate the male gaze in literature while promoting more inclusive and powerful stories that subvert patriarchal power structures and conventional gender norms.

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