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## POP FEMINISM: TELEVISED SUPERHEROINES FROM THE 1990s TO THE 2010s

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***Abstract:** This paper analyses the construction of two superheroines, one from the 1990s (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and one from the 2010s (*Jessica Jones*). I contend that popular feminism has changed between the 1990s and the present and that this is evident in the representation of televised superheroines. While in the 1990s superheroines were more conformist, today they are more transparent in their feminist intentions. I suggest that this is due to contemporary cultural trends in the United States.*

***Keywords:** Buffy, girl power, Jessica Jones, postfeminism, rape culture.*

### 1. Introduction

In the midst of the current electoral craze in the U.S., the possibility of the first female president has engendered discussions about what it means to be a feminist. Strangely, the disagreement seems to be among the feminists themselves, who have split between an older generation of women

who identify with the second wave and the generation of millennials who have just come into their own. Introducing Hillary in New Hampshire in February, Madeleine Albright pronounced that “There is a special place in hell for women who don’t help each other.” This comment in all probability came as a response to the polls showing that the majority of young women do not in fact support Clinton, but Bernie Sanders. Addressing the same issue, the feminist icon Gloria Steinem told Bill Maher in an interview that younger women are “going to get more activist as they grow older. And when you’re younger, you think: ‘Where are the boys? The boys are with Bernie.’”

This polarization dates back to the 80s and 90s when the term post-feminism first cropped up. Post-feminism seemed to crystallise around three major issues it has with second wave feminism: victimisation of women, universalising tendencies, and gender role reversal. For instance, in *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism* (1993) Katie Roiphe argues that feminism casts women in the role of victims, trapping them in a position of vulnerability:

The image that emerges from feminist preoccupations with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victim [...] This image of a delicate woman bears a striking resemblance to that fifties ideal my mother and the other women of her generation fought so hard to get away from. (1993:6)

Similarly, Naomi Wolf is unhappy with the narrow definition of womanhood in second wave feminist writing (white and middle-class), especially in the way it was portrayed in the media. She argues that this has caused the term feminist to become overloaded and passé:

the definition of feminism has become ideologically overloaded. Instead of offering a mighty Yes to all women's individual wishes to forge their own definition, it has been disastrously redefined in the popular imagination as a massive No to everything outside a narrow set of endorsements. (1993:68)

Finally, in her 1997 work, *Postfeminism: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*, Ann Brooks argues that while second wave feminism assumes that a simple reversal of the hierarchical dualism of man/woman will effect the liberation of the female half of the equation, post-feminism replaces the dualism with diversity, or even a spectrum.

On the other side of the argument, second wave feminists saw this backlash against them as a knee-jerk reaction of the mainstream in defence of the status quo. In 1999, Germaine Greer ironically paraphrased post-feminism in *The Whole Woman*: "The future is female, we are told. Feminism has served its purpose and should now eff off. Feminism was long hair, dungarees and dangling earrings; post-feminism was business suits, big hair and lipstick; post-feminism was ostentatious sluttishness and disorderly behavior" (2000:12). As Greer defines it, post-feminism is little more than a market-led phenomenon, for "the most powerful entities on earth are not governments, but the multi-national corporations that see women as their territory." Its assurance to women that they can 'have it all' – a career, motherhood, beauty, and a great sex life – actually only resituates them as consumers of pills, paint, potions, cosmetic surgery, fashion, and convenience foods. Greer also argues that the adoption of a post-feminist stance is a luxury in which the affluent western world can indulge only by ignoring the possibility that the exercising of one person's freedom may be directly linked to another's oppression (quoted in Gamble 2004:42).

In popular culture, the late 1990s and early 2000s was the time of the Girl Power movement and marked the reevaluation of girl culture in general, both of which seem to be the unspoken targets of Greer's critique. According to Claudia Mitchell, the term 'girl' in itself is at once infantilising and sexualising (2008:XVIII), which possibly counters the movement's aim of empowering young women. Since then, especially in the last five years or so, pop culture products seem to have discarded their girly sugar coating. TV shows such as *Girls*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *The Mindy Project*, *Transparent* and *Broad City* routinely take on a wide range of issues from slut shaming, abortion and the wage gap to the particular spin that class and race put on these issues and on the idea of gender as spectrum. Female comedians have gained unprecedented popularity: Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Amy Schumer, Jessica Williams, Sarah Silverman, and Tig Notaro, to name but a few, have definitely deconstructed the stereotype that women aren't funny. Furthermore, such icons as Emma Watson and Beyonce have reclaimed the word "feminist" in an attempt to rid it of the negative connotations which had caused its rejection in the 90s.

When it comes to superheroines, they have a long history of functioning as feminist symbols and reveal the issues and attitudes associated with feminism at a particular point in time. For instance, on the cover of the first issue of *Ms. Magazine*, founded by Gloria Steinem herself, Wonder Woman is enthroned under a banner reading "Wonder Woman for President." In this paper I look at two superheroines: Buffy Summers and Jessica Jones. Buffy is the protagonist of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* which first aired in 1997 and ran for seven seasons. She is considered to be the epitome of the Girl Power movement. Jessica Jones is the protagonist of the eponymous TV series which aired its first season in 2015. *Jessica Jones*

is an adaptation, with major revisions, of the comic book series *Alias* which was serialised between 2001 and 2004. In comparing the two superheroines I wish to answer the following questions: To what extent do Buffy and Jessica Jones represent inverted gender roles? Are the two superheroines portrayed as cultural aberrations? How has the representation of superheroines changed from the 1990s to the present and what does this say about feminism in popular culture?

## **2. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer***

Buffy Summers, a regular teenage girl, is revealed at the beginning of the show to be the chosen one, the latest in a line of young women known as Vampire Slayers who have been called to battle vampires and demons of all sorts – the forces of darkness in general. Like all Slayers, Buffy has a Watcher – in her case Rupert Giles, who trains and guides her in her quests. Unlike other Slayers before her, however, she is also surrounded by a group of friends known as the “Scoobies.” Buffy and her friends, Willow Rosenberg and Xander Harris, are 16 at the beginning of the show. In the first scenes of the show, we are told that Buffy has just moved to Sunnydale, CA from L.A. following the divorce of her parents and after having been kicked out of her old high school for setting the school gymnasium on fire. Buffy is introduced as the prototypical Valley girl with a twist. Joss Whedon, the creator of the show, a self-proclaimed radical feminist, says that he got the inspiration for Buffy from watching horror movies in which a young blonde is always the victim; he wanted to turn the tables by making Buffy the heroine.

Frances Early, in her essay “Staking Her Claim: Buffy the Vampire Slayer as Transgressive Woman Warrior,” notes that the warrior/hero role is

reserved in Western culture for male personages and that “female heroes have not been permitted to form a tradition of their own except as temporary warrior transgressors” (2001:13), as a cultural aberration in which a female body inhabits a male role under very exceptional circumstances. Typically, when this happens, I would argue, female identity is at stake: these exceptional warriors are portrayed as unfeminine and threatening to the heteronormative order. Buffy herself is depicted as exceptional, as we find out from the opening credits: “In every generation there is a chosen one. She alone will stand against the vampires, the demons and the forces of darkness. She is the slayer.” However, Buffy holds on to her markers as a girl (e.g. ice-skating, fashion). In this paper, I will seek to show she does so by appearing alongside a series of failed femininities which she negates throughout the series. She later comes to incorporate these identities, but only after they have been repeatedly castigated.

Throughout the first three seasons, Buffy also has two shadow selves, i.e. two characters who show the ways in which Buffy could have gone wrong: Cordelia Chase and Faith Lehane. Cordelia is the mean girl of Sunnydale High; she is popular, shallow, obsessed with her looks but at the same time clever and very mean to other girls. Buffy often competes with her, for a place on the cheerleading squad or for prom queen for instance. She frequently tries to suppress her slayer identity in order to be able to beat Cordelia at these things, as her masculine strength would mark her as deviant and thus prevent her from achieving her goals. Buffy and Cordelia’s interactions are best summed up in the scene where they trade insults in the episode Homecoming of the third season when Cordelia calls Buffy a “crazy freak” and Buffy retorts “vapid whore.” The mean girl stereotype represents normative fears that the pressure on young girls to combine masculine

assertiveness with feminine ways of relating may cause them to slip into the pathological:

while the middle-class mean girl is constructed as pathological, this profile is also constituted as the expected norm. Indirectness and meanness reaffirm conventional femininity, repression, and pathology and are central in the regulation of the boundaries of normative girlhood and appropriate models of neoliberal subjectivity. These boundaries are constitutive of other, deviant and failed femininity, in danger of slipping into unmanageable excess – for instance, hypersexuality, pregnancy, dropping out of school, or delinquency and violence. (Mitchell 2008:12)

Thus Buffy and Cordelia accuse each other of deviance from the norm, which translates into not being entitled to the title of Homecoming Queen that they have been fighting over. By the end of the episode, Buffy has killed a vampire by using her physical strength and Cordelia has scared one off through sheer meanness. Each is empowered in her own way, but in the end neither becomes Homecoming Queen, suggesting that conformity demands demureness and not assertiveness.

If Cordelia represents the mean girl, Faith Lehane represents another type of deviant femininity, namely the bad girl. By a fluke of destiny, Faith is also a Slayer, so for the first time in the lore of the show there are two chosen ones. Faith is the opposite of Buffy and is often referred to by fans as the dark slayer. This is evident in many ways, from her appearance to her personality and sense of morality. In contrast to Buffy's playful and colourful outfits, Faith wears dark colours, revealing outfits and lots of leather. Her posture, on the other hand, is rather masculine, as is her style of fighting. While Buffy's moves look more like something choreographed, Faith's impress us through their bluntness and violence. She is also

portrayed as hyper-sexual and a man-eater. In terms of her moral code, Faith tells Buffy that slayers do not need the law because they are the law, suggesting that she will not be cowed by authority and that she is unpredictable. After Faith kills a human being, Buffy and she fall out and Faith joins the evil mayor of Sunnydale as his right hand. Murder here acts as the dividing line between the moral and the immoral, the good and the bad.

It is later revealed that Faith has a traumatic background, having grown up in poverty with an alcoholic mother. The viewer is led to believe that Faith is jealous of Buffy, of her mother and her friends and especially of her relationship with her watcher, who functions as a father figure for Buffy throughout the series. The mayor then becomes a father figure for Faith and while he does not try to correct her violent tendencies, he encourages her to hide them under a layer of femininity: he buys her dresses and asks her to pull her hair back, so that her beautiful face can be more obvious. At the end of the season, the mayor turns himself into a giant snake, the phallic symbolism of which is hard to ignore. Faith's relationship with this father figure makes her more sympathetic to the viewer as it mirrors the relationship Buffy has with her watcher.

Throughout the series, myriad female identities are explored, but it is safe to say that Faith receives the most unforgiving treatment, especially in the first three seasons. Upon closer analysis, Buffy and Faith are not so very different. Before Faith came into the picture, Buffy herself had attempted to kill a human being, namely her mother's boyfriend, Ted, a misogynistic and violent man who only much later is revealed to be a robot. They both use their power to toy with the emotions of Xander, who in the series fulfils the function of the normal straight man. And they both show remorse for their

actions, although they do so in different ways. The only difference between them seems to be the fact that Buffy is surrounded by friends and family who constantly validate, correct or forgive her behaviour, whereas Faith is alone. Additionally, Faith has a working class background, while Buffy grows up in a comfortable middle class home. Thus it is their backgrounds and social circumstances that validate their behaviour.

Buffy and Faith's connection is constantly acknowledged throughout the show – it is often suggested that they speak a language that only the two of them can understand, and while there is rivalry between them, there is also affection. This sisterly bond (which some have very convincingly argued has lesbian undertones) is symbolically depicted in the scene in which Buffy and Faith each hold a knife to the other's neck, which makes it seem that if one dies, so will the other. As they release each other, Faith kisses Buffy on the forehead and tells her that Buffy is not ready to become her yet. Buffy does indeed later become Faith, both literally and symbolically.

The first time Buffy becomes Faith is in season four, when Faith awakes from her coma and performs a spell through which she exchanges bodies with Buffy. The two slayers come to experience the world through each other's eyes, with Buffy getting to experience the loneliness and violence of Faith's existence. After the conflict is resolved, Buffy tells Faith: "I've lost battles before but nobody else has ever made me a victim", to which Faith replies: "You're all about control. You have no idea what it's like on the other side! Where nothing's in control, nothing makes sense! There is just pain and hate and nothing you do means anything." It thus becomes clear that Faith is a victim, being subjected to violence because she

is positioned outside of normative life by her deviant femininity as well as by the social class to which she belongs.

Starting with season four, the show takes on a less campy tone as Buffy matures into womanhood. Gradually, Buffy becomes more like Faith as her circumstances change so that they eventually resemble those of her nemesis. Seasons four and five represent her endeavours to succeed in college. Season four and the first half of season five show us Buffy at her most well-adjusted, managing to excel at her slaying duties, as well as in academia and in her love life. Buffy here embodies the ideal of post-feminism, being literally and figuratively a supergirl. However, things change when it is revealed that Buffy's perfect life is only a facade. In fact, she is unhappy, especially in her love life, because she is the stronger partner in her romantic relationship with Riley Finn. This, I would argue, speaks to fears that the empowerment of women will lead to the disaggregation of gender roles, with dire consequences: both genders will be unhappy.

Towards the second half of the fifth season, Buffy's life becomes increasingly bleak as her mother dies and she is left to look after her younger sister, whom she sacrifices her life to protect in the season's finale. At the beginning of season six, Xander and Willow bring the Slayer back to life: Buffy is forced to crawl out of her own grave to a Sunnydale immersed in noise and violence. After this event, Buffy loses her girly spunk and the assumption is that she "came back wrong." Her circumstances also change drastically as her mother has left her in debt so that she has to quit college and get a job in a fast-food restaurant in order to be able to look after her sister. Most importantly, her watcher Giles, the patriarch of the show, leaves, arguing that he is standing in her way to greatness. As a

consequence, the Slayer slips into a depression from which she tries to recover by having loveless and violent sex. The sixth season represents a break with the others as it does not have a big-bad, a powerful monster that Buffy has to defeat by the end of the season, as was the case with each of the previous seasons. The evil in this season takes the form of the characters themselves becoming their worst selves, which in Buffy's case seems to be a depressed, burnt-out single mother. Buffy essentially becomes at once Faith and Faith's mother.

In the final season, although Buffy is somewhat redeemed compared with the previous season, she still echoes Faith: "In the end, the Slayer is always cut off. There's no mystical guide book, no all-knowing council. Human rules don't apply. There's only me. I am the law," placing herself outside of the social order. In the meantime, Faith repents of her deeds, thus negating her deviant identity, and returns to Sunnydale to help Buffy fight the First Evil, an incorporeal force that insidiously hides in everyone. The two slayers again change places, as Buffy's friends vote for Faith to be in charge, so that she takes a turn at being the acceptable model of femininity: Faith is now demure, while Buffy is voted out for being too hard. In this way it is suggested that social groups grant power to those who will conform to the ideal of femininity. Having been the protagonist of the series and the perspective from which the story is told, Buffy still retains the viewers' sympathy, deconstructing the idea that female heroism is meant to be coupled with demureness and easy-going cheerfulness.

During the last episode of the series, Buffy and Faith are finally reconciled, and we see them musing over the exceptional nature of the Slayer, the embodiment of both masculine and feminine, and the loneliness that comes with being an aberration, and concluding that they were never

supposed to exist together. The only advantage in their situation, as Faith remarks, is that they are “hot chicks with superpowers”, thus acknowledging in a way the role that physical conformism to gender roles plays in accommodating behaviours typically considered masculine, such as physical strength and assertiveness. This mirrors what the TV show itself represents: a means of introducing feminist ideas in a form that is palatable to audiences. On the one hand, it punishes and negates deviant identities such as the mean girl and the bad girl. On the other hand, it validates them by ascribing their characteristics to the protagonist, who the audience already sympathises with, thus making them acceptable. Half-conformism, the show seems to suggest, is the way in which attitudes towards what it means to be a woman can be changed. In the finale, Buffy literally shares her strength with all girls who have the potential of becoming Slayers, creating an army of women just like her and dismantling her status as aberration. Half-conformism becomes the sacrifice that Buffy makes in order to empower the next generation of women.

### 3. *Jessica Jones*

Marvel’s *Jessica Jones* is a web television series based on the eponymous Marvel Comics character. Although the character Jessica Jones first appeared in *Alias*, the first issue of which was published in 2001, i.e. about the same time that *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reached its peak, the series departs from the characterisation of the comic series to such an extent that one may assume it is representative of a different era. The series is part of the recent craze for comic-book adaptations from both the Marvel and the DC Comics universes, Joss Whedon (the creator of *Buffy*) having written and directed several of them. Mainstream superhero comics have

notoriously been obsessed with stereotypical masculinities and unkind to their female characters. Jessica Jones is perhaps one of the few rounded female characters in the Marvel universe. An analysis of the adaptation of the character would no doubt be revealing in itself, but here I focus exclusively on the TV series, perhaps unfairly disregarding the context of its production and the rest of the fictional universe. Unlike Buffy, the protagonist of this series is deviant from the beginning, and it is gradually revealed to us why this is so.

In the TV series, Jessica Jones is a former avenger, endowed with superhuman strength, turned private investigator after suffering personal trauma. The show reenacts many noir tropes, casting Jessica in the role of the noir or hardboiled detective – a typically male role, and one that has been a favourite target of feminist criticism at that. Like that stock character, she is a morose, cynical and sarcastic drunkard, which is only a mask for her personal pain and idealism. This makes it seem as if Jessica Jones is simply assuming the characteristics of a typically male character. Physically, too, it seems as if the creators have gone to great lengths to make her appear masculine, from her clothes to her muscular body to the way she moves. She even scoffs at girly things – one of the differences between the comic and the TV series is that Jessica Jones never wears the costume of her superhero alter ego, Jewel. In fact, her appearance is very similar to that of Faith, as is her sexuality. Even so, she is depicted as a victim from the start, and a gendered one too. It is gradually revealed through flashbacks, which act as the symptoms of Jessica's PTSD as well, that she is the victim of abuse, a type of abuse that is usually associated with women, namely stalking and rape.

Before starting a detective agency, Jessica was held hostage by the character Killgrave, who, like her, is gifted, with the difference that his power is mental rather than physical: he is able to control minds. Rather than indulging in graphic depictions of rape, this power has to do with the aftermath and consequences thereof. Killgrave always lingers at the edge of Jessica's consciousness. The metaphor that drives the show is his ability to control and coerce anyone so that Jessica always needs to have her guard up, paralleling the deep distrust of people that rape victims feel after being subjected to that trauma. Furthermore, it suggests that rape is a systemic problem because of the intricate ways in which all the characters on the show are involved in it, so that rape functions as a metaphor for misogyny in general and for rape culture in particular. In addition, the series is significant for breaking the rape trope<sup>1</sup> constructed by comics, where rape is often used as a plot device to start off male-led stories of vengeance.

The series also deals with the idea of pregnancy as a result of rape. Hope, another victim of Killgrave's, who drives the plot of the season as she is the person whom Jessica is trying to save, pleads for an abortion, saying of the foetus: "every moment it's in me is like he's raping me all over again." Hope's fears that the child will have the same abilities as the father mirror the discussion surrounding rape and abortion which concerns the issue of whether mental illness can be inherited.

Unlike Jessica, Hope has no supernatural abilities, although she too is exceptional in her physical strength because she is an athlete. The irony of the situation is that here physical strength does not matter, the characters

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<sup>1</sup> Gail Simone famously coined the term "women in refrigerators" to refer to the violence against women used in comics as a plot device. It refers to an incident in *Green Lantern* #54 (1994), written by Ron Marz, in which Kyle Rayner comes home to his apartment to find that his girlfriend, Alexandra DeWitt, had been killed and stuffed into a refrigerator.

have both been similarly victimised as Killgrave enslaved their bodies by enslaving their minds first. In fact, their physical strength seems to be his fetish and they are objectified because of it. While Buffy's physical strength is often portrayed as intimidating and unappealing to men, Jessica's strength becomes the object of a manic obsession to achieve control over it. As for her mind, Killgrave does not make her act against her will, but makes her desire to be enslaved. The gruesomeness of the situation is perhaps best exemplified by the scene in which he forces Jessica to smile. In the aftermath of the event, Hope and Jessica both grapple with the guilt of having submitted to his will. This all suggests that violence performed against women is more often than not insidious as they submit to it seemingly willingly because of manipulation. On a more literal level, it also brings to light the issue of what is considered rape: how "in control over one's mind" does one have to be to give consent?

Thus, although Jessica performs a male character, i.e. the noir detective, she is victimised by Killgrave's objectification of her female body and is punished for her physical strength. This is reenacted at the level of cinematography as well. In spite of her clothes and attitude, the camera at times seems to deliberately enact Killgrave's male gaze: while Jessica fights, for instance, the camera focuses on her lips, underplaying the importance of her strength. Unlike Buffy, who chooses to make herself different by using feminine markers, these are constantly imposed on Jessica. In the series that I discussed earlier, stereotypical feminine traits empower the characters as they are reclaimed by them. The running joke in Buffy is based on the surprise that a girl can be so strong, disconnecting certain so-called feminine preferences and behaviours from the idea of weakness, while also pointing to the power such markers have of correcting

deviant female behaviour. In *Jessica Jones*, these markers are only seen as violent impositions on female characters.

Furthermore, Jessica Jones is not unique or an aberrant transgressor. In the universe of the series, several characters have superhuman abilities. The Slayer is a result of the magic of a group of men who give a single woman physical strength and thus force her in a sense to become a heroine. Jessica, on the other hand, is endowed with supernatural powers by accident, and she is not only unable to use that strength to defeat her enemy, but it is actually what brings him to her. Another difference between the comic series and this one is that here Jessica manages to escape Killgrave's grasp through sheer mental strength while in the comics she is rescued by Ms. Marvel, another female avenger. The show seems thus to suggest that exceptionality makes women more vulnerable, and, at the same time, that it does not take exceptionality to be empowered and overcome violence.

What is more, Jessica does not hide her identity, while Buffy does, not only literally, but also through the show's preference for pastiche, layered meanings, doubling and humour that makes it appealing to wider audiences. *Jessica Jones*, on the other hand, is a show ostensibly about rape, all the characters in the show being engaged in solving this single issue. Jessica even tells Killgrave that he raped her, which forces viewers to interpret the allegorical intentions of the plot as attempts to avenge this single crime. Consequently, the series appears more unapologetic about its aims as it addresses the issues in an altogether different tone.

#### 4. Conclusions

To conclude, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* traces Buffy's evolution from the typical Girl Power icon who struggles with the impossible integration of stereotypically masculine ideals of power and assertiveness with stereotypical female physical perfection and demureness. She does so by integrating deviant femininities. This process mirrors her role as societal regulator. The slayer is in fact a societal regulator in the Foucauldian sense, as she annihilates biological aberrations, i.e. monsters. As the show becomes more lax with female identities, the "bad" in the show stops being connected to biology as well, allowing demons to act as forces of good and humans to be deeply evil. The suggestion here, I think, is that while the slayer line that Buffy represents was created and kept in check by men, the new line of slayers which she empowers by struggling with her identity represents a new type of heroine, one that is freed from the burden of an exceptional, aberrant and deviant identity through the creation of an exceptional individual and then of a group willing to push against gender norms.

In *Jessica Jones*, on the other hand, Jessica dismisses so-called feminine ideals, even though these are constantly imposed upon her body, and attempts to perform a more masculine identity. Although she is supernaturally strong, she is not physically exceptional within the storyworld and her true strength lies in her mental abilities to overcome violence. While Buffy's main concern is how to legitimise being a hero in spite of being a woman, Jessica becomes a heroine by fighting violence against women. It is my contention that this shows a shift in the kind of cultural capital that disenfranchisement, structural violence and trauma hold in American culture, especially after 9/11. If *Jessica Jones* (along with

countless other recent TV shows which are popular especially with young women) is any proof, contemporary feminist discourse in American popular culture is shifting away from Girl Power to a more sombre attitude towards issues like rape, intersectionalism or the wage gap that was undoubtedly engendered by a generation of young women educated in critical theory.

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