



REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70s & 80s Interview with Pratibha Parmar

Interview by Maggie Warwick, 10th May 2007

MW: Is there a particular piece of work that you've made, that you think perhaps hasn't had the recognitions it deserves, or maybe it has?

PP: It's a really difficult question to answer because as a video and filmmaker, I am attached to every single piece of work that I've made. Each one has its own history, both around the idea, the inspiration, the actual practicalities of getting it made and making it. I suppose the one video that I would say is extremely personal to me was *Sari Red*, which I made in 1987. It was the third video that I'd made. I'd been making short videos and teaching myself. I was learning the kind of practicalities of making videos. I was picking up the camera and just trying to create my own way of telling stories. I am particularly emotionally attached to *Sari Red*.

MW: It's a very powerful piece of work and a very political piece of work. Presumably it was based on a true story? How did you decide to make it?

PP: There was a video collective in Brighton who asked me if I would make a 10-minute video on anything I wanted. They gave me a Hi-8 video camera for 2 weeks and, at the time something like £200, to edit it. I saw it as a challenge and thought, "Ok, I will make this 10 minute video. It'll be a way in which I can really learn the technology, but also try and find my own story-telling voice", I had been really moved when I read a story of this young Indian woman who'd been killed by three white racists on the streets of London. I'd read about what had happened to her. I read about how they had screamed racist abuse at her and she had shouted back at them in self-defence. They were driving along in a white van, and as a result of her shouting back, they turned the van around, went on to the pavement and crushed straight into her deliberately and her 2 friends. All because she had stood up for herself and shouted back. At that time I felt, when I read that, it could so easily have been me or any other Indian person that I knew. I did that. I would shout back at racists and here was a young girl who had been killed for it. So, I really wanted to make a video in her memory. I didn't want her to end up as another statistic. So, I had a photocopy of a photograph of her and I put that on my desk and I sat down and I wrote a narrative poem about her and what her life could have been; what it was and what had happened. Then I got the camera and it was a really organic process, where I started filming and doing reconstructions. It was not of the actual incident, but using really visual signs and symbols from Indian culture and of our own particular story of migration as Asian people to Britain. I collected a whole bunch of images and then went into an edit room and started editing it with a voice-over I had written. I remember it vividly because the music that's with it was made by my friend Trevor Mathison, who was in the Black Audio Film Collective at the time. Somebody was helping me with editing it and that way the whole thing came together. The way the whole thing came together was really quite startling to me. I remember watching it with the editor and couple of friends in the edit room on Three Machine U-matic Tapes. Now it sounds so archaic but at that point it was the highest video technology we could get. I had a Three Machine so I could do fades and dissolves and all those kind of

things. It was very moving. I was really pleased with it but I had no idea where it was going to get shown or anything or whether it would even be seen. The collective in Brighton, who had given me the video camera to make the work, put it in as part of a High 8 Video Camera film festival. It was a tiny little festival in Brighton with about a 100 people there. It was at one of the Arches in Brighton. But, there was a really amazing response to it. As a result things spiralled and it started getting shown in New York. The Museum of Modern Art showed it and they bought a copy as a piece of video art. Then the Pompadour Centre in France bought it as a piece of video art. Suddenly, I was being hailed as this video artist. I had no idea what a video artist was. I was just trying to tell my own story or what my response was to this particular story, in my own way.

MW: You mentioned that the Black Audio and Film Collective were working at that time as well. Obviously you were aware of Black Audio, but were you involved with the people there and did you help each other out?

PP: Yes, very much. The late 80's and the early 90's saw a real growth in Black and Asian filmmakers, video makers, visual artists and writers. There was this whole black arts movement that was emerging at the time. Of course, we were all connected to each other. Black Audio Film Collective were fantastic in that when I made my first video, *Emergence*, which I think is another one of my favourites because it is my very first video, Black Audio helped me with it. They helped me to shoot it. They helped me with the sound on it. John Akomfrah helped me to edit it. I made that as a way of saying something about the emergence of Black women and Asian women as cultural artists and cultural activists. So, I was very much in touch with Black Audio and worked with them. Isaac Julian was a good friend and we were very supportive of each other because at that point, there were not that many Black, Asian or Gay artists. Both of us were gay and we were out and we were very open about our sexuality. So, we occupied quite an interesting position within the Black Arts Movement, where we were also bringing our queer identity to bare on the work that we were doing at the time.

MW: Did you find difficulty in getting your work distributed? You've said that you got your work shown at festivals nationally and internationally, but for actual distribution, where did you go for that?

PP: There was very little opportunity to distribute work like that. LUX was around at the time and they picked it up. But really, I think it got shown at few places, galleries and small events within the UK. It's really interesting to me that it's had much longer exhibition life in the US. I do have distributors in the US, Women Make Movies distribute most of my work there, and a lot of my work, including *Sari Red*, is seen and bought by universities and colleges in the US. Some of it is used as texts in cinema studies and women's studies over there. *Sari Red*, from 1987 to now, which is 20 years, is still used and seen by people. It still has relevance and I still get a tiny little royalty check every now and then.

MW: Would you say that the funding in this country at that time and perhaps now as well, and the kind of recognition that you got, came all from abroad rather than the UK?

PP: Definitely, I would definitely say that. I would definitely say that the US has given me much better exhibition opportunities and distribution opportunities than the UK. I also think that there has been a response to my work, and my body of work as a filmmaker in the US, in a way that I've never really felt here in the UK. It's partly because we don't particularly have distribution networks for independent work. Also, I think that it's to do with the ways in which, both culturally and politically, the climate has changed through the 90's, making it a lot less friendly for cultural artists who come from an activist background like myself. I started off making video in a very small way, which was shown, like with *Sari Red* and *Emergence*, in small exhibition spaces and small niche film festivals. Then in the early 90's, Channel 4 gave me an opportunity to actually begin to make work for much a broader audience. At the time, the culture of Channel 4 was one in which it welcomed so called minority voices and made it possible to make work that would be seen by much broader audiences. For me, that was really important at that point because I came into film and video from a political background as an activist. So, I wanted to make work that had started to be seen by much larger audiences. Mainstream television at the time didn't really, from my point of view, address or make visible Asian people's lives in Britain in the way that I would have liked to have seen. For me, the whole question of self-representation was really crucial. That partly came out of my background as an academic. I was at Birmingham University, at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, at the same time as Paul Gilroy and Hazel Carvey. We did a book called *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in the 1970's in Britain*. One of the things that we were doing with the book was challenging the old paradigms around race and representation and creating new ways at looking at race and gender and class. I think both my political background and my academic background really impinged on my filmmaking choices. One of those choices was to work in mainstream television, and try and actually carve out a space, both aesthetically and politically to tell stories and to make visible the invisible. It was to show the marginalised experiences of queer communities and Asian women's experiences. That was a turning point for me as a filmmaker, because Channel 4 allowed that at that point. For a number of years I was able to make work on a regular basis, which was very well supported and funded and had its own exhibition rationale. So, it went out. I made *Khush* in 1991. It's only a half-hour documentary, but it was the first ever look at South Asian lesbians and gay experiences, both here in the UK and in India. I had over a million people watching it, and to me, audiences are important. I want to make work that is not just accessible but also seen by large audiences.

MW: Who were the people at Channel 4 who supported you?

PP: It was the Channel 4 is the department of Independent Film and Video. It was Alan Fountain and Caroline Spry. They were very supportive of me and my work. Alan Fountain and Caroline Spry were the two people who I would go and have conversations with. They would understand what it was that I was trying to make and I didn't feel like I had to really prove myself to them. Things have changed fundamentally since then. It's as if you've never done any work, when you go in and try and have a meeting with them.

MW: But you felt that they spoke the same language, and you started off on the same footing and found it really supportive. In terms of how you worked with them, were you

associated with a production company team and then you directed the film or did they team you up with the production company?

PP: In the early years, I asked them. I'd gone with couple of ideas to Channel 4 and I had said "Who would you recommend as a production company?" and so Alan and Caroline guided me as to who the producers were out there, who could help me start off with my work. But I worked with different producers in the first few years. I directed all of my documentaries and then eventually I started to direct and produce my work. I felt that it just gave me a little bit more control over the ways in which I was developing my own style of shooting and my own style of storytelling. I knew how I wanted the budget spent and where I wanted the money to go to and for me the money had to always be on the screen. I also knew that I liked to do a lot of set pieces for instance so my documentaries, even for Channel 4, weren't conventional documentaries. I used dance and so I'd have a studio and I'd have a production designer and I had trucks and maybe sometimes try and get a crane, all the kinds of things that were used in drama. But, for me it was always really important to blur those boundaries between didactic, polemical documentary style filmmaking and bringing my own different visual modes of telling a particular story. So, it was a really exciting time. I just felt I was flourishing. I was being nourished as an artist and a filmmaker and supported financially. I was also really given the freedom to explore non-conventional documentary style filmmaking. For instance, with *Khush*, I had a visual strategy. I had a dancer in there but I also used a very old black-and-white Indian, classical Bolywood film. I took a clip of an incredible dance number but in the original film there was a king looking at a woman and it was the male gaze that was looking at the female dancer. I re-edited that classical dance piece and took out the male gaze, put that as a kind of back projection and had 2 women who were in love with each other in front of it. So really, it was about re-appropriating traditional narratives both culturally and aesthetically.

MW: Did you ever have any issues editorially with Channel 4?

PP: Never. It was fantastic. Both Alan Fountain and Caroline Spry were absolutely brilliant, but I kept them always in the loop when I was making a piece of work. It was only towards the late 90's when I did my last documentary for Channel 4, *The Riotous Babes*, about women rock musicians and feminism that editorial control started coming in. That's when I decided to stop trying to go to that institution for funding, because that was not why I wanted to make work as a video and filmmaker. I'd never gone into it thinking of it as a career. I've always been into it as something I want to do but creatively and politically. If I'd thought of it as a career, I would not have been making queer work and making documentaries of Alice Walker on female genital mutilation. So, for me, as soon as that hands-on editorial control started to take over Channel 4, I decided that I wasn't going to fit into any of their moulds and I didn't want to really.

MW: Can you talk about the female genitalia mutilation tape? Again, it is an extremely powerful piece.

PP: One of the things there for me is that my work is also very much informed by my feminism. I have never been afraid of the "f" word. I am not ashamed of it. I've always been out about my feminism and as a filmmaker obviously my feminist politics have come into play. I made a documentary called *A Place of Rage* in 1991, which is about

African-American women and the civil rights movement. There is so often historical amnesia around women's role in history and how women have shaped history and historical movements. I met Angela Davis who was at one time the most wanted woman by the FBI and on the run. She's been involved in the civil rights movement and the Black Panther movement. I also knew June Jordan who was another African American activist. So, I wanted to make *A Place of Rage* and when I was making that I met Alice Walker. I interviewed her for that documentary too and we became good friends. Then a few years later she wrote a novel called *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which was about a story of a woman who had undergone female genital mutilation. She sent me the manuscript when she finished writing it and she said that she really wanted to work on a documentary. She said she wanted to go to talk to women in Africa about this practice and would I collaborate with her on it. Of course I couldn't say no. I didn't want to say no. I felt it was a really important issue to look at. It was also at that time a real taboo issue. Nobody was talking about it. There was a major silence on it. We went to Africa and we worked with African women who were working on this issue and we made this documentary. It was a one-hour documentary and again Channel 4, Alan Fountain and Caroline Spry supported it. It was just incredible how that one documentary and Alice's book *Possessing the Secret of Joy* just blew the top off the issue. Alice had death threats from people. We had both men and women saying "Who are you to be looking at this issue?" but at the same time, W.H.O, Amnesty International, Save the Children, all these international agencies who had refused before then to take a position on this, suddenly felt that they were being given permission to talk about it, to actually have some policies and put some resources into it to try to stop it. Our fundamental premise was that this is not about culture. It is not about tradition, it's about basic civil human rights and no girl, child or woman should be mutilated against her will in this way. The power of a documentary to actually fundamentally begin to change things was something that I've actually witnessed with making this documentary, *Warrior Marks* and then seeing how it's been taken up in different contexts. It was used in a court case in Portmant, Oregon to argue a case where an African woman was going to be deported with her daughter. Her lawyer argued and showed clips from the film in court to say, "This is something very real". It could happen to her client if she was deported back to Africa. Her case was won and she wasn't deported so for me, it was just really gratifying to feel that there was that positive response, not to me, but to the actual issue and that's why we did the film.

MW: Not only with that film, but with other pieces as well, have you travelled internationally to festivals and conferences etc. to show the work and to speak about it?

PP: Yes, I've been asked several times over the years to tour US colleges or universities and do cine presentations and show clips from my work. Most recently I was asked to do that by Florida University. I really enjoy doing it because it's not only just a faculty in cinema studies and women studies or queer studies, but it is also for film and women's studies students. It gives me a real opportunity to look back at my body of work and show clips and actually talk about my trajectory as a filmmaker and as a cultural activist. It keeps me fresh because it keeps me questioning my own strategies and my own concerns around filmmaking and particularly now, having recently made my first feature film, it's been really interesting for me to travel to film festivals. In this last year I've been travelling a lot to international film festivals with *Nina's Heavenly Delights* and mostly queer film festivals. Queer audiences love the film. It's upbeat and feel-good. It's a romance and it's a comedy. It's all of those things. On the

surface it looks like a mainstream film but I was trying to do so many other things with it. I've been travelling to a lot of lesbian and gay film festivals this last year particularly with *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, and it's been really interesting to me because there is now a whole new audience. Because it's my feature debut, I'm meeting so many people who know hardly anything about my previous work. They introduce me saying, "This is Pratibha Parmar and *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is her feature debut". They think I'm just a new filmmaker and it's kind of quite bizarre really to sort of experience that. Then there are people who have been following my career, as it were, and know my previous work. That's also been really interesting to have conversations with them, because *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, ostensibly is like a mainstream film as much as a Lesbian Curry Romance can ever be a mainstream film. But, in its narrative form, it's very much a beginning, middle, and an end. There are quite predictable plot points and it follows a certain narrative formula I suppose. For me, that was actually a deliberate choice. I wanted to do that because I felt that I am here, trying to tell a very unconventional and to this day, still transgressive, love story. It's where one Indian girl falls in love with a Scottish girl, and what happens in the pool between personal desire and family duty and how does that get played out? It was also important for me. Cinema is about all kinds of possibilities and I want to try and experiment and try my hand at doing different genres. I wanted to really look at an urban fairy tale where it has a happy ending. Quite a lot of the first the financiers were like, "Oh we can't fund this film unless you make one of the girls into a boy". So that was my first stumbling block. It was completely absurd. You think we're in the twentieth century. So, "Turn one of the girls into a boy and we will give you the money to make the film." I wasn't prepared to compromise so that's why it took me 7 years to make my first feature. That was just the first stumbling block. Really, what I wanted to do was to use a mainstream fictional genre to tell this transgressive love story. I also wanted to put out there a representation of an Indian family, which was not about a cultural clash. We've had cultural clash British Asian movies. It's become the default position that all British Asian movies have to have that cultural clash element to it. I just wanted to tell a story of a very specific Indian Scottish family who run their restaurant. It's an immigrant story and what happens to all the members of the family when the patriarch of the family dies. Up until recent years we have often had Asian families in mainstream media, being slightly psychotic or backward and still caught in that 1950's immigrant paradigm of backward culture. There is something wrong with it and it is western liberal democratic culture that's going to free them. Particularly in the area of sexuality, it's always been seen as being where western liberal democratic culture comes in and liberates all these Indian lesbians and gays and black lesbians and gays from their oppressive cultures. I didn't want to buy into that. I don't for a minute. I know that that's so not true. Liberal white cultures have not freed me in anyway at all. It's been the choices that I've made and being able to make because my family has allowed me to make those choices as an immigrant family. So, in *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, I wanted to try and really do something ambitious in that way, which was to not to posit that tradition, modernism, with an argument or paradigm in that way, but to say, here is a family. They are Scottish. They are Indian and they are rooted in both those cultures and in their neighbourhood. This is like a microcosm of this particular experience. It was actually really fun to do that because in the late 80's and the early 90's we were very concerned with notions of hybridity and trans-global identities. Now I feel like the pendulum has really swung back to looking much more microscopically our specific experiences. And you know, I think that *Nina's Heavenly Delights* does that to a certain extent. At least that was what I tried to do with it.

- MW:** How have the audiences reacted themselves? Have they been positive?
- PP:** The audiences have all loved it, Indian audiences as well. I've shown it to 100% Indian audience audiences.
- MW:** And you are going to India?
- PP:** I am going to Delhi to show it in Delhi for a premiere at a film festival and seminar on gender and sexuality. I am really excited about that. Currently I am on this queer film festival circuit. I've been in Paris and in Turin and in Miami. I'm going to San Francisco and New York. Audiences have absolutely loved it. They've really taken to it. It is sentimental. It's sappy at times and there are certain points when sometimes you think, "That's stretching it a bit", but I think it's because it's got a really good heart to it. It's very warm and it's a sweet love story people have really taken to it. It's not just a lesbian queer film. It's really a film about a family. It's a love story. The response from the audiences has been fantastic. UK critics on the other hand were particularly savage about it, not on the whole, but quite a few of them. I don't think they had a reference point for it, because it didn't fit neatly with those cultural-clash British-Asian movies, that they've had before. There is also not one, middle-aged, white, heterosexual man in the film at all.
- MW:** It also goes back to what you said earlier about making films not because you want to make a career, but because you want to make your voice heard and you want to tell stories. But, you want to tell your own stories in your way and from your own voice and get it out there.
- PP:** Yes. I don't think I've ever veered away from that. Often people say to me "But don't you want more mainstream success?" and "Don't you want to be more in the commercial film industry market?" Of course I do, I'd love to have those budgets and I'd love to be able to make my stories with that level of funding support, and that level of distribution support but I just don't think it's in my DNA to kind of fit into anyone's mould. I am just too much of an individual wanting to keep my own creative and political integrity. I think that's what it is fundamentally in the end.
- MW:** Before *Nina's Heavenly Delights* you made short dramas as well as lots of documentaries. *Wavelengths* was a short drama, how did you get funding for that and why did you choose to make a drama in the first place?
- PP:** I decided to move into drama, not give up documentaries, but to actually learn how to direct dramas and make dramas. Partly it was because the culture at Channel 4 had changed so fundamentally in terms of documentary filmmaking. I had to question myself as to whether I was to continue to make the work that I wanted to make and try and get funding for it, but then, how was I going to do that? So I felt that actually by making drama I could try and come in from the side and try and tell my stories through the dramatic form. I thought that maybe it was easier to do, and easier to get funding for, than the documentaries that I wanted to make. That was rather naive of me at the time because it's just as difficult to get funding for drama. *Wavelengths* was my second short drama and the first one was *Memsahib Rita*, which was for the BBC. That was something that they approached me with. It was one of those things where they were

encouraging Black and Asian women directors and writers for a specific strand called *Siren Spirits*. They came to me with a couple of scripts and said, "We'd like you to direct one of these and you can choose a script". It was the first time I was actually working on something that somebody else had generated, but it was also the first time I was directing a drama, so the whole thing was a learning process for me. I've never been to film school so everything I've learnt has been by just doing it and asking questions. It has been through doing it time and time again. *Wavelengths* was again a script that came to me. Somebody said they'd written the script and would I be interested in directing it. I got support for it from Jackie Lawrence who was at the time at Channel 4, commissioning queer work. So she supported it. Before the Film Council there was Lottery funding. I got some lottery funding and found a producer who produced it and again it was a huge learning curve for me. Then I decided that one of the things, in terms of drama, was that I really wanted to learn the language of directing actors. So, I went and did a three-month intense of acting course that actors do, but I went as a director. So I really learnt about the process through which actors go through to try and get a performance or to give a performance. That was fantastic for me. It gave me so much more confidence. Then, seeing it as training again, I actually went and directed some soap for BBC 1. It was a daytime soap called *Doctors*. I did a whole bunch of those because it was fantastic training in terms of fast-track TV drama. Then, when I was making *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, which is a low budget film, having worked on a fast-track TV schedule, it just meant that I really knew what I needed to do, in order to get my coverage for a scene. So I was quite strategic in that way. I wanted to learn the grammar of conventional drama.

MW: Where did you get funding for *Nina's Heavenly Delights* in the end?

PP: In the end *Nina's Heavenly Delights* was funded through patchwork funding. I had a couple of producers on board. It had such a long history that film, but the Scottish Screen Lottery were always incredibly supportive because the film was based in Glasgow. They were the first in with development money and also with production finance, some tax money from a company called Sion. We did a pre-sell to Sky Movies so they bought it. There were some individual investors, friends of friends who put some investment money into it and Fortissimo Film sales. They are an international sales agency. They don't normally put in production money, particularly with a first time feature director. One of my producers at the time, Scott Meek, knew them and he sent them the script. They really liked the script. They met with me and took a chance on it. So it was patchwork funding really.

MW: What are you working on now? You are back working with Alice Walker?

PP: Yes, I've got several projects that I'm working on. Because making *Nina's Heavenly Delights* took 7 years and because it was such a long journey, I don't want that kind of time to go between another piece of work. So I am doing a number of things, I am developing a feature drama, which is set in India. It's a road movie. I am also doing a feature documentary on Alice Walker and her life. I'm trying to raise finance for that in the US. I also have a wonderful little HDV camera now and I'm starting to make work for myself and learning Final Cut Pro. I've decided that I am going back to my *Sari Red* days and just start making short pieces of work. So, I am continually working at the same time as I writing my screenplay for my next feature film and trying to raise finance for my next documentary. I still want to keep doing work and I think that it is

just so fantastic now that you don't need tons of money. We have access to really good technology that is financially accessible. I shot Nina's Heavenly Delights on HD and I am a total convert to it now.

MW: Have you ever used 16 mm film?

PP: Yes, I shot quite a few of my documentaries on 16mm film.

MW: Why did you choose to use film rather than video?

PP: When I first started, it was on Hi-8 video camera on a small, domestic camcorder. I was also shooting at the time Super 8. My dad had a really old Super 8 camera and so I started using that. I was using Super 8 in *Emergence*. I used some Super 8 footage, which I tele-cined onto video. I used that as part of the film. I was really exploring the different formats in those early years. I really loved working with video at the time because it was so accessible and made it possible for me to do something, but when I started to get more money, I really wanted to explore 16 mm. At the time, there was a big difference between film and video. 16 mm was fantastic in terms that I learnt so much about light and lighting. I had a great DOP that I worked with for a number of years, Nancy Schiesari. She used to teach at the London College of Printing. She taught me a lot about framing and about lightning and really helped me to develop my visual eye. We shot *Warrior Marks* on film. Shooting that in Africa, we could really tell the difference in both the textures and the colours and the depth. I've never shot on 35mm, but with *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, even though we were shooting on HD, I wanted it to have a film look. I worked with my DP and we had a lighting design for it, which when it was blown up to 35mm, most people didn't know that it was shot on HD until they saw the end credits. I'd like to shoot on 35mm at some point, but actually I'm not so stuck on it anymore. I think the whole tyranny of formats has become a lot less kind of hierarchical because HD, and post-production on HD, makes so much possible in a way that film doesn't. It's much more accessible financially.

MW: You said that you've got your own HDV camera now and you are going to do some more experimental work. You have a poetic vision in all your work. Are going to go back and explore that more do you think?

PP: I think so at some point. There isn't anything in particular or specific that I am working on right now but I think I always leave myself open to that possibility. I've been using my HDV camera for the feature documentary that I'm doing on Alice Walker. We are really good friends. We've known each other for 16 years now. This is going to be a feature documentary about her and her life. She is going to be opening up to me both as a friend and as a filmmaker. I don't want to go in with a film crew for some of the conversations that I am going to have with her. I've already shot a lot of material with her. She was invited to Rwanda and to Congo and I accompanied her. I took my camera and I shot a lot of material of her in Rwanda and Congo, which I want to use as part of the feature documentary. At the moment, I am exploring making that as part of a visual aesthetic throughout the film. I will have more set-up interviews and I will shoot it on higher format HD, but I also want to try and use the footage that I shoot as part of that documentary. I am really excited about being able to actually have the freedom to just be with Alice in her garden and put the camera on a tripod and for us to

have a conversation where there aren't lots of lights or a big crew hanging around. I think it will give it an intimacy, which I really want the film to have.

MW: In your very early work, in *Emergence* and *Sari Red* did you operate the camera yourself?

PP: Yes, I shot all of *Sari Red* myself. With *Emergence* I shot some of it myself and some of it was shot by Edward George from Black Audio Film Collective.



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