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Gender Equality in Batak Toba Society in the Lights of the Theological Thoughts of Ivone Gebara

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Abstract

In the shadow of strong traditional customs, Batak Toba women are subjected to the authority of men, whether husbands or male relatives, and are confined to the role of parhobas (servants) for every family event. Ivone Gebara's thoughts would provide inspiration to address the challenges of gender inequality through empowering women and inclusive human values in open dialogue, aiming for personal and social transformations that are inclusive, just, and sustainable, following the social-cultural context of Batak Toba in Indonesia. The focus of Ivone Gebara's theological thought aligns with the principles of Liberation Theology, emphasizing the importance of efforts to connect the Christian faith with the lives of communities affected by social and economic injustice, along with solidarity with the poor and oppressed. This research used a literature review method by examining recent articles on Ivone Gebara's thoughts. She critically observes the patriarchal structures in society and the Church, advocating for the need for critical reflection in inclusive and egalitarian interpretations of women's experiences to promote gender equality. Gebara's thoughts serve as a foundation to enrich public narratives and support education and feminist awareness for social change within the Batak Toba community. Contextualizing Gebara's ideas in Indonesia, particularly in the Batak Toba culture, can support movements and awareness regarding religious norms and encourage open discussions about women's roles in diverse societies.

Keywords

Liberation Theology, Gender, Feminism, Batak Toba

INTRODUCTION

The Batak community is a tribe that steadfastly preserves its customs and culture to this day. Wherever they are, the Batak people adhere to their traditions and customs. In Batak Toba Society, traditions and culture play a crucial role in shaping the social structure, including gender roles. In Batak Toba culture, women often face gender inequality in education, customs, and inheritance rights. In customary life as

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well, women are frequently subjected to unfair treatment, such as in the distribution of inheritance. In daily life, it is evident that there are still many disparities between the roles of Batak women compared to men. This is closely linked to the strong influence of patriarchal structure, making gender a recurring issue in Batak Toba Culture.

In the Batak Toba tribe, there is a kinship system that embodies a patriarchal culture known as *Dalihan Na Tolu*, translated as "Tungku Nan Tiga" in Indonesian. *Dalihan Na Tolu* consists of three elements: (1) *Manat Mardongan Tubu*, which focuses on maintaining relationships among family members within the same clan, mainly male; (2) *Elek Marboru*, which emphasizes support and care for sisters or daughters; (3) *Somba Marhula-hula*, highlights the respect that women should have for their brothers and parents. The Batak people highly value and implement this kinship system as a way of interacting with others.

The portrait of inequality within Batak Toba families is evident in various aspects. Firstly, concerning inheritance rights, male children have greater inheritance rights compared to female children. Sons have various responsibilities in society that legitimize their more significant inheritance rights. In contrast, daughters only have limited inheritance rights. Often, these inheritance rights are expressed as gifts based on compassion. Women may receive something if the male heir is willing to give a small portion of the inheritance when requested by the female party. The compassion mentioned here is also when the *Inong* (ibu) in the family possesses and keeps jewellery or valuable items; the female child will inherit these possessions when the mother dies.

Secondly, inequality in the public sphere becomes apparent when women still face constraints in decision-making and recognition of their roles. Decision-making processes predominantly involve men, while women are placed in the role of decision implementers. This results in low participation of women in the public sphere, disadvantaging them in various fields such as education, health, economy, social matters, politics, and culture. In other words, it can be said that men hold control over women.

The issue of gender inequality is not only evident in conflicts with men but also within women themselves, as seen in the dual roles played by Batak Toba women. They play a significant and crucial part in managing households. Thus, women are present and involved and play roles in both the private and public spheres

simultaneously. While they play a significant role in household matters, they face several constraints in the public sphere. In addition to inheritance rights and decision-making, Batak Toba women also encounter irony regarding recognising of their roles and injustices in various aspects of life.

Recognizing this phenomenon, society has an increasing awareness of addressing and understanding the gender disparities present in this structure. One interesting approach to examining this issue is adopting a feminist theological perspective involving insights from Ivone Gebara. Ivone Gebara is a feminist theologian who has made significant progress in developing a theological framework that recognizes and opposes gender inequality.

This paper aims to delve into the feminist theology of Ivone Gebara and assess its potential application in Batak Toba society. The paper will explore the key principles of feminist theology developed by Ivone Gebara. It will also examine how her insights can contribute to addressing gender inequality in Batak Toba society, which is vulnerable due to the strong and pervasive influence of patriarchal culture. By studying Ivone Gebara's feminist theology, this paper offers a perspective on efforts to achieve gender equality in Batak Toba society while serving as a source of inspiration to promote positive transformation towards an inclusive and fair society for all individuals, regardless of gender.

METHOD

This paper employs the method of literature review (Library Research). Library research is a research activity conducted by collecting information and data using various source materials available in libraries or through the Internet. The steps taken by the author involve gathering various recent journal articles (within the last ten years) on the phenomenon of inequality in Batak Toba culture and the feminist theological thoughts of Ivone Gebara. From these references, the author reads, comprehends, and takes notes on findings that support the focus of this study.

RESULT

Gender Inequality in Batak Toba Culture

Women in the Family

The issue of gender inequality in Batak Toba culture, like many other cultures in Indonesia and around the world, has become a complex problem with multiple

aspects and ongoing developments. Despite the rich cultural heritage and strong traditions of Batak Toba, this culture is not exempt from gender gaps deeply embedded in its social and cultural framework. Misunderstandings in gender perceptions, prevalent among men and women, and the patriarchal kinship system, as well as the customs of Batak Toba culture, form the basis for the marginalization of women.[1]

In everyday life in Batak Toba culture, gender injustice is still evident in various aspects, including education, traditional customs, and inheritance rights. Women often face limitations in access to education and find themselves constrained by patriarchal customary norms, particularly in terms of inheritance rights. The highest decisions in this culture are in the hands of men, meaning that women do not have the right to speak or make decisions. Inheritance is also owned by men, especially the eldest son (*sianghangan*) and the youngest son (*siampudan*). The role of women in this life is limited to the role of the petitioner (*sipanjalo*), while men are more likely to work outside the home, and women focus on domestic work inside the house or *huta*.[2]

The lyrics of the song *"Holong Mangalap Holong"* vividly depict the roles and positions of women and men within the family. From the outset, the song portrays that the family's positions and division of tasks are predetermined. One of the songs that tends to highlight this is the song titled *Holong Mangalap Holong: "di huta anggitta siampudan, di parmahanan hahatta panggoaran, amatta nang inanta tu balian, ibototta ma patupahon panganan* (in the village, the younger brother is the smallest, in the pasture, the older brother is the biggest, father and mother in the fields, our sisters prepare the food).[3] In these lyrics, it is clear how tasks are divided and the positions of children within the Batak family. In this context, women find their place in the domestic realm and household duties.

In the Batak tribe, sons are highly esteemed and are responsible for preserving and passing down the family or clan name. The family name, known as "marga," holds significant importance in Batak culture and is exclusively passed down through males. Women in the Batak Toba tribe are valued for their ability to bear heirs for the clan or

[1] Harisan Boni Firmando, "Eksistensi Perempuan Batak Toba Ditengah Kemelut Gender Di Tapanuli Bahagian Utara (Analisis Sosiologis," *Jurnal Kajian Gender dan Anak* 5, 2 (2021): 82.

[2] J. B. Simatupang, "Perempuan dalam Budaya Adat Batak Toba," *Jurnal Pendidikan Tambusai*, 5, 3 (2021): 10288-10289.

[3] Firmando, "Eksistensi Perempuan," 84.

male lineage. It can be said that not having a son is considered a shortcoming within the family, while not having daughters has no impact. For daughters, their clan identity only continues after they marry, and even then, they will be known through their husband's clan. After marriage, daughters fully become part of their husband's families, as women are "bought" through *sinamot* (dowry), and their responsibilities shift entirely to caring for their in-laws, no longer having obligations towards their parents.

Batak Toba Women After Marriage

In customary events, women are often seen merely as guests who do not actively participate in the main traditional ceremonies but instead play roles in the kitchen or are referred to as *parhobas*, meaning servants. On the other hand, sons become the focal point and protagonists of these ceremonial events. This distinction is absolute. In Toba customary practices, women are considered to be in a secondary position, while men hold the main/primary roles and are even regarded as kings. The patriarchal nature between husband and wife in the Batak Toba tribe is evident in the expectations placed on women/wives within the family. Wives are expected to take care of the home and family, serve their husbands well, obey without questioning, and show respect to their husbands. Men, as leaders, take charge and actively engage in public affairs.

In this era, an ongoing debate and growing movement challenge and oppose patriarchal culture. Like women from other cultures, Batak Toba women are also beginning to emerge and participate in various aspects of society. In some cases, Batak women are considered stronger and wiser than men, especially in marital relationships. However, within customary practices, particularly in the *Dalihan Na Tolu* system, the status of women remains unchanged and is deemed unlikely to change. The deeply ingrained customary practices within the Batak tribe have perpetuated a patriarchal culture. Some Batak women still accept and believe that they should be treated accordingly. All perceptions and concepts assigned to women are inseparable from the life philosophy of Batak Toba society, namely *Dalihan Na Tolu. The Dalihan Na Tolu* concept is an integrated kinship system deeply rooted in the traditions and values of Batak Toba culture from the beginning.[4]

[4] Grecetinovitria Merliana Butar-Butar, "Eksistensi Perempuan Batak Toba Dalam Budaya Dan Agama," *Jurnal Pionir* 6, 2 (2020): 193.

In this gender crisis, many women persist and undertake dual roles based on the complex needs of the modern era. Various issues and demands in the modern age require women to maximize self-realization. The existence and capabilities of women have been proven and tested, ranging from managing the family and contributing to the family's economy through activities such as farming, weaving (*martonun*), and online trading to being the backbone of the family as professional women, leaders in the workplace, and mothers at home. Women deserve to be recognized as promoters because, in addition to advancing their families, they can also engage in various fields that benefit the wider community. [5]Therefore, the stigma traditionally associated with Batak Toba women starkly contrasts the reality of their roles and achievements in today's society.

Liberation Theology and Feminist Theology of Ivone Gebara

Ivone Gebara is a nun from the Order of Our Lady of Conegas of Saint Augustine. Before gaining recognition as a feminist and theologian, Ivone Gebara worked in a small town called Camaragibe near the city of Recife in Northern Brazil, focusing on the poor and women who were victims of violence.[6] Consequently, the theological orientation of her thinking is inseparable from her charitable work as a nun.

Ivone Gebara holds a theological perspective that significantly differs from most theological orientations. She argues that male groups are too controlling the discussions about God. Consequently, this masculine viewpoint, according to Gebara, is seen as a way for male groups to maintain an understanding of God and society. Gebara suspects that such patterns are utilized by patriarchal leadership as a claim to the truth about the understanding of God. If men declare themselves as the group holding the whole truth of God, then the voices of women will be silenced.

Gebara likens this theological phenomenon to clothing. Understanding God's true identity is like clothing that humans wear over all their concrete experiences and feelings. The issue is that this clothing is made based on the design of only one party and never replaced. In other words, masculine theology has been used by the Church for too long and has never been taken off. Therefore, Gebara advocates for removing

[5] Firmando, "Eksistensi Perempuan," 83.
[6] Claudio Carvalhaes and Fabio Py, "Liberation Theology in Brazil," *Cross Currents* 67, Nr. 1 (2017): 163.

this patriarchal theology and replacing it with a more comprehensive theology. For her, God is a mystery that encompasses both men's and women's lives.

Claudio Carvalhaes and Fabio Py carefully observe the direction and journey of Ivone Gebara's theology. They find that Gebara reflects on patriarchal theology, which, in turn, hinders people from recognizing God more fully. Carvalhaes and Py express:

> "Theology is a process of knowing and patriarchy has forced us to think in univocal ways offering us only one piece of cloth to understand God and ourselves. For Gebara, religious experiences are born and lived in and through our bodies and it is in these bodies and bodies' relations that we can find the threads of what God might be in our midst. There is a tapestry of solidarity and connection that gives us, in different bodies and unique feelings, a sense of what and who God might be: a mystery that graces us in many forms and shapes. In this mystery, lived in the plural ways of living that begs for different forms of knowledge to give different accounts of God, of ourselves and our live together."[7]

As mentioned above, Ivone Gebara's theological foundation does not primarily arise from the contradiction between masculine and feminine theology. Instead, Gebara's theology initially speaks to the idea that religious experience is always grounded in everyday life. The religious experience becomes full when individuals discover God's presence and role in their lives. Therefore, humans can better understand that God is always present and bestows His grace in various forms and shapes. On the almost opposing side, overly masculine theology restricts the experience and awareness of God's presence. The experience and presence of God are underpinned by male dominance in all areas of life. Hence, such patriarchal theology can hinder humans from getting to know God more deeply and comprehensively.

Based on this theological foundation, Ivone Gebara sees the strength of women in creating and rebuilding all aspects of life amid patriarchal cultures.[8] In highly patriarchal environments, women continue to advocate for their voices, not just for themselves but for the collective good. Gebara observes that women contribute significantly to economics, politics, social solidarity, gender, and sexuality.

[7] Carvalhaes and Py, "Liberation Theology in Brazil," 164.
[8] Carvalhaes and Py, "Liberation Theology in Brazil," 166.

Ivone Gebara views the traditional dogma of God the Father and Jesus the Son as 'sacred' tools for the patriarchal tradition to subjugate women under their authority. The Father and the Son are gods whom all humans must obey. However, this model is employed by men to promote their dominance over women under the guise of obedience. Confronted with this theological situation, Gebara contemplates that women need daily salvation and resurrection to overcome such challenges.[9]

Gebara is aware that her theological thoughts are within the scope of Latin American Liberation Theology. She agrees that Latin American Liberation Theology establishes a new relationship between the saving Christ and the social struggles of the local community. However, she also criticizes this theology for not recognizing the growth of androcentric character within it. Liberation theologians often fail to question this androcentric character, thus perpetuating a patriarchal theological epistemology.[10] In other words, Liberation Theology is seen as too focused on the struggle for socio-economic justice, neglecting the fight for gender justice. For Gebara, women's rights should also be advocated as an integral part of overall social justice.

Therefore, besides hindering people from understanding God more comprehensively, patriarchal theology also closes the possibility for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of justice. Gebara writes:

> "Liberation theologians saw spirituality as the presence of God's Spirit helping us in our initiatives against justice. It was the strength of His Spirit that held us together to resist the social and political forms of evil. But, this liberationist spirituality never accepted the critique of Christian feminists regarding the limited, oppressive and invasive presence of God the Father. Despite their coherence in a past contextual situation, those meanings are now challenged by the winds of the human right to democratic diversity, to feminism and to pluralistic understanding of justice."[11]

Facing a dynamic world and society, Gebara does not deny the reality of diverse meanings. However, these meanings are deemed inappropriate if used to perpetuate

[9] Ann Lutterman-Aguilar, "A Protestant Feminist Perspective in Response to Our Current Context of Violence," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 2 (2018): 135.

[10] Alexandra Rodriguez Sabogal, "From Liberation Theology to Feminist Ecotheology," *Chasqui* 50, no. 2 (November 2021): 163.

[11] Ivone Gebara, "Spirituality and Resistance: A Latin American Perspective," in *Feminist Theology Reaching New Borders, ed. Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians* 39, Nr. 1 (2016): 65.

the process of male domination over women. Religious language, too, opens up a space for diverse meanings. As mentioned earlier, Gebara sees that men often use the masculinity of God (The Father and The Son) to subjugate women in the name of 'divine obedience.' She suspects that religious languages are used to strengthen the throne of capitalist societies.

Ivone Gebara is also a foundational figure in eco-feminism. Eco-feminism involves the concern and understanding of women and the dignity of the entire natural ecosystem. The patriarchal culture challenged by Gebara ultimately leads to the conclusion that men can be identified with culture. If men are associated with culture, then women are associated with nature. The association between women and nature is based on similarities in physical functions such as reproduction, lactation (breastfeeding), and childcare.[12] Due to the association of these functions, any struggle for justice within Liberation Theology must consider this eco-feminist perspective.

Eco-feminism becomes a crucial pillar within the structure of Latin American Liberation Theology because it inspires a perspective that brings a 'feminine' touch to the struggle for justice. The oppression of the people due to an oppressive government needs attention from the world, akin to a mother caring for her child. The significant poverty of the people requires the breastfeeding intervention of the world as a mother. Just as nature nurtures everything within it, the world should similarly view all those who are poor, oppressed, suffering, and marginalized.

Due to its contribution to collective social justice efforts, Ivone Gebara's eco-feminism opens up space for women to have a more liberated voice and express their opinions. This is possible because women are seen as the group that understands and experiences the functions of maternal physiology most intimately. Consequently, Ivone Gebara's feminist theology has its distinctive features. Unlike most feminist theology, which often focuses on discussions about masculinity and patriarchal thinking that heavily influences human concepts of God, Gebara's eco-feminism does not get entangled in dogma or questions about God as the highest entity or as a single spatial entity of pure essence within and of itself.[13] In short, Ivone Gebara's feminist

[12] Olga Consuelo Velez Caro, "Ecofeminism: New Liberation Paths for Women and Nature," *Exchange* 44 (2015): 69.

[13] Cyntthia Garrity-Bond, "Ecofeminist Epistemology in Vandana Shiva's The Feminine Principle of Prakriti and Ivone Gebara's Trinitarian Cosmology," *Feminist Theology* 26, no. 2 (2018): 192.

theology does not limit itself to the patriarchal background in the concept of God but discovers the role of God in caring for and loving all humanity, both men and women.

Interdisciplinary Approach: Religious and Cultural Perspectives

In Batak Toba society, tradition and culture play a crucial role in shaping the social structure, including gender roles. Women face gender inequality in education, customs, and inheritance rights. This section encompasses the theological thoughts of Ivone Gebara, emphasizing gender inequality and advocating the need for critical reflection through inclusive and egalitarian interpretations of women's experiences to promote gender equality. Ivone Gebara also believes that in a patriarchal culture, women play a significant role in creating and reconstructing all aspects of life. Therefore, the interdisciplinary approach between religious and cultural aspects in this context involves understanding and addressing gender inequality in Batak Toba society by studying Ivone Gebara's feminist theology and offering perspectives on achieving gender equality in the Batak Toba community.

In Batak Toba society, men are positioned as decision-makers in every consideration. Both family and community rely on a man's decision for communal actions. On the other hand, women are placed in the position of *"parhobas"* or servants. The legitimacy of such roles points to the privilege of men to subjugate women under their authority. Cultural systems like these could silence women's voices in Batak Toba society.

In the realm of Liberation Theology, particularly feminist theology, Ivone Gebara identifies a potential opening in a situation similar to the position of women in Batak Toba society. Ivone Gebara recognizes the strength of women in creating and rebuilding all aspects of life amidst a patriarchal culture.[14] Gebara sees that as women become more alienated from society, their rights are increasingly asserted. Like men, women also aspire to play a role in economic development. Just as men contribute to political progress, women increasingly become involved in state politics.

Women can find this opening as they discover that an increasingly dynamic society generates diversity in meanings. In her theological reflections, Gebara observes that men often employ the masculinity of God (Father and Son) to subjugate women based on 'divine obedience.' She suspects that religious language is used to

[14] Carvalhaes dan Py. "Liberation Theology in Brazil," 166.

solidify the throne of capitalist societies. Gebara offers a new interpretation of the nature of God through her ecofeminist perspective.

Ecofeminism is not entangled in dogma or questions about God as the highest entity or as a single spatial entity of pure essence existing within and unto itself.[15] God is not only portrayed as a powerful Father but also as a Spirit who observes and cares for all oppressed humanity. The maternal function of the Spirit of God is emphasized here. Thus, the feminine nature is inherent in God. This new interpretation elevates the dignity of women to be equal to men's.

The fundamental values of ecofeminism are also present in Batak Toba society. There are two significant concepts within Batak Toba's ecofeminism. The first concept revolves around a divine entity known as Si Boru Deang Parujar. This belief originates from the Tapanuli community in North Sumatra. In Batak Toba culture, it is believed that a man and a woman were initially born as twin siblings named Raja Ihatmanisia (male) and Boru Itammanisia (female), serving as the ancestors of all humanity on Earth. [16]Raja Ihatmanisia and Boru Itammanisia were born from the womb of Si Boru Deang Parujar. Since Si Boru Deang Parujar gave birth to both male and female children, this entity became a symbol of equality's idea in Batak Toba society. Si Boru Deang Parujar is also depicted as a celestial goddess who willingly descended to Earth to cultivate the land for human use. Therefore, Si Boru Deang Parujar is not only the mother of all humans but also the mother of the Earth.

Therefore, Si Boru Deang Parujar embodies an idea of equality that transcends not only the social and community level but also reaches the cosmological level. The cosmological myth of Si Boru Deang Parujar emphasizes the independence of thought and action for women as individuals who cannot be interfered with by the injustices born from the patriarchal system that originated from the celestial realm. [17]Beyond that, a noble responsibility is also bestowed upon Batak Toba women as the mothers of natural and human life. In essence, the representation of Batak Toba women as independent, not oppressed by the patriarchal system, and connected to nature is embodied in Si Boru Deang Parujar.

[15] Bond, "Ecofeminist Epistemology," 192.

[16] Roy Charly H.P. Sidabutar, dkk, "Ekofeminisme Batak Toba: Pembacaan Lintas Tekstual Kejadian 1 dan Kosmologi Si Boru Deang Parujar," *Kurios* 9, no. 3 (Desember 2023): 721.

[17] Sidabutar, dkk, "Ekofeminisme Batak Toba," 725.

The second important concept in Batak Toba ecofeminism is *Dalihan Na Tolu. Dalihan Na Tolu* is a framework that encompasses blood relationship connections and serves as the basis for kinship relations in Batak Toba society.[18] *Dalihan Na Tolu* consists of three elements: (1) *Manat Mardongan Tubu*, which focuses on maintaining relationships among male members of the same clan, (2) *Elek Marboru*, emphasizing the support and care for sisters or daughters, (3) *Somba Marhula-hula*, highlighting the respect that women should have for their sons and parents. This kinship framework dictates how women should submit to men within their families. In addition to the patriarchal concept embedded in it, this kinship framework also holds a deeper meaning. *Dalihan Na Tolu* implies that humans will continue to exist in space and time and are capable of sustaining themselves within the universe.[19] The concept of *Dalihan Na Tolu* leads to contemplation of the cosmos in its vast and boundless depth: a light emanating from every form of existence and the cosmos as a whole.[20]

The contribution of feminist theology and ecofeminism by Ivone Gebara significantly enriches the foundation and reference points for the struggle for the dignity and equality of women in the context of Liberation Theology. The contributions of Gebara's thoughts can also be applied to the gender inequality situation faced by Batak Toba women. Gebara offers a 'new garment,' namely the idea that the maternal function of the Spirit of God expands and deepens the human understanding of God. Batak Toba society also has its ecofeminist thoughts. The idea of equality elevated to the cosmological level further underscores the noble dignity of Batak Toba women. Thus, ecofeminist thinking in the context of Liberation Theology is believed to be more easily applied to the struggle for gender equality among Batak Toba women because they share similar thoughts with Gebara's ecofeminism.

CONCLUSION

In the daily life of Toba Batak culture, gender injustice is still evident in various aspects, including education, customary traditions, and inheritance rights. Women often face limitations in accessing education and find themselves constrained by patriarchal customary norms, particularly in terms of inheritance rights. Therefore, an

[18] Andi Fransiskus Gultom, "Refleksi Konseptual Dalihan Na Tolu dan Porhalaan Pada Etnis Batak Toba dalam Perspektif Kosmologi," in *Filsafat Islam: Historisitas Dan Aktualisasi* (*Peran Dan Kontribusi Filsafat Islam Bagi Bangsa*), Prosiding, vol. 1, cet. 1 (Yogyakarta: FA Press, 2014), 197.

[19] Gultom, "Refleksi Konseptual," 220.

[20] Gultom, "Refleksi Konseptual," 206.

interdisciplinary approach that incorporates religious and cultural aspects in this context involves understanding and addressing gender inequality in Toba Batak society by studying Ivone Gebara's feminist theology. It also offers perspectives on efforts to achieve gender equality in Toba Batak society. For Gebara, God is not only portrayed as a powerful Father but also as a Spirit who observes and cares for all oppressed human beings. For Toba Batak women, a noble responsibility is bestowed upon them as the mothers of natural and human life.

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