ISSN - 2395 - 7522 (Online)
Impact Factor : 6.21 (IIJIF)
www.literarycognizance.com

Literary Cognizance

An International Refereed / Peer Reviewd e-Joumal
of English Language, Literature and Criticism

(Vol. - VII, Issue-2, September 2026)

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Literary Cognizance
ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e-Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol.-VII, Issue- 2, September 2026 – (www.literarycognizance.com)

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ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
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Vol. – VII, Issue-2, September 2026

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GENDER PERFORMANCE AND FEMALE SOLIDARITY IN POILE SENGUPTA'S *INNER LAWS*

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Abstract

This paper strives to examine the subversion and reconstruction of feminine identity in Poile Sengupta's Inner Laws (2010) through the lens of feminist literary criticism and gender performativity. It argues that the play challenges essentialist notions of womanhood by presenting femininity as a socially constructed and culturally performed identity rather than a fixed biological reality. Using the theory of gender performativity of Judith Butler as the primary theoretical framework, supported by the feminist perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, the study analyses how domestic roles are learned, repeated, and sustained within patriarchal family structures. Employing a qualitative methodology based on close textual reading, dramatic analysis, feminist criticism, and selective discourse analysis, the paper explores the symbolic significance of the Mother in Law Club and the Daughter in Law Club as institutions that reproduce inherited gender norms. It further demonstrates how satire, humour, role playing, and theatrical performance expose the artificiality of patriarchal expectations while creating possibilities for resistance and transformation. The analysis reveals that Inner Laws not only critiques internalized patriarchy but also reconstructs feminine identity through dialogue, awareness, and female solidarity. By examining the performative nature of gender in the play of Sengupta, the study contributes a fresh perspective to scholarship on Indian English drama, feminist theatre, and gender studies, highlighting the relevance of the play to contemporary debates on identity, agency, and social change.

Keywords

Poile Sengupta; Inner Laws; Gender Performativity; Indian English Drama; Feminist Theatre; Patriarchy; Female Solidarity, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Contemporary Indian English drama has increasingly challenged traditional representations of gender by questioning the cultural assumptions that shape identities and social roles of women. Among contemporary women playwrights, Poile Sengupta (b.1948) occupies a distinctive position for her critical engagement with patriarchy, family, identity, and gender relations. In *Inner Laws* (2010), she employs satire, humour, role playing, and symbolic theatrical structures to expose the socially constructed nature of femininity. Through the Mother in Law Club and the Daughter in Law Club, the play demonstrates that domestic identities such as mother in law and daughter in law are not natural or biologically determined but are culturally learned and repeatedly performed. Rather than portraying women merely as victims of patriarchal oppression, Sengupta reveals how women themselves participate in sustaining inherited gender roles while also possessing the capacity to question and transform them. This study argues that *Inner Laws* subverts conventional

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
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notions of femininity by presenting gender as a performative social practice and reconstructs feminine identity through awareness, resistance, dialogue, and female solidarity.

This study primarily applies the theory of gender performativity of Judith Butler to analyse how repeated social performances construct and normalize feminine identities in *Inner Laws*. The analysis is further informed by the feminist perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray to examine representation of patriarchy, feminine subjectivity, and gender reconstruction of the play. Existing research, including the studies of Trupti Ratnaparkhi (2017), S. Priya Darshini (2025), and other feminist analyses of Poile Sengupta's theatre, has largely focused on patriarchy, domestic oppression, and resistance of women. However, the subversion and reconstruction of femininity through theatrical performance and gender performativity remain insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a qualitative methodology based on close textual reading, feminist literary criticism, dramatic analysis, and selective discourse analysis to demonstrate how *Inner Laws* dismantles essentialist ideas of womanhood and reimagines feminine identity as dynamic, performative, and open to transformation.

Theoretical Framework:

This study draws primarily upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, developed in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), which offers the central theoretical lens through which *Inner Laws* is read. Butler contends that gender is not an internal essence or a pre-given attribute that individuals simply express; rather, it is constituted through a "stylized repetition of acts" performed within a rigid regulatory frame, so that what appears to be a natural, abiding substance is in fact the sedimented effect of repeated performance (Butler 191). Gender, in this view, is a matter of "doing" rather than "being": identity is produced retroactively by the very acts that are said to express it. This reversal of cause and effect is central to the present analysis, since it allows domestic identities such as motherhood and daughter-in-lawhood to be read not as natural conditions that precede the play's action but as effects continually produced through repeated speech, gesture, and ritual within the household.

Equally important to this framework is Butler's account of gender as a citational practice, whereby each performance draws its intelligibility and authority from prior, culturally sanctioned performances rather than from the individual performer's intention. Because the "naturalness" of gender depends upon this constant reiteration, it can never be fully secured; every repetition carries within it the possibility of variation, error, and resignification. Butler illustrates this instability through practices such as drag and parody, which expose the gap between performance and any presumed "original" identity, thereby denaturalizing gender itself (Butler, 191). This dimension of Butler's theory supplies the interpretive basis for treating the Mother in Law Club and the Daughter in Law Club simultaneously as disciplinary institutions that train women into normative femininity and as theatrical structures whose very self-consciousness about "syllabus," "training," and "planning" risks exposing gender as rehearsed artifice rather than inherited nature.

The analysis of constructed femininity is further grounded in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's foundational claim that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman anticipates Butler's performative model by locating femininity in socialization rather than biology. Beauvoir argues that patriarchal culture positions woman as the Other against a male norm treated as the universal subject, confining her to immanence—repetitive, body-bound domestic existence—while transcendence, agency, and self-definition remain coded as masculine privileges. Women, she suggests, are taught to know themselves primarily through external, male-authored expectations rather than through autonomous choice (Beauvoir, 295). This framework illuminates the manner in which the members of the Mother in

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
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Law Club instruct the daughter-in-law to define her worth through appearance, cooking, and conversational polish—markers of an identity assigned from outside rather than chosen from within.

Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* extends this analysis by theorizing patriarchy explicitly as a political institution rather than a natural arrangement, one sex governing another through structures of consent secured chiefly by ideology and socialization rather than force alone. For Millett, the family functions as patriarchy's primary agent, transmitting its values to each new generation and thereby reproducing male dominance at the most intimate level of everyday life (Millett, 25). Crucially, Millett also theorizes the mechanism of internalization: patriarchal ideology survives and reproduces itself because the subordinate group comes to accept the dominant group's values as its own, participating in its own regulation without perceiving it as domination (Millett, 35). This concept of internalized patriarchy is indispensable to reading the Mother in Law Club, whose members enforce patriarchal expectations upon younger women not out of malice but out of genuine belief in the values they themselves were trained to embody.

Elaine Showalter's theory of gynocriticism contributes a complementary emphasis on the recovery of women's suppressed voices and experiences. Showalter traces women's literary and cultural expression through successive phases moving from imitation of dominant, patriarchal models, through protest against those models, and finally toward an autonomous, self-defining female consciousness, and she insists that feminist criticism must attend to this process of finding voice (Showalter, 13). This trajectory offers a useful frame for tracing the daughter-in-law's movement across the play, from a figure initially constructed entirely through the expectations of the Mother in Law Club to a speaking subject capable of dialogue, negotiation, and self-representation.

Hélène Cixous's concept of *écriture féminine*, articulated in "The Laugh of the Medusa," critiques the binary oppositions—active/passive, culture/nature, speech/silence—that structure Western thought and consistently subordinate the feminine term. Cixous calls upon women to write themselves and the body into discourse as a means of escaping a phallogocentric symbolic order that has historically silenced them (Cixous, 875). This call for new, self-authored modes of expression informs the reading of female solidarity in *Inner Laws* as a discursive as much as a social achievement, one in which women begin to speak to and of one another outside inherited scripts of rivalry.

Luce Irigaray's *This Sex Which Is Not One* offers a further critique of the phallocentric symbolic order, arguing that women have historically been permitted to exist within language and culture only as mirrors or deficient versions of a masculine norm, their own desire and subjectivity rendered unrepresentable. Irigaray proposes mimicry as a strategy of resistance, whereby women deliberately assume and exaggerate the very roles imposed upon them in order to expose, through that exaggeration, the artificiality of those roles (Irigaray, 69). This concept of subversive mimicry is particularly suggestive for a play built upon institutional parody: the exaggerated seriousness with which the Mother in Law Club drafts its domestic "syllabus" can be understood as a theatrical enactment of the very mimicry Irigaray theorizes, one that simultaneously performs and satirizes patriarchal expectation.

Read together, these theories establish a two-part analytical trajectory that structures the discussion which follows. Butler's performativity, supported by Beauvoir's account of woman as socially produced Other, provides the primary framework for examining how *Inner Laws* constructs femininity as a learned, institutionally regulated performance. Millett's theory of ideological internalization, read alongside Showalter's, Cixous's, and Irigaray's accounts of suppressed voice, mimicry, and self-authored expression, then provides the framework for

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e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
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examining how that same femininity becomes internalized by women themselves, and how it may nonetheless be reworked through dialogue, parody, and collective female solidarity.

Constructing Femininity:

Poile Sengupta's *Inner Laws* challenges the belief that femininity is a natural or biologically determined identity by presenting it as a social performance learned through repeated cultural practices. The play demonstrates that the identities of a mother in law and a daughter in law are not innate but are produced through behavioural codes, institutional training, and inherited traditions. This representation closely corresponds with Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, which argues that gender is constituted through repeated acts that gradually acquire the appearance of natural identity (Butler, 191). Rather than depicting domestic relationships as spontaneous, Sengupta reveals that they are consciously rehearsed and culturally regulated.

The Mother in Law Club symbolizes this institutional construction of femininity. Instead of functioning as an informal gathering, it resembles a training centre where domestic knowledge is systematically transmitted. The educational character of this institution becomes evident when Mrs Pandu asks, "Han, toh what syllabus must we prepare? ... Conversation English, cooking, beautifying ..." (Sengupta, 182). The use of the word *syllabus* transforms domestic expectations into an organized curriculum, suggesting that cooking, appearance, language, and behaviour are learned social practices rather than natural feminine qualities. Butler's argument that repeated performances create the illusion of stable gender identity is clearly reflected in this process (Butler, 191).

The institutionalization of femininity becomes more explicit when responsibilities are divided among the members. Mrs Nandan volunteers, "I, Mrs Nandan. All different styles ... South Indian, Maharashtrian, Bengali ... East and West ..." (Sengupta, 183), while Mrs Pandu assigns another responsibility by stating, "Beautifying ... Mrs Dasarath... aap complexion ka dekhengi..." (Sengupta, 183). Domestic skills are treated as specialized disciplines, comparable to academic subjects, revealing how patriarchal culture standardizes feminine behaviour. The satire lies in the exaggerated seriousness of these discussions, yet beneath the humour Sengupta exposes the systematic production of socially approved femininity.

The regulation of the female body further reinforces this construction. Mrs Dasarath confidently declares, "I will deal with hair ... nails ... clothes" (Sengupta, 184), and another member adds, "With clothes I can help you... I watch the video fashion show regularly!" (Sengupta, 184). These conversations reduce feminine identity to visible markers of beauty and appearance. Simone de Beauvoir argues that women are taught to understand themselves through external expectations rather than personal freedom (Beauvoir, 295), while Kate Millett observes that patriarchal values survive because they become internalized by successive generations (Millett, 35). Sengupta dramatizes these ideas by showing women themselves becoming custodians of patriarchal ideals.

The play also transforms the domestic sphere into a performative stage where gender identities are rehearsed and monitored. The household is not merely a private residence but an institutional space that regulates feminine behaviour. Mrs Hrimaan proposes, "I thought we could have the sessions in my house, is that alright?... Mrs Vasudev, I will give you the directions" (Sengupta, 181). The home thus becomes a classroom where ideal womanhood is taught. This institutional atmosphere is reinforced when Mrs Pandu insists, "Ladies! Please, ladies! Why are you itne jaldi mein? We must have some charcha first, planning, yojana" (Sengupta, 181). Administrative language such as *planning* and *yojana* transforms ordinary family life into a

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bureaucratic system of regulation, demonstrating that patriarchal authority operates through organized social practices rather than isolated actions.

Power within this domestic space functions through surveillance and collective control. When Mrs Hrimaan attempts to participate in decisions concerning her own family, she is silenced: "Nahi, nahi, Mrs Hrimaan. You do not say anything... go and lie down on the sofa... aur hum decision reach kar lenge" (Sengupta, 182). Authority is exercised under the guise of concern, illustrating Michel Foucault's observation that modern power often operates through supervision and normalization rather than direct coercion. Similarly, the collective decision to visit the daughter in law together—"Unity mein takat hai" (Sengupta, 184)—ironically transforms solidarity into an instrument of domestic surveillance. Sandra Lee Bartky's discussion of the disciplined female body further explains how appearance, behaviour, and self-regulation become mechanisms of patriarchal control.

The play extends this critique by portraying motherhood and daughterhood as performative identities rather than natural familial roles. The educational programme prepared for the daughter in law demonstrates that successful daughterhood must be acquired through training in cooking, conversation, appearance, and domestic management (Sengupta, 182–84). Likewise, motherhood is represented as a position of social authority learned through repetition rather than biological experience. The older women sincerely believe that preserving these traditions protects family life, thereby illustrating Millett's argument that patriarchy is maintained through cultural reproduction (Millett, 25). However, Sengupta avoids portraying mothers in law as villains. Their authority reflects inherited conditioning rather than individual cruelty, making the critique institutional rather than personal.

The play gradually destabilizes these identities by exposing their contradictions. The members of the Mother in Law Club frequently disagree, interrupt one another, and reveal uncertainty, undermining the illusion of unquestionable authority. The daughter in law, initially constructed through the expectations of others, gradually emerges as an individual capable of dialogue and negotiation. Elaine Showalter's insistence that feminist criticism recover women's voices (Showalter, 13) is reflected in this movement from imposed identity towards self-expression. Through satire, theatrical performance, and symbolic institutions, *Inner Laws* ultimately demonstrates that femininity, motherhood, and daughterhood are not fixed destinies but cultural performances that can be questioned, revised, and reconstructed.

Internalized Patriarchy:

One of the most significant feminist insights in *Inner Laws* is that patriarchy is sustained not only through male authority but also through its internalization by women. Poile Sengupta demonstrates that domestic oppression survives because inherited values are accepted as natural and transmitted across generations. The Mother in Law Club symbolizes this process. Its members genuinely believe that they are helping younger women by preparing an educational programme covering cooking, beauty, conversation, appearance, and domestic management (Sengupta, 182–84). Their enthusiasm reveals that they do not recognize these practices as restrictive; instead, they perceive them as essential preparation for successful family life. Kate Millett argues that patriarchy continues because its values become embedded within everyday institutions and behaviour rather than depending solely upon direct authority (Millett, 25). Sengupta dramatizes this process by showing women becoming agents of the very ideology that once shaped their own lives.

The satirical force of the play lies in the contrast between the audience's understanding and the characters' assumptions. While the members consider their programme an expression of care, the audience recognizes it as the reproduction of restrictive gender norms. Butler's concept of

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gender performativity explains this contradiction, as repeated social performances gradually acquire the appearance of natural behaviour (Butler, 191). Similarly, the discussions concerning beauty reinforce external standards of femininity. Mrs Dasarath confidently declares, "I will deal with hair ... nails ... clothes" (Sengupta, 184), and another member proudly adds, "With clothes I can help you... I watch the video fashion show regularly!" (Sengupta, 184). These conversations reduce feminine identity to appearance and bodily discipline. Beauvoir's observation that women are encouraged to define themselves through external expectations rather than individual freedom (Beauvoir, 295) becomes particularly relevant here. Elaine Showalter's emphasis on examining the cultural conditions shaping women's experiences further explains why these characters reproduce inherited practices without questioning their origins (Showalter, 13).

However, *Inner Laws* does not conclude with the exposure of patriarchal conditioning. Instead, it gradually reconstructs feminine identity by demonstrating that socially produced roles can also be transformed. The conflict between mothers in law and daughters in law is revealed to arise from inherited cultural expectations rather than natural opposition. As communication gradually replaces instruction and surveillance, the characters begin to recognize one another as individuals instead of merely occupying predetermined domestic positions. Butler's theory supports this transformation by arguing that identities created through repeated performances remain open to revision through new forms of action (Butler, 191). The weakening authority of the Mother in Law Club symbolizes this shift, as humour and self-realization gradually expose the limitations of its assumptions without resorting to dramatic confrontation.

The reconstruction of femininity also involves rejecting conventional ideals that define successful womanhood through beauty, obedience, domestic efficiency, and sacrifice. Greater importance is instead placed upon dialogue, mutual respect, and empathy. Hélène Cixous argues that women must create new forms of expression beyond patriarchal definitions of femininity (Cixous, 875), while Luce Irigaray emphasizes the diversity of female experience and rejects fixed categories of womanhood (Irigaray, 69). Sengupta embodies these ideas by allowing her characters to redefine their relationships beyond the rigid identities of mother in law and daughter in law. Their transformation demonstrates that feminine identity is dynamic and continually negotiated rather than permanently fixed.

The play reaches its feminist culmination through the emergence of female solidarity. Initially, the Mother-in-Law Club and the Daughter-in-Law Club represent institutionalized conflict, suggesting that rivalry between women is inevitable. Gradually, however, the characters recognize that both generations have been shaped by the same patriarchal system. This realization replaces hierarchy with mutual understanding and reveals that conflict originates from cultural conditioning rather than personal incompatibility. Showalter's call for recovering women's shared experiences (Showalter, 13) is reflected in this movement towards collective awareness, while Millett's critique of patriarchal power suggests that genuine resistance begins when women refuse to reproduce inherited structures of domination (Millett, 25).

From the perspective of feminist theatre, this transformation is especially significant because it is enacted through performance. Changes in dialogue, gesture, and interaction make visible the reconstruction of identity, enabling the audience to witness how social roles are created and can therefore be performed differently. The domestic space is transformed from a site of surveillance into one of communication and equality. Rather than advocating revenge or reversing existing hierarchies, *Inner Laws* proposes dialogue, cooperation, and shared humanity as the basis of social change. The play therefore subverts conventional constructions of femininity by exposing gender roles as socially performed and by imagining new forms of feminine identity founded upon awareness, equality, and female solidarity. Through this vision, Poile Sengupta

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moves beyond the critique of patriarchy and offers a constructive feminist model of personal and social transformation.

Conclusion:

Poile Sengupta's *Inner Laws* offers a compelling feminist critique of the cultural processes through which femininity is constructed, performed, and transmitted across generations. The study has demonstrated that the conflict between mothers in law and daughters in law is ideological rather than natural, emerging from inherited patriarchal expectations instead of personal incompatibility. Through the symbolic representation of the Mother in Law Club, the play reveals how domestic femininity is systematically produced through instruction, discipline, repetition, and social conditioning. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis establishes that gender identities are socially performed rather than biologically determined. Furthermore, the household functions as a performative space where everyday practices, language, behaviour, and rituals regulate and reinforce accepted feminine roles.

The study has also shown that *Inner Laws* extends beyond exposing patriarchal oppression by examining the operation of internalized patriarchy and the reconstruction of feminine identity. Satire, humour, role playing, and institutional parody expose the contradictions embedded within conventional domestic practices, while the play demonstrates that motherhood and daughterhood are socially constructed identities open to reinterpretation. Supported by the feminist perspectives of Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, and Luce Irigaray, the analysis argues that feminine identity evolves through dialogue, empathy, and self-reflection rather than unquestioned obedience. The emergence of female solidarity further challenges the stereotype that women are natural rivals, suggesting instead that inherited patriarchal performances can be transformed through mutual understanding and cooperation.

This study contributes to existing scholarship by presenting *Inner Laws* as a drama that not only critiques patriarchy but also reconstructs femininity through theatrical performance and gender performativity. By integrating feminist literary criticism with theories of gender performance, it offers a fresh perspective on Poile Sengupta's dramatic art and contemporary Indian feminist theatre. Ultimately, the play affirms that gender roles are culturally produced rather than naturally fixed and that their reconstruction becomes possible through critical awareness, dialogue, collective resistance, and human empathy. In doing so, *Inner Laws* transforms the domestic stage into a powerful space for feminist resistance, identity reconstruction, and social change.

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ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online), Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)
Literary Cognizance:An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e - Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism
Vol. – VII, Issue-2, September 2026

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Article Received: 06/09/2026
Article Accepted: 12/09/2026
Published Online: 30/09/2026

To Cite the Article: Shinde, Nitish and Mane, Prabhanjan. "*Gender Performance and Female Solidarity in Poile Sengupta's Inner Laws*." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VII, Issue-2, September, 2026, 112-119. www.literarycognizance.com

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Literary Cognizance

An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed
e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism

Volume-VII,Issue-2,Sept. 2026

www.literarycognizance.com

ISSN – 2395-7522 (Online)
(Imp. Factor - 6.21 (IIJIF)

Certificate of Publication

This is to certify that a research article entitled Gender Performance and Female Solidarity in Poile Sengupta's Inner Lawswritten byNitish Pandurang Shinde[1] (Assistant Professor) from P. V. P. Mahavidyalaya, K. Mahankal, Dist. Sangli, MS, India & Prof. (Dr.) Prabhanjan B. Mane[2] (Professor & Head) from Department of English, Shivaji University, Kolhapur, MS, India is published by following the process of the Double Blind Review in the Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literatures and Criticism,Volume-VII,Issue-2,Sept.2026 with Page No. from 112 to 119.

Date:30/09/2026

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ISSIN
2395-7522
LATUR (MS), INDIA

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