

# Leave Her Alone, She Speaks the Truth: Alphonsine as a Spiritual Vessel of Nyina Wa Jambo<sup>1</sup> in Katori Hall's Play, *Our Lady of Kibeho*<sup>2</sup>

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## SHORT BIO

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## ABSTRACT

Most feminist debates, including Western Feminism and postcolonial strands of feminism such as African Feminisms, place emphasis on religion – specifically Christianity – as an oppressive structure dominating women, and justifiably so. Within feminist and colonial discourses, however, Christianity occupies complex, ambiguous spaces. In considering Christianity's positioning within colonialism and feminism, an African feminist position should seek to recognize the contradictions inherent in Christianity and, by extension, facilitate the nuanced experiences women in postcolonial, global South contexts have with Christianity. While some women might find Christianity oppressive, others may find it deeply fulfilling and others still may experience these dichotomies simultaneously. This article presents an African feminist reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2018). Inspired by real-life events and centering Christianity (specifically Catholicism), Hall's play tells the story of three Rwandan convent high-school girls – Alphonsine, Anathalie, and Marie-Claire – whose Marian apparitions garnered widespread attention. Through a textual analysis of, primarily, Alphonsine, who reportedly had the first and most frequent visitations, Christianity is proffered as a site of concurrent oppression and liberation. This article does not engage in the specificities of Catholic doctrine, but rather offers a discussion of varied encounters with Christianity.

## KEYWORDS

African Feminisms, Decolonial Feminism, Christianity, Textual Analysis, Katori Hall

- 1 A term in Rwanda's official language, Kinyarwanda, meaning 'Mother of the Word'.
- 2 A hardcopy version of the original 2015 published play was inaccessible. As such, this article references the electronic version published in 2018, edited by Roberta Uno. Roberta Uno, *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color : An Anthology*, (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: New York, 2018).

## **Colonialism, Christianity, and African Women: An Introduction**

Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal famously said, "All theatre is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them".<sup>3</sup> Theatre has an inherently political nature, as across contexts it continues to be visible as a platform for highlighting various pertinent issues and for the construction (and reading) of a myriad of identities. In this paper, I offer an African feminist reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho* (2018), a play steeped in "religious ecstasy" that combines fact and fiction.<sup>4</sup> Set in 1981 at an all-girls convent high school in the remote Rwandan village of Kibeho and based on real-life events, Hall's two-act play tells the story of three young women who had frequent visitations of the Virgin Mary, or *Nyina wa Jambo*. The three women, Alphonsine Mumureke (16), whose name means "leave her alone, she speaks the truth", Anathalie Mukamazimpaka (20) denoting "one who settles arguments and brings peace" and Marie-Claire Mukangango (21) whose cultural name means "woman", experience spiritual inhabitations leading to their renaming as "the Trinity". Their divine encounters confound the school authority, comprising Father Tuyishime (the head priest), Sister Evangelique (the head nun), Bishop Gahamanyi (town bishop and head of the Butare Diocese), and the Italian investigative priest from the Holy See, the "miracles office" at the Vatican, Father Flavia. The frequent Marian apparitions, which throughout the play take place in contained dormitory rooms, culminate in a public vision where about 20 000 villagers gather at the Assumption of Mary Feast to experience a divine visitation first-hand. What follows are ominous voice-overs signaling bloodshed and death over Rwanda; a foreshadowing of the harrowing genocide that takes place 13 years after the first vision. In dramatizing three Rwandan girls' nuanced experiences of traditional Christianity, a religion embedded in ambiguous, complex spaces in colonial history, Hall offers a form of decolonized Christianity.

The introduction of Christianity to Africa was not a neutral entry, as its arrival in the name of civilization dispossessed Africans of their culture and religion.

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3 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 1979), ix.

4 Michael Billington, "Our Lady of Kibeho Review – Startling Story of a Heavenly 'Visitation'," *The Guardian* 2019.

As such, "it is difficult to separate colonialism from religion, especially Christianity".<sup>5</sup> As much scholarship from sub-Saharan Africa asserts, European colonizers used Christianity to teach Africans subservience to Europeans and became a way by which to deny Africans expression of their unique culture and religious practices.<sup>6</sup> In *African, Christian, Feminist*, Teresia Hinga notes, "in many instances, the struggle against colonization was simultaneously against European Christianity, which was seen by many to legitimize colonialism or even to participate in it".<sup>7</sup>

Christianity had a complex role during colonialism in Africa: "Christian missionaries achieved many things related to the development of African people", including a commitment to health services and bringing "reading and writing" to the continent.<sup>8</sup> However, the education intended to "civilize" Africans instead conscientized oppressed Africans to fight for their liberation.<sup>9</sup> This outcome profoundly challenged colonialist attitudes towards Africans as a people unable to self-govern. Missionary churches also played complex roles during the struggle for independence. Given the tendency to undermine African culture and religion, missionary churches preached a Gospel message suited to the white man's needs, excluding those of the black man.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Rwanda, the setting of Hall's play, "the colonial Belgian government favoured Tutsis over Hutu because they thought Tutsi

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- 5 Wendpanga Eric Segueda, "Imported Religions, Colonialism and the Situation of Women in Africa " in *Schriftenreihe Junges Afrikazentrum/ Young Africa Centre Series* (2015), 8.
  - 6 Nokuzola Mndende, "African Religion and Religion Education" (University of Cape Town, 1994); Matsobane Jacob Manala, "The Impact of Christianity on Sub-Saharan Africa," (University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa 2013); C. N Mbalisi, N. J Obiakor, and C. A Okeke, "Colonialism: Nexus for Myriad Religious Contentions in Post-Colonial Igboland (an Historical Overview)," in *African Journals OnLine* (2015); Fidelis Nkomazana and Senzokuhle Doreen Setume, "Missionary Colonial Mentality and the Expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016); Sibusiso Masondo, "Ironies of Christian Presence in Southern Africa," *ibid.* 31 (2018).
  - 7 Teresia Mbari Hinga, *African, Christian, Feminist: The Enduring Search for What Matters* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), xviii.
  - 8 Jean-Paul Niyigenga, "Global Christianity in the Context of Africa Historical Point of View and Challenges," (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Publishers, 2022), 296.
  - 9 Masondo, "Ironies of Christian Presence in Southern Africa."; Niyi Wariboko, "Colonialism, Christianity, And personhood," in *A Companion to African History*, ed. W. H; Ambler Worger, C. and Achebe, N (New Jersey, United States: Wiley Blackwell, 2018).
  - 10 M. L. Daneel, "Communication and Liberation in African Independent Churches," *Missionalia* 11, no. 2 (1983).

lips and noses resembled those of Europeans, [and, consequently] the missionary church took the Hutu side, designating Hutus the victims and underdogs".<sup>11</sup> Ironically, the Hutus would later become the perpetrators of one of history's bloodiest genocides. Indeed, missionary Christianity played a complicated role in dividing African societies across lines of race, gender and culture/ethnicity.

Tantamount to colonial oppression, but also advancements that have arguably developed the continent, Christianity in Africa continues to be fraught with tensions and complications. Through a gendered lens, we can modify the opening quote to submit it is a challenge to separate colonialism and religion, and their joint impact, on colonized African women, especially. The cultural and religious dispossession that came through Christianity had a compound effect on these women. In pre-colonial society:

African women had greater respect, standing, and authority than previously assumed, and they were given a particular status, especially as grandmothers, mothers, sisters, potters, farmers, healers, and religious leaders. Seniority, life stage, family and ability – and not gender – determined status and authority in Africa prior to 1900.<sup>12</sup>

European Christianity clearly shifted this idea of African women as healers. In colonial Rwanda, Rwandans adopted European standards and embraced Catholicism leaving Rwandan women, who previously had authority as spiritual healers, with few opportunities to progress in these newly established communities of Christian faith.<sup>13</sup> In their African traditional spirituality, they would be able to perform miracles after spirits would inhabit them. Moreover, missionary Christianity had additional negative impacts on black women, whereby colonial institutions did not only recognize men more

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11 Elin Diamond, "Reactivating the City: Kibeho, Black Lives Matter, and the Situationist Dérive," *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 3 (2018): 357.

12 Christine Saidi, "Women in Precolonial Africa," in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedias* (2020), 2.

13 Erin Jessee, "'There Are No Other Options?': Rwandan Gender Norms and Family Planning in Historical Perspective," *Medical History Journal* 64, no. 2 (2020): 229.

than women,<sup>14</sup> but additionally barred women from speaking for themselves during this period.<sup>15</sup> The black body was also integral to Europe's missionary enterprise, as "conversion of Black bodies was the fulfilment of the 'Christian duty' of conquering, colonising (invading) and converting",<sup>16</sup> with the weight of colonialism and missionary Christianity felt "on black women's pudenda".<sup>17</sup> Colonialism's reconstruction of African culture involved locating African womanhood at the intersection of race oppression, religious domination, gender discrimination, and sexual objectification.

Given the impact of Christian missionaries on black women, African feminists call for biblical interpretations and spiritual practices that lift the once colonized, African woman out of suppression as relates to race, gender, and class.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, "African women's theologies are committed to exposing the ideological base of Christianity that maintains and justifies the oppression of women",<sup>19</sup> as culture and religion continue to be sites of oppression in the lives of women in contemporary Africa.<sup>20</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that some African regions view Christianity as a western religion, since its introduction to the continent seemed to cooperate with other colonizing tools, including commerce, civilization and slavery. African and postcolonial feminist perspectives continue to refashion European Christianity, since "to a large extent, Africans experienced the Gospel as a tool of colonialism, racism, sexism, classism and exclusivism".<sup>21</sup> Nguhi summarizes Christianity's positionality in contemporary postcolonial

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- 14 Funmilayo Iidowu Agbaje, "Colonialism and Gender in Africa," in *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*, ed. Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), np.
  - 15 Olatundun Aboosedo Oderinde, "Bible and Women Identity in Post-Colonial Africa," *KIU Journal of Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2019).
  - 16 Itumeleng D. Mothoagae, "The Colonial Matrix of Power: Image Ontology and the Question of Blackness," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* (2021): 5.
  - 17 Wariboko, "Colonialism, Christianity, and Personhood."
  - 18 Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology, Introductions in Feminist Theology* (United Kingdom: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).
  - 19 Isabel Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium," *Agenda*, no. 61 (2004): 21.
  - 20 Urther Rwafa, "Culture and Religion as Sources of Gender Inequality: Rethinking Challenges Women Face in Contemporary Africa," *Journal of Literary Studies* 32, no. 1 (2016).
  - 21 Phiri, "African Women's Theologies in the New Millennium."
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African contexts, noting that “among many African communities... the subordination of women was finally sealed through colonialism and Christianity”.<sup>22</sup>

It is worthwhile at this point to consider the ways in which creative writers of the global South have addressed African women's encounters with Christianity in texts intended for performance on a stage (plays).

## **African Women and Christianity in the Global South: A Literary Landscape**

Plays encompassing Christian themes from global South contexts, published from the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, often feature African women characters in settings situating Christianity uncomfortably and contentiously.

In the Zimbabwean context, two unpublished plays explore a convergence of Christianity and African traditional practices: Innocent Dube's *Africano-Americano* produced in 2002 and Daniel Maphosa's *Heaven's Diary* created in 2004.<sup>23</sup> Dube's play tells the story of Africano, a young African woman who marries a white American man (Americano) in a “white wedding” ceremony, in which her parents are absent. Her husband proceeds to have various extra-marital affairs and eventually stabs Africano to death. Africano's fate seems to support views held within African scholarship of Christianity's cultural and religious imperialism in African contexts.<sup>24</sup> Laiza, the lead female character in Maphosa's dramatic text, connects deeply with traditional African religion to the extent of taking on an irreverent attitude towards Christian faith.<sup>25</sup> In the Nigerian context, renowned dramatist Tess Onwueme's *The Broken Calabash*, written in 1984, centres a female protagonist, Ona, who is strongly devoted to her Christian faith while her father, Cortuma, remains set in his traditional beliefs. Each character is

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22 Wanjuri Nguhi, "Can We Imagine a Feminist Future within Religion?," (2021).

23 Nehemia Chivandikwa, "Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 23, no. 1/2 (2010).

24 Chivandikwa, "Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances," 135.

25 Chivandikwa, "Dialectics and Dynamics of Religion in Theatre: Reflections on Gender and Sexuality in Selected Zimbabwean Theatrical Performances," 143.

puzzled by the religious choice of the other.<sup>26</sup> *Lake God*, a play written in 1986 by prominent Cameroonian playwright Bole Butake, tells the story of a village under attack from supernatural forces because Fon, the village leader, abandons customary ways of worship, converts to a “new religion”, and marries a Christian wife, Angela, whose presence in the village contributes to its eventual destruction.<sup>27</sup> Finally, in a South African setting, acclaimed writer Zakes Mda’s 1996 play, *The Nun’s Romantic Story*, narrates the story of Anna-Maria, a young Catholic nun who kills the General who commanded the soldiers responsible for raping her mother and killing her family years ago. Instead of displaying piety and love, as one might expect of a nun, Anna-Maria’s actions seem driven by political motives.

Against the backdrop of Africa’s complex relationship with Christianity, alongside nuanced literary representations of African women’s experiences of Christianity in dramatic texts set in the global South, this article presents an African feminist reading of Katori Hall’s play, *Our Lady of Kibeho*. Through this lens, I endeavour not to omit Hall’s subjectivity as an African American woman – after all as playwright, Hall translates her artistic vision into this narrative. The methodology section, therefore, includes her journey to creating the play. Since theatre refers to a “seeing place”, this paper’s focus is on examining the narrative Hall prompts us to “see” through an African feminist lens. In this play, Christianity is the domain of three African girls but also offered as a space for complex, non-binary experiences of a religion rooted in colonial legacies. Although this paper does not deal with spirit inhabitation in the context of traditional African spirituality, it addresses this in the context of orthodox Christian religion. As vessels of the divine, the three African schoolgirls access a Christianity removed from the colonial project, and coloniality at large, and, as such, represent a decolonized, revitalised image of African women’s encounters with Christianity.

The vast framework of African feminisms, which include various labels like Womanism, inform this paper. I am particularly drawn to Amina Mama’s ideas:

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26 Kimi D. Johnson, "Prodigal Daughters: Postcolonial Women in Three Plays by Tess Onwueme" (Florida State University, 2008).

27 Dora N. Mbu, "Domination in Gender Relations: Implications for Peace and Conflict in Bole Butake's *Lake God* " *Islamic University Multidisciplinary Journal* 5, no. 2 (2018).

I have no problems with womanism but changing the terminology doesn't solve the problem of global domination. I choose to stick with the original term, insist that my own reality inform my application of it.<sup>28</sup>

I employ an African feminist lens for two primary reasons. First, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal movements including Black feminism, postcolonial feminism and African feminisms got their vigour precisely as politics responsive to a Western-centric feminism that fundamentally excluded black women, women of colour, and women in global South geographies. Second, the "feminism" aspect of African feminisms is semantically grounded in the decolonizing potential of feminist activity and reinforces the necessity of continuing the labour of constructing decolonial feminist frameworks. This decolonial perspective is important in framing my reading of Katori Hall's play, *Our Lady of Kibeho*.

## **Early Feminisms, African (decolonial) Feminisms and Christianity**

The situation of religion (Christianity) has notably shifted trajectory due to feminist activity. During the early movement, "feminists drew on Christian understandings of the nature of God and humans to develop their case for the equal abilities of men and women".<sup>29</sup> Black and white women, although unequally positioned in the movement, found solidarity in Christianity. While Christianity "did provide space and support for many first-wave social reform efforts",<sup>30</sup> by the second wave, many feminist activists (black and white) "saw religion as colluding with other institutions" and "came to understand all forms of religion as oppressive".<sup>31</sup> Mary Daly's slogan seemed to encapsulate this anti-religious stance of early feminist activism: *since God is male, the male is God*.

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28 Elaine Salo and Amina Mama, "Talking About Feminism in Africa," *Agenda* 50 (2001): 61.

29 Meredith Minister, "Religion and (Dis)Ability in Early Feminism," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29, no. 2 (2013): 6.

30 Laurel Zwissler, "Feminism and Religion: Intersections between Western Activism, Theology and Theory," *Religion Compass* 6/7 (2012): 356.

31 Zwissler, "Feminism and Religion: Intersections between Western Activism, Theology and Theory," 356-57.

This pursuit of religious alternatives from the so-called second and third waves of feminism finds expression in postcolonial feminist discourse that seeks to strengthen community among women in the global South by recognizing the differences between them. In her seminal essay,<sup>32</sup> Chandra Mohanty confronts western Feminism for ascribing homogeneous categories of identity such as “Third World” women. Audre Lorde similarly argues that, “without community, there is no liberation”.<sup>33</sup> That is, for women to truly be aligned against gender oppression, the larger feminist movement must recognize and facilitate the myriad differences between them. African feminist writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reiterated this caution against the danger of a single story in her famous 2009 TedTalk.<sup>34</sup> As she challenges myopic representations that stereotype individuals and groups, Ngozi unashamedly implicates herself and draws attention to identities and experiences as diverse and intersectional.

As part of current feminist activity's impulse towards the multiplicity and diversity of women across various contexts, African feminisms, which rejects associations with Third Wave feminism, responds to the exclusionary philosophy undergirding the larger feminist movement.<sup>35</sup> African feminisms centre the experiences and concerns of women inside and outside the continent<sup>36</sup> and exist in numerous iterations, including Africana womanism,<sup>37</sup> Stiwanism,<sup>38</sup> Nego-feminism,<sup>39</sup> and others. African feminist scholars argue that precolonial African societies were not organized along hierarchies of

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32 Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Boundary 2* 12(3) - 13(10) (1984).

33 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.

34 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TEDGlobal, July 2009, intellectual talk, 18:23, [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en)

35 Ruvimbo Goredema, "African Feminism: The African Woman's Struggle for Identity," *African Yearbook of Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2010): 34.

36 Pumla Dineo Gqola, "Ufanele Uqavile: Blackwomen, Feminisms and Postcoloniality in Africa," *Agenda* 50 (2001).

37 Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (Routledge, 2019).

38 Molarra Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (Africa World Press, 1994).

39 Obioma Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture and Society* 29 (2004).

difference as understood and foreground in Western feminist discourse and that social identity markers, particularly race and gender, can carry different meanings within African contexts. For instance, prior to colonialism, races as we understand them did not exist<sup>40</sup> and gender hierarchies were absent.<sup>41</sup> Societies were structured according to seniority<sup>42</sup> or sex-based roles.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, while the first, second, and third waves defined Western feminism, three political epochs – precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Africa – shaped African feminisms.<sup>44</sup>

Decolonial feminist thinking, which aligns to African feminisms, centres gender as a crucial component to understanding the oppression of colonized women. Maria Lugones argues the very term “colonized woman” is an oxymoronic “empty category”, since the obvious outcome of the coloniality of gender is the complete dehumanization of the “colonized woman” who, in being less than human, cannot be categorised “woman”.<sup>45</sup> For decolonial feminists, the colonial enterprise was most pernicious on the bodies of black women and women of colour. Colonized women’s subjugation was realised at the nexus of sexism and racism primarily, among other oppressive structures of power. Essentially, decolonial feminism takes issue with a decolonizing agenda that neglects to centralize gender.

African and decolonial feminist scholars’ shared goal is to validate and centre the experiences and concerns of black women and women of colour in/of global South contexts. With an underlying race and gender consciousness, African feminisms and decolonial feminisms emerged with distinctly postcolonial frameworks within the wider feminist movement. Through these perspectives, we therefore, cannot, one, disqualify

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40 Oyeronke Oyewumi, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

41 Oyewumi, “The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses”.

42 Oyeronke Oyewumi, “Conceptualizing Gender: The Eurocentric Foundations of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge of African Epistemologies,” *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002).

43 Nkiru Nzegwu, *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (SUNY Press, 2006).

44 Goredema, “African Feminism: The African Woman’s Struggle for Identity,” 35.

45 Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 745.

Christianity as a legitimate experience of African women, despite its complicated history and legacy; and two, cannot, by extension, speak of a single experience in Christianity where black womanhood in postcolonial African contexts is concerned. After all, in its aim to de-centre white, Eurocentric experiences and narratives, an African decolonial feminist lens should examine the diverse, multi-faceted stories and identities of women in “Third world” and global South contexts.

## Methodology

This paper employs the qualitative methodology of textual analysis, focusing on the ways in which the plot, setting, characterization, dialogue, and stage directions collectively point to Christian encounters that are simultaneously oppressive and empowering to the three central African female figures, particularly Alphonsine. The dramatic text was read closely to unearth the ways in which Hall disrupts colonial discourses in relation to the protagonists’ experiences. The text was organized thematically to foreground the nuanced nature of the three women’s Christian experiences in a postcolonial setting. Hall’s creation process to realizing the play is included here, not only as a way to foreground her subjectivity as playwright and contextualize the work, but additionally to highlight that the three Rwandan schoolgirls’ Christian experiences she imagines dramatically, also took place in reality. This understanding prompts us towards African women’s nuanced, complex, and powerful real-lived Christian encounters in postcolonial settings.

Between 1981 and 1989, three girls enrolled at Kibeho College, a convent high school for girls, had visions of *Nyina wa Jambo*, whose messages included the instruction to pray daily and, later, also an apocalyptic warning of terrible bloodshed that would break out in Rwanda. The young women – Alphonsine Mumureke, Anathalie Mukamazimpaka and Marie-Clare Mukangango – became known for the only Vatican-approved Marian apparition in Africa.<sup>46</sup>

A pilgrimage to Rwanda in 2009, and another the following year in search of the real-life visionaries, culminated in Hall’s writing of *Our Lady of Kibeho*. About Rwanda, the playwright states:

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46 "Dynamic Catholic: Marian Apparitions," <https://www.dynamiccatholic.com/rosary/marian-apparitions.html>.

You are flooded with the horrors of the genocide to the point where you virtually become numb . . . There are literally a million tales that need to be told. There had been several movies and plays that addressed a certain parenthesis in Rwanda history . . . But I wanted to address a different parenthesis, a different door. I did not want to enter the gates of hell.<sup>47</sup>

After hearing from one of the parish priests about three village girls' darker visions that some have interpreted as being about the genocide, Hall narrates her epiphany:

When he said that, chills went down my spine. This was the way in – my sneaky way to write a play about genocide without writing a play about genocide. I walked through the doors of heaven instead of the gates of hell.<sup>48</sup>

An ethnic war between the persecuted Tutsis and perpetrating Hutus lasting a hundred days, the Rwandan genocide, which saw the deaths of approximately one million people, is among the most gruesome in modern history. Hall's use of the religious metaphor "gates of hell" describes what has often been the entry point of many creative works into the atrocities of the genocide. By contrast, she wanted to enter the Rwandan civil war through "heaven's door", a metaphor that points to the Christian perspective she offers through the voices of Alphonsine, Anathalie and Marie-Claire. While Hall's intention is narrating a tale about the genocide from an inspiring perspective, the various elements in the two-act play locate it as a work ideologically undergirded by African decolonial feminist thinking. She essentially locates these characters in a postcolonial African context that subverts African/European encounters of colonialism.

## **Africa Encounters the West**

In the play's opening scene, we read that in Father Tuyishime's office hangs a "picture of the white Jesus on the wall looking down at them. With the

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47 Lynn Nottage, "Katori Hall's Raptures of the Spirit in 'Our Lady of Kibeho,'" *American Theatre* 2015.

48 Nottage, "Katori Hall's Raptures of the Spirit in 'Our Lady of Kibeho'."

bluest of eyes and the blondest of hair" (Act 1, Scene 1). Father Flavia seems to embody Jesus as his presence causes excitement amongst the village girls. Seeing the Italian priest for the first time and aware of his mission, Marie-Claire says: "Well, if it isn't the *muzungu*" (Act 2, Scene 2). Father Flavia is the foreigner, the *muzungu* (or *mzungu*), a term used in East African geographies to denote whiteness.<sup>49</sup> The only white character in the play, Father Flavia exemplifies the West's perceptions of and interactions with Africa, "looking down at them", like the picture on Father Tuyishime's wall:

Father Tuyishime: Look at that view. They call it the Switzerland of Africa.

Father Flavia: Who says that?

Father Tuyishime: There is a saying in our country, Rwanda is so beautiful that even God goes on vacation here.

Father Flavia: He might vacation in Rwanda, but always remember He lives in Rome.

(Act 2, Scene 1)

Father Flavia seems to insinuate Africans are not inherently enlightened – a state afforded by orthodox religion. More significantly, his statement underscores Christianity's complicity in the colonial process. After all, "Western civilization, Christianity, commerce and colonization were believed to be inseparable".<sup>50</sup> Clarifying the reason for his visit – which is, at first, misunderstood by Father Tuyishime to be the validation of Alphonsine, Anathalie and Marie-Claire (the Trinity) – Father Flavia continues in his pomposity:

Father Flavia: I have travelled all over the world to suss out the truth of these happenings. Our Lady has shown Her face in Portugal. In Italy, quite naturally, even in the mountains of India, but never, ever in the jungles of Africa.

Father Tuyishime: Well, this is not a jungle, Father.

Father Flavia: I beg your pardon, father?

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49 Michelle Christian and Assumpta Namaganda, "Good Mzungu? Whiteness and White Supremacy in Postcolonial Uganda," *Identities* 30, no. 2 (2023).

50 Nkomazana and Setume, "Missionary Colonial Mentality and the Expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800 to 1900."

Father Tuyishime: Rwanda is not the jungle.

Father Flavia: Could have fooled me.

(Act 2, Scene 1)

Shortly after their first encounter with Father Flavia, “the Trinity” become enraptured in a vision as they pray to *Nyina wa Jambo*. Determined to prove (or rather, disprove) the legitimacy of their visitations, Father Flavia pulls out a needle and quickly plunges it into Alphonsine’s eye. Father Tuyishime runs to grab a hold of him:

Father Tuyishime: You can plainly see that she is lost. Alphonsine is lost in the rapture –

Father Flavia: The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith demands this for consideration. They must pass the medical tests.

Father Tuyishime: This is what the Vatican calls a medical test?

Father Flavia: This is only the beginning.

Father Tuyishime: This is BARBARIC!

(Act 2, Scene 2)

“When Africa alone is granted the label ‘absurd spirituality and religiosity’, it allows Western consciousness to position itself above these every-day absurdities, while maintaining its own absurd practices”.<sup>51</sup> In defining Father Flavia’s medical assessment as ‘barbaric’, Father Tuyishime highlights the West’s double standards in its perceptions of Africa. The Vatican investigative priest fails to perceive the absurdity and, indeed, barbarism, of poking a needle into Alphonsine’s eye. He, however, treats the girls’ visions with suspicion, despite the fact that Alphonsine barely flinches as a needle enters her eye. Father Tuyishime demands an end be put to Father Flavia’s search for “evidence”. Dismissing Father Tuyishime’s concerns, the Italian priest patronizingly responds: “For all I know, these girls have a high tolerance for pain” (Act 2, Scene 3).

In Act 2, Scene 5, Father Flavia has a transformative moment. As the girls listen to a radio announcement stating that thousands will travel to Kibeho

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51 Rune Larsen and Stig Jensen, "The Imagined Africa of the West: A Critical Perspective on Western Imaginations of Africa," *Review of African Political Economy* 47, no. 164 (2020): 327.

the next day to see “the Trinity”, the trio become entranced in a vision. Upon entering the room, poised with a needle, Our Lady inhabits Anathalie and confronts the Father about his sense of superiority while also lovingly affirming him: “What, you don’t recognize me? You don’t believe my words would fall out of the lips of a little black girl? Her lips suit me well”. To validate her presence to Father Flavia, Our Lady reveals through Anathalie personal details from his childhood that could only have been supernaturally disclosed. This revelation pierces the Father’s unbelief:

Father Flavia: “But why here? Why Rwanda, Mother Mary?”

Anathalie (Our Lady): You weren’t complaining when I flew to Brazil, I tell you that!

Father Flavia: Forgive me. Forgive me.

Anathalie (Our Lady): Luis, I have a message that is bigger than Rwanda. It is meant for the entire world. There is a sickness in the hearts of men. And these girls. They know it well. You know it well, too...

Father Flavia: What do you mean?

Anathalie (Our Lady): I know what happened to you, Luis. Forgive him, Luis, you are not alone in the belly of the whale.

The stage direction notes “Father Flavia falls to his knees with tears in his eyes” (Act 2, Scene 5).

In his embodiment of Jesus, Father Flavia seems to represent the gospel of European Christianity brought to Africa. By kneeling before Anathalie (as Our Mother), the initially maligned spirituality of the African “Other” is, not only recognized, but becomes the vehicle through which the white, western Father is liberated. This image becomes, additionally, disruptive given that the chosen oracle to humble the *muzungu* Father is a young, black girl from a remote African village.

## Disrupting the Biblical Trinity

The Trinity is the male godhead and supreme authority in Christian doctrine revealing the nature of God as three distinct Persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hall attributes this sacrosanct position to three African girls, described as “the Trinity”, following visitations from The Virgin Mary. While Marie-Claire, the eldest and domineering member, seems to symbolize the

Father, Anathalie represents the Holy Spirit. She is the only character that the Virgin Mary inhabits. She represents the Church's holiness because of the "Spirit's inhabitation".<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Alphonsine evidently embodies Jesus, the Savior who died on a cross and a central deity in Christianity, highlighted in the text when Father Flavia's needle enters Alphonsine's sternum, which trickles blood like the body of Christ on a Cross" (Act 2, Scene 2).

By situating three African village schoolgirls as embodiments of the godhead – the very essence of Christian faith – Hall removes these characters from margin to centre.<sup>53</sup> In a postcolonial setting, Hall detaches the trio from the compound oppression of their intersecting identities, ascribing visibility and voice to a markedly erased positionality in colonial discourses. Furthermore, these characters upend colonized women's vilification in colonial processes, where "colonized females were understood in relation to Satan".<sup>54</sup> By attributing godship to three African schoolgirls, Hall seems to respond to what early feminists held up as their point of departure in resisting orthodox religion: "If God is male, the male is God". These characters seem to radically reframe this mantra as, "If God is female, the female is God". Alphonsine, the first and youngest of "the Trinity", stands out as a young girl of great religious conviction, as will be discussed in the following section.

## **Alphonsine: Burdened, yet Chosen**

In a heated discussion between Father Tuyishime and Sister Evangelique in the play's opening, the head nun accuses Alphonsine of being a "liar" and of "blasphemy" for claiming to have seen the Virgin Mary. In response, Father Tuyishime seeks the truth while Alphonsine holds unwaveringly to her experience:

Father Tuyishime: So are you telling the truth? About what you saw?

Alphonsine: Yes.

Father Tuyishime: Alphonsine, I think you *imagined* that.

Alphonsine: No, no! I saw. I *saw!* Almost like I could touch Her, smell Her.

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52 Johannes van Oort, "The Holy Spirit and the Early Church: Doctrine & Confession," *HTS Theologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 67, no. 3 (2011): 171.

53 bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

54 Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," 745.

Father Tuyishime: Well, maybe you were just...hot. Hallucinating!  
Alphonsine: No, Father, I was not hallucinating.

...

Alphonsine: I was not HOT. I am not lying. I promise. I only speak the truth.

(Act 1, Scene 1)

Even after Anathalie joins Alphonsine in visitations from Our Lady, Alphonsine seems to make peace with the harsh consequences as Mother Mary's elect:

Girl #2: It's Alphonsine who started it all. Tutsi Lying Through Her Teeth Alphonsine. My mother was right. They are all liars . . .

...

Alphonsine: (*she shrugs*): The speaker of truth has no friends.

(Act 1, Scene 8)

In a later scene, Marie-Claire, before completing "the Trinity", becomes jealous of the attention laid upon Alphonsine and Anathalie after a glorious sight where both girls were used by Our Lady to make the sun spin. Marie-Claire follows Sister Evangelique's instructions to burn the two girls when they next have a vision. Seemingly oblivious to the chaos around her as Marie-Claire burns her skin with a candle, Alphonsine speaks directly to the Virgin Mary: "I care not about this world. I only want to speak your truth" (Act 1, Scene 11).

Truth, as a theme in Hall's play, is front and centre in Alphonsine's Christian experience. Although a noble pursuit and one congruent with her name, Alphonsine's interactions with Father Tuyishime, her religious advisor and confidante, reveal the weight of responsibility she has to bear as a messenger of divinely-revealed truths:

Father Tuyishime: What has made your heart so heavy, dear child?

Alphonsine: I am trying to understand this, Father. This mantle that has been placed upon my head. I don't understand it, Father.

Father Tuyishime: Neither do I.

Alphonsine: I am just a dirt poor girl with no shoes, no friends, no father who has not read every word in that Bible and yet She chose me.

Father Tuyishime: There are things beyond our control, my dear child.

(Act 1, Scene 9)

A confession, starting with Alphonsine unburdening to Father Tuyishime, ends in a poignant moment where the Father admits some painful truths to the young girl. The Virgin Mary's revelation to Alphonsine that Father Tuyishime has not prayed in "8 years, 8 months and 2 days" since the brutal murder of his mother in a politically violent period in Rwanda in 1973, causes the Father to confront his waning faith. Alphonsine's spiritual gift brings about a positive, notable shift in Father Tuyishime's belief, as illustrated in the final scene of the play when the young girl shares: "You prayed last night. She told me" (Act 2, Scene 11).

Alphonsine's disquiet evidently stems from an awareness of her positionality. Her commitment to narrate divine revelations becomes significantly arduous as a young, black, and poor female in a society rife with ethnic bullying. Hall ascribes agency and visibility to a character who wrestles with the perpetual powerlessness and victimhood typically ascribed to women and girls in third world contexts. Even in her acutely marginalized social identity, Alphonsine's frequent Marian apparitions are not just burdensome. Describing the young girl's state during visitations, scene 3 of Act 1 reads:

Alphonsine looks utterly at peace. Exuberant even. Stars stream from her eyes. She is somewhere else.

A warm light begins to dance across Alphonsine and Anathalie's faces.

Alphonsine's spiritual visitations also instill a growing confidence to challenge Marie-Claire's harassment and Sister Evangelique's manipulation. In scene 3, Act 1, Marie-Claire and her group of drunken friends taunt Alphonsine and she retorts: "Do that again and I will slap you so hard your descendants will feel the sting!!" Two scenes later, Sister

Evangelique, spurred by jealousy of not being Mother Mary's chosen, hurls vitriol towards Alphonsine, which the young girl counters with confident composure:

Sister Evangelique: . . . You little ingrate. You little witch! . . . I know you. I know your kind. You shake hands with the devil and use the same hand to make the sign of the cross . . .

As Alphonsine begins staring at Sister Evangelique *the Sister begins to shake in fear. Actually. Visibly quake. There is a fire in Alphonsine's eyes that has not been there before. A blinding light...*

Alphonsine: You do not scare me anymore.

(Act 1, Scene 5)

In Alphonsine, Hall constructs a character who, while negotiating the tensions and discomfort of her marginalized positionality, emerges as postcolonial feminist scholar, Gayatri Spivak's subaltern – the female figure who shifts from “historically muted subject” to agent<sup>55</sup> – a state facilitated through her firm Christian faith. Despite this significant identity shift in Alphonsine, and, indeed, the entire Trinity, the schoolgirls must still navigate an oppressive Church structure.

## **The Trinity: Unseen and Unheard in Structures of Oppression**

Located in a part of the world rendered silent by colonial processes, “the Trinity” speaks. Their marginalisation is perceptible, not just through Father Flavia who represents Western imperialism, but, also, through the multiple oppressions dominating their existence. Before she reveals her actions as motivated by jealousy, Sister Evangelique refutes the girls' visitations at every turn. Ironically, while being aware of patriarchy's negative impact, she is seemingly oblivious of how she has unwittingly become a product of it. The nun says to Marie-Claire, “I have seen many young girls start life with bright eyes only to have them swollen shut by the hand of a man . . .” (Act 1, Scene 7).

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55 Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader.*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 91.

In the character of Anathalie's father, Nkango, a patriarchal suppression existing along cultural and traditional lines is most glaring. After Anathalie's first encounter of Mother Mary, Nkango, described as a "big, hefty farmer" (Act 1, Scene 4), arrives with a belt, adamant on removing his daughter from the school. He says, "I should have never let you come. This was nonsense anyhow and all of this is proving me right. Your mother was always wrong. Book learning makes a girl go crazy . . .".

In the wake of the Trinity's fame, further in the text Nkango disingenuously responds to a reporter at the scene of the Assumption of Mary Feast:

Reporter: How does it feel to know your daughter Anathalie is a visionary?

Nkango: It is not a surprise to me. Something told me that when she went to Kibeho College she was destined for greatness. That is why her mother and I worked so hard in the fields . . . She is a good girl.

(Act 2, Scene 8)

Another figure of the Church, Bishop Gahamanyi represents religious dominance. In his effort to contain the rumours of visions, since the girls' "lies will only lead them down the path of perdition", the town bishop firmly addresses his church colleagues, Father Tuyishime and Sister Evangelique, stating "I don't care who is goading who and what and where and why. Get it under control or I will SHUT. IT. DOWN. This school will be closed . . ." (Act 1, Scene 6). Later in the play, however, Bishop Gahamanyi notably changes his mind as he considers commercial gains on the horizon:

"If these girls get confirmed, and they *will* be confirmed Father Tuyishime, with or without your help, they will make a name for Rwanda, a name for this village".

(Act 2, Scene 3)

In witnessing the continuing visitations, Sister Evangelique finally allows herself to see the girls. In a similar vein, only after recognizing his daughter's fame, Nkango suddenly celebrates Anathalie. Similarly, the town bishop's interest in the girls is in regard to the potential commodification of their gift. Indeed, the Church figures seem to see and accept the girls conditionally.

Father Flavia, Bishop Gahamanyi, Sister Evangelique, and Nkango jointly play an antagonistic role in the Trinity's expressions of faith. Before each of these characters are able to come to a point of accepting the unconventional, spellbinding happenings at the school, the girls continue to stand against the Church's opposition, by seeing and speaking.

## **The Trinity: The Girls who See and Speak**

Events encapsulating dichotomous encounters with Christianity, take place in the final scene of Act 1, as well as in scene 8, Act 2. These scenes individually point to a representation of Christianity as both liberatory and oppressive, both empowering and frightening.

The final stage direction of Act 1 reads:

*Marie-Claire looks up and she is bathed in Our Lady's light. Her body slackens. And she is hoisted far above the heads of everyone, joining Anathalie and Alphonsine in the sky. The trinity is now complete. The girls are screaming. They are scrambling. But someone or something has locked the door. They cannot get out. There is nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. They hang like clouds. Three big bangs occur. The bed Alphonsine floats above breaks in half. The bed Anathalie floats above breaks in half. The bed Marie-Claire floats above breaks in half.*

(Act 1, Scene 11)

About her Rwandan pilgrimage, Hall shares:

I kept on going back to what the priest said, "This is where their beds would break." It was a touchstone, an emotional talisman . . . It was an undeniable, indisputable, tangible physical fact that could not be disproven . . . Being so caught up in the rapture that your bed breaks? I knew that had to be in the play.

The image of beds breaking is, indeed, a striking one. Language like "screaming", "scrambling", and "bangs" denote a terrifying experience. Hall depicts a scene of girls seeking a way out of a glorious, yet frightening, experience, however, find no escape. While Hall constructs a fear-inducing

occurrence, it is also one saturated by a sense of thrill, adventure, and empowerment for a group of young, black girls in a Rwandan village school.

Act 2, scene 8 takes place on the day of pilgrimage when approximately 20 000 villagers gather to see “the Trinity” and the Mother Mary. The girls, finally, have Father Flavia’s blessing and are likely to be confirmed as visionaries, pending the Vatican’s final assessment of the proof gathered by the investigative priest. As the girls and villagers start singing, the sky darkens and “suddenly, a gush of tears start flowing from the girls’ faces”. As the Trinity plead with the Virgin Mary who has now appeared they start convulsing and vomiting. The girls begin to speak:

The Trinity: The hills of Rwanda will run red with blood. The hills of Rwanda Will Run Red With Blood. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED WITH BLOOD. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED.

As time is stretched, these stage directions follow:

*In the black, there are moans and screams. The crackle of burning of fire. The electric slice of a machete being drug across asphalt. Echoes. Echoes. A light pulses and we see shards of a vision. Visions of the unthinkable. The unseeable. The unvoiceable . . .*

In the following scene, ominous voice-overs signal imminent bloodshed and death:

The Trinity (V.O): The hill of Rwanda will be littered with graves. The rivers will run red with the blood of babies. Sons will slaughter their fathers, husbands will rape their wives, babies will have their brains dashed out by mothers. We are in the end days...

...  
The Trinity (V.O): Sorrow will sink Rwanda and the passion fruit that grows from our trees will bleed with the blood of the fallen. The hills of Rwanda will run red blood. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED BLOOD. THE HILLS OF RWANDA WILL RUN RED WITH-

This disturbing vision, described by Father Flavia as “dangerously specific” (Act 2, scene 9) and, thus, one that should be heeded, sees the Church – here represented by the male heads, Father Tuyishime, Bishop Gahamanyi and Father Flavia – descend into disarray. In Father Tuyishime’s office, the Trinity is motionless. While Alphonsine appears in the final scene, Anathalie and Marie-Claire do not appear after this in the play, perhaps denoting their deaths in the genocide. In the final exchange, Father Tuyishime loses all sense of control:

Father Tuyishime: This is not real. They made it up.

Father Flavia: We need you to settle yourself --

Father Tuyishime: They have made it up.

*Father Tuyishime shakes the motionless Anathalie*

Father Tuyishime: Tell them that you made, that you ALL made it up

—

*Bishop Gahamanyi tries to grab Father Tuyishime.*

Father Tuyishime: Tell them that you are lying.

Bishop Gahamanyi: Father Tuyishime—

Father Tuyishime: Please, Anathalie.

Father Flavia: If you believed the initial visions why can't you believe this one.

*Father Tuyishime turns around to Father Flavia.*

Father Tuyishime: You SHUT UP! YOU SHUT UP!!!

Father Flavia: Calm down Father.

Father Tuyishime: No, there is not evil here in Rwanda. THIS is where God goes on vacation. THIS is the land of love, of milk and honey. Where I was born —

Father Flavia: Calm down, Father —

Father Tuyishime: Fix them! We have to fix them! Stop them for seeing these—these—these horrible things--

Father Flavia: This is something we can't fix, Father --

Father Tuyishime: Cure them! Things need to go back to normal, before, before.

Father Flavia: Before what?

Father Tuyishime: They are disrupting the order of things. Making everyone afraid —

Father Flavia: They should be—

Father Tuyishime: —Getting things out of order here—

Father Flavia: But, Father—

Father Tuyishime: The world is buckling, buckling beneath my-  
Father Flavia: But why wouldn't you want to hear what Mother Mary has to say?

Father Tuyishime: BECAUSE I DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE FATHER! I DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE THIS!!

(Act 2, Scene 9)

Up until this point, the figures of Church authority manage to exercise control and contain the happenings at the convent school. However, the Trinity's startling vision of the genocide leads to a patriarchal Church structure unraveling from the powerful, elucidative, yet fear-provoking words of three black, village schoolgirls.

## **Conclusion**

Katori Hall's *Our Lady of Kibeho* offers a counter-hegemonic narrative where the representation of traditional Christianity in global South dramatic texts is concerned. While Hall's play relates to other plays set in this region dealing with similar themes, in that it points to the complexities of Christian faith in African settings, her text takes an interesting departure in how it does not portray Christianity contending with African traditional belief systems. She, instead, presents orthodox Christianity as a complex site in which the three protagonists advocate their potent spiritual experiences. Through the Trinity's encounters, Hall decolonizes Christianity, first, by presenting it as a powerful force in the lives of three, young, black African girls and, second, by offering Christianity as a space in which the nuanced experiences of three Rwandan girls take place. Hall offers Christian encounters dislocated from neat binaries of oppressive or liberatory. Traditional Christianity – a worldview rooted in Eurocentric, racist and patriarchal ideals that situate African women as non-human – is reimagined in Hall's play. As such, it ceases to be the domain of the Church, Western empire, or traditional patriarchal domination. Instead, presented in its ambiguities and complexities, Christianity as a religious structure and through the varied experiences of the Trinity, is powerfully reclaimed in a postcolonial African setting through the spiritual inhabitations of three young African village girls.

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