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Portrayal of human relationship and understanding within Persian ambience: A study of Gieve Patel's selected plays

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Abstract

This paper intends to locate the self-instructed poet cum writer Gieve Patel's outlook as a playwright towards his own born and brought up Parsi community in terms of different terrains of human relationships, bondage and understanding through the notable plays, namely Princess (1970), Savaksa (1982) and Mr. Behram(1988). This secluded community of west coastal areas of India had been neglected in the country's mainstream linear progress all around and even they took a little part to play in making up uprising moments and events of this country since they were put into the brackets of 'colonial elites'. Still, the traditions and cultures of this community with their power of adaptation, negotiation and acceptance hurl back to present themselves as being unique in almost every parts in the society. These plays celebrate the vigorous situation of the then societal structure to which they belonged. The essential journey unveils with discovery of unfathomable psychological relationships and tensions among human beings under uneven facade of circumstances and carries forward through lucid yet critically framed the language - the spoken words, the expression of the characters. The awareness of feudalism-politics, male-centred power structure of the society, the dualism in nature - all these have come to fore through the portrayal of characters.

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Key Words- *Parsi, Relationships, Mainstream, Colonial Elites, Feudalism, Dualism.*

The Parsi community in India and their close-knittedness with Indian theatre has long been standing from the time immemorial. This community having been located themselves within the west coastal areas of Mumbai and Gujrat has produced number of eminent and prolific writers, theatre personalities and film actors and so on. This privileged minority group of people had been subsumed within the bracket of nonchalant and non-respondent from the time of their inception to be acknowledged as inhabitants of this country, though how one could forget the importance of Jamsedji Tata being the pioneering figure in setting up indian industry at a time of India's subservient to the Raj and the leading political figure like Vikhaji Kama with her sheering indomitable spirit to fight against British in Indian's freedom struggle? Yet, they were being kept as fragile figure in the course of time when there were great rifts between Hindus and Muslims over partitions. This peace-seeking community has enjoyed their own customs and cultural festivity within their secluded cocoon of cultural milieu. The stories of their 'roots' , their struggle to cope up within the existing societal structure, sometimes their acceptance to fate and sometimes their negotiation and self-reflectivity with objective observerance, their history with cultural complexities and various ethno-religious traits to set-up their own identity have come out through literary writings of Rohinton Mistry, Boman Desai, Thrity Umrigar, Meher Pestonji, C. S. Nazir, Cyrus Mistry, D. M. Wadia, P.P. Meherji, Ninaz Khodiji, Zubin Driver, Gieve Patel and many others.

The growth of Parsi theatre could be traced back in the colonial rule of India. The exponents of Parsi theatre, the playwrights C. S. Nazir (*The First Parsi Baronet*,1866), D. M. Wadia (*The Indian Heroine*, 1857), P. P. Meherji (*Dolly Parsen*, 1918), Cyrus Mistry (*Doongaji House*, 1978) began the initial Parsi theatre movement through their publication and widely performed plays which had a great impetus on Indian theatre and cinema as well.

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In the late nineteenth century and the first half of twentieth century, the Parsi theatre was being performed by local Parsi inhabitants as dramatis personae through their verbal expression in typical dialect of Gujrati and Hindustani. Most of texts were replete with the theme of ethno-religiosity, culture and rituals, and the newly-emergent concept of national label of indianness in Gandhian whirlwind and those writings explore the realistic situation of the Parsi community and showed the larger world about their own cultural identity viz-a-viz the identity hovering throughout the best remaining part of the country.

Gieve Patel (1940-), born and lured in Parsi ethos in coastal region of Mumbai peeps out to be one of the most powerful and prominent Indian writers in the 70's. Being a self-instructed poet, artist, painter and a playwright, he canvases the human conditions with its uneven edges, the difficult terrains of human and family relationships with power and grace, the oppressed and downtrodden and anyone having devoid of his basic right to live, the isolation, deprivation, pain and agony of the Parsis who are restricted with the stereotypical nickname as 'colonial elites' from the mainstream society dominated by Hindus or Muslims. This distinguished Parsi playwright has written three plays which are - *Princess* (1970), *Savaska* (1982), and *Mister Behram* (1988). Reading these plays of this playwright is a discovery of the subtle underlying psychological human-bonds within a certain culture under the surface reality of extremes of heaves and sighs of human suffering, in general. Foregrounding himself in the 'true' Indian conscience and experience, Gieve Patel tries to explore the so far unsung and unexplored tragedies of the Parsi community, sometimes, woven with common Indian 'melodrama', 'cinematic' and parallel 'sentimentality' through the lively and sound active performance of the noted theatre-personalities, including Pearl Padamsee, Noshervan Jehangir, Roger Pereira, Shernaz Patel, Rajit Kapur. These are plays situated within the Parsi community of Mumbai and rural landed gentry of south Gujrat, a region that Patel has had close family ties with. He himself acknowledges,

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...the play has close observations of the entire ethos of these villages. And my family being nearest, lots of observations come directly from it. The characters often have traits taken from various persons but there are no direct depictions, always aspects chosen from various people. For the needs of the play. (Patel, 13).

Popular culture has often reduced Parsis to shrewish or oddball caricatures who habitually debase their own emotions. In his interviews accompanying the plays, Patel confesses that it was very important for him to avoid these stereotypes. He succeeds in showing us a world and a way of life built around a single ethnic identity but by universalizing their triumphs and failures, makes them speak for all. The difficulty of his task must have been compounded by his own refusal to play up a few stray examples of ethnicity as local colour. Thus he writes in English without using sprinkling Gujrati words, a device that lesser writers have used liberally. His explanation offers an insight into the exacting ways of the playwright, "However close to life a work of art may be, to me it is a work of art and to that extent it is artificial, in the best sense of that word ". (Patel, 17)The artifice he chose was to work in one language and mould it in various ways for different characters so that there is not a single Gujrati expression, "I was quite sure that I did not want a single naturalistic Gujrati expression to come up...Most others are not literal translations from Gujrati, they are more evocations of the rhythms of the characters' thought and feelings and language ".(Patel, 16).

Influenced by the major works of Racine and Henry James, Patel craftily handles emotional tensions of characters and situations , full of great passion as well as 'classical control' to keep away from the mediocracy of the Parsi farce which affects the Parsi mind because he thinks that the Parsi mind would like to evade any tragic vision of its own existence .Once in an interview by Karen Smith that whether the others enjoy/ridicule imitating the Parsi accent and Parsi mannerisms, Gieve Patel responds, "Yes . So, for this

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reason, I was conscious also that my play should be corrective. I wanted to show Parsis that there may be a few truths in all these fables, in all these stereotype characteristics, but that, in fact, Parsi life is as full of violence, brutality and warm, human charm as any other..." (Patel,5). Gieve Patel overtly paints the heights and depths of human passion and pain with the extremity of deepest human psychology through his plays. Not only he just eulogizes his own community, he also pricks with subtle criticism for its many drawbacks. Overtly, he has been apt in creating a new genre of play with his own community and their secluded locale in the western coastal areas of India. Patel himself admits, "My people came from Nargol. There's a definite biological sensation about the place for me. Just getting into the bus and entering that part of the country makes me feel it. The feeling is important to my writing and thinking"(Patel, 120)

In his first play, *Princess* (1970), Patel in his 'ethnic' approach has exposed the gruelling painful scenario of the Parsi community just after Indian Independence. The play had had its background when both land and liquor began to be under threat. After the Land Ceiling Act and the prohibition act of selling liquor did adversely affect the Parsi landlords who were the liquor merchants. In those feudal system, many of the landowners possessed large tracts of lands; but a violent diluge came when the government was taking new policies to abolish the feudalism from the country. This was the time when most children of the landlords had migrated to other cities and they began to acculturate themselves with new mannerisms and city life-style. The three types of Parsi community are reflected through the characters of this play; one is the unimaginative and staggered hapless landlords who did not find any way of living once their over lordships were threatened and the character like Khushrow who is always 'busy and managing' to cover up for his inefficiency and mental indolence falls in this category, the other group being industrious and imaginative becoming industrialists and they were generally humane to the working class or labourers who include

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in the third group. These working classes are Warlis and they are basically tribals and aboriginal people.

Patel is very much an intuitive and instinctive person. He believes that a play is a piece of art which carries human thoughts and human interaction in a network of spoken language. The language and feelings go together. Though, in the performance of this play there were so many Gujrati words spoken, the playwright, for the sake of readers, does not use Gujrati in English. The characters like, Kali and Ratan entirely speak to each other in English. The character like, Mamma's violent and turbulent expression such as 'He is in dung' (74), 'swine', (74), 'But when he growls I show my teeth'(74), and when Khorshed says of Nergish, 'You want a man to sit on your mouth'(87), refer to the some part of native Surati-Gujrati expression used by the rustic villagers.

In this play, Patel both affects and critiques on the characters and the situation they are placed. It's about a conflict between two families for the possession of a young male child. At root, this play is about ownership-who owns what-in this case a ten year old boy-which can really extend to everything else. The way human beings react to each other in a situation of wanting to possess something, the kinds of conflict that can explode around such a situation.

Marriage is a great issue in this play. The women in this play are very strong but when the question of woman's right and freedom comes, they too become the puppet of male machinery. The women are all individually realized. Ratan and Themis have no children, Nergish is unmarried and she celebrates her spinsterhood. Spinsterhood is her personal choice. Shireen has daughters and Banu is 'old' and she is regarded as 'barren'. The women are more grasping in this play. Because the focus of the play is a child, an area where women feel that they would be within their rights to put in all they have. Like the mainstream society of India, the Parsi community too believes that the birth of a boy-child is 'an object of everyone's avarice' (Patel, 11). The importance attached to the concept of a male-child leads

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to the formation of stabilized and strong patriarchal roots in this community. Though, ironically, the playwright very consciously use the title to let us know that Parsi originally come from Persia, and stories about Persian kings and princes are often related to Parsi children by their grandparents. In this play, Pappa tells Noshir in one scene, 'You are a Persian prince, aren't you' (58). This play shows that men have the world of their profession outside of the family in which to give vent to aggression, violence. Women have to manage theirs within the family.

Patel has vividly recorded the tribals and their way of living in this play. He himself said that there was the mutual respect between his own grandfather and the Warlis. 'There was respect and there was reciprocal, deeper concern and involvement' (Patel, 5). But the next generation of the Parsi landowners did not have the respect and the Warlis had been exploited to a greater degree in the hands of those Parsi landowners. At the period of this play tribals would have been paid half a rupee or a rupee for the day's work or sometimes measures of rice. The women tribals would be paid a little less. The tribals or the 'kheadas' (bondmen) had to be dependent on the landowners for their family sustenance, marriages, fiancée-arrangement, and even children's marriage. The good Parsi landlord becomes father-figure to the Warlis. We can see how Patel objectively criticize the Parsi landowners in their attitude to the tribals. In an interview with Karen Smith, Patel said,

Yes, Ratan romanticizes the tribals. She is too fragmented, self-indulgent and weak to be able to follow up with any useful action after the first glimmer of recognition that, right in her backyard so to speak, a glorious kind of life has existed. She cannot have the energy even to take in the full glory of it, and then go on to the next real step which would be to understand also the degradations of this life, and to attempt to understand the reasons for both the glory and the degradation.... (Patel, 13).

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This play could be read as a play with the strong political notions within this community. The late 1940's communists' fight to show the alternative way of life in the favour of Warlis. But where the Warlis would go if they fought against the capitalist Parsi landowner. It is easy to lead them by saying that everyone should drive out their landlord. But they would have to suffer a lot because the Warlis would be more and more exploited. The character like, Khushrow stands as a person of anti-Communist and possibly anti-Congress views. His usage of the word 'dance' may be have the implication of the process and the humanitarian attitude on the part of each and every political parties for having votes and to win people's mandate by softly flattering the folks after joining in their (tribals) ceremonial dance.

In his next play, *Savaksa* (1982), the playwright explores the theme of the use of power in an intimate relationship through the device of an older, prosperous landowning Parsi man who is enamoured by a young improvised Parsi girl from Mumbai. The life of a lower class improvised Bombay family came up in a series of images which instigate the playwright to incorporate into the play. In the sociological context, it seems that the theme and story line of this play very exploitation of the virginity of a little girl child and repercussions of the lost soul. The play rounds in a certain setting and in this respect, the playwright himself confesses,

...I was not out to write a play of local colour or an ethnic play. Because the experiences different communities have in India are largely common experiences. They may be different from each other in certain specific respects but at root our victories and our defeats are similar. So I was keen while writing *Savaksa* to see that it should be a play that would sound true in any part of India". (Patel, 119).

The play is about the perverting emotion between human beings. The use of power between human beings, in close intimate relationships, in slightly distant or far distant is very

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much prevalent in society as well as in politics of the society. Power and the use of power is everywhere- power camouflaged love, power masquerades affection, power displayed as bride, power as perversity of emotion. So much widespread it is that the people, knowingly or unknowingly becomes the prey of it. Human mind is preoccupied with this very sense of power irrespective of his class or caste or race or community.

The two protagonists of two different generations, one is Savaksa and other is his own son, Dorab - typically form the dramatic tension throughout this play. Both of them are lulled by the power- politics and its ideology. Savaksa knows how to control the opposing forces rising against him and his treatment to oppress the workers sometimes may be not in the right way. Though he has blindness to social reality and the old-fashioned notion regarding holding of power, he needs to engage fresh insights for continuing his oppression in due course of time. On the other hand, Dorab, a young lad of twenty-twenty tries to do so many things. He shows interest in writing, interest in theatre and interest to join political party. He is a charmer of politics; his has the ideology of getting advantages in politics. So he does little care to join in any particular party. Patel admits, "I think this is the philosophy of a whole new generation. The seeds of it have been present all along in our generation, in the elder generation as well. But it is much more blatantly and cynically present today". (Patel, 121).

In the characterization of Kermina, the playwright upholds his superiority-self of Parsi community. The idea of spinsterhood in mainstream families is always shameful, but Kermina like Nergish in *Princess* celebrates her spinsterhood in her own way. It was her choice to live such a life. She becomes blighted once she came across in close touch with Savaksa and she showed her tremendous devotion to him. The characters like Perin and Hutoxi are 'multifaceted' and 'multidimensional'. Perin is extremely young, vulnerable and attractive and she acquires such an 'inner life' that Savaksa and Hutoxi become attracted to her. But none of them have the crystal clear emotional feeling for that girl, only perversion

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remains with their distorted thoughts. Hutoxi is tough and courageous. She is not naive and impulsive like her sister, Perin. When she tells Savaksa that if a woman can earn six hundred rupees a month she has 'no need of him' (88) or of persons like him, it is, indeed, a wonderful declaration of freedom from patriarchy.

Gieve Patel's *Mr. Behram* (1988), is a dark intense play in four acts, cast in classical mould. The play is set in 19th century South-Gujrat where many Parsis have enormous estates. It was an abode to many tribes including the Warlis who used to work in the lands of these Parsi landlords. Gieve Patel came from a fairly middle class background, and he used to come in contact with these Warlis when he visited his grandfather's estate in South-Gujrat. Patel himself said in an interview, "I begin to see the Warlis in a sociological context-the exploitation, how they had been reduced to bare skin and bones...there is such a thing as a tribal wave of life, and for a moment I was a part of it ". (Patel, 204).

Mr. Behram, the protagonist of the play is a very well known lawyer and reformist. He adopts a young Warli orphan boy- Naval and the moment he realizes that he has got a brilliant child in his hands, he sends him to school and later on to London to study law. Despite the opposition, many people in the society, he marries off his only daughter Dolly to Naval. As Naval begins to show his talents, the older man feels threatened and he obsessively clings on to his creation and the tragedy begins here.

The language used in this play is very characteristic of the English used by the 19th century elite upper class Parsi household. The Parsis, due to their close connection with the colonizers were adept in the usage of the English language and this flair for English is reflected in their conversations also the language which they use in their household is a heady mixture of Parsi and Gujarati.

In *Mr. Behram*, the protagonist is a mirror image of the colonizer. During the Raj, the colonizers needed efficient, handy men to help them in smooth functioning of the law and administration. In other words, the Raj needed collaborators to ensure an uninterrupted flow

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of colonies wealth into the imperial coffers. For this, among the natives, the Parsis were the best to handle the job efficiently because they were the most sophisticated and the most educated members of the Indian society. The British warmly extended hands towards a long term friendship which many of them wholeheartedly accepted. While handling many of the key positions in colonial administration, they started developing a sense of power and elite consciousness many of them got fully swayed away as a result of enormous power bestowed upon them. At the same time many of them, like Mr Behram also learnt the trade and tricks of the business. It was Behram's growing reputation as a powerful independent- mind lawyer with sympathy towards his own countrymen that became a challenge for the Raj. But towards the end of the play the district collector, Mr. Wattss not only sabotages this challenger's case but also his life. The characterization of Mr. Behram shatters the typical stereotype of the Parsi elite aligning with the colonizers.

There are several complex issues which are raised in the play including the adoption of the tribal boy Naval and his subsequent marriage to Behram's only daughter Dolly. Patel through this Nahnu-Naval incident tries to challenge the existing debate prevalent amongst the Parsi-Zoroastrian community as to whether they should accept outsiders into their fold. Noted critic Nilufer Bharucha has very interesting view to offer. She is of the opinion that the promises made at a time of refuge in India are today observed more for economic reasons than theological. Historically these promises and self imposed conditions were a means of protection and self-definition...But today the reasons are very different...During the British colonial period the Parsis prospered tremendously in economic terms and today Parsii Panchayat Trust Funds are indeed very rich in terms of property, bonds, shares and even cash. Given the sky-high property prices in Bombay and other metros in India, conversion to Zoroastrianism would give the new converts the right to recede in the sprawling houses complexes owned by Parsi Panchayats and claim their rights also to their other welfare schemes. This is a scenario not many Parsis would welcome with open arms.

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The characterization of Mr. Behram raises questions whether the rules regarding adoption and marriage at the same for everyone irrespective of their class, or are they flexible enough to bend when highly successful men like Behram lobby for their personal interests. Behram, in an attempt to get this Warli tribal boy into Parsi fold, gives him a typical Parsi name Naval. He is totally in love with his creation and is dependent upon his creation to draw love and sustenance. He not only owns Naval's body but also his mind. Naval is the ultimate source of pride for the colonizer who believes that he is the sole person responsible for turning the 'savage' into a 'civilized individual'. This episode brings into focus how the elitist groups in the colonized societies internalize the colonizer's notions of serial 'civil' and 'savage'. In order to show-off his prowess of civilizing his protégée, he completely humiliates and strips Naval almost naked in front of the district collector Mr. Watts. He points out to Mr Watts, "See that body Mr. Watts! A repository of secrets! Under trousers and suits and the lawyers gown is that essential Warli body. Our bodies Mr. Watts, yours and mine, are dull dough before this vision". (222).

This reveals the colonial attitude imbibed by Mr. Behram where he automatically assumes 'the colonial gaze'. He also inherits from the colonial masters the orientalist tendency together sociological and anthropological information about the colonized thereby classifying labeling him and turning him into a mere object of study. Now, if we trace back to Shakespeare's, *The Tempest*, the same master-slave or colonizer-colonized theme resonates through the spoken-words of Prospero to Caliban. Prospero says to his daughter, Miranda,

PROSPERO:- Shake it off. Come on,
We'll visit Caliban, my slave, who never
Yields us kind answer.

MIRANDA:- 'Tis a villain, sir,
I do not love to look on.

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PROSPERO:- But as 'tis,

We cannot miss him; he does make our fire,

Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices

That profit us.- What ho, slave! Caliban,

Thou earth, thou: speak. (*Tempest*, 1.2.314)

Joseph Conrad delineates the theme of master and slave bondage through exemplification of the whites and non-white in his novel, *Heart of Darkness*, (1899). The mouth-piece of the civilized western world, Mr. Crutz and his snobbish attitude the uncanny place and 'savage' people where he went for his work can be related to the attitude of Mr. Behram and Mr. Watts towards Naval, the tribal boy. But in the civilising project, not only the colonized but also the colonizer becomes the victim of 'dependency complex' whereby Mr Behram becomes increasingly dependent on levels admiration. His is like Mr. Crutz, who became so enchanted and stupified by the nature and the people there where he went for his work, that he had been transformed into a living-dead to his superior caviled community. And here, Behram is not happy when anybody else praises him. He tells Rati, "When you praise me, Rati, I feel well and fortified. But when he praises me-I feel giddy delight!. I feel my head should burst with pleasure-".(218).

This may raise the issue of colonizer acceptance of the colonized wholeheartedly and also of a secluded kind of homosexual inference. Behram's daughter openly accuses him of it knowingly or unknowingly. She speaks, "You are no different from men who nurture little infants over the years, waiting for unspeakable pleasures that will be theirs when their charges have ripened-".(217).

Another important aspect which reflects the Parsi sensibility is the role of women in the play in the pre-independence era, even though many of the Parsi women were educated and were conversant in the tongue of the colonial masters; they actually did not play significant roles outside their home. Of course, there were meritorious women like Meheri

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Bai who wrote highly feminist course in order to encourage and inspire women to venture out of the confines of the four walls to experience the life around them. There were also spirited women like Cornelia Sorabji, who used their knowledge of law to help distressed women around them. Women like Vikaji Cama unfurled the first Indian flag, thereby providing a role model for women to actively participate in the freedom struggle.

Apart from a handful the majority of Parsi women did not muster courage to revolt against the highly patriarchal Parsi society who believed that women had no business outside their home and their duties merely revolved around the smooth functioning of the household and rearing of the young ones. Gieve Patel's *Mr. Behram* too exemplifies this psychology where by both the women in the play i.e. Rati, wife of Mr. Behram and Dolly, daughter of Mr. Behram are 'silenced' by the male members of the household, Behram and Naval. Behram like most other man of his times has internalized the psychology that women wear inferior to men both physically and mentally. In the course of the conversation with his wife Rati, he blurts out, "Wives are to be prized, petted, fed, bathed, clothed, like little goddess. Then of course they should be put to school as well as provided with the best books, to distract their minds from his mind". (286).

By and large, Patel shows the subjection and subjugation of matriarchal values and thoughts in the hands patriarchal machinery of society. About the title of the play, *Mister Behram*, a noted literary critic, Bruce King in a conference of *World Literature Today* commented,

Mister Behram has a high formality of diction and abstraction of sentiment, suggesting of a dignified historical tableau, but there are rapid shifts in emotional levels, with words uncovering progressively deeper levels of feeling... The work is rich in themes, including self-deception of liberals, the mistreatment of women, the cunning of the underdog, and the sexual drives that find expression in social and political attitudes. (This work) suggests that

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the Indian English drama is likely to join the Indian English novel and poetry as worthy of international attention. (Bruce King, World Literature Today).

Gieve Patel, the unchekovian playwright delves into the deep psychology of mankind and his depiction of human relationships, power, tensions in-between the lines of speech of each and every dramatis-personae mark him not only the playwright of his own born and brought up Parsi community, but a playwright who can carry the cultural values and distinct traditions from one shore to the other. The representations of the Parsi community with pain and agony are nicely woven into the plots and scenes through his plays. Somehow, the so-called Parsi community finds a way to break the shackle of the stereotypical nickname, 'colonial elite' and forms their own identity with their own individual quality and individual self with consciousness in reality as well as in literature.

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