

“A League of *Thayir Own*” – An Analysis of Linguistic Trends in Select Fictional Works by Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair

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Abstract

Indian Writing in English (IWE) is evidently a linguistic legacy of the British colonial rule that takes pride in its pluralistic multicultural tradition. Postcolonial women writers like Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair who represent the “new makers of world fiction”, proclaim their artistic independence and insight through their literary works by negotiating between the two great traditions: one inherited and the other acquired. The beauty and strength of their works lie in their linguistic ability to depict a sociocultural reality unmistakably rooted in an Indian milieu. A common characteristic found in a majority of IWE works is the liberal usage of crosslinguistic and crosscultural lexical terms that are code-mixed or code-switched in the narratives resulting in interwoven hybrid texts. Roy and Nair have also attempted a process of relexification by using pan-Indian terms, localisms, calques pertaining to sociocultural habits such as chewing *paan* or mastering *kalaripayattu*, Indian English compound words like ‘Non-Veg restaurants’, hybridised English idioms like ‘a fly in one’s *paal kanji*’ and so on, ignoring the linguistic conventions of Standard English. The strategies of appropriation and abrogation employed by Roy and Nair in their novels in an attempt to ‘nativise’ and use the English language as an ethnographic and subversive tool to “write back to the centre”, is comparable to the indigenous art of making *thayirsaadam* (curd rice), a favourite item in South Indian cuisine. This article intends to investigate how the authors use the English language creatively by means of deliberate linguistic choices and innovative use of various linguistic forms to depict their fictional personas and imaginary worlds in a realistic manner.

Keywords: Indian English, linguistics, crosslinguistic, crosscultural, lexical items, nativise

The *raison d'être* for the phenomenal spread of English all over the world is obviously colonialism, a dreaded epoch in the history of many third world nations including India. This phenomenon has “permanently transformed the English literary canon, which has blown the English language to the four winds” (Boehmer 7). Postcolonial literatures

termed as “bicultural formations” (Thumboo 278) employ diverse linguistic and literary resources to depict social realities and contemporary issues pertaining to a wide array of themes ranging from history to modernity, migration and displacement, religion and politics to ordinary lives of individuals across the globe. In their seminal work, *The Empire Writes Back*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin use the lower case for ‘postcolonial literatures in english’ to distinguish them from English as a colonialist discipline. “By inscribing meaning, writing releases it to a dense proliferation of possibilities, and the myth of centrality embodied in the concept of a ‘standard language’ is forever overturned. It is at this moment that English becomes english” (Ashcroft et al. 87). Thus “what began as postcolonial writing as the creolization of the English language has become a process of mass literary migration, transplantation, and cross-fertilization, a process that is changing the nature of what was once called English literature at its very heart” (Boehmer 233). Hence the need arose for a suitable and English-semiotic system that will enable a non-native English writer to portray a non-English fictional world.

Thumboo in “Literary Dimension of the Spread of English” observes that in order to explore and carry a new social reality, English has to be uncluttered, freed from certain habitual associations; it must develop a new verbal playfulness, new rhythms, additions to its metaphorical and symbolic reach to explain and amplify feelings and ideas about literature and life and to cater to the claims of the imagination (259). To point out the difference in the use of the English language in colonial and postcolonial literatures, Ashcroft et al have referred to an essay by Maxwell:

[t]here are two broad categories. In the first, the writer brings his own language – English- to an alien environment and a fresh set of experiences: Australia, Canada, New Zealand. In the other, the writer brings an alien language- English- to his own social and cultural inheritance: India, West Africa. (Maxwell 82)

The history of Indian Writing in English (IWE) can be traced back to 1793 with the publication of *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* by Sake Dean Mahomed in London. IWE is definitely a linguistic legacy of the British colonial rule in India and has a pluralistic multicultural tradition. During the colonial regime Indian writers were naturally influenced by the British education system and the values embedded in it. So, their literary works were “written in English in non-English cultural contexts, situated in the moment of linguistic and cultural contact, having been written in the English language while being set within the context of very different social and cultural forms of interaction, and diverse literary traditions” (Syal 17-18).

Boehmer is of the opinion that pre-independence IWE writers had focussed on their desperate attempts to reclaim and reconstitute their lost culture and identity through their literary works (122). According to Kachru, in *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao “appropriates English language on Indian terms, and the language legitimises itself in India’s sociocultural context” (2005: 143). Meenakshi Mukherjee in *The Twice Born Fiction* compares the writing styles of Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand and, observes that Rao had attempted to use language as an ethnographic tool and adapted it to suit his needs thereby enhancing the repertoire of IWE. Anand also experimented by incorporating his individual style of language use.

During the post-independence era, IWE writers began to rely heavily on hybridity – “that is, the blending of different cultural influences, an upfront and active syncretism- to

unsettle the colonial inheritance...this is illustrated in the 'impurity' of influence in postcolonial writing" (Boehmer 203). Kamala Markandaya in her article published in *The Literary Criterion* titled "One pair of eyes: some random reflections", sees culture, ethos and roots as being powerful, fundamental and self-sustaining and which helps an IWE writer to negotiate between the demands of two great traditions, one inherited and the other brought by English and its great literature. With the 1990s IWE ushered in a new age with the advent of world-renowned authors such as Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry, Amit Chaudhuri, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, Arvind Adiga, Kiran Desai, Chitra Divakaruni, Anita Nair, Rukmini Bhaya Nair and so on to name a few.

Pico Iyer in his article titled "The Empire Writes Back", published in the *Time* magazine in 1993 has commended IWE writers as "The New Makers of World Fiction". By the time Arundhati Roy received the Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut novel *The God of Small Things*, IWE had already acquired universal acceptability in the English-speaking world.

To tell her story, Roy uses a highly innovative and experimental narrative strategy with verbal experimentation, innumerable flashbacks and flash-forwards and recurring references to the same events and objects time and again, like the multiple refrains in a musical composition. The playful and meticulously planned narrative technique with its deliberate discontinuities, digressions, repetitions, philosophising, irony and humour gives a distinct flavour to the novel...In terms of appropriation of 'english' as a resistance and subversive strategy in a postcolonial novel, *The God of Small Things*, despite a sprinkling of Malayalam words, phrases and names throughout the text, is very much an English novel. (Ramana 226-227)

In the "Introduction" to *Indian Writing in English: The Last Decade*, Rahul Bhargava states that undoubtedly creative writers of IWE are simultaneously engaged in a double enterprise: to nativise the English language and to universalise the Indian experience. John Olive Perry observes that the most fundamental problem of contemporary literary critics is defining the character of Indian English writing. Another related problem, according to Perry, has to do with "distinguishing *Indianization* (in language) from *indigenisation* (in literature), and dissolving some of the remaining entanglements concerning what is alien and how much *alienation* is unavoidable in contemporary Indian society" (Perry 38).

IWE women writers Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair who also belong to the "new makers of world fiction", proclaim their artistic independence and insight through their literary works by negotiating between the two great traditions: one inherited and the other acquired. The beauty and strength of their works lie in their linguistic ability to depict a sociocultural reality unmistakably rooted in an Indian milieu. A common characteristic found in their works is the liberal usage of crosslinguistic and crosscultural lexical terms that are code-mixed or code-switched in the narratives resulting in interwoven hybrid texts. The strategies of appropriation and abrogation employed by Roy and Nair in their novels in an attempt to 'nativise' and use the English language as an ethnographic and subversive tool to "write back to the centre", is comparable to the indigenous art of making *thayirsadam* (curd rice), a favourite item in South Indian cuisine. This article intends to investigate how these authors use the English language creatively by means of

deliberate linguistic choices and innovative use of various linguistic forms to depict their fictional personas and imaginary worlds in a realistic manner. The texts selected for analysis are Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2018) and Nair's *Mistress* (2005) and *Idris: Keeper of the Light* (2014).

Braj Kachru in his article "The Pragmatics of Non-Native Varieties of English" published in 1980 uses the term 'nativised' English, for the English used by non-native writers who employ various linguistic devices to contextualise English in their own 'un-English' cultures. There is a relationship between the use of linguistic means in the nativisation process that results in the acculturation of English. Kachru lists the common linguistic devices used by non-native writers to nativise the English language:

1) Lexical innovations:

Many writers indulge in borrowing of words from local languages. Hybridization of words from two distinct lexical sources is also a common feature, for instance words like 'lathi-charge', 'policewala' etc.

2) Translation equivalence:

Many creative writers use translation from their mother tongues into English as one of the devices for correlating the speech event with its appropriate formal item, for example: "You spoiler of my salt" (approximate literal translation of *namak haram* used by Mulk Raj Anand in *Untouchable*).

3) Contextual relexification of lexical items of English in new contexts:

Use of kinship terms, attitudinal terms.

4) Rhetorical and functional styles:

Native style repertoire is often recreated in English and non-native English literatures thus acquire a distinct stylistic characteristic. (In L.E.Smith (ed) 1981)

Michael Lawrence Ross in his article titled "Arundhati Roy and the Politics of Language" claims that Arundhati Roy's insertion of Indian vernacular words and phrases in her fictional works is judiciously calibrated to serve the author's activist political agenda. According to Ross, both *The God of Small Things* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* feature a Bakhtinian or dialogic interplay of linguistic modes. In Roy's debut novel she uses only Malayalam along with English but in the second, "the linguistic terrain broadens to include several tongues of the subcontinent, along with English. Roy gives special exposure to two: Urdu and Kashmiri, to reclaim them from the oppression both of them, along with their speakers, are undergoing at the hands of the dominant Hindi-speaking majority" (Ross 406). *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* opens in a graveyard inhabited by flying foxes where Anjum/Aftab, the Hijraprotagonist lived. Anjum/Aftab was born with both "boy-parts and a small, unformed, but undoubtedly girl-part" (Roy 7), a sight that terrified his mother, Jahanara Beegum.

In Urdu, the only language she knew, all things, not just living things but *all* things... had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word

for those like him – *Hijra*. Two words actually, *Hijra* and *Kinnar*. But two words do not make a language.

Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl. (Roy 8)

Jahanara Beegum's query regarding the possibility of leading a life outside language in fact resonates throughout the narrative, especially in the sections dealing with Kashmir where "Dying became just another way of living" (Roy 314). Aftab's father, Mulaqat Ali, traced his family's lineage directly back to the Mongol Emperor Changez Khan through the emperor's second-born son, Chagatai (Roy 13). He was a hakim, a doctor of herbal medicine and a lover of Urdu and Persian poetry who prescribed poems to his patients as he believed in the healing power of poetry. "He could produce a couplet from his formidable repertoire that was eerily apt for every illness, every occasion, every mood and every delicate alteration in the political climate" (Roy 15). But when Jahanara Beegum told him about Aftab, "perhaps for the first time in his life Mulaqat Ali had no suitable couplet for the occasion" (Roy 16).

Meera. C's article "Un-knowable Lives: Idioms of Unintelligibility in Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*" explores how the "motif of cultural unintelligibility figures in the complex relation between language, embodiment and subjectivity as they play out in the fictional universe created by the novel" (149).

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, we come across characters whose acts of comprehending and making sense of the World ensue primarily from language and the specific cultural references which are available to the speakers of a language...

In the Urdu-speaking life-worlds where the novel is set, the language and its cultural frames of reference is shown to be what renders legibility to the experiences of individuals. In such a realm of linguistic coherence, what is unintelligible to the legibility of the mainstream World becomes expressed only as a linguistic impossibility. (Meera 150)

It is this space of cultural unintelligibility that Aftab and his distraught parents occupy as they are unable to locate themselves within the "linguistic frame of legibility by which the normative World operates" (Meera 150). Unable to bear the incessant teasing, Aftab ran away from what most ordinary people thought of as the real world- that the Hijras called *Duniya*, the World (Roy 24). He finds refuge in the haveli of the Hijras called the Khwabgah – the House of Dreams. According to Meera, "Roy's fictional universe offers glimpses to the parallel existence and functioning of distinct realms of legibility through the trope of language-as-comprehension" (149).

Roy is renowned for devising her own narrative strategies that unravel the stories of the plethora of characters in her fictional works. "The plurality of the narrative voice, the discontinuous non-linear narrative structure and the primacy of irony, metaphor and parody in the novel are features that connect it with postmodernist fiction" (Sreenivasan 55). The fragmented narratives and diverse array of characters all converge towards the end of the novel and are revealed to be interrelated, although they appear to be independent and shattered stories in the beginning. The second protagonist, Tilottama's

poem towards the end of the novel resounds the complex nature of Roy's innovative storytelling techniques:

*How to tell a shattered story?
By slowly becoming everybody.
No.
By slowly becoming everything. (436)*

A unique linguistic feature in the text is Roy's liberal use of capitalisation to describe people, events, things and places as in "Man Who Knew English" (4), "Elixir of the Soul" (12), "Modern Era" (16), "House of Dreams" (19), "Flyover Story" (35), "Equal and Opposite Reaction" (62), "Fort of Desolation", "Rest-of-Her-Life" (67), "Man of the House" (71), "Gujarat ka Lalla", "Trapped Rabbit" (81), "Father John-for-the-Weak" (99), "Lime Man" (107), "Super Capital" (115), "City of Funerals" (386), "Man of the Moment", "Time was Now" (405), "Hazrat of Utmost Happiness, Saint of the Unconsoled and Solace for the Indeterminate, Blasphemer among Believers and Believer among Blasphemers" (416) and so on. Capitalisation serves to emphasise and draw the reader's attention to grasp the gravity of the word or the specific socio-political context in which it is used. Roy also italicised and repeated words like refrains, used hyphenated phrases and sentences, and the meanings of many Indian words are given in brackets as seen in the following sentences:

*He's a She. He's not a He or a She. He's a He and a She. She-He, He-She Hee!
Hee! Hee! (12)*

...beating-husbands and cheating-wives are all *inside* us. The riot is *inside* us. The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down. It *can't*. (23)

'She said, *Nahin! Nahin! Nahin!* So we got drenched, and we kept walking...'

'With *garam-garam* (warm) soo running down your *thanda-thanda* (cold) legs!' (34)

Women are not allowed. Women are not allowed. Women are not allowed. (387)

According to Anita Felicelli, "Somehow in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, her first novel in 20 years, Roy outdoes *The God of Small Things*, and this is largely because it is an even more unsettling, artistic cry against injustice. It is a polyphonic protest" (www.lareviewofbooks.org). This polyphonic protest is recorded in various forms throughout the narrative. There are conventional forms such as journal entries, anecdotes and letters that enable the readers to understand the thoughts and emotions of the characters. Roy also uses:

...unusual documents like medical files of patients (of Maryam Ipe and Amrik Singh), entries from a dictionary that is being compiled ("Kashmir-English Alphabet"), stories and press clippings with questions at the end from a "Book of English Grammar and Composition for Very Young People" (written by the character Tilottama), witness testimonies in a criminal case, and narrative based on the paraphrase of an interview, besides songs and poems in Urdu, Kashmiri, English and Malayalam. The songs and poetic passages in particular are an integral part of the narrative strategy as they resonate with feeling, set the mood,

state the motif and at times provoke ironic contemplation on the porous border between truth and falsehood. (Sreenivasan 55)

Roy skilfully uses the English language by encompassing the necessary local and global cultural indicators within its contextual frame of reference to reflect the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the characters. She has retained the conventional linguistic features of Standard English to a great extent but has also brought in her distinctive stylistic and structural changes to produce her own form of nativized English.

Anita Nair's bestselling novel *Mistress* is a literary tour de force which revolves around the lives of Koman, the aged protagonist who is a former Kathakali artiste; his niece Radha and her husband Shyam who own a resort named "Near-the-Nila"; and Christopher, an American travel writer. *Mistress* consists of three books with three sub-sections each, with a prologue, epilogue and a Kathakali lexicon at the end. Each book begins with transliterated lines quoted from *Nalacharitham Attakkatha*, a Kathakali play (*Aattakatha*) written by the renowned Malayalam poet and dramastist Unnayi Warriar who lived during the 17th and 18th centuries. The quoted lines contain a mixture of Malayalam and Sanskrit lexical items, followed by the author's translated version in English. These sets of introductory verses seem to function as a harbinger to the events in each book and also prepare the readers to be in the exact frame of mind needed to appreciate the novel.

Nair has captured the zeitgeist of contemporary Kerala by wilfully blending Kathakali, the iconic cultural dance form of Kerala with the lives of the fictional characters. "Kathakali lends the book its structure and grounds its even-handed intense drama in a rich setting of myth and ritual; whether sketching Kerala's changing conditions, charting Radha's loveless marriage or describing the closed world of an Islamic village (Smart www.theguardian.com). Each sub-section is named after the *Navarasas*, the nine emotions which encapsulate the expressive core in Indian classical dance and drama, in order to divulge the personal sentiments of the characters in that particular section. "In the novel, the nine rasas of Bharata's *Natyashastra* become more than just aesthetic emotions to be performed by the Kathakali dancer on stage" (Dhar 57). The nine rasas have to be deliberately used as titles to evoke anaesthetic Indian cultural ethos and endow the narrative with an exotic and mystical aura. Readers have to infer the meanings of the native linguistic terms from the context or refer to the lexicon given at the end of the novel.

Nair has pertinently used the *navarasas* to denote the seasonal changes and flora and fauna in Kerala. The first sub-section in Book 1 of *Mistress* titled *Sringaaram* unfolds with a vivid description of the quintessentially beautiful landscape of Kerala in the month of August.

Yellow-trumpet-shaped flowers and the tiny ari-poo in the hedges. Marigolds, chrysanthemums...

The present is the harvest that lies in homes, in wood-walled manjas, golden and plump. (*Mistress* 7)

In the above extract Nair has not only borrowed and subtly interwoven Malayalam words like *ari-poo*, but she has also made appropriate changes in case and plural markers, as in 'wood-walled *manjas*'. The second sub-section *Haasyam* refers to the mischievous

thiruvadhirakaatu, the December winds whereas *Karunam* the concluding sub-section of Book 1 describes the month of *karkitakam* in July and the song of the *karinkuyil*, the Indian cuckoo. In Book 2, *Raudram* is depicted as a version the *thulavarsham* and *meenam* stands for *bhayanakam*. *Adbhutam* is experienced when the enormous and prickly jackfruits yield golden yellow pods which taste like nectar (*Mistress* 336). The translucent ice fruit of palmyra enclosed within the purplish cannonball shell is the epitome of *shaantam*.

Anita Nair's *Idris: Keeper of the Light* is a historical fiction set in seventeenth century Malabar and recounts the interesting travel experiences of Idris Maymoon Samataar Guleed, a Somali trader and his son Kandavar, the offspring of an unforeseen midnight tryst with an aristocratic Nair woman, Kuttimalu. The vast difference in their cultures and religions do not permit Idris and Kuttimalu to marry, so Kuttimalu requests Idris to take Kandavar along his trips in order to distract him from his fatal ambition of becoming a *chaver* (a warrior tribe ready to sacrifice or to be dead for the king without fearing for their lives). The fictional journeys of Idris begin from the Malabar coast to Ceylon, and then to the pearl-harvesting port of Thoothukudi in Tamil Nadu, finally ending in the diamond mines of Golconda. The narrative gives valuable panoramic insights into the sociocultural dimensions of life in seventeenth century South India. The arrival of Idris in Malabar coincides with *mamangam*, a great cultural carnival and spiritual festival that took place only once in twelve years on the banks of the river Nila. Nair has judiciously chosen a renowned historical and cultural landmark to begin her narrative. It is here that Idris meets his son, Vattoli Kandavar Menavan who fervently wished to a member of the *chaverpata*.

In *Idris*, Nair has devoted an entire section tracing the origins of the ancient martial art form of Kerala, *Kalari*. The *chavers* were trained in *kalari* from a very young age. The author uses the original lexical terms from the Malayalam *kalari* lexicon to describe the sacrosanct infrastructure of the *kalari* and the various moves like *padinettamadavu* (eighteenth trick) that was rumoured to make the *chavers* virtually invincible. An example of a spatial cultural marker used in *Idris* is the description of the *Vattolitharavad* (ancestral home) or the *naalukettu*.

Naalukettu is the traditional homestead of old *Tharavadu* where many generations of a matrilineal family lived. These types of buildings are typically found in the Indian state of Kerala. The traditional architecture is typically a rectangular structure where four halls are joined together with a central courtyard open to the sky. The four halls on the sides are named *Vadakkini*, *Padinjattini*, *Kizhakkini* and *Thekkini*. The architecture was especially catered to large families of the traditional *tharavadu*, to live under one roof and enjoy the commonly owned facilities of the *marumakkathayam* homestead. (www.shabdakosh.com)

The descriptions of Kuttimalu's courtyard in *Idris* reflect how Indianisms have been clearly embedded in the narrative to portray the geographical and social features of Kerala. Idris, while observing his surroundings from the *padipura* (gate house), sees an elderly woman sweep the yard and sprinkle a mixture of cow dung and water on the ground, another woman plucks the leaves off a betel creeper. These are customary cleansing rituals reflecting the culture of South Indian households. "The terminology that

sets the scene, with the topographical and transport registers dominant, is already distinctively Indian, despite the English words used” (Rollason 101).

Nair has used a plethora of Indian and foreign words to describe the attire worn by the characters. Using attire as a social deictic, the author also gives an instance of the class difference prevalent in India even today. In *Mistress*, the railway porter Mohammed “lets the lungi he has hitched up when carrying the bags fall to its proper length” (11). The hitched-up *lungi* before elders and persons belong to higher caste/class is a social deictic marker that signifies blatant disrespect in South India. Here the contextual frame shows that Mohammed belongs to the lower economic class in society. “It is impossible to wear clothes without transmitting social signals. Every costume tells a story, often a very subtle one, about its wearer” (Morris 213).

Lexical terms describing local food items find place in both the novels by Nair. In *Mistress*, the resort’s restaurant named *Mulla Pandal* (jasmine bower), serves only Malayali ethnic food items like *masala dosa*, soft fluffy *appam*, *karimeen*, *mathi-poola*, *meenpappas* (varieties of fishes) and *erachiolarthiyathu* (meat fry). *Idris* refers to food items which at times crossed borders that includes Arabian food items like *hares*, *shambusa*, *dorowat*, *berbere* and so on. Native sociocultural linguistic markers blended in the texts include references to history, art, classical and folk music and dance forms, ethnic food and attire, ancient literary texts, myths and legends, use of kinship and honorific terms and so on.

Nair has also incorporated linguistic translations of Indian culture and its localisms using colloquial expressions and usages unique to a specific linguistic community or geographical area. In *Mistress*, the protagonist Radha uses the expression “An elephant’s egg, hardboiled?” (61), to convey her annoyance when her sister-in-law refused to eat the food that she had prepared. This is an example of lexical transfer in which an Indian lexical item is transferred to an English lexical item (Bandyopadhyaya 130). The idiomatic meaning is that just as an elephant can never lay an egg, however hard Radha tries she can never please her fastidious sister-in-law.

Roy and Nair have used the English language as a suitable tool to create their fictional text world and their cultural personas. The selected texts offer valuable insights through polyphony and pluralistic foci while generally ascribing to the tropes depicted in realistic, postcolonial literary works. The literariness of their works can be attributed to the fact that they have used the English language as a vehicle to construct their narratives to foreground the culture and identity of people and places portrayed in their fictional worlds. S. Aravind, a stand-up comedian in his newspaper article “A League of *Thayir Own*” in *The Hindu Metroplus* reminisces with great nostalgia how the art of preparing curd rice or *thayirsaadham* is indigenous to South Indian culture and how this wisdom was passed down over several generations. The selected authors in the same way have produced brilliant hybrid narratives “inscribed with myriad linguistic cultural layering” (Choudhry 140). Such postcolonial writings “frequently referred to as ‘hybrid’ or ‘metisses’ because of the culture-linguistic layering which exists between them, have succeeded in forging a new language” (Mehrez 11).

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