

**“Beware of Children”:
Representation of Childhood in
Khalid Jawed’s (*Nematkhana*)
*The Paradise of Food***

Faizan Moquim

— “I had made a clean escape after committing two murders, [...] I was a kid in shorts when I committed those two murders.”
(*The Paradise of Food* 149)

— “All history should be read from the bottom up and from left to right. [...] To return from old age to childhood is true evolution.”
(*The Paradise of Food* 321)

— “[N]oose of memory is the noose of the gallows.” (*The Paradise of Food* 316)

Introduction

If love is considered to be one of the fundamental dispositions of human life, so are anger, hatred, and revenge. Does anger germinate in children? If yes, what devious forms may it take and problematise our accepted notions of childhood? If revenge leads to homicide, what may be the consequences of such revenge on one’s existence? Such questions become crucial in understanding the nature of the evil acts Guddu, the protagonist of *The Paradise of Food*¹, performs in the novel. *The Paradise of Food* is a story of an old man named Hafeezuddin Babar, who is lovingly called Guddu Miyaan in his childhood. Largely written in first person, the narrative is based on what the protagonist remembers of his past. In his old age, that is around 60 years, he becomes obsessed with

¹ Khalid Jawed’s novel *Nematkhana*, published in Urdu in 2014, has been translated by Baran Farooqi as *The Paradise of Food* (2022).

writing his life story. He is not writing to simply share his extraordinary life experiences. His purpose is to produce a document having legal validity in a court of law – an appeal that can be presented in court. The story that we read is thus a document which will argue his case before a judge. But why does Guddu seek a court for his own trial? The answer to the question lies in the events of Guddu's childhood and their subsequent impact on his life. The question of trial is connected with crime, punishment, justice, and guilt in the novel.

The paper draws upon Karen J. Renner's conceptualization of evil children narrative and seeks to argue that the evil act of homicide committed during the conscience free period of childhood takes an existential toll on the protagonist with the building up of conscience in adult life. The source of evil is shown to be in the dysfunctional family and social structures. The affective responses in the form of anger and revenge in turn play a pivotal role in the make-up of Guddu's childhood. It will argue that traumatic childhood thereby precipitates existential problems which remain irresolvable for the protagonist and that the protagonist's search for a court of law gets transposed into an internal court of his own guilt-ridden conscience. In doing this, the paper presents the complex experience of Guddu's childhood and its role in configuring his adult life.

The paper distinguishes child from adults by way of age bracket commonly used in law discourse, where those younger than eighteen years of age are considered children. Guddu's experiences understood as referring to his childhood are contextualized within this bracket. For the category of evil children, the paper follows Renner's framework as developed in her works, particularly *Evil Children in Popular Imagination* (2016) and extends her argument by considering the novel under discussion here.

The problematic of the source of evil in narratives involving children as an agent of crime is manifold. Renner sets up her study of evil children in relation to the assumed causes of evil. In her typology, "each subtype of evil child symbolically tackles a particular response to the question of where evil comes from" (*Evil Children* 8). And it is important to underline that Renner only focuses on narratives which have a metaphysical angle to evil. Consequently, her study deals with categories of monstrous births, gifted children, ghost children, possessed children, ferals, and changelings. The child in Khalid Jawed's *The Paradise of Food* can be seen through the gifted children typology but with certain departures from Renner's argument. Renner engagement with gifted children narrative is limited to certain motifs, that is, she focuses on giftedness in ways it manifested in "paranormal mental abilities, such as telepathy, telekinesis,

and clairvoyance” (43). Guddu’s ability to intuitively sense an imminent ill-omen by way of food certainly makes him a gifted child but this particular type of giftedness is not within Renner’s ambit of study. However, Renner’s perceptive point regarding narratives of gifted children holds relevance in the present study. She says, “[T]hese [gifted children] narratives also function as symbolic examinations of child development and childrearing theories, *the psychological effects of abuse within the family*, and the exploitation of The Child by larger institutions” (43 emphasis added). It is the component of psychological effects of abuse within family and society around which this paper seeks to tease out aspects of evil acts.

In Renner’s schematization of evil children, she teases out different types of failures of structures which correspond to different typologies of evil child narratives. In her essay “Evil Children in Film and Literature II: Notes Toward a Taxonomy” She says, “While the possessed child narrative explores the unique psychological failures of a particular family, the feral child narrative investigates broader social failures that affect children in general” (177). Extending Renner’s position in way that both types of failure—of family and social structure—coincide in the same narrative, the paper argues that existential narrative of *The Paradise of Food* indicates failures of both kinds in a single narrative. It is pertinent in the case of *The Paradise of Food* because the kind of travails Guddu goes through in the story points to the psychological effects of breakdown of family as well as social structures.

Implications of Breakdown of Family and Society: Evil Acts and Traumatic Childhood

The two homicides committed by Guddu in his childhood are connected with two people, Anjum Baji and Anjum Apa, with whom he was very close and had an affectionate bonding. Anjum Baji, his aunty’s daughter, was about ten years older to him lived in the same house as him. Guddu’s mother died when he was few months old and his father passed away when he was about two. Guddu writes that he lived at his maternal grandmother’s home which was a joint family where all sorts of cousins lived together. Among all his relatives, he admits that he was close to Anjum Baji, “She was probably the one who loved me the most in the teeming household. Up until I was six or seven, she carried me in her arms [...]” (*The Paradise of Food* 41). Guddu develops a strong liking towards Anjum Baji. In fact, for Guddu it was love. He says, “I had fallen in love with Anjum Baji when I was a boy in shorts and hadn’t even sprouted pubic hair, but I can say with confidence that the nature of my love was no different from the love of youth, or even that of a lusty old man, like

raw meat not yet marinated in spices or been put into the cooking pot to boil” (42).

Guddu’s love however remains unrequited. He also gets to know that one of his cousins, Aftab Bhai, is intimate with Anjum Baji. Guddu recalls that he always had a feeling of hatred towards Aftab. He describes Aftab bhai’s persona in these terms: “His eyes were brown and cruel, and his mouth resembled that of a bulldog’s. He considered all this to be the pride of his aristocratic family and a sign of his masculinity” (*The Paradise of Food* 43). Aftab was a smoker and Guddu gets to know him by the smell of cigarettes. He says that “My hatred for Aftab Bhai increased manifold when I realized Anjum Baji’s breath smelt the same” (43). As Guddu grows, Anjum Baji no longer carries him in her arms and he feels isolated and gloomy. He says, “Aftab Bhai had become a rope of hatred with which I was bound. I cast plaintive looks at Anjum Baji like a wild animal tied with this rope. She couldn’t make sense of anything, or pretended ignorance deliberately. It was around that time that she knitted a red sweater for me. I have never worn that sweater till date” (45). The separation and lack of love Guddu feels continue to make him lonelier. He says, “I began to spend more time with my schoolbooks and did not go to Anjum Baji all the time. I occasionally went to the parrot’s cage and stood before it, depressed” (45).

The theme of mental health of a child is an important undercurrent in the narrative. In reading the story of Guddu’s childhood, one readily becomes aware that Guddu remains a forlorn figure. He has guardians in the form of maternal uncles but the absence of parents and the associated structure of care is implicitly foregrounded. Of all the numberless gathering of cousins, aunts, and uncles in the joint family, the only figure with whom he feels a sense of love and care is Anjum Baji. There are no friends until he goes to the city for his B.A. and there too, he does not succeed making strong friendships. Outside home, he is close to a girl who lives in his neighbourhood, Anjum Apa. Rather than finding companionship in human beings, it is with animals—Jack and Lucy, the rabbits, and Sumbul, the parrot—that he finds some occasional moments of affection. The feeling of sadness, isolation, and unhappiness cuts across his childhood days. Judith Trowell and Emilia Dowling in “The childhood Depression Project” point towards the prevalence and increase in the incidence of depression in children. They write, “Everyone becomes sad at times. Life has bad experiences and difficulties, so it is appropriate to be sad. It becomes depression when the sadness persists and cannot be lifted. One must think of depression when a child talks about feeling low, sad, or empty and of how this feeling is there most days” (4). Guddu is not aware of what he is going through but the narrative provides signs

which adequately indicate the troubled childhood of Guddu. Representation of childhood in *The Paradise*, thus, invokes crucial questions about the mental health of such a child growing up in a dysfunctional family set-up. It pertinently raises issues of childhood depression.

However, Guddu's intense dislike for Aftab bhai has a two-fold context. One is that of jealousy in finding Aftab's closeness to Anjum Baji. His view of Aftab is underlined by the symbol of the eagle when he says, "Aftab Bhai seemed to me that hateful eagle flying with a rotting piece of gut pressed in its beak. This putrid bit of gut could drop on any neat and clean place or on some pure and clean human body" (*The Paradise of Food* 44). The image of eagle defiling something or somebody plays a key role in understanding Guddu's homicide. For him, Anjum Baji's body "had a certain pale goldenness. Whatever the colour of her dress, it always seemed to me that her pale golden body was reflected through it in some mysterious way (42)." The way in which Guddu perceives Anjum and Aftab in contrasting ways is important to understand his psyche. For Guddu, Anjum's body-personality exudes what he calls "*peelepan ki pakiza magar pur asraar*" (a certain pale goldenness) (42) tonality. *Pakiza* connotes purity as well as chastity (Platts). Both connotations get undercut in the narrative when Aftab bhai rapes Anjum just before her the pre-martital ritual of *maiyan*.

The psychological impact of having witnessed a rape within the bounds of family structures proves a traumatic experience for Guddu. Minullina in the article "Psychological Trauma of Children of Dysfunctional Family" argues that "Conflict relationships in dysfunctional families trigger children's anxiety, increasing and perpetuating their fears. Parents of dysfunctional families by using unharmonious parenting styles in relation to their children, contribute to the formation of their psychological trauma" (8). The heinous act of rape of someone with whom Guddu had a profound affection compounds his sense of anger. It is important to notice that Guddu does not premeditate on killing Aftab. Neither does he seek outright punishment for him. The act of killing Aftab happens all of sudden when he finds him alone in the house. The emotions of anger and revenge get better of him and he narrates the event in such a manner where he seems to be doing the act as if he were in the grip of them. Rather than focusing on the free will or intellect of the mind, the narrative foregrounds intelligence of body, especially hands, in making their own decision. Guddu says, "Hands have personalities of their own. [...] This is the reason different hands cook food that differs in taste, aroma as well as appearance" (*The Paradise of Food* 48). Guddu recalls that one day when all the inmates of the house

go to a nearby village for the mourning ritual of an uncle, he was alone with his aunty who was mentally ill. At this point, Aftab comes the house, and enquires about the leftover food in kitchen for eating. While Aftab is rummaging through the pots and pans in the kitchen, Guddu feels that “the bones of my feet were crackling under the awful weight of my revulsion and my kneecaps felt jammed” (123). He soon finds himself doing things without aforethought or deliberation. He says,

All of a sudden, the dark and huge shadow which had found sustenance in me transferred itself into my hands with all its might. My hands had transformed into the hands of a demon.

These hands now belonged to another world; they had a different mind and personality and a different nervous system. These hands were total strangers to the rest of my body and my mind.

The hands asked me to bend. I bent down and my hands picked up the heavy grinding slab, the way someone picks up a dry yellow flower from the ground. The grinding slab had the yellow colour of dried turmeric on it.

Aftab Bhai was in the same posture, on his haunches, eating the firni. Although I could not see his jaws moving as he ate, I could see an obscene kind of movement in his back again and again. *I might have seen or felt this kind of an obscene movement somewhere earlier too.*

Holding the stone grinding slab fairly high with my hands, I began to move towards Aftab Bhai very slowly, barefoot. I was right behind him now. The mixed scent of blood and ubtan entered my nostrils.

Holding my breath and applying all my strength, I lifted the slab higher and banged it on Aftab Bhai’s head. He emitted a sound like a loud burp. It was certainly not a scream; he did not get an opportunity to scream. (*The Paradise of Food* 123-124 emphasis added)

Guddu as a growing child had previously witnessed rape within the family. Aftab masks birth control pills as headache pills and makes Anjum have them. On the same night Guddu witnesses non-consensual intercourse between the two. Being a child, he does not fully understand the event, but rough and forceful movements of body do register in his memory. While hitting Aftab’s head in the kitchen, his body movements remind Guddu of that night. Aftab’s savagery and meanness get inscribed into Guddu’s memory. Guddu remembers the scene where Anjum Baji cries and asks Aftab: ““You cur . . . why did you feed me those pills?”” and Aftab responds ““Because I didn’t want your husband to enjoy the

pleasures of the first night with you. But I couldn't care less. I'll . . . right now, in this state'" (*The Paradise of Food* 110).

The homicide of Aftab as well as the killing of Anjum Apa's husband is driven by the subterranean emotion of anger, hatred, and revenge. After Anjum Baji's marriage, Anjum Apa, the other person with whom he was very close, also gets married. When Anjum comes from her in-law's house to father's home, Guddu goes to meet her. Guddu comes to know that Anjum is now blind. On coming back, he asks his maternal uncle about it. Guddu gets to know that "Anjum Apa's husband had turned out to be an extremely cruel and violent man. He was a useless drunkard kind of guy with no income of his own and spent all his time gambling. He bashed up Anjum Apa to extort money from her father, and flung the tobacco from a burning cigarette into Anjum Apa's eyes one day. The poor voiceless girl became blind and no one could do anything about it" (*The Paradise of Food* 136). On learning about Anjum Apa's tragic married life, he feels that the black anger "wanted to break out from the creases and compartments of my spirit" (137). When again after some time he revisits Anjum Apa at her home, he finds that his husband is right there in the kitchen, abusing her and asking for money. He forces Anjum to ask her father for money, which she refuses. He slaps her, threatens to kick her foetus and opens a knife to cut her nose. Out of fear, Anjum runs away shrieking from the kitchen. The brutality of the domestic violence is at its peak in the scene. Witnessing such a cruel treatment of someone whom he loves, makes Guddu dumbfounded. At this point he realizes that "it was revealed to me for the first time that the world of humans had been transformed into a wasteland" (141).

On finding Anjum Apa's husband sitting alone in an inebriated state, busy making tea, he says, "I felt a strange restlessness in my hands. My entire body stiffened, as if preparing to expel something from within. I had probably even stopped breathing.... I witnessed a dark, gigantic shadow come out of me and leap towards the kitchen. I followed my shadow" (143). Guddu goes from behind in a fix and pushes a bottle of kerosene from the cornice and runs away. Consequently, the stove burst and the house was on fire. He later comes to know that Anjum Apa's husband dies before reaching the hospital. What is operating in both the homicides are the three characteristic aspects of emotion— affective, cognitive-evaluative, and motivational (Gaut *Art, Emotion and Ethics* 204). It is clear that Guddu is affected by the wrongs done by Aftab and Anjum's husband. Berys Gaut argues that "According to the [...] cognitive-evaluative theory of the emotions, an emotion not only has an intentional object, but also essentially incorporates an evaluation of that object. So ...to be angry with someone essentially involves thinking of

that person as having wronged someone about whom one cares. Finally, an emotion is a state that characteristically can motivate actions [...]” (*Art, Emotion and Ethics* 204).

It is crucial to keep in mind that it is not the child who is writing but the child who is now in old age recollecting his past. But the *raison de'être* of recollecting his past is interesting. Guddu writes, “I don’t want to go back to my childhood once more so that I may live it again, rather I want to understand it. The way children want to break open their old toys to understand how the clockwork monkey lifts the bottle of milk and places it on its lips” (65). However, past is not present in the sense that one can go and grab it or see it. Memory is decomposable and yet there remains something elusively present in the past which makes us believe in our episodic autobiographical memories. Referring to Chris Jenks, Kumar and Multani write, “the concept of childhood is esoteric, primarily because it is difficult for an adult to recall his or her own childhood” (3). The world of the child is not entirely self-apparent to the child himself or herself. The difficulty of looking back and finding one’s childhood is insightfully teased by Guddu. He acknowledges that despite his elephant’s memory he could not find his childhood the way he wanted to. Instead of finding a wholesome and intact childhood, what he finds are fragments of memory. The temporal distance between the experiencing self of the child and the narrating self of the ageing Guddu allows a retrospective space for interpreting the traces of childhood memories. In doing so, the narrative generates insight into the nature of Guddu’s childhood. He says,

When I focus my attention on these broken pieces of my childhood, I realize that a certain kind of maliciousness was gradually taking birth in me. A dangerous kind of malice, which had a low-grade violence hidden in it. An unexplainable desire to cause suffering often rose in me. For instance, I often felt like poking a needle into someone sitting close to me, or spitting quietly into the food someone was cooking, or roaming around doing other such mean and unnatural deeds. (*The Paradise of Food* 65-66)

Such an insight into violent or disruptive potential pervading his childhood is now presented to the ageing narrator, but such knowledge was not part of the experiencing self of the child. Allied with this analysis of childhood, the narrative also marks ways in which the emotion of anger shapes his world. In the context of his hatred towards Aftab bhai, anger is predominant. After witnessing the rape of Anjum Baji by Aftab, this anger takes an altogether different and intense bearing on his inner life. He likens his anger to a snake that is present in his heart. He says,

I hadn't felt as lonely as I had expected to after Anjum Baji's wedding. The reason could have been the dangerous rage smouldering inside me. I had taught myself to live with the anger concealed within the deeper recesses of my being. This anger was black, not fiery red or yellow. It blinded me but also provided me with succour. I was always accompanied by the black shadow of this anger that had befriended me, and I held on to it tightly, clasping it with both my hands. (*The Paradise of Food* 114)

This indicates that the powerful instinctive urges in childhood, if not regulated by the care and love, can become problematic and then potentially impact adult life.

The affective force of anger and revenge in the period of childhood becomes mysterious and gripping and it did get better of Guddu, resulting in two homicides. In making sense of the homicides committed by Guddu, aspects of anger and hatred reveal an important angle. Khalid Jawed poignantly teases out the possibility of violent revenge and anger in childhood. These affective responses also emerge in relation to what Guddu intuitively perceives as wrong. Berys Gaut writes, "anger or indignation involves the evaluative thought of someone else having done something wrong (including morally wrong)" (*Art, Emotion and Ethics* 241). However, the conditions of possibility for such extreme forms of revenge also bespeak to the state of family and society. Anjum Baji's rape in the closely knit relationship matrix of Muslim society problematises the edifice of safety and security within family structures. The story dramatizes the savage betrayal and lust of Aftab bhai and its impact on Guddu's life. The sanctity of marriage, a building block of family structure, is equally undercut by the rape as well as by the brutal domestic violence in the life of Anjum Apa. If Aftab's act poses questions regarding family setup, the latter raises questions on the complicity of society in perpetuating regressive structures. The helplessness of the father as well as the neighbour in the face of Anjum Apa's husband's debauchery and continuous episodes of domestic violence indicate the State's complicity and inability in weeding out such inhumane practices. In the article "Social Dimensions of Domestic Violence against Women" Alok Sharma comments,

The State has to create such environment in which every person, male or female can realize one's rights and enjoy them. But the State and its functionaries have completely failed in implementing the fundamental right of equality of women. Instead of protecting rights of females they themselves practice discrimination against them by enacting and upholding discriminatory personal laws and in the name of family as private

sphere they do not want to check infliction of domestic violence due to their extreme gender insensitivity. (193)

Guddu's act of homicide thus brings to fore how the breakdown of structures of family and society cause fissures that aberrate children in different ways.

Childhood Trauma and Existential crisis

Guddu's adult life is haunted by the memories of his traumatic childhood and leads to an existential crisis. He says:

The memories of my childhood and adolescence had snatched my youth away from me like it is possible only in a terrifying dream. I wanted to get rid of those terrifying dreams but it was not possible. Those memories were like a black flood that, after sweeping away my past with its waves, continues to advance towards me and is adamant on drowning my present and my future too. (*The Paradise of Food* 147)

On his maternal uncle's insistence, Guddu after passing class 12th moves to the city and takes admission in a college. He takes admission in B.A. and dreams about doing an M.A. in Political science, so as to become a professor. But soon we witness what Freud calls "the return of the repressed." Freud says, "the traumas of childhood are all the more momentous because they occur in a time of incomplete development and are for that reason liable to have traumatic effects" (qtd. in Kumar and Multani 3). Guddu says,

Though I had shamelessly forgotten that past, the fact is that no one really forgets anything. A leaf falls from a tree and sticks to the sole of your shoe. You hear the scrape of the leaf as you walk on the street, but the noise of the world around you drowns the sound and destroys it. But there comes a day when you sit down to clean and polish your shoes. That day reminds you of your sins. (*The Paradise of Food* 178)

And Guddu's sin, if it was a sin, was the murder he committed and that remains alive in his memory. The existential guilt over the act makes Guddu reconsider his future plans. Now instead of going for professorship, he decides to study law. Guddu recounts, "As far as I am concerned, I had no political awareness at that time and neither do I possess any now. There were other questions confronting me. I was accompanied by a past that smelt of blood" (*The Paradise of Food* 178). The questions that were relevant for him were related to existential issues and his existential issues are related to crime, punishment, and justice. He did not want to study law to make a career and become either a lawyer or a judge but wanted to seek answers for questions like,

Who is it that commits crimes? What is punishment like? Does the face of punishment resemble that of murder? [...] And justice? Which is the court that imparts justice? Where is this court? What is the difference between punishment and justice? Are the teeth of punishment as big and pointed as those of justice? (179)

Given his past, Guddu thinks that studying law would help him resolve existential questions. He says, "I wanted to solve the fundamental questions of my inner self through the study of law. I wanted to understand the sense of terror, the anger and the uneasiness in the deep recesses of my being. I wasn't going to be satisfied with any superficial explanation of the sense of guilt (200)." After graduation Guddu takes admission in LLB and dedicates himself to understand the ideas of crime and punishment. But he gradually gets disillusioned with law. He does not find the law discourse satisfactory enough to resolve his existential crises. He says, "While studying Law I often got the feeling that I would suddenly find a solution to my problems. But there was no trace of any such solution. This subject was like religion, science or philosophy, where there are only some words and then some items that represent those words and some tricks about how to bide one's life" (187). However, he continues studying but his desire to find a court and a judge where he would be on trial eludes him.

The burden of traumatic memory makes Guddu interrogate into the existential questions related to crime and punishment. But whether there is such a court that can evaluate his case, problematizes the question of crime and punishment. Do his acts constitute real crimes? What he does, on one level seems like a punishment for the crime others did with his loved ones. The logic of judicial proceeding that focuses on keeping black and white intact and separate turns into an aporia in the case of Guddu. It is towards the end of his life; he comes to realize that "It's difficult to figure out now whether the punishment was an imitation of the murder or the murder was an imitation of the punishment. If there's anyone who knows it's the God sitting in the distant blue sky or a cockroach" (*The Paradise of Food* 344). His honesty and obligations take the form of homicide. But for Guddu, he perhaps does what was expected of him: revenge. He says that "Revenge, the product of which or the worm of the roots of which I too was" (177). In doing so, the narrative by way of Guddu problematizes the relation between crime and punishment and justice. The novel foregrounds the inadequacy or impossibility of judicial procedures in the face of existential questions.

Though Guddu keeps faith in the law, his reflections simultaneously suggest that there would probably be no court that could do justice to his

case. The appeal he is writing for a court in fact becomes a way to make sense of his guilt. For Guddu, the trial in a court becomes a trial before his own conscience. Discussing the nature of the semantic of guilt Paul Ricoeur in “Guilt, Ethics and Religion” says,

The most significant symbolism of guilt is that which is attached to the theme of tribunal; the tribunal is a public institution, but metaphorically transposed into the internal forum it becomes what we call the 'moral consciousness'. Thus, guilt becomes a way of putting oneself before a sort of invisible tribunal which measures the offence, pronounces the condemnation, and inflicts the punishment; at the extreme point of interiorisation, moral consciousness is a look which watches, judges, and condemns; the sentiment of guilt is therefore the consciousness of being inculcated and incriminated by this interior tribunal. (104)

The problematic of guilt, childhood trauma and ensuing existential questions split Guddu from within. His married life too remains barren. The tragedy of Guddu’s life lies in the conundrums of dysfunctional family, society, existential guilt, in short, human condition.

Conclusion

Concurring with Renner’s assertion that “evil child narratives are an essentially humanistic genre that proposes that evil has source and therefor a solution” (*Evil Children* 8) the paper shows that Guddu’s act of homicide has roots in the dysfunctional family and society where the ills of both make individual’s life existentially fraught with lifelong traumas and identity crisis. In writing his appeal, Guddu not only puts the events of his life on display but on trial before his conscience. It is perhaps why the “noose of memory is the noose of the gallows” (*The Paradise of Food* 316) for Guddu. Khalid Jawed in portraying Guddu’s experience of traumatic childhood, the complex web of emotion, existential queries, and their impact on the trajectory of his life presents a nuanced and complicated picture of childhood.

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