

# Disrupting the Asphyxiating Dilemmas of Women in Marital Relationships: a thematic analysis of Reneilwe Malatji's *Love Interrupted*

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## Abstract

Women and African women, in particular, have, over the years, been contending with patriarchal paradoxes disguised as cultural heritage. This article undertakes to disturb the asphyxiating gender incongruities visited upon African women by their male counterparts in their marital relationships by using Malatji's selected short stories from her text, *Love Interrupted* (2012) as a mirror. These repressive patriarchal stereotypes are used to objectify women by disempowering them from optimal participation in community activities. This article is a qualitative study which is undergirded by African Feminism which is an emancipatory theory that advocates for gender parity in society, with women as the lynchpins. Purposive sampling was utilised to select the short stories from other short stories by the same author because of their aptness to the study. Thematic textual analysis was then employed to analyse them. The article proposes that for Africa and the entire human race to develop, gender diversity should be promoted.

**Key words:** patriarchy, women, culture, disrupt, Feminism, gender parity

## Background

*Love Interrupted* (2012) is Reneilwe Malatji's collection of short stories that articulate the voices of abused and cheated black South African women by male figures in their lives who are both their husbands or men in the community. In these short stories, women regularly find themselves in multiple dilemmas of succumbing to their abusive spouses in the name of culture, religion and societal norms. Thus, they are subjected to the power of culture that promotes male dominance and patriarchy within the society. They are perceived as sub-human and objects that need to be controlled by men, culture and society. These women may be expected to make sacrifices such as complying with the rules and influence of culture where their self-worth is diminished or not considered. Kanengoni (2013:1) notes that many men invoke culture to justify unhealthy masculine predilections that take away the freedom of many women and girls. She proposes that men at times use their physical power to over-rule women by taking away the freedom that women are entitled to.

## Women and Culture

The dilemmas that women face are those that are usually influenced by culture and male dominance. This gender disparity dates back many years ago. However, despite the moves towards transformation, the notion of gender equality is constantly discouraged and denigrated. Women are still perceived as sub-human and objects to be controlled by men, culture and society. Kottak (2011:27) defines culture as "a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom and other capabilities and habits acquired by a man as a member of the society". The idea that is derived from this definition is that 'man' is used synonymously with human beings, but relating this idea to the gender it implies that women are not recognised. Kottak indicates that 'man' is the one being that has to practice all the knowledge, belief and other aspects found in culture. Men are given the privilege to practice culture than women, which makes women to be perceived as insignificant beings within culture and society.

Patriarchy and the influence of culture and society on how women should be treated are still dominant in many countries today. In Africa, such practices are prevalent mainly in rural areas where men are worshiped and

respected like gods. This kind of worship and respect is what culture and religion enforce, and it encourages women to believe that men are the superior gender. Women are subjugated and overpowered by male dominance and patriarchy because religion and culture elevate men as superior and women as inferior. Thus, a woman who respects and understands culture and religion is, at times, considered by her society to be much more of a real woman than the one who challenges these customs.

Rakoczy (2004:30) states that in patriarchy males are superior and females are regarded as inferior in every way, which suggest that all women are inherently inferior to men. This makes men feel that they have the right to control women and to treat them like objects. Women suffer because of their gender and because they are considered weak in certain areas such as logical thinking and good decision-making. Women's cultural responsibilities include being mothers, wives and home administrators. In these roles, they undertake all domestic duties, including cooking, feeding the family members, keeping the home tidy and above all, childbearing (Machaba 2011:02). This is evident in Malatji's short story text, *Love Interrupted*, where women are expected to play roles of being the perfect wives, daughters-in-law and child bearers, and to manage the households and every family member within the family. These women are obliged to tolerate their husbands' mistresses threatening the wellbeing of their marriage and children and they have no support from the society and the extended family members. Hence, some women turn a blind eye on their abusive relationships by insisting on staying in such relationships with the excuse of providing their children with a better life while others turn to church for survival. Among the themes within these short stories are patriarchy and male dominance. In the selected short stories, patriarchy and male dominance are promoted, where women are treated as inferior and sub-human because they are considered as weak human beings. Despite their professional occupation outside the home, they are still expected to perform household chores such as cooking and cleaning. Women's abilities are considered to be strong in terms of monitoring the household, handling family members and giving birth to children, being part of the household management instead of being the head of the household. Feminism, which the theory that underpins this study, suggests that men and women are should be equally treated with equal power and opportunities granted to both genders in spite of existing cultural stereotypes.

Although, women may be in important, powerful and influential positions, patriarchy and culture still consider them inferior to men (Rosaldo, 1974:17). This means that women are culturally subordinate to men. Considering the perception that women are a weaker sex in society, it then promotes the notion that men are leaders and women are followers.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

This article has adopted African Feminism as its theoretical lens. which endorses women's rights in respect of sexuality, reproduction and their role in society amongst others. It promotes women's understanding of their purpose in life (Walters, 2005:97). It further endeavours to demystify the myth that Feminism is averse to men. Its evolution is connected to the works by scholars such as Ama Aidoo in Morgan, 1984; Mohanty, 2003 and Weir, 2013. African Feminism is a strand of the broader Feminism movement that seeks to validate women's rights in Africa and African diaspora (Goredema, 2010:34). It seeks to restore women's position in society based on gender equality and equal access to opportunities for all genders. A qualitative research approach, guided by thematic textual analysis, was utilised in the critical analysis of the selected short stories. These short stories were purposively sampled for this study due to their thematic germaneness.

### **Thematic Textual Analysis of the Selected Short Stories in *Love Interrupted***

Women in the selected short stories, "Love Interrupted", "The Things We Do For Love", "Lebo's Story 1: A Young Girl's Dream Interrupted" and "My Perfect Husband" consider themselves fortunate to have been married. Hence, they acquiesce to domestic violence, where they are abused emotionally, and sometimes physically, by their husbands who cheat on them. Although these women experience emotional trauma, they still decide to stay and hold on to their inconsiderate men. Often, such women feel helpless and are afraid to be judged by community members and extended family members and to be beaten up by their cheating and inconsiderate husbands. Hence, McDowell and Pringle (1992:09) argue that "men's sexual and physical violence is supported by the institutional power...a man is entitled to respond violently if his wife attempts to depart from very narrowly prescribed norms of marriage and motherhood". It is assumed that physical violence is what will make a woman behave in the manner that is expected from a wife, that is, she will respect her husband at all times, at all costs. Each selected short story was analysed to investigate whether the influence of culture and society affect women in the short stories.

**“Love Interrupted”**

The short story “Love Interrupted” is set in Modjadji village, Limpopo, where culture and society are significant and play a major role. A daughter-in-law is perceived to be a domestic worker in her new family. Her duties, as the married woman, are to bear children, respect the mother in-law and every member of the family and most importantly, to do her chores as the daughter-in-law.

*Sacrifice of the self*

Generally, women like Anna with occupations are obliged to be selfless because culture and society perceive them as lesser beings. Although Anna has a job and is able to take care of herself and her children financially, she would still not be recognised as woman enough in her community without a man or husband in her life. Despite the fact that her husband abuses and cheats on her, she has to portray a picture of a strong and understanding wife within the community and that is where she is sacrificing her own happiness and reputation for the sake of being accepted in the community by having a male figure in her life and staying married.

Anna is a professional teacher married to Leshata who becomes an abusive, cheating and alcoholic husband. Leshata constantly abuses and cheats on Anna and she keeps quiet about it because she considers herself as one of the fortunate women who is married in her community. Societal expectations allow her to consider herself as privileged to have a husband and that her children will not grow up fatherless. She is even confident to think that: “I was fortunate to have a husband. Most women were struggling to find a man to marry them. Their children were being raised fatherless. I should be counting my blessings, I thought” (Malatji, 2012:27). Her marital status and the perception of the community force her to accept her husband’s behaviour because she does not want to end up like other women in her community who are without husbands or male figures. She makes her marital status a priority before her individuality and abilities as a woman.

Hall (1990:02) suggests that most women in the world live at levels of subsistence survival. Their energies are consumed by making ends meet. Women have no time to call their own and little opportunity to assess the quality of their lives or status. Furthermore, they are socialised to accept restrictions and still consider themselves fortunate. Anna is one of the women who considers herself fortunate enough to have a husband, and this kind of status makes her forget her inner ability as a woman and the profession she occupies. She forgets about herself and puts great effort into the survival of her marriage, her children and keeping her husband to herself despite the treatment she is receiving from him. Hall (1990:51) indicates that history has placed women in a high state of self-sacrifice and selflessness. Anna is in the position where she accepts and understands her husband’s behaviour because she is a woman (the inferior being) as culture and society insist she is.

*Cultural perception of women*

The idea of Kottak (2011:27) indicates clearly that culturally, women appear to be perceived as the object, the other being, a lesser being. The ‘man’ is the one that acquires all the necessary knowledge of culture and by having such knowledge, he is perceived as an important member of the society that ought to control the woman because the woman has not been given the opportunity to learn the ways of culture. Hence, she is compelled to comply with the standards culture prescribes for her. The perception of women within culture is that women are supposed to be selfless, bear children to make heirs for the man, and care and respect their husband/man and his extended family members no matter the circumstances.

Anna is one woman who is obliged to comply with the ways of culture as the daughter-in-law because she is perceived as the domestic worker in her new family. Even in a situation where she is pregnant, she is still working and still expected to perform all kinds of chores in the house. She indicates: “I was always tired from having to go to work and then come back home to chores. My swollen feet and stomach did not help” (Malatji, 2012:27). The fact that she is pregnant and she needs time to rest does not make any difference because she is the daughter-in-law and she is a woman. This means that her husband does not take any part in helping her with chores around the house and the mother-in-law is instructed to leave the chores in the house because the person responsible for them has arrived. Culturally, she is perceived as the domestic worker who is supposed to comply with the ways of her new home and what culture expects from her as a woman.

Her duties as the daughter-in-law and wife include waking up early to cook for her husband despite the fact that she is heavily pregnant. Such duties are expected from her by her mother-in-law because if she fails to do her duties, the mother-in-law will take over and mock her for being an incompetent wife to her son (Malatji, 2012:30). In addition, Anna as a woman and a wife is expected, culturally, to reproduce children so that she is perceived as a real woman. Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974:1) add that women are viewed as passive sexual objects, and devoted mothers, and as dutiful wives. They imply that a woman is categorised within three features which are being the sex object that reproduce children, being the dedicated mother that cares for the

children and always keeping busy with chores around the house. In addition, the novel titled *The Joys of Motherhood* by Emecheta (1979:62) clearly outlines that traditionally in Ibo society, a woman is perceived as woman enough if she is able to produce children for her husband, especially a boy who would be the heir of the husband. This traditional expectation has even drawn conclusions that a woman who is unable to bear children for her husband is a failed woman. This implies that a woman's worth is judged by how many children she can produce for her husband. Thus, the worth of a woman is determined by cultural expectations.

Reproducing children for a woman like Anna comes with difficult circumstances where she is not allowed to come into contact with her husband as long as she is breastfeeding because if she comes into contact with her husband it is assumed that the children might be affected, or worse they may die. Anna's mother-in-law indicates that "It's our tradition. You can't sleep with your husband until you stop breast feeding. Otherwise you will kill the babies" (Malatji, 2012:33). This gives Anna's husband, Leshata, the opportunity to be away from home often because he goes to other women to satisfy his sexual desire while his wife cares for the children. Such behaviour seems to be accepted culturally and in Anna's society. Although she is aware that her husband is after other women, she is obliged to be silent. Her silence makes her to be perceived as the good and matured wife within the society.

#### **"The Things We Do For Love"**

The short story, "The Things We Do For Love", is set in a context where Mosima is unemployed, which makes her a stay-at-home-mother. She is married to the Minister of Public Works, Ngwato. She is another woman who has to deal with dilemmas such as her drunk and cheating husband who comes late at night, mistresses that threaten her marriage and the livelihood of her children, neglect by her husband, and disrespect by the husband's mistress. Mosima is expected to understand and accept cheating in her marriage because she is a woman and she is unable to provide for herself and her children.

#### *Self-sacrifice*

For a woman who is not working or unable to provide for herself financially, it means that she has to be dependent on any man she finds herself with. She would have no choice but to be selfless and trade her worth just to have a male figure in her life despite the level of stress she experiences. Mosima has no financial income to look after herself and children because she has no job; hence, she tolerates the husband who is always away and hurting her. She stays because the husband provides a better life for her financially.

It is Mosima's unemployment which gives her time to be a mother and take care of things in the house while the husband is at work and providing for the family. She becomes the care-taker of the household to the extent that she surrenders to the whole notion. Mosima perceives herself as alone in her marriage, but because she also perceives herself to be the strongest in the relationship, she feels obliged to stay in the marriage and put up with her husband's behaviour. The story states: "Mosima was a woman of strength. There was a dignity about her..." (Malatji, 2012:110). The kind of dignity that she holds as a woman is that of being strong, of having the strength to deal with her husband's behaviour and attitudes and that makes her forget that her inner self exists. When her husband comes home late at night and drunk, she does not tell him how his behaviour affects her wellbeing and marriage. Instead, she feels obligated to cook for him and put the food in the oven for him because he is the husband, the man. For instance, "His coming late was no longer an issue. It was something she was used to. She turned over and went back to sleep. He has his own key and his food was in the oven if he was hungry" (Malatji, 2012:108). The neglect and disrespect that her husband keeps on showing does not provoke her to leave, instead she stays and cares for the children and the property and waits for him every night to come back home.

Dayima (2014:1) indicates that in many cases women stay in abusive relationships because they do not have a job or other resources. She implies that it is often that women who do not have any source of financial income choose to stay in abusive relationships because without the male partner who is the provider, they probably will not survive. Mosima sacrifices her happiness for her marriage because she convinces herself that she is the one that loves her husband for who he is and his behaviour, not for the money he earns as the Minister of Public Works. She is even confident to say: "I will never leave my husband over some cheap tickiline. I don't think she loves him. She is only in it for the money" (Malatji, 2012:118). Mosima feels the need to stay with her husband because she tells herself that she loves her husband more than the girlfriend does. She thinks that the girlfriend is dating her husband for money rather than for love; hence, she is willing to stay with her husband even if it makes her unhappy.

To her, her happiness is not important because at times she blames and tortures herself for her husband's behavior. She feels it is her fault that her husband's behaviour is the way it is. She feels as though she is being punished by God for taking Ngwato from his fiancée years back. She does not blame him for his infidelity; instead, she makes endless excuses for them and punishes herself more.

#### *The significance of marriage*

In an African context, marriage plays a significant role culturally and in the society. However, the outcomes of being married offer different circumstances based on gender, where men are at the advantage of being favoured by the ways of culture and having the opportunity of suppressing their wives in the name of culture, while women find themselves at the disadvantage of being unfavoured by culture and for that they are abused and treated as lesser beings.

According to Link (2010:02), historically, upon marriage, a daughter leaves her natal home and moves to live with her husband's family, and comes under the authority of the mother-in-law and the husband. Link suggests that a daughter does not belong to her biological parents any longer because she will be married and that makes her belong to the family where she is married and will be under the power of the husband and the mother-in-law. She will be told how to conduct herself and how to behave as the bride. Therefore, the bride has to be committed to her marriage and give all her effort so that she is regarded as the well-mannered daughter-in-law, who respects and loves her husband even when he is behaving disrespectfully towards her and mistreating her.

The new bride, like Mosima, is committed to her marriage and always finds excuses for her husband's behaviour. She cannot leave her husband because she made a vow to love him until death do them part. However, this becomes an unbearable burden because she has to deal with her husband's mistress which degrades her self-image as a woman (Malatji, 2012:121). It seems as though she chooses to be a fool like Anna in "Love Interrupted", yet in her situation is even worse because Ngwato is the provider and she has no source of income with which she would be able to look after herself and the children. She depends entirely on Ngwato financially and it seems she does so emotionally and psychologically as well.

Mosima is an unhappily married woman, yet she does not leave her marriage and husband because she is afraid of leaving the lavish lifestyle accessible to the wife of a public figure. She lives in a mansion with the latest and most expensive cars, she has a chauffeur who drives the children around, and she and the children have the privilege of spending holidays in expensive and first-class hotels simply because the husband can afford a materialistic lifestyle. However, he cannot be there for them as a father and husband because he is preoccupied with mistresses and late night parties.

In addition, Mosima feels that she needs her husband more than she needs anything else because if she has her husband to herself and at home at all times, her children will grow up with both parents. As a result, she ends up degrading herself in front of Ngwato's girlfriend in the name of love, marriage and her being the wife, the mother of Ngwato's children. She feels the need to talk to Maphefo, the mistress, woman to woman. When she meets her, Mosima tries by all means to convince her that Ngwato belongs to her because she is the wife and she has borne children for him. She indicates that "I came here to you about my husband. In case you have forgotten, I want to remind you that he is married to me and that he has three boys who are still growing and need him. You can't keep on making him stay away from his home. God will punish you for your cruelty" (Malatji, 2012:119). She tries to make mistress see that she, Mosima, needs Ngwato more than the mistress and that Ngwato has responsibilities as a married man and it is wrong of Maphefo to keep Ngwato away from home, where he belongs. When Maphefo refuses to leave Ngwato alone, Mosima beats her up and promises to kill her if she does not leave her husband alone (Malatji, 2012:120). The sacrifices that Mosima makes for her marriage demean her and turn her into someone who is dependent on her husband in order to live. Marriage seems to be more important to Mosima than her life and freedom and the lives of her children. She is willing to do anything in her power, even kill someone, in order to keep her marital status.

#### *The cheating and abusive husband*

Culture seems to have a way of disadvantaging women and advantaging men, where patriarchy becomes the system that gives men the authority to rule women through political, social, economic, legal, cultural and religious institutions (Wilson, 2013:6). Ngwato cheats on Mosima and does not make his infidelity private because he is the man and the provider. It seems as though, culturally, it is acceptable for him to have more than one partner because even those who are aware of his cheating take it as a norm that should not be questioned or corrected. Mosima is aware of her husband's unfaithfulness and she still chooses to stay with him because she is afraid of being alone and raising his children as a single parent.

Ngwato's cousin, Phuti, knows about Ngwato's cheating and she advises him to consort with more secretive women than the one he is currently dating. Phuti indicates that "if you really have to cheat, couldn't you do it with someone more respectable? Like those ladies from parliament, they can be discreet" (Malatji, 2012:115). This implies that cheating is acceptable when the man does it with women who are discreet and will make themselves invisible in the presence of the wife so that they do not hurt her feelings.

Ngwato justifies his cheating by explaining to his cousin that he is a better man because other men in parliament have more than one mistress and it is the African culture, the way people used to live in the past (Malatji, 2012:115). Hence, culture approves his cheating and he is not ashamed and is prepared to flaunt his mistress publicly. He ends up not coming home to his wife and children but living with Maphefo on a fulltime basis. He neglects his wife and since she does not leave the marriage, she makes excuses for his behaviour, saying that he is bewitched. Mosima alludes to superstition as the cause of her husband's behaviour and stays in her relationship, waiting for him to come back to her (Malatji, 2012:110)

### “Lebo’s story 1: A Young Girl’s Dream Interrupted”

Lebo, the protagonist in this short story, is a young woman who grew up dreaming of a better future. She grew up working very hard to prove that she could have a better life than her mother’s, grandmother’s and any other woman’s in her community. She foolishly believed in her boss, Lucky, who was only interested in using her as his sex object while his wife was away at work. When she eventually discovers that she is pregnant, Lucky offers her money to abort the baby and when Lebo refuses, she is fired from her work, accused of ruining Lucky’s marriage. Her dreams of becoming a better person are interrupted by a man whom she thought would assist her in brightening her life. Instead, he robbed her of her life by lying and using her to satisfy his lustful sexual desires.

#### *Striving for independence*

African culture and tradition had and still has, though to a lesser extent, a way of placing women in the bottom rung of society where their chances of dreaming big are reduced to being (house) wives, mothers and daughter-in-law. They were and still are not given opportunities to dream of any occupation than household responsibilities and caring for the internal and external family members. With time, some of them realised the need to be outside the home and to be in the public domain where they would be able to dream of becoming independent individuals. Lebo is one of the many women who saw the need to be independent despite the hardship of dealing with the challenges of male dominance, culture and tradition in order to achieve her dreams. She grew up in a poverty-stricken home under the care of her grandmother, uncles and aunties while her mother was a domestic worker. However, she always viewed her life as being better than those in her family hence, she worked hard and did every given task to perfection. At the age of eight, she was able to do all the chores in the house including cooking (Malatji, 2012:57). She worked very hard to learn as much as she could because she did not want to end up like her mother or grandmother. She helped with chores and looking after children at her teacher’s house. Most of the time when she was left alone, she would fantasise about how rich she would be, one day.

Lebo impressed her mother’s bosses with her hard work to the point where her food was preferred more than her mother’s (Malatji, 2012:60). Her desire for a better future included her having no contact with boys or men because they would impregnate her and rob her of her dreams: “I think boys will spoil my future. I will have a boyfriend when I’m done with school and have started my own business”, she would say (Malatji, 2012: 70). She had always been inspired by women she often came into contact with: teacher Mangena, Sindi and her mother’s madam.

#### *Control of the body*

Society has its own way of shaping the lives of people who live in it, and this includes what is considered a desirable woman’s body and how a woman should conduct herself (Calef and Simkins, 2009:7). Calef and Simkins (2009) note that a woman’s body is perceived to be controlled by society. For instance, Lebo’s grandmother had a baby when she was thirteen years of age and her own mother had her when she was fifteen. Lebo thus plans to have a baby only when she is successful and owns her own business. However, along the way she is robbed of her future and ends up pregnant at the age of eighteen (Malatji, 2012:73). It appears that these women’s lives are controlled by reproduction. Calef and Simkins (2009:8) add that women’s efforts are often focused on reproduction and the health of the family. It seems as if women are good at doing two things in their lives: bear children and look after the family members. It is as if women have been indoctrinated into being dependent on what society and culture tells them to do.

Male dominance is largely encouraged by entrenched cultural and traditional belief systems in which men are socialised to perceive women’s bodies as objects to satisfy their sexual desires. Hence, Lucky sees Lebo’s body as an instrument to satisfy his sexual needs by lying and manipulating the young girl to a point that he impregnates her and then provides an escape route for himself by offering financial assistance for her to abort the child: “He promised her that he would help her achieve her dreams because he loved her. He would redeem her from her poverty. He made all the promises that every man who wants sex would make” (Malatji, 2012:71). Lebo thought of Lucky as her saviour from her disadvantaged situation, one person who would help her to become a better person. She falls in love with him because he offers her support and appears to believe in her dreams. While he makes her trust that she is in love with him, he interrupts her dreams by giving her the baby she is not ready for.

Lebo's dreams of becoming an independent woman are not only interrupted by Lucky but by her mother as well. When she thought that she would be a woman that does not depend on men and not be a domestic worker, her mother tells her that those are just illusions because she, her mother and grandmother, have worked as domestic workers which makes the job inevitable for Lebo. Her mother encourages her to be like other women in the society, including herself and Lebo's grandmother, by accepting dependence on men by not dreaming as a young girl. Lebo's mother mocks her:

Dream on, my girl. Your children will wash underwear because there will be no one to wash them for them. You will never be rich. If it was that easy, we would all be rich. These people did not become rich by themselves. Their grandparents' grandparents were also rich. And wena [you], who has ever been rich in your family? You are going to follow the same road as me and your grandmother. You can't escape it. The sooner you accept that, the better. I am just happy that you are not lazy: you know the white man's work. Your children won't die of hunger. (Malatji 2012: 62)

The fact that Lebo is a black woman dooms her future to failure. She should not dream of being rich because she would, nevertheless, end up as a domestic worker. However, Lebo thinks about this and sees herself differently from what her mother perceives her. She is determined not to end up like her mother and grandmother hence she stops sharing her dreams with her (her mother) because she discourages her.

### Conclusion

This article has examined the suffocating gender incongruities visited upon African women by their male counterparts in their marital relationships by using Malatji's selected short stories from her text, *Love Interrupted* (2012) as a mirror. It was revealed from the selected stories that certain African cultures and societies have a way of negatively disadvantaging women over men by promoting male dominance and patriarchy. The needs and well-being of women are often compromised in the process. Although women may be offered an opportunity to play some role in the public sector, they are still culturally and traditionally perceived as less important. They have limited platforms to raise their voices hence their perseverance to stay in relationships that are unfavourable to them. They just comply with anything that culture offers them, even if it means suppressing their sense of self, voice and happiness. The article proposes that for Africa and the entire human race to develop, gender diversity should be promoted by using Feminism as a theoretical weapon.

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