

Challenging Societal Boundaries: A Critical Study of Female Self-Actualization in Amber Reeves' *A Lady and Her Husband*

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ABSTRACT

*This study explores the psychological and social causes of low self-esteem in women and examines the process through which they attain self-realization and self-actualization. The problem is embedded in socially constructed gender roles that shape the thinking of both men and women, often portraying women as inferior and discouraging their intellectual and personal growth. This qualitative research is grounded in Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization from 1943. Through a close textual analysis of Amber Reeves' novel *A Lady and Her Husband* (1914), the study reveals how women are expected to conform to patriarchal standards and are often denied autonomy and individuality. The novel presents a journey in which the female protagonist, initially bound by the expectations of others, gradually awakens to her sense of self through observation, reflection, and participation in public life. The findings emphasize that self-realization emerges when individuals are given equal opportunities and are free from judgment and societal constraints. The study contributes to feminist literary discourse by highlighting the need to challenge traditional narratives that limit the personal and intellectual freedom of women.*

Keywords: Self-actualization, gender roles, low self-esteem, Maslow, Amber Reeves, women's identity.

INTRODUCTION

Women are the most marginalized section of society. Even in the advanced societies of the west women face a lot of problems. They have struggled very hard to achieve their rights and social position. Still, this seems inadequate as there are a lot of things which demand serious attention of the people so that women should be made more effective and productive section of society. There are some real grave problems with the psyche of people even in the 21st century that most of the women seem dissatisfied and uncomfortable with what they have or doing in their lives. They are not aware of their true self and this is an alarming situation because they are thought responsible for bringing up the children and how can they raise the children of men properly if they are not fully aware of their true self and potential. One's satisfaction with life is the most important component of a healthy person's life which seems missing even in today's era.

Socially defined gender roles have made both the genders to do their respective duties without raising any objection. They seem content with what they are doing in their daily lives without showing any concern to

raise question that why are the things the way they are. They seem least bothered about their roles and thus succumb to what is assigned to them by society. But in this whole scenario men seem the fortunate section of society as they are given the upper hand in each and every matter. It seems as if women are made passive and less productive through proper scheme. Women are made to stay at home and manage the home and children for the man whereas men are responsible for earning the livelihood. Women are not encouraged to read books and develop critical skills because it is something which should be done by the man. This is a sheer discrimination that women have to ask from the male members of the family before doing anything in order to make sure that whatever she is doing is right or wrong

Laws are made regarding the women's right to vote, political representation, equal job opportunities and many more but still women are expected to do all domestic chores everywhere and both men and women have become accustomed to this but this does not make it lawful, legal or ethically right thing. The problem lies here that whatever is socially accepted becomes right and no one objects whether this is right or wrong. Same is the problem with modern society. Despite having a lot of opportunities and gaining a lot of freedom women seem less aware of their true potential. Patriarchal setup has made them become passive recipients of what they are told to do and women seem unable to take this out of their mind that they are individual beings and have some responsibilities towards themselves as well and among those duties and responsibilities self-actualization tops the list. There is no need to be afraid of becoming self-aware and question the structure of society in which they are kept less aware and considered less intelligent than men.

Everyone has a desire for personality development and it is also the need of every sane man to become a strong and integral person. It is neurotic tendency that pushes a person to achieve the final goal of human development (Nikadambeava, Klicheva 2021). In this article the researchers tried to show the importance of self-actualization and self-realization in 21st century. According to them, self-actualization should take place during the years that one spends while getting education. This is the time when one faces challenges and difficult situation in understanding a subject. If a person chooses to face them, he starts the process of self-development and choosing not to accept them makes a person go through crises and losses. The researchers conclude that the future culture and values depend on the students of this present time. Strong, stable and psychologically developed minds are very important for the world and societies. In order to achieve this, it is very important to give them more enabling socio-psychological environment for young people's personal growth.

Self-actualizing is the basic thing in an individual's life just like all other needs and basic necessities of life. Women need it the most as they are the most marginalized section of society. they have been forced to live in a certain manner defined by men but in reality, they all urge to live a life of fulfillment by taking the risk of separateness and isolation to attain freedom as freedom is never granted it must be taken and the protagonist in the novel does the same to achieve it. By the end of the novel Mary realizes her full potential and seems content as compared to her previous life of cherishing the needs of others.

This study focuses only on *A Lady and Her Husband* by Amber Reeves (1914) as a primary text for critical analysis. Though the novel encompasses many other themes but the study will primarily deal with psychological development of female character within the parameters of the novel and the ways through which she gains her true identity which was hidden due to the other identity which was given to her by society which she was unable to recognize as a real threat to her true identity in the beginning but later she is able to discern this and thus achieves a new identity by coming to her consciousness.

It is very important for a healthy society that both its sections; women and men live peacefully and this peace and healthy society can only be possible if no one tries to keep others inferior and subjugated. Women can play a very meaningful role in society if they are given ample and equal opportunities and are not seen as weaker sex. They should be appreciated to read books and take parts in other activities. Their

opinions should be considered seriously and they should be taken as complete human beings. Their low self-esteem is the main reason of their low productive role in society. They should neither be harassed nor be bullied by anyone anywhere so that they could focus on something else rather than worrying about how to escape bullying and harassment. It is their right to live as freely as men do. It is the duty of everyone to make women believe in themselves and to become a self-actualized and self-realized person.

Statement of the Problem

Socially defined gender roles have caused a lot of problems for the women. They are kept psychologically subjugated by the society and thus live their lives without attaining the highest level of personality development. This study investigates the causes which keep women socially and psychologically subjugated to the men and it also shows the ways and means through which a woman can achieve the true cause of her existence as a human.

Significance of the Study

This study aims at giving an in-depth analysis of a character's journey towards self-actualization. It uncovers the ways for the readers through which they can embark on the journey of realizing and attaining their true self. The innate ability and desire of people pushes them naturally to become self-realized person. Through different situations, events, behaviors and utterances in the novel the researcher explains that how societal roles subjugate a person's psyche and make him/her believe in things in a certain way. The present situations in which the protagonist is made to believe is not a fixed reality rather it is fluid one and she realizes this as she encounters new things and people in her life. This research will help scholars in the field of social sciences and literature to further investigate this issue by applying it on other literary pieces of writers.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to highlight the causes of low self-esteem in women and the process through which they realize their true self and potential. The study poses questions to reveal that what are the factors that contribute to women's low self-esteem and how they actualize their true self and potential.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is the basic need of every individual to live his life the way he wants but due to the social construction of certain phenomena they are unable to achieve and realize their true self as an individual. Centuries old societal norms and belief serve as a hurdle in the way one's progress towards actualizing their true individual self. Same is the case with the women of our society. Due to certain barriers, they cannot fully attain and utilize their true potential. They are capable to do wonders but held restrained by the male dominated society. Mrs. Heyham in the *A Lady and Her Husband* (1914) is an apt example of this. The researcher tries to uncover this phenomenon through this research paper and gives suggestions as how can a female break away from the shackles of society and live her life with complete self-awakening and realization of her potential.

Self-actualization can only be achieved when the first four needs are satisfied. "Self-actualization is a process by which individuals may ascend a hierarchy of needs that is linear as opposed to dialectical" (Amparado, Javier, Pomar, Malabana and Landicho, 2014). Aslam, Akhter and Aslam (2023) published an article titled "Self-Actualization, Individuation and Self-Realization to Search the True Self: A Comparative Study of Siddhartha and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man". In this article they have searched about the self-realization journey of the protagonists by using the critical lenses of self-actualization, individuation and self-realization. According to the researchers, Siddhartha and Stephen Dedalus embark on the journey of self-actualization after fulfilling and satisfying their all needs according

to the Maslow's hierarchy of needs. It is in the great interest of every human to realize all of his potentials which lie deep down in the unconscious. In both the novels the protagonists seem dissatisfied in that present state and leave their respective towns, families and their former identities in order to achieve their true self. Siddhartha seems motivated and decides to learn from herself her real strengths and Stephen Dedalus wants to flee all the bullying and insult he has faced with or without his fault. According to the aforementioned research article a person disowns and renounces his past life and identity due to the growing dissatisfaction that one experiences while living in his old environment. This dissatisfaction brings them to self-awareness and to their true potentials which were hidden due to societal pressure and bullying.

Jin, Winardi and Linuwih (2022) in their research paper titled "Self-Actualization in Jane Eyre's Main Character: A Feminism Study" talked about Jane Eyre's inner feminist thinking in the novel "Jane Eyre" (1847). The protagonist questions, resists and criticizes the existing social culture and strives for her self-esteem. The novelist also utilizes Maslow's Self-actualization theory (1943). It is very important for a woman to have self-respect, self-esteem and freedom. The researchers propound that there are five characteristics of self-actualization personality: perceive reality, being problem centrist, accept self and others, independence, resist and criticizing existing social culture. Self-esteem is prerequisite for person seeking self-actualization. Jane Eyre fights for her self-esteem and tries to abolish inequity. She appears as a very strong character as the novel proceeds and seems the most content person for achieving self-actualization and true sense of her existence as a human.

Kaufman (2018) in his research paper titled "Self-Actualizing People in the 21st Century: Integration with Contemporary Theory and Research on Personality and Well-Being" has done a remarkable job by analyzing Maslow's theory and compared its suitability in the 21st century and tries to fill the gap by employing this in psychological literature. He links Maslow's theory to contemporary theory on personality development and well-being. The results of this study provide support for Maslow's proposed elements of self-actualization. He says that according to Maslow there is a strong relationship between self-actualization and psychological health but Maslow prefers to use the term of self-actualization rather than the later one. One's satisfaction with life is one of the most important factors of human well-being and it is directly linked with overall human's health well-being. By having good and positive emotions in life one can achieve this level of satisfaction and one should make a clear choice by selecting the positive force of self-actualization and by ignoring the other force which always keeps people in defensive mode and discourages them to take decisive actions to live a life of fulfillments and satisfaction by challenging the norms and boundaries society has defined for them and it has mold their psychology in that particular way.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researcher has applied Abraham Maslow's Psychoanalytical theory of Self-actualization which was published in his 1943 article titled "A Theory of Human Motivation". He propounds that it is human need to gain self-actualization after satisfying his other human needs. Originally, he enlisted five needs and those were psychological needs, safety needs, love/belonging needs, esteem needs and self-actualization needs. Later, in his other writings, he replaced self-actualization needs with cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, Self-actualization need, and self-transcendent needs (Bornstein & Bornstein, 2018). The first four needs were classified by him as deficiency needs and latter four as being or higher needs. Once the aforementioned six needs are satisfied the humans are able to embark on the journey of self-realization and self-actualization which can be achieved through introspection, contemplation, and self-discovery. The researcher has applied this theory on Amber Reeves' A Lady and Her Husband to show as the protagonist embarks on the journey of self-actualization.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The nature of this study is qualitative as the researcher gathers non-numerical data for the analysis of the research problem. It is the frequently used method in the fields of humanities and social sciences. It is defined as an enquiry process for understanding a social or human problem. Qualitative method focuses on non-numerical data while interpreting text and its meaning in a particular context. It explores complex issues and helps in generating new ideas by critically evaluating a research problem. It answers to the question of people regarding certain phenomena of society and explains why the things are in a particular way. Their exploration helps societies think more rationally and logically. The researcher analyzes different situations, behaviors of the characters and their utterances in the novel by employing this method on *A Lady and Her Husband* (1914) by Amber Reeves. The researcher carries out her research by using qualitative descriptive method and analyzes the novel critically and thoroughly by using this method.

To fetch data as a primary source for this study the researcher conducts a close study of Amber Reeves' *A Lady and Her Husband*. The researcher analyzes the structure, dialogues, situation, behavior and characters of the novel and then gives her in-depth analysis of the text in the context of female self-actualization. Through qualitative methodology a detailed description of patriarchal society is provided and it has been tried to convey that what are the basic things that an individual can adopt to become a content person with complete knowledge of her potential and worth in male dominated societies and settings.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

By Employing qualitative method, the researcher delves deep into the novel titled *A Lady and Her Husband* by Amber Reeves (1914) to figure out the causes behind women's low self-esteem and the process through which the protagonist of the novel achieves her true self and realizes her true worth and questions the very structure of society which is biased and based on male supremacy. The novel is very interesting in this context and compels its readers to think critically.

Factors of Low Self Esteem in Women

In the very beginning of the novel the writer gives details of the room's setting and through this detailed overview Reeves tries to show that in the very beginning of the novel that room gave the impression of a male's taste. It shows that as if women are not capable of doing these things on their own, as if they do not have this much elaborate sense of taste of these things or maybe they are not allowed to do certain things because they are not trusted and relied on in certain matters by indicating at this very thing in the start of the novel. Then she further gives information about the mindset of the man that they always have a say in a lot of important matters of life. Women are perceived as creatures to please men and thus he deliberately made her do the setting of the room which is pleasing to men just like women who are supposed to be created to please men only. Men are too dominating and want everything according to their taste and interest and it is a traditional concept of viewing and perceiving these two genders and that is how they are expected to behave in social setting; the one active, dominating and powerful while the other is a passive recipient, dominated and weaker section of society. This mindset is the main reason of the deplorable condition of the women in our society irrespective of any specific region because more or less, directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, overtly or covertly women are treated in the same manner all over the world. They are not expected to behave rationally by using their own mind and they are thought of not having a mind and brain carry on important tasks and things in our day-to-day life. The writer, very intelligently, hints at this very thing in the beginning of the novel to convey the traditional mindset of the society and people towards women.

"Rosemary looked round her mother's drawing room. It was a charming room, she thought, of its conventional kind, gay and luxurious, anxious to please, like some soft, pretty woman. She had never

considered its origin before, but now she felt sure that her father must have planned it. It revealed his mind---large, cheerful, excellent---and showed the thorough competence of his taste.” (p1, chap 1)

When Rosemary tells her mother about her decision to get married because she is in love and decided on her own to marry that person, her mother gets upset and disappointed. This disappointment also has some sort of fear in it. The fear of being left behind with no one and nothing to do at home as her life revolves around her children and domestic duties but after the marriage of her youngest daughter what will she do at home. This is the main reason of her disappointment. This shows that women of 20th century were unable to think out of the box and all they can think of is husband, children, home and domestic duties. Through centuries old practices this idea has been inculcated in their mind that they are not worthy of becoming something else other than a good house wife, a mother and a pleaser at home working according to the taste and desires of society and men at home. They were never perceived or encouraged to become working women in business and at other working places. Men think that women are their properties and they will act according to their will and dictation and women accepted this without raising any objection because that is how societies defined gender roles, racism and many other things which in itself are not fixed realities but they have been practiced and now people are trying to give equal rights to all sections of society which seems ridiculous because women have never been considered and received by society on equal level with men.

It is also very alarming to notice that Mrs. Heyham is forced to do household chores and she is not given a chance or an idea to develop her personality by reading and participating in her husband’s business whereas, on the other hand contrary to this, Mr. Heyham is introduced in the novel by telling the readers that he is in the library when Mrs. Heyham was busy with her daughter’s matrimonial affairs and was worrying about her decision. Mary also feels guilty after telling her mother about Anthony because she thinks it is due to her father who kept her mother “so wrapped up” that now she is unable to act properly when faced with a fact. Women are made so helpless that they cannot bear the burden of naked truths and realities of life. They are busy in their own tiny worlds and they seem happy and content with that unless or until they are brought into reality and real world by some external force.

Rosemary is also upset because she feels insecure after talking about her feelings for Anthony as everyone will poke his nose in her affair and create a fuss about this. Trent, her brother, is also a sort source of discomfort for her as he considers it his responsibility to give “his opinion” in this. This whole scenario shows that women are not trusted in the matters of serious nature and they are just thought to be kept inferior and a kind of show piece for the comfort of men and this manly world. Moreover, women themselves are also responsible for their deplorable condition as they treat their men like gods and raise their sons to become the same dominating men as their husbands, fathers and brothers. When James speaks Mary seems proud of her husband for being a successful businessman and she is willing to ignore the drawbacks in his personality as she is fond of him and his charisma. The way James says about Mary and her marriage that “it is quite possible she’ll soon have as many cares as you, my dear” (ch 1, p 16), illustrates the clear picture of patriarchal society where men think of women doing the same old routine work that all women are compelled to do as wives and mothers. They are supposed to remain in the cage of routine and no one is going to spare them from this until they take a step and stand for themselves. And men are happy to keep women dependent on them emotionally, financially and psychologically. The writer depicts this fact very beautifully in the novel while drawing a character sketch of James;

“But he has done his best to make life smooth for Mary and the girls, he was glad she had cried on his shoulder.” (ch 1, p 18)

In the second chapter of the novel the researcher notices another very important reason of women having a low self-esteem. When Rosemary proposes to her mother, Mary, that she should join business and work in the factory; everyone at the house especially Trent and James seem unhappy and discontent at hearing

this idea. For Trent it is not appropriate for her mother to think such a thing and James also finds it ridiculous. The plot shows that they play with the psyche of women as they are not appreciative of this very idea of Mary working in the factory with other girls and supervise them. According to them she is not capable of this and Trent, her son, also wants to see his mother at home and he seems afraid of Rosemary's revolutionary ideas and thus gives his opinion in the matter by showing disapproval. It is as if males of the family have waged an indirect war against her and very tactfully convince her to succumb to their pressure because she is not made business and economics as writer depicts rightly in the second chapter "and Mary felt weakly inclined for a compromise." Moreover, they further pressurize her by showing no trust in her thinking and critical skills when she asks for some time to ponder over this matter and find a more convincing argument to work at the factory. James, her husband, says mockingly;

"Think it over as much as you like, but I don't expect you'll find your argument." (ch 2, p 25)

To sum up the above-mentioned factors contributing to the low self-esteem in women it can be deduced that the controlling behavior of Mary's husband, societal expectations and pressure to fit in the social conformity of the people and her own internal struggles with insecurity and lack of confidence play a vital role in the deplorable condition of the protagonist in the novel. Through this it is illustrated that there are many a slip twixt the cup and the lip in the way of women realizing and actualizing her true self. Though the setting of the novel is in 20th century but it is evident even in today's era that all these elements are still present lurking in modern societies where women face an indirect and unintentional pressure and control from society to celebrate and attain her true worth. Women should be encouraged and trusted in all spheres of life so that societies could progress in a balanced way where no section of society is marginalized and pressurized on the basis of their gender, caste, creed or race. Everyone deserves an equal access to all the opportunities and it is the duty of the state and people in general to make sure the equal distribution of resources and opportunities to its people.

Mary's Self-Actualization Journey

Her self-actualization process starts from the third chapter of the novel when Mary starts reflecting on her dependence on her husband and very few opportunities available to women in their society. Her attitude shows a growing dissatisfaction with the constraints of her life which set her on the path of self-assertion. This shift of thought on the part of Mary marks the beginning towards the journey of self-discovery. At first stage, she stays in the conformity of the people and society and succumbs to societal pressure. She prioritizes social acceptance and conformity despite knowing her inner voices which are against these things but as she wants approval and acceptance from her husband, her son and other people so she kills her desires and opinions by suppressing them. At second stage, she starts to develop awareness and discomfort for the things happening around her and with other factory girls. This awareness creates a battle and conflict within her and a sense of dissatisfaction with current situation of women in general and herself in particular. At the third stage Mrs. Heyham engages in introspection and starts thinking and examining herself, her desires and the pressure or expectation of society and what she was doing until now and what she got in return of all her services and sacrifices for the family and her husband. This compels her to think what she truly wants for herself. Then, at the fourth stage, she becomes more self-aware and gives vent to her opinions and challenges the established norms of society which held women back from so many things and left them ignorant and shy away from realizing their true worth. Then, at the end, she embraces her true and authentic self, pursues her own interests, accepts her individuality and makes choices according to her own taste and desires. She starts leading a more fulfilling and meaningful life. Her whole journey of self-actualization is not the destination but rather is a process of growth and self-discovery. Self-actualization is the realization of one's full potential and Mrs. Heyham succeeds in achieving this milestone on her own.

When Mrs. Heyham visits her husband's tea shop and on seeing the condition of working women she realizes that the plight of women working at tea shops is quite miserable. This helps her understand the true picture of women in their society and how she has spent her life in ignorance which according to her son is a sheltered life. This makes her detach herself from her husband and look deep into the things as women are equal citizens of a country and deserve treatment on equal footing. Her visit of tea shops plays an important role in making her realize the sad and miserable plight of women. Their poor conditions and the exploitations faced by them is a key step in her personal transformation.

With the passage of time Mrs. Heyham becomes more involved in the lives of women and this creates tension with her husband as she detaches herself from her husband and becomes indifferent towards him. The writer very carefully chooses the terms and words to describe this situation in the novel as she uses words like pale, detached and indifferent which show growing divide between them. Her internal reflections about her life as a wife and mother also contribute in her self-awakening. Moreover, she gets rid of her shyness as she was portrayed in the first part of the novel and challenges her husband's decisions and finds courage within herself to contradict her husband and give her opinion regarding factory girls and their situation.

To sum up this whole discussion, it can be deduced that women should live a satisfied life full of realization of their true worth and potential. The journey of Mrs. Heyham towards self-actualization was not easy and smooth but she struggles and resists the stereotype to achieve and realize her true potential which is essential for each individual because women are also complete individuals and have the right to think independently and to separate themselves from society by taking the risk and by encountering the fear and gazing into the eyes of fear and societal pressure. Women should not do this to have power over men but it is really important for them to have power over themselves and live their life like any other individual irrespective of their gender. Women are half of the world's population and we cannot have a peaceful and progressive world without their equal participation in each sphere of life.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The objective of this study has been to examine the factors that prevent women from realizing their true selves and to explore how such barriers contribute to low self-esteem. The constant undermining attitudes of individuals within their social environment often led women to internalize the belief that they are incapable of contributing beyond fulfilling men's desires and domestic expectations. Through a critical analysis of Amber Reeves' novel *A Lady and Her Husband* (1914), the study demonstrates how a woman's journey toward individuality unfolds and what conditions enable this transformation.

The relevance of this inquiry extends to contemporary society, where technological advancement and fast-paced lifestyles have led to the neglect of ongoing gender inequalities. Despite progress in education and awareness, subtle and often unconscious perceptions and judgments about women persist. These attitudes can have long-lasting psychological effects, hindering women's self-worth and overall societal advancement. Thus, the concerns raised in Reeves' work remain pertinent and pressing.

In the novel, Reeves introduces Mary, the protagonist, as a woman burdened by low self-esteem and self-doubt. As the narrative progresses, it becomes apparent that her fractured sense of self stems from multiple sources, including her relationships with her mother, father, husband, and son. Each of these figures exerts psychological control over her, treating her more as property than as an autonomous individual. Mary is consistently portrayed as fragile and dependent, unable to pursue her own happiness or personal development.

Although she expresses dissatisfaction with this imposed control, she also paradoxically exhibits gratitude toward her husband. This response stems from deep-seated societal conditioning that leads her to regard

him as superior and to consider herself fortunate for his perceived kindness. This internal conflict underscores how gender roles are constructed and perpetuated by the normalization of male dominance and female submission.

However, Mary's gradual exposure to the world beyond her domestic sphere marks a turning point in her development. Through engagement in business activities, observation of the working-class women around her, and critical reading, she begins to challenge the narratives she once accepted. She develops the ability to interpret the underlying meanings in the statements and actions of men, especially those disguised as concern or propriety. Eventually, Mary asserts her voice, offering critical opinions on her husband's business and advocating for the rights of underpaid women in tea shops. She opposes the exploitative labor conditions, particularly the expectation that women wear uncomfortable high heels, and calls for better wages and dignified treatment.

This transformation highlights the potential of education, awareness, and experience to empower women to reject oppressive norms and reclaim their agency. The narrative serves as a critique of structural gender inequality and a call for egalitarian values.

The study concludes that all human beings deserve to be treated with dignity and equality. Each person has a purpose and should not be subjected to marginalization based on socially constructed categories such as gender, caste, class, or race. These categories, though pervasive, are fluid constructs rather than inherent truths, and they must be critically interrogated. The novel reinforces the idea that freedom is a natural right and that no one should be allowed to control another's life or choices based on personal, cultural, or institutional biases.

In essence, *A Lady and Her Husband* not only traces a woman's journey from subjugation to self-realization but also encourages readers to reflect on the broader societal structures that continue to limit individual freedom. The study thus advocates for transformative social change grounded in equality, justice, and mutual respect.

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