CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAMOPHOBIC NARRATIVES: DECONSTRUCTING THE PHRASEOLOGY OF FEAR AND INTOLERANCE

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Abstract

The malaise of Islamophobia has wide-ranging symptoms and calls for a sustained critical response. Islamophobic ideologies seem to have been operating on the assumption that Muslim societies suffer from some kind of cultural lacuna, which eventually prevent them from 'progress' and increasingly draw them to violent and reactionary modes of resistance. With these age-old orientalist and colonial clichés at its back, the present-day Islamophobia is fast assuming the status of a civilizational and cultural racism reminiscent of historical anti-Semitism. Though a complex socio-political and demographic phenomenon, most often it tends to be oversimplified at best as a corollary of immigration and multiculturalism and at worst as a 'Return of Islam'. Islamophobia has occupied the central stage due to incidents such as the Iranian Revolution, the Bali bombings, the Gulf War, 9/11, just to name a few. Specifically, since 9/11, Islamophobia has been consistently expressing itself in different genres and modalities ranging from verbal abuse and discrimination to physical attack and racial profiling. Today, negative portrayals of Islam and Muslims abound in the Western media and public discourses. The author examines different manifestations of Islamophobia across a wide spectrum of socio-political perspectives taking into account newspaper reporting, anti-Muslim ads, inclusion/ exclusion patterns and racist narratives.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Western Media, Stereotypes, Racism.

Introduction

Islamophobia is a complex and multifaceted notion with varying degrees and manifestations across a wide range of practices, attitudes and beliefs. Some just take it as an ideological and abstract fear of Islam; others deem it as an existential and sociocultural threat of genocidal proportions[1]. As a result there is a huge variety of its definitions but arguably the definition framed by the Berkeley University Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project is the most inclusive and perceptive:

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> *"Islamophobia is a contrived fear or prejudice fomented by the existing Eurocentric and Orientalist global power structure. It is directed at a perceived or real Muslim threat through the maintenance and extension of existing disparities in economic, political, social and cultural relations, while rationalizing the necessity to deploy violence as a tool to achieve 'civilizational rehab' of the target communities (Muslim or otherwise). Islamophobia reintroduces and reaffirms a global racial structure through which resource distribution disparities are maintained and extended".[2]*

Another very useful definition of Islamophobia and the one which illustrates the far-reaching effects of this phenomenon runs like this: Islamophobia is "an outlook or world-view involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination."[3] Taking insight from these definitions, the researchers conceptualize Islamophobia not in a strictly abstract, rhetorical or theoretical manner but in a more inclusive and pragmatic way. We take Islamophobia as a 'performative' i.e. it seeks to problematize Muslim identity and agency in the social sphere and operates as a speech act with an immense perlocutionary effect[4]. This performative constructs not just a state of mind but also a state of affairs by the fact of it, being uttered in different geographical and temporal contexts born of anti-Muslim historico-social dynamics.

In its different forms and manifestations it is not just an abuse of basic human rights but also a peril for communal harmony. Just five days after the 9/11 attacks, a letter by a Muslim was published in *The Times* which reads:

> *Despite the fact that Muslim communities throughout the world have condemned the terrorist attacks and have joined in with the rest in mourning and praying for the families of the victims, they have been harassed and verbally abused. Using the word Islamic with words such as terrorists, extremists, etc. paints the whole community and Islam as being terrorist and extremists. We in the press, have a responsibility to ensure that our intemperate reporting doesn't lead to any more incidence of abuse and threats of violence against people sharing a sense of shock and outrage.[5]*

The letter characterizes not just the mood of the Islamophobic world but also the mental and psychological anguish, which Muslims have increasingly been a victim of. This mood stretches further, back to the early 20th century, which saw a proliferation of movies and myriad media representations centered on the European views of sabre-rattling bearded Muslims and a stereotypical harem with imprisoned and seductively veiled women. These men and women were routinely played out in the sensual and violent imagery not just of movies but also of paintings and plays[6].

This common assessment has been reiterated by many studies. For example Ihsan Bag by puts it this way: "Movies have been less kind to Muslims and Islam. Ugly stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs in particular has a long history in Hollywood".[7]

More recently, Jack Shaheen has estimated that only 5 percent of movies that include Muslims or Arabs show a human image of them. Since the late 1970s, the image has been that of terrorists from "Black Sunday 1977" to "Iron Eagles 1986" to "The Siege 1998".[8]

Egorova and Tudor, in their landmark study have laid bare various patterns in the Islamophobic media coverage of Islam. They have demonstrated with plentiful evidence that such expressions abound in prime time media coverage of Islam: "Islamic terrorism", Islamic extremism", "Islamic bombs", "Islamic fascism", "violent Islam". They have also drawn a correlation between the use of such expressions and the spread of negative perceptions about Islam.[9] Such findings are corroborated by another independent research done by John E. Richardson, who is of the view that British media has played a role in disseminating anti-Muslim and racist prejudices and negative stereotypes about Islam.[10] As per the statistics given by Richardson, about 85 percent of mainstream print media treated Muslims as monolithic mass and termed them a threat to British society during the general elections of 2001 and 2005.[11]

Another problem is that of lopsided coverage of violence committed by Muslims vis-à-vis the violence committed by the followers of other faiths. For example it is common for European media to over-report a terrorist attack done by the so-called Muslim extremists. But when some terror attack is committed by some non-Muslim terrorists such as non-Irish white terrorists, it conveniently goes under-reported regardless of its greater magnitude.[12] A growing number of journalists and writers are wrongly representing the Muslim diaspora as the 'Return of Violent Islam'.[13] This is a very misleading characterization of a complex sociological and demographic phenomenon. Oriana Fallacy, late French journalist and an Islamophobe, represented the same line of thinking when she said: "Europe is no longer Europe; it is Eurabia, a colony of Islam, where the Islamic invasion does not proceed only in a physical sense, but also in a mental and cultural sense."[14]

Media Portrayals: An Anatomy of Intolerance and Ignorance

If truth is the first casualty in a war then in the War on Terror, it is the truth about Islam and the Muslim which is the first casualty. All around us, unexamined opinions, ingrained anxieties, simmering resentments, willful fabrications, suspicions and fears are being fuelled by myriad media portrayals of Islam and Muslims.[15] Like a violent tornado feeding off of its own energy, our contemporary Islamophobic segments of media are busy taking violent incidents as 'evidences' and then turning them into proofs that are disseminating all kinds of ill-founded opinion and judgments.[16] The following analysis visually as well as discursively demonstrates the presence of Islamophobia in the Western media narratives and social discourse. The analysis also shows frequent demeaning and demonization of Muslims emanating

from all shades of the socio-political spectrum—liberals, conservatives, democrats, Marxists, and progressives. In this analysis, specimens from the mainstream Anglo-American print media and anti-Muslim bus ads have been subjected to critical discussion.

This is one among the many ads run on Philadelphia buses in America in *2015. The campaign was sponsored by Stop Islamization of America, an anti-Muslim,*

pro-Israel, American organization known *primarily for its Islamophobia. The ad runs:* *"Islamic Jew-Hatred: It's in the Quran. Two* thirds of all U.S. aid goes to Islamic countries. Stop the hate. End all aid to Islamic countries." The text is accompanied by a 1941 photograph in which Hitler is shown sitting with Amin Al-Husseini, a Palestinian nationalist and an Arab leader. The photograph has a caption: "Adolf Hitler and his staunch ally, the leader of the Muslim world, Haj Amin al-Husseini."

This ad has many issues. First of all, the ad contains a glaring factual inaccuracy. Al-Husseini was the Grand Mufti of Palestine and not at all a leader of Muslim world. Additionally, he was appointed by British administration in the Mandatory Palestine, where Muslim population formed less than one percent of the entire population of the Muslim world[17]. Second, Al-Husseini's encounter with Adolf Hitler was not any kind of lasting alliance between Nazis and Muslims. It was just a temporary and one-time consultation. Third, it makes a nonsense demand and even if we accept the veracity of its claim, it remains problematic. How can stopping military aid to Afghanistan, will end "Islamic Jew-hatred"?

Here we have another Philadelphia bus ad which reads, "In any War between the Civilized Man and the Savage, Support the Civilized Man—Support Israel—Defeat Jihad" This ad, apart from its hateful content, sets up false binaries and commits massive a misappropriation of facts. The quote mentioned in the ad is from Pamela Geller, an American Islamophobe known for her anti-Muslim writings. In fact, Pamela Geller's quote is based on Ayn Rand's anti-Arab views who once said: *"If you mean* *whose side should we be on: Israel or the* Arabs? I would certainly say Israel because it's the advanced,

technological, civilized *country amidst a group of almost totally primitive* savages"[18] The quote presupposes Israel (along with all its policies of aggression and expansion) as the epitome of civilization and those fighting this aggression and expansion as savagery incarnate. In the ad, one can clearly see two Stars of David, a symbol of Jewish politico-religious identity. This semiotic aspect foregrounds the faith-based hatred of Muslims.

This is *The New York Post*'s cover story headline dated 20th November 2010 and it reads: "Muslim Killers". *The New York Post* is a US daily newspaper which is published and mainly read in New York City and its suburbs. It is the 13th oldest newspaper, in America, and in 2009 it claimed the 6th highest circulation. In 2017, it was reported to be one of the favorite newspapers of Donald Trump who has close ties with its owner, Rupert Murdoch. Just look at the cover story headline composed in mammoth font. It is sweeping, stereotypical, inflammatory and irresponsible. Whosoever the killers were, it was crucial for the paper to draw a line between millions of peace-loving Muslims and tiny section of violent extremists. At the very least, there should be some kind of qualifier or limitation. Interestingly, just one week before this incident, *The New York Post* did not mention the race or the religion of another killer—a white Christian, Robert Lewis Dear who killed three people in Colorado. This is how Islamophobic narratives are shaped and anger is inflamed.[19]

This is another blatant instance of anti-Muslim bigotry—a front-page headline of *the Daily Express*, an influential national tabloid newspaper in the UK with an average daily circulation of 391626. The mammoth headline, dated 4th November 2010, reads: "Muslims Tell British: Go to Hell". Now, there are about 3 million Muslims in Britain. How many of them told the British to go to hell? As per the headline, every Muslim living in Britain did so. Moreover, look carefully at the selection of words in the headline. It sets up a false binary between being Muslim and being British i.e. "Muslims" and "British" are being presented as mutually exclusive categories. According to the details, during a courtroom hearing of a murder in which a Muslim was implicated, a few Muslim miscreants created a ruckus and chanted slogans: "British, Go to hell". Once again the

question arises whether a bunch of miscreants can represent about 3 million Muslims living in Britain. Indeed, the headline is provocative and intends to be over generalizing and antagonistic.[20]

This is yet another instance of an epic failure to adhere journalism ethics. Occupying the center, literally as well as metaphorically, the headlines makes a universal, unqualified, wholesale claim bordering on not just inaccuracy but also absurdity. The nefarious act of plotting to kill the Pope is being 'Islamized' here by the placement of the attributive 'Muslim' before it. The headline, dated 28 October 2009, is not just racially outrageous but also factually inaccurate.[21] In fact, about six sanitary workers got arrested in relation to an alleged plotting to assassinate Pope Benedict. However, the charges were dropped and all the accused were acquitted. The men were presented as "Islamic terrorists disguised as street cleaners" and it also mentioned that "the threatened attack was foiled at the 11th hour after police raided a cleaning depot in London". Nevertheless the subsequent investigation disclosed that they were neither Muslims nor terrorists.[22]

This is another specimen of stereotypical reporting on Muslims in Britain by *The Sun*. What we have to bear in mind is that this kind of reporting can be done only on Muslims; not on the followers of any other religion i.e. it is just unthinkable to come across a headline like this: "Christian Convert Beheads Woman in Garden", or, for that matter, "Buddhist Convert Beheads Woman in Garden". The claim, which is being made by this headline was not corroborated. Nicholas Salvador, the killer, was later on found to be a patient of paranoid schizophrenia and no correlation was established between his alleged new religion and the murder he committed.[23]

At the same time, there is considerable controversy about his religion. One of his former employers claimed that Salvador, though converted to Islam, never discussed or owned his religion. One of his friends said that, though he was a Muslim, he never observed his religion and was a frequent gambler and alcoholic. According to some other accounts, in 2014 Salvador abandoned Islam and embraced Buddhism[24]. Moreover, there are so many murders of women at the hands of White Americans hailing from religions other than Islam. But nowhere do we find the mentioning of

their religion along with their criminality. This odd bracketing of faith with deeds seems to be reserved only for Muslims.

Sadly, Over decades, the unchecked efforts by some of the government officials, orientalists and the self-styled experts of Islam have brought about a state of affairs in which the word 'terrorist' has got conflated with a Muslim, particularly a bearded Middle Easterner. This resulted in a radicalized and stereotyped characterization of countless millions of Muslim around the globe as the 'enemy' or worse, as the 'other'.[25]

## Anti-Muslim Discourses: Hate Masquerading as Scholarship

One of the basic contentions of the researchers in this paper is that Muslims are still fundamentally a subject of scrutiny and study for Western scholars, as Edward Said theorized it about four decades ago.[26] Since then, the years that have passed by have just added to the intensity and conviction of that claim. Still Muslims are largely excluded from the discursive modes employed to represent them and are not frequently included to comment on their very existence. This exclusion is so conspicuous that everyone having slight familiarity with media knows it. Muslim experts, scholars and analysts are a rare presence in the mainstream media discourses.

It is strange to see that media programs which impact the lives of millions of Muslims and shape the popular perceptions about them do not have considerable presence of Muslims themselves. For example, look at the media coverage of the travel ban issued recently by the Trump administration. During this coverage, the mainstream US media largely excluded the Muslim voices. Not just the so-called conservative media houses like Fox News, but also relatively liberal media outlets also failed to represent the Muslim perspective proportionally.[27] As per the statistics issued by Media Matters for America, a politically progressive, US-based media watchdog, during the immediate coverage of the travel ban a total of 90 commentators were invited by CNN and out of them only 7 were Muslims. Same is the case with other media outlets. MSNBC, a progressive news cable and satellite television network in America, invited a total number of 28 commentators and out of which only 2 were Muslims. This statistics shows an alarming absence of Muslims in media space where the coverage of Muslims and Islam is recurring and robust[28].

We also find that those media outlets which claim to be liberal are busy propagating a liberal brand of Orientalism. There too Muslims are taken as a subject of scrutiny and study. Their role and existence is objectified and they are deemed deserving of pity and sympathy. It speaks of a condescending attitude which characterizes many of these media networks[29]. On the other hand, conservative media houses routinely caricaturize and stereotype Muslims. This they mostly do by

featuring some native informant determined to slander Islam. Liberal media outlets have a slightly different (and arguably more effective) strategy to achieve the same goal.[30] They would invite a handful of Muslim commentators just to create an illusion of "proportionate representation" while assigning major portion of coverage to white males, In fact, an all-white-male panel discussing a matter that directly impacts Muslims is a common sight on liberal news media outlets. This sight is particularly concerning in the Trump era, where an endless pool of effective Muslim commentators are lending insight on mainstream print media and social media, and are within easy reach for cable news outlets and their bookers. However, the exclusion of Muslim voices seems to be heightening at a moment when regular inclusion of Muslim voices has never been more important.[31]

According to Fairness and Accuracy Reporting (FAIR), a media criticism American organization, the mainstream media houses tend to essentialize clichéd images as abiding traits of Muslims' moral character.[32] A visual summary of this Islamophobic essentialization can be seen in figure below.
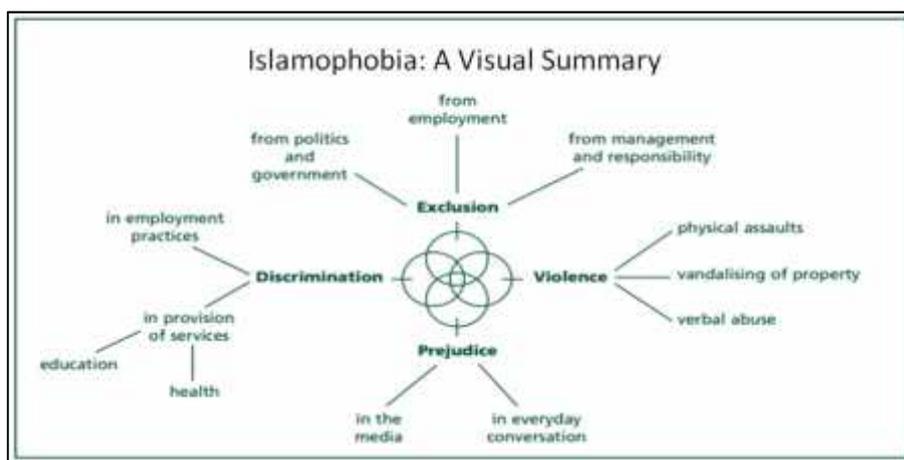
It can be seen from this figure that Islamophobia results in four major kinds of anti-Muslim expressions: exclusion, violence, prejudice and discriminations. It is also worth noting that the circles representing these expressions are intersecting i.e. these expressions do not always operate in isolation; rather there exists and complex mix of these attitudes which only makes matter more intractable. This essentialization of Muslims has been coupled with a widespread maligning of Islam. The Quran has been likened to Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and a ban on it has been demanded.[33] Some Islamophobes have also been demanding a tax on wearing headscarves and a total banning of burka.[34] Some of these Islamophobic demands have already been met by some of the European governments acquiescing to public pressure, which itself is indicative of the pervasiveness of Islamophobia.

How ill-informed these Islamophobes are about Islam can be appreciated from the following statement which Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician known for his anti-Islam persuasions, made in the Dutch Parliament:

> *Very many Dutch citizens, Madam Speaker, experience the presence of Islam around them. And I can report that they have had enough of burkas, headscarves, the ritual slaughter of animals, so-called honour revenge, blaring minarets, female circumcision, hymen restoration operations, abuse of homosexuals, Turkish and Arabic on the buses and trains as well as on town hall leaflets, halal meat at grocery shops and department stores.[35]*

This except is a classic example of rampant ignorance about Islam and Muslims. The question arises when democracy itself promises religious freedom then why should we pick holes with the dress codes of minorities and subject it to derision and scorn? Statistically speaking, there has been no correlation between the wearing of burka and the commission of acts of terror. Honor revenge has nothing to do with Islam. At maximum it constitutes a cultural expression of some long-standing traditions which by no means are confined to Muslim societies. Similarly, what Wilders is denouncing as "blaring minarets" has historically been taken as a fabulous architectural expression of Islamic civilization whose grandeur is lost only on those who have already taken a hardened position against Islam. All over the Muslim world, there are spires of churches and domes of temples but nowhere do we see such hostility against such buildings.

Similarly one wonders what is uniquely 'Islamic' about the practice of hymen restoration. Lastly, when we ourselves acknowledge, nay take pride in, living in a multilingual and multicultural world, then must we react so hysterically on seeing Arabic or Turkish in the public spheres? Sadly, what Wilders said finds its parallels in the views of many other Islamophobes as well. Orthodox blogger Pamela Geller, for instance, said that she believed that a Muslim could be a moderate but as far as Islam was concerned it could not be moderate.[36] Interestingly she has her own definition of a moderate Muslim and if one does not fulfill that definition, he/she is not moderate at all. To her, a moderate Muslim is the one who is secular. Interestingly when it comes to her own religious affiliation, she herself does not happen to be quite a secular.[37] This is an interesting case of imposing one's own terms and conditions and then to derive self-serving conclusions.

Even more interestingly, there are avowed Islamophobes who dispute the very term—Islamophobia. They seem to be in a mood of denial. Sam Harris, a vigorous defender of atheism and a harsh critic of Islam, is dismissive of Islamophobia, and considers it an invented psychological syndrome.[38] Similarly Pascal Bruckner, French writer and critic, also rejects the term Islamophobia outright in

these words: "a clever invention because it amounts to making Islam a subject that one cannot touch without being accused of racism".[39] However the ample evidence of Islamophobia presented above falsifies such claims.

Today, people like Bill Maher and Sam Harris are spearheading systematic media campaigns against Muslims and Islam through brash assertions, trendy jokes and phony arguments and manufactured consent. They have been called, "snake oil charmers selling their hate on prime time television"[40]. The problem with these Islamophobe is their pseudo knowledge of Islam and Muslims as has been pointed out by Hamid Dabashi:

> *These liberal Islamophobes, proverbially the enemy of that which they do not understand, pontificate their pathological fear of Islam and Muslims with fake authority and false familiarity. They dare to talk about the "battle of ideas" without a single citation of any living or dead Muslim theologian, philosopher, mystic, poet, artist, or public intellectual evident in their vertiginously vacuous prose. The monumentality of their ignorance is only sanctioned by their self-entitled white privileges. They are white; they can say whatever they want. At the height of the Enlightenment modernity, Europe ended up in German concentration camps. At the height of American democracy, they are ruled by Trump. And they dare to talk about "battle of ideas!" What ideas? [41]"*

Moreover, the routine slanders of Islam coming from people like Bill Maher shows how the so-called liberals are also eagerly joining hands with hawkish conservatives to malign Islam. Maher's recent rant against Linda Sarsour, a Palestinian-American political activist and prominent civil rights advocate, only illustrates the pervasiveness of Islamophobia even among the liberal left.[42]

Finally, a word ought to be said about a crucial transformation in Western perceptions of Muslim women. Over the last about one hundred years, views about Muslim women have gone through a crucial change. Early stereotypes about Muslim women were about their portrayals as oppressed and submissive humans. Veil was taken as a symbol of decadence and oppression. But since the last quarter of the 20th century, these stereotypes have undergone a change and now a veiled woman tends to be taken not so much as an oppressed human but as a threat to the Western civilization.[43] After 9/11 this image was more and more associated with a suicide bomber. The mystique associated the veiled Muslim woman is no longer a matter of oppression; it is a threat of civilizational magnitude which has the potential to erode a hard-earned modernity. Such an image of women deserves necessary legal (i.e. police) action; not sympathy. As a result, "The use of veiling by Muslim women now had politically sinister connotations of danger, fanaticism, and terrorism.

Conclusion

In this paper the researchers have taken into consideration a wide range of instances and attitudes indicative of implicit and explicit bias and anti-Muslim bigotry. An extensive analysis of newspapers, electronic media coverage, bus ads and think tank reports has been carried out. It has been shown that there exists a widespread Islamophobia which manifests itself as discrimination, exclusion, violence and prejudice. These bigoted manifestations of Islamophobia are further compounded because of rampant ignorance about Islam and Muslims. In response to this problem, we need to adopt a responsive, non-biased and inclusive attitude towards all religions and races if we are to ensure a peaceful coexistence in our multilingual and multicultural world. All of us should play our role to make the public sphere more and more culturally sensitive. In most of the Islamophobic discourses, cultural practices are confused with religious teachings. This confusion has resulted in some of the most obnoxious stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. It can also been inferred from the preceding discussion that how sometimes contemporary geopolitical conflicts are framed as timeless civilizational clashes. Such ahistorical attitudes are responsible for an oversimplification of complex and nuanced conditions. Former UN secretary General Kofi Annan perceptively analyzed this situation in a seminar organized by the United Nations which located Islamophobia as a serious problem deserving immediate action. His words provide the fitting closing to this paper.

An honest look at Islamophobia must also acknowledge the policy context. The historical experience of Muslims includes colonialism and domination by the West, either direct or indirect. Resentment is fed by the unresolved conflicts in the Middle East, by the situation in Chechnya, and by atrocities committed against Muslims in the former Yugoslavia. The reaction to such events can be visceral, bringing an almost personal sense of affront. But we should remember that these are political reactions...disagreements with specific policies. All too often, they are mistaken for an Islamic reaction against Western values, sparking an anti-Islamic backlash.

NOTES

1   There is no dearth of political activists, writers and media commentators who voice their fear about what they consider the growing encroachment of Islam. A large of number of these people are ill-informed even about some of the most basic notions of Islamic theology and most of their knowledge of Islam is based upon the everyday media portrayals of Muslims from such troubled regions as the Middle East, Afghanistan, Central African Republic, etc. An extremely well-researched article exposing the ignorance of some of the Islamophobic writers titled "The Ignorance of the Islamophobes" appeared in *New Statesman,* one of the leading British cultural and political magazines on 17 December 2001. The article can be accessed at http://www.newstatesman.com/node/194271

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