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**RESEARCH PAPER**

## Religious, Cultural and Lingual Stereotypes: a Deconstructive Study of Haji's the Sweetness of Tears

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**ABSTRACT**

This study aims at the deconstructive analysis of the religious, cultural and lingual stereotypes represented through the Americans and the Muslims in Nafisa Haji's *The Sweetness of Tears*. Both Americans and Muslims have been sharing a binary of the victims and the victimizers since the incident of 9/11. Muslims are scrutinized and deported to their hometown on charge of being 'terrorists' by the Americans. Firstly, the study illustrates that by deconstructing these stereotypes, a new intimate association can be established between the Americans and the Muslims. Derrida has given the approach of 'Deconstruction' to equalize the power structures of binary oppositions. In his theory of 'Deconstruction', he deconstructs the unequal association of binaries as "good" and "evil" and "Superior" and "Inferior". He says that these binaries are the expression of one another e.g "good" is the expression of "evil" and "evil" is the expression of "good". Similarly, "Superior" is the expression of "Inferior" and "Inferior" is the expression of "Superior". By deconstructing these stereotypes, the rigid bond of the Americans and the Muslims can be entered into a harmonious association. Secondly, the Muslims can maintain their identities as "Muslims" without tagging them as being terrorists. Thirdly, by crossing the boundaries of a Muslim country, Americans can learn and understand Muslims' religion, culture and language as is shown in the novel under discussion. This study depicts that the Americans have started to accept the Muslims as non-violent people. Jo March (protagonist) learns Urdu (the national language of Pakistan), comes to Pakistan and lives here to know about the culture, traditions and religion of Muslims. She binds the ties together and made a harmonious association between the American family and the Muslim family. This study supports this intimate association between both Americans and Muslims.

**KEYWORDS** Boundaries, Deconstruction, Inferior, Intimate Association, Stereotypes, Superior

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**Introduction**

*The Sweetness of Tears* by Nafisa Haji is an emotional, deeply layered story that explores the far-reaching effects of cultural prejudice, forbidden love, and hidden histories on a young woman and her family. A high school biology course in Mendel's laws sends Jo March on a cross-continent journey that challenges her very identity. Haji's sprawling novel is a family saga that expands over several decades to explore the history of Islam, the reach of Christianity, the horrors of the war in Iraq, and several other contentious issues. Predictably, the author alternates viewpoints to give thickness to her characters and to connect them with one another: Jo's newly discovered biological father, Sadiq, is a Pakistani taken as a child from his mother Deena, who moved to America, remarried, had

another child, and later briefly reunites with Sadiq. Angela, Jo's mother, also abandoned by a parent, went on a journey of her own almost 20 years ago that led to a brief affair with Sadiq (hence: Jo). As each character's life unfolds, Haji's focus expands to the breaking point, covering Christian missionaries and fundamentalists, the Sunni-Shia conflict, the status of women in Muslim society, the suffering of soldiers, the U.S. military's handling of Iraqi civilians, and enhanced interrogation tactics. Somewhere in all of this is a family story, and the many threads eventually cleave to illustrate how a complicated blend of race, religion, culture, and tradition can create peace rather than conflict.

Jo (protagonist) started her journey of going beyond the boundaries to seek her own identity. She became curious about the color of her eyes. Her mother's eyes were blue, but the color of her eyes was black. On asking from her mother Angela, she came to know that her biological father is Sadiq, a Pakistani Muslim. This is the reason that she learns Urdu and Arabic, comes to Pakistan, lives here, discovers her new relatives, and knows about the culture and religion of Muslims. Jo March belongs to an American family. She goes beyond the boundaries and binds the ties together and made a harmonious association between American and Muslim's families. She comes to Pakistan, lives here to learn about the cultures, traditions, and religion of Muslims. She learns Urdu (the national language of Pakistan). Nafisa Haji breaks the facts about the War on Terror in her novel *The Sweetness of Tears* through her Protagonist. The protagonist (Jo March) also goes to Iraq and knows about the War in Iraq. By her mouth piece Jo March, the author has revealed the facts that Muslims are not terrorists rather it is an imposed identity on them by the Americans.

Nafisa has shown the positive change in the attitudes of American citizens towards the Muslims and their cultures, language and religion in the work under study. Initially, the incident of 9/11 appeared as the most tragic in human history that spoiled the repute of Muslims all over the world. After the accident, Muslims badly suffered from being tagged as extremists or the terrorists which is addressed in this piece of fiction. The writer projects that later on the things are getting improved and there is a bit change in the Western biased and stereotypical projection of the Muslims as the violent citizens. The overall message of *The Sweetness of Tears* is one of the peace and compassion. The writer beautifully describes the people from different backgrounds and brings them together in a beautiful way. There exist so many ways that collaborates to make people turn into a family. The writer has openly described the difficulty in cultural, social and political issues that Muslims faced in the outside society. The treatment of prisoners by the United States in the period of war on terror is the basic and main topic dealing with the Muslim women rights. She turned the portion of the novel in the social commentary without being overly moralistic and resulted in the wonderful change of people's learning. Despite the issue of Muslims as terrorist, she openly and more calmly expressed the political, social and cultural Pakistani and American relationships.

By applying the approach of 'Deconstruction' by Derrida the stereotypes about Muslims is being deconstructed in this study. Derrida gave the approach of 'Deconstruction' to equalize the power structures of binary oppositions. According to Derrida binaries are the expression of one another. This study demonstrates that by applying the Derrida's approach on the Haji's text the stereotypes between America and Muslims are being deconstructed. This work is an effort to stir up the soft corner of American non-Muslims towards the Muslims around the world that is recently built. This study also accommodates Muslims in sustaining their identities in the globalized world.

## Literature Review

This portion deals with the critical survey of the scholarly work already done with reference to the issue of cultural, religious and lingual conflicts and its consequences. Plenty of ink has been spilled over the question of representation of Muslims. Muslims have been presented as terrorists, dangerous and uncivilized by the western media since the incident of 9/11. Many dissertations and analyses have been done on the deconstruction of stereotypes of the Westerns and Muslims.

Scholars have explored the various ways in which religion is constructed and represented in literature. In an article "Faith and Possession: American Orientals and Post-9/11 Islamic Theology in Nafisa Haji's *The Sweetness of Tears*," Faiza Moatasim (2018) argues that *The Sweetness of Tears* challenges the popular understandings of Islam and the Arab world presented in the media, highlighting the importance of redefining Muslim identity after 9/11.

Aguayo, M in his review in *Global Media Journal*, *Representations of Muslim bodies* demonstrates that after 9/11 Hollywood films paid attention towards the representation of Muslim bodies as violent. Muslims have been represented as terrorists, dangerous, and uncivilized in the popular media. There are many famous movies as *Black Hawk Down*, *The Kingdom* and *The Gee* which shows the hegemonic representation of Muslim men and women. This paper demonstrated the political construction of Muslim bodies in the film *The Kingdom* and the complex ways through which Muslim bodies are considered as violent and terrorists. Aguayo has borrowed Stuart Hall's "communication circuit" and deconstructed the discourses. He has shown that how politically and through the characters the Muslim man and woman are represented as pre-modern, uncivilized and violent. Aguayo has successfully portrayed the circumstances of 'War on Terror' after the incident of 9/11. But the question is; can this stereotypical treatment of Americans towards Muslims be ended? (Aguayo, 2009).

Some other studies have also highlighted the relevance of cultural stereotypes in Nafisa Haji's *The Sweetness of Tears*. In her article "*The Sweetness of Tears: Cultural Representation and Stereotypes*," Fariba Rabe'ei (2016) argues that the novel presents new identities that are not limited by stereotypes and traditional roles of culture. Similarly, in "*Articulating Alternative Futures through Postcolonial and Gendered Aesthetics in Nafisa Haji's The Sweetness of Tears*," Ayesha Fatima (2016) explores how the novel challenges the gender roles and patriarchal values that are often perpetuated in South Asian culture, pointing towards the possibility of alternative futures.

Menchawi Fawal (2013) in his dissertation *The Representation of Islam and Muslims in Popular Media* pinpoints the negative and stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslims by the western popular culture especially Hollywood media. Fawal has analyzed three popular movies: *Kingdom* (2007), *Rules of Engagement* and *New Muslim Cool* (2009). She has demonstrated that after the incident of 9/11 Muslims have been treated as terrorists and violent and Islam has been shown as a violent religion by the Hollywood media. *The Kingdom* and *Rules of Engagement* are movies in which stereotypical representation of Muslims and Islam has been shown by the United States. Muslims have drawn as violent, uncivilized and terrorists in these movies. On the other hand, *New Muslim Cool* is the movie in which these dangerous stereotypes have deconstructed. Fawal has tried to deconstruct the stereotypical recognition of Muslims in her analysis of these movies.

Scholars have also analyzed how language is instrumental in perpetuating stereotypes in literature. In "translating the curriculum: Multiculturalism into cultural studies", Edgerton, S. H. (2014) shows the challenges of implementing multicultural education in American schools and argues that there is a need for a more inclusive cultural studies approach. Through a series of case studies and theoretical analyses, the author proposes ways to transform the traditional curriculum into one that is more diverse and inclusive. The book also explores the role of language in education and how language barriers can hinder multicultural education efforts. Additionally, in "Breaking Boundaries and Disseminating Knowledge" Nevin Uysal (2019) examines that how the novel defies linguistic boundaries and challenges the assumed superiority of English, deconstructing the power dynamics that exist within language.

Moore, A. (2010) in his review of *American Muslim Minorities: The new human rights struggle* shows that the consequences of the incident of 9/11 are felt throughout the United States. American Muslim minority is the most affected community than any other else. Muslims of the US have been facing social discrimination, economic and political violations since the attacks of 9/11. These discriminations are the causes of clear misunderstandings of Islam and those who practice Islam. Islamic organizations are fighting against these discriminations and protecting the Muslim minorities. A medium for education on Islam can be provided by Islamic Organizations and outside participants to Islamic settlements and meetings can be invited to develop better relations with the external community. American narrative of Islam can also be created like the African-American story. However, the relationships that have developed between Americans and Muslims cannot be fixed completely by these proposals, but these can benefit to increase the Americans' knowledge of Islam. Judgements and exploitations are more likely to be lessened by increasing the knowledge of Islam.

## Material and Methods

This research methodology outlines the approach used to conduct a deconstructive study of Nafisa Haji's novel *The Sweetness of Tears*. This is qualitative research on the positive representation of Muslims' identities specifically of Pakistani Muslims who are being victimized and ill-treated up till now. Approach of 'Deconstruction' by Derrida is applied to critically analyze the ways in which the stereotypes are constructed and deconstructed to highlight the complexities of identity and representation. The analysis focuses on identifying how the text presents and challenges these stereotypes, and how the identities and experiences of the characters intersect with these constructs of stereotypes.

Deconstruction is a philosophical approach developed by Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* where he explored the interplay between language and the construction of meaning that aims to challenge the traditional ideas of binary oppositions and hierarchical structures in language and thought. It involves a critique of the way in which language is used to frame and categorize knowledge within established structures of power. Derrida argues that binary oppositions such as male/female, white/black, and good/evil are socially constructed and sustained by unequal power relations. Through deconstruction, Derrida attempts to uncover the hidden assumptions that underlie these binary oppositions and expose the ways in which they are used to maintain the status quo. This approach has attracted significant attention across multiple disciplines, including literature, philosophy, sociology, and cultural studies, and has been influential in shifting the focus of intellectual inquiry towards issues of representation, identity, and power. "Deconstruction doesn't consist in a set of theorems, axioms, tools, rules, techniques,

methods... there is no deconstruction, deconstruction has no specific object" (Derrida, 1996, p. 218).

By applying the approach of 'Deconstruction', the stereotypes regarding relationship between Americans and Muslims are being deconstructed in this research work. The novel *The Sweetness of Tears* is written by Nafisa Haji that is true implication of Derrida, where the novel is the indication of the fact that Muslims are not always being problem originators. She presented the strong character of woman that depicts the way of evaluating things that are not always indicated or presented. The facts are somehow different than that are indicated. The theory is not merely discussion for an empirical or psychological claiming but the tough situation of transcending an immature and egocentric concept of giving. According to Bellour, L. (2014) in his book "*Jacques Derrida Islam and the West*" argues that Derrida who considers Islam and Muslims as the prey of western especially United State oppression. He viewed that in West Islam is considered as an evil and a demon that must be cultivated from the west and explained that west considers the construction of its identity by excluding other. It is designated that conspiracy theorists and Western media are responsible for the fixing of Islam as a violent religion. Derrida put a stress to deconstruct the European intellectual construct of Islam so the major target of deconstruction is to destroy all identities and deconstruct all the stereotypes about Islam (pp. 89-96).

## Results and Discussions

### Textual Analysis

*The Sweetness of Tears* is a novel by Nafisa Haji that explores the complexities of identity, culture, and religion. It is a true implication of deconstruction of this negative treatment and negative attitude of America towards Muslims. An Intimate association between Americans and Muslims is being demonstrated in this study. Jo March (protagonist) belongs to an American non-Muslim family but she stepped towards positivity and goes beyond the boundaries to bind the ties together between both America and Muslim families. She comes to Pakistan, lives here to learn the national language of Pakistan (Urdu) and the culture and religion of Muslims. This research work is helpful in building the intimate association between Americans and Muslims which was not built up till now.

### Religious Stereotypes

Jo is a mouth piece of Nafisa Haji. Through her protagonist, Haji has illustrated the history of Islam, the reach of Christianity, the horrors of the war in Iraq, and several other pivotal issues like Christian missionaries and fundamentalists, the Sunni-Shia conflict, the status of women in Muslim society, the suffering of soldiers, the U.S. military's handling of Iraqi civilians, and enhanced interrogation tactics.

After the incident of 9/11, American military arrested Muslim people and beat them brutally. They investigated from those Muslims that from where they came and why? Jo's duty was only translation of those phrases which were said by those men who were questioned the following questions: "Ask him about his boss. Ask him if he's ever met Bin Laden." (Haji, 2011, p.150) "What's that he said?!" the interrogator interrupted. "Something about a madrassa?" "Yes. But that's just a word for 'School' ---he says he went to school." "Yeah! Fuckin' Jihad School is what it is! Ask him about that! Where the school was? Did they have guns there?" (Haji, 2011, p. 151)

Muslims have been treated brutally by the Americans. America always tried to impose a tag of terrorists on the Muslims. They beat the innocent Muslims people, kill them. America has drawn a line between us and them. Nafisa Haji has tried to break this line between us and them through her novel. This study is an effort to break all these stereotypes imposed by the west. American Muslim minority faces a social discrimination known as Islamophobia. Muslim minorities are seen through the sphere of "Otherness" in the United States. It is obvious that American Muslims face intense and hard provocations from institutional, social and economic discrimination. However Islamic Organizations have begun to fight these discriminations. Leadership of the community is responsible to spread the pure knowledge about Islam, to reach out the mainstream of the community in a try to fight the constant cycle of terror and detestation. There are clear methods that can support to lessen some of the detestation and misinterpretation of Islam. A medium for education on Islam can be provided by Islamic Organizations and outside participants to Islamic settlements and meetings can be invited to develop better relations with the external community. American narrative of Islam can also be created like the African-American story. However, the relationships that have built between Americans and Muslims cannot be fixed completely by these proposals, but these can benefit to increase the American's knowledge of Islam. Judgments and exploitations are more likely to be lessened by increasing the knowledge of Islam. The Westerns consider Islam as a construct that consists of all negative characteristics that opposes western culture, language, and values that is evident through different media portrayals of Islam.

One of the central themes of *The Sweetness of Tears* is the intersection of religion and identity. The novel presents a variety of religious stereotypes, particularly in the depiction of Muslim characters in the post-9/11 era. However, the novel challenges these stereotypes by allowing the characters to explore their religious identities in complex and nuanced ways. For example, when Tamara, a Muslim-American character, is asked if she is "one of those terrorists," she responds by pointing out that "there are seventy-two virgins in heaven, and none of them are named Tamara" (Haji, 2011, p. 27). This response deconstructs the stereotype that all Muslims are terrorists by highlighting the absurdity of such a generalization. Islam is treated as the 'Other' of democracy. The Derrida referred the term 'monotheisms' for the Islam, Judaism, and Christianity collectively that are Abrahamic revelations. There is a need to differentiate completely between Islam and Islamism that are quite distinct from each other yet is the reality that Islamism functions by using the name of Islam. Group of few people does not represent the western liberalism and true Islam. Muslim as well as people of West stood against terrorism. True Islam is, in reality, is a big supporter of all democratic form of government raises voices against injustice and dictatorship. According to Robert Inglehart and Pippa, Norris Muslims are more supportive towards democracy as compared to non-Muslims. They advocate that Islam is a vital part of democracy.

### **Cultural Stereotypes**

Nafisa Haji has depicted the impact of war on human beings in her novel. She has shown the war in Iraq in her novel and the after effects of war on the soldiers and human beings who saw this. Jo's grandfather was a warrior and her brother Chris also became a warrior. War affected their psychology and they were mentally lost. "You know, the truth is that war isn't complicated. It's about killing. Killing is the whole purpose of it, avoiding getting killed yourself and killing others in order to do that. Everything I'd seen and done came back with me" (2011, p. 109).

Nafisa Haji has depicted the destruction of war, destruction of minds and emotions and psyche of human beings. Chris went to Iraq for war. When he came back, he was

totally changed. He wasn't in his senses for many days. He loses his memory of past 5 years. Through this mental condition of Chris, Haji wanted to show that war is only destruction. It's only about killing people and killing one's emotions and feelings. Angela, Chris's mother explains his mental condition: "But now, after coming back from Iraq, the changes in Chris were more drastic than the ones in Jo" (Haji, 2011, p. 258). "When Chris signed up for Marines after 9/11, I saw how worried Jake was for his son. He knew the danger. I'd thought of my dad and worried too. About what a war does to a man" (Haji, 2011, p. 258).

Jo March observes the culture and diversity of cultures. She observed the *Shia Sunni* divisions and attended *majalis*. She went to mosques of the Pakistan and observed the rituals there. She also visited many places with his Pakistani family. She also observed fasts there. "I watched them hold their dates up to their mouths, whispering for a few seconds before taking their first bite. Very solemnly, they took sips of water. Then we ate in silence" (Haji, 2011, p. 208). "Like everything else I'd experienced in Karachi, it was an adventure, at midnight, like going to an old-fashioned drive in, the kind you see in old movies about life in America in 1950s" (Haji, 2011, p. 320). The writer observing the situation of the incident tried to reveal the real picture of the whole scenario as things are not always true that is considered as true and logical.

### Lingual Stereotypes

Jo comes to Pakistan, she learns Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. She also learns Arabic. She knows the culture, religion and language of Muslims of Pakistan. She discovers the truth that Islam is a peaceful religion and Muslims of the world are not terrorists.

Jo decided to leave the missions with her grandmother and started taking Urdu and Arabic language classes to learn these languages. She did it intentionally but then she fell in love with these languages. "That I signed up for an Arabic class and an Urdu one instead. I only dropped in to audit the classes at first. But I fell in love with the letters--- mostly the same alphabet for both languages. The curves and the dots, the unfamiliar sounds", (Haji, 2011, p. 79) "You've certainly chosen two very challenging languages to learn" (p. 81).

Jo's Urdu professor was a Christian American. He told Jo that she has chosen very challenging languages to learn. Nafisa Haji has tried to construct an intimate relation between both Americans and Muslims by showing that Jo's Urdu and Arabic professors are both Christian Americans. She also depicts that they are so native in their accents that if someone doesn't look at them one cannot know that they are Americans or English men. They speak Urdu fluently. Jo was not only learning Urdu and Arabic rather she was also becoming a native speaker of one of those languages. She ate Pakistani food which she never ate before. She goes to the Pakistani restaurants and conversates in Urdu there with Pakistani waiters. She orders spicy Pakistani food and demonstrates Chris that how good she is in eating spicy food and in speaking Urdu. "And talked him into trying Pakistani food, taking him to Masha Allah Restaurant on Devon Avenue" (Haji, 2011, p. 83). "Zahid the restaurant owner, who I'd gotten to know the past couple of years, seated us, handing us minus. I showed off my Urdu, asking him about his family, his mother and father in Karachi, his sister in New Jersey. Chris looked obligingly impressed" (p. 83).

Another interesting thing that Nafisa has shown in her novel to deconstruct the stereotypical treatment of Americans is that March's Urdu professor was not a Pakistani or Indian rather he was a white man, an American non-Muslim. "For Urdu there was just

one professor, a native of Minnesota, with a much milder, gentler personality than professor Crawley, Professor Dunnett---who was tall and thin-faced, with white soft hair. Some of the other students in his classes, Indian and Pakistani Americans trying to reconnect with their roots, said his (professor) accent was amazing. That if you listened to him with your eyes closed, you'd never know he was white" (Haji, 2011, p. 80).

The novel is the deep and stereotypical sensational story. The novel is the description of discrimination by the proper description of the characters that navigate by the complex and deep connection to the world in which we live in the present time and everyone is relating to it. *The Sweetness of Tears* explores lingual stereotypes, particularly the power dynamics that exist within language and the ways in which language is used to construct meaning. The novel presents a range of linguistic stereotypes, including the assumed superiority of English and the marginalization of other languages. However, these stereotypes are also challenged and deconstructed through the complexity of the characters and their experiences. For example, when Jo March reflects on her mother's experience of speaking English, she observes that "it was an act of will for her mother to speak English ... it was as though she had to shift her entire self, alter her bearing and outlook, to accommodate the language" (p. 417). This deconstructs the stereotype that English is the superior language by highlighting the negative impact of language barriers on non-native speakers.

Jo's mother Angela told her about her biological father Sadiq on her insistence. Jo met her biological father, who was a Muslim Pakistani man, Sadiq. Sadiq told his story to Jo: his family background, relatives, religious and how he met her (jo) mother Angela. While he was telling the story, Jo was writing all the words she didn't hear before from Urdu language. She wrote all the words and names of his family members. Maybe she has decided to see them. "I wrote down all the words I could remember, the foreign ones from his story, adding them to the lines of words in my special notebook under a new heading: Urdu" (Haji, 2011, p. 68).

*Ameemother*            *Nohareligious sad song*

*Dadigrandmother*    *Chacha*    Uncle

*Dada*    grandfather        *Dupatta*    Scarf

*Zakirapreacher*        *Rickshaw*    motor tricycle

## Conclusion

The author, through the character of Jo, has tried to reveal the concept given by Derrida that war is not the solution of everything but the peace, hospitality and forgiveness can turn the situations into something positive and pleasant. The deconstruction of the stereotypes of religion, culture and language discrimination is the way of establishing the balanced environment among two nations. If our society becomes free of what is superior and what is inferior, the results will be better and problems can be solved with any sort of bloodshed as everything appearing on the screen is not always as is presented. The novel in actual tries to depict the worse situation of the fact that influence Muslim community, make them think as inferior but the factual situation is very different. The terrorist activities containing their own whole background, and this was made in the depiction that the activities that supposed to be associated with Muslims is in actual containing the story of international politics and need serious consideration. Reduction in the level of hatred and decreasing some misunderstanding leads to a healthy relationship whereas to dislike



the culture of other could be a major reason of contention. Cultural dialogue can be improved by studying and observing the culture of others. To be in touch with others' cultures, a perfect way is of decreasing fear and hatred and ascending the trust.

In conclusion, this deconstructive analysis of *The Sweetness of Tears* has identified how the novel challenges and deconstructs religious, cultural, and linguistic stereotypes. Through the complexity of its characters and their experiences with identity, culture, and religion, the novel exposes the unstable and arbitrary nature of these stereotypes. The novel thus contributes to a broader conversation about representation, identity, and power. An approach to reading the novel through a deconstructive lens not only challenges the reader to break away from the stereotypes but also highlights the importance of careful analysis of the text. As such, this study is an example of how a thoughtful engagement with literature can yield valuable insights into the complexities of human experience.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the deconstructive analysis of *The Sweetness of Tears* by Nafisa Haji, the following recommendations can be made for further study:

- Expand the scope of the analysis to examine how the novel challenges and deconstructs other forms of stereotyping, such as racial or class stereotypes.
- Further explore the relationship between language and power in the novel and how it intersects with the deconstruction of stereotypes.
- Conduct a comparative analysis of *The Sweetness of Tears* with other literary works that address similar themes of identity, culture, religion, and power, to gain a broader understanding of the ways in which these themes are explored in literature.

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