Scatology and the Aesthetics of Vulgarity in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*

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الملخص:

هذا المقال يتناول الطرق التي يستخدم فيها آرما هذا الكاتب الغاني الجمال كآلية في الشاعرية الثقافية الخاصة بأدبه.

الهوية الثقافية بالنسبة للكاتب هي تعبير جمالي تشمل ليس فقط الأشخاص، بل حتى بعض العادات والتقاليد. غياب الجمال هو انعكاس للانتشار الواسع للكلام السوقي، هذه الصورة الجمالية المعكرة لا يمكن أن تكون منعزلة عن غياب رؤية واضحة للمجتمع وحالة الإحباط السائدة فيه. هذا المقال يدرس هذه الصور البرازية في الرواية واستعمالها كأجهزة مزعجة للإفاضة في الخيارات الأخلاقية للمجتمع الغاني ودرجة التحلل الأخلاقي فيه.

Abstract:

This article considers the ways in which the Ghanaian writer, Ayi Kwei Armah (1939-present), engages in his fiction with beauty and the significance of that engagement in the cultural poetics of present day African literature. Indeed, identity seems to be regarded by the writer initially as a form of beauty encompassing not only individuals but also certain mores and customs. The absence of beauty translates the massive spread of the vulgar in terms of verbal and moral choices on the part of the population. Such a murky situation cannot be disjointed from the conspicuous lack of vision and the frustrations resulting from that lack. This article argues that the displayed scatological images in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) are principally disturbing devices deployed by the author to indicate how moral choices come to be under threat. The myth of ugly and nefarious Africa is there with the objective of assisting people to undo the effects of reification sparkled by false beauty or the gleam. This gleam puts moral choices under monumental pressure, but the tension is resolved near the end of the novel where the gleam bad smells and nasty looks. In the end, Armah manages to create a myth of

clean and moral Africa, which given the experience of the coup, many people embrace and consciously identify with.

Keywords: Scatology, Aesthetics, Beauty, Africa, Post independence

Introduction:

The choice of Armah's first novel for the illustration of Armah's aesthetic formula is meant to underline his early but succinct preoccupation with beauty as both a concept and device. Focus here is on *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) even though *Fragments* (1970) or *Osiris Rising* (1995) are no less useful and relevant for the point expanded below in this article. Beauty, to start with, is a concept that carries the writer's collection of ideas and thoughts regarding Africa's regeneration. Pushed to extremes, that collection of ideas and thoughts amounts to the understanding that in the absence of the beautiful ones, only ghosts roam Africa. This present is actually processed by the writer as an arid desert where the excreta, putrefaction and ugliness reveal a world order that spells political corruption and lack of active civic engagement on the part of the population. All through this first novel we read about the man's (so comes the name of the principal character) deep distrust in any widely publicized ideal because given his circumstances, it seems that there is no ideal worth looking for. Armah's aesthetics of the renaissance he projects *inter alia* is examined in terms of beauty and the sublime. In this novel, there are only images of excrements and bad smells, indicating not only a bleak worldview but a certain deadening metaphysics. A particularly perceptive critic of Armah, Joshua D. Esty, has seen the point behind Armah's images of excreta and waste.

> In Armah's novel—as in other post colonial texts—excrement assumes a variety of figurative guises and narrative functions: shit acts as a material sign of underdevelopment; as a symbol of excessive consumption; as an image of wasted political energies; and as the mark of the comprador's residual, alien status. (Esty, Spring 1999)

Esty follows his remarks by claiming that in *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born***,** Armah reveals an unusual fascination with all that is related to death and disintegration. Corrupt political choices in the early independence period are the causes that explain this kind of fascination by the writer. And this portrayal uncovers Armah's way of discrediting comprador nationalism which, according to him, ruins the country and shatters rosy hopes which came with the dawn of independence. Indeed, the same fascination reveals more ethical and existential concerns of the writer that go hand in hand with the political framework under which Ghana was run at the time. For Armah, the absence of beauty cannot be separated from the absence of a political vision that is capable of bringing forward hope to the general populace.

Armah's Pressing Vision of Aesthetics:

In this direction, one has to observe that Armah is not as iconoclastic as some of his critics have observed. The German art theorist, Theodore Adorno, has keenly noted art's need "to make use of the ugly in order to denounce the world which creates and recreates ugliness in its own image." (Adorno, 1984). Indeed, in his way of stressing his alarms over the absence of beauty and the consequences related to this absence, Armah translates this very understanding artistically, and this translates to the symbolic dimensions of *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Tsegaye Wodajo has noted the deployment of corruption as an icon, that is, as part of the novelist's

design of stating his ideas. However, Wodajo has neither traced nor carried out an analysis relating his symbols to his overall project. In the novel, Wodajo's analysis of corruption as a symbol does not go beyond stating "Armah's exposure" to "Ghana's social and political ills from the lowest to the highest level." (Wodajo, 2004). In fact, the concern of this article is to see how corruption as an emblem is actually deployed by the novelist as part of his strategy of outlining a certain aesthetic that fits in with his definition of the African world view and metaphysics[1].

As the chapters of *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born* follow one another, the narrative starts to operate less figuratively and more literally. The story first starts with the famous bus scene in which the conductor embezzles money from the tickets he sells. The sleeping protagonist, the man, or the watcher as the conductor calls him, assumes the position of a god since he is the only one who eyes the conductor's misconduct.

> The watcher only continued to stare. He did not need to hurl any accusations. In the conductor's mind everything was already too loudly and too completely said.
> 'I have seen you. You have been seen. We have seen all.'
> It was not the voice of the watcher. It could not be the voice of any human being the conductor knew. It was a large voice rolling down and everywhere covering empty spaces in the mind and really never stopping anywhere at all. (*The Beautyful Ones*, 4).

In italics that may stand as an excerpt from some ancient scripture, the narrator reads: "*And so words and phrases so often thrown away as jokes reveal their true meaning. And Jesus wept. Aha, Jesus*

[1] -According to Wodajo, in helping Joe Koomson escape the country, the man "seems to have become a participant in the evil acts of corruption he has so despised in others." I think that Wodajo here simply overlooks the protagonist's choice to help Koomson escape. Tsegaye Wodajo, 68.

wept." (*The Beautyful Ones*, 4). Armah implies that his protagonist has been there and has been a witness to all moral perversions and misconducts. In other words, like a god, the man has seen it all! If only figuratively, this watcher acting god seems to be the one who appropriates justice in his hands. The same narrator reacts with his response, 'spittle' that is the body vermin that goes with the moral one just taking place: "…a stream of the man's spittle. Oozing freely, the oil like liquid first entangled itself in the fingers of the watcher's left hand…" (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.5) The way the narration is devised leaves the reader with little doubt as to the unethicality of the whole drama going on outside. In case Jesus wept for some committed wrongdoing, as the interjection in italics claims, "…the conductor [quite astonishingly] did not weep." (*The Beautyful Ones*, 4). The bottom line from this scene is that because the man in the story is delineated as a god in a godless universe, his only means of calling for justice is to reflect that injustice and consider the stealing of resources of the nation as a filthy enterprise. This first scene in particular is premonitory through the fact that it announces the shape of the morality/immorality in independent Ghana throughout the novel. The man (the principal character) typifies any man, representing the helpless population standing in judgment over ruthless public servants. Armah's imitation of the scriptures is effected with the purpose of heightening the sense of urgency, as the displayed absence of morals highlights the gravity of the African condition after independence.

In moving from the literal to the symbolic levels of the novel, the conductor can be approximated as the cabinet minister

Koomson, while the driver seems to be paralleled with President Nkrumah. And again the man is like a God (or Jesus) who keeps faithful with his first symbol as a god who forgives and handles justice on his own terms. He (the man), after *the coup* helps the 'fugitive minister' to hide and escape to safety in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. True, the ex-minister has cheated him and deceived his wife and mother-in-law in the shipping project which they were supposed to procure the necessary funds from the bank by using his influence as a senior public officer. Nevertheless, the man finds no reason why he should not save that corrupt minister from the jaws of no less myopic new leaders. The man seems to reason that since the fate of Ghana is to exchange hands between old embezzlers and new ones, why should he hand over Koomson in a game of revenge? "But for the nation itself there would only be a change of embezzlers and a change of the hunters and the hunted." (*The Beautyful Ones*, 162). To help Koomson find his way to Abidjan does not mean he is, after all, forgiven and his nasty treatment simply overlooked. Faithful to his god imagery, Armah here, as in the entire final scenes, leaves no doubt that Koomson, very much like his driver or the former Ghanaian premier, Nkrumah, have to be spared until the day when the beautiful ones are born and justice can be eventually executed. On his way back home after putting Koomson on a boat bound for exile, the man witnesses a scene that reconfirms his distrust in the regime that has recently seized power. A bus driver handing his license folder to a policeman has slid cedi notes in it. And again the man reclaims his god-like stature, for "The driver must have seen the silent watcher by the roadside, for, as the bus started up the road and

out of the town, he smiled and waved to the man." (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.183). The man, the reader understands, is left to conclude that the filth the first rulers have caused and the stench they brought cannot possibly be cleaned, and justice established, by a new military regime which is as corrupt as the previous one, if not more.

Soon after the conductor is through with the man, the driver clears his throat and aims his blob that contains a hoarse growl at the man with the stomach to repeat the same action again. The spittle of the conductor itself connotes filth. Beside the fact of indicating that this driver has no respect or esteem for ordinary people walking down the street, the same behavior illustrates that the driver and conductor are both complicit in the nasty game. Meanwhile, such metaphor permeates power functioning in the newly independent Ghana. Elevated to the driving position, the driver uses a privilege that recalls that of a head of state presiding over the people in order to humiliate them, not to serve them. Both transgressions—embezzling state money and spitting on common people–are deliberate actions of will instead of accidental coincidences. Indeed, it is in the symbolic bearings of the drama of driver-conductor that the reader is encouraged to see the parallel to Koomson-Nkrumah and fully explore it in the rest of the novel. Switching from seemingly trivial and inconsequential little filthiness, that of the driver and his conductor, to wider taints and slovenliness, like that of the president and his cabinet ministers, is Armah's way of recording the implications issuing from the lack of beauty in independent

Ghana. Such a way is found by one critic to be overwhelmingly mythical[1], which further supports the point introduced here.

Descent into the Inferno of Ugliness:

Reflecting on the direct or literal reasons behind Armah's stand *vis-à-vis* fictional Koomson as a senior officer, one could find Armah quite eccentric, as many of his harsh critics often see him. But it is only in investigating the rationale of his symbolic and mythic framework in this novel and the way it is channeled to feed into beautiful, egalitarian and serious visions of Africa that we might be ready to acknowledge his efforts and place them in their exact historical situation. Socialism and African nationalism, from Armah's viewpoint, are promises not kept, and Africans reaped only the gleam instead of actual beauty.

> Having the whiteness of the stolen bungalows and the shine of the stolen cars flowing past him, he could think of reasons, of the probability that without the belittling power of things like these we would all continue to sit underneath old trees and weave palm wine dreams of beauty and happiness in our amazed heads. And so the gleam of all this property would have the power to make us work harder, would come between ourselves and our desires for rest, so that through wanting the things our own souls crave we would end up moving a whole people forward. At such times the man was ready to embrace envy itself as a force, a terrible force out of which something good might be born, and he could see around close corners in the labyrinth of his mind, new lives for Oyo; for the children with their averted eyes; for himself also. Then in the morning the thick words staring stupidly out from the newspapers, about hard work and honesty and integrity, words written by men caring nothing at all

[1] -The critic is Ben Obumselu and he writes that: "*The Beautyful Ones* is best read as myth. Its treatment of the corruption of power, of the contradictions inherent in the idea of benevolent autocrat of the oppression of social and political experience, as patterns which repeat themselves suggests that the operative imaginative form is that of myth." Ben Obumselu, "Marx, Politics and the African Novel" *Twentieth Century Studies*, 10 Dec., 1973, 112

> about what they wrote, all this would come to mean something.
> But then in the office it is hard work not to see that even this little peace of mind is an illusion. Hard work. As if any amount of hard work could ever at this rate bring the self and the loved ones closer to the gleam. How much hard work before a month's pay would last till the end of the month? (*The Beautyful Ones*, 94-5).

The gleam, as this excerpt clearly adds, functions as a deceptive mirage for the amazed wonderers in search for the promised wealth. Armah's idea here is that no matter how hard one tries to work, there is something in the logic of the gleam that does not end up in satisfaction. Stolen wealth justifies itself in newspapers by preaching demagogical slogans like 'hard work' and 'keep your city clean'. Meanwhile, the man survives only from payslip to payslip. No amount of saving and planning can help the man satisfy the basic needs of his loved ones, Oyo and the children. Yet it is these loved ones that are mostly driven by the misguided slogan of the "gleam". Indeed, and as he acknowledges to Teacher, the man is horrified at the loved ones' inability to understand this 'trick' of the gleam. He makes it clear "I cannot sit and watch Oyo and her mother getting fooled by this Koomson." (*The Beautyful Ones*, 57). When he faces both Oyo and his mother-in-law with the fact that Koomson is actually a thief and as corrupt as hell, he finds that no one is ready to listen to him. Oyo starts explaining her philosophy of justification: "…long roads and short roads…"(*The Beautyful Ones*, 58), whereas her mother simply stops listening to him and leaves.

Koomson's gleam, when considered in its mythical proportions, seriously threatens the man's value of honesty and moral integrity. The man's immediate family sees him essentially as an incorrigible failure. Still Armah's focus is not on the subject, that is, the

man's agony, but on the object which is the gleam and the absence of real and lasting beauty. Koomson, by contrast, is looked at by the man's loved ones as some prophet of a mythical *EL Dorado* profiting from the chances open before him as a cabinet minister. As a result of such a reversed worldview, home stops being the comforting home that the man used to seek after work. Emotionally, he is separated from his wife by an ocean of contrary aspirations and identifications albeit they live in the same house. Loneliness and domestic insults take the better of his manhood. On the day he takes his children to their grandmother, the old woman greets him with wailings and a warning addressed to his own son: "not grow up to be a useless nobody [like the man, his father], that he would be a big man when he grew up." (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.124) The scene where Oyo's mother warns her grandchildren against adopting their father's ethos comes after her successive disappointments in his restrained attitude. If the man's moral choices have only resulted in destitution and distress, then for Oyo and her mother, it is a better choice to trade ethical standards for the spoils of the 'national game'. If the man's own boy is pushed not to embrace his father's ethical choices and moral values, then certainly Armah has captured the very essence of the modern identity crisis in postcolonial Africa. The gleam, which is again, only a shortcut of a stolen beauty, is a symbol of bastardization, a severe identity crisis. The gleam, thus, serves to justify inauthentic and non-democratic political choices[1].

[1]- In reference to the power to the captivating radiance of the gleam in Armah's *The Beautyful*, one has to take in consideration de Gruchy's observations that "…art in its endeavor to help us see differently, is often iconoclastic, reacting against images and symbols associated with de-humanising ideologies and powers." John W. de Gruchy, "Holy Beauty: A Reformed perspective on Aesthetics within a World of Unjust Ugliness." http://livedtheology.org/pdfs/deGruchy.pdf, 7. One such reflective image in the novel is

Ironically and exactly as Teacher predicts, only time shows them how naïve Oyo and her mother were in expecting the minister's loyalty by being his partners in fraud. Koomson finally deceives them into signing the application forms, gets the bank loan and buys athe fishing boat for himself. He christens the boat PRINCESS, in honour of his own daughter, which is his way of stamping his footprint of selfishness and mockery on the boat. What adds insult to injury is that they are sent the crumbs of the fraud, some baskets of fish from the boat that was supposed to be theirs in the first place. In the end then, Oyo and her mother get the truth about Koomson. The fact is that he is none but a callous cheater, someone whom the man has been alerting them against for years. But it is not until the *coup* occurs that the man regains his wife's trust and true esteem. That day and while the man is on duty at work, Koomson comes to hide at Oyo's. Only that day does Oyo start feeling "…a deep kind of love, a great respect" for the man, her former *chichi dodo* husband. Caught by the sway of his former gleam, Oyo could not think of Koomson's exact identity until the day when she has been able to contrast his former lavish life with the bad smell and "the corrosive gas, already half liquid" that "had filled the whole room, irritating not only the nostrils, but also the inside, of eyes, ears, mouth, throat." (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.161) Later, the narrator adds that whenever Koomson speaks, his mouth "…had the rich stench of rotten menstrual blood. The man held his breath until the new smell had gone

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the gleam which derives its force from borrowed time from the future. Since no matter how hard you work no one can possibly amass such wealth, brilliance and glamour and stay at the same time morally and ethically clean.

down in the mixture with the liquid atmosphere of the Party man's farts filling the room." (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.163)

Radiating Beauty Pervails as Everyone Eventually Gets What He or She Deserves:

In portraying Koomson's fall as self-suppressive and annihilative, Armah casts the whole final episode of the minister's career a grotesque dimension. His purpose, however, is matching Oyo's need for self-apprehension. Intentionally, Armah credits Oyo with examining the circumstances arising from her ex-'brother Joe's' abject and humiliating fall. Her early confusion and shock were a necessary and helpful means of reconciliation with her husband, and by extension, with his ideals of moral beauty, not just the shining gleam. Similarly, the same shock is indispensable for her to realize that the foul smell which the minister causes inside her own bedroom have been the insides of his gleam, derision and stolen glamour. Still she has learnt that these demeaning characteristics have been essentially there with Koomson all his life. Seen in its true light, the *coup* frees Oyo's sense of beauty from what de Gruchy calls "…the tyranny of superficial and facile images of the beautiful [to the extent that she] can begin to understand the beauty of God and its redemptive power amidst the harsh reality of the world." (DeGrucy, 2003) In other words, witnessing the irony of fate in Koomson has shattered Oyo's sense of a disrupted orientation towards the gleam, and finally rectifies her own definition of beauty and self. The result is that she renews her trust in the man's ethical choices and embraces his moral cleanliness as her own.

What Oyo learns that day is by no means simple. In fact, her realization of her husband's true worth strikes a very special chord on the entire bearing of Armah's objective in the novel. True, corruption wins

the day since the *coup* ushers in just other embezzlers, but for the man, at least, home has been regained as home in the spiritual sense once more. Oyo's commentary: "How he smells!", in reference to Koomson, sums up the beautiful transformation in her. She soon adds: "I am glad you never became like him." (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.177) The narrator notes the change with this comment: "In Oyo's eyes there was now real gratitude. Perhaps for the first time in their married life the man could believe that she was glad to have him the way he was." (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.165) In order to appreciate this change, one has to contrast this dénouement with her former disappointments in the man's moral choices.

As it happens, Oyo's ultimate identification with the man's moral choices can be traced in the novel as some switching in her symbolic conception of Koomson. The image of the Minister, as it constantly crosses her mind, used to offer her the promise of the gleam. His fat, perfumed and soft body had long hurt her, as long as she used to contrast that wealth with her humble condition. When the Koomsons visit them for talks about the boat deal, she feels hurt for not wearing the same diamond ring as the one worn by Estella (Koomson's wife). The goods and the furniture she wondered about in the Koomsons' reception room had a bewitching power over her composure, values and moral choices. That gleam nourishes a set of standards amounting to a fantastic world where she cannot accept less than those standards. In embracing those standards, Oyo had presupposed that there would be no shadow cast on that gleam. Indeed, it is the boundaries between the real and the unreal that have been erased. To have her long-roads-and-short-roads litany while her mother openly insults the man for his ethical values

meant the end of all things beautiful. Without the lessons of the *coup*, the world would have kept the man in a marginalized position. The *coup* in Armah's dramatic design restores some equilibrium in the world and reveals to anyone that there are cosmic laws that preserve beauty by giving the world some sense of order.

With the coming of the *coup*, it is not Oyo that hankers after the gleam. On the contrary, it is the gleam, or fake beauty, that seeks refuge in her bed room. This time the gleam comes to her naked, revealing its true identity: fright and ghastly smell! Because down at the bottom, the gleam turns out to be what the man has always rejected the slightest involvement with: public theft and stealing by means of employment. Since her husband gives up his own meal to feed the hungry Koomson, Oyo finally but also ironically experiences the gleam's true story by herself. In the image of the man passing his meal over to Koomson, this latter stands faithful to the man's former portrayal of him about 'public theft', that is Koomson as 'a taker', 'consumer of what there is' and never a producer or originator. This, indeed, opens her eyes to some truth and deepens her trust in her husband's assessments and moral choices. Only this time Oyo is able to process the features of the gleam logically and in context. Instead of comparing Koomson's glamour with the meager conditions of her husband, Oyo compares the same past glamour with the source of the poisoned air deep in the darkness inside her bedroom. She is finally able to discover the seamy side of that glamour. Because in the end, that gleam is sown to be the identical twin of this poisoned air which she cannot smell, and this dénouement indicates that Oyo has sensed the immorality of the enterprise through the fact that she has been swindled by her "benefactor".

Conclusion:

One indeed ought not to diminish Oyo's transformation and the circumstances leading towards that transformation. A cursory look reveals that the melodramatic developments of the story stress the positive shift which has taken place and which has not been simple or possible without some compelling and inspiring qualities of the man.[1] The man is indeed idealised as an individual without ill feelings, and bearing a grudge against those who were unfair to him. What matters for him is that order is restored. The beauty in that family's renewed harmony at the end of the novel reveals the overall beautiful picture of people reunited. The reader is offered two final scenes actually. On the one hand there is the man's restored harmony in his household and, on the other hand, Koomson's shattered equilibrium in consequence of his immoral actions.

Oyo's reconciliation with the man is but a tiny glimpse of hope that Armah offers near the end of his otherwise mostly criticized book. The glimpse comes in the form of hope. For the glimpse is indicative of the chasm still to be bridged between the rulers and the ruled, as well as between self and the other or beauty and excrement[2].

[1]-In a very interesting paper, Richard Priebe finds: "… the novel [*The Beautyful Ones*] is a powerful and eloquent thematic elaboration and exploration of the man's role as priest and the attendant paradox of being part of, yet separate from, the structure of society." Richard Priebe, "Demonic Imagery and the Apocalyptic Vision in the Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah", *Yale French Studies*, N° 53 (1976), 111

[2]- Joshua D. Etsy, in the above mentioned article, "Excremental Postcolonialism", offers an interesting observation. If corruption ends up with Koomson no better than the excrement his body gets rid of (think of the time he was hiding in Oyo's bedroom and the foul smell he lets go of), then that excrement is the product of the self. Esty claims that "Shit, operating as the preeminent figure of self-alienation (the matter that is both self and not-self), becomes a symbolic medium for questioning the place of the autonomous individual in new postcolonial societies." 36-37. In other words, to what extent one is involved within the cycle of beauty-excrement seems very relative and a matter of little clarity. That is why, it seems, the man unquestionably and without second thoughts decides to help Koomson escape. The metaphor of shit as both self and not-self works its effects on the man and shapes his ethical choice not to leave Koomson to the Soldiers' jaws.

The man expresses this case quite rhetorically when implying that the coup is simply a façade betraying only a change of the hunters and the hunted. (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.173) And as the drama unfolds, between the first bus scene and the second one, which significantly marks both the beginning and the end of the novel, Africa lives inside its morass of corruption and stench. Such a structuring of the novel justly captures the spirit of Armah's understanding of African politics. When one refers only to Ghana's record of military *coups*, history has not proved him wrong. In the final analysis, Africa's case looks very much like the mad woman the man met by the sea when back from Koomson's rescue: "It [the woman] was not young, and it looked like something that had been finally destroyed a long time back. And yet he found it beautiful when he looked at it." Though destroyed and ripped in her nerves, Africa is still resourceful in beauty. Expecting her to articulate some understandable statement, she only cries: "They have mixed all together! Everything! They have mixed everything. And how can I find it [the crazy woman] when they have mixed it all with so many other things?" (*The Beautyful Ones*, p.180) Perhaps the mad woman is metaphorically like Oyo, she is confused over which scale of values to take and which ones to refuse. As in Oyo, the gleam has made it difficult for her to decide and distinguish the truly beautiful from the fake.

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