



**THE DISCOURSE OF POWER/KNOWLEDGE AND THE  
COLONIZED OTHERS: READING V.S. NAIPAUL'S  
*A HOUSE FOR MR. BISWAS***

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**ABSTRACT**

*V. S. Naipaul gained world-wide recognition with the publication of his masterpiece A House for Mr. Biswas which marked the major phase of his fiction. This paper is an attempt to analyse the novel from Michel Foucault's theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse. In A House for Mr. Biswas, Naipaul attempts a subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial situation in Trinidad through his fine imagination and sensibility. Despite the marriage of the protagonist, Mr. Biswas, into the Tulsi family, he remains an outsider, a victim of power relations but he does not submit and remains grand in his stature in different contexts and situations in the novel whenever he takes a solitary stand against the mechanical, stereotyped and obsolete Tulsi ideologies which further signify Foucault's notion that power relations are dispersed in a society in a net like organization and a society without power relations can only be an abstraction. The threads of power relations extend everywhere as our social fabric is knitted by power relations.*

*Key Words: Colonial Situation, Power, Knowledge, Discourse.*

*A House for Mr. Biswas* (1961) is a celebrated and prominent novel by V.S. Naipaul which has gained world-wide recognition and is generally acclaimed as the superb creation of Naipaul's brilliant literary career. If we have a close look at Naipaul's photograph, his face reflects all those layers of personality as a writer, he is so well-known for: a face reflecting a mixture of tenderness and cynicism of a man deeply concerned with the human condition, but one who is harsh and sceptical about all kinds of popular cures and panaceas which hold out promise. It was with *A House for Mr. Biswas* that Naipaul started his major phase of fiction with which he also achieved an assured place among the great novelists of the twentieth century. This novel marks a turning point in his literary career since it was in *A House for Mr.*



*Biswas* that Naipaul showed his traits as a writer; his obsession with failure, exile, alienation, the quest for identity and his later scathing attacks on underprivileged and vulnerable societies. Memory, autobiography and imagination here created an epic novel which truly exposed the complexities and imponderables of the mixed cultural and racial existence in Trinidad.

The present paper is an attempt to scrutinize and understand the relevance of Foucauldian concept of Power/Knowledge Discourse in the context of V.S. Naipaul's novel *A House for Mr. Biswas*, but before analyzing the novel from the Foucauldian perspective, it will be very significant to know the comments of prominent critics on this renowned and illustrious colonial text. *A House for Mr. Biswas* has been hailed as Naipaul's major achievement as a work of art, and as a statement on the human condition in a rootless and underprivileged context. Almost every critic has commented upon it. The basic reason for its appeal lay in its warm and humane concern with sensitive issues such as poverty, alienation, the search for identity and human relationships. Francis Wyndham remarks, "*A House for Mr. Biswas* is as subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial situation as anything in imaginative literature" (Wyndham 223). Landeg White contends, "*A House for Mr. Biswas* is one of the most extended treatments on the parallel significance of Naipaul's art and life" (White 42). Helen Hayward remarks, "*A House for Mr. Biswas* is a great novel as it explores and conveys the fine and subtle growth of a literary sensibility coming into confrontation with the harsh and materialistic world" (Hayward 69). The writer himself says, "Of all my books, this is the one that is closest to me. It is the most personal, created out of what I saw and felt as a child" (Naipaul 22). The novel attains the stature of a great multidimensional work, because Naipaul most brilliantly fused the several threads of his comic-satiric technique with a new seriousness of purpose, a much wider scope in his handling of the various themes, and a new emotional sympathy for those in search of balance, together with a will to humanize Mr. Biswas's context.

*A House for Mr. Biswas* portrays the colonial situation in Trinidad around the time of World War II. The colonial set-up has been analyzed quite comprehensively. Mr. Biswas, the protagonist has been set against the conventional and customary conservative Hindu ideas, traditions and ideology. He is completely isolated in a crowd and is the lone fighter against the powerful conservative system filled with rotten myths, customs and rituals. The inherent power of these narrow ideas of the Hindu community has been instrumental for inciting the spirit of rebellion in Mr. Biswas, the man who stands alone against these dominant forces of dogmatism and mechanical habits. This happens so because he wants to liberate himself from the power structure of cruel, narrow customs and rituals of the so-called Brahmin socio-cultural system and tries to establish his own identity in a fast changing multiethnic society.



Mr. Biswas has progressive ideas in contrast to sterile, outdated customs and conventions in the colonial Hindu society of Trinidad, and he refuses to submit to the outdated, inhuman system. He has a clear thinking about the defective system of Hindu society. In order to go on with the crusade against the unreasonable thinking of rotten colonial Hindu society, V.S. Naipaul weaves such a plot in the novel that Mr. Biswas is married to Shama, a gullible, semi-educated, immature daughter of the Tulsis. The Tulsis represent the then existent, narrow, irrelevant, unreasonable, dogmatic beliefs, customs and rituals of Trinidad Hindu colonial society who also belong to the powerful landed aristocracy in colonial Trinidad. Mr. Biswas, being married to an unintelligent girl of such a community, is to undergo a lot of suffering and repression as there are so many cultural clashes and social conflicts. This is so because he belongs to a labourers' class which is powerless enough to show any resistance against the powerful and dominant ideology. That is why the shabby treatment meted out to Mr. Biswas from his in-laws due to his inconvenient circumstances of poverty and compulsion brings a lot of torture and agony to him. His suffering is that of a penniless individual struggling to possess a minimum basic necessity in the form of a house or a place of his own. As such, Naipaul explores the struggle of a working class individual to have his own house at least before his death. "Knowingly or unknowingly, whether Naipaul is writing a travelogue or novel, he tends to trace a self conscious sympathetic response to the need to discover an appropriate literary form to frame a psychic and symbolic sense of homelessness" (Ball 90).

Mr. Biswas was not naturally rebellious. Rebellion was rather thrust upon him by the predominant forces of rituals, myths and customs and his rebellion is significantly crucial in the plot of the novel. At first he was destined to be a Pundit which he could not become because he rejected the rituals, customs and false notions when he was learning the skills from Pundit Jairam in his childhood. The reflection of Foucauldian conception of discourse is apparent because discourses are those sets of sanctioned statements which have profound influence upon others and in this novel we see that from the time of Biswas's birth, he was thought to be "inauspicious" for the family because he had "an unlucky sneeze", "a sixth finger" and "good but wide teeth" (16). Since the boy was born with inauspicious signs, the father was not to see him in the flesh for twenty one days. Pundit Sitaram predicted not only these things; he also warned that the boy should have been kept away from trees and water. It is evident that the religious discourse of Pandit Sitaram was so powerful and influential that no one in the household dared to challenge his words. The family members did not even try to think that this prediction can be false, rather they are so much under the influence of the religious discourse of the Pandit that they regarded his words as truth. By the cruel design of destiny it so happened that Raghu, Mr. Biswas's father died when he was diving in a pond in searching of a lost calf.



Thus, after being a great failure to be a Pundit, he returned home to his mother at Tara's house. He resumed his studies with Lal, the teacher and went on to learn sign-painting. He was also engaged with Bhandat's rum shop where he was severely beaten and returned to his mother at "Pagotes". Now the fatherless child met Ramchand, Dehuti's husband on the way who helped him and Mr. Biswas went to Hanuman House where he was engaged in sign-painting at Tulsi's store and fell in love with Shama, the youngest daughter of the Tulsis. The Tulsis were famous among the Hindus as a "Pious, conservative, landowning family" (81). Hanuman House, the imposing home of the Tulsis represented all these conservative, outdated, dogmatic beliefs and customs. The weakness of Mr. Biswas for Shama was an opportunity for the clever Mrs. Tulsi and Seth to trap him to include as a member of the Tulsi family. "Mr. Biswas entered the world of Tulsis unaware that his romantic ego would be crushed by a hierarchical order that did not allow for the expression of the individuality" (Cudjoe 54) To Mr. Biswas it seemed that "the world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped" (91). In this context of the novel, Foucault's views are significant that where there is imbalance of power, one person will surely try to dominate the other. Mrs. Tulsi and Seth were so much powerful socially and economically that they were successful in trapping Mr. Biswas into marriage with Shama, with "no house, no money, no dowry" (96) Mr. Biswas's Brahmin caste suits the Tulsi needs, and that is why he is quickly bullied into marriage with one of the daughters and joins the Tulsi circus at Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas had thought of being helped by the Tulsis but it was not the case. "Mr. Biswas had no money or passion. He was expected to become a Tulsi... At once he rebelled" (97). Biswas was expected to live in the Tulsi House just like his other brothers-in-law who were married to other Tulsi daughters, namely Chinta and Sushila. "In the powerful Tulsi household, men were needed for two reasons – husbands for Tulsi's daughters as well as labourers for Tulsi's estate" (Prasad 5). Biswas immediately feels trapped into the powerful and oppressive clutches of Tulsidom. He finds himself in situations that made him feel powerless. He never has any personal power and realizes that with money and possession, a person tends to have more power in society

Naipaul depicts Hanuman House as an alternate slave society where Mrs. Tulsi and her brother-in-law Seth were at the top in the scale of power structure and they need workers to boost their sinking influence of economy. They exploit the homelessness and poverty of men like Biswas and others by exercising their power on them which shows that in this situation power functions from top to down. The acceptance of Hanuman House and its dubious claim is equal to the submission to slavery. By inference, Naipaul tries to portray that subjugation is not something peculiar to the West, or to the Whites. He satirizes the Indians' insistence on carrying out their old caste system within themselves while they resent white colonialism. Naipaul's protagonist is powerless and alienated from the Hindu community in Trinidad, and is fighting out a personal battle for freedom and recognition. Mr. Biswas is aware in an undefined way that by becoming a part of the Tulsi household, he had sacrificed his life and





future. “The entry of Mr. Biswas into the power structure of Tulsi household creates a disturbance because his ideas are different. He had spent his childhood in an environment more liberal than the one which prevailed at Hanuman House” (Iyer 22). The entry of Biswas into the Tulsi family causes a turmoil because his ideas are different and since it challenges their code of normative behaviour. Gordon Rohlehr rightly remarks:

Hanuman House reveals itself not as a coherent reconstruction of the clan, but a slave society, erected by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth who need workers to help rebuild their tottering empire. They therefore exploit the homelessness and poverty of their fellow Hindus and reconstruct a mockery of the clan which functions only because they have so completely grasped the psychology of a slave system

(Rohlehr 87).

In fact, Hanuman House is just like a Panoptic tower where Mrs. Tulsi and Seth are the constant watchers. Just as in a panoptic tower, if the inmates are convicts, they cannot make any evil plans because there is a system of surveillance which is interiorized by the overseer. In the same way, constant surveillance and assessment of the individuals are maintained by Mrs. Tulsi and Seth in the Hanuman House because the use of the panoptic technique of disciplinary power is to make every member of the family docile and disciplined through constant supervision by these two powerful watchers of the Tulsi family. Thus, “Panopticon brings together knowledge, power and control of the body and control of the space into an integrated technology of discipline” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 157).

*A House for Mr. Biswas*, metaphorically represents a miniature world which symbolizes the larger colonial world. Mr. Biswas’s personal battle with the control of the Tulsi clan is a powerful quest for existential freedom and the struggle for personality. As Manjit Inder Singh remarks: “Mr. Biswas is the unaccommodated man representing the outcast’s symbolic quest for a place in the hostile universe”(Singh 126). The Tulsis are running a sort of mimic world of colonialism and the important thing is that the Hanuman House too is run on the traditional Hindu familial lines and protocols. On the surface, the Tulsis have made an admirable reconstruction of the clan in strange and hostile conditions. It has its own schemes, leaders, duties, law and order, religious rituals and provides jobs and help to men of their community on merit. “Mr. Biswas was trapped in the clutches of Tulsidom. He has his dream of owning his house and the house which he gets after in the marriage was nothing but a slave house and the novel graphically deals with the protagonist’s dry and monotonous journey full of jerks and jolts” (Prasad 5).

It was rather strange that Mr. Biswas remained lonely in the overcrowded Tulsi house and revolted against the system which signifies the Foucauldian notion that “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* 94). Though Mr. Biswas



feels powerless and helpless against the oppressive forces of Tulsidom yet he wanted to assert his authority by resisting the power structure of the strong Tulsi household. Hence, it is not surprising that Mr. Biswas finds himself out of place in Hanuman House. He dealt a blow to the old Hindu culture at Hanuman House and hurls a stream of revolutionary ideas against this closed world. The Tulsis are proud of conformity among its members while Biswas finds pleasure in asserting his own individuality because he has an inherent love for independence. He differentiates himself by speaking Creole English at Hanuman House while others speak Hindi. He ridicules Hari, the symbol of religious reference, he mocks at the young Tulsi sons by calling them 'Gods'. When Govind, one of Tulsi's sons-in-law suggests that to leave sign-painting and become a driver for the Tulsi estate, Mr. Biswas immediately voices his dissent, "Give up sign-painting? And my independence? No, boy. My motto is: paddle your own canoe?" (107).

It seems that for Mr. Biswas, sign-painting, taken up by him voluntarily, has become a part of his identity. He refuses to adopt a profession which is associated with the Tulsis, and he is not ready to merge himself into insignificance like other sons-in-law. This clearly manifests that it is wrong to think power is a commodity or a thing which can be possessed by groups or individuals and it can function by the powerful upon the powerless in a descending order for the purpose of repression, but in the power relations, power also functions from bottom to top in the form of resistance. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, this resistance is shown many times against the dominant power structure of the Tulsi family and attains partial success. In other words, both "power and resistance are synonymous with sociality, their respective forms may change but a society without relations of power and therefore forms of resistance is in Foucault's view inconceivable" (Smart 133).

To the utter disgust of the entire household, he throws food upon the head of one of the gods. He openly disapproves Mrs. Tulsi and her policies, challenges their religious belief and openly preaches the progressive and reformist ideas of the Arya Samaj. To assert his power and freedom in Hanuman House, Mr. Biswas joins the Aryans, a group of 'protestant' Hindu missionaries from India, and starts advocating women education, and the abolition of the caste system, child marriage and idol worship, knowing that these doctrines will enrage the Tulsis. Mr. Biswas does not revolt against established customs because of social and political beliefs. His revolt is against the value system which denies the intrinsic importance of man, denies freedom and dignity. There were conflicts between Biswas and Shama, who represented her mother with narrow, orthodox ideas and dogmatic beliefs of the Tulsi family. The daughters had no real position in the Tulsi family and they are totally powerless in the scale of power structure of the Tulsi household. They were to live there as second class citizens whereas Mrs. Tulsi, Seth and the "two gods", Shekhar and Owad, the sons of Mrs. Tulsi were to live very comfortably with privilege and luxury.



Seth asserts his patriarchal power and informs Mrs. Tulsi that Biswas does not offer the desired regard to him and Mrs. Tulsi. In this context of the novel, the 'juridical discursive hypothesis' of power is visible whose aim is to make everyone docile and disciplined because the main purpose of the disciplinary power is to maintain obedience upon the actions and bodily postures of the individual. Biswas can also be categorized in the Foucauldian sense, an aberrant or non-conforming member of the civil society who is forced to follow the laws of state and public institutions. His rebelliousness is considered dangerous, and a threat to the strict codes defined by state institutions, as pointed out by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. At this point, the younger son Owad, who is the powerful agent of the Tulsi household wants Mr. Biswas to apologize to Mrs. Tulsi. But Biswas gets infuriated and asserts, "The whole pack of you could go to hell, I am not going to apologize to any one of the damn lot of you" (113). "I am not staying here a minute longer. Having that damn little boy talk to me like that! He does talk to all your brothers-in-law like that" (113) In this situation, the Foucauldian notion of constraint and exclusion can be observed because while living in a dominant power structure, an individual is not free to say or to do anything according to his choice because there are checks on him by the powerful societal or even familial set up. In this novel, though Mr. Biswas wants to assert his power by showing resistance in difficult situations yet Biswas is very conscious of his limitations and he knows how far can he be rebellious in his behaviour. Biswas is aware that he can potentially utter an infinite variety of sentences but he is conscious of the fact that he has to show resistance in narrowly confined limits which Foucault calls 'discursive limits' and Mr. Biswas has the knowledge that he cannot cross the discursive limits set by the power structure of Tulsidom.

Mr. Biswas also calls Seth 'the big boss' and 'big bull' in the face of his wife Shama. Mr. Biswas is so angry that in a later scene he calls this house is a monkey house "And what about the two gods? It ever strikes you that they look like two monkeys? So, you have one concrete monkey god outside and two living ones inside. Eh monkey, bull, cow, hen. This place is a blasted zoo, man" (123). For Biswas's revolt, he was shunted to move to "The Chase" as he could not fit into the Tulsi set-up and because of his ideas and actions, there was a great disruption in the Tulsi family. In this situation, Foucault's perception of discourse is quite relevant when Seth exercises his power, "I do not think we could stand you here any longer. You want to paddle your own canoe. All right, go ahead and paddle. When you start getting your tail wet, don't bother to come to me or Mai, you hear. This was a nice united family before you came, you better go away before you do any more mischief and I have to lay my hand on you" (143). It clearly shows that the discourse of a powerful person like Seth cannot be challenged because in the power structure of Hanuman House, he is second only to Mrs. Tulsi and his discourse is so influential and dominating that Biswas has to follow his orders and thus becomes a powerless victim of this dominance.



Thus defeated by the powerful ideology of Mrs. Tulsi, Biswas left Hanuman House and moved to "The Chase". At that time, Biswas's wife Shama was pregnant. Since "The Chase" was not a profitable place for the Tulsis, so Biswas was shunted to this place which shows that he becomes a powerless victim of the dominant power structure. Mostly the workers in the sugarcane estate and on the road were living there. Both of them tried to build a house very soon but Shama was quite unhappy in this new place. So Shama arranged a party at "The Chase" and all her relations of Hanuman House were invited but Mr. Biswas found himself a stranger in his own yard. In reality it was rather the Tulsi's property and people never knew much about Mr. Biswas, he had no identity. After some days, they had their first child and Shama was to live at Hanuman House. Mr. Biswas had to suffer a lot and felt himself alienated in the Tulsi organization and he now lived alone at "The Chase". His sense of impotence and deprivation of male identity must be seen in the context of the world he inhabits. It is Naipaul's conviction that to be colonized is to submit to symbolic impotence. He is the descendent of indentured labourers, people little better than slaves, subjected to decades of dispossession, crushing poverty and the trauma of displacement. If manliness is about power and affirmative action, the world that he inhabits is a castrated one, crowded by meaningless, unnecessary and unaccommodated beings.

Mr. Biswas, fed up at "The Chase" and unable to cope with The Tulsis at Hanuman House was sent to "Green Vale" as a driver and supervisor of the workers of the Tulsi estate. By now he had four children and Shama along with children were living at Hanuman House. Thus as per the Foucauldian power principles of 'inner confinement', Biswas was confined to "The Chase" and then to "Green Vale" in order to discipline him but this type of power is a productive discipline because in this context of the novel, it is evident that knowledge is inextricably associated with the networks of power because power produces knowledge and the function of power is not always negative and repressive but positive and productive also. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, when Biswas becomes a victim of the dominant power structure, he has to leave Hanuman House to "the Chase" and then to "Green Vale" to work as a supervisor, he gets the knowledge about his position in the Tulsi family and he starts thinking of owning a house at all cost which is the productive effect of power on Mr. Biswas which further signifies that power relations between individuals are not always master-slave relations, rather they are productive relations. That is why Biswas wanted to build a house of his own and he decided to construct a house with immediate effect with a meager amount of hundred dollars. "The House in this novel is a symbol not for rootedness but for freedom – freedom from slavery and oppression" (Das 102). Surprisingly the house was about to collapse due to heavy rain and storm and as a result lightning, thunder and rain helped the house to collapse fully and this incident became the cause of his mental breakdown. Thus he was taken to the Hanuman House for treatment by a doctor. His revolt against the established order had brought him a lot of suffering and he was in a dilemma whether to surrender to the dominant control of Tulsi family or not.





Mr. Biswas's illness lasted for a longer period and one day after gathering strength, he left Hanuman House for "Port of Spain". He lived with his sister Dehuti and searched for a job and was appointed as a sign-painter for *The Sentinel*. In course of time, Mr. Biswas was regarded as the best reporter of *The Sentinel* and his salary was fixed at 50 dollars a month. His name was published everyday on the paper for his writings and as a result, the Tulsis were very impressed. Thus a reconciliation was brought about and Biswas tasted success on his own. Shama and Mr. Biswas, along with their children stayed with Mrs. Tulsi for some days. Meanwhile there was a lot of disturbance at Hanuman House as there was a serious misunderstanding between Seth and Mrs. Tulsi and the Tulsis decided to move to "Shorthills". Bipti, the mother of Mr. Biswas also came to live with them at Hanuman House where Mrs. Tulsi exercised her power on all the people. In this context of the novel, the reflection of Foucault's concept of Bio-Power is also evident. Foucault argues that discipline and order is maintained through the production of docile bodies, passive, subjugated and productive individuals through its institutions like schools, prisons and family etc. Bio-power is a technology of disciplinary power which is a way of managing the people as a group and in *A House for Mr. Biswas*, the supreme power of the Tulsi household is Mrs. Tulsi who exercises her power to discipline her daughters, sons-in-law and their children and even the workers of the Tulsi estate. The aim of the exercise of bio-power is to make every individual of the Tulsi family productive, docile and disciplined. "To discipline the body, optimize its capabilities, extort its forces, increase its usefulness and docility, integrate it into systems of efficient and economic controls" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 139), and thus produces the types of bodies that society requires.

Mr. Biswas decided to purchase a house by borrowing five thousand dollars but unfortunately he was taken ill for a month and later on came to his own house and lived quite satisfactorily. The children were also informed about the illness of Mr. Biswas through a notice from *The Sentinel*. Savi came back from abroad but Anand did not turn up. Mr. Biswas the journalist died prematurely at the age of forty-six and Shama was to live with her children without a single thought of going back to The Tulsis. Thus Mr. Biswas had a belated, posthumous victory. First, his wife and children were liberated from the moorings of The Tulsi conservative set-up. Secondly, Shama gathered courage and strength to live all alone in a practical world. Thirdly, Mr. Biswas died in his own house with full privacy and satisfaction which is a positive and productive aspect of power relations and it convincing from Foucauldian perspective that even "the most constraining, oppressive measures are in fact productive, giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply crossing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour" (Mills 33). The house cements the family bond and there he dies, secure in the thought that the family is not without shelter. The house, of course, is the most powerful symbol in the novel and it represents the need for physical and spiritual shelter. The need of shelter is shared as much by the Hindus and the Creole society



as by Mr. Biswas himself. Andrew Gurr rightly contends, “*A House for Mr. Biswas* stands out as an amazing act of redemption. Biswas, for all his lifetime spent as a fantasy man, an escapist, finds heroically a home and in recording that achievement Naipaul acquires his own identity” (Gurr 71).

*A House for Mr. Biswas* is, therefore, a fictional text which basically explores the conflicting ideologies and social contradictions of different classes and communities, more specifically the conflicts between the landed aristocracy and the powerless working class. In this novel, Mr. Biswas represents the consciousness of dignity of a man despite the poverty. His great obsession with establishment of his own identity brings out a superb and powerful conflict with conservative ideas of the Tulsi set-up. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, Naipaul attempts a subtle and comprehensive analysis of the colonial situation in Trinidad through his fine imagination and sensibility. Despite his marriage into the Tulsi family, he remains an outsider, a victim of power relations but does not follow the family in their habitual devotions. He does not submit and remains grand in his stature in different contexts and situations in the novel whenever he takes a solitary stand against the mechanical, stereotyped and obsolete Tulsi ideologies which further signify Foucault’s notion that power relations are dispersed in a society in a net like organization and “A society without power relations can only be an abstraction” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 222). The threads of power relations extend everywhere as our social fabric is knitted by power relations, and in this novel, it is crystal clear that the web of power has affected the most intimate relations like husband-wife, parent-children, etc. Hence, *A House for Mr. Biswas* can be justifiably scrutinized from the perspective of Michel Foucault’s theory of Power/Knowledge Discourse which unfolds a new way of understanding this superb colonial text.

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