R. K. Narayan's *A Tiger for Malgudi*

An Indian view on non-human animals

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This article examines R. K. Narayan's novella *A Tiger for Malgudi* through the lens of animal studies, arguing that a purely Western critical framework overlooks the significance of Hindu philosophy in understanding the novel's portrayal of animal consciousness. While postcolonial literature has brought non-Western narratives to the attention of the whole wide world, interpreting paradigms have often remained rooted in Western thought. Likewise, animal studies predominantly draws upon Western philosophical traditions, potentially limiting its applicability to non-Western texts. By analysing Narayan's text, particularly the tiger protagonist's first-person perspective and his spiritual journey, the article argues that Hindu concepts like metempsychosis and the figure of the *sannyasin* offer crucial insights into the novel's exploration of animal subjectivity, human exceptionalism, and the interconnectedness of beings. Ultimately, the article calls for a more culturally sensitive approach within ecocriticism and animal studies, urging a move beyond Western epistemologies to fully appreciate the nuances of non-Western literary representations of animals.

Keywords: R.K. Narayan, animal studies, Tiger for Malgudi, Indian epistemology, non-human animals.

1. The Western origin of animal studies[1]

In the late Twentieth century, writers from former colonies revolutionised the old Western genre of the novel. Starting in the mid-twentieth century, for the first time, new narrative voices, folklore, oral literature have found their way into novelistic narratives, making themselves heard all around the world. Thus, works like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* incorporated local materials hitherto unknown to European and American novels. Western readers were delighted to deal

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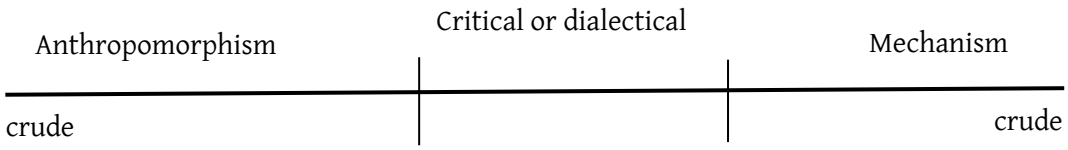
with non-Western stories, deities, narrators, idioms, mindsets. Literary criticism has therefore developed a set of interpretive paradigms that go by the name of postcolonial studies. The latter were developed by major scholars, often of non-European descent, like Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, or Gayatri Spivak. However, while postcolonial literature was rooted in indigenous myths and lore, interpretive paradigms remained rooted in Western philosophy. Most postcolonial critical theory is based on the works of philosophers like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, or Antonio Gramsci, not to mention French Deconstructionism. It is no accident that the most prominent postcolonial thinkers write primarily in European languages and are often based in the USA. The decolonial movement has now started to change all this, and possibly the next generation will see literary criticism based on Confucius, Shankara, and Al-Ghazali, but that has not happened yet.

Likewise, animal studies applied to literary studies are mainly based on Western philosophers like Peter Singer (1975)—who devotes quite a few pages to Jeremy Bentham and René Descartes—Mary Midgley, Jaques Derrida, Donna Haraway… While their contribution to the reflection on non-human related ethics is beyond dispute, their applicability to cultures and literary works other than Western may be problematic. In his very perceptive essay entitled 'Why Looking at Animals?,' John Berger (2015) points out that the perception of non-human animals has changed dramatically since the end of WW2, particularly in urban contexts. Formerly, the philosopher argues, the contiguity between humans and non-humans was such that animals were considered essentially different from humans. Every animal used to be both an individual and a metonym for its species; as such, it often retained a connection to the cosmic order that modern man fails to see. Eight out of twelve signs of the Zodiac are animals, Berger points out, and humans never had any problems identifying with them or with a totemic animal. Industrial farming has hidden animals from the human view and perfected the mechanisation of non-human animals theorised by René Descartes.

Berger is indeed very persuasive, but he fails to take into account non-Western views of animals. Descartes's huge importance in shaping the perception of animals and reducing them to mere mechanical objects is deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian dualism. Only humans are endowed with a soul, as the Book of Genesis maintains, and *therefore* animals do not participate in the divine substance of Man. Despite his secular language—the opposition between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* developed in his *Discours de la methode* (1637)—Descartes is deeply indebted to St. Paul. Consequently, according to Descartes, there is no essential difference between a cat, a pine tree, and a stone. None of them has a soul, nor real agency. The cat is compelled by nature to react as it does, exactly like the pine tree is eventually obliged to shed its cones or needles. The only difference between the three, Descartes concedes, is a difference in complexity, the mechanism regulating the cat being much subtler than

those regulating the stone. Industrial farming, Berger maintains, is just an extension of the idea that animals are mere mechanisms.

When it comes to the literary representation of animals, a writer traditionally faces two opposite choices: either ignore animals and describe them simply as background props, or anthropomorphise them in order to adapt them to the established literary techniques employed to portray humans. Both techniques may reflect human exceptionalism without troubling human identity. On the whole, animal representation stretches in a continuum that goes from anthropomorphisation to mechanisation. Greg Garrard (2023) justly opines that these forms can be crude or critical, i.e. they can take into account the contiguity between human and animal beings, or totally obliterate it. Thus, the continuum may be thought of as in the following diagram.



Crude anthropomorphism in literature may correspond to what some sociologists call Disneyfication, namely a kind of cultural appropriation that brings everything that is different within the comfort zone of a theme park, where nothing is really different from what is expected.[2] Thus some animal traits are appropriated by the narrative, while most others are substituted by human qualities. On the other end, crude mechanism may correspond to any story in which animals are considered as commodities, which includes most realistic literature, especially from the past. Even when it does not use these words, most literary animal studies-based criticism relies on a similar distinction. Mostly, however, critics are partial to stories which remain within the critical area. Herman Melville's description of Moby Dick is a case in point; the sperm whale is granted agency and determination, but it is never anthropomorphised by the author; quite on the contrary it is Ahab who anthropomorphises the whale thinking it has a personal grudge against himself. The novelist never succumbs to the temptation of describing the world from the viewpoint of the cetacean, and yet he offers such an amount of information about the whale that Northrop Frye (1957) considered *Moby Dick* as a quintessential anatomy.

[2] According to Merriam-Webster Disneyfication is the transformation (as of something real or unsettling) into carefully controlled and safe entertainment or an environment with similar qualities.

Another novel often praised for its treatment of non-human animals is Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), where dolphins are described as beloved animals, with typical non-human behaviours. On the other hand, *The Hungry Tide* focuses on the cultural encounter between the Western attitude of Piya, the American scientist, and the local fishermen. Ghosh does not omit to include a few characters to whom dolphins are supernatural creatures, Bon Bibi's messengers, thus introducing two equally critical (in Garrard's sense) attitudes towards dolphins: the Western secular ecological and conservationist view, and the religious supernatural perception of animals. Ghosh does not overtly endorse either view, and lets both play against each other as the novel unfolds. Reading *The Hungry Tide* alerts us to an obvious difference, which is often overlooked: in the words of Steve Baker, "Culture shapes our reading of animals just as much as animals shape our reading of culture" (Baker 1993: 4). This insight is particularly relevant in a novel that explores the boundaries between nature and culture in the fragile ecosystem of the Sundarbans.

Baker stands out for his study of the perception of animals in popular culture. He claims that our understanding of human nature reflects the way in which popular culture depicts animals, no matter how absurd or fantastic. It follows that, when it comes to literary interpretation, animals cannot always be compared to human characters, but must be considered within the cultural framework of the author.

R. K. Narayan's novella *A Tiger for Malgudi* and its reception may illustrate an interesting critical misunderstanding, as readers tend to forget that the tiger protagonist is the product of a Hindu novelist. The book was written in 1983, when Narayan was long established as a best-seller author of realistic social comedies. However, if one considers Narayan's career, the author began writing in a challenging context, where finding a publisher was very difficult and, once established as an ironical 'painter of modern India' (Pousse 1995), he had little reason to deviate from the path of success. John Thieme (2007) convincingly argues that Narayan's American experience changed his perception of his reading public and encouraged him to be more experimental. According to Thieme, his finest novels, *The Guide* and *The Man-eater of Malgudi*, are the result of this newly-found perception of his audience, which led him to experiment. Elsewhere, I argue that this experimentation led Narayan to write in a less secular way (Vescovi 2024), which means that he overtly included more Hindu elements than he did in the past. Indeed, the first international audience Narayan had in mind as a young writer was made by the few English colonials he had met in his school days. Over time, however, his international audience came to comprehend young Americans, hippies, and, more generally, people genuinely interested in Indian lore.

2. *A Tiger for Malgudi*

A Tiger for Malgudi takes Narayan's new confidence a step forward in that he writes his story in the first person and from the point of view of a tiger. While talking animals are a typical feature of fables, Narayan insists on the realistic plausibility of his narrative. In his Introduction to the story, he recounts how he came to think of it:

> During the Kumbh Mela festival [...] arrives a hermit with his companion, a tiger. He does not hold the animal on a leash since he claims they were brothers in previous lives. The tiger freely moves about without hurting or scaring anyone. Such a combination seemed incredible when I read reports of it and saw the photographs. But as I got used to the idea, I began to speculate on its possibilities for a novel. Also I came across a few other instances of enduring friendship between tigers and human beings (Narayan 1982: 7).

These few lines at the onset of the narrative offer an interpreting key. The story of the tiger is not just another animal fable, like the Panchatantra, the animal Jatakas, or—in Narayan's line of business—Kipling's *Jungle Books*. Narayan lays two claims: first, that stereotypes about the dangerousness of tigers can be gainsaid, and second, that Indian epistemology can be used as a basis for a realistic tale as much as the Western one. By citing newspaper reports and photography, Narayan vindicates the realistic quality of his story: it may sound strange elsewhere, but in India a tiger can be tame if he realises that he once was a relative of a human. Of course, this event is not unexceptional, else it would not be reported in a newspaper, but still, it is counted as possible. To further prove this point, in the same Introduction, Narayan devotes a page to describe the characteristics of a *sannyasi*:

> [...] During certain yogic practices, eight kinds of supernatural powers may be roused; one could become invisible, levitate, transmute metals, travel in space, control animals and men, live on air, and so on and so forth. But such magical powers are considered to be stages in one's evolution, incidental powers acquired on the way, to be ignored and not exercised for profit or self-promotion, except to mitigate pain or suffering in others.
>
> Now, in my story the 'Tiger Hermit' employs his powers to save the tiger and transform it inwardly–working on the basis that, deep within, the core of personality is the same in spite of differing appearances and categories, and with the right approach you could expect the same response from a tiger as from any normal human being (Narayan 1982: 9).

The Introduction makes therefore three relevant statements:

1. the story that follows is an invention but it is based on real facts;
2. countless people believe in the transmigration of the soul and their belief must be taken into serious consideration, so much so that a modern realistic tale can be based on it;

3. it is well known that *sannyasin*s may acquire supernatural powers and therefore this story is perfectly plausible within an Indian framework.

The novella is recounted as a monologue that unfolds within the head of the old tiger, now 'retired' in a zoo, as he watches visitors and fancies talking to them. The tiger does not actually speak in human language, but is able to think in Tamil since his Master taught him the language along with religious wisdom. The storyline is not without some unexpected twists and turns. Raja, once a fierce and proud tiger, narrates his life journey from being a wild, uncontrollable animal to finding inner peace and enlightenment. The story begins with Raja's birth in the jungle where, once grown up, he rules with ferocity and strength. However, his fate changes when he is captured and sold to a circus owner named Captain, who trains him to perform tricks for human amusement. Life in captivity brings Raja face-to-face with human cruelty and kindness. He eventually escapes and meets a spiritual guru who teaches him the ways of compassion and understanding. Under the guidance of the hermit, Raja is transformed from a beast driven by instinct to a wise being capable of introspection and empathy.

The tiger's life is described in retrospection, with a subtle difference between the pre-enlightenment days and the days spent under the guidance of the *sannyasin*. The protagonist clearly perceives this as the major watershed of his life. While experiences in the first part of the tiger's life are remembered as emotions and translated into words with the benefit of hindsight, the latter part is rather similar to a human life in that emotions are immediately known through language and conceptualisation. Yet, even after learning the language, Raja retains a certain naïve perplexity in front of human affairs.

Possibly Narayan did not mean to make a point for animal rights, and his prime inspiration was the possibility of writing from an unusual perspective. However, in the Introduction, he seems to advocate that animals have an equal claim to appear in literature as humans.

> It also occurred to me that with a few exceptions here and there, humans have monopolised the attention of fiction writers. Man in his smugness never imagines for a moment that other creatures may also possess ego, values, outlook, and the ability to communicate, though they may be incapable of audible speech. Man assumes he is all-important, that all else in creation exists only for his sport, amusement, comfort, or nourishment (Narayan 1982: 6-7).

These words, written in the early eighties, before Peter Singer's book garnered circulation and international attention may resonate with a memory of the Raj and the colonial past. The 'smug' attitude of humans referred to by Narayan largely coincides with the attitude of urban dwellers and the middle class, which was—and still is—the most westernised part of Indian society. Following this

line of interpretation, one may argue that the novel juxtaposes the tiger's transformation with the human condition, highlighting the importance of self-awareness, spiritual growth, and the quest for a higher purpose. However, in the Twenty-first century, it is impossible not to see how Narayan earnestly engages with a non-human viewpoint. His reference to other creatures' 'values, ego, outlook' appears extremely modern in defending animal dignity along with the Hindu belief in metempsychosis. Indeed, the idea that 'all else in creation exists for [man's] sport, amusement, comfort, or nourishment' sounds like a subtle critique of the Judeo-Christian notions expounded in the Book of Genesis—where God tells Adam that he is master of Eden—especially when it is used to justify the exploitation of so-called natural resources.

Animal studies, as developed by Anglophone critics, is a discipline not incompatible with the idea of metempsychosis as long as the latter recognises the existence of different approaches to non-human life, the scientific one and the religious one—in fact, what we see in *The Hungry Tide*. Recently, Angshuman Kar (2008) published a scathing critique of the novella, which, in my opinion, reveals the limits of Western paradigms when applied to animal perception in India—that the author is Indian is scarcely relevant as all his bibliography and outlook are Western. Along with interesting critical insights, Kar argues that Narayan was unable to overcome the temptation of anthropocentrism. Besides, Narayan did not do his homework well, as he did not know enough about the subject he was talking about, viz. tigers' life, which Lawrence Buell (1995) considers an indispensable prerequisite for anyone who wants to write about animals. Going back to *The Hungry Tide*, it is like saying that Piya has a stronger claim to speak about dolphins than Fokir.

Buell is right when he says that one must know what he talks about, but there is not only one knowledge. In fact the very notion of anthropomorphisation should be revised in order to adapt it to a plurality of cultures. For Kar, anthropomorphising consists in making animals similar to humans and appreciating them the more similar to humans they are. However, while endowing a tiger with human values may be absurd for an American ethologist who watched Tom and Jerry as a kid and has long left it behind, it may be absolutely natural for a Buddhist nature conservationist who read the Jatakas as a boy and has never denied their inner truth. If we accept the notion that human and non-human animals differ in how they can express themselves but not necessarily in their spirit, then the criticism of excessive anthropomorphism ceases to make sense. Narayan is conscious that, at the end of his spiritual journey, the tiger has completely subdued his nature. Master says that the old feline now is "a sensitive soul" and "a tiger only in appearance" (Narayan 1982: 151). The author is well conscious that he is narrating a unique phenomenon and does not pretend that the way Raja has eventually come to think reflects the point of view of any wild animal.

The animal viewpoint is best taken up when Raja remembers his pre-enlightenment days and translates his remembrances into actual concepts, i.e. for all practical purposes in English. As a tiger cub, Raja thought that his life would never change, while he soon must have his first trauma:

> I had no doubt whatever that [my mother] would live for ever to look after me: a natural delusion which afflicts all creatures, including human beings. However, she just vanished from my world one evening. I was seized with panic and hid myself in the cave (Narayan 1982: 12).

This is the first natural emotion translated into language. Another follows suit as the tiger's instinct asserts itself. With hindsight, Raja admits that he wanted to become "king of the forest" (Narayan 1982: 13). Apparently, instinct is not really nobilitating. However, his self very much depends on a very strong body and little spirituality. Thus, the tiger here treats other animals as food or subaltern, not really recognising the notion of species, which Narayan seems to say is a cultural and, therefore, human construction. Here Narayan's irony sets in, as he shows that the spiritual weakness of the brute is in fact that of many humans. Later he will expound Raja's theology, who envisages God as an "enormous tiger, spanning the earth and the sky, with a tail capable of encircling the globe, claws that could hook on the clouds, and teeth that could grind the mountain, and possessing, of course, immeasurable strength to match" (Narayan 1982: 136). While Raja's aggressivity and, later, his religious views are brought about by his shape and animal constraints, they are not necessarily anthropomorphic. All animals, including humans, are conditioned by their own bodies and instincts. Their grasp of truth is severely limited by these natural constraints.

Little by little Raja builds a family of which he is justly proud. One day, however, poachers kill his mate and his cubs. Following this second and much less natural trauma, he feels a "blind impossible anger" (Narayan 1982: 22) and wishes only to kill and take revenge. He resorts to eating cattle instead of jungle animals, partly because it is easier, partly because he is seeking revenge on humans (Narayan 1982: 24). In this case, Raja too assumes a kind of mechanic view of other species, as sheep is considered even by the tiger as simply food; this is the nadir of his consciousness, as he abandons even the natural law of the jungle.

With hindsight, he recognised that he had chosen an easy path, an act for which he is ultimately punished:

> Looking back, I feel that I should not have chosen the easy path of raiding villages. Stepping into human society was a thoughtless act. Instead of living the rest of my life majestically as an honest-to-god tiger going in and out of his cave, eating and sleeping, performing no act except what he wished, Lord of the Jungle, before whom other creatures from a squirrel to a bear quaked in fear, I

> had let myself in for ultimate slavery. I had thought that there could never be any creature stronger than a tiger. I was mistaken (Narayan 1982: 25-26).

What follows is the capture of the tiger and his training to become a circus attraction. The circus owner, called Captain, considers the tiger mechanically and trains him to go against his nature "by sheer doggedness" (Narayan 1982: 55). The ultimate trick that the man devises is putting a goat in front of the tiger and having the wild animal drink milk instead of attacking the ruminant. The Captain manages to subdue the tiger by means of a whip and a chair. The latter, in particular, seems to cow the tiger, who recalls his fear of the chair: "I felt infuriated at the lashing and felt like jumping on him; but he held that terrible chair" (Narayan 1982: 47). Eventually, the tiger's instinct prevails and Raja kills the abusive Captain without any notion of what he is doing: as the Captain hits the animal with a hook, the tiger, trying to protect himself, hits the man and breaks his neck. The tiger does not plan it and does not even realise what happened. The laconic commentary is, "It was surprising that such a flimsy creature, no better than a membrane stretched over some thin framework, with so little stuff inside, should have held me in fear so long" (Narayan 1982: 100).

At this point the tiger is ready for its transformation. The Master first of all presents himself as a *sannyasin*, who, as a consequence of his spiritual achievement, loves and respects animals. A partly comical situation ensues when the tiger is locked up in a headmaster's office and the school staff does not know how to get it out of the room.

> 'Now that this brute is safely locked up, we must decide'— began a teacher.
>
> At this moment my Master pushed his way through the crowds and admonished, 'Never use the words beast or brute. They're ugly words coined by man in his arrogance. The human being thinks all other creatures are "beasts". Awful word!'
>
> 'Is this the occasion to discuss problems of vocabulary?' asked someone. 'Why not?' retorted my Master. At which they looked outraged. Someone said, 'What a reckless man you are! Who are you?'
>
> 'You are asking a profound question. I've no idea who I am! All my life I have been trying to find the answer. Are you sure you know who you are?' (Narayan 1982: 103).

The newly arrived holy man flouts the ordinary perception of the tiger by posing him in the broader perspective of the universe, or, one could say, in a Hindu perspective. The whole parable of the tiger's life takes on a new meaning. The remains of the story actually resettle the animal within the cosmic order. Humans like the Captain and even school teachers—the book seems to say—are egocentric and hardly know their place in the universe. This condition severely undermines their liberty. Likewise, initially Raja does not enjoy total freedom because he is a slave to his tigerish nature; however, as he later abandons even his tiger's *swadharma* by preying on cattle, he becomes ever less free until he

actually falls prey to humans at the circus. Here, he is completely deprived of any freedom and even pretence thereof; he cannot follow either his dharma or even his animal instinct. However, Raja is not less conscious than most humans, which is ironic. Indeed, the Captain has brought ruin onto himself precisely because he was unable to see the other in his animals; he is the man described in the Introduction: One who "never imagines for a moment that other creatures may also possess ego, values, outlook, and the ability to communicate" (Narayan 1982: 6).

The figure of the Master deserves a comment, too. *Sannyasin*s do not always fare well in Narayan's stories; more often than not, they are impostors, as he warns even in his Introduction to this novella. Such is the case with the self-declared *sannyasin* in *The Bachelor of Arts*, *Mr Sampath—The Printer of Malgudi*, *The Painter of Signs*, while in *The Guide* the position of the *sannyasin* is debatable but hardly established. In the novella, one is tempted to consider the Master as the author's spokesman, or a kind of ideal (Atkinson 1987). He is wise, is in control of everything, and treats with irony the shortcomings of other humans. Narayan must have felt the incongruity of making a man the real hero of a novel dedicated to the tiger, and therefore, he endows the Master with a past. This is all the more curious as Narayan writes in the Introduction that one should never enquire about a *sannyasin*'s past, nor his name and former whereabouts.

When the tiger is learning to live in the hermitage, eating as little as he possibly can and feeling ashamed for the suffering inflicted on the creatures he hunts, he often entertains discussions with the Master and learns about dharma and religion. Sometimes, the faithful come to ask for the Master's blessings, and the tiger hides in a corner so as not to scare them off. One day, a woman comes who claims to be the wife of the Master, whom he abandoned to pursue his spiritual path. In fact it turns out that the man was a comparatively wealthy clerk before he left his family and left them well provided for, so he cannot really be blamed for failing in his domestic duties. However, the Master, although deeply troubled by the woman's visit, never acknowledges her and never admits his former identity. Indeed, he is rather cold with his former wife, who has come from far away through a dangerous forest road. Eventually, he sends her away without a minimal hint of human sympathy for a woman who has long lost her husband.

The *sannyasin*'s behaviour with his wife casts a shadow on his sanctity. He may well be wise and know the right words and paths to moksha, but he lacks human sympathy; his freedom comes at a price, and he is not the only one who pays for it. According to Atkinson, the Teacher allows Narayan to represent an ideal condition while simultaneously rejecting the human personality cult, which is a part of the Hindu religion. Eventually, there is no human perfection in this novel; the only perfect being is the tiger, even though he, too, has a troubled past. However, the tiger's perfection is possible only

thanks to his apparent naivety. The story develops as a kind of *Bildungsroman* in which the tiger slowly becomes conscious of his self. He learns to distinguish his natural restraints and eventually lets his mind roam freely. Even though he had been a violent animal in the past, his innocence is preserved as he passes from an utter lack of self-awareness to spiritual development. In the former state, his non-anthropomorphic self helps the tiger preserve his innocence. Even his hatred for the Captain and the poachers who exterminate his family is a natural reaction that does not hinder his later development. Even as an enlightened being, the tiger does not really understand the nuances of human behaviour; he reflects on his own past as a wild animal and never judges human behaviour. This complete lack of malice keeps his thoughts pure and ensures his moral standing in the novel.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, Narayan envisages a non-human self as the encounter of a soul with the restraints of the animal condition, just like a human self would be the encounter of a soul with the body and constraints of the human condition. Thus, the novelist imagines the basic emotions and stimuli to which the tiger responded without being able to make sense of them, as he does with hindsight at the moment of telling. In order to recount this particular self, the author imagines that the tiger has been enlightened so as to learn human speech and spiritual values. While this enlightenment would be fabulous for a secular writer, Narayan goes to great lengths to introduce it as exceptional but acceptable in an Indian context. Once endowed with a language and the values that it brings with itself, the tiger can recall his past and translate it for the benefit of the reader, even though he simply imagines telling the story, being unable to actually utter human speech. To make justice to Narayan's novella, ecocriticism and animal studies must take non-Western philosophies into their stride and avoid the essentialist temptation of relying solely on Western epistemology.

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