

Edward Said's Critique of Eurocentric Self-Centrality through His Criticism of Orientalist Studies

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ABSTRACT

The effects of Orientalism as an ancient field of knowledge was and still puts the East under study by the debate on the one hand about the extent to which orientalists contribute to the preservation of the cultural heritage of the nation and on the other hand through the premises and approaches taken by orientalists for this end, and the extent of their objectivity; Knowledge - power - creation patience by making premises, methodology and ideology the subject of critical question, considering that his mission as an intellectual practices criticism against him to reach the invalidity of what was presented by orientalists based on the structural rule "that all knowledge is the product of an authority" and power does not produce knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but produces knowledge for the sake of interest and domination; In the critique of the centrality of the European self and its culture through his analysis of the phenomenon of Orientalism?

Keywords: Centrality; Orientalism; European Self; Superiority; Culture

INTRODUCTION

More than forty years have passed since Edward Said's book *Orientalism – Knowledge – Power – Construction*, which has matured and taken shape through the momentum and influence it exerted on the imagination of Arab intellectuals of various orientations. It is considered one of the most prominent books that analyzed the discipline of Orientalism in a scientific manner. On one hand, it witnessed the growth and maturity of this discipline, which facilitated its treatment; on the other hand, Said's use of the English language, his analytical method, and his academic expertise enabled him to address this field academically. As a result, no one who contributed to this subject after him was able to reach the same conclusions, despite the fact that he himself was not spared from criticism.

Said starts from a fundamental premise, namely that Orientalism was not merely an objective study of the East, but rather a tool for colonial domination and cultural control. He sees that Orientalism constructed its image of the East as backward and strange, thereby reinforcing the superiority of the West over it.

Secondly, Eurocentrism is based on constructing a distorted image of the East as weak and in need of Western dominance and literary texts and academic works contributed to anchoring this idea.

Thirdly, Said questions the intellectual and epistemological foundations upon which the Western perception of the East was built, revealing the interconnection between power and knowledge in the formation of centrality.

How, then, did Orientalism, according to Edward Said, contribute to establishing the centrality of the European self through the entrenchment of a stereotypical image of the East? And to what extent is Orientalist knowledge linked to colonial power and domination?

The Term: Essence and Emergence

Arab Renaissance and reformist thinkers became acquainted with Orientalism during its period of flourishing and major expansions in the second half of the nineteenth century. They interacted with it in various ways, were influenced by it, and drew inspiration from its methods, approaches, questions, and issues. Some engaged with it in defense of their heritage based on its premises, while others criticized it and clearly objected to many of its theses. Regardless of the context, forms, and scholarly levels of this interaction (Belkrez, Abdelilah – 2017, p. 23), there is no doubt that Orientalism represented an intellectual challenge that tested their cultural and cognitive abilities to confront its questions just as colonialism, or the threat of it, was a political challenge that tested their societies and their capacity to resist.

Just as modern ideas, brought in by European civilization under foreign occupation, intruded upon their traditionally certain cultural space, so too did Orientalism, shaking their minds as part of modern knowledge. Orientalism gave rise to the question of the self and identity, posing the problem of the self and the Other, thus forming the foundation of Renaissance consciousness.

To begin, it is necessary to define the term Orientalism in order to analyze Edward Said's critical view of it.

According to Al-Maany Dictionary, "Orientalism" is derived from the triliteral root "shīn – rā' – qāf" with the prefix ist- (alif, sīn, tā') which implies a request or pursuit. Thus, istashraqa means "to seek the East." (Al-Zubaidi, Muhammad Fathallah, 2002, p. 17)

- **Linguistically**, the term is derived from East (al-sharq), or mashriq, meaning the place where the sun rises. The letter ش in the word istishraq indicates a pursuit, i.e., the pursuit of studying the East. The term East, especially following the Islamic conquests, underwent a shift in meaning to include Egypt and the countries of North Africa. (Al-Nabhani, Muhammad Farouk, 2012, p. 08)

In general, Orientalism linguistically refers to the East or sunrise. It is a verbal noun in the pattern istif'āl derived from sharq, and it means the pursuit of the East or a movement toward it.

- **Terminologically**, the term has come to refer to the Western study of Eastern societies. The word Orientalism entered the French Academy's lexicon in 1838, embodying the idea of a specialized system for studying the East. From then, the classification of individuals as Orientalists began, and the idea of Orientalism deepened significantly.

In the eighteenth century, the East began to appear in Western writings alongside the West in a comprehensive intellectual horizon. According to Rodinson, the term Orientalism and the word Orientalist are relatively recent in Latin-based languages, and the studies conducted on Eastern

civilizations in the eighteenth century were still drawing the attention of scholars. (Smailovich, Ahmed, 1998, p. 25)

It is the study of the East or the Eastern world a field that examines the languages, heritage, civilization, societies, past, and present of the East. The term encompasses any area considered part of the East.

This term refers to "the Western study of the East," a movement concerned with the study of Islamic sciences, literature, and culture, with the aim of understanding the mindset, ideas, orientations, sources of strength, and areas of aggression among Muslims. (Saad El-Din, Sayed Saleh, 2006, p. 19)

The German thinker Rudi Paret defined Orientalism by saying: "The word Orientalism is derived from the word East, and East means the sunrise. Accordingly, Orientalism is the science of the East or the science of the Eastern world." (Al-Nabhani, Muhammad Farouk, 2012, pp. 11–12)

However, Paret later finds himself puzzled, asking: What does the word East really mean? The concept of this word changes depending on place and time. The East differs for a Japanese, an Arab, a German, an Englishman, or an American.

Orientalism also refers to the study by non-Easterners of Eastern civilizations, religions, languages, history, sciences, psychological attitudes, and social conditions particularly Islamic civilization and the condition of Muslims throughout different eras.

- **Eurocentrism**, on the other hand, is an intellectual and cultural worldview that considers Europe as the cultural, intellectual, and civilizational center of the world, and the source of progress, modernity, and rationality. According to this view, European values and standards are presented as a universal model to be emulated by other peoples and civilizations, leading to the marginalization of other cultures and their characterization as less developed or inferior.

The Emergence of Orientalism:

Orientalism has long been, and continues to be, a subject of interest for many researchers, especially those concerned with Orientalist studies. However, pinpointing an exact historical period for the emergence of this phenomenon remains a matter of debate and disagreement among scholars, leading to a variety of interpretations regarding its origins. Some researchers suggest that the earliest seeds of Orientalism date back to the pre-Christian era, as seen in the writings of the Greek historian Herodotus (5th century BCE) in his *Histories*, in which he discussed Egypt and Libya, and also in the writings of Strabo (1st century BCE), who described the conditions of Arab tribes and cities. Additionally, the Roman historian Sallust mentioned similar themes in his defense of Julius Caesar's policies and the Roman expansions in North Africa. (Abdel-Samad Tawfiq Mazari, 2015, pp. 24–25)

Researcher Tawfiq Mazari believes that these writings represent early forms of Orientalism, focusing on Eastern societies from a Western perspective, often linked to glorifying colonial domination, such as Alexander the Great's campaign to the East in 334 BCE. Others, however, argue that Orientalism began with the emergence of Islam, citing the early encounters between the Prophet ﷺ and the Christians of Najran, or the Prophet's dispatching of messengers to kings and rulers beyond the Arabian Peninsula, or even the meeting between the Muslims and the Negus in Abyssinia. Some view the battles of Mu'tah and Tabuk, and the subsequent contact with the Byzantines, as the starting point of Western interest in studying Islam. The rapid spread of Islam prompted Christian clergy to study it in order to protect their followers among them John of Damascus (676–749 CE), who wrote

Dialogue with a Muslim and Guidance for Christians in Debating Muslims. (Zaqzouq, Muhammad Hamdi, 1993, pp. 18–19)

However, some scholars reject the idea that these attempts represent the beginning of Orientalism, arguing that John of Damascus lived under the Umayyad Caliphate. Another group believes that Orientalism began with European monks who traveled to Al-Andalus during its period of scientific and cultural prosperity. These monks studied in its schools and, upon returning to their countries, translated the Qur'an and Arabic books into their own languages thus contributing to the dissemination of Arab culture and sciences. Among the most notable of these monks were the French monk Gerbert, Peter the Venerable, and Gerard of Cremona. (Mustafa Al-Siba'i, n.d., pp. 17–18)

The German Orientalist Rudi Paret, translator of the Qur'an into German, stated that the history of Orientalism can be traced back to the 12th century CE, when Arabic and Islamic studies began in the West. In 1143, the Qur'an was translated for the first time into Latin under the supervision of Peter, abbot of Cluny Monastery, in Spain. Some researchers believe the roots of Orientalism date back to the early Christian centuries. Al-Aqqad noted that it began among monks who traveled to Al-Andalus at the height of its cultural flourish to seek knowledge. Among them was the French monk Gerbert, who later became Pope of the Church in Rome in 999 CE. Others argue that Orientalism arose from the West's need to respond to Islam and understand the reasons behind its strength, particularly after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, when Islam posed a barrier to the spread of Christianity at the time. (Omar Fawzi, Farouk, 1998, pp. 18–19)

Several researchers identify the academic beginning of the Orientalist movement with the convening of the Council of Vienna in 1312, which recommended the establishment of Arabic language chairs in universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, Bologna, Rome, and Paris. The 19th and 20th centuries are considered the golden ages of Orientalism, during which Orientalist societies flourished, actively publishing journals and Orientalist literature. The 19th century also witnessed the beginning of international Orientalist conferences, with the first held in 1873.

Despite differences among Muslim and Orientalist writers regarding the origins of the Orientalist movement, the view adopted here is that Orientalism began with the rise of Islam, even if it was not labeled as such at the time. Its presence and spread have continued across eras up to the present day, particularly with the growing wave of Western Orientalist attacks and deliberate distortions of Islam through various media outlets in our time. (Omar Fawzi, Farouk, 1998, pp. 29–30)

Motivations of Orientalism:

Through the study of the connections between Orientalism and missionary activity, and the relationship between Orientalism and Western colonial institutions, a researcher can summarize the main objectives and motivations behind the Orientalist movement as follows:

1. Religious Motivation:

The religious motivation for Orientalism emerged from the attempts of churchmen to defend the distorted Christian doctrine, which had begun to lose its grip on European minds. Some resorted to studying Islam with the aim of distorting it and highlighting its perceived flaws to European audiences, in order to prevent them from being attracted to it especially as more people were searching for a new religion. The main goal was to reinforce the idea that Islam did not deserve respect, and that Muslims were a group of savages and bloodthirsty people, to suppress any criticism of the altered Christian doctrine. Other objectives included attempts to convert Muslims

to Christianity or to tarnish the image of Islam in their eyes, pushing them either toward atheism or intellectual and social submission to the secular Western civilization. One of the secondary goals was to cast doubts on the sources of Islamic legislation by claiming that they were derived from Judaism and Christianity. (*Ben Nabi, Malek, 1969, p. 5*)

2. Colonial Motivation:

Orientalist studies were employed to serve colonial agendas aimed at dominating the Arab and Islamic worlds. These studies focused on identifying the strengths of Muslim peoples and the sources of their spiritual and moral resistance, with the intent of undermining their confidence in themselves and their heritage, while amplifying their weaknesses to facilitate colonial domination. They aimed to spread Western materialist cultures and provoke nationalist and regionalist sentiments to fragment the unity of the Islamic Ummah. The ultimate goal was to make Muslim societies more receptive to colonial ideas and policies. (*Mustafa Khalidi and Omar Farrukh, Missionary Activity, 1986, p. 184*)

3. Political Motivation:

With the expansion of Western colonialism, colonial states were compelled to train their officials in the languages and heritage of the colonized peoples to better manage and direct them. After the end of military colonialism, the West ensured the training of personnel to work in embassies and consulates to implement Western policies and exploit relationships with intellectual and political elites in the Islamic world. These individuals were used to instigate sedition and political and social upheavals in ways that served Western interests. (*Bou Slim Saleh, 2016, p. 238*)

4. Economic and Commercial Motivation:

The West sought control over the wealth and natural resources of the Islamic East due to their importance for the prosperity of its industries and trade. The goals included depriving the region's peoples of their resources, seizing commercial markets, and eliminating local industries. To achieve this, Orientalists studied the region's history and geography, as well as the customs and traditions of Muslim peoples. (*Bou Slim Saleh, 2016, p. 239*)

Objectives of Orientalism:

1. Religious Objective:

There is no doubt that religious inclination shapes an individual's life and governs their behavior, often driving them to seek elevation and achieve noble goals. The role of religious motives in the emergence of Orientalism, the birth of its philosophy, its orientations, and its influence on its trajectory is well established. Rudi Paret points out that the main objective behind the efforts of Orientalists in the early stages of Orientalism particularly from the 12th century CE onward was missionary work. He defined it as: "*Convincing Muslims in their own language of the falsehood of Islam, and attracting them to the Christian religion, which at the time was viewed by Westerners as Islam's sole adversary and a religion unworthy of spreading.*"

This deeply influenced the goals of Orientalism, making one of its most prominent aims to "*undermine the ideals and noble values of Islam*" on one hand, (*Muhammad Al-Bahi, n.d., p. 533*) and to affirm the superiority and greatness of Western ideals on the other. It portrayed any call to adhere to Islam as backward and reactionary.

Although Orientalism began under the encouragement of the Church and clergy, religious interest remained its first and foremost objective. When Christians especially churchmen witnessed Islam sweeping through regions once dominated by Christianity, and people flocking to Islam not only for its tolerance but also for its simplicity, clarity, and comprehensive nature as a life system, they became alarmed. Islam emerged at a time when the world was facing an intellectual and spiritual crisis, offering people a transition from darkness to light, from falsehood to truth, from fanaticism to tolerance, and from destruction to life. Within a century, it accomplished what others had failed to achieve over centuries. People, even non-Muslims, began flocking to its centers and institutions for learning—among them Gerbert, Scott, Bacon, and others. This led Christian clergy to fear for their social and political status in the Christian world, prompting them to oppose Islam, especially since it had no clerical class as found in Christianity. (*Muhammad Al-Bahi, n.d., p. 534*)

2. Scientific Objective:

A large number of Orientalists approached Orientalism out of a desire to explore the civilizations, religions, cultures, and languages of other nations. They translated major Islamic works from Arabic into Spanish, Hebrew, and Latin many of whom perceived Arabic as a language of culture, literature, and civilization. They found the Qur'an at the pinnacle of this language and devoted themselves to its study purely out of scientific curiosity driven by a quest for knowledge, leaving behind great and commendable contributions.

Many Orientalists focused their efforts on studying Arabic texts, translating books of hadith and tafsir, studying the Arabic language, and compiling dictionaries. Europe would not have been able to rise without first accessing the achievements of Islamic civilization in all scientific fields.

It is certain that pure scientific objectives were achieved by some Orientalists who, motivated by curiosity and admiration for the Islamic message and its realistic teachings, wrote about Islam with sincerity and without prejudice. Various sources document a considerable number of individuals who, after engaging with Islam, abandoned their initial aims. Some changed their names, others secretly converted to Islam, and some remained in their faith but maintained respect, objectivity, and fairness toward Islam and Muslims. However, such integrity often negatively affected their academic careers: they were excluded from conferences and seminars, their work was not published in Orientalist journals, and they were denied opportunities to work in Arabic and Islamic studies centers. Rarely did they even receive appreciation from Muslims. Moreover, they were often deprived of financial support, forcing them to rely on personal resources. In this regard, Omar Awda Al-Khatib notes: "*Such integrity can only be maintained when one has the financial means to pursue Orientalism honestly and faithfully, since unbiased research is neither welcomed by clergy nor politicians, nor by the majority of fanatical Christian readers. Thus, it brings no profit or financial return, which explains the rarity of such individuals among Orientalists.*" (*Abd Al-Aali Ahmamu, 13/06/2018, p. 14*)

3. Political-Colonial Objective:

At its inception, Orientalism had no direct ties to colonial ideology and was primarily driven by religious and scientific motives. During this phase, the Church and its institutions were the primary vessels for Orientalist activity, providing direction and resources.

When colonialist thought swept through Europe guided by racial theories led by Renan and his peers and when European nations set their sights on colonizing the Eastern world, they found themselves in need of extensive knowledge to realize their ambitions. Orientalists provided ready-made frameworks strongly linked to the East and were well-versed in its languages, cultures, and history thus paving the way for colonial expansion. At this point, Orientalism and colonialism merged, ushering Orientalists into a new phase: the colonial phase.

Although these motivations had deep historical roots dating back to before Christ and evolved thereafter, they became more pronounced as Arab influence expanded, Islam dominated former empires, and reached into parts of Europe. Confronted with this reality, the West began preparing for a decisive struggle, seeking to understand and surpass Islam by learning its language, history, and civilization. This was followed by crusading adventures centuries of warfare against Islam without success until the final expulsion of Muslims from Al-Andalus.

The colonial motivation for Orientalism emerged from the Crusades, which were Europe's first colonial campaign outside its borders against the East. Western Europe projected its internal weaknesses onto the Arab Islamic East, seeking solutions to its own religious, social, and economic crises through wars waged by Crusader armies across the Muslim East. After widespread corruption plagued both the Church and society, Pope Urban II (1088–1099) proposed a bold venture that would unify the Christian world under a common cause. In his famous speech at the Council of Clermont, he declared:

“Rise up and turn your weapons, which you have been using against your brothers, toward your enemies the enemies of Christianity. You oppress orphans and widows, murder and rape, plunder the people on the roads, and accept bribes to kill fellow Christians, shedding their blood without fear or shame. You are like vultures drawn to the stench of human corpses victims of your greed. Rise up, then, and fight not your Christian brothers, but your enemies who have taken Jerusalem. Fight under the banner of Christ, your only leader. Redeem yourselves you who are guilty of the vilest sins. This is God's will.” (Saeed Abdel Fattah Ashour, 2010, p. 23)

Chronology of the Concept and Its Development:

As for Orientalism in the modern period, it is evident that Arab Renaissance intellectuals approached it through two main channels: the first was through reading Orientalist texts, and the second was through academic training. Many Renaissance thinkers studied under Orientalists in both Arab and European universities and were influenced by the ideas instilled in them this influence varied in terms of perspectives and issues, as well as in methodology and modes of analysis. The degree of influence from Orientalists increased among those who studied under them at universities. (Belkrez, Abdelilah – 2017, pp. 26–27)

This led to a kind of fascination with Orientalism, although we must not overlook the critical dimension that followed this initial phase. This critical moment marked the emergence of epistemological questioning, and "Abdelrahman Badawi" best represented this moment before Edward Said, through his various translations of Orientalist works and his extensive discussions of their views.

So, how did Edward Said express his critique of the centrality of European culture through Orientalism? Or rather, how did Edward Said critique Western culture through his criticism of Orientalist discourse?

Edward Said and the Mechanisms of Critique:

Edward W. Said (Edward Wadih Said)

Born on November 1, 1935, and died in September 2003 in New York, Edward Said is considered one of the most prominent Palestinian and even Arab intellectuals of the twentieth century, whether in terms of the depth of his influence or the diversity of his activities. Some even regard him as one of the ten most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. He was one of the founding figures of postcolonial studies, a university professor of literary criticism and comparative literature at Columbia University in New York, and an advocate for the rights of the Palestinian people. Robert Fisk described him as "the most powerful voice in defense of the Palestinian cause." (Wikipedia, accessed on 20-08-2023 – <https://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki>)

Edward Said begins his famous work *Orientalism – Knowledge – Power – Construction* with an introduction in which he outlines the context of its writing and his intellectual preoccupations. This is followed by the translator Kamal Abu Deeb's preface, in which he summarizes the book's content and presents his own understanding of the questions that Said sought to raise through it. Abu Deeb begins by describing it as a revolution in knowledge that deconstructs Western culture and exposes the mechanisms of power, domination, and control exercised over it, labeling it a form of "absolute power over the outside."

Said's questions are not so much about the history of Orientalism as they are a confrontation with it and its mechanisms an inquiry into self-awareness and the awareness of the Other, and the distinctions constructed between the two. There is oppression exercised over both culture and the Other.

Said's project seeks to uncover the nature of knowledge, power, and the tyranny exercised by discourse, as well as the relations of power in a Foucauldian manner. He proposes a fundamental framework: that the East is a constructed and composed entity, not a natural reality; it is defined through geographical, religious, racial, or cultural classifications and the West holds the sole perspective through which this study is carried out.

At the end of the study, he raises relational questions, the most important of which is: How does one represent other cultures? This question encompasses a conceptual entanglement involving race, religion, culture, history, and more. Said continues to raise questions such as: How do ideas acquire authority? leading to a discussion on the East's awareness of itself through the West's perception of it. He calls for refuting this perception by rediscovering the self in its historical and civilizational dimensions, rather than through the Other.

Here, he poses the question of the importance of the intellectual's critical consciousness especially oppositional critical awareness.

Mechanisms of Critique Presented by Edward Said

Edward Said based his reading of the structure of *Orientalism* on several foundations.

- **First:** He focused on the internal consistency and coherence of *Orientalism* and its ideas about the East, or as he says: "Disraeli's East as a specific field of activity, the East as a craft or profession, regardless of any actual correspondence with the real or actual East." This internal consistency and coherence is what confirms the existence of a pre-established and dominant structure among Orientalists in their treatment, description, and construction of the East regardless of the actual and

historical transformations that the East undergoes. Here, Orientalists "treat the East as an essentialist structure incapable of change or transformation, except within the boundaries set and permitted by the Orientalists themselves."

Said criticized the way Orientalists depicted the East as a static, backward, and strange space, in contrast to portraying the West as advanced, rational, and civilized. This binary reinforced the "superiority of the West" in contrast to the "inferiority of the East."

Through his study, Said attempts to reveal the contradiction between what Orientalists claim, on the one hand, and the actual condition of the Eastern societies they represent, on the other. He is as much concerned with understanding and analyzing the Orientalist discourse itself as a closed, self-sufficient structure armed with imperial power as he is with the societies in question. The importance of this book lies in its study of the entire set of cultural structures that represent the East from a Western perspective. (See: "A Reading in Edward Said's Orientalism," accessed August 23, 2023, at 19:55 – <https://www.mominoun.com/>)

- **Second:** The relationship between East and West must be studied as one of power and domination; Orientalism is nothing but a hegemonic discourse that served as a tool for political and cultural control over the East. The East was Orientalized by the West, where Said argues that the West was the one that defined, distinguished, and differentiated between two constructs: East and West.

In the opening of his book, Said cites a significant quote by Karl Marx, in which Marx says of the Eastern peoples: "They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented."

Said relied on many Orientalist writings throughout the pages of his book from the eighteenth century to the present such as the writings of Lord Balfour, the *Description de l'Égypte* encyclopedia, and the novels of Flaubert, in order to demonstrate the relationship between power and domination in Orientalist discourse from the eighteenth century until now. The key point is that knowledge was formed alongside military and political power, leading the East to accept the superiority and subjugation of the West. (Bint Hamid Al-Ghafriyah, Maryam, 2016 – Issue No. 10)

CONCLUSION:

Through the elements of critique presented by Said, it becomes clear that Orientalism is not an objective science, but rather a discourse founded on relations of power and domination, aiming to affirm the West's superiority over the East. It served as a tool of colonial hegemony and was not merely a neutral cognitive practice, but rather part of a colonial project of domination. Modern colonialism is, in fact, a result of the studies produced by Orientalists.

One of the most significant outcomes of Said's critique is his revelation of the exclusionary nature of Eurocentrism, which treated its own culture as a universal reference point for the entire world. Orientalist knowledge was based on the assumption that the West represents the highest model of civilization. Yet, through this field of knowledge, the West exercised epistemic violence against the East, to the extent of making it believe that Western superiority was inevitable, and that the only option was to accept this status under the pretext of inferiority imposed upon it.

The East is thus called upon to reshape the foundations of its own identity both self and epistemological and not to submit to the narratives constructed by the West, which were neither innocent nor neutral, as claimed. Said opened the way for Easterners to redefine themselves beyond

the stereotypes imposed by the Orientalist discourse. He empowered the East and its intellectuals with the necessity of regaining control in shaping their cultural identity.

Since Orientalist discourse relied on the binary of East/West, which establishes a clear distinction between the two presenting the East as backward and the West as advanced it justified colonial intervention under the pretext of “civilizing.” That is, the East was always portrayed as in need of the West’s mind to modernize and develop it.

One of the manifestations of the centrality of the European self is that the East was never an active agent in producing its self-image. In the end, Eurocentric self-centrality constitutes the epistemological foundation upon which Orientalists built their discourse and through which they established their hegemony.

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