



MAPPING SOCIO-POLITICAL REALITIES: ARUN JOSHI'S THE APPRENTICE

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi's *The Apprentice* throws a flood of on a rotten, rudderless, materialistic society with its corrupt amassing of wealth. Ratan, the protagonist, uses the confessional mode to express existentialist phase amid the social reality. As he comes face to face with social reality and realizes phony social norms and consequently suffers like the typical existentialist characters. He exposes the real picture of the society he lives in. On the other hand, he is presented as a victim of the circumstances. Corruption, selfishness, dishonesty are the ways of the society that make him a money minded person. His absurd choice of accepting bribe makes him a man of crisis of character and lends him towards dread despair of his soul. Therefore, *The Apprentice* is a stark exposure of the sordid social corruption, a powerful indictment of the tyranny of the bureaucratic organization, defeated moral values which depersonalizes man and stifles his human element.

Key Words: Amassing, Confessional, Sordid, Indictment, Bureaucratic, etc.

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Regarded as an avant-garde novelist in the annals of Indian English fiction, ArunJoshi(1939-93), who endeavours to make us understand the socio-political realities of life through his writing, exploits a very potent issue of his time "a maladjusted individual pitted against an insane, lopsided society..." (Ghosh,30). *The Apprentice* (1974), which is also a cry of the human conscience in the sick Indian social macrocosm, probes deeper into the real situation of Indian society. Presenting the stark and naked reality of the social and political corruption, his heroes are the sensitive individuals resulting from the confusion of values in the society in which they live. In this novel, Joshi delineates the agonizing predicament of his protagonist, RatanRathor, who feels confused and lost in a world full of chaos, corruption, hypocrisy and absurdity. Feeling powerless and alienated from his own self as well as his surroundings, he becomes a victim of the

society. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh observes: "Crisis in the soul of an individual who is entangled in the mess of contemporary life with its confusion of values and moral anarchy and his untiring quest for a remedy lie at the core of Arun Joshi's exploration of human reality in *The Apprentice*" (90). It is the story of an individual with a guilty conscience, "a man without honour... without shame... a man of our times" (*The Apprentice*, 141) trying painstakingly to retrieve his lost innocence and honour. At the same time, it is a severe indictment of a rotten, rudderless, materialistic society with its unscrupulous amassing of wealth in defiance of the sanctity of means and its absurd pursuit of success in career. The novel is about the protagonist's conformity to, and victimization by a crooked and corrupt society, thereby lending it a wider social relevance. The other important thing is about the inevitability of evil boomeranging on the evil doer.

Despite the chaotic circumstances the choice always lies with the individual, and when one deliberately chooses evil, it boomerangs.

The Apprentice seems to be largely influenced by Albert Camus's *The Fall* as the protagonists of the two novels use the confessional mode to express existing dilemma amid and social reality. The narrative consists of a long confessional monologue addressed to a young college student from Punjab by RatanRathor, a government official who also hails from the Punjab. He relates to the student the story of his full over a period of three months during the time he was rehearsing for the NCC Parade on the Republic Day. The novel concerns the miserable plight of the contemporary man "sailing about in a confused society without norms, without direction, without even, perhaps, a purpose" (70). RatanRathor, who is both the hero and anti-hero of the novel, probes into his inner life and exposes the treachery, pettiness, chicken-heartedness and the degeneration of his own character. He fully conforms to the doctrine that man forms his essence in the life he chooses to lead, and in his choice lies his freedom. He is a man of the world, pragmatic to the core and rises in the hierarchy by making deals and sucking up to the bosses. It reminds us of Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* by its painful presentation of the corrupt social and political scene. As RatanRathor, coming face to face with the social reality, conforms to the phony social norms and subsequently suffers like typical existentialist characters. He is like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, brought to disaster by the false values of contemporary society.

RatanRathor, like Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, and Jean-Baptiste Clamence in Albert Camus's *The Fall*, detains a young national cadet to narrate to him the gruesome details of his own hypocrisy, cowardice, corruption, degeneration, debauchery and, finally, his great betrayal. He holds his own portrait as a mirror to his contemporaries, "the image of all and of no one" (102). The confessional note becomes persistent in *The Apprentice* in which the protagonist reflects upon his wasteful past after Brigadier's death and gives as an insight into his degenerate soul to gain some

perception of truth in life. As Peter M. Axthelm defines the confessional novel as one which "presents a hero, at some point in his life, examining his past as well as his innermost thoughts, in an attempt to achieve some form of perception" (8). The important aspect of the novel is that RatanRathor fails to confess his guilt or crime before anybody except the young student for the latter reminds him of his father: "You look a little like him (Ratan's father), if I may take the liberty of mentioning. Fifty years younger, of course, but grave and clear eyed. Not a washout like me" (7). His father's selfless sacrifice had made such an indelible impression on his psyche that the memory kept haunting Ratan all his life. It is to the image of his father that he is making this honest confession of his fall and degeneration. *The Apprentice* can be divided into three phases as H.M. Prasad remarks:

The novel enacts three stages in the human divine comedy of Ratan. The pre-independence period is the dawn, the period of idealism, the phase of innocence, the post-independence India is the broad day light of experience, the inferno of corruption, the last part the area of expiation, is the door to the purgatory. (65)

Ratan, a child of double inheritance, was brought up in an atmosphere of antithetical philosophies of life. On the one hand is the patriotic and ideal world of his father and, on the other, is the worldly wisdom of his mother. The advice of his father keeps singing in his ears: "To be good ! Respected ! To be of use!" (18). Ratan's mother, a tubercular woman, with a pragmatic attitude towards life tells him to earn money: "Don't fool yourself, son... Man without money was a man without worth. Many things were great in life, but the greatest of them all was money" (19). She further tells him: "It was not patriotism but money-that brought respect and brought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed. There were many laws but money was law unto itself" (19). Ratan is torn between these two conflicting choices-one shown by his idealist and patriotic father, the other by his down-to-earth mother. The character of Ratan further indicates how the norms of society make him a money-

mindful man and how he gives up his father's ideals and follows his mother's views.

The greatest flaw in Ratan's character is his cowardice. As his higher self goads him to emulate his father's example, his lower-self dictates him to pursue, as his father calls, "careers and bourgeois filth" (39), and torn between the two he is reduced to a split personality. Another person whose memory keeps haunting him all his life is that of the Brigadier. His memory is associated with boyhood escapades amid idyllic setting, the cross-country they undertook together. He remembers how the Brigadier fought for Ratan when half a dozen miscreants accost him while the two were returning after one of their boyhood escapades Ratan feels the Brigadier's selfless love for "... me who no one had fought for" (16). He felt "I was not alone amidst the sugarcane, abandoned on the planet" (16). This incident proves another contrast to his life after the "fall" which has resulted in the loss of paradisiacal innocence. An ironic situation is created when Ratan decides to join Subash Chandra Bose's army: "I am very excited. I am on my way to greatness about to lay the foundations of the glorious future" (20). As he sets out on his promising journey, with every mile that he traverses, his courage gives in, and "sweating and exhausted, in sight of his destination, he set in a mangrove and wept" (21). This was the first time he falls prey to his lower self, indicative of the future that awaits him. His tubercular mother advises him to seek a job in Delhi with the help of his father's friends who now were well established and wielded some clout in the political corridors. "Tight in stomach, no doubt, but quite full of hopes", he goes to Delhi where to fail would have been "the sign of the greatest incompetence" (29). He makes a futile search for a job and his back has nearly broken by the world's unjust thrashing. Wherever he went, he was "examined, interviewed, interrogated", only to be "rejected" (29).

Now Ratan realizes that sacrifice, hard labour, honesty have no value and this is the sordid reality of the contemporary society. He finds that martyrs like his father and the Gandhian values they had fought for have been replaced, as Victor Anant says, "by opportunism, treachery, cowardice, hypocrisy and wit" (311-312). The nation his father

had laid his life for was a nation of frustrated people. As M.K. Naik writes:

The most disturbing phenomenon on the socio-political scene has been the steady erosion of the idealism of the days of freedom struggle, the new gods of self-aggrandizement and affluence having rather too easily dethroned those of selfless service and dedication to a cause. (189)

In one of his anguished outbursts, Ratan tells the student: "There is nothing in the world as sad as the end of hope. Not even the death" (25). His sojourn for a few weeks at Delhi changed him altogether as he confesses: "I had added a new dimension to my life. I had become, at the age of twenty one a hypocrite and a liar; in short, a sham" (27). He now loses his identity in the corrupted society and with this all started to crumble. RatanRathor never blames others for his debasement and failure, though they might actually be at fault. He never shrinks from personal responsibility. Dr. Faustus also does not put the blame for his fall on his parents. Shrinath aptly opines: "*The Apprentice* shows a remarkable self-awareness in ruthlessly exposing his over-subtle ties, fads, self-deceptions, preoccupations, ego and boredom of the dark phase of his life." (129)

Although he remains estranged from the society devoid of any hope or promise, he acclimatized himself to it. He is able to procure a job of a temporary clerk in the department of war purchases, with the assistance from a fellow in-dweller. Thereafter, like a careerist, he devotes himself wholeheartedly to the secret cult of career in utter defiance of the purity of means. He soon forgets his friends as he considered himself superior to them in education, in polish, in even intelligence. It is not through diligence and efficiency, but through obedience, docility, servility, flattery, cunningness and shameless sucking up to the boos that helps him reach higher than others. Ratan frankly confesses: "Some survive through defiance, others through ability. Still others through obedience, by becoming servants to the powers of the world" (33). He is branded a whore, an upstart,

by his colleagues, but this doesn't affect him as he has turned shameless. He tells the young student:

I am a thick-skin now, a thick skin and a washout but believe me, my friend, I too have had thoughts such as these. But what was to be done? One had to live. And, to live one had to make a living. And, how was a living to be made except through careers. (39)

Here he exposes the atrocities of the world through self-mockery and self-ridicule. Throughout the novel it has been seen that Ratan had so ambitious that he does not hesitate to betray his colleagues for a promise of confirmation from his bosses. The insults hurled on him by his friends had the least effect on him. "One day they refused my tea. It was a considerable snub as such things go, but, to my surprise, I discovered that it made no difference to me" (40). A definite degeneration had set in, and the higher he rose in echelons of power, the lower his character fell and vice-versa. The Gandhian purity of means which his father believed in, was replaced by the Machiavellian dedication to the end. His fall can be gauged from two incidents concerning contractors when he was new to the job. Ratan was offered a bribe of ten thousand rupees to change his note on the file of the contractor in question. He turned down the offer although he needed money most, and felt proud and self-righteous. In another incident, he takes a big sum for changing his note on another contractor's file, although he had no need for money. In the first incident the contractor went bankrupt, and Ratan came face to face with anarchy of the world.

The utter servility people showed to him also amazed him. He was confused by the ways of the world and confided his doubts and fears to the Superintendent, his mentor. But the latter's reply leads to Ratan's confusion worse confounded: "You know, Rathor, he said, nothing but God exists. You can be certain only of Him" (42). He further says, "there was point in looking for truths aside from the truth of God. Money in the world always changed hands. God was only concerned with what one did with the money" (42-43). But Ratan couldn't take an explanation that took no cognizance of the purity of

means and the consequences of one's actions. His perplexity knew no bounds:

Was graft, in His eyes, the same as any other money? And what about the consequences, consequences for what was termed as the "character", of the given and taker? Or, was 'Character' just a myth that I had somehow picked up? (43)

Even his Superintendent advises him to become totally a social person. He says, "keep your ears open.... but never let them know that you know. And don't take to heart what you hear.... Above all, don't take things to heart" (47). He follow this blindly and becomes a faker. This fake society makes him a master-fake. Because of his efforts, he becomes a valued employee and he recognizes himself superior. RatanRathor understands that a successful career can't be realized through diligence and sincerity but through flattery and cunning. His apprenticeship with the world gives him the realization that it "is not the atom or the sun or God or sex that is at the heart of the universe: it is DEALS" (48). In one such deal, he marries the Superintendent's niece, gets his job confirmed, and is upgraded as an assistant with a dozen clerks under him. Later, he is made an officer in the department. Though he marries and gets promoted, he suffers from humiliation. After many "nights of humiliation, nights when you are ashamed of something, ashamed of yourself, when the darkness is full of insults, pointing fingers and mocking laughters" (47) an intense inner conflict, almost Hamletian rages with in him.

RatanRathor exercises his choice to pursue his material ends. Now he readily accepts bribes, owns a car, a flat of his own, a refrigerator, and also twenty thousand rupees in the bank. But the irony is, the more he gets, the more he wants. The more money he accumulated, the more he was dissatisfied and the more he was determined to enjoy life. He is all praise for the Superintendent who has taught him the secrets of the trade. His discontent was troublesome for him. His hypocrisy knows no bounds and the tragedy is that he has been gradually sinking into the abyss of darkness, corruption, exploitation and bourgeois filth, and yet he thinks he is swimming. As he himself confesses :

"We are defeated and we celebrate victory! God exists and doesn't mind graft! We sink and we think we are swimming" (50). Soon after this, he confides to the young man an anti-climatic personal revelation: "You see, to cut a long story short, just before the war started I took a bribe. An enormous bribe. Yes, Mr. Crisis of Character took an enormous bribe. No more, no less" (57).

This is an irony that the son of a freedom fighter runs after a bureaucratic career, and he becomes corrupt and acts against national interest. A month before the Chinese invasion Ratan cleared a huge pile of useless war materials lying in Bombay. This results in the Brigadier's abandoning the post for which he is later court-martialled, and in a great depression commits suicide. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh critically remarks: "The Brigadier could not wait for Ratan's martyrdom he committed suicide" (115). This incident kept haunting Ratan all his life like a dead albatross. He is unable to pin down the motive behind his act, like the Ancient Mariner's killing of the innocent albatross. He was in real need of some kind of consolation, and he seeks solace from the annals of corruption.

Here he describes that the whole system of the society was involved in the corruption. From a peon to police officer, and from doctor to politician, everybody was sinking in the annals of corruption. Taking some solace from these he takes bribe for clearing a consignment of sub-standard war material meant for the war front. He finds every official making money out of the heaven sent opportunities provided by a war. The words of a Member of Parliament shocked him when the M.P. told him that nobody lost a war these days. To be candid he whispered who cared for the wilderness that we are quarrelling over. What surprises him most is that Himmat Singh, the Sheikh, conducts his operations for neither money nor power but in order only to destroy. Like Camus's Caligula, he is out to destroy the world that made a whore of his mother. Like Caligula, he derives sadistic pleasure in destroying everything from top to bottom from one end of the continent to the other. The Sheikh tells Ratan:

This country had two kinds of people.... The rulers and the ruled. The rulers were a fraud... phoney people who knew only how

to make speeches, be cruel, and feather their nests, people who made a mess of things, then went off without knowing how to clean it up. The ruled were brainless. (80) Ratan is afraid of accepting bribe for fear of losing respect in the eyes of the society but Sheikh sets his fear at rest and said that there was no such book Rathor—what existed—was not written by God but by a silly society that would do anything for money. He accepts the offer with a feeling that something had gone wrong with his life. He wasn't where he belonged. His mental state is like that of the protagonist in Camus's *The Fall* when the latter says, "yet I was unhappy about this as if I had violated the code of hour" (41). Though he consoles himself by what he sees ministers, secretaries and official sunk deep in the corruption- he is worried about the sharp slump in people's morality. As Ratan says, "I felt choked, oppressed, rebellious but tied up totally in knots" (62-63). It is this conflict that provides existential dimension to the novel. The novel being socio-political treatise on post-independence India is "the author's sense of the concrete and his eye on situation and character" (Srinath,129).

He looks into the causes of his indulgence in this nefarious act, and recounts how the gears began to slip after his country's tryst with destiny. After India's independence, the people's dream of prosperous and strong nation remained unfulfilled leading to disappointment. The corridors of power became a hot bed of politics. Flouting the self laid sanctified norms, the ministers began to give misleading statements in the parliament. A new set of politicians and statesmen surfaced occupying the centre stage: "So they had appeared again. That is if they had ever left the scene in the first place. There was the public and there were THEY" (60). On the one hand, we find Ratan a coward, a weather vane turning its head where the wind blows and on the other hand a slave of his circumstances. The wide world took him in its wake, overwhelmed him, smothered him. Despite this, Ratan is finally responsible for his deeds as he betrays his conscience. As R.G. Das remarks:

Arun Joshi appears very close to Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene and William

Golding in the sense that the act of treachery inflicts an irreparable injury upon the moral nature of man, and that a guilty Ratan lives inescapably in the presence of his conscience. He too realizes as Razumov does in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, that all a man can betray is his conscience. (43)

His self-betrayal leads him to feeling of being a non-entirety. Joshi delineates Ratan as a modern man "at once everyman and nobody" (Barret, 5). He wants to know what he really is, if not a master faker. Although he enjoys his life in Bombay, all the time he is conscious of the evils of the so-called elite suffers from. His social fall is complete when once he had merely walked into a brothel hounded by a strange disturbance. His utter vacuity and dissatisfaction is complete. Ratan's sense of insignificance and the resultant anguish at the destruction of his authentic self was not his own self and had to lick the boots of his bosses and put on smiles for their pleasure. As Tapan Kumar Ghosh aptly remarks: "He was not himself but simply a cipher in the mass existence of the crowd, a cog in the social mechanism" (106). His soul had been rendered sterile by the perverted modern civilization and by his own inherent cowardice, and he saw his soul turn to ashes.

The result of what Ratan and his likes did was that the Indo-China war was lost. The Brigadier, his friend, had to desert his post ignominiously for which he is to be court-martialled, who in utter shame commits suicide. It reminds us of Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* where the father passes a consignment of faulty cylinders for a bribe, becomes responsible for killing his own son. Although the Superintendent of Police detects his involvement and he is put behind the bars, but is subsequently released on the interference of the Secretary and the Minister who were accomplices in the crime which manifests that there was a hold of evil people in the arena of society and politics. Though he is released his guilty conscience haunted him as to his own identity – "Was I the murderer they said I was"? (106) The absurdity of his existence consequent upon his being alone in this wide world makes him "descend into madness", "immobilized, fuddled, tongueless, ununderstood, laughed at" (124). For

the Brigadier's death, Ratan makes himself and Himmat Singh fully responsible. He takes a gun and decides to kill the Sheikh but the Sheikh discloses the fact that the whole idea of clearing the substandard consignment had originated not with Himmat Singh but with the Minister and the Secretary, and they picked Ratan as a pawn because he was a spineless flunkey. Actually Ratan had become as Sheikh tells him, "the victim of the most ancient jokes that man had ever played upon them", and that he had been "sold over, double crossed" (130) by the Secretary himself.

Himmat Singh pronounces his final verdict on Ratan's character: "You are bogus, RatanRathor... from top to bottom. Your work, your religion, your friendships, your honour, nothing but a pile of dung. Nothing but poses, a bundle of shams" (131). This is how, Ratan becomes a puppet in the hands of politicians and officers. This is what, Arun Joshi presents through Ratan and his mother, who are mere a victim than a follower of society. "In such a diseased world devoid of any value system as well as any principle of conduct, the efforts of the lost, lonely individual to understand the meaning and purpose of his existence take on the proportion of tragedy" (Ghosh 106). It was this very society which had made Sheikh's mother a whore and his sister a vagrant and so vindictively he sold his soul to the devil. Gandhiji says that everybody knows the truth but few dare to follow it. Ratan now realizes that the villain lay within him. As he says:

...to know good, and to know evil and to choose evil: what greater betrayal of the spirit is there? And who does this choosing I ask you? Who does this choosing but ourselves. And yet we roam the world, beating our breasts, looking for scapegoats." (137)

Ratan takes stock of his life and realizes that the twenty years he spent in the city were a waste. Twenty years earlier, he had come to this city, to learn, to work, and in the process to make his mark. He had come full of hope, ambition, a good will that was left was a pile of dung. For the first time, his father's memory becomes well pronounced: "Father, Father what have I done"? (134) But at last takes the blame upon himself, his sense of shame

helps him in his moral awakening. Like the Ancient Mariner who later begins to love all creatures of nature in him a definite transformation takes place. Like Mahatma Gandhi, Arun Joshi believes that man's transformation lies in man himself. At the Sheikh's suggestion Ratan decides to kill the secretary, but realizing that had his father been in his stead he wouldn't thought of killing the Secretary, avoids it: "He would not have killed this man... because it would have been too much of a simplification, too primitive a solution" (136).

That very night the Sheikh takes Ratan to a shack in the shanty town where his mother lived and died as a whore. He wanted to avenge himself of his mother's tragic death. Unlike Ratan, he does not sell himself, but only becomes an instrument of the Devil. The Sheikh's mother was shocked at his anti-social ways and cursed him that God's darkness has come over him. And Himmat Singh would give a poignant cry:

But if it was God's darkness. What was the cure? What was the cure of a crooked world. None, perhaps. Revolution perhaps... perhaps God himself God alone remove his darkness. But where was God? What was God? And Where? (140)

The darkest part of Ratan's confession comes on the night before the Republic Day, as he himself says that it is a secret darker than the darkness of the night. When he visits to the hospital to see the Brigadier but is denied admittance: "Great friends, they told him, were usually the most harmful" (92). When he encounters the multitude of maimed soldiers whose very respectable existence was at stake, he is shocked at the devastation he and his likes wrought upon the soldiers. It is this encounter which impels him to be good. To make good the loss he decides to confess, but when the moment comes to make amends, he retraces his steps. He goes to the temple to seek some solace and moral courage, but to his great consternation the malignant tentacles of corruption had the temple as well in its grip. The priest, the agent of the God, offered him bribe to save his son, a dishonest contractor, from punishment for having mixed too much of sand in the mortar. He now knew religion was not a remedy for his malaise.

Ratan was aware that there was no cure to the crooked ways of the world. One could only reform oneself. Ratan hasn't lost hope and as the Sheikh tells Ratan: "My soul was killed, you put yours at pawn. But the souls that were pawned could perhaps be retrieved", (140) that he should try to "put yourself to use.... It might be too late" (141). He firmly decides upon putting himself to social use and thereby expiates his sin. But the question is how to put oneself to social use and to have faith in what kind of God. According to Gandhi, the greatest religion of man was to put oneself to selfless service which only suffering and sacrifice can make possible. He chooses to have complete faith in God and selfless social service. Leaving the world to its incorrigible crooked ways, every morning he goes to the temple to wipe the shoes of the congregation and begs forgiveness of all those whom he had harmed deliberately or unwittingly:

I never enter the temple. I am not concerned with what goes in there. I stand at the door step and I say things. Be good, I tell myself, Be good. Be decent. Be of use. Then I beg forgiveness of a large host: my father, my mother, the Brigadier, the unknown dead of the war, of those whom I harmed, with deliberation and with cunning, of all those have been the victims of my cleverness, those whom I could have helped and did not. (143)

Here we find RatanRathor's metamorphosis from Marlowe's Dr. Faustus to Goethe's Faust towards the end. Like Faust and unlike Dr. Faustus, he retrieves his lost soul by putting himself to social use. He remembers his father's words that whatever you do touches someone somewhere. Ratan starts anew with a firm faith in life and himself. As he himself says that he knows it is too late in the day but one must try and not lost heart, not yield, at any cost, to despair. Ratan expresses the hope that the young generation of the unpolluted listener like him might yet hold back the tide and if they are willing to learn from the follies of their elders then get ready for sacrifice. The novel ends at dawn, symbolic of Ratan's transformation and regeneration.

In the final analysis, the novel is a critical indictment of a rotten, rudderless, materialistic

society with its corrupt amassing of wealth. In the novel, the protagonist uses the confessional mode to express existentialist phase amid the social reality. As Ratan comes face to face with social reality and realizes phony social norms and consequently suffers like the typical existentialist characters. So, there is no doubt that *The Apprentice* presents a true picture of a corrupt society where corruption is the centre. There is no doubt that Ratan exposes the real picture of the society in which he lives. On the other hand, he is presented as a victim of the circumstances. Corruption, selfishness, dishonesty are the ways of the society and these ways make him a money minded person. His absurd choice of accepting bribe makes him a man of crisis of character and lends him towards dread despair of his soul. Therefore, *The Apprentice* is a stark exposure of the sordid social corruption, a powerful indictment of the tyranny of the bureaucratic organization, defeated moral values that depersonalizes man and stifles his human element.

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