

## Balancing Life: A Study of Leila Seth's *On Balance*

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Leila Seth's *On Balance* (2003) is an autobiography of a judicial luminary whose crown of career is studded with numerous jewels of public accomplishments. Her life-narrative depicts how she has obtruded upon the uninterrupted circumference of the purely male bastion of the judiciary in order to establish her own regime in public sphere and how she has been implemental in pioneering socio-cultural and legal transformation in Indian society. As put by A.O.J. Cockshut, "How did I become what I am?" (*Art of Autobiography* 16), this paper will examine how Leila Seth has displayed her private and public self on balance. She has overstepped the hurdles laid in her way and has built up a distinguished career gilded with a list of achievements to her credit and simultaneously she has maintained her family life and domestic responsibilities. Leila's inclination for her family is distinct from her description of her grandmother to her granddaughters in her life-narrative and Geetha Ganapathy-Dore says, "It is exceptional in the sense that it gives us a glimpse of five generations of Indian women" (*Commonwealth* 40).

In maintaining these two roles, she has shown immense inner strength facing infinite inflictions and troubles as Sarah Gilead points out that women "in patriarchal societies are cast into the contradictory roles of culture-preserver and culture-threat" ("Emigrant Selves" 43–44). Her presence in the judiciary is synonymous to unconventional "culture threat" as she became a renowned public figure, empowering her own life and raising herself to a standard at par with men. Keeping legal profession on one side she developed herself as a conventional "culture preserver" as she maintained her traditional roles growing up as an obedient daughter, a caring wife and an affectionate mother thus equally balancing her both ends. This can be effectively diagnosable through a closer inspection of her female experiences revealed in her

autobiographical canvass. She writes in her autobiography, “I tried very hard to balance my work and home life, but sometimes it was difficult” (*On Balance* 153).

A quick glance over her public portfolio demonstrates that Seth was the topper at the London Bar Examination in 1958 and has graduated as an IAS officer in the same year. Thereafter in 1959 she enrolled herself in the Calcutta High Court and then in the Supreme Court of India. She has remained the first woman judge of the Delhi High Court appointed in 1978 and the first woman Chief Justice of Simla High Court in Himachal Pradesh appointed in 1991 and served there for 6 years. Her private life is equally conserved. The book depicts her happy marriage of over fifty years with her husband Premo, former director of Bata Shoe Company, and the experience of bringing up three remarkable children: Vikram Seth, the renowned author, Shantum, her second son, is a peace activist and Buddhist teacher, and her daughter, Aradhana, is an acclaimed documentary filmmaker. Intimate, open, and honestly written, *On Balance* is a great assortment of serious, solemn, but often humorous experiences of an exceptional woman.

Early in her life, Seth’s inner self is constructed in utter sufferings and dejection. She describes her childhood torments caused by her illness. She was compelled to continue her study from her home. Seth describes the very unusual incident of her birth. Unlike most of the Indian parents who become unhappy at the birth of a daughter, the author’s parents rejoiced at her birth, in 1930, in Lucknow and devoted hours in choosing her name: Leila, meaning ‘the playful one.’ Her father, Raj Behari Seth, a railway engineer, a dissident and staunch protester against dowry, prioritized his daughter’s education over her marriage, her freedom and free-will. But his early death left Leila, at the age of 12, to spent most of her life combating with her destiny. This vagary of life turned to be tough on Leila’s mother, Chanda who tried to bring up her children alone with little money available, but that proved to be futile. At this sudden unexpected transformation in Leila’s life, being fatherless and homeless, circumstances compelled a conversion of her inner self from being meek, timid and yielding to being valiant and courageous. She writes: “I even tried calling my father’s spirit once, and often wondered what my life would have been like had he not died so prematurely” (*On Balance* 26).

In this autobiography, the author recollects her childhood days when her widow mother sought shelter with their family friends, Mr. and Mrs. Dutt, where she grows up in the twirling lanes of Darjeeling pursuing twisting lines of her fate. Her anecdotes of her uncle and aunt Dutt,

the Irish nuns in her school, her description of Holi celebration, a terrific landslide in one horrible night over her house in Darjeeling, etc., are all afresh in her memories and are very lively represented in her life-narrative. She remembers how she had made up her mind to become a nun and enter the Christian order. Her mother was paranoid by her decision and she was taken away from Loreto Convent School in Darjeeling from where she did her schooling. She steadfastly resolved to answer it and stood first from Bengal in the Senior Cambridge examination in 1946. A large part of Leila's childhood is influenced by her mother as Seth writes: "I was a docile and submissive child brought up in my mother's shadow..." (*On Balance* 16).

The self of the author undergoes another transition as she retrieves the time of her marriage in her autobiography after her graduation when her family came to settle in Calcutta. She writes, "At nineteen, I already felt that I was being left on the shelf and marginalized, as there appeared to be no life for a girl without marriage" (*On Balance* 57). Honouring her mother's choice, Leila, then working as a stenographer at the Assam Rail Link Project, got married to Premo, who was then at the beginning of his career in the uncommon profession of shoe manufacturing in Batanagar; and this wedding proved to be a boon in disguise for her and helped her to flower later in her life. As she went abroad with her husband Premo, who was posted at the Bata Development Office in Old Bond Street in London, Seth wanted to be a Montessori teacher then. But her entry into the legal profession was by chance only, as she says in an interview to Sonam Dema:

...when I got married when I was 19 then I had Vikram, and later my husband was posted to England. Then, having one child, I thought that I am in England now and I have to do something and start a course. I also realized that with a child, husband and a family to look after, it won't be easy to go for any kind of regular course. Then I bought a book called 'Careers Encyclopedia' and I found in that book that you didn't need official attendance, that's was the only reason why I went for the Law though I had no particular interest in law. (*News Bhutan*)

As all that she needed to pursue her legal studies was to attend ten dinners only and no classes, Seth went for the law course in London with Vikram in her lap and Shantum to be born a shortly after. Singlehandedly, with her perseverance and determination, she continued her studies along

with her responsibilities of being a housewife and mother, putting in her best in whatever she did. Within three months after delivering her second baby, Leila Seth, at the age of 28, topped the London Bar examination and became the first woman to do so. In her autobiography she has merged the particular photograph that extols the 1957, 5 Nov., Star-newspaper caption: "Mother in law" which depicts her picture holding her new-born baby. The newspaper said, "Here's a mother who knows all about law – 28-years old Lucknow-born Mrs. Leila Seth. She has come top over all men candidates in the latest Bar final examinations" (*On Balance* 115).

The self of the author as a public woman takes its root at this stage of her career, and from its point of origin to its full-fledged development it suffered discrimination along gender lines in public sphere. Practising law in the 1950s in India was a challenging and herculean task for women. Upon asked in an interview by Sonam Dema about her experiences as a lawyer at the beginning of her career Seth replied:

I didn't face any discrimination when I was studying in England but certainly, when I came back to India, as a beginner you have to join a senior lawyer for one year, and then you are entitled to go and argue yourself. Later I decided to join Sachin Chaudhary's chamber (who became the finance minister later). When I met him, he asked me why I was there, and he told me that it is not a very good profession for young woman. He said for a young woman, its proper to get married first and I told him I am. Then, he said I should have a child, and I said I have. He then said it not fair to have only one child and I should have two children, so I said I have two children. So, he said to me, "well that is it, you are a persuasive young woman, come and join my chamber." You would have never asked a young man those questions; therefore, it was very difficult for a woman in such profession. (*News Bhutan*)

To the clients, legal profession appeared to be a purely male stronghold. It seemed to have glued in their minds that a woman in legal studies is a very unusual thing. This concept directly questions on women's aptitude and skill in judiciary. She writes:

I also realized, however, how difficult it was for a solicitor to brief us young female lawyers coming up in the profession. (I was reminded of an incident when a client was taken to consult a woman lawyer, and protested, 'I wanted to go to a lawyer, not a woman'). (*On Balance* 193)

Seth joined at the Patna High Court and she describes her fight over the years as the second woman lawyer there, the other one being Dharamshila. On her arrival she found that the ladies' toilet was full of cobwebs, bats, insects and flies, and was not at all in a useable condition. On her complain to Dharamshila, she surprisingly replied: "How do you intend to practice and do well in Bihar if you are afraid of bats" (*On Balance* 128). This statement moved her conscience and helped her to become an intrepid groundbreaker in her judicial profession. Later she had practiced in Calcutta and then at the age of 48 she became a judge at Delhi High Court. Everywhere in judiciary, she had withstood the turbulence of gender discrimination by the highly educated male legal practitioners. She recollects how awfully most other judges use to introduce her to the outsiders saying, 'Meet our new lady judge'. She would exasperatingly ask them, 'Why don't you introduce Justice Narinder Goswami as our new gentleman judge. Surely my sex is apparent; I am not a new lady judge but a new judge' (*On Balance* 260). Through and through situation grew tough and her existence amidst male stratagem became difficult. But in the middle of it her inner self matures with indomitable spirit, ready to combat any antagonistic circumstance on her way, as she was committed to her career.

Numerous instances of gender differentiation that she experienced in her legal profession are there in her autobiography. Seth was an attractive entity for the local multitude for being one among two women lawyers in the Patna High Court. But she was forthright and presumptuous in her dealings. The male judges were apprehensive of a woman in the judiciary and often waffled to sit with her. She ponders over this issue and writes, "I wonder how a male judge would feel and behave if he were the sole man among twenty-five women judges" (*On Balance* 414). The male chauvinistic attitude of the lawyers and their hesitation to address her as "My Lady" is sarcastically portrayed in her autobiography. Seth writes:

It was only when I sat with Justice T.P.S. Chawla, who was a barrister and a stickler for form, that he insisted that I be addressed correctly....Once, when I asked a question of a lawyer in court and he started replying, 'My Lord...',

Justice Chawla interrupted him and requested him to ‘address the court correctly’. The lawyer was foxed: he had no idea what to do. When Justice Chawla repeated and later explained what was expected of him, the lawyer decided to turn his face towards Justice Chawla and answer the question as if it had emanated from him. He thought that that was the easiest way out: address the Lord and forget the Lady. I think it was a very rare occasion when I was addressed as My Lady. (*On Balance* 259-60)

In another instance, Seth admits that though her male colleagues were amiable, initially it was difficult for them to adjust with her and to her role as a judge in their sole realm. They could hardly change their attitude towards the notion that women are only meant for kitchen, and therefore, once they stood in conformity with their proposal:

Now that we have a woman judge, we do not have to worry about the catering; she will make all the tea arrangements’. I put my foot down and said I certainly would not and that whoever was doing it earlier should continue to do so. It was quite enough that I took care of all this at home. (*On Balance* 260)

Seth never succumbed to irreverence or to an attitude of abasement for being a female judge among many a male. In one such case she daringly wrote to the Chief Justice of India without considering the backwash of her action: “I am not used to being shouted at or spoken to in an offensive tone...I would like to register my protest. I expect both to give and to receive a modicum of courtesy” (*On Balance* 312). The most memorable incident that she recollects from her professional life is that:

One day while sitting in court I was intently reading a judgement....I heard some shuffling of feet and the soft murmur of many voices. I looked up and found the courtroom absolutely packed with dozens of people standing everywhere, staring at me. I asked my reader whether any specially newsworthy case had suddenly been assigned to me. He replied: ‘Oh no, no. This crowd is a group of farmers whom Prime Minister Charan Singh has invited to Delhi to see the sights. They have just visited the zoo: and now they have come to see the woman judge in the Delhi High Court’. (*On Balance* 261-62)

With a woman in the judiciary, expectations of favouritism of the women lawyers started rising high. But they were stupefied to find women litigants were devoid of privileges from the hands of Seth. On one occasion, on meeting her friend, Lily Thomas, at a social gathering, she was asked, “What kind of a woman judge are you that you don’t give any special weightage to women? We had such high hopes of you”. Seth promptly replied: “...though I could emphathise with women, I was a judge and had to decide matters in accordance with the law. I held an even balance: I was not a judge for either women or men” (*On Balance* 261).

With an efficient hand, Seth has conducted a number of issues related to Tax, Civil, Company and Criminal cases and even matrimonial suits and writ petitions. Her seriousness, sense of responsibility, faith on her capability and her potential of being industrious augmented her territory and she earned her fame for being the first woman to become Chief Justice of a High Court in Himachal Pradesh. At this time she found that authority and power holds the thread of society and therefore when a woman conquers and comes in power, though the road to her success is not a bed of roses, then the line of discrimination on the basis of gender becomes gradually blurred for her. She writes:

Living in Simla on my own as Chief Justice, I found that the household revolved around my needs.....In my earlier homes, my needs had always been considered last. The man of the house, whatever his job, was treated in a special manner; everything revolved around his needs, and it was accepted that he could never be disturbed when he was working. On the other hand, I, as a working woman, was treated differently....At Simla, for the first time, I felt like a person in my own right – and this attitude of the staff somehow also rubbed off on my family when they came to visit. (*On Balance* 334)

This gave her opportunity to work for the marginalized and traumatized in the society, and she brought forward legal literacy among women. She writes about her experiences when she was called to direct an enquiry commission that examined the death of Rajan Pillai, the biscuit king, in prison. About whom she articulates: “Who could have guessed that a man who...lived in a fabulous house in Ridout Road in Singapore and possessed beautiful homes and cashew plantations should have his permanent address shown in the post-mortem report as Jail No.4, Tihar, New Delhi” (*On Balance* 385-86). Seth was also the member of 15<sup>th</sup> Law Commission of



India till 2000. There are references in her autobiography that she has worked on a large number of subjects like corruption in judiciary, equal rights for daughters in joint family property under the Hindu Succession Act, gender discrimination in judicial system, amendments on the educational and constitutional law, etc.

The evolution of her public self that grows from her glorious professional accomplishments requires an analysis of the ontogenesis of her private self as both her public and private self stand as a fabricator of each other. The author's private self is developed with her marriage and motherhood. In this autobiography, Leila has portrayed her efficient entwining of family life with that of professional, striking a balance to set equilibrium between the two. Often she has been flummoxed in dilemma, she writes:

As I established my legal practice, there were times when I had to choose between giving priority to work obligations of family commitments. I juxtaposed, maneuvered and adjusted, but the flow of neither stream ever stopped. Luckily I never had to make the dreadful choice of following one to the exclusion of other. I always knew in my heart that it would be very hard if I had to choose, but that of course my family would come first. (*On Balance* 467)

It could be easily derived from her statement that Seth is conscious about her role as a dedicated homemaker. Seth has managed to run her family along with her career with an efficient hand and immense patience and perseverance and in her autobiography she gives a description about how she did it:

The balancing act has not been easy. Two considerations have, however, helped me. One thing I realized quite early on is that if you are sincere with your work and love your family, you can share your problems and difficulties with them. It is surprising what solutions emerge through consensus....The second consideration is that in some ways doing two different kinds of work is less stressful than doing only one. When I felt stressed by my legal work, I could switch to housework, and vice versa. This change of occupation was itself a form of relaxation. (*On Balance* 467)



Seth was particular in time management which is utterly required in balancing the two different worlds. She was nicknamed ‘Sausage over the Sink’ by her friends Neera and Lily as she hardly bothered to cook when she used to be alone in the house. She writes, “This was because I would grill a sausage, pick it up with my fingers, turnaround from the stove and eat it while holding it over the sink – thus saving myself from washing and cleaning pans, crockery, cutlery and linen” (*On Balance* 102).

The excavation of the private life of a public woman often unveil at least one or more than one guiding force, who remain on the whole, the necessary inspiration of the woman to aspire for a vocation of her own choice and often facilitate her to enter and explore the fields that have traditionally remained under patriarchal supervision. As the saying goes that there is a woman behind every successful man, the maxim is reversed in case of every successful public woman. Her husband Premo has always remained a huge support for whatever Leila Seth has accomplished in her life. She has acknowledged him in her autobiography repeatedly. His moral and physical accompaniment has helped Leila’s public as well as private self to develop, mature and achieve as a judicial woman and as a homemaker. She writes:

Our marriage was a happy one. There were, however, difficult times when there was a clash between my duties as a lawyer and as a wife. I remember one particular day after a lot of tension I told Premo, who was very disgruntled, that I had decided to stop working, since my work seemed to make him unhappy. He replied, ‘I know that your work is one of your hands and that the family is the other. How can I ask you to cut off one hand? No, no, you must work and we will adjust’. (*On Balance* 172)

Premo has always contributed from behind; he has given her freedom and space to her inner self to develop and achieve its purpose. In mapping her private self, it is important to note that Seth’s career commenced and bloomed only after her marriage. She writes, “I suppose I had potential but no confidence; I flowered after marriage. But many women wither after marriage, exhausted by cruelty, dismissiveness or the daily grind” (*On Balance* 465). In locating her private self in the circumference of marriage, Leila Seth’s autobiography brings profound perceptivities for harmony in married life. It renders how to restore our faith forever in the institution of marriage, where both should stand for one another’s self to grow. She writes about

pertinence of marriage: “A good marriage is a wonderful thing—you are always there for each other. When I look back over more than fifty years, I wonder what the secret of our marriage has been” (*On Balance* 451). In her words one cannot get success alone; behind the veil there remains many whose support are sometimes focused, at other times continue to persist in the shadow of the light of triumph. It evokes from her statement that no progress can be achieved in isolation. She writes:

I can hardly believe that I have known Premo for more than fifty-three years, of which we have been married for fifty-two. On balance, it's been a pack of lucky cards that I have been dealt. Premo is not like other men I know or meet, who are apprehensive of their wife's success. He takes pride in it because he is confident of the merit of his own work. He has given me the space to grow and not held me back; rather, he has encouraged me. I am so glad I married him despite the warnings of my elder brothers; one said that he was not sufficiently anglicized to fit into the family and the other raised unfounded doubts regarding his parentage....Premo has been a true friend, not a male chauvinist—may be because he was an orphan and had to fend for himself and earn the love he got, or may be just because of the generosity of his being. (*On Balance* 450)

During her Bar examination in London, Premo took off from his office shortly and cooked for the family helping Leila to devote her time and concentrate on her studies. He stood thick and thin in every step of their married life. Seth admits that her husband Premo is her pillar of strength, and she could not have achieved this much in life without his marriage to him and his support thereafter. Talking about her marriage she writes, “It's about finding someone who helps you become the best person you can be” (*On Balance* 454).

In turn Leila too supported Premo to reach the zenith of his career. She often put up with his habit of displaying new pairs of shoes on the dining table designed by him and often bringing his work back to home. Thus they fostered each other's aspirations. There are many references in her autobiography that conveys Leila's sacrifice for her husband and her family. In London she enrolled in law only because there was no strict discipline for attendance. That provided her time to spend with her family and she could take care of them. She skipped interesting lectures just for the sake of her husband as she writes:

I had heard from Lily, an Indian classmate, that Dimitry Tolstoy's lectures on Divorce Law were extremely illuminating and I thought I would listen in before deciding whether to take up the subject. This class was held between 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. and I stayed on and was enthralled. But when I came home, Premo was already there and in a foul mood, sullen and sarcastic, because he had had to actually switch on the lights himself after entering a dark and unwelcoming house. I promptly decided to drop my intention of studying divorce as a subject, out of fear of its occurrence at home. (*On Balance* 98)

With no regrets, Seth had twice declined her promotion of elevating to the post of a judge of the Patna High Court, because, Patna held no higher scope of career for her husband Premo Seth. Unlike the male judges, whose families usually shift with their every transfer order and promotions in their fields, it was difficult for her family to quit their duties and tasks and accompany her to her places of transfer. It shows that she has always given importance to her husband and her children whom she always preferred over her profession. She writes, "Apart from my family life, my legal career was very important to me – and I wanted both to be equally successful....I therefore tried to balance and prioritize. The children had top priority. Their life was my life. Though I tried to give them space to grow, I still felt that what they did and were was a part of me" (*On Balance* 426).

Recalling her early days bringing up her children, Seth cites one incident when one of her friend, Dr. Kovarik, came to stay with them and said to little Vikram: "It must be wonderful to have such an intelligent mother". Vikram replied: "I do not care how intelligent she is, she is never here when I want her" (*On Balance* 152). In a state of indecision she ponders:

But obviously that wasn't enough, something was lacking. How was I to create that fine balance between my work, my obligations as a wife and my duties as a mother, so that none suffered? Should I give up my legal work? Was I failing my children? The answer to my doubts appeared soon after...he [Vikram] turned to me and said, "Mama, I am so glad that you work and you use your mind and don't talk to me only about the price of onions and the stupidity of servants". (*On Balance* 152-153)

Seth feels blessed with her children's achievements. Three of her children grew up to be famous personalities and they have their own refulgence and aura in their respective genre. They have cultivated their talents and stood tall keeping up their mother's pride. They have settled down being married, except Vikram, whose bisexuality though hard to abide, was still accepted by his parents. Leila loves to be called as well-known writer Vikram Seth's mother. She was worried about Vikram's career as his Magnum Opus, *A Suitable Boy*, took long seven years to complete. Her motherly anxiety made her imagine of him ending up as a penniless writer leading his life in some garage. But it made him renowned and her most suitable son. The self of the author finds its fulfillment when she perceives motherhood as something sanctified and god-bestowed. She writes about her feelings on motherhood:

It is said that the only really unselfish love is that of a mother for her child. Perhaps this is because the mother perceives the child as an extension of herself, having carried the baby within her for so many months. In India there is a belief that love goes downwards, so that the love of the mother for the child is greater than that of a child for the mother; and the child in turn will give that motherly love to her child. A large part of a mother's life is spent taking care of her children; for many women it is their whole life. Parents see children as a reflection of themselves, and a mother, who has been the moulder of their minds and morals, sees their successes and failures as her own achievements and shortcomings. (*On Balance* 424)

The hallmark of any autobiography is the confession of truth in one's life. Seth has maintained constant revelation of her inner self and its suffering during her poignant anxieties in life with complete probity and honesty. Seth has openly discussed about Vikram Seth's bi-sexual orientation, Shantum's earlier experimentation with marijuana and magic mushrooms and Premo's attack of psoriasis. She has downrightly unfolded Shantum's four days stay in prison in Norwich in 1985, for his protest campaign against America's first-strike nuclear trial. Neither her children nor her husband ever objected to what she has candidly written in her life-narrative. Undoubtedly, Seth accedes to the fact that there is dearth of balance in Indian judiciary. She straightened out her discussion on various turpitudes and corruption in the judiciary and even promptly disclosed the depravity and moral degeneracy followed in the appointment of judges in

the courts. The most poignant confession comes when she pours out a mother's heavy heart and talks about her fourth child, Ira, whom Premo and Leila conceived to give to her brother Sashi and his wife Usha who were childless, as their three children died consecutively in infancy. Ira being their only child suffered from solitariness and heavily lacked companionship. Later, her depression soared high when a defect in her heart got diagnosed and operated. This led Ira to jump from a balcony in Mumbai and she died at a very young age of 16.

Seth has dedicated this book to her husband Premo as a gift on his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday for whom, she writes, "I have learnt not to fear change, in fact that change is essential to growth....The day I stop to learn, I will truly be old" (*On Balance* 465). Even her retirement from official authority could not hold back her duties and responsibilities towards society. Post-retirement she exuberantly looks into matters of arbitration trying to help people with out-of-court settlements in construction cases. She also works as a member and head of many boards in various schools, colleges and commissions. Seth is also deeply involved in women's education. Talking about women's position in our present society, she writes: "I wanted women to walk alongside men, not two steps behind or one step ahead. I wanted to help bring out legal literacy, so that women would become more aware of their rights" (*On Balance* 415). Seth has shown this world that if given an opportunity to explore efficiency, women can exhibit great mastery in public sphere as well as in domestic judgement. Altogether, she views women's literacy as the fundamental groundwork for women's emancipation and she dreams of an egalitarian society where gender discrimination vanishes.

Leila Seth has also dedicated her autobiography to her two granddaughters Nandini and Anamika, who as she feels are part of her own and therefore they need to know their family roots. Seth ponders in her autobiography:

Why is one's grandchild so precious? Nandini, is it because I feel that when I die a part of me will be alive in you? Or is it because I have the satisfaction of knowing that some of my treasured possessions and family jewellery, whatever little there is, will be passed on to you and looked after by you with love?...Is it because I feel that the values and ideals I hold dear will be carried on by you, and that this will help lead to a happier and more peaceful world?...I hope you read

this book when I am gone, and that it repays you a little for all the joy that, in the autumn of my life, you have given me. (*On Balance* 463)

Looking back at the pages of her autobiography, she contemplates "...the little fatherless girl with no connections has come a long way" (*On Balance* 469) balancing her various roles in her life. Leila Seth is still high-spirited and enthusiastically desires to show women that with a life well-balanced they are sure to succeed.

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