



## Overcoming Difficulties in Transference of Cultural and Religious Context in Translation of Poetry: Dilip Chitre's 'Prophet' - a Case Study

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**Abstract:** *Symbiotic nature of translation activity confers the role of catalyst on the translator. In socio-cultural communication translation plays pivotal role but in translation of literary text socio-cultural context poses severe challenges resulting into untranslatability of them. As language is the soul in the body of culture and literature in any language springs from cultural context, translation without consideration of cultural aspect i. e. people's way of life including religious beliefs will not be successful. Poetry, an expressive type of text, is unique and a 'musical thought' as defined by Tomas Carlyle having exact wording as its power. Poetry is the most creative use of language. In the words of Paul Valery 'Poetry is to prose as dancing is to walking' (Kennedy and Gioia:1997:361). The untranslatability of cultural and religious context in it results into distortion and loss of meaning and creation of mystery. The present paper examines the difficulties in transference of cultural and religious context and symbols from Marathi language to English Language i.e. from multiculturalism to monoculturalism. The texts selected for the case study are bilingual (Marathi and English) poet Dilip Chitre's original poem (in Marathi) 'prekshittanchya dolyant aasto....' and its translation into English 'Prophet'. It explores translation theories of Nida, Newmark, Reiss and Vermeer, Venuti and Toury for translating culture which leads to better translation of aforementioned challenges.*

**Key Words:** *Translation, poetry, cultural and religious context, untranslatability.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Translation boosts up globalization through cross-cultural contacts. It unites humankind, literatures and cultures. The beginning of translation dates back to ancient time in the form of decoding of inscriptions and epigraphs and transferring it to different languages. Earlier it was considered as part of linguistics and was revolving around the notions of literal, free, faithful, translation, etc., In modern times, its main concerns are the position of the source text, form of the target language and the cultural context. Today it is autonomous and an independent discipline. In the words of Prof Bijay Kumar Das- 'We have come a long way from taking translation first as a 'carry over of meaning' and then as a linguistic activity-to- accepting it as an 'intercultural activity'(2010:180)

It cannot be confined to only one definition. Its nature yields a great number of definitions. For Roman Jakobson, it is 'the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.' For Newmark it is a means of communication through which transmission of culture takes place. He describes translation activity by using an analogy of an 'iceberg'- 'the tip is the translation-what is visible, what is written on the page- the iceberg the activity, is all the work you do, often ten times as much again, much of which you do not even use.' (Newmark:1988:12)

Traditionally speaking it involves transfer of meaning of words, expressions or text which is constituted by style. Stylistics and translation are closely related as both are concerned with the fine linguistic details of a text, writers' textual choices and source of effects on readers. According to Leech and Short style is the 'dress of thought' (2007: 13) and 'sense + stylistic value= (total) significance' (2007: 20) which emphasizes inseparableness of style from meaning. It is further emphasized by Burke by stating- 'translation is concerned with reflecting not only what is said but how it is said' (2018:394). Stylistic reading of the source text leads to better translation.

The issue of death of languages is crucial in contemporary scenario. Translation helps in the survival of languages and literatures. It enriches literature in world and local languages as well. It is highly demanding and dynamic activity today. In the words of Paul Engle 'translate or die'.

Translation is a boon in multicultural and multilingual India as it has been enriching literatures of the country. Translations from one regional language to another, from regional languages to English or any other foreign language



and vice-versa do take place always. In this regard K Satchidanandan, an eminent poet-critic says, 'Translation has helped knit India together as a nation throughout her history; Ideas and concepts like 'Indian literature', 'Indian culture', 'Indian philosophy' and 'Indian knowledge system' would have been impossible in the absence of translations with their natural integrationist mission.' There is a long tradition of Indian writers reaching out to the world readers through the translation of their literary works into English e.g. Rabindranath Tagore. The prolific writers like Durga Bhagwat, Dilip Chitre, Vinda Karandikar carried forward the legacy. Inadequacy of translation theories for the transference of cultural and religious context has been crucial down the ages.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

### Difference Between translation of Literary and Non-literary Text:

Translation of non-literary texts is nothing but reproduction of the content and function of the source text. Literary translation involves a great deal of interpretation about intent and effect. Stylistic link with the source text is paramount in translation of literary text. Style is the deciding factor in the distinction between translation of literary and non-literary texts. Literary writing is open to multiple interpretations because of stylistic features like metaphor, ambiguous expressions, etc., which are 'weak implicatures' according to Boase-Beier as quoted by Burke (2018: 394). And poetry is full of weak implicatures.

### Inadequacy of Only One Translation Theory in the Translation of Poetry:

As compared to other forms of literature, poetry witnesses the most creative use of language. All the resources of language are utilized to the fullest in it. Its features like figurative language, foregrounding, defeated expectancy, significance of sound patterns, similarity between poetic and musical composition, various types of ambiguities, aestheticity, etc., pose challenges in the translation of poetry. In poetry words act upon each other. It is rightly said by Geoffrey Leech 'that a poem or piece of poetry cannot be paraphrased' (1969: 40) Many linguists and translation scholars have underlined the untranslatability of poetry. For Robert Frost 'Poetry is what gets lost in translation'.

According to Benjamin the relationship between form and content is like fruit and its skin. It creates tension in the translation of poetry. Employment of just one translation theory in the translation of poetry is not adequate. Instead use of multiple translation theories for the translation of poetry is essential and it should be brought to the centre in translation studies as it encourages experimental strategies which is emphasized by Lawrence Venuti. All in all, poetic composition is easier than translation of poetry.

### Language is a Heart in the Body of Culture:

Any language is deeply rooted in its culture and bears the stamp of cultural specificity. For Foley (1997: 108) as quoted by Kanji Kitamura culture is a mental system which generates all and only the proper cultural behavior' as per this it entails 'all socially conditioned aspects of life' It has attached values. According to Gayatri Spivak 'Anthropologists must of course attempt to describe cultures as a doctor must medicalize bodies' Language, society and culture are closely related. Translation without considering cultural aspect will fail as rightly said by Susan Bassnett- 'Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life energy. In the same way that the surgeon operating on the heart cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from culture at his peril'.

The process of translation is made more complex because of the different socio-cultural and linguistic assets of languages. The more the cultural gap between source language and target language, the more untranslatable it is. And the less the cultural differences between two languages, the less are the issues of cultural untranslatability. For example, the issues of cultural untranslatability between Dutch and English are not severe because of less cultural differences between these languages. Translation of culture-bound expressions pertaining to ethics, religious beliefs, customs and traditions, clothing, food habits, manners, etc., pose challenges. For Ildiko Pusztai-Varga 'culturally –bound lexical elements are lexical elements which evoke the connotative and affective meanings connected to them by the given culture or subculture regardless of both text and translation context'.

In a nutshell, transferring content from source language and culture is as difficult as shifting and fitting the clothes in another suitcase of different shape. Kundan as quoted by D G Sawant opines 'Linguistic untranslatability is apparent when SL sentences involve structures that do not exist in the TL. Also cultural untranslatability surfaces when it involves absence in the TL culture of a relevant situational feature for the SL text.'

## 3. Different Conventions of Marathi and English Languages:

Marathi belongs to the Indo-Aryan family of languages and English is a West Germanic language. They have different grammatical conventions. The basic structure of English is subject + verb + object whereas the structure of Marathi language is subject + object + verb. Marathi does not have articles whereas English has articles. In Marathi



there is practice of using specific terms for showing reverence to elders and royals whereas English does not maintain that distinction. English has fixed rules about concord between subject and verb whereas Marathi uses imperatives regardless of number. In English, prepositions are free morphemes whereas Marathi has the system of adding kana, matra, velanti, etc., Marathi language has limited diffusion and literary context compared to English.

The phrases and idiomatic expressions bearing the stamp of Marathi people's beliefs, rituals, religious practices, food habits, clothing, customs, etc., do not have proper English equivalents e.g. the culture-bound words like kumkum, dhoti, lehenga, tamasha, etc., And the literal translation of such culture-bound expressions will result into loss of cultural context.

#### 4. An Overview of Translation Theories:

##### 4.1 Eugene Nida's Formal Equivalence Translation and Dynamic Equivalence Translation:

Modern linguistics is the basis of Eugene Nida's translation theories. His translation process entails analysis, transfer and restructuring. According to him and Taber 'the areas where the problem of content transfer arises are: idioms, figurative meanings, shifts in central components of meaning, generic and specific meanings, pleonastic expressions, special formulas, redistribution of semantic components and provision for contextual conditioning' (1982: 106).

Nida's suggestion for overcoming the problem of diverse meaningful relationships between structurally similar types of expressions is application of Noam Chomsky's generative grammar. It helps translators to decode source text and generate corresponding expressions in the target language with the various techniques such as permutation, replacement, addition and deletion. Arbitrary nature of linguistic symbols attributes elasticity to language and allows new combinations helping language to describe new objects which come into the culture. He advocated Formal Equivalence Translation and Dynamic Equivalence Translation.

- a) **Formal Equivalence Translation:**- It focuses on the preservation of grammatical units, formal indicators and meaning in terms of the source context which results into literal reproduction of the idioms and expressions so that reader may be able to understand the way cultural elements are employed for conveying meaning in the source text. It compares message in receptor language and culture with the message in source language and culture as the standard of accuracy and correctness. All in all, it is source oriented.
- b) **Dynamic Equivalence Translation:**- Nida defines it as 'the closest natural equivalent to the source language message'(1964:166) It emphasizes equivalence of response rather than equivalence of form. It does not demand understanding of cultural patterns of the source language context from receptor. 'It tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture.'(1964:159) According to Nida natural rendering must fit i) the receptor language and culture as a whole, ii) the context of the particular message and iii) the receptor language audience(1964:167) Grammatical modifications as per the obligatory structure of target language and adaptations of grammar and lexicon are at its centre. If the semantic requirements of the receptor language are not fulfilled by the lexical structure of the source message, Nida suggests consideration of three lexical levels i.e. i) terms with available parallels are unproblematic, ii) the use of another term reflecting the form of the referent though not equivalent function is advocated by him for the terms which identify culturally different objects but with somewhat similar function, iii) for the translation of the terms which identify cultural specificities, he suggests 'foreign association'. According to him 'No translation that attempts to bridge a wide cultural gap can hope to eliminate all trades of the foreign setting.' (1964:167)

Between these two types of equivalences, dynamic equivalence has been increasingly emphasized. Nida replaced it with 'Functional Equivalence' later on. But there is not much difference between the two. Functional equivalence which emphasizes information entails lexical equivalence, sentence equivalence, passage equivalence and stylistic equivalence. For Nida correspondence in meaning is primary and correspondence in style is secondary. He advocates sacrifice of form for the sake of promoting translatability. Translation of poetry is characterized by the acute tension between form and content and conflict between formal and dynamic equivalences. In this regard Nida quotes William A Cooper who suggests 'to cling to the spirit of the poem and cloth it in language and figures entirely free from awkwardness of speech and obscurity of picture. This might be called a translation from culture to culture'(1964:161) This conflict in the translation of poetry can be successfully dealt with equivalence of response.

##### 4.2 Peter Newmark's Semantic Translation:

Just like Nida Newmark's theory of translation is built on linguistics. For him translation is an exercise in applied linguistics. He adheres to Bühler's functional theory of language according to which three main functions of language



are-expressive, informative and vocative. Expressive function is concerned with the mind of the speaker, writer, etc.,. One of the expressive text types is serious imaginative literature and the most intimate expression is poetry. He proposes 'semantic translation' and 'communicative translation' in 'Approaches to Translation'. He advocates an application of different translation methods to different text types. Communicative translation is reader – oriented and direct. It is used for informative and vocative texts e.g. technical report, an article, scientific writing, persuasive writing, etc.,.

Semantic translation attempts to render, as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. It is subjected to the original culture and author. It emphasizes content than the effect. It has to interpret and allows more freedom to the translator. It is economical and written at the author's linguistic level. It transfers the cultural components intact.

According to him translation of serious imaginative literature is challenging and demands constant compromise and readjustment because of connotation, coherence, etc.,. Newmark opines 'poetry presents the thing in order to convey the feeling' (1988: 164). In the translation of poetry, the conflict between expressive and aesthetic function i. e. between truth and beauty occurs. Poetic devices like metaphor creates extra-linguistic realities and connects expressive and aesthetic function. Intact preservation of these devices in translation is necessary. A clash among lexis, sound, culture, etc. hinders parallel effect. According to him 'equivalent effect is the desirable result rather than the aim of any translation' (1988: 48). The translator of poetry cannot make any concession to the reader such as transferring the foreign culture to a native equivalent e.g. if Autumn in China is not the season of Keats's mists and mellow fruitfulness but of clear skies then the reader must simply understand this background.(1988:164)

He has given cultural categories in 'Textbook of Translation' namely, Ecology (flora and fauna), Material culture(food, clothes, etc.), Social culture (work, leisure, etc.) organizations,customs, activities, procedures, concepts ( religious, artistic, etc.) gestures and habits (handclap, spitting, etc.) For this he has suggested transference, use of approximate cultural equivalents, the application of functional equivalent procedure which is a cultural componential analysis for deculturising cultural words, adaptation, additional information and notes for dealing with the difference between SL and TL cultures. All in all, for him 'a successfully translated poem is always another poem' (1988:165) and 'interpret the sense, not the words' is the translator's last resource (1988:76)

#### 4.3 Reiss and Vermeer's Skopos Theory:

The notions such as translational interaction, intentional interaction, interpersonal interaction, communicative action, intercultural action and text-processing action are pivotal in functionalist approaches to translation. Skopos theory is based on functionalist approach. It is first introduced in an article published in the German journal in 1978. It is explained in detail in 'Towards a General Theory of Translational Action' by Katharina Reiss and Hans Vermeer. For them a 'translational action, by definition is interlingual and intercultural'(2014: 72) It signifies a shift in approaches to translation from linguistic equivalence to functional appropriateness and socio-cultural factors. It views translation as an action with purpose and its purpose determines the process and strategies of translation i.e. the end justifies the means. It offers information offered by the source text to readers with a target culture conditions with new set of norms and conditions in new form may be with different function. Translator should know reason for translating source text and the function of the target text. It gives due consideration to both source culture and target culture but focuses more on target culture. Translation is primarily a process of intercultural communication.

In a nutshell, it opens the avenue of possibilities of rendering the same text in number of ways. It is not subjected to the notion of right and wrong. The question of adequacy and inadequacy will be answered by the purpose or communicative function. Receiver determines the target text skopos. It does not emphasize similar functional equivalence to a source text. It dethrones source text and approximates adaptation. The translator is a creator and an architect of the target text making it function optimally in the target culture.

#### 4.4 Lawrence Venuti's Domestication and Foreignization:

Lawrence Venuti, an American translation theorist introduced two strategies in his book 'The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation' in 1995. These strategies are- Domestication and Foreignization. For Venuti culture is at the centre of the translation process. These two strategies are crucial for translating cultures as they are rooted in social and cultural circumstances and their choice depends not only upon a translator but specific social situations. Conformity of the translated text to the target culture is crucial in them.

**Domestication:-** It is target text oriented translation in which expressions which are strange to target culture are changed even at the cost of loss of meaning and information of the source text. It reduces the strangeness of the foreign text for being in tune with the cultural norms of the target reader. It is ethnocentric and makes the translator invisible to readers as there is no trace of the source language in translated text.



**Foreignization:-** It is source text oriented translation and it makes translator visible with traces of source language and culture in target text. In the words of Venuti 'foreignizing method is an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad' (1995:20). It resists target language cultural values and signifies the cultural difference of the foreign text, by breaking the target conventions and retaining foreign text element and sends reader abroad. Venuti advocates that translator can do either of the things. But he favours foreignization. According to him dissimilarities between languages and cultures should never be removed in translation. In translated text different cultures should emerge and a reader can view cultural other.

#### 4.5 Gideon Toury's Descriptive Translation Studies:

The decade 1970s witnessed the shift to functional, descriptive and target- oriented approaches in translation theory with consideration of socio-cultural perspectives. Gideon Toury is the pioneer of Descriptive Translation Studies. It, being an empirical branch of translation, focuses on the description of translations and not on an advocacy of how they should be. It does not put any restrictions on the translation process. It helps to examine translation as a cultural phenomena. Descriptive Translation Studies unfolds and explains the regularities and relates them to the socio-cultural context which constrains them through systematic exhaustive description. This multidisciplinary approach focuses on linguistic and socio-cultural context and literary intertextuality. In this target oriented approach target culture frames the context of text as stated by Toury 'translations are facts of target cultures'(1995:29)

It gives different perspective of equivalence. 'Equivalence as it is used here is not one target-source relationship at all, established on the basis of a particular type of invariant. Rather, it is a Functional- relational concept; namely, that set of relationships which will have been found to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate modes of translation performance for the culture in question'(1995:86)

Gideon Toury introduced norms in book 'Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond' in 1995. According to him, translator plays a social and cultural role and fulfills a function allotted by a society. These norms which are seen as performance instructions are socio-cultural constraints controlling translational behavior. They entail politics, ideology, ethics, morality and religion. Amongst all, religious norms are inflexible and influence the choice of translation strategies largely. For the translation of them, domestication will be effective. Descriptive nature of these norms allow translator's subjectivity through the strategies like adaptation, omission and total rejection.

In his 1980 essay 'In Search of a Theory of Translation' Toury talks about 'source oriented' and 'target oriented' translation theories. According to him one should always keep in mind that the primary goal of a translated text is to convey the message of the original. Target oriented translation aims at adapting the text to the structures and cultural context of the target language. According to him acceptable translation has to comply with the rules and structures of the target language and culture through adaptation and increase readability. All in all, he emphasizes transcreation.

#### 5. Research Methodology:

This paper examines challenges posed by cultural and religious context in the translation of poetry with respect to Marathi and English languages. It explores the translation theories of Eugene Nida, Newmark, Reiss and Vermeer, Lawrence Venuti and Gideon Toury and their suitability for overcoming the aforementioned challenges in the translation of poetry. The selected texts for case study is a bilingual poet Dilip Chitre's own original Marathi poem 'prekshittanchya dolyant aasto.....' and its translation into English by him 'Prophet'. The qualitative research design is employed in carrying out this research.

##### 5.1 Original Marathi Poem (Transliteration):

prekshittanchya dolyant aasto prakashacha screw  
ghatta baswun taklela.tyanna disat nahi kalokh  
swatahchayach lungitala. tyanchya wanit aasto prasad  
ani awajat mardav. prekshit jenvha yetat  
tenvha kutri bhunkat nastat. tyanchya sheptya matra haltat  
patrakaransarkhya, tyanchya jeebha baher yetat  
ani galte palhalik lal  
agralkhasarkhi  
rastyawarchi gardi  
kalingadasarkhi fakte  
prekshit jenvha yetat.



pan quachit chandnyanchahi fuse udun jato  
visarlelya kitlipramane awakash wukalto  
dolyantalya prakashacha screw nikhalun jato  
ani prekshit andhala howun habkun jato.....  
tenvha swargache chakrakar lokhandi jeene,  
guntaguntiche architecture pratham olkhu yete

tyala prathamach kalte ishwaracha amanush kantala  
ani tyachya buttanche map. tyachya payanche  
wajan. ani tyachya pratek halchalit prakat honari  
sampurna maktedari. tenvha pratham kalate  
ki ajwar jee watchal keli ti ahe  
tya ishwari jambhaiche dikkalatma bhuyar.....!

## 5.2 Translated Poem 'Prophet'

Prophets have light  
Screwed tight in their eyes. They cannot see the darkness  
Inside their own loincloth. Their speech has grace  
And their voice tenderness. When prophets arrive  
Dogs do not bark. They only wag their tails  
Like newspaper reporters. Their tongues hang out  
And drool as profusely  
As editorials.  
Crowds in the street  
Split up like watermelons  
When prophets arrive.

But there are times when even the fuse of heavenly stars is blown  
Space boils like a forgotten kettle  
The screw comes off from the eyes  
And the blinded prophet is stunned  
It is then that he comprehends the spiral staircase of heaven made of iron  
The complexity of its architecture.

It is the first time that he apprehends God's inhuman boredom  
And the size of His shoes. The weight of His foot.  
And the total monopoly reflected  
In His every movement. It is then that he realizes that  
His journey so far is only  
The space and time of His almighty yawn.

## 6. Difficulties in Transference of Cultural and Religious Context in the Translated Poem 'Prophet':

Dilip Chitre was a bilingual writer (Marathi and English), translator, painter and film maker who called himself a plurilingual and a natural translator. He is known for creating cultural hybrids by blending trends in Marathi with Western trends. His work has been translated into most major Indian languages as well as into English, German, Spanish, French, Japanese and Hungarian. He translated saint Tukaram's *abhangas* (devotional poetry), saint Dnyaneshwar's *Amrutanubhav*, his own poems originally composed in Marathi and Marathi literature by other writers into English. Apart from a number of awards he received in recognition of his contribution in the field of literature, he received the Sahitya Akademi Translation Prize in 1994 for his translation of saint Tukaram's *abhangas* into English.

The selected poem 'Prophet' is his translation of his own composition originally in Marathi titled '*prekshitanchya dolyant aasto.....*'. In the original composition it is divided into three parts. The first part of the poem depicts existence of prophets in society as people chosen by God to speak to His creatures. They are the most revered in society as they are in possession with spiritual and moral insights, some special power through which they can see beyond the mists of future. They are the people with unusual experiences and may become the victim of God's anger.



As the perfect God punished angels also for disobedience, when this supernatural source of power dries up and darkness arrives in their life, these blinded prophets experience earthly experiences, experiences of imperfect human beings. The last two parts of the poem shed light on their experiencing darkness as they are deprived of the heavenly light. It is then they see the iron staircase of heaven, realize God's inhuman boredom, the size of His shoes, the weight of His foot, God's complete monopoly over every movement and his journey so far with that moral uprightness, spiritual insight, wisdom and God's protection is just the space and time of His yawn. So the depiction in the second and last part of the poem gives the glimpse of punishment by God.

The original composition in Marathi is studded with loads of similes and metaphors and cultural context with respect to religion. The transfer of these culture-bound words and expressions to English seems untranslatable as English is not completely soaked in Indian socio-cultural context till now. And that's why transference of the very spirit, aestheticity, Indian symbolism and sensibilities becomes herculean task. As English is just like a transplant in multilingual and multicultural India, there is wide cultural gap between English and Marathi languages.

Because of the lack of proper English equivalents the word 'lungi' in original composition is translated as 'loincloth' which will be understood differently by people of different cultures. The transference of the cultural and religious context in the expressions like 'When prophets arrive, Dogs do not bark (which is auspicious), 'they wag their tails like newspaper reporters (sign of their being happy and overwhelmed) and 'crowds in the street split up like watermelons (suggesting people's kind-heartedness and reverence towards prophets) gets distorted.

The literary work in any language springs out of its culture. This cultural context should not be distorted by paraphrase and literal translation. The literal translation of the expressions in 'Prophet' such as, 'fuse of the heavenly stars is blown', 'space boiling like a forgotten kettle', 'blinding of the prophets and their comprehension of iron staircase of heaven', their apprehension of the size of His shoes', the weight of His foot', etc., result into loss of cultural and religious meaning as the vein of God's anger and punishment runs through them.

In a nutshell, literal translation of culture-bound words and expressions and context, use of inadequate equivalents and paraphrase result into loss of mysticism which surrounds prophets. Dilip Chitre in the foreword to 'Shesha' says, 'It is no easier for me as a translator to handle my own source texts than to handle texts written by the vast variety of poets I have translated during the last fifty years' (2008). The consideration of how much global readers know about culture specific words and expressions and transcreation of the poem would have yielded better translation.

## 7. CONCLUSION:

If the difficulties in transference of cultural and religious context in the translation of poetry are not addressed appropriately, translated text will badly suffer from distortion and loss of meaning, glory of the original text and pragmatic impact. Employment of the translation theories elaborated upon will definitely help in retention of the spirit and soul of the original text in new form in translation. C W Orr's saying as quoted by Nida 'the painter does not reproduce every detail of the landscape- he selects what seems best to him. Likewise translator must be concerned with the embodiment of spirit and not the letter of the original version (1964: 162) reinforces the idea.

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