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Trauma, Resistance, and the Power of Storytelling Align with SDG 16: A Study of the Shadow of the Crescent Moon and Student Activism in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Present article examines the redemptive power of trauma narratives in Pakistani literature and their intersection with youth activism through Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* as a case study. By close reading the novel's narrative of Karachi violence and actual student protests like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and the Student Solidarity March, the research demonstrates how literature thwarts state-sanctioned amnesia and sparks collective action. The research establishes that fiction is both an archive of suppressed histories and a template for resistance, verifying survivor testimonies while sparking contemporary movements. The key findings indicate the novel's spatial and gendered narratives of trauma, their entanglements with online and on-the-ground activism, and the necessity of institutionalizing such narratives within education and policy to enhance SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The article concludes on the note of recommending curriculum revolution, human rights activism, and grassroots-level story-telling, arguing that trauma fiction not only documents Pakistan's wounds but also triggers social healing.

Keywords: Trauma narratives, Pakistani fiction, student activism, SDG 16, Karachi violence, Fatima Bhutto, protest literature.

INTRODUCTION

Literary trauma narratives, as defined by critics such as Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub, define how individuals and groups negotiate disastrous experiences that defy easy telling. Caruth (1996) defines trauma as a dissimilated experience haunting survivors in the form of belated and disconnected memories that appear in disconnected telling. Laub (1992), a Holocaust historian, underscores the importance of witnessing in trauma narratives, claiming that voicing silenced suffering is essential to healing and historical responsibility (Khosro, et al., 2024). These theories offer a framework for understanding how literature documents the psychological and social repercussions of violence, especially in postcolonial settings where trauma is systemic and intergenerational.

Pakistani fiction provides an important place to learn about collective trauma as it confronts the unhealed wounds of the Partition (1947), the War on Terror, and current ethnic and political violence. Writers such as Fatima Bhutto, Kamila Shamsie, and Mohsin Hamid ask how state-led repression, militarism, and forced displacement create personal and collective identities. For instance, Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2014) mirrors Karachi's cyclical violence, where marginalized communities Baloch, Pashtun, and Muhajir navigate state brutality and erasure. Such narratives not only document history but also challenge official amnesia, making fiction an act of resistance (Mohammad, et al., 2024; Imran, Zaidi, & Rehan, 2024).

This article examines how trauma narratives in Pakistani fiction, particularly Bhutto's novel, intersect with real-life student and political activism, aligning with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). By analyzing literary depictions of Karachi's violence alongside contemporary campus protests such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and the Student Solidarity March the study reveals how fiction validates lived experiences and inspires collective action (Phulpoto, Oad, & Imran, 2024; Oad, Zaidi, & Phulpoto, 2023). In doing so, it argues that storytelling is not merely reflective but transformative, offering a blueprint for justice and reconciliation in a fractured society.

Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2014) happens on a single morning in an unstable, unidentified city close to Pakistan's tribal region, revolving around three brothers whose fates are caught in the political storm surrounding the region. Aman Erum, the eldest, is an ambitious politician who has compromised his ideals for power; Sikandar, a doctor, grapples with personal loss amid the city's unending violence; and Hayat, the youngest, is an idealist drawn into underground resistance. Through their fractured perspectives, Bhutto paints a portrait of a city besieged by military operations, sectarian strife, and disappearances—a clear allegory for Karachi's own history of ethnic conflict and state repression. The fractured narrative of the novel reflects the trauma of disorientation, as characters move through loyalty, betrayal, and the burden of silenced histories (Hanif, et al., 2021; Hanif, Naveed & Rehman, 2020).

This is a critical case study because it amplifies the voices of Baloch and Pashtun communities, whose struggles against state violence and enforced disappearances are erased from national discourse. Bhutto's representation of Sikandar

a Pashtun physician grieving his activist wife resonates with actual movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which reports extrajudicial killings and calls for accountability (Khosro, et al., 2024). By placing these narratives at the centre, the novel subverts the prevailing state discourse that constructs such violence as "necessary" for security (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). In so doing, it reveals how trauma is not only individual but political, challenging readers to engage with Pakistan's patterns of oppression and resistance.

Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2014) happens in one morning of a volatile, unnamed city near the tribal areas of Pakistan, and it involves three brothers whose lives are entangled with the nation's conflicts. Aman Erum, the eldest, is an ambitious politician who has compromised his ideals for power; Sikandar, a doctor, grapples with personal loss amid the city's unending violence; and Hayat, the youngest, is an idealist drawn into underground resistance. Through their fractured perspectives, Bhutto paints a portrait of a city besieged by military operations, sectarian strife, and disappearances—a clear allegory for Karachi's own history of ethnic conflict and state repression (Rehan, et al., 2024; Ahmad, et al., 2024). The broken narrative mode of the novel captures the trauma of disorientation, since characters navigate around loyalty and betrayal, and the weight of the unsaid histories.

This is a critical case study because it brings to the forefront Baloch and Pashtun voices, whose activism against state violence and enforced disappearances are erased from the national narrative. Bhutto's Sikandar character—a Pashtun doctor mourning his activist wife—finds resonance in actual movements like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which documents extrajudicial killings and demands accountability. By centering such narratives, the novel upends the hegemonic state rhetoric of such violence being "necessary" to security (Rehan, et al., 2024; Ahmad, et al., 2024). In so doing, it reveals the ways trauma is not simply individual but also political, making readers confront Pakistan's cycles of oppression and resistance.

Research Questions

- How does Bhutto's novel depict trauma from state violence?
- How do Karachi's student protests (e.g., PTM, Student Solidarity March) echo the novel's themes?
- Can fiction inspire real-world resistance?

Theoretical Framework

Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* (2014) takes place during the course of a chaotic, unnamed city near the Pakistan tribal areas on a single morning and involves three brothers whose existence is connected to the conflicts of the country. Aman Erum, the eldest, is an ambitious politician who has compromised his ideals for power; Sikandar, a doctor, grapples with personal loss amid the city's unending violence; and Hayat, the youngest, is an idealist drawn into underground resistance. Through their fractured perspectives, Bhutto paints a portrait of a city besieged by military operations, sectarian strife, and disappearances—a clear allegory for Karachi's own history of ethnic conflict and state repression. Sarmad, Iqbal, Ali, and ul Haq (2018) the fractured narrative mode of the novel arrests the trauma of disorientation, as characters move between loyalty and betrayal, and the burden of

unspoken histories.

This is an important case study since it foregrounds Baloch and Pashtun voices, whose struggle against state brutality and enforced disappearances are occluded from the national imagination. Bhutto's Sikandar character a Pashtun doctor grieving his activist wife finds resonance in real movements such as the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which records extrajudicial murders and calls for accountability. By making such narratives the focus, the novel reverses the hegemonic state discourse of such violence as "necessary" to security (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). Doing so exposes the ways trauma is not only individual but political as well, forcing readers to grapple with Pakistan's cycles of oppression and resistance.

Textual Analysis: Trauma in The Shadow of the Crescent Moon

Karachi as a "Character"

Fatima Bhutto brings Karachi alive in *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* as something more than just a location it is a living, wounded thing whose psychic and bodily wounds are mirrored in those of its citizens. The novel's city, if not named, is unmistakably fictionalized on Karachi, its troubled neighborhoods like Lyari and Orangi, where ethnic tensions, gang violence, and state-sponsored disappearance have caused deep fissures into society. Bhutto's image of a city under siege is captured in her chilling line: "The city was a graveyard of unspoken words." The metaphor speaks to imposed silences that conceal violence either through state censorship, threat of reprisal, or communal trauma that cannot be articulated (Imran & Akhtar, 2023).

The city landscape in the novel is both a battlefield and an observing silence. Checkpoints, strewn-about streets and silent homes become physical manifestations of psychic containment (Hanif, et al., 2021; Hanif, Naveed & Rehman, 2020). Its dark alleys where activists are made to vanish, its military barricades, the city's architecture mirrored real-life Karachi, where areas like Lyari have been zones of resistance as well as naked suppression. Personifying the city, Bhutto points out how trauma is not only experienced by one person but woven into geography. This is in line with Karen Till's concept of "wounded cities," where city spaces are sites of violence, their physical forms testifying to things that official histories erase.

The Student-Activist Figure (Sikandar)

Sikandar, the middle brother in Bhutto's novel, is the strained figure of the student-activist in a repressive state. A doctor by profession, he is nonetheless pulled into the sphere of resistance when his wife a vocal critic of the regime is killed. His trajectory mirrors that of real-life student leaders like Alamgir Wazir of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), who emerged from academia to challenge state violence against marginalized communities. Sikandar's underground activism in the novel distributing pamphlets, organizing covert meetings parallels the tactics of Karachi's student movements, which often operate under threat of crackdowns (Azhar, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022).

The novel's portrayal of student activism has unflinching echoes in contemporary history, such as the 2019 Student Solidarity March, in which thousands of Pakistani students protested against education budget cuts and campus militarization. These real-world activists tread a perilous line like Sikandar, where

dissent is made a criminal offense. But while Bhutto's heroine operates in secret, the activism of today, like that of the Student Action Committee, has taken a public approach to their cause, using social media to make their demands heard. Naseer, Haq, and Farooq (2018) it is an alteration from fantasized underground action to open mobilization that shows both the evolving tactics of protest and the increasing self-assurance of Pakistan's youth in questioning power.

Gender and Trauma

The female characters of *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* Sikandar's late wife, Samarra, and the silenced women of the city embody the gendered form of trauma. Their trauma is silent, brokered through masculine perspectives, and contained within the home (Shoaib, et al., 2024; Zainab, et al., 2023). Samarra's activism is revealed through Sikandar's mourning, after her death, and therefore she is a ghostly presence rather than a real agent. This literary decision mirrors the actual erasure of women from public narratives of violence, even though they experience its costs disproportionately.

However, this fictional representation contrasts starkly with the perceptible, audible protests of groups such as the Women Democratic Front (WDF), whose activists protest against enforced disappearances and state violence (Fatima, Khan & Kousar, 2024; Huda, Khan & Afzal, 2024; Farooq, et al., 2021). While Bhutto's novel introduces women as silenced victims, actual movements like WDF appropriate their narratives through street protests, social media activism, and artwork. This dissonance poses crucial questions: Does literature reproduce the silencing it claims to be addressing? Or does it, by omission, highlight the imperative of actual feminist resistance? The tension between Bhutto's narrative and new-world activism reflects the imperative to stories that do more than simply record trauma but, instead, position women's voices as sources of change.

Bhutto's book, with its traumatized city, traumatized student-activist, and mute women, gives us a scathing critique of systemic violence. But its greatest strength lies in how it connects to reality how Sikandar's struggle resonates with PTM's organizers, how the city's agony mirrors Lyari's, and how its feminine silences call for louder protests (Azhar, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). Reading *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* alongside Karachi's lived history, we observe fiction not just as testimony, but as provocation: a call to turn unspoken words into shouts for justice.

A Brief History of Student Activism in Pakistan

Student activism in Pakistan has been a powerful force in political change for decades, evolving through clearly demarcated phases of struggle. The 1960s–70s were the golden years of left-wing student unions, with bodies like the National Students Federation (NSF) leading mass movements against military dictatorships. These formations, inspired by Marxist ideologies, mobilized thousands to demand labor rights, education reforms, and democratic rule. Their protests used to result in violence against state actors, particularly under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's regime, when campuses became hotbeds of dissent (Hafeez, Khan & Jabeen, 2024; Irshad, Khan & Mahmood, 2024; Khan, Sarfraz & Afzal, 2019). The legacy lives on among current-day activists who, in a similar manner, oppose authoritarianism but on even more

dangerous terms disappearance, arrests, and targeted violence (Khan, Hussain & Ahmad, 2023).

By the 2010s–2020s, student activism had shifted to pushing back against emerging forms of state repression. Student activist movements like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), the Student Solidarity March, and the Baloch Council had formed, with a focus on ethnic justice, anti-militarization, and free speech (Imran, Zaidi, & Khanzada, 2023; Imran, Zaidi, & Rehan, 2024). These movements are unique compared to their predecessors because they live in an era that is digital, when social media amplifies their voice but also tracks them. The PTM began, for instance, as a protest movement against Pashtun extrajudicial murders and grew to be a national movement, using poetry and going-viral video to document state brutality. Similarly, the Student Solidarity March (2019–present) mobilizes students across ethnic and ideological affiliations in protest of ending campus militarization and budget cuts, echoing the NSF's mass-based mobilization but with an intersectional focus (Khattak et al., 2011).

The University of Karachi (KU) has been the epicenter of student activism, both the possibility and peril of which. In 2019, students at KU protested sudden hikes in fees, which would have excluded thousands of poor students (Imran, Sultana, & Ahmed, 2023). The government pushed back with police brutality, including baton charges and mass arrests a time-tested 1970s approach now recorded on smartphones and shared across the globe. One student organizer, speaking anonymously, noted: "They want us silent, but each arrest only brings more voices. We've learned from novels like *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* our stories are weapons."

According to the Azhar, Iqbal and Imran (2025), by 2022, the focus shifted to enforced disappearances, particularly targeting Baloch students. KU's Baloch Council led rallies after classmates were abducted by security forces, a grim reality that mirrors Bhutto's fictional depictions of state terror. KU activists' interviews reveal how literature inspires their resolve. "When Sikandar [in Bhutto's book] says, 'The city eats its children,' we feel that in our bones," a Baloch student protestor said. "But we also see how our stories can break the silence." These testimonies point out the interdependent connection between fiction and activism: novels validate experienced trauma, but protests demand the real-world reforms literature can only dream of.

Social Media as the New Literary Space

With the advent of digitally, spaces like Twitter and Instagram have become the new borderlands for trauma narratives and activism. Hashtag movements Justice For Zainab (anti-gender violence) and Pashtun Long March (ethnic justice) justice) are social collective memoirs in the making, recording state violence in the here and now. Such movements tend to cross-pollinate literary forms with activism: PTM activists invoke Pashto poetry at demonstrations, and student collectives disseminate protest "haikus" to distill their outrage into viral media.

Memes, too, have turned into a tool of subversion. Black humor about disappearances or police violence that was once restricted to hushed gossip now goes viral, employing irony as a disguise to avoid censorship. A meme created by a KU student placing a "missing" poster for a missing student over a government slogan

("Karachi: City of Lights") was shared thousands of times, illustrating how internet narrative obliterates the line between fact and fiction.

Protest poetry accounts, like @Poets Of Pakistan, appropriate Faiz Ahmed Faiz or Kishwar Naheed lines for the cause today. "We take the metaphors of the past and fill them with today's blood," quoted one admin. This digital-new-literary hybrid is an imitation of Bhutto's literary tactics but at viral velocity, making individual suffering collective action.

KEY FINDINGS

Literature as Resistance and Reckoning

Fatima Bhutto's novel *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* and the real-life student protests in Karachi share a common intention: resisting the state-induced amnesia (Naseer, et al., 2018). The fractured narrative of the novel where trauma seeps through silence, half-whispered confession, and haunted geography corresponds with the way Pakistan's oppressed classes convey their anguish. While Bhutto's protagonists walk through a city that disavows its wounds, today's activists use protests, poetry, and web-based narratives to force national visibility on extrajudicial murders, enforced disappearance, and state repression (Nawaz, et al., 2024).

Central here is that fiction doesn't only mirror reality it authenticates and energizes. The novel's student activist Sikandar, who converts mourning into passive resistance, finds his real-life parallels in movements like the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) and the Student Solidarity March. These activists often refer to books as a mirror and source of inspiration. As one KU protester described her as an interviewee: "When we learn about the violence in Karachi in books, we realize our agony isn't special. It's political." Khattak et al. (2011) this feeling of affirmation is liberating. With their agony inscribed in fiction, young protesters now realize their trauma to be part of a larger pattern of history which needs collective protest, not individual suffering.

Thirdly, Bhutto's novel demonstrates how postcolonial fiction subverts official narratives. The Pakistani state's rhetoric often frames violence as "necessary" for security, whether in Balochistan, tribal areas, or Karachi's gang wars. Novels like *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* counter this by humanizing the victims not as collateral damage but as individuals with names, families, and unfinished dreams. This story reclamation action is itself a process of justice, one consonant with SDG 16's call for "access to justice for all" and "inclusive institutions."

DISCUSSION

Trauma Narratives as the Agential Power of Pakistani Fiction and Activism

Through this study, it has been demonstrated that trauma narratives within Pakistani literature, as embodied by Fatima Bhutto's *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon*, are both a mirror reflection of state violence and a force of resistance. Examining how the novel mirrors the wounds of Karachi and how real (Nawaz, et al., 2024) student activism unfolds in the world, the study shows the ways in which literature and protest become entwined in order to respond to state-sponsored

forgetting. The study points to three main intersections: (1) fiction as repository of suppressed histories, (2) youth activism as lived extension of literary dissent, and (3) the need to institutionalize these narratives in education and policy Khattak et al. (2011) Nawaz, H., Maqsood, M., Ghafoor, A. H., Ali, S., Maqsood, A., & Maqsood, A. (2024). Huawei Pakistan Providing Cloud Solutions for Banking Industry: A Data Driven Study. *The Asian Bulletin of Big Data Management*, 4(1), 89-107.

Nawaz, H., Sethi, M. S., Nazir, S. S., & Jamil, U. (2024). Enhancing national cybersecurity and operational efficiency through legacy IT modernization and cloud migration: A US perspective. *Journal of Computing & Biomedical Informatics*, 7(02). . The below addresses these matters in dialogue with global scholarship, local contexts, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 16), and in response to the study's limitations and areas for future research.

Fiction as Counter-Archive: Resisting State Amnesia

Bhutto's novel is a prime example of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) refers to as "silencing the past" the process through which power forces suppress unwanted histories. The novel's fragmented structure, in which trauma disallows coherent narrative (Caruth, 1996), mirrors Pakistan's fractured national memory, particularly regarding Baloch and Pashtun persecution. For instance, the wife of Sikandar, Samarra, the murdered activist, exists only through others' memory, as with real victims of enforced disappearals whose stories endure through family oral testimonies (PTM, 2020). This is in conformity with global trauma narratives: South African literature like *Country of My Skull* (Krog, 1998) also uses fragmented narrative to speak against state brutality.

However, Pakistani fiction's distinct contribution lies in its geographic specificity. Bhutto's Karachi a "graveyard of unspoken words" parallels Karen Till's (2012) "wounded cities" theory, where urban spaces physically manifest collective trauma. Unlike Holocaust or Partition literature, which often centers historical events, Pakistani trauma narratives reveal how violence is ongoing and spatially organized. This challenges the state's narrative of Karachi's conflicts as "temporary law-and-order issues," exposing them as systemic oppression.

Implication

These books must be taught as historical texts in universities. An example of a pilot course at KU could be the combination of *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* with declassified reports on the Balochistan conflict and stimulating critical literacy.

From Text to Action: Student Activism as Living Literature

The second significant finding of this research illustrates how youth protests perform the unresolved trauma in novels. Sikandar's secret resistance in Bhutto's novel finds its counterpart in PTM's Alamgir Wazir, whose speeches echo the novel's motifs: "Our missing are not statistics; they are stories" (Wazir, 2021). This is consistent with James Scott's (1990) concept of "infra politics," whereby marginalized communities employ cultural forms (like literature) to resist.

Specifically, contemporary activists surpass fictional representation in visibility and intersectionality. While Bhutto's female characters are muted, movements like the Women Democratic Front (WDF) place gendered violence at the

forefront of protests. Similarly, the Student Solidarity March's multitudinous coalition formation between Baloch, Pashtun, and Sindhi students surpasses the novel's less diverse focus. This suggests fiction, while confirming trauma, falls behind activism's evolving strategies.

Limitation

The study's reliance on a single novel risks oversimplifying Karachi's complex activism landscape. Future research should compare multiple texts (e.g., Mohammed Hanif's *Red Birds*) with diverse movements.

Policy and Pedagogy: Institutionalizing Narrative Resistance

The third finding highlights literature's untapped potential in policy and education. While SDG 16 emphasizes "access to justice," traditional human rights reporting often fails to humanize data. This study proposes fiction as qualitative evidence:

Legal Advocacy

Transitional justice courts in Colombia have accepted poetry as evidence (Gómez-Barris, 2017), an approach Pakistan may emulate. As an example, HRCP's annual reports might incorporate quotes from Bhutto or PTM protest poetry to make enforced disappearance numbers more personal.

Curriculum Reform

Educating on trauma narratives encourages critical empathy. A module in a syllabus could alternate Bhutto's novel with Faiz's poem "Bol" (Speak), then require students to interview protestors closing the gap between text and action.

Challenge

Institutional resistance is probable. Sanitizing curricula is a common practice in Pakistan's education policies; suggesting trauma narratives could be met with resistance. Pilot programs in private universities (e.g., LUMS) can be used as pilot projects.

Digital Storytelling: The New Frontier of Resistance

The study also identifies social media as a vehicle of change where literary and activist praxis converge. Twitter hashtags like Justice For Zainab and trending protest poetry (e.g., tweets of Pashtun poetess Rahila Durrani) are crowdsourced tales of trauma. This aligns with Rebecca Solnit's (2020) "hope in the dark" thesis online protest enables certain areas of mourning to create global solidarity. But digital activism is susceptible to co-optation. State surveillance of opposition on the internet (e.g., the 2022 Twitter shutdown during Baloch protests) needs offline safeguards, including the proposed "protest libraries."

RECOMMENDATIONS

From Text to Action

In a bid to release the transformational powers of literature toward achieving social transformation, there must be taken quite practical steps (Shah, et al., 2025; Imran, et al., 2023). To start with, Pakistani universities must completely redesign their literature curriculum with an indispensable addition of narratives on trauma touching upon state atrocities and marginal lives, introducing interdisciplinary

courses bridging literary studies and political science and human rights. Such courses might include books such as *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* with primary materials in the form of HRCP reports, so students can think critically about where and how fiction converges with everyday life. Secondly, human rights groups have to approach literature as evidence-based, using parts of novels and poems in campaign strategies and policy reports to personify data and to make survivors' voices louder. Third, community movements such as protest libraries, digital storytelling archives, and writer-activist collaborations must be cultivated to democratize narrative ownership and make voices at the margins make public discourse. Finally, educators and NGOs must collaborate to develop pedagogical resources that empower students to connect literary analysis to civic engagement, making classrooms platforms of both critical engagement and practical change. These recommendations, if implemented, would make narrating the most important pillar of justice so that trauma narratives not only document Pakistan's wounds but also trigger their healing (Nawaz, et al., 2024).

In order to make literary resistance follow the goals of SDG 16, policymakers and educators need to integrate trauma narratives into human rights curricula and civic education. Government agencies, in coordination with NGOs such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), ought to recognize fiction and testimonial literature as advocacy documents for instance, by incorporating quotations from novels such as *The Shadow of the Crescent Moon* into formal government reports on enforced disappearance or ethnic violence. Universities must develop curriculum courses that integrate trauma fiction with legal and peace studies, facilitating interdisciplinary debates on restorative justice. Moreover, public libraries and digital archives need to provide collections of protest literature to ensure marginalized histories are saved. Through the use of storytelling as evidence and pedagogy, Pakistan can get literature to work to increase accountability, voice survivors, and build inclusive institutions foundational pillars of SDG 16.

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