

GENDER ISSUES IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A PHILOSOPHICAL EVALUATION

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Abstract

New theories of Africa must accept the strategic value of a philosophical analysis of gender issues in African literature. This is because gender marginalisation frustrates the harnessing of Africa's full potential, thus making gender concerns critical to Africa's future. For this reason the resolution of the deeper issues of gender marginalisation requires a broad understanding of its roots. This is where philosophy and literature come in as methodological tools. Literature can reveal the nature of an individual's relation to society particularly in the area of change that has occurred over extended periods. Interrogating gender and approaching it from the angle of literature makes it possible to address inequalities and injustice and what gave rise to them. Literature, however, is a work of fiction. The job of philosophy here is to extract the ideas contained in literature and expose them to critical investigation. This way the ideas contained in literature can be used to further gender understanding. This study finds out that gender issues are nuanced and multidimensional and cannot be explained by mere gender difference. This study concludes that there is serious need to build gender social capital that is sensitive to how the issues causing gender discrimination is handled so as not to create other forms of discrimination in male-female relationship. This is also a statement of what is needed to produce understandings capable of holding male and female and, even, their dreams together.

Keywords: Gender, African literature, Philosophy, Africa, Societal inequalities

Introduction

Gender simply denotes the fact of being male or female. Empirical evidence, however, suggests that gender plays a significant role in the experiences of men and women. It is at the root of social and cultural expectations a society deems as appropriate and normal behaviour, responsibility, rights, attitude and, even, appearance for women and men. In its connotative application, then, gender transcends the mere classification of humans into male and female. It incorporates notions of inequality, marginalisation, and asymmetrical relations between men and women. It suggests the subordination of women. It projects the idea of women as weak while profiling men as strong and the right candidates for power and decision making both at home and in the public sphere. It involves belief that women are disadvantaged socially, politically, educationally and economically when compared with their male counterparts. Gender as such is a social construct that helps to articulate the opportunities, advantages and disadvantages available to a person for being a woman or a man.

In Africa today, a critical discussion on gender is essential because gender issues affect three crucial interlocking sites that define the wellbeing of any nation. These are the family, culture and society. It is important to understand what goes on in the family, the role of culture in family matters and how these are carried into society. Activities of people in literature provide examples of a wide range of issues on what goes on in the family, the society and the role of culture. It helps to properly situate gender as not dealing solely with women but on the inequalities and injustices between male and female. It probes and offer counter narratives to analyses of gender differences that focus mostly on projecting women as weaker and disadvantaged in political, social, economic, educational, legal, physical and, even, mental issues. Literature helps to capture the broader consequences of an unequal arrangement in gender relationships. By focusing on the daily activities of people literature help to project the confluence of interests that shape men and women's relation and how this help to open up interior and hidden areas of concern for scrutiny. To interrogate these issues however demand an analytical approach. Philosophical analysis is generally considered to be rigorous, critical, objective, and uncompromising in delving into and questioning every aspect of knowledge. It provokes established knowledge, upsets accepted

assumptions and dismantles guaranteed information. Philosophy opens up limitless dimensions on how to apprehend ideas contained in literature. Importantly it helps to interrogate the issues from multiple angles often revealing the role of women themselves in entrenching structures of oppression. This way a philosophical reflection offers a more extensive exploration and helps to deepen understanding of gender issues. It is for this reason that philosophy and literature are employed as methodological tools. A philosophical reflection helps to understand the complexities of gender especially the need to properly interrogate the male-female opposition and the extent such opposition furthers or hinders understanding of the issues driving gender. The analysis focuses mainly on Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, hereafter referred to as *Purple*, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, hereafter referred to as *Anthills* and Ngugi's *Wizard of the Crow*, hereafter referred to as *Wizard*. The varieties of aspects raised and presented by the authors illustrate the diversity of thought and the many ways gender issues can be apprehended. The novels in different ways capture issues that can form the basis for understanding and interrogating gender in Africa. That is they represent narratives of events which can be afforded significant positions in any attempt at a broad understanding of gender issues in Africa.

This study places emphasis on the non-universal and multi-layered character of issues associated with gender. It aims at an exploration of gender dynamics that opens up different facets of oppression that target both men and women in different cultural spheres and influence their responses to daily challenges of life. This way the study aligns itself with the position of these scholars. Desiree Lewis' (2004:38) submits that 'power relations between men and women are complex, multi-dimensional and pervasive, requiring diverse tools and angles to disentangle and contest them.' Filomina Chioma Steady (2004:48) reminds that there is a widely accepted notion that women are 'a non-essential category and represent diverse groups with different social locations. Gender can therefore mean different things to different people since it carries the ideologies of the socio-cultural context in which it is constructed.' For Oyeronke Oyewumi (2004:2) 'it is imperative that any serious scholarship on the place of "gender" in African realities must necessarily question prevailing concepts and theoretical approaches.' She insists that analyses and interpretations of Africa must start with Africa. They should reflect specific cultural and local contexts, not imported, often colonial, ideas and concepts. Both Edward Kisiang'ani (2004) and Gregory Ogbenika (2022) warn that rigid division in the study of gender in Africa is not beneficial. Ogbenika warns that degenerating into gender wars and inspiring hatred for the male gender is only a counterproductive endeavour that would plunge society deeper into realms of underdevelopment. He cautions that 'actualizing a society free from gender biases is a gradual process that would not happen overnight' (p.152). He insists that 'the clamour for gender equality would be seen in the light of progress and not an attempt to raise any gender above another or discredit any gender. When the gender gap is bridged and there are equal opportunities for everyone, society would grow geometrically in leaps and bounds' (p.152). This study will capture all these strands as the discussion progresses.

Analysis: Gender issues in African literature

Gender as a socio-cultural construct and the issues arising from it are varied. They cannot be subsumed under any universal set of priorities. This study also recognises that the application of philosophical reflection to African literature presents the best means of exposing, interrogating and understanding the multidimensional aspects of gender. Six points will be used to establish this claim.

One, interrogating gender through African Literature helps to explore and expose all the contours of gender. Instead of compartmentalising women's subordination and struggles and objectifying them as the candidates of inequalities and injustice, the works under review help to portray how multi-layered gender issues are. For instance, subordination is not necessarily directed at women but a function of the proximity or otherwise of a male or female to power and the attitude of the person (people) who wields the power. The all-male cabinet members in *Anthills* are merely His Excellency's 'Yes men.' He sees them as grossly incompetent men who are 'soft to the core' (21) and whose sole duty is to unquestioningly support his idiosyncrasy and wanton ambition. He detains them for not having fore

knowledge of the visit of the Abazon people to the Presidential Palace. Even with all these, they resort to back-biting to remain in his good book. Their marginalisation comes not only from His Excellency but from themselves. As cabinet members they are subdued by His Excellency and rendered powerless to make any meaningful contribution to state affairs. They eagerly support His Excellency's bid to become a life president without considering how this will impact on the wellbeing of the people and the development of the state. As cabinet members, they turn against each other to curry favour from His Excellency. Here then are men who offer themselves as candidates for inequalities and injustice to stay close to power. Equally in *Wizard* the male-exclusive ministers see the Ruler as their 'One Truth, One Party, One Country, One Leader, One God' (580). Armed with this majestic power over his ministers, the Ruler turns them into subservient men whose actions are directed at pleasing their master. To win back the Ruler's favour they have to offer their wives and, even, daughters to him. To appease the Ruler over his supposedly wrong utterance, Sikiokuu, the Minister of State, send his first wife, his second wife, his third wife and finally his two daughters to the Ruler by night to plead for him before 'the Ruler softened and he started to see Sikiokuu again, but then only to vent his anger on the hapless minister' (23). On the face value is the use of women as objects, which clearly spells out their subordinate position in the gender arrangement. This is not all there is to it. The women see it as 'an act of personal honor and recognition!' and are 'genuinely flattered to be of service to power!' (235). This contrasts sharply with the action of the women who disrupted the Ruler's birthday gift project. The difference is such as to leave the Ruler, who 'would have sworn that he thoroughly understood women through and through' (235), completely puzzled. This introduces different elements to the notion of gender subordination of women. First, a woman may accept her subordination if she sees it as a form of elevation in another area. Second, a woman may not be conscious of her worth and may define her relevance through her association with others, especially those in high places. Third, a woman can decide not to allow her gender to be a deciding factor in her activities. There is another more serious aspect: a man who can offer his wives, girlfriends and, even, daughters to be in the good book of another man is in a very serious disadvantaged position, even more disadvantaged than the women he is offering. What is the worth of a man who cowers under another man to the point of offering his wife and daughters as objects of atonement? As a husband and lover he loses his manhood and suffers eternal humiliation. As a father he is stripped of every respect and fails completely as a guardian. Even to himself he is divested of any iota of dignity and self-respect, for he would have offered himself if the Ruler is gay. For him every gender consideration is a curse: as an advantaged male, he is a colossal failure; as a human being, he is the personification of a freak. Even in a gendered society that favours men, he will fail abysmally in his role as the protector of his family. Here Filomina Steady's (2004:48) observation is pertinent. She sees analysis of power which focuses solely on male/female relations as restrictive. For her an adequate gender analysis must incorporate power relations based on race, class, ethnicity, age, nationality and so forth.

Also Eugene, in *Purple*, despite all his display of power over his wife, Beatrice, is actually the main object of subliminal injustice through his unreflective close ties to the all-powerful catholic doctrine. In defence of the church position he inflicts serious harm on his beloved ones. In reality he suffers more. He is tormented each time he tortures them. He cries as much as they do, takes them to hospital and in most cases keeps vigil by their bedside. It is the strangulating hold of Christianity on him that manifest as his tyrannical self. The good reverend father he lived with taught him that the best antidote for sin is to severely punish which ever part of the body that lures one to a shameful act. For sinning against his body the good father soaked his hands in a bowl of boiled water (203). On his own, to ensure that his family members do not deviate from their strive for perfection in their journey to heaven he continues with the legacy of the good father, often improving on it. In his diseased mind this also corresponds to Christ injunction in the Bible that if one's right eye or right hand should be the cause of one's downfall, the person should cut it off and throw it away. Even if rendered in its literal meaning, the admonition is for the owner of the organ to cut it. It is this that embodies the true expression of remorse and the willingness to achieve eternal salvation. In assuming the responsibility of his family members towards their sin,

Eugene fails completely as a saviour. The people he desperately wanted to save want to be left alone with their sinful organs. The more he tries to save them, the more their hearts are embittered and move towards resentment and rebellion. Unfortunately, in his ecclesiastical fervour Eugene refuses to accept that salvation is a personal choice. By blindly sharing in Eugene's demented notion of Christianity Beatrice makes it easy for Eugene's tyranny to succeed. Their relationship, whether in its violent expression, male-dominant tendency or oppressive institution, is located primarily in their colonial experience. Beatrice's subordination is not gender-based. It is rooted in her not realising on time that she is married to a deranged Christian. Eugene and Beatrice experience show that in Africa gender discussion must go beyond subordination and even gender-based violence. There must be an organic link between gender equity and freedom from religious indoctrination, ignorance and post-colonial domination. Indeed, Kisiang'ani (2004:15) connects African women's marginalisation and domination by men to the institutionalisation of western religion in Africa. To correct this, he opines that there is need for a revival, especially through serious research, of the traditional belief system in Africa. He insists that a 'people without their own religious grounding can never be respected' (p.16).

Two, African literature by dealing with the daily lives and activities of people helps to project that cultural norms are not enough to make gender roles static. In *Wizard* Nyawira went from enjoying the life of ease and comfort provided for her by her father to a life of self-reliance defined by hard work and commitment to the service of the people. In her early university days the chief joy of her life are 'fast cars, parties, and beauty parlor.' She hated people who were critical of the government and never bothered to look under the surface of things. As the daughter of a wealthy man she accepts it as 'natural and inevitable' to marry into a wealthy family to consolidate her family's wealth, power and social standing. A close shave with death, involving a near fatal car accident, changed her perception of life. What surprised her 'was the number of cars that simply passed her by; no one had stopped to see if anyone was hurt or needed help' (79). Instead the people 'who hurried to her rescue were the barefooted, mostly. One unloaded his donkey cart to rush her to the nearest medical center many miles away...'. It was during the period of recovery that 'she started thinking seriously about her life. If she had died, what would she have left behind as her legacy to the living?' This turned her into a social critic, a determined student of African history and an unrelenting candidate in pursuit of a model society for her people. This caused a rupture in her relationship with her father. She turns her back on the cultural pre-ordained role to marry into wealth and continue an unreflective life of dependence on men. She opts for a life of self-reliance and a marriage with someone with whom she could build a new tomorrow. Even though her marriage to Kaniuru fails due to lack of shared vision, Nyawira seizes her freedom as opportunity to devote all time, efforts and resources to the socio-political enlightenment and wellbeing of the people especially women, on how their complacency help to create and consolidate their marginalisation. She counsels women not to swallow insults in surly silence but instead to resist any violation of their sacred self. By seeing herself as a person who has the right to utilise her skills, potential, abilities, intelligence among others, Nyawira becomes the chairperson of the Movement for the Voice of the People, an organisation dedicated to fighting the atrocities of the government. Even her declaration as the number one and the most wanted enemy of the state did not deter her. Instead in this capacity she is able to mobilise the people to fight against the unpopular policies of the Ruler and his cohorts. In particular she is able to galvanise women to the realisation of their strength and how their combined effort can help to stop injustices directed at them. Under her able leadership a new order of justice created by today's modern women cure Tajirika of his obsession to turn his wife Vinjinia into a punching bag. Nyawira's experience teaches that what truly limit a person are the limitations one accepts rather than the one imposed by culture and that an individual can pass through many gendered social transformations in a lifetime. More significantly it points out that a woman through conscious decision backed up with committed action can redefine the limits of cultural imposition and upturn societal roles in gender matters. By choosing to make it on her own and earn respect through hard work, Nyawira earned a political platform and became a major player in the socio-political events in her country, especially as they affect marginalisation and injustice directed at women. It seems a major meaning Ngugi attaches to the gender issue depends on the unquestioning acceptance of

a woman's cultural role by Nyawira before her car accident and how she changed into a reflective being aware of the vicissitudes of life, the socio-political dynamics propelling the events in the society and the need to challenge them as a practical response towards instituting an ordered society. Nyawira becomes an embodiment of an agency that is transformative. Naila Kabeer (2006:28) submits that transformative forms of agency do not simply address immediate inequalities but are used to initiate longer-term processes of change in the structures of patriarchy. He insists that 'while changes in the consciousness and agency of individual women are an important starting point for such processes, it will do little on its own to undermine the systemic reproduction of inequality.' What will leave a lasting impression is institutional transformation which requires movement along a number of fronts: 'from individual to collective agency, from private negotiations to public action, and from the informal sphere to the formal arenas of struggle where power is legitimately exercised.'

Three is the central role of women in achieving gender equality. *Anthills* makes it clear that women must be at the vanguard in any serious effort in achieving gender equality. Ikem challenged Beatrice to define what the new role for women will be (98). The reason is simple. Women are in a better position to articulate the nature of their marginalisation. Beatrice believes that women should be proactive in their action instead of acting only when the men are no longer in a position to do anything. The way to equality is for women to be prepared to work alongside men especially in tough situations. At the height of the political crises in Kangan, when Chris is on the run, she did her best to protect him. Towards the end of the story, when the state has crumbled, she asked the most pertinent question: 'What must a people do to appease an embittered history?' (220). Importantly, she became 'a captain whose leadership was sharpened more and more by sensitivity to the peculiar needs of her company' (229). Nyawira, in *Wizard*, is aware that men cannot agree to gender equality except women through conscious and sustainable practice make them to accept it. For this reason she is intentional in her actions. She goes to work for Tajirika to gather intelligence on the Marching to Heaven project and the activities of the Global Bank mission for her organisation, Movement for the Voice of the People. When she noticed that her marriage to Kaniuru is heading nowhere, especially as he believes that as a man he should lord it over her, she ended the relationship. Though aware that in 'Aburiria politics was strictly a masculine affair' and women were not expected to plan and execute political actions, Nyawira successfully organised women's demonstration against Marching to Heaven. Indeed it is the series of political intervention spearheaded by her that eventually scuttled the project and provided enlightenment on the political events in the country for the masses.

Four, the novels point to the role dialogue plays in gender relationship. Dialogue creates room for both sexes to continuously learn things about themselves that may not be captured in the existing social role approved by the society. The only chink in Ikem's, the editor of the *National Gazette*, armoury of brilliant and original ideas according to Beatrice in *Anthills* is his lack of clear role for women in his political thinking. His interaction with Beatrice initiated a stream of self-exploration. His political stance questioned, his self-esteem broken, Ikem takes to serious reflection on the role of women in society. He came to understand his limited understanding of issues concerning women. This opened a new platform of understanding for them. Ikem both thanked her for the gift of insight into the world of women (96) and also acknowledged that men are not qualified to prescribe a formula for women. It is women who will set the agenda for their new role 'I can't tell you what the new role of women will be....You have to tell us' (98). Through dialogue some guiding principles for eliminating gender inequality can be established. These include: willingness to speak and willingness to listen, ability to present differences, even grievances, in a friendly manner; openness to new and contrary opinions; willingness to admit wrong; creating and allowing a level playing ground; and patience with each other. Edgren (2003:23-24) submits that 'if the dialogue partners refuse to seriously discuss the basis for their arguments, they are building *defensive positions*' and that true 'dialogue cannot develop where any participant is using advantages in power or access to information to impose their will on the others.' For dialogue to succeed both men and

women should also remember that cooperation is a matter of attitude. Without sincerity on both sides to rejig the balance and accommodate each other's views cooperation cannot be achieved. At this point this question must be asked: what changes men's attitude towards women? Ikem's attitude towards Beatrice is a guide to what changes men's attitude towards women. A simple answer is that their attitude invariably changes when women compel men to take them seriously and men are willing to do so, recognise them as intellectual equals, and turn them into partners and actors in their shared life experience instead of relating with them as subordinates. Without this incorporation women cannot become integral and integrated in gender discourse and every day activities. This has some chain consequences. One, women are denied the chance to critically review the value of usefulness of their contribution, knowledge and experience in everyday life. Second, they are denied the opportunity to understand the flaws and gaps in their contribution and the consequent need for them to accept and initiate new modes of cooperation with men. Through their interaction Beatrice recognises 'that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough' (p.91). In all, *Anthills* suggests that men and women must be united in the pursuit of creating new spaces for dialogue and intercommunication. This will invariably result in cooperation and mutual respect as well as equal opportunity to contribute in whatever endeavour one is suited for.

Five, African literature helps to show that gender roles are more dynamic than the functionalists' position portray. The functionalists argue that gender roles were established as a practical response to the pre-industrial era when men took care of responsibilities outside the home and women those in and around the home. They attributed this to the differences in their biological makeup; while men can engage in hunting and such activities that can keep them away from the home for long, women due to pregnancy and nursing were not fit for such roles. The World Health Organisation (2014) defines gender role as 'socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.' The novels under review however show that gender roles are dynamic and cannot be subsumed under biological determinism or social construction. The roles both play are function of circumstance which can change and as changes occur roles can be reversed, adjusted, reviewed or abandoned. What is important is for the agent to be able to correctly key into the demands and requirements of the prevailing circumstance. When Elewa's uncle in *Anthills* delayed in coming to name her child as the cultural prerogative of male family member demanded, Beatrice rose to the occasion and performed the naming ceremony. She did not stop at that, she gave the female child a name culturally assigned to a male child. Through this action she upturned the Igbo traditional costume that it is only a male child who can keep a family name going. Equally in *Wizard*, before Tajirika's illness and subsequent incarceration, his wife, Vinjinia 'trusted her husband to deal with outside matters while she worried about life at home' (143). However when the situation changed, Vinjinia was able to run all his businesses efficiently, kept good records 'as if she had been a businesswoman all her life' (423). The novels suggest that it is always within the powers of women to renegotiate their cultural role and expand it to meet the demands of the society. To achieve this all they need to do is to do away with the spirit of timidity, fear and unreflective acceptance of their cultural position and replace them with the spirit of determination, courage and confidence.

Six, inquiry into gender through African Literature helps to project the importance of shared values in gender issues. On the one hand African literature helps to show how shared values help to eliminate gender inequality as well as foster healthy gender relation. On the other hand, it helps to project how shared values help to consolidate gender inequality and unhealthy gender relation. In *Purple* Eugene and Beatrice are strong adherents of the catholic faith. They hold strongly the position of the church regarding the submissive role of a wife, the indissolubility of marriage and the cleansing power of confession. It is these shared values that set the stage for the harrowing experiences that characterised their married life. Eugene believes that whatever he does, the confession is there to render him 'spotless' and a candidate for 'Heaven' without even the 'cleansing of Purgatory' (115). By participating in this belief, Beatrice hands Eugene unfettered authority to deal with her and their children as he pleases. Here

shared values instead of helping to eliminate gender inequality and injustice becomes the tool for their entrenchment. Conversely, in *Wizard*, Nyawira's realisation that her values of aspiring to a self-reliant life and respect achieved through hard work are not shared by her husband Kaniuru made her end their marriage in less than a year. Unencumbered by religious indoctrination she sees no reason to stay in a relationship where her husband sees himself as 'the man to lead and she a woman to follow' (147). She knows that such attitude that freezes differing perspectives cannot enhance any form of growth. Rather it will institute discrimination, inequality and injustice in their relationship. She eventually meets Kamiti. This encounter did not immediately translate to shared values. Where Nyawira believes in political activism as a proper response to counter bad governance; Kamiti tows the path of passivity. This introduced friction into their relationship and placed them on a crossroad. Fortunately they realise that the dilemma they face is best confronted by keeping an open mind, acknowledging and working with each other's position in order to develop fresh and deeper modes of addressing their situation. This eventually led to Kamiti accepting to become a member of the Movement for the Voice of the People based on self-exploration and conviction. He embarks on a critical reflection on the socio-political events in Aburiria and discovers that his apolitical stance and idealistic tendency are not adequate response to the practical complexity of the problem at hand. On Nyawira's part she freely accepts Kamiti's interest in herbs. This knowledge proved useful when circumstances forced her to play the role of the Wizard. These experiences brought them closer. Kamiti sees her as a worthy ally, a partner who can be depended upon especially in tough situations. Nyawira regards him as a man who 'had no set views of a woman's place in the world' (195); who is willing to listen and learn from a woman. By buying into each other's worldview they realise the vision that nation-building can only be achieved through alliances between men and women. This way they are able to approach gender issues as an aggregate of networks that inform men and women's attitude and relationship. By avoiding the simplistic approach of compartmentalising women's struggles and instead aiming at the exploration that interrogates gender dynamics they make a telling statement of the need for a united front in any attempt to achieve a sustainable, equitable gender society. Together they worked to bridge divisions and struggles for power, relevance, resources, dignity, respect and self-expression that define relationship and characterise the inequalities between men and women. This is necessary in order to foster healthy gender relationship, strong communication and fruitful cross-gender deliberations. For them the essence of shared value is to make each other and the society better. This points to the central importance of the family in issues relating to gender; how issues of discrimination, inequality among others are instituted or eliminated based on the values held by couples. Where partners share common interests that promote healthy co-existence and overall wellbeing of the society, unequal power arrangement that usually characterise gender relationship is eliminated. A philosophical evaluation of African literature, thus, helps to demonstrate that shared values are not what is most important. The crucial issue is what kind of values is shared.

These points individually and collectively demonstrate the strategic importance of a philosophical analysis of gender issues in African literature in building new authentic, home-grown theories that can be implemented and sustained. More importantly it helps to show how to creatively eliminate discrimination in male-female relationship in Africa.

Conclusion

This study sets out to show that new theories of Africa must incorporate the strategic value of a philosophical analysis of gender issues in African literature. This concern is however not exclusive to any particular gender. This study demonstrates that through the daily lives and activities of people in African literature that gender issues are more nuanced and cannot be explained by mere gender difference. Factors such as the attitude of power brokers and social locations of both men and women can determine their inclusion/exclusion, control/powerlessness, hope/despair and independence/vulnerability in gender matters. This study also shows the importance of building gender social capital by paying close attention

to how family issues go a long way in strengthening or undermining gender relations. That is, the bond between gender, African literature and societal progress must be underscored. In this wise, the study highlights a serious danger that gender discourse face. This is that some of the issues causing gender discrimination if not properly interrogated could potentially create other forms of discrimination in male-female relationship. This is also a statement of what is needed for the restoration of order: a gender analysis that holds male and female and, even, their dreams together.

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