

Postcolonial Studies

Polemics at the Turn of the Millennium

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Abstract

Postcolonial theory over the years has become an inflated term. The field of study that initially dealt with literatures originating in regions with a colonial past gradually grew to encompass broad social, political or cultural aspects arising in diverse societies with no colonial history. In my article I am concentrating on the original use of the term and going to argue that the research area has turned from being a TOPIC of investigation to a general METHOD. What led to this transformation was the commodification of a post/colonial heritage: during the 1990s the exotic became a marketable cultural product. As primary texts appeared to be profitable ventures on the international publishing scene, postcolonial theory has flourished with key figures occupying cushioned academic positions and creating a body of secondary literature detached from the original mandate of postcolonialism in the original sense of the term.

Keywords

postcolonial studies, exotic, academic market, literary theory, turn of the millennium, commodification

In the following pages I am going to discuss the discrepancies surrounding recent changes in what once was termed ‘postcolonial theory’. Discrepancies arise from the fact that the field of research once related to a relatively narrow topic concentrating on literatures written (in the language of the colonizer) in late colonial regions after colonized nations have achieved full or partial independence, has been broadened to encompass various aspects and spheres of societies, cultures, literatures and attitudes that are no longer specifically colonial or postcolonial but in some respect present or reflect patterns of a colonial or postcolonial setting. I am considering postcolonial theory here as a

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narrow or 'classical' phrase and going to focus on changes at around the millennium and disregard later transformations of the original theoretical field. A possible step in the future might be to discuss specific regions or individual authors as case studies to support some of the points I here only highlight as general observations, but such a detailed and expanded discussion is beyond the scope of the present investigation. My aim here is simply to draw attention to a change in postcolonial theory from being a research area which studied postcolonial cultures and literatures to becoming a general approach: from being a topic of investigation to becoming an overall method of cultural studies. Perhaps this change is inevitably a consequence of globalization, of marketing exotic cultures, of inviting and emancipating regions that once had been colonized, but aspects of these broader sociological trends would also unnecessarily stretch the boundaries of my present endeavour.

1. Cultural Identities

V. S. Naipaul, the Indo-Caribbean, British novelist, was often seen and criticized as a controversial character who played the detached role of someone withdrawn from the noise and daily scuffle of postcolonial affairs. However, Naipaul's figure as a type of character is far from unique. At the core of postcolonial polemics is the discrepancy that, on the one hand, postcolonialism is treated as if it were a uniform whole, while on the other hand, it is fractured or even splintered by consisting of individuals who in their strife for international recognition stand in conflict with one another competing for key positions on platforms that shape a global or local postcolonial culture. A postcolonial author cannot escape representing a political stance, but this is not the daily politics of government and current affairs, rather, a politics of voice by which he immediately separates himself from the local and negotiates his position in the global scheme of a post-imperial world order. As soon as an Indian or West African author uses English, for example, he has already committed himself to supporting a cultural base which originally had not been his own.

A postcolonial author writing in English belongs to at least two literary traditions: one inherited as his native, often oral, tradition, and the tradition of English literature. To the latter he is indebted not only through the language he uses but also by a mentality received in his colonial schooling. In his quest for a postcolonial identity, a transculturated self is in danger of turning into an advocate on the colonizer's side; his "ambivalent mandate to *experience* but not to *become*" English is "doomed from the start to distress and failure." (Achebe 1988, 34) Belonging to two worlds often

means being alien in both by being divided between the two. However, this division of the self by leading to internal tensions boosts energies which as a surplus form a compelling urge to arrive at a new definition of identity through self-expression.

2. Modes of Assimilation

Patrick Colm Hogan explains the various possible standpoints from which postcolonial authors may relate to the larger postcolonial world and to their former colonizers. “Colonial contact disrupts indigenous culture [...] and ends the easy performance of traditional practices”. (Hogan 2000, 9) Colonial contact compels indigenous societies to reassess their self-understanding and to negotiate a new identity. To what extent an individual accepts or rejects changes caused by colonial contact and to what degree he incorporates elements of the cultural scheme of the colonizer into his original culture forms the base of a conviction by which then an author presents his characters and thus represents himself. Between the extremes of “orthodoxy” and “alienation” Hogan describes a set of possible attitudes that may characterize a postcolonial person integrating cultural changes caused by colonial contact.

By “orthodoxy” Hogan generally refers to individuals who advocate a return to precolonial practices. An array of possible positions are inherent in this broad category depending on differences in degree. An “originalist” believes that precolonial traditions were once pure and have degenerated by colonial contact, therefore, original practices should be revived without changes. A “reactionary traditionalist” “tries to eliminate from indigenous culture all elements that it shares with European culture” (Hogan 2000, 12) even if some of these had been truly original practices. This view is akin to fundamentalism as it rejects previously accepted elements on the basis that colonial contact has infected and deteriorated what once had been pure. The standpoint which advocates a return to original practices but which at the same time accepts that original practices may change and may be modernized, in Hogan’s terms, “open-minded orthodoxy” adopts changes “as advances on traditional ideas and practices, either for empirical or moral reasons.” (Hogan 2000, 11) “Unreflective conformism,” in contrast, is “the thoughtless repetition of [...] practices of a tradition, not only without criticism, but without understanding of their relations and purposes.” (Hogan 2000, 11)

In parallel with orthodoxy, “assimilation” for Hogan is “the full acceptance and internalization of the other basic culture” (Hogan 2000, 14), while in parallel with reactionary traditionalism is “mimeticism,” “the repudiation of indigenous

traditions” including “the repudiation of those aspects of English culture that overlap with indigenous traditions.” (Hogan 2000, 15) Hogan terms “syncretist” those who attempt to combine elements of both the metropolitan and the traditional culture and he asserts that this attitude is “preferred by the bulk of Anglophone postcolonization writers” but “by no means typical of postcolonization people.” (Hogan 2000, 16) Finally, by “alienation” Hogan refers to

the paralyzing conviction that one has no identity, no real cultural home, and that no synthesis is possible. [...] The character [...] internalizes the alien culture after extensive education, typically including a period in the metropolis. His/her racial or ethnic origin prevents true acceptance in the foreign culture, and the internalization of the foreign culture makes him/her (in Achebe’s phrase) “no longer at ease” in the home culture as well. (Hogan 2000, 17)

Since nobody attains a fixed, unchanging cultural identity with birth, over time an individual may cross over from one possible standpoint to another, for example, “a colonized person who ends up as a reactionary traditionalist will very often do so after having passed through a period of mimeticism.” (Hogan 2000, 15) Furthermore, most people advocate one standpoint with regards to some aspects of their culture and society, while they may subscribe to another standpoint without contradicting themselves when considering another aspect of the same culture or society. The patterns and circumnavigation among these possible strands and their combinations define the cultural identity of individuals in a postcolonial world.

3. Theory Enforced

Postcolonial theory over the years has become an inflated term. The field of study that initially dealt with literatures originating in regions with a colonial past gradually grew to encompass broad social, political or cultural aspects arising in diverse societies, even ones with no colonial history. Here, however, in this essay I am concentrating on the original or classical use of the term as in the last decades of the twentieth century it evolved to describe cultures and societies that recently attained independence from a colonial regime. I am going to argue that postcolonial theory as a research area has turned from being a TOPIC of investigation to a general METHOD. What led to this transformation was, partly, the commodification of a post/colonial heritage: during the 1990s the exotic became a marketable cultural product. Graham Huggan (*The Postcolonial Exotic*, 2001) and Sarah Brouillette (*Postcolonial Writers in the*

Global Literary Marketplace, 2007) explored ramifications of the emerging new field of postcolonial literatures. As primary texts appeared to be profitable ventures on the international publishing scene, similarly, postcolonial theory has flourished and become a marketable product with key figures occupying cushioned academic positions and creating a body of secondary literature disconnected from the original mandate of postcolonialism in the original sense of the term.

Graham Huggan in the concluding chapter of *The Postcolonial Exotic* asserts that “the most recent work in the field of postcolonial studies gives the impression of having bypassed literature altogether, offering a heady blend of philosophy, sociology, history and political science in which literary texts, when referred to at all, are read symptomatically within the context of larger social and cultural trends.” (Huggan 2001, 239) Earlier, John Thieme has already warned of the peculiar turn of events; in his view, creative writers may easily be “in danger of becoming the new subalterns of postcolonial studies.” (Thieme 1996, 6) Huggan claims that “in the overwhelmingly commercial context of late twentieth-century commodity culture, postcolonialism and its rhetoric of resistance have themselves become consumer products.” (Huggan 2001, 6) He says, it has “become more fashionable to attack postcolonialism than to defend it – a sign [...] of its increasing commodification as a marketable academic field.” (Huggan 2001: 2-3) The attacks were directed against established theorists’ rigid adherence to entrenched academic opinions that denied space for the formulation of new critical perspectives that would attempt to dismantle the trenches themselves. Of course, the position of critics towards the field displayed an array of possible stances. “Some of them might wish to disclaim or downplay their involvement in postcolonial theoretical production. [...] Others might wish to ‘opt out’ of, or at least defy, the processes of commodification and institutionalization. [...] Still others, however, have chosen to work within, while also seeking to challenge, institutional structures”. (Huggan 2001, 32)

Introducing *Colonialism and Cultural Identity*, Patrick Colm Hogan complains that readers of his manuscript “have been troubled by the lack of ‘theory.’ One colleague actually went so far as to ask, ‘Why isn’t there any theory in your opening chapter?’” (Hogan 2000, 24) Hogan extends the view of his proofreaders to a wider academic society:

my colleague is not alone in tacitly reducing “postcolonial theory” to a handful of prominent poststructural critics. Indeed, he appears to be in the majority – so much so, that if one sends out an article or book manuscript on postcolonization literature, it is very likely that one will be required to treat Bhabha and/or Spivak as a condition of publication. (Hogan 2000, 25)

Hogan returns to the topic in his “Afterword”, thus showing that the predicament he experienced during the process of writing his book was not a fleeting thought of a single colleague, but a persistent “dogmatism in postcolonial studies: it seems to be increasingly difficult even to publish in this field without adhering to the ideas associated with Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and a few other poststructural writers.” (Hogan 2000, 305)

4. Anomalies Revisited

Postcolonial theory grew out of the area of literary studies earlier designated as ‘Commonwealth Literature’ or ‘New Literatures in English.’ Over the years postcolonial studies have expanded to include cultural areas without a colonial past, studies on the ‘subaltern,’ for example, are extended to the social classes in the Western world who present a parallel to historical colonization. Thus, people on the verge of society, silent minorities, people living in diasporas, homeless wanderers, patients treated in hospitals, children bullied at school, supervised workers, gays and lesbians as outsiders to the accepted norms of society (cf. the emerging social wave of the LGBTQ movement), and ultimately people who are slow in thought, who are unskilled, helpless, frustrated, abashed or shy – everyone, who in any kind of social relation feels he is subordinated, oppressed, exploited or discriminated, is in a way subject to subaltern studies, is internally ‘colonized.’ Paradoxically, however, as Arif Dirlik points out “the term *postcolonial*, understood in terms of its discursive thematics, excludes from its scope most of those who inhabit or hail from *postcolonial* societies.” (Dirlik 1997, 300) Millions of people, the majority of the population of the developing world is untouched by and unconcerned with the twists of theory launched by critics cushioned in the comforts of Western academia.

Robert Young, a professor of Oxford University and editor of *Interventions*, a journal of transnational cultural studies, asserts that postcolonialism

stands for empowering the poor, the dispossessed, and the disadvantaged, for tolerance of difference and diversity, for the establishment of minorities’ rights, and cultural rights within a broad framework of democratic egalitarianism that refuses to impose alienating western ways of thinking on tricontinental third world societies. It resists all forms of exploitation (environmental as well as human) and all oppressive conditions that have been developed solely for the interests of corporate capitalism. It challenges corporate capitalism’s commodification of social relations and the doctrine of individualism that functions as the means through

which this is achieved. [...] The sympathies and interests of postcolonialism are thus focused on those at the margins of society, those whose cultural identity has been dislocated or left uncertain by the forces of global capitalism – refugees, migrants who have moved from the countryside to the impoverished edges of the city, migrants who struggle in the first world for a better life while working at the lowest levels of those societies. (Young 2020, 113-4)

In contrast with Young's view, postcolonial theorists at the turn of the millennium seemed to be unconcerned with social discrepancies; they embarked on fabricating theoretical models that do not help the lives of people living in postcolonial societies at all. Some of these authors, like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak or Abdul JanMohamed, bearing the burden of growing up in a third world society, has become entrenched in elitist Western universities where, enjoying the fringe benefits of an academic setting, they leaned toward obscurity, organized conferences, and contrived new studies that seemed to explore and aid who they called the subaltern. The publishing and academic industry surrounding the field offered space to verbosity and interlocutions of the initiated instead of addressing real problems arising from the postcolonial situation. By interlocutions of the initiated I simplify what Graham Huggan defines as the "self-enclosing affiliative network in which the intellectual validity of any given theoretical project consists in its ability to cross-reference other, preferably canonical, theoretical works." In his view, postcolonialism "risks mystifying not only the social, historical and economic circumstances of imperial encounter it seeks to abstract from, but also the specific material conditions underlying its own institutional development." (Huggan 2001, 259)

Such contradictions shed light on the tension among critics working in the field of postcolonial studies. Key theoretical models within the field fail to relate to the social strata they describe; the models remain merely descriptive, and as such, by legitimating the privilege and access of an academic elite to scholarship, they consolidate the isolation and the discrimination of subordinated spheres of postcolonial societies.

What has become of postcolonial theory fails to assert effects in the direction of democratic egalitarianism, as Robert Young would like to make it seem: for people occupying key positions of authority resigning from authority is just as difficult as for the suppressed to represent their interests. The conclusion of Gayatri Spivak's seminal and celebrated essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is that the subaltern cannot voice their intentions because of their being subdued by a dominant actor. Yet, Spivak's conclusion is a simple case of tautology, since as soon as the subaltern

becomes able to represent his interests, we cannot designate him as subaltern: with this shift he comes to be the representative of an unsuppressed interest group which then competes for authoritative positions at, ideally, more or less equal terms with other interest groups. The subaltern is *per definitionem* deprived of the ability to represent his interests, is deprived of rights and justice, and as a result of his disadvantage, he is often unable to formulate a congruent opinion.

Among the critics who put forward arguments against the hegemony of postcolonial theory, Aijaz Ahmad warranted his theoretical stance by his career: as the research fellow of Nehru Museum and Library in New Delhi, he was not dependent on Western academia and thus his opinion may carry some elements of truth from an outsider's perspective. He argues

that postcolonial theory is simply one more medium through which the authority of the West over the formerly imperialized parts of the globe is currently being reinscribed within the neocolonial "new world order" and is, indeed best understood as a new expression of the West's historical will to power over the rest of the world. [...] Postcolonial theorists reproduce within the academic sphere the contemporary division of labour authorized by global capitalism. (Cited in Moore-Gilbert 1997, 59)

Postcolonial theory in recent years, in contrast with its morphology, is not a theoretical investigation *following* the period of colonialism, much rather it is the confirmation, extension and reinforcement of colonial relations: the term is a euphemism for the much less justifiable term, 'neocolonialism.' The independence of many of the formerly colonized nations is a quasi-independence: a variously determined, in their political, economic, and cultural existence restricted and bonded, relative independence embedded in colonial pasts. Independence for India after partition, for Nigeria by being moulded into a multi-ethnic society where descendants of formerly often hostile tribal traditions are forced to live as a single nation, clearly, is not the same independence these territories had enjoyed prior to European colonization. Independence in the West Indies is anything but that of the native Caribs and Arawaks, who are practically extinct as a result of European encounter.

A pre-colonial independence can never be regained, but at the same time, as Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin point out "colonizers never eradicated the pre-colonial culture." (Ashcroft et al. 2003, 195) In parallel, independence cannot instantly eradicate the trauma of colonization; the legacy of the colonial period is bound to remain with newly independent regions for a long time. To try and come to terms

with this legacy, to try and understand its effects and the transformations that it had left behind is inevitably the main preoccupation of most postcolonial writers.

Postcolonial discourse of the 1990s disregarded the fundamental contradictions outlined above, instead, the aim seemed to be to construe theoretical models. In John Guillory's view, postcolonial studies failed "to compensate for the *real* social inequalities their deployment is apparently designed to redress." (Huggan 2001, 249-50) Even Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, who are deeply entrenched in the academic field of postcolonial theory, so much so that in fact, recently a collection of essays appeared commemorating and celebrating their original and seminal study: *The Empire Writes Back* (see Zabus 2015) admit that "the validity of the post-colonial lies in its efficacy. Whatever its function as an academic discourse, we need to ask how well it has served to empower post-colonial intellectuals and assisted in implementing strategies of decolonization". (Ashcroft 2003, 203)

Curiously enough, however, such critics as Aijaz Ahmad, Benita Perry and Arif Dirlik, who represented dissident views on postcolonial theory, were often included in anthologies on postcolonialism, and thus, perhaps in contrast with their original intention, have become integrated into the discipline. Some harshly critical articles that originally appeared in periodicals like *Third Text* or *Critical Inquiry* criticizing established bastions of postcolonial theory were subsequently selected into general Readers that aimed to introduce postcolonial studies; thus, some authors have become part of the theoretical framework which they had originally rejected. When an author who criticizes postcolonial theory is defined as part of postcolonialism, a procedure of quasi-recognition, a melting into and ultimately a dismantling process commences that may lead to the silencing of the original critique.

Obviously, the editors of postcolonial Readers somehow strain to represent a broad approach to the area of study and hope to offer a complete view, but a critic's aim when turning against postcolonialism, if authentic and credible, is exactly not to melt into the discipline or to earn royalties by way of his critique being corrupted. Aijaz Ahmad laconically summed up his dissatisfaction with the tendency to commercialize theory: "Theory itself becomes a marketplace of ideas, with massive supplies of theory as usable commodity, guaranteeing consumers' free choice and a rapid rate of obsolescence." (Ahmad 1992, 70) The predicament of the critic, however, is insurmountable. If, on principle, he rejects the publication of his article as part of postcolonial theory, he deprives himself of the possibility of voicing his opinion and relegates himself to the position of the subaltern who is unable to find a forum to express his views, or else, he takes up the role of a sceptic, but either

way, he remains marginalized. As soon as, however, he becomes integrated into the ‘industry’ of theory, his views, at least in part, lose authenticity.

The publishing industry and academic elites at times might disorient authentic scholarship. The access to various awards, to competitions for posts, to publication forums and to other forums for voicing opinions can quite easily be restricted to specified target groups or even target persons in line with the interests of persons or groups of people in positions of authority distributing resources. Scholars who devote more time to monitoring and submitting applications and demonstrate better skills in public relations are bound to advance more rapidly than those who merely pursue scholarly research. Conferencing, publishing and academic scholarship in recent years have become an affluent market where the laws of a market economy apply. In this sense, art, culture, science, philosophy, social studies as well as politics, or any intellectual endeavour, become intangible merchandise, marketable products.

5. After Postcolonial Theory

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin claim that “forces such as globalization are the evidence of the continuing control of the ‘West’ over the ‘Rest’” (Ashcroft et al. 2003, 194), and that “[t]he most extreme consequences of imperial dominance can be seen in the radical displacement of peoples through slavery, indenture and settlement. More recently the ‘dispersal’ of significant numbers of people can be seen to be a consequence of the disparity in wealth between the West and the world.” (Ashcroft et al. 2003, 217) Thus, as our world at the turn of the millennium was becoming homogenized through forces of global market economies on the one hand, on the other hand, it remained divided by disparities reinforced through quasi-democratic, quasi-egalitarian ideologies and through the restriction of access to privileges by the counter-selective distribution of key positions of authority. Consumer behaviour, commercial media, a market of new entrepreneurship, the logic of Western democracy, modes and styles of mass communication, changes in education and technology – all these dissolved participating regions into a broader, uniform world. According to Arif Dirlik, the homogenizing processes were only

an appearance of equalization of differences within and across societies, as well as of democratization within and among societies. What is ironic is that the managers of this world situation themselves concede that they (or their organizations) now have the power to appropriate the local for the global, to admit different cultures into the realm of capital, [...] and even to reconstitute

subjectivities across national boundaries to create producers and consumers more responsive to the operations of capital. Those who do not respond [...] – four-fifths of the global population by the managers’ count – need not be colonized; they are simply marginalized. [...] Those peoples or places that are not responsive to the needs (or demands) of capital, or are too far gone to respond ‘efficiently,’ simply find themselves out of its pathways. And it is easier even than in the heyday of colonialism or modernization theory to say convincingly: It is their own fault. (Dirlik 1997, 311)

Challenging global problems calls for global participation: this is the rhetoric why peoples and cultures were becoming homogenous and uniform. The transculturation of the world was a double-edged weapon: “the flow of culture has been at once homogenizing and heterogenizing; some groups share in a common global culture regardless of location even as they are alienated from the culture of their hinterlands while others are driven back into cultural legacies long thought to be residual to take refuge in culture havens that are as far apart from one another as they were at the origins of modernity.” (Dirlik 1997, 312) Wherever we look, aims to liberalize always competed and conflicted with aims to preserve the *status quo*. The subaltern would forever be deprived of authority, of self-representation, of the ability, the drive and occasionally the opportunity to enforce his interests and to exercise his rights. A strive for equal rights among people would always remain in conflict with the natural inclination to strive for a better life and the conviction that people want to become equal with someone who is *superior* and not *inferior* to them. “The liberal, pluralistic self-image of the university can always be pressed to make room for diversity, multiculturalism, non-Europe; careers can arise out of such recognitions of the cultural compact. But this same liberal university is usually, for the non-white student, a place of desolation, even panic; exclusions are sometimes blatant, more often only polite and silent.” (Ahmad 1992, 84)

If detached from its original mandate of investigating the culture and society of regions with a colonial background, postcolonial theory fails at what it claims to pursue. Construing twisted models of theoretical thinking, the heavy fog of jargon does not create empathy for colonized societies of late. Just the opposite: it alienates and places these societies at a greater distance. Efforts as those of Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh, to keep postcolonial studies intact by ‘rerouting’ and ‘remapping’ the scene, seem a futile attempt to consolidate vested interests. (Wilson 2009)

Let me repeat. Postcolonial theory over the years has become an inflated term. The field of study that initially dealt with literatures originating in regions with a colonial past gradually grew to encompass broad social, political or cultural aspects arising in diverse societies with no colonial history at all. In my essay I concentrated on the original use of the term and attempted to argue that the research area once designated as postcolonial studies has morphed and shifted from being a TOPIC of investigation to a general METHOD. What led to this transformation was the commodification of a post/colonial heritage. During the 1990s the exotic became a marketable cultural product. Merchandise that appealed to Western consumers often included various artistic forms: African sculptures, small or large wooden figures of a naked black person often believed to have a devotional value but most of the time only a fake depiction of folk mythology for disinformed tourists; incense sticks were imported from India; what we now term as world music infiltrated Western popular songs; novels, plays and poems written by authors living or coming from a region of the world with a colonial past were welcome by Western readers; exotic, international restaurants were established and food ingredients of various oriental cuisines became widely available anywhere we live. As primary texts of postcolonial literature appeared to be profitable ventures on the international publishing scene, similarly, postcolonial theory has flourished and become a marketable product with key figures occupying cushioned academic positions and creating a body of secondary literature disengaged from the original mandate of postcolonial studies in the original sense of the term. What was at stake at the turn of the millennium was the integrity of the field. What would justify and validate postcolonial theory once it turned away from its original target area and consequently has very little to do with the post/colonial phenomenon? Postcolonial theory fabricated in Western academic settings in recent years had no major impact on postcolonial societies. It seems Sarah Broulliette's viewpoint is justified by developments in recent decades: "Postcolonial literature, once theorized as Third World literature, perhaps [is] soon to be recategorized again as global literatures, or as the literatures of globalization." (Broulliette 2007, 174) It is not obvious that postcolonial theory has a future. The case might be that it has run its course and would soon become outdated as other theoretical approaches earlier (positivism, structuralism, deconstructionism) and give way to newly emerging approaches with new perspectives ready to explain developments and situations, evolving from globalization, migration, climate change, geopolitical contests, wars, ecological and economic problems. Then, we shall treat postcolonial theory from a historical point of view because it was nothing more than a vanishing phase in the history of literary theory in the last decades of the twentieth century.

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