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PLIGHT OF WOMEN IN SELECT SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN WRITERS' WORKS: A DIASPORIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper is an endeavor to go beyond debates concerning South Asian diaspora writers-Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* as 'The Novels of Diaspora' and to understand their plight how these South Asian diaspora women face alienation, dislocation, discrimination, and establish their identity in an alien land. These writers represent different diasporas, such as Pakistani-American (Bapsi Sidhwa) and Bangladeshi-English (Monica Ali). Generally, diaspora studies discuss the nature of exile, displacement, dislocation, nostalgia, alienation, identity crisis, discrimination, and cultural change. Bapsi Sidhwa is widely recognized as one of the most prominent Pakistani-Anglophone novelists writing today. Her fourth novel *An American Brat* tells the story of a young Pakistani girl, Feroza, and her adventure in America. Later Feroza realizes how far she has come- and wonders how much further she can go. This delightful coming-of-age novel is both remarkably funny and remarkably acute portrayal of America as seen through the eyes of a perceptive young immigrant. Monica Ali, a Bangladeshi-born British writer, and novelist is widely known for her debut novel *Brick Lane*. The novel follows the life of a Bangladeshi woman Nazneen who migrates to London with her old husband Chanu, faces many problems like alienation, displacement, nostalgia, discrimination, communication problem. It explores her life and adaptations in the community, as well as the character of Chanu, and their larger ethnic community.

Key Words: cultural change, diaspora, discrimination, migration, nostalgia, the plight

Introduction

Movement is the key philosophy of human action. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, various discoveries of the world, colonization, decolonization, intellectual diaspora, the Jewish diaspora, and dollar diaspora are all linked to the idea of movement. This movement is sometimes willing and sometimes forced from the root to the stem, home to unhome, association to dissociation. With the arrival of globalization and scientific discoveries, the whole world has become the global village and various opportunities knock the doors for the people living in any corner of the world. Various societies, cultures, religions, traditions, relations, perceptions, people, and ethnicities have all been not only affected but also restricted. This is the change which is the concern of various thinkers and scholars, because people thought empty-handed, always carry with them many belongings such as culture, religion, customs, language, etc. When these belongings are at risk or at some third space where two spaces clash, are the state of both friendship as well as enmity.

At the same time, the idea of movement is devoid of its denotations and absorbs the connotations of displacement, forced migration, and dislocation which leads to other states such as alienation, nostalgia, theorization, dissociation, etc. It is well-accepted fact that the basic theme of all literature is a human being, his or her behavior, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and faiths. As a human being is described as a social animal, it is quite obvious that the sociological aspect of the human being is reflected in literature. Literature deals with sociological concepts and movements aesthetically. 'Diaspora' is one of the sociological theories developed through interrelated concepts that find their reflection in today's literature. Diaspora literature deals with the expatriates' sensibility. Generally, the term diaspora denotes displacement, but at present, the term "Diaspora" has various meanings. The concept of diaspora is sometimes defined as *galut*-exile of bondage-and as *golah*-a relatively stable community in exile primarily derives from the historical experiences of the Jewish people. A dictionary definition of diaspora reveals that it originates from the Greek verb 'diaspeirein' which can be translated as 'to sow widely'. The term diaspora is based on the Greek terms "speiro"- to sow, and the preposition "dia" – over. The term has been associated with the Greeks, as they have moved away from their land for purpose of trade and business. Innumerable studies have been attempted to define and comprehend the term-diaspora.

Etymologically, *dia* means 'through' and *speiro* means to 'scatter'. Now the term is used in a more generalized sense of referring to the migration population along with their ways of life to the place of destination abroad. However, the term diaspora and diasporic communities are increasingly being used as the metaphoric definition for expatriates, expellees, refugees, alien residents, immigrants displaced communities, and ethnic minorities living in exile.

The term originally associated with the Jewish historical experiences but today the term has acquired a more expanded meaning and it refers to the common ancestral homeland, voluntary or involuntary migration, and a sense of marginality in the country of residence. In expansion to the understanding of diaspora, the people

generally have a memory of their native place as they believe their roots are their ancestral places and that's why where they belong.

It is assumed that Diasporic literature focuses on writings of and by the Diasporic community, wherein, writers through their works convey their ambivalent position in the world and their oscillating condition between the homeland and settled land. It is a very vast concept and an umbrella term that includes in it all those literary works written by the authors outside their native country, but these works are associated with native culture and background. In this wide context, all those writers can be regarded as Diasporic writers who write outside their country but remained related to their homeland through their works.

At the same time, the idea of movement is devoid of its denotations and absorbs the connotations of displacement, forced migration, and dislocation which leads to other states such as-alienation, nostalgia, theorization, dissociation, etc. Alienation is not an easy term to define. It means estrangement and separation. It has various meanings.

The idea of the diaspora is also connected to the idea of movement; a considerable account of various studies is available dealing with the concept of diaspora studies. Thousands of novels, films, stories, fiction, plays, paintings, and music partly or completely touch the theme of diaspora studies. In literature, diaspora writings are, to a greater extent, the record of the experiences the author lived, enjoyed, and suffered. The term 'Displacement' is associated with the diaspora. Displacement, unfortunately rarely has a definitive terminus, for it seems to perpetuate itself. The displaced often suffers from an almost-pathological wanderlust. In recent times, diaspora refers to the displaced communities of people who have been dislocated from their native homeland. It comprises the idea of up-rootedness from the homeland, a place from the displacement and dislocations that occur, and the narratives of the ruthless journeys of migrants begin. This 'uprooted', sandwich, or 'trishanku' mood has been so frequent and dominant that it has acquired a currency in the name of "Expatriate or Diasporic Sensibility". Some terms that are usually associated with diaspora are exile, alienation, nostalgia, discrimination, despair, dislocation, displacement, abandonment, and disintegration.

As this paper discusses South-Asian Diasporas, a very brief historical tracing is undertaken herewith. The people who moved from the South Asian regions such as-India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives were termed as South-Asian Diaspora. South Asia, known as Third World by the western countries has seen a large scale of migration of people to the U.S.A., U.K., Germany, France, or other European countries for the sake of professional, economical or academic purposes. The South-Asians moved into the US and Canada in the 19th century for various reasons such as- freedom from bondage, liberation from slavery as well as an urge to find out a better lifestyle. On the other hand, immigration to the 20th century was more for professional gain. The South-Asians face racial tensions and poor living conditions in the new land. As far as South Asian diaspora is concerned, people have acquired a new identity through the process of self-fashioning and increasing acceptance by the West. South-Asian women writers are largely categorized as those who are indigenous to India,

Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and those who are of South Asian descent but reside in the diasporas and the contemporary world owes much for the substance to these Diasporic women writers that they are pouring to the serious readers of literature. These women writers assert their definitions of femininity through the female protagonists.

The Diasporic writing of South Asia has multiple hues of emotions and feelings in it. It is full of feelings of alienation, love, and concern for home, nostalgia, dispersion, dual identity with the original homeland and adopted country, identity crisis, and search for self in an alien land, etc.

The writers selected for the present paper belong to different communities of diaspora. The selection of writers from different communities enables readers to know the history and practices of various Diasporas.

The present paper attempts to throw light on the theme of diaspora used by the diasporic writers- Bapsi Sidhwa and Monica Ali in their novels. They have written novels and short stories which delineate their evolution from alienation to adoption and assimilation. The confusion of gender boundaries and the historical implications of cross-cultural phenomena by the characters are also highlighted in this paper. The novels, undertaken for the research are *An American Brat* by Bapsi Sidhwa and *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali. Various themes emerge in these novels. Many of them have partly or completely explored.

Bapsi Sidhwa was born on August 11, 1938, in Karachi, Pakistan. Her family belongs to the Parsi ethnic community which practices the Zoroastrian religion. In 1975, Sidhwa served as Pakistan's delegate to the Asian Women's congress. She immigrated to the United States in 1983 and became a naturalized American citizen in 1993.

Since moving to the United States, Sidhwa has taught, lectured, and presented workshops in creative writing at several colleges and universities, including Columbia University, St. Thomas University, the University of Houston, and Mount Holyoke College in Amherst, Massachusetts. She held a Bunting Fellowship at Radcliffe/Harvard in 1986 and was a visiting scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation center in Bellagio, Italy, in 1991. She was awarded the Sitara-i-Imtiaz, Pakistan's highest national honor in the arts. She has also received a variety of grants and awards for her fictions, including a National Endowment for the Arts grant in 1987, a *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book of the year award for *Cracking India* in 1991, and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest award in 1993. She has shown keen interest in social works related to women and destitute children. She has also been on the Advisory Committee to the Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Women's Development. She is best known for her collaborated work with Indo-Canadian Filmmaker Deepa Mehta. She currently resides in Houston, US. She describes herself as a "Panjabi-Parsi-Pakistani".

Monica Ali was born on October 20, 1967, in Dhaka, East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) to a Bangladeshi father and an English mother. She is a Bangladeshi-born British writer and novelist. In 2003, she was selected as one of the “Best of Young British Novelists” by *Granta* magazine based on her unpublished manuscript; her debut novel, *Brick Lane*, was published later that year. It was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize. She has published three other novels too. At present, she lives in South London with her husband, Simon Torrance, and two children.

An American Brat (1993), written after Bapsi Sidhwa immigrated to America, follows a sixteen-year-old Parsee girl- Feroza Ginwalla. *An American Brat* is the fourth novel of Sidhwa. It tells the story of a young Pakistani girl, Feroza, and her adventure in America. It is an account of a Pakistani immigrant to the United States. In depicting the expatriate experience, Sidhwa has tried to juxtapose the first and the third world perceptions. The main protagonist- Feroza is sent to America for a three-month vacation by her family to broaden her outlook because she has become more conservative due to Pakistan’s rising tide of fundamentalism. She lives there with her uncle Manek, a student. However, she decides to remain in America as a college student, where she falls in love with a young Jewish man. Feroza’s journey to the USA makes her completely modern. Later, it becomes very difficult for her to adjust herself according to the Parsi tradition and culture.

Feroza’s relationship with Jo and David brings enlightenment and maturity to her character and at the same time, it also results in her mother, Zareen’s trip to the US as she wishes to sever Feroza’s relationship with David. The mother-daughter relationship and behavioral changes in the character of Feroza are portrayed through Zareen’s eye. With her mission accompanied, she returns home, while Feroza to come out of the pain of the break with David decides to stay on there. The novel focuses on the cultural shock experienced by the immigrants in the settled society, their sense of alienation and estrangement.

Brick Lane is one of the few novels which reflect the lives of first and second-generation Bangladeshi immigrants in Britain. *Brick Lane*- named after Brick Lane, is a street at the heart of London’s Bangladeshi community focuses on Nazneen as the central character. The novel provides very rich information about her lifestyle. Nazneen is a Bangladeshi girl who moves to London at age of 18, after marrying an old man, Chanu. They live in Tower Hamlets. Due to the lack of the English language, she is unable to communicate with others. Her life slowly changes, when her daughter begins to teach her English language, life and culture. Later on, she begins to earn money independently. Karim enters into her life and she finds that her life takes a twist. Due to this aspect of self-reliance and her friendship with Razia, she is able to reject Karim’s proposal of marriage. Chanu wishes to return Bangladesh, and he leaves for Bangladesh leaving his family back in London. *Brick Lane* shows the discrimination faced by the Bangladeshi community in London, cultural clash, and problems between the first and second generations of the Diasporic community.

Diaspora study helps to select some of the Diasporic themes found in diasporic narratives like dislocation, displacement, alienation, discrimination, cultural change, and gender inequality.

The researcher's inquiries are to be directed for diasporic features in the novels chosen for study, Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*.

In *An American Brat* and *Brick Lane*, one can easily find that most of the female characters suffer from dislocation. Their displacement occurs due to their marriages and their educational purposes. Their moves from their homeland to settled land cannot be considered as a voluntary movement. Though, the male characters come to the foreign land for education and career purposes. In *An American Brat*, there are two kinds of displacement both voluntary and non-voluntary. Feroza's uncle, Manek comes to the US due to his wish, for higher education, While Feroza is sent to the US by her parents due to political conditions in her home country. Feroza is quite excited to know about her trip to the US. Until now she just heard about America as "...the land of glossy magazines, of 'Bewitched' and 'Star Trek', of rock stars and jeans..."(27). But in the case of Aban, Manek's wife, it is forced displacement.

In *Brick Lane*, Chanu lives in London for more than twenty years. He moves there to find a job for supporting his family and later settles there. Nazneen, the female protagonist of the novel, is forced to live in London. At the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Chanu Ahmad is unable to adjust to London. He is not able to acclimatize to the British way of life. Nazneen feels alienated and estranged both socially and culturally. Nostalgia also emerges among the dislocated and displaced people. In these novels, most of the women characters leave their homelands after their marriages to settle in new lands.

In *Brick Lane*, When Nazneen's father decides her to marry a person of his choice, Nazneen replies, "Abba, it is good that you have chosen my husband. I hope I can be a good wife, like Amma" (7). Nazneen marries Chanu, who is forty years of age, almost double her age. She migrates to London and lives in Bangladeshi ghettos at Tower Hamlets in the Brick Lane area of London. She struggles a lot to settle there. She feels alien in the foreign land. When her husband goes for his job, she feels lonely at home. She is not able to speak in English except for two words like 'sorry' and 'thank you'. The problem of communication heads her into forced imprisonment. She misses her life in her homeland. Nazneen feels alienated in London. She is like a caged bird with her own house. Though her husband, Chanu lives in London, he does not allow Nazneen to follow the Western culture. He is still orthodox. She always remains at home and does the same household chores and therefore she suffers from isolation, alienation, and monotony. She depicts her loneliness: "In all her eighteen years, she could scarcely remember a moment that she had spent alone. Until she married. And came to London to sit day after day in this large box with the furniture to dust, and the muffled sound of private lives scaled away above, below and around her"(Brick lane 24).

In her initial stage of settlement, she feels utterly loneliness. Chanu does not like the British way of living too. He always wants to go to his homeland. It can be said that Chanu is suffering from "Going Home Syndrome". He says, "They don't even really leave home. Their bodies are here but their hearts back there. And anyway, look how they live: just recreating the villages here" (32). Finally, he leaves America for his motherland.

In *An American Brat*, Feroza's uncle, Manek moves to the US for higher studies. He also feels alienated. In his initial stage, he suffers from the cultural and social differences in the foreign land. After knowing about Feroza's arrival in America, he becomes very happy. Though Feroza is very much excited about her trip, she also feels homesick in a foreign land:

After school, Feroza sat glumly in front of the TV nursing her broken heart and her empty lap and thinking about home. She missed her grandmothers, her parents, friends, her friends, her ayah, the incessant chatter of her cousins, and even the raucous Chorus of the Main Market mullahs on Friday afternoons. She became unbearably homesick and found it impossible to work on her term paper (*American Brat* 162).

Aban, Manek's wife also suffers from loneliness. She is not able to cope up with the American culture. She feels alienated in the foreign land. Most of the time, she thinks about his motherland and misses her family. She complains to Feroza:

I thought coming to America was such a big deal, so wonderful-my Prince Charming carrying me off to the castle of my dreams. Everybody, back home thinks I'm so lucky, but I'm tired of coping, tired of doing everything on my own.... Oh, I miss home. I am longing to see my family and friends and longing to talk to them. Just sit and talk to them. Sometimes I wish I'd never come here (*American Brat* 315).

The first-generation diasporic immigrants often experience a sense of isolation, displacement, loneliness, and a sense of loss in the new land. Consequently, they cannot intermingle with the people of other communities in the settled country. Even if they try, they find it difficult for they are frequently victimized by the bitter experiences of discrimination. Initially, they try to mingle with the new culture and society of the settled country, but their close bonding with their homeland and culture does not allow them to follow the new land's culture completely. Most of the time, their internal problems like isolation, alienation, loneliness cause more suffering to them than outer problems like an identity crisis, prejudice, and discrimination.

Discrimination is one of the major problems faced by diasporic communities. Immigrant women's experiences differ a great deal from the men-folk. They not only have to adapt to new surroundings or context, but also feel gender-based discrimination from their husband within their households and society as well. Women face more difficulties compared to men because they experience both alienation and gender-based discrimination. In *An American Brat*, discrimination is not shown as much as in *Brick Lane*. In *An American Brat*, in her initial stage, Feroza faces discrimination due to her cultural differences, but later it is not mentioned. When Feroza goes shopping with her friend Jo, her manner of speech and her dressing irritated the saleswoman. The saleswoman is displeased by Feroza's activities, and she shows her displeasure by saying, "You may not. You'll have to pay for it. This is not Salvation Army, y'know ; it's a drugstore" (*American Brat* 150). Parekh states about discrimination,

“That no society can ever ensure full equality to all its cultural minorities” (411). In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen utterly suffers from discrimination by her husband as well as society. She is not allowed to go out for getting a job, every time she is thwarted by her husband: “Why should you go out? Said Chanu. If you go out, ten people will say, I saw her walking in the street. And I will look like a fool” (30). Still, he is a master of his dogmatic ideas. Nazneen remains confined to the domestic environment of her home, as a form of purdah (it is a symbol of slavery in Islam). Ali shows patriarchal dominance in the novel. Ali highlights Chanu’s disallowing his wife to work and earn for the family. Chanu believes, “Man for the field and woman for the hearth”, one of the most quoted lines of the Victorian poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem “The Princess”. In his account, the only man should work for the family, and the woman remains in the domestic sphere. He says: “Some of these uneducated ones, they say that if the wife is working it is only because the husband cannot feed them” (Ali 147). Though Nazneen lives in Western society, she still maintains her meek and timid status. She covers her hair and even walks a step behind her husband.

Racial discrimination is an unavoidable issue in the settled society for the diasporic community. Even though the people in the settled society are educated, they are not able to escape discrimination. In *Brick Lane*, Chanu mentions racial discrimination as the reason for not getting a promotion. Nazneen expresses her opinion to her friend Razia: “He thinks he will get the promotion, but it will take him longer than any White man. He says, if he paints his skin pink and white then there would be no problem” (72). Discrimination shown by the people in the settled society cannot be stopped totally. If the diasporic community is well educated and rich, discrimination faced by them could be less. In *An American Brat*, due to Feroza’s innocence and cultural difference, she faces discrimination in the initial stage.

Gender-based discrimination can also be seen in these novels. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen suffers from it. When she expresses her desire to learn the English language, she is denied by her husband. She finds herself in trouble when she goes out because she knows nothing except two words ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry’. It collaborates with the clashing ideologies of the two genders. Her narrow-minded husband, Chanu denies her, saying that: “You’re going to be a mother...Will that keep you busy enough? And you can’t take a baby to college...it’s not as simple as that, just to go to college, like that” (57). Unwillingly, she has to suffer his harsh behavior. She accepts it. For a Bangladeshi woman, her husband is like her God. She cannot go beyond his will. Her prior duty is to obey her husband all the time. A woman must always give importance to her gender role than her inner desires. In the case of Razia Iqbal, another woman like Nazneen, also a first-generation immigrant faces gender-based discrimination. She also wants to work for providing for her family because her family needs it direly but her husband does not allow her. Razia complains:

“He works all day and night. He keeps me locked up inside” (*Brick Lane* 96). When her husband dies, she gets an opportunity for employment to support her family. After his death, Razia feels extricated from her domineering husband’s strangulation clutches. Razia remains in her home but after his death,

she feels relief and says, “I can get that job now. No slaughterman to slaughter me now” (*Brick Lane* 110).

Towards the end of the novel, it can be seen that there is an unexpected metamorphosis in the character of Nazneen. Chanu always has a keen desire to return to his homeland, Bangladesh. Finally, he goes back to his homeland at the end of the novel. Nazneen, who always remains like a cow surprises the readers by staying back in London, she refuses her husband for going back with him. Now she believes that “Character is destiny”, she does not let her fate decide her life. She is becoming a free woman mentally, socially, emotionally, and physically. She breaks all the shackles of ‘Patriarchal-cringe’ and establishes her own identity. She leaves her husband and stays in London with her daughters.

As already mentioned the diasporic communities do not want to leave their cultural patterns of existence. For this, they attempt to create ‘imaginary homelands’, which are culturally and traditionally similar to the homes they left behind. In *An American Brat*, when Feroza decides to marry David Press, a non-Parsee, it shocks her family in Pakistan. In the Parsee community, exogamous marriages are condemned severely and they are excluded from the community and its rights. Zareen, Feroza’s mother gets worried about her daughter and her future, she goes to America. Feroza wants Zareen to think the American way, while Zareen wants Feroza to think the Parsi way. She says: “And you’ll have to look at it our way. It’s not your culture! You can’t toss your heritage like that. It’s in your bones” (*American Brat* 279).

Zareen regrets sending her to America saying: “I should have listened. I should never have let you go so far away. Look what it’s done to you- you have become an American Brat! (*American Brat* 279).

In *Brick Lane*, Chanu thinks that London is not a suitable place for his daughters to grow up. Chanu stresses wearing traditional Bangladeshi attire but his both daughters- Shahana and Bibi think otherwise. They resemble British girls of their age by their interest, clothes, tastes, education, and language skills, etc. They speak English as Americans speak. Ali says:

“Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music. Her written Bengali was shocking. She wanted to wear jeans. She hates her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint in them. If she could choose between the baked beans and dal it was no contest. When Bangladesh was mentioned, she pulled her face” (144).

Consequently, there are always conflicts and arguments between Shahana and Chanu. When he expresses his desire to go back to Bangladesh with his family, Shahana denies her father’s proposal to go with him, saying: “I’m not going, said Shahana. I’ll run away” (*Brick Lane* 175).

The first-generation immigrant Chanu comes to England with a dream. He looks upon England as a ‘Money Land’. He has a dream to be successful and has several expectations that coming to England means

thundering success and prosperity that he cannot get in Bangladesh. His character reminds the readers of the 'rags to riches' formula of the myth of 'American Dream' represented by Arthur Miller, an American playwright in his famous play entitled *Death of a Salesman*. The character of Chanu resembles the character of Willy Loman, the protagonist of the play. He is a salesman who sticks to the myth of the 'American Dream' without understanding its true sense and essence. His misinterpretation of the notion of the 'American Dream' leads him to an agonizing frustration due to the total failure and finally, he kills himself. However, there are many differences between the characters. Chanu moves from Bangladesh to England, whereas Willy, an American, lives in America only. Chanu is a Bangladeshi diaspora who failed in England, while Willy is an American who failed in America. Unlike Willy, he does not commit suicide, he only gives up. He returns to his homeland. His dreams of being successful are never accomplished. He says:

“When I came I was a young man, I had ambitions. Big dreams. When I got off the plane, I had my degree certificate in my suitcase. I thought there would be a red carpet laid out for me. I was going to join the civil service and become a Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. That was my plan. And I found things were a bit different” (Ali 21).

In *An American Brat*, Feroza's love affair with David Press disintegrates due to her mother's interference. After her break up with David, she feels alone there, but she rejects to go back to Pakistan and stays in America. The novel ends with Feroza's becoming in her mother's words “an American Brat”.

Conclusion

The paper concludes as even though the works produced by the diaspora community are brought under the umbrella term of 'Diaspora Literature' each writing differs in its way. It can be said that it is obvious that settling in a culture that looks down upon the entrants with suspicion, hostility, and different traditions and customs bring challenges before the migrant social group. The novels bring the various issue of diaspora viz., the reason for migration, depiction of homeland and host land, attitude of the diaspora with the homeland and host land, issues of identity, and feelings of nostalgia, alienation and discrimination, and the plight of women under these situations as well. The two writers of South Asian origin portray the settled lands in different ways. *An American Brat* and *Brick Lane* concentrate on the description of entry into the new land and the suffering of isolation, alienation, discrimination, and cultural clash.

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