

SPACES, PLACES AND DISPLACEMENT IN JABULANI MNGADI'S NOVEL, ASIKHO NDAWOBAKITHI

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ABSTRACT

Mngadi's novel *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (1996) is a depiction of the South African struggle towards nationalism, the contradictions that characterise it and the ambivalent nature of freedom. Based on the postcolonial concepts of dislocation and displacement and anchored on the textual approach, this article argues that the novelist uses places and spaces as an index to the state of the South African nation, particularly the natives, before and after attaining its freedom in 1994. The article also argues that, because of spaces and places, the natives are narrativised as neither belonging here nor there, and as foreigners in their own land. It also asserts that dislocation and displacement beget fertile grounds for alienation, and the multiplication of contradictory and hybrid identities. After a brief introduction, the article defines some of the key concepts before it discusses them in relation to the mentioned novel.

Keywords: *Nationalism, Spaces and Places, (Dis) Location, (Dis)Placement, Zulu Novel.*

1. Introduction

This article intends to discuss the notion of place not as a literary element of setting where the story takes place but as a phenomenon that demonstrates a "simultaneity of inheritances", a double-ness or double consciousness (du Bois, 1903). It intends to argue that displacement from one place is instantaneously a placement in another. It is the paucity of studies that focus on this phenomenon that motivated the undertaking of this study. By referring to Jabulani Mngadi's socio-political novel, *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (1996), this writer intends to argue that that spaces and places embody the index of the state of the nation, the natives' belonging and non-belonging, a notion which simultaneously renders them citizens and foreigners. The writer also intends to illustrate that places serve as a fertile breeding ground for the multiplication and hybridisation of identities. The next section discusses the research method that is adopted by the current study, namely, the qualitative research. Then this writer discusses issues of placement and displacement, gives a short summary of the novel before exploring location/dislocation and placement/displacement as explicated in the novels.

2. Research Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative research

method, specifically the textual method, because the researcher relies on a close reading of the text and refers to secondary reading materials available in the library. Broadly speaking, qualitative research method refers to the method that focuses on how and why things happen the way they do. This is a research method that describes various phenomena deeply and wholly. It does not rely on statistical data to make observations. In literary studies, it analyses issues in literature, as creative literature depicts and explores them. This method is highly dependent on the interpretive approach to literature rather than on numerical statistics. Mason (2002: 5) makes three valid points about the nature of the qualitative research method, and these are:

Grounded in a philosophical position this is broadly 'interpretivist' in the sense that it is concerned with how the social world is interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted. While different versions of qualitative research might understand or approach these elements in different ways (for example, focusing on social meanings, or interpretations, or practices, or discourses, or processes, or constructions), all will see at least some of these as

*meaningful elements in a complex –
possibly multi-layered and textured
– social world.*

Based on methods of data generation which are both flexible and sensitive to the social context in which data are produced (rather than rigidly standardized or structured, or entirely abstracted from 'real-life' contexts).

Based on methods of analysis, explanation and argument building which involve understandings of complexity, detail and context. Qualitative research aims to produce rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data. There is more emphasis on 'holistic' forms of analysis and explanation in this sense, than on charting surface patterns, trends and correlations. Qualitative research often does use some form of quantification, but statistical forms of analysis are not seen as central.

Mason's above working definition of qualitative research method highlights a few things about this research method. One, it is based on how the world is, interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted. Two, it is based on data collection methods that are flexible and sensitive to context. Three, qualitative research studies intend producing analyses that are holistic and context-sensitive of the empirical data. It is worth observing that, if creative literature is generally (and specifically) an interpretation of the social world, then its analysis and interpretation is an interpretation of the interpretation, a kind of self-introspection to the art. A qualitative research method is therefore naturally appropriate for the literary studies such as this one.

Its flexibility and context-sensitivity to data collection are realisable in that the data is collected from everywhere and the researcher is fluid in doing so. Any text, be it visual, audio, or both, serve as source of information. The findings are sensitive to the context within which they delineate. The holistic nature of the findings refers to the roundedness and impartiality of its interpretation, notwithstanding the context-sensitivity of this very attribute. Therefore, the

interpretation and results reached in this study should be understood in the context of the novel, *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (1996). The next section defines some of the key concepts.

On Placement and Displacement

Places, spaces, (dis)location and (dis)placement are central to colonialism and slave trade, the two historical processes against which postcolonial theory developed (Sibiya, 2021). People were forcefully moved from different countries (places and spaces) in Africa, India, and the West Indies, and taken to the sugar and tobacco plantations in the Americas between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries' slave trade (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2018). Being displaced from their places of birth and origin, they are later placed in new spaces, i.e., countries of enslavement and alienation. Similarly, during colonialism, the colonial subjects are moved from certain places and placed in new spaces to serve the needs and interests of the colonisers. Spaces, places, location, dislocation, placement, and displacement are interrelated and simultaneously inform each other. They are inherent to all colonial experiences, characteristic features of colonialism in that many colonised people were often forcefully removed from their locations to new places of the colonisers' liking. In South Africa, for example, involuntary movement and displacement have been the order of the day during both colonialism and apartheid.

It may also be the movement of people from the countries of origin to foreign ones (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2013: 85). These migrations are like slave trade, for example, the transatlantic slave trade, because they are often alienating to those who are dislocated or displaced. The process of dislocation, be it national or international, is also a process of location in that, as people are displaced, they are subsequently placed somewhere else. Stated differently, in some sense, dislocation becomes another form of location, thus rendering it dichotomous. Although the ambivalent character of dislocation is illuminating, its effects on identities and cultures are even more significant than dislocation itself. Identities and cultures become an important issue

when they are threatened, and dislocation is one of the conditions that give rise to this threat (Sherman and Cohen, 2006). It is this threat that begets nostalgia, a sense of longing for an idealised past. Put differently, dislocation necessitates a condition in which the past and the present dialogise. As slaves or colonised subjects adapt to the new environments and locations, the new identities emanating from these environments battle with the pre-existent old identities and cultures, thus forming the new hybrid ones, whether for better or for worse. This means that dislocation and displacement provide a fertile ground on which to breed new hybrid cultures and identities. Those who are affected look at the past with a nostalgic contemplation.

A Brief Synopsis of Asikho Ndawo Bakithi

The novel is based on the impact of the Land Act of 1913, the introduction of the Apartheid system in 1948 and the Group Areas of 1952. It is a story of a married couple, Zwelisha Dubazana and MaZondi Dubazana, who wanders from one place to another, one shack to the other, from village to township and vice versa, to find a secure place to live. Dubazana is constantly sent off to Vryheid district offices by the police because he does not have a special permission to stay in Durban. Ironically, he also does not belong to Vryheid in the sense that his family had been chased away from the farm. He neither belongs to Durban nor to Vryheid, thus is he a wanderer with no sense of belonging.

The novel deals with the ironies and contradictions of displacement, placement, and landlessness in South Africa during the apartheid era. Dubazana and MaZondi move from the rural areas to Durban, where they try to earn a living. While Dubazana secures employment at a firm, he does not have a secure place of his own. It is either he or his wife is tenant in someone's backroom, or they erect a shack in a restricted place in a township. The two characters are like the ancient nomads, as they move from one place to another, from one section of an informal settlement to another. At some of the places, the property owner will let them pay not only rental money but also money for the monthly groceries

for their families. At one place, they are required to stay in one very small room together with their two children, Makhosazana and Nkosana. Life in these township houses is such that more than two families will stay in one compound, making it difficult to practice specific family rituals if needed.

One of the initial places where the Dubazana family rents a place is at the Silangwes. Soon MaNcanana, Mrs Silangwe, suspects that MaZondi has an affair with her husband. Therefore, they must find a new place. When they later find a place at a different section of the township, Mr Nyokana, a man who stays alone in a four-roomed house, offers them a room to rent. From the word go, Dubazana's family stay at the Nyokanas becomes difficult because they have strict rules to adhere to, such as buying groceries for all. One day, MaZondi cooks pork stew, which Mr Nyokana does not like. A few days later, Nyokana arranges for an armed robbery at his place. Nyokana makes sure he is away when the robbery happens. Dubazana and MaZondi become victims of this robbery. Many incidents happen after this ordeal until the Dubazana family discovers that Nyokana is a witch who kills other women's husbands and marries them to inherit the deceased men's belongings. This very discovery makes the Dubazana family to wait no more but leave the place and look for an alternative one. After a sleepless night they spend at Dubazana's workplace, they get a place at the Mlangenis. At the Mlangenis' compound, everyone is a drunkard, from MaMlambo to all her daughters, and the home is a shebeen. Each of the four daughters is unmarried yet they have between three and five children, making the entire Mlangeni family more than forty members. MaMlambo offers the Dubazanas one of the two bedrooms in the house.

Soon, Dubazana has one of MaMlambo's daughters sitting on his lap, trying to seduce him. Although Dubazana does not fall into the trap, MaZondi becomes jealous and uncomfortable to continue staying at the Mlangenis. At some point, MaZondi discovers red lipstick on Dubazana's face, and she is offended. It is during their stay at

the Mlangeni household that Makhosazana is nearly raped by an old businessman who is a benevolent 'blesser' to the Mlangeni family. MaZondi comes to her daughter's rescue. Dubazana family subsequently gets a place at the Busani informal settlement. When they arrive at Busani, they are so unfortunate that it is during a terrible time, the height of the violent clashes between rival political parties just before the 1994 democratic elections. Although the Dubazana family is not affiliated to any political party, a party leader or gangster, Njayiphume, forces this family to choose between his political party or its supposed enemy. Seeing that he might be killed, Dubazana chooses Njayiphume's freedom fighters. Dubazana's family learns new rules of the party, which include, among other things, attending regular camps where 'children are also trained' to be political activists. Young as they are, Makhosazana and Nkosana must attend camps and all night-vigils in the name of fighting for freedom. It is during these camps that Makhosazana and Nkosana are also raped. Dubazana is forced to join the political battle when Njayiphume's group attacks people from the nearby township. In that attack, Dubazana is forced to kill a woman which was a way of baptising him into the group. More drama happens in this place. A few days later, the Dubazana family is attacked, Dubazana is hit with an iron object and becomes unconscious and MaZondi is brutally raped. The Dubazana family have no choice but to run for their lives on this very day. Without any secure place to run to, they make their first stop at the church house. As per Njayiphume group's rules, this family cannot report the ordeals to the police.

During Makhosazana's rape ordeal, she falls pregnant and is infected with HIV. MaZondi's rape negatively affects her relationship with her husband. Dubazana no longer trusts her; he no longer has affection for her, probably to deal with his inability to protect his family in its time of need. Although her HIV test results come back negative, the gap between them becomes even wider. At the church house, they bump into the Mpanza family, who later offers them a place to

stay.

For the first time in very a long time, the Dubazana family lives like all normal human beings. The Mpanzas give them not only shelter above their heads but also clothes and food. However, the wounds caused by the rape of MaZondi do not heal swiftly, their marriage is severely damaged, day after day, because Dubazana does not even touch his wife. To make a living, Dubazana starts selling some eatables by the roadside. The lacuna between the couple leads to MaZondi sleeping with Mpanza one day as he is trying to comfort her. She becomes pregnant. Realising what the implications of this are to his marriage and relationship with Dubazana, Mpanza plants drugs in the eatables that the former is selling and then informs the police about this. The police arrest Dubazana by the robot where he is selling. He is sentenced to two years' imprisonment in the then Kandasput Prison (now Ncome Prison), between Nquthu and Vryheid towns, which is more than 300 km away from Durban. Mpanza is temporarily relieved by Dubazana's arrest and ultimate imprisonment. However, as days go by, MaZondi's delivery time draws closer and closer. She gives birth to a baby boy named Mxolisi who looks just like Mpanza! When the neighbours start making remarks about the baby's resemblance to Mpanza, Mpanza's and MaDlamini's marriage begins to fall apart. MaDlamini goes back to her family home, leaving MaZondi and Mpanza in the house. One midnight, Dubazana unexpectedly comes back from prison. MaZondi wishes the earth could open so that it can swallow and save her from Dubazana's wrath. In addition, Mpanza does not have the courage to face Dubazana after sending him to jail for a crime he did not commit. As expected, a quarrel begins, and hell breaks loose. The two men fight physically. At first, it looks like Dubazana is winning the fight. Then, MaZondi helps Mpanza. The latter manages to get the better of Dubazana. He strangles him to death. MaZondi and Mpanza realise only later that they have killed Dubazana. Mpanza must be brave and think quickly. They take Dubazana's corpse to the car and drive off to a bush that is far away from

Umlazi Township. They take a rope and hang the corpse so that it looks like Dubazana has killed himself. When he is found some weeks later, his body is already decomposing. Dubazana's brothers explicitly express their thoughts; they suspect that MaZondi and Mpanza are responsible for their brother's savage assassination. During the funeral, they even attempt to bury them alive. They are eventually saved by the community.

After the funeral, MaZondi goes back to the Zondi family. However, she does not live comfortably because she has since become the talk of the village for what she did to her husband. Meanwhile, back in Umlazi Township, Mpanza is trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle that used to be his family. While he is trying to mend his family, MaZondi comes back to Durban. On the one hand, he feels bad that she is suffering because he killed her husband whilst he needs to regain his wife's trust and rebuild his family, on the other. Mpanza's children in the rural home of Bergville are also getting unruly; everything is falling apart as Mpanza, 'the centre' of the family, cannot hold them together (Achebe, 1958). Like Mpanza's children, Nkosana also ends up living as a homeless street kid in the streets of Durban. He joins a group of youth that burns people using old tyres and petrol. MaZondi and Mpanza's attempts to rescue him do not bear any fruits. Nkosana seems to have an uncontrollable anger and he is holding grudges against Mpanza and MaZondi after he had seen them killing his father.

One of the group members gives Mpanza a call notifying him about the decision that has been made about his life. The decision is to 'necklace him', that is to put a tyre around his neck, pour petrol and kill him. After hearing this news, Mpanza decides to go to MaDlamini and confess about the death of Dubazana. As he leaves the apartment, his car breaks down. Therefore, he takes a taxi to go to MaDlamini. On his way back, he finds Nkosana's group already keenly waiting for him. They put an old tyre around his neck, pour petrol and burn him. A car that is passing by rescues MaZondi before the gang eats her alive. She heads straight to the police station. When the police arrive on the scene, Mpanza was already

dead.

Notions of Displacement and Placement

Postcolonial theory developed as a response to two world's major historical processes, viz. colonisation and slave trade. While colonialism is an intrusion into foreign land by European colonising countries, slave trade largely involves the movement or displacement of the black African folks from their continent to various plantations in the Americas. As the African people are displaced, they are later placed in new spaces that are foreign and alien to them. It is worth observing that, like science, which does not allow any vacuum, displacement is immediately followed by placement. If one is displaced, one is simultaneously placed elsewhere and therefore displacement instantaneously becomes another side of placement. If the milieu informs one's culture and identity, then displacement will naturally have an impact on one's culture and identity. Although Mngadi's novels do not explore, largely and directly, the notion of intercontinental movement or cross-border migration or slavery, it does, however, illustrate forms of displacement and placement. The effects of the movement of some of the characters from rural to urban areas are as disintegrating as the effects of forced migration and exile, as well as those of the slave trade.

In *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (1996), Dubazana and MaZondi are the best embodiments of the notion of displacement and placement. The then apartheid government necessitated movement by introducing tax laws such as the poll tax, the hut tax and laws governing movement such as carrying of special permits, and acts such as the Land Act of 1913 and the Group Areas Act of 1952. The passing of these laws and acts forced people to move from the rural villages to the city to look for employment so that they can pay these taxes and make a living. It is also worth noting that the rural to urban movements epitomise the contradictions and the chaos of the postcolonial state. The author best expounds these phenomena in the very first chapter when the narrator puts it thus:

Lusaya phezulu usizi uma uhulumeni

*esaphikelele ukusendana nabantu
ebasa ezinkantolo ezisemapasini,
umuntu abe axoshwa epulazini
elikuleyo nkantolo; uma uhulumeni
esaphikelele ukuthuthana nabantu
ebasusa ezindaweni zabo
ngempoqo. Ngaley o ndlela
kuhlakazeka iminden i, nedlanzana
elalinemizi ligcine lingasenayo.
Abanye bathuthwa emakhaya
basiwe emadolobheni, wona kanye
la madolobha uhulumeni abuye
abaxoshe kuwo abasendele
emakhaya.*

(The grief escalates if the government persistently sends people back to the regional courts that are written on their identity documents, when a person was dismissed from that particular farm within that region; when the government insists on forcefully removing people from their areas. In that way families break down, and the few people that had homes end up having none. Others are sent off from the rural areas to the city, the very cities from which the government also ironically sends them back to rural areas.) (Mngadi 1996: 7)

This back-and-forth movement of the people, as illustrated by the foregoing excerpt, elucidates the displacement and placement and the contradictions that characterise them. Some black people are sent off from places of their origin in the rural areas while others are removed from the city because they do not have special permits to occupy those places. In a sense, both rural and urban areas are repelling and welcoming simultaneously. They represent the good and the bad, belonging, and non-belonging at the same time and epitomise the state of the black natives during apartheid. The forced removals of people that the narrator elucidates in the quotation reflect the brutality of colonialism (just like slavery in the Americas) and the multiplication of identities. If people are dismissed from both rural and urban areas, they end up having no sense of belonging, hence the title of the novel *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (Home is nowhere my people). The effects of these movements are not only physical but also psychological in nature.

The natives therefore end up losing confidence in them, become confused, rootless, helpless, devastated, and self-hating. Even within the same urban environment, there are constant movements, as Dubazana and MaZondi move from one section of the township to the next. These movements become constant reminders to them, that they do not have a sense of belonging; they are helpless wanderers in the land that used to belong to their ancestors.

The two characters, Dubazana and MaZondi, are symbolic of the effects of migration that beget identities, which are both fluid and in constant motion. The married couple moves from the rural areas to the city of Durban in search of jobs. Although Dubazana secures a job in one nameless production firm around the city of Durban, the major predicament that he and his wife are facing is housing and land. Having moved from a land of plenty, where large families live in one compound with different huts, in the city they learn to be tenants, staying in a corrugated-iron shack or backroom they cannot proudly call their own home. They have to adapt to living in one room together with their two children, which means they hardly have time for intimacy as a married couple. Most of these township houses are four-roomed houses that are built in extremely confined spaces, where neighbours often share the fences from three sides. The little space that the property owner has behind or on the side of the house gets populated with either backrooms or shacks. A married couple will either occupy one of the rooms in the four-roomed house (sharing with the family) or erect a shack behind it.

Like the ancient nomadic herders, Dubazana and MaZondi move from one compound to the next, from one section of the township and informal settlement to another. The movement constantly reminds them that they are landless and homeless. Just like someone who goes to self-exile and comes back, only to find that he can no longer identify with his homies and yet does not belong to the foreign country to which he was exiled. In the process of movement, they belong neither to the city nor to the rural areas.

Sometimes, Dubazana and MaZondi find themselves paying not only the monthly rent but also buying the groceries for everyone in the compound, including the property owner's family. Their displacement from the rural villages such as Nkumba and placement in Umlazi Township are both an experience of alienation and a memento of the nostalgic rural past. They neither belong to the townships, nor do they feel comfortable living in the rural areas. The placement of Dubazana and MaZondi, and other natives far away from the city-based workplaces, ensures that their financial situation does not improve but remains the same or even worsens as time lapses. If going to the city and getting employment is a way of improving lives, then it is not the case with Dubazana and his wife. In a sense, their identities become fragmented, contradictory, and multiple.

The concept of an African traditional family as that of a wife, husband, children, grandparents, and great grandparents is questioned and its meaning is constantly shifting. The family and community ties that characterise the rural area are shaken in the urban environment. The homesteads in the rural areas are placed far apart from each other, yet the community that comprises them is closeknit. On the contrary, the houses in the urban areas are very close to one another (sharing fences) yet the communities who constitute them are very far from each other in the sense that the neighbours hardly know each other. As Sibiya (2010) critically observes, neighbours 'build high walls to bar their next-door neighbours from seeing what is happening within their compounds'. This is the same experience that Dubazana and his family have in their stay in Umlazi Township. They feel very estranged, yet their neighbours are so close.

The new family setup comprises different non-blood-related individuals who blur the boundaries between families. Parents and children sleep together in a single room, where the former does not have privacy. With some of them, their intimate relationship is no longer private as it is normally the case, thus blurring the boundaries between the private and the public. Dubazana's family is not immune to these

crossroads.

MaZondi and her only daughter, Nkosazana, are sexually molested, and contract HIV in the process. This grave incident blurs the boundaries between girlhood and womanhood. The children are also compelled to become freedom fighters but have no clear understanding of what they are getting into, another example of the contradictions that characterise the postcolonial epoch (Mbembe, 1992). The conditions under which they dwell are not only appalling and catastrophic but also simultaneously need adaptation, cultural tolerance, and submission to new rules of different family constitutions. One house accommodates more than one family, which is a condition that gives rise to the chaotic pluralism and hybridisation of familial ways of life. The accommodation of more than one family in one compound also produces fertile ground for cultural conflicts, degeneration and mingling of cultures in that only the property owner has the sole right to practice his or her basic cultural rituals such as burning the incense, communicating with the ancestral spirits and slaughtering a goat, if need be. In other words, the displacement of Dubazana's family has a *domino effect* that results in a void between them, the extended family and their ancestral spirits. The new spaces and places in which they live are not only unwelcoming but also beget social and spiritual alienation. It is worth noting, however, that the displacement and placement phenomenon is not particular to *Asikho Ndawo bakithi*. One can also observe it in Mngadi's other novels such as *Yiza Mntanami* (2007) and *Bayeza Abanqobi* (2013). An example of cross-border movements, although the author does not explore them fully, is found in *Yiza Mntanami* (2007), where the readers learn that some of the prostitutes that Lunga and Ziziba oversee come from as far as Nigeria. One learns that these young girls are forced to exchange sex for money in order to live in a foreign land.

All these estranged subjects, embodied by members of the Dubazana family in *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (1996) and the sex workers in *Yiza Mntanami* (2007), emanate from their

displacement from their land and environment and their placement in strange places in a similar manner that the slaves were uprooted from the African continent and placed in American plantations centuries ago. The nostalgia with which they beckon or recollect the past from the present is almost identical. The only difference between the South African situation and the American condition is that, for apartheid (in South Africa), the European colonialists brought oppression to the victims while the slaves were taken to their oppression (in America). Despite the differences in the aims and objectives of these two enterprises, they precipitate the same dichotomous phenomena of self and other, familiarisation and estrangement, the oppressor and oppressed, the dominant and dominated, and insiders and outsiders (Loomba, 2002; 2015).

In Mngadi's *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (1996), the characters become outsiders in their communities both in rural and urban areas and this is facilitated by the constant displacement from familiar to unfamiliar territories. The novelist explores these dichotomous contradictions by making the natives foreigners in their respective land, and, implicatively, the foreigners the owners of the land. The displacement and placement of characters in the novels necessitate the fragmentation and multiplication of identities and questions the notion of belonging. In a sense, as the indigenous Africans try to reclaim their displaced identities, the writer indirectly writes back not only to one centre but to different centres. The novelist writes back indirectly in the

sense that he does not write in a language that the centre understands better, namely, the English language. The English language and culture are but one centre from which the African cultures endeavour to emancipate themselves (wa Thiong'o, 1993). Another centre, to which the novelist writes, comprises the group of brain washed African folks and the very writers who write in foreign colonialist languages but are fully conversant in one or the other indigenous African language. The latter group represents Africans who look down upon their languages and cultures and appraise the foreign ones; their cultural identities are displaced in one way or the other.

3. Conclusion

This article demonstrated how Mngadi's novel *Asikho Ndawo Bakithi* (1996) uses places and spaces and the notion of displacement/dislocation as an index of the state of the nation. It was observed that these phenomena are interrelated and inform each other. Places are more than just a setting where the story takes place, but they represent identity crisis, multiplication, and ambivalence. It was also observed that displacement is simultaneously placement in that when the characters are displaced, they are later place elsewhere. However, it was also observed that Dubazana and Zondi belong neither here nor there, just like slaves who were uprooted from their places of birth and placed in equally alienating new places during the slave trade centuries ago.

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