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Critiquing the Critic: A Reader's Reaction to Edde Iji's *Black Experience in Theatre* (1996)

Esther Frank APEJOYE

Department of Theatre, Film and Carnival Studies,

University of Calabar,

540004, Etta Agbo Rd,

Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Email: estheromo@unical.edu.ng

apejoyee@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Analytical critique is an evaluation of the efficacy and quality of a work, with the longevity of that work possibly being influenced by the outcomes. Furthermore, the term "critique" is often used in contexts of theatre and the arts; readers and reviewers typically focus their critique on objectivity, real-world efficacy, and applicability. Thus, from the above, this work is a critique of Edde Iji's (1996) *Black Experience in the Theatre: The Drama of the Human Condition*, which critiques black panoramic achievement in relation to how Africans are portrayed and expressed through some drama and theatre and the understanding of the human condition and experiences. Specifically, Iji (1996) used the comparative studies method to examine the ideological trajectories of some African playwrights and their works, underlying the temperaments that permeate the entire spectrum of drama and theatre across Africa and the diasporas. This work uses the reader's response theory as well as the analytical critique method to review Edde Iji's work under consideration. This study re-elucidates Iji's views on the experiences and conditions of black people on the African continent and in the diaspora, specifically as depicted in the dramatic works of Wole Soyinka, Amiri Baraka, Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark, and Tunde Fatunde. The work contends that various implausible manifestos have been written in order to undermine the legitimacy of African theatre. However, the black man has often demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt the viability of his art. Thus, this work applauds Edde Iji's insightfulness in expounding, expatiating, and explaining the human predicament specific to the black man.

Keywords: African; black people; African Diaspora; African continent; Human Condition.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the African, or by extension, the black man, appears to have been turbulent (Akpan & Udofia, 2015). Western historians of the early 19th and 20th centuries often arrogate or portray a grim picture of the past of the black man to further underscore this tragic history (Washington, 2006). While determining the plausibility or otherwise of a man's history remains a difficult task for historians, it is important to critically examine many aspects of the indigenous African, from his primitive, conservative, and anachronistic tendencies through colonial and postcolonial experiences, as well as the resulting contact with civilization in all of its manifestations.

To this end, some Afro-American playwrights from both Africa (the mother continent) and the black diaspora have expressed the black man's worldview, radiating the impact of colonialism, the independence struggles, and post-independence African experiences as often reflected in the protest dramas of Amiri Baraka (Leroy Jones), Femi Osofisan, Tess Oonwueme, Zulu Sofola, Ola Rotimi, Tunde Fatunde, J. P. Clark, Wole Soyinka, to mention only a few. Interestingly, their artistic products have a tinge of blood—the sample survey as well as being representative of their socio-political activism that unfolds the crisis of human experiences and conditions in their varied environments. These above-named playwrights' experiences are further expressed through the vehicles of the interplays of literary forms such as satire, comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, and other paradigms (Iji, 1996). The above-mentioned African-origin authors have earned powerful and resounding critical assessments from many perspectives throughout the world.

In this study, I will focus on Edde Iji's evaluation of a representative sample of black panoramic achievement as it pertains to the articulation and representation of Africans' knowledge of the human condition and experiences through the medium of drama and theatre. *The Black Experience in Theatre: The Drama of Human Condition* (1996) by Edde Iji is a useful tool for resituating the drama or theatre of the human condition and experience as documented through theatre and drama as a means of expatiating and explicating the impulses and motivations of these dramatic genera. The objective of this research is to re-elucidate Iji's views on the experiences and conditions of black people on the African continent and in the diaspora as depicted in the dramatic works of Wole Soyinka, Amiri Baraka, Zulu Sofola, Femi Osofisan, Ola Rotimi, J. P. Clark, and Tunde Fatunde.

The Black Experience in Theatre: The Drama of the Human Condition (1996) by Edde Iji, on which this study is based, is a critical analysis and evaluation of prejudices against black people on the mother continent and in the diaspora. Furthermore, it is a paradoxical recapitulation of the black man's brutality towards his own kith and kin, both at home and in the diaspora, compared to what Basil Davidson refers to as the black man's burden (Iji, 1996). In the process, Iji (1996) employs the comparative studies technique to telescopically mesmerise the aforementioned theatrical endeavour in order to discover the parallels and counter-claims in the drama or theatre of human experiences and the condition of blacks in Africa and the diaspora.

Iji's *Black Experience in Theatre: The Drama of Human Condition* (1996) is divided into five chapters spanning across 105 pages. The first chapter of the book recapitulates views of black experiences in Clark, Baraka, and Rotimi's drama. The second chapter provides a bird's-eye view of the drama of gender empowerment as seen in the black and female themes of the finest African-American dramatist, Lorraine

Hansberry. Chapter three, on the other hand, offers an interpretation of villains as heroes, similar to Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants*. In chapter four, Iji (1996) focuses on Fatunde's repressed dramaturgy. Furthermore, in Chapter 5, Iji (1996) analyses Femi Osofisan's *Yungba Yungba* and the *Dancing Context* as a microcosm of a change parable. Yet, in an attempt to re-evaluate Iji's *Black Experience in Theatre: The Drama of the Human Condition*, the author of this work has perspicuously infiltrated the themes of Iji's global view of black experience and situations at home and abroad in her own way.

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE: A CYCLIC STRUGGLE

Contextually, colonialism, slavery, post-colonialism or neo-colonialism, and other types of oppression have marred much of the black man's history (Childs & Williams, 2014). Apart from the previously accepted Egyptian civilization, to which Africans may occasionally allude, Africa as a continent has essentially slunk away from global reckoning due to generally slow or resistant cultural practises and beliefs (Ziser, 2013). During a period of aggressive lack of civilization throughout the mediaeval era, Europe and the rest of the western world were fervently positioned to translate into the new world (Pieterse, 1992). Then came the Renaissance era, the revival of knowledge—a movement from which Africa was conspicuously absent (Montgomery, 2000). Consequently, Africa's convenient absence from the global scheme of things eventually made it a rich hive for colonial rule and varying degrees of exploitation, an experience that lasted for decades. The unyielding clamour by African foremost nationalists for the erosion of colonial rule eventually forced the colonial masters to cede to their demands for independence. Regrettably, these experiences for Africans can be akin to the stigma of a 'publicly pronounced leper who, even upon experiencing the miracle of cleanliness, cannot shake off the vestiges of his stigmatised experiences'.

Using comparative analysis, *The Black Experience in Theatre* has, through a thorough examination of the ideological leanings of some African dramatists and the expressive trajectory of their works, underpinned the temperaments that saturate the entire spectrum of drama and theatre across Africa and the diasporas. It has been noticed that linguistics and the semantic structure of the English language, particularly on corollaries such as the term "black," have grown to have a negative connotation (Wray & Grace, 2007). This perhaps explains why nothing laudable comes to mind when we think of or sometimes deploy words like "black list", "blackmail," etc. It implies that beyond African colonial experiences, the African man's situation has over the course of time come to be synonymous with blackness or all things dark (Moten, 2008). All these elements have become important and fertile paradigms that exercise a pervasive influence on African playwrights. This perhaps explains why *The Black Experience* describes the dramaturgy of the likes of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Leroy Jones (Baraka), and Ola Rotimi, to mention a few, as reflective of the black man's natural burden of always having to exert himself against the odds in a bid to survive in a lopsided world that has long been out of joint. However, even though these playwrights appear to be in sync in terms of ideology, their artistic expressions seem to emerge from divergent perspectives. Overall, the lessons they wanted to impart were not only moral and ethical injunctions of African raconteurs, but also socio-political and economic ones aimed at dissolving the injustice and exploitation inherent in the capitalist system that characterised the cycle of conflicts.

To this end, some radical African playwrights have and are still willingly identifying with these struggles and speaking on behalf of the lowly and the downtrodden. This humanist dimension becomes a model of dramaturgy for human conditions. It is from this perspective that Edde Iji (1996) undertakes his close readings of sampled plays by some African playwrights on the mother continent (Africa) and in the diaspora, methodologically showing how each playwright illumines a picture of the black man's struggles and perennial handicap at the hands of the colonial masters and even in the present postcolonial continuum through assimilation's tendencies occasioned by imperialism and neo-colonialism.

UNSUNG HEROINES OF AFRICAN DRAMA

Over the course of human history, theatre has often been seen as the watchdog of society (Allain, 2005). Furthermore, over the course of human history, theatre, drama, and their practitioners in Africa and the diaspora have been and are still a veritable tool with which to highlight the bane of the human condition and experiences in society, raise social consciousness, and jolt man into making the best decisions for himself (Grace, 2007). Significantly, the dominant trend in African theatre and drama has been the role of male writers as seeming heroes who function as the recorders of the stories of their people (Plastow, 1996). However, as time has passed, women have moved from what constituted a minor and local concern to becoming major and global contributors to the struggle to provoke change and changeable destinies, using the instrumentality of drama to appraise the human condition.

From a humanist point of view, this is a welcome development as humankind had effectively moved from Ibsen's 20th-century societal view, which relegated women to merely fringe and subservient roles in the home and society at large, to a place where women were afforded a seat at the table to also proffer viable solutions to the problems facing humankind (Akter, 2021). Closer to home, at the end of the 20th century, there was a considerable increase in the number of female writers in Africa..Edde Iji (1996) seems to agree that an honest identification of the female dramatist as a dynamically committed human being and humanist who projects herself as the voice of vision in her own time is appropriate. In *The Black Experience in Theatre: The Drama of Human Condition*, Iji apparently eschews the Brechtian notion of heroines as protagonists who humbly submerge their individuations in collectivity so as to contribute towards improvement in the human condition.

Iji (1996) seems to have set the tone for the prevalent idea of black women as the unsung heroines of African and Afro-American drama in his reading of sampled plays by Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme, and Lorraine Hansberry. Iji (1996) characterises them in the socio-political and cultural context as daughters of Africa. Iji further argues that each of these female dramatists has made significant contributions to the realm of dramaturgy through aggressive histrionic sensibilities, specifically by making very profound statements on human conditions, the ways of the world, the need for orderliness in society, human and individual rights vis-à-vis the essence of freedom and life based on justice, equity, and man's humanity to man, as gleaned through artistic visions of the willing suspension of disbelief. Esther Apejoye (2020) had noticed that some plays present women as weak, vulnerable, and unable to take decisive and resolute action to circumvent the pitfalls of patriarchy dug by both men and women, explicitly and implicitly. Against the backdrop of this portrayal of weak, vulnerable female anti-

heroines bedeviled by tradition, gyno-authors have, like Soyinka's Amazon characters, created women that are full of power, or even power-drunken, strongly built like men, flamboyant, and effeminate who upturn patriarchal traditions in their bid to bring up or install matriarchy. For instance, Tess Onwuemes *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), published in 1988, upturns the patriarchal system, which men perpetuate.

Iji (1996) takes a telescopic look at Lorraine Hansberry's dramatic works and concludes that she has a vision of all arts as ultimately social, no matter the form, content, or language, and the artists, whether black or white, are obligated to participate universally in the intellectual and social affairs of humanity. To Iji (1996), Hansberry's drama and other writings abhorred narrow-mindedness, parochialism, racism, and sexism. Iji(1996) further acknowledges the gender empowerment consciousness in Hansberry's drama. According to him, she is often quoted as asserting, 'I was born black and female'. This exposes her double consciousness of her ethnicity (blackness) and gender (femininity), which demonstrates areas of victimhood and conflict that seem to be the dominant forces in the twentieth century. Iji (1996) further insists that the core of Hansberry's worldview is her stimulating stance that playwrights and other concerned humanists cannot live with sighted eyes and a feeling heart and not know and react to the miseries that afflict the world. Iji (1996) further examines her plays like *Les Blancs* (1970) and *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) and concludes that her spiritual contacts and vision of Africa and African struggles towards universal brotherhood and the dignity of man, irrespective of colour and race, are assured, as is her vision of America, black or white.

In the first case, being born black in America during the first half of the twentieth century, when slavery, racism, and prejudice against blacks were at their height, put her at an inherent disadvantage as a human being. In the second instance, I (the author) was born a female, again in a society where women were seen as mere appendages to the men, incapable of exerting themselves as fully emancipated members of the society. It is also fascinating to notice that, despite the bad hand society dealt her and her type, she channelled her artistic energies towards emancipating human society rather than excoriating it. This is however abundantly clear in her 1959 masterwork, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which takes an altogether different perspective and makes a genuine endeavor to discover a ray of hope for mankind, as opposed to Beckett's grim picture of reality. Edde Iji's unyielding desire to inculcate time-proven values into the youngsters is what aptly encapsulates Hansberry's unwavering belief in the ability of humankind to evolve from antagonistic, draconian tendencies to better and more acceptable standards that resonate equity, equality, and respect for the human race.

Still, along the same lines, there were Zulu Sofola and Tess Onwueme, whose contributions to dramatic literature on gender empowerment laid a solid framework for the restructuring of the emerging sophisticated society. Upon coming in contact with Sofola's *Sweet Trap*(1977) or Onwueme's *Tell It to Women*(1997), the first impression that comes to Iji's mind is the fact that such plays were written with intense feministic inclinations, but by the time these two plays come to an end, he finds that regardless of their gender (which has faced serious relegation in the past), these women are more concerned about setting the records straight and clearly defining the role of the woman to avoid sending the wrong message home. This is captured wholesomely when Clara's birthday party at Fatima's residence ends in an imbroglio and also when the traditional and rather conservative women in *Go Tell It to Women* (1997) win the fray against their

elitist counterparts. By devising an end that somewhat contravenes the expectations of various stereotypical women around the world, these women have shed their inhibitions and rendered an unbiased service to humanity.

Over the turn of the new millennium, the United Nations articulated what was identified as the most pressing global concerns, specifically the eight-millennium development goals, which include the desire “to promote gender equality and empower women” (Waage et al. 2010). To this end, it is not far-fetched to say that despite gaining more currency over the decades, the woman had still not attained full emancipation. As a result of this reality, certain quarters of society, particularly in the western world, began to misconstrue the distinctive roles of men and women in society. As a result of broken homes, divorce, and its attendant tendencies became the norm. Having spent ample time across the shores of Africa, Sofola and her contemporaries, therefore, remain unsung heroines in their noble attempt to deploy their talents in setting the records straight. Consequently, the African, despite all his challenges and seeming disadvantages, can boast of recording more success in the marriage department as opposed to western proclivities, which have recorded a perplexing rate of failed marriages.

VILLAIN-HEROES OF AFRICA’S POLITICAL SYSTEMS: A SORDID BOON

Without a doubt, Wole Soyinka is one of the few writers whose controversial yet intelligent drama has resisted harsh political regimes. He chose anagrams to convey his message because he was concerned about the ramifications of launching a direct attack on the dominant political structures. In his analysis of *The Black Experience*, Iji (1996) chooses the quite interesting title “Villains as Heroes in Soyinka’s *Play of Giants*.” According to Iji (1996), the play is an agglomeration of some villain heroes in the corridors of power in Africa, including Nigeria. These include a parody of sit-tight past and current leaders in Africa whom Soyinka sarcastically calls ‘a gallery of supermen’. However, the question remains: in what world can we consider Idi Amin Dada, with all of his heinousness and utter disregard for the sanctity of human life, a hero? Around the mid-16th century, the former Italian statesman Niccolo Machiavelli asserted that it was frequently essential for leaders to exercise dictatorial control over their citizens (Tames, 2008). For Machiavelli, the only way to keep a wide net and a tight mesh on the government was if the leader had the last say on all collective concerns. The following centuries saw leaders and social critics either support or condemn this type of leadership (Sample, 2003).

In Africa, this Machiavellian streak was adapted and even laced with inhumane proclivities like the utter extermination of all those who constituted opposition or resistance to the government (Timamy, 2005). Regardless of the sheer heinousness of this form of leadership, Iji (1996) identifies an ounce of redeeming quality, which could depend on the degree of logic and rationality behind it, and presents these villains as heroes. This is in view of the fact that, despite their beastly and beastly tendencies, Idi Amin and his cronies maintained an intense commitment to ward off foreign incursions of any kind into Africa, thereby protecting the continent from further exploitation by her erstwhile imperial masters. Again, if the thrust of these analyses remains focused on the human condition, then the heroism of Idi Amin (Kamini) may remain a subject for the critics to evaluate and ultimately come up with a verdict.

EVALUATING THE NETHER REGIONS OF AFRICAN SOCIETY

The plight of the proletariat is one of the subject matters that has almost sufficiently been treated in dramatic literature across the world (Yazdani & Shahbazi, 2015). Perhaps the most notable is Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1993), which gained currency in the early 1970s and has continued to hold sway in theatrical circles to this date. Beyond Boal's model, which has a specific template that is highly participatory in nature, several African dramatists have developed similar models, which, although not entirely similar to Boal's, share striking corollaries. One such African playwright to delve into the theatre advocating for the proletarians is Tunde Fatunde. Iji's categorization of Tunde's theatre as the theatre of the oppressed is therefore not incongruous by any stretch of the imagination.

In the early 1970s, a period that in Nigeria's history is usually regarded as a period of the oil boom and consequently a period of economic prosperity, the then military head of state, Yakubu Gowon, made a statement that reverberated in the minds of Nigerians for a long time. In an address, Gowon made the bold claim that "the problem with Nigeria is not money, but how to spend it" (Iji, 1996, p. 74). What this audacious remark implied was that Nigeria had, for the first and perhaps the last time, reached Olympian heights vis-à-vis her economic peg. Therefore, this was a very sanguine comment and one that calmed the nerves of all strata of society, owing to the evidently high standard of living that was prevalent at the time. Only about a decade later would the tables turn, and it would no longer be business as usual for the average Nigerian, as the pure bliss that had existed a decade earlier had dissipated into oblivion.

This was perhaps the primal inspiration that gave birth to Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom* (1985). This is not to say that oil reserves underground have suddenly dried up, but then, the country had plummeted into a reproachable political administration in which poor remuneration and non-payment of salaries had become commonplace, while the elite gentry of the society continued to plunder public coffers with impunity. In line with drama's primal function of arousing social consciousness, Fatunde has adequately denuded this repulsive underbelly of society. The potentially emergent society can only learn from their gullibility if their children and their children's children are to escape the fate of eating from the trash can like their fathers did.

Fatunde also goes beyond the domestic problems of Nigerian society to explore the deleterious effects the apartheid system of government left on South Africa (Williams, 1996). Through Fatunde's play *Blood and Sweat* (1985), we behold, in graphic terms, man's inhumanity to man. While some may find Edde Iji's recreation of Africa's unforgettable experience repugnant, this re-creative analysis is significant, and very much so to succeeding generations as the ultimate price which their forefathers paid for freedom. In truth, many quarters of society will still view dialogue as the best means to conflict resolution; the experience of Apartheid remains a reminder that the cold, terse, laconic, and brusque truth is that table manners do not always work.

"The individuals who benefit from the system cannot be expected to alter it; it is the little guys who need to raise their voices and be heard," is a popular African saying. The experience of apartheid may have left an indelible mark on South Africa, but the resultant effect of the struggle remains a reference point for not just South Africans but the whole of humanity on the confounding miracle that can emanate from bearding the lion in his den (Besteman, 2008). In the words of Theodore Roosevelt,

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat (Roosevelt & Lodge, 2022, p. 553).

EDDE IJI AS A MARXIST

With regard to the main thrust and crux of Edde Iji's works under consideration, the undertones of Marxism comes to play as he portrays it in Fatunde's dramaturgy, the one ideological persuasion that readily comes to mind is the concerns of Karl Marx, which he articulated as his political philosophy (Adegbamigbe et al., 2020). After witnessing the plight of the proletariat at the hands of the elite under capitalist climates, Marx was convinced that the only way to bridge the dichotomy between the elites and the nether regions of the society was a paradigm shift towards socialist tendencies that will accommodate the lower class in the means of production and distribution (Janos, 1986).

On this note, Edde Iji like Fatunde advocates for a society where the workhorses are not reduced to feeding from the bread crumbs and the dustbin, whereas their elite masters continually enrich themselves. The experiences of the likes of Hassan in Fatunde's *No More Oil Boom* (2002) can be compared to those of the animals at Jones Manor's farm in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945), where, after Old Major describes a wonderful dream he had about a world where all animals live free from the tyranny of their human masters, the animals are inspired by this philosophy of animalism and then plot a rebellion against Jones. After the revolution occurs thanks to the valiant tactics of Snowball and Napoleon, there is this feeling of equality and equity shared by all the animals, but as times decline, the pigs, out of unrestrained greed, engage in a series of activities that end up classifying this new, emergent society. Squealer (a pig), in his brand of twisted logic, succeeds in persuading the other animals that the pigs are always moral and correct in their decisions. As this new society continues to plunge down this path of classification, the seven laws of animalism no longer apply to all; the workhorses continue to toil laboriously while the pigs grow fatter. The class struggle in the novel finally climaxes when Napoleon (a pig and the leader of all the animals) is enjoying a card game with Mr. Pilkington, during which both of them try to play the ace of spades. As the other animals watch the scene from outside the window, they cannot tell the pigs from their erstwhile human masters.

By direct comparison, the society that Fatunde (2002) chides in his drama is not dissimilar from Mr. Jones in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). For instance, after Napoleon succeeds in deviously ousting Snowball from the farm, he takes credit for the idea of the windmill project, which will provide electricity for all the animals, and beckons on the animals to begin the process of building the windmill. Boxer, an incredibly strong horse, offers his strength to help build the windmill. When Frederick

and his men attack the farm and explode the windmill, Napoleon predictably blames Snowball and orders the animals to reconstitute the project. Boxer again offers his strength to help build the windmill, but when he grows weary and sick from his strenuous endeavours, Napoleon sells the poor horse to a local doctor and swindles all the other animals into believing that Boxer dies a peaceful death in the hospital. The treatment of Boxer after his intense commitment to the collective cause here can be likened to the laborious toils of the workers in Fatunde's plays, but instead of reaping the rewards of their endeavours, the ruling class, out of sheer greed, fleeces these workers of every ounce of their strength and then leaves them in the lurch.

Edde Iji in his work has brought to bear the radicalism of the Marxist theory as he portrays the Europeans as a set of people who rather destroy and reduce the works of Africans and our Africanness by exalting the values in their own literatures. His stance against colonialism, neo colonialism, dictatorship, man's in humanity to man racism and marginalization in all sense of the word from the European and the African point of view cannot be over emphasised. However, his coinage and thoughts about the female dramatists in his work where he termed the unsung heroines is worth interrogating. The question that comes readily to mind is ;are these women really heroines that are unsung? All over the world today there is barely a theatre department that does not have the works of Lorraine Hansberry in their curriculum. In Nigeria, the average literature students have read at least one or two of the works of Zulu Sofola to say the least. These women might not have been given a voice as at when they wrote their plays but as it stands today their plays have made their praises to be sung because these plays of theirs has birthed more plays that stand for the rights of women and against marginalisation of every sort.

CONCLUSION

Out of sheer prejudice, western scholars like Jung have mooted several unconvincing manifestos in an attempt to discredit the credibility of African drama. Suffice it to say that over time, the black man has proven without reasonable doubt the plausibility of his art. It is therefore refreshing as well as insightful to have the human condition peculiar to the black man expounded, expatiated, and explicated in Edde Iji's *Black Experience in Theatre*. The ultimate goal is the progression of knowledge and offering greater insights into the labyrinths of the black man's experiences in a world where he is bullied to constantly surmount the odds and assert himself against the unending barrage of adversities within his existential realities.

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