Article

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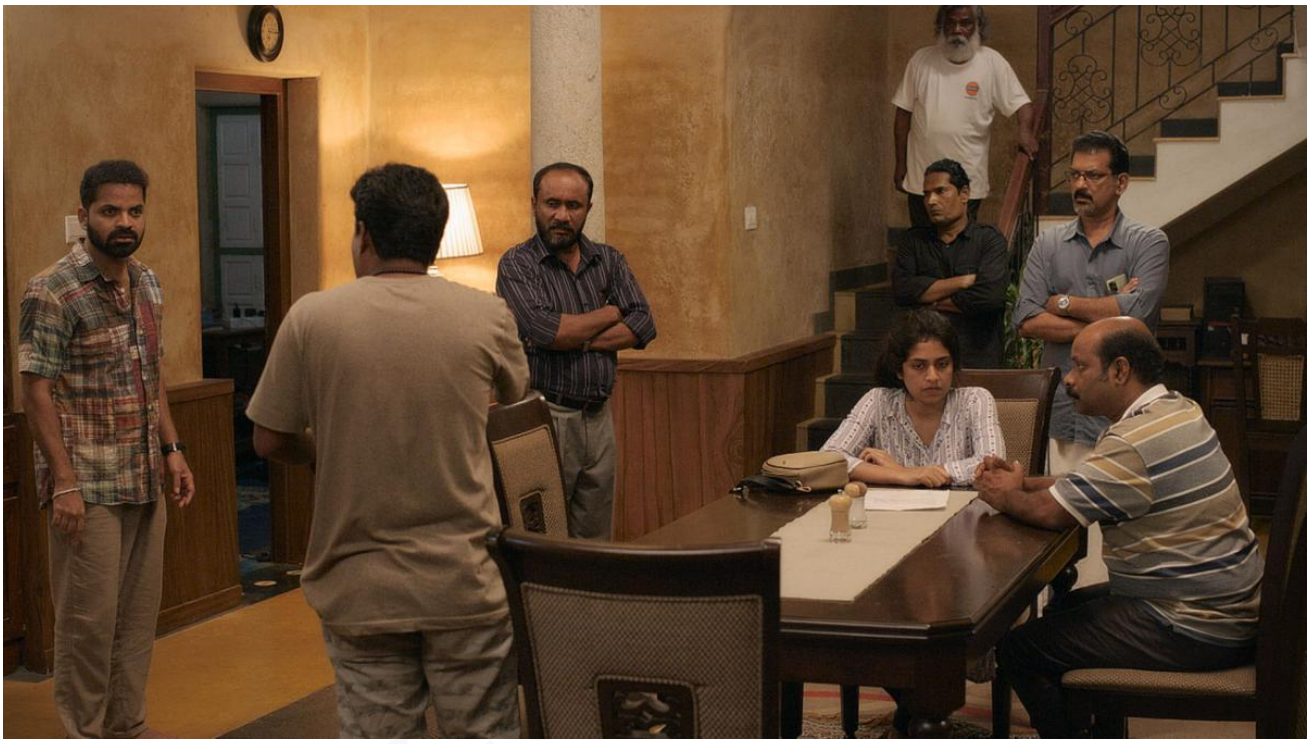
From the Drama of Discomfort to the Comedy of Catharsis: A Brief Analysis of Evolving Depictions of Gendered Violence in Malayalam Films



Aattam

Abstract:

This article attempts to trace and analyse the evolving trajectories of gendered violence portrayed in Malayalam films post-2017 in light of numerous socio-political changes in Kerala. The analysis is primarily done in light of 'symbolic violence' and how a particular ideology subtly propagates what becomes physical manifestations of violence as well as 'counter-violence,' which provides a cathartic respite to the receivers of violence through active inversion of the oppressed, especially in gendered situations. In this regard, the analysis relies heavily on the subtle dialogic exchanges and formal acts of subversion in the two films that deal with these ideas in distinct manners. The two films primarily used in this study are *Aattam (2023)* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey (2022)*. A scrutiny of how the film form is actively being used to generate discomfort in place of sadomasochistic pleasure among the spectators to counter the masculine hegemonic gaze is being studied here through the Marxist feminist lens as well as feminist screen theory.

[Keywords- Film form, Marxist Feminist Film Theory, symbolic violence, counter-violence]

Violence is a heavily studied yet ambivalent term. Slavoj Žižek identifies two facets of it, namely subjective and objective violence. 'Objective violence' loosely refers to the force of ideology, one underlying the roots and fabric of any given society. It manifests itself as 'subjective violence,' a physical display of harm in socio-culturally established norms or regulations. How subjective violence reveals itself, especially on screen, is entirely derived from objective violence, which can be divided into symbolic and systemic violence, borrowing from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In a simplified sense, the former refers to individualistic and internalised ideological manifestations of objective violence, and the latter relates to institutional manifestations.

This article focuses on 'symbolic violence', which is embedded within the ontological factions of the society, which, as per Žižek's theorisation, is best captured in a poetic, rather than the prose form because 'truthfulness', as a constructed notion, is fragmented and full of ruptures, rather than logically assembled. In films, it can be deduced that the form contributes mainly to how spectators perceive violence. This socio-cultural specificity of what stands as a paradigm of violence has been identified by numerous theorists, furthering the notion that violence is, after all, a socio-cultural phenomenon and the physical representation of it is subjective. Kendrick writes:

> Film violence is not one thing but rather those actions and images a viewer perceives as violent in a given time and place. It is, above all, an individual experience which necessarily entails disagreement. (Kendrick, 13)

Carrying forward this argument and placing it within the sociological context of the Indian film industry at large, and the Malayalam film industry, in particular, it is to be observed that Mina T. Pillai notes how Kerala underwent a rapid change from its matrilineal lineage to an insecure masculine regressiveness, leading to diegetic aggression towards women, a "looming threat of violence" serving to "keep them in their place" (Pillai, 111), especially between 1980 and 2011, with the lack of representation of female protagonists who could counter such violent motivations. (Pillai, 112). While exceptions arguably exist, notably in the works of Padmarajnaj, Gopalakrishnan and other parallel filmmakers, the commercial, mass-consumed films lacked that representation. Pillai further notes:

> The hallmark of hegemonic masculinity in Malayalam cinema is male violence towards women in interpersonal relationships in the private as well as in the public sphere, where the lack of 'democracy of the emotions' on the personal plane makes 'dialogic democracy' (ibid.) or the willingness to listen to or debate with the other an impossibility, thus making violence the only alternative. (Pillai, 112)

After 2017, Pillai and many other cultural theorists identified a shift in this representation, especially by forming the Women in Cinema Collective (WCC). Pillai writes:

For the first time in the history of Malayalam cinema, there began 'an insistence on the imperative to create a space and devise a means of speaking as woman, to revision sexed subjectivities in cinema and to puncture its masculine language with feminine needs, desires and anxieties' (Pillai, 58)

22 Female Kottayam

This marks a situation where women were treated as subjects rather than objects. When the socio-cultural aspect of violence, and particularly film violence, is placed in corroboration with contemporary feminist film theory, several junctures rise. Firstly, as subjects in films and beholders of violence, many feminist film theorists have identified violence as a means for women to reclaim their power by engaging in culturally identified masculine practices. However, this theorisation can be a bit shortsighted since violence, as a spectacle, is reductive. A simple example can be traced through the comparative readings of *22 Female Kottayam* (2012) and *Chola* (2019). Keeping the respective narratives aside, the depiction of rape itself in the two films becomes reminiscent of how violence is to be perceived in the changing historico-cultural contexts. In the former, which is a revenge rape drama, rape becomes a spectacle, a phenomenon where the explicit depiction of the act is supposed to extrapolate the same degree of sadomasochistic pleasure as the stabbing of the woman in slasher films, as explained by Carol Clover.

In contrast, Jana Bufkin noted that rape sequences in films could also invite active viewing when the standard paradigm is challenged, and the notion brings forth discomfort rather than pleasure.

> Victims' accounts of their experiences do not exist in a vacuum of authenticity awaiting a feminist revolution to be able to safely express themselves since victims, like all of us, get their cues from the intersecting and conflicting discourses through which the world is understood and shaped. (Mardossian, 747).

In *Chola*, the act is constructed using images that are signifiers of terror, such as a looming camera in the empty streets at night coupled with screams and howls of the young girl, and fragmentary montage, with the exploitative actions taking place in the midground rather than the foreground. In simpler terms, despite the woman being an active transgressor in *22FK*, the film evokes voyeuristic pleasure. In contrast, in *Chola*, despite the woman being a passive recipient of violence, the film form actively perpetrates discomfort, challenging the notion that women engaging in culturally

identifiable masculine activities to reclaim power can necessarily provide subversion.

Keeping aside this socio-cultural evolution, the two facets of the woman gaining control via form and narrative logic, as well as a critique of the violence solely through form, rather than the woman being an active agent in gaining power, can both be studied in various films of the Malayalam Film Industry. In this article, *Aattam* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* have been used to understand how the different forms and genres can be employed to subvert gendered notions of violence at various levels.

Aattam and the nuances of subversion

Aattam is about a conflict that ensues when the only female member of a theatre crew is molested by one of the members, and the entire narrative of the film hinges on their treatment of the situation. The lexical essence of symbolic violence holds a heightened impact in this film because it is not centred around actions as much as the dialogic interactions among a set of men regarding an experience that is essentially alien to them in the given context. The film is replete with dialogic instances of symbolic gendered violence. As the narrative slowly unravels, it shows the nature of violence that even the passive perpetrators of a particular ideology can carry forward. This is understood via some prominent features of the film.

Firstly, unlike films like *22 Female Kottayam* or *Puthiya Niayamam*, *Aattam* does not sensationalise the assault by presenting it as a spectacle of violence within the narrative. Sorcha Gunne and Zoe B. Thompson identify an increasing need for filmic "rape narratives that refuse voyeurism and exploitation" and instead "confront the uncomfortable and shocking nature of sexual violence in [ways] that are themselves shocking and uncomfortable and break the mould of the victim/perpetrator binary" (Gunne, Thompson, 3).

Secondly, most of the problems are communicated through the interactions among male characters and by placing several economic restraints on them, Ekarshi problematises what can be best understood as the economy vs ethics debate, where the roots of misogyny can also be traced deeply within seemingly harmless and overtly progressive personalities and can be taken to have a deep linkage with the economic situation of a given individual. While Anjali's job besides the theatre group is not specified, the men in the film come from diverse ordinary backgrounds. Vinay is a chef, Nandan is a driver, Cijin is a salesperson, Santhosh has a doomed travel agency, Jolly is a plumber/electrician, and Madan, who is a newspaper editor, is known to be dependent on his wife, and so on. This simple information guides their extreme thirst for the supposed money and fame that Hari promises the vis the Europe tour. Looking at it from a Gramscian perspective, the economic liability does promote the hegemonic ideology of patriarchy. However, the film presents this as only one of the layers. The symbolic violence, therefore, arises from a varied class of people who, in some way or another, present themselves as subservient to the existing economic structures of the society.

The complex economic power structure and disparity play a guiding role in the members becoming perpetrators of the

violence. From the very inception of the film, Hari is seen as a bully, holding a superior position of entitlement over the other characters. In one of the initial scenes, he is seen removing his purse out of sheer mistrust towards one of the crew members, and when countered by Anjali, he answers that he has seen "crooks younger than him." He even comments on Nandan's phone, suggesting he has a better one, and presents Cijin as a lecher in front of the play's director. Later, he bullies him when he comes forward to counter him. Jolly is in the same theatre group and does plumbing at Hari's house. Later, during the party, he pushes Anjali into the swimming pool without her consent. All these instances somewhat present the discrepancy between him and the other characters regarding power distribution. At a later point in the film, Cijin even admits to not liking him much. However, it is the European trip, along with the ingrained patriarchal belief, that causes them to shift from believing Anjali to doubting and then entirely dismissing her. Initially, when Madan reveals the truth, people blame Hari for disliking him. Still, as the film progresses and there are significant power dynamic shifts, everyone changes their stance, suggesting everything, ranging from compromise to even dismissing the trauma of the woman, based on the discrepancies of her story.

Thirdly, as Mardorossian explains in her article,

> Focusing on women's reactions or lack thereof during an attack necessarily takes the focus off of the rapist and places it—along with the 'responsibility' for the outcome of this scripted interaction—on women and women alone. The responsibility of the rapist is seen as inherently linked to the victim's behaviour and, as a result, often gets erased. (753, 756)

This is precisely what happens in the film, as the narrative gets hijacked from one man to another. First, Vinay, Anjali's lover, pushes her to say that she has seen Hari, and when confronted, she keeps lying, forcing her to do the same and saying that is the only way to make others believe her. He even vehemently denies his affair with Anjali. This lack of empathy is solidified towards the end, when despite having been romantically associated with Anjali, Vijay keeps denying the association and pushing Hari as the main culprit even though Anjali attempts to tell the truth. He is the one to have told Madan about the situation when Anjali is not ready to, which may come off as a well-wisher's activity. Still, as the film nears its end, during the sequence at the bus stop, even Vijay is shown to be lured by the offer of touring Europe at Hari's mercy. Then, Sanosh blames Nandan, and his motives are ambiguous due to his underlying resentment regarding his love interest, Athira, who left him for Nandan.

Finally, 'symbolic violence' can most easily reveal itself via language. From the beginning, the film showcases casual instances of violence, such as Sanosh verbally abusing Athira while talking to Jolly because she has left him, Sudheer asking his wife, Shajitha, to tell Anjali to dress appropriately, or Selvan asking Anjali to ponder on whether she was at fault too since men tend to get out of control when drunk. These expected normative paradigms of gender performativity present dialogic forms of

symbolic violence within the film and are perpetrated as societal expectations. For instance, Jolly's wife, Delna, is shocked to find Anjali, a woman, drinking. No character assumes the role of an absolute antagonist until the very end, not even Hari, who is seen to be sound asleep moments before the incident and the car keys Anjali brings as proof; other characters are seen discussing it.

As per Žižek's theorisation, language can be symbolic violence's most prominent pushing force. He even writes:

> …when we perceive something as an act of violence, we measure it by a presupposed standard of what the "normal" non-violent situation is-and the highest form of violence is the imposition of this standard with reference to which some events appear as "violent." (Žižek, 64)

When analysed in this context, the dialogic exchanges of casual sexism and patriarchy, utterances like "women always think about what benefits them. It's better not to trust them" or thinking about asking Anjali to prove she had been molested are instances of violence that escalates into a heated debate once the only female character herself reveals the entire truth. Cijin even says at one point that he doubts anyone even groped Anjali. This course of conversation in the presence of a victim becomes an active example of patriarchal violence exuded on her.

When Anjali tries leaving upon feeling enraged by Sevan saying she should ponder on whether she is to be blamed in the pretext of apologising, Sanosh reveals to her that they had been taking action out of fear that she will go to the police, not trusting, and Jolly agrees. This leads her to recount the whole incident, and Madan goes on to insinuate that it did not even happen but was a tactile hallucination. This further invigorates the fact that when Anjali says she did not see Hari, people start focusing on the fact that they had been "fools" and she "lied" to Madan rather than wondering who the actual culprit is, something that is echoed by the character a little later, herself.

Once she leaves, a parallel action of the discussion of the men shows how they are entirely occupied with concealing the situation till the tour, where Sudhee r even remarks that she might be at the police station because one does not know with the "girls these days," Madan and Selvan even go on to rejoice in the fact that she has no concrete evidence due to the absence of CCTV footage at the resort and because she left the keys over there. Santosh shows momentary worry that someone did grope her, but Prasanth, mad at Anjali, dismisses it.

Ironically, throughout the narrative, the most authentic connection between the spectator and the film is established through Anjali's voice and her insistence on sticking to the honest narrative, thus making her far from an unreliable narrator and authenticating her story the most and the truth about her violence is expressed by her through the play, and not within the framework of realism that the film otherwise operates in. at various points, different male characters, such as Nandan suggest a scheming way of getting Hari out while getting to go on tour by manipulating the time when Anjali had approached them or even heave a sigh of relief that Anjali is left with no material proof when she is leaving Madan's house, thus

leaving her incapable of filing a complaint. Cijin asks Jolly to show her the screenshot only if she refuses to compromise, and Sevan clearly says everyone agreed to take action because they were too scared she would go to the police. Anjali's character, however, is placed within the reality of her situation, and these instances act as microcosms of violence on the woman's being at a psychological level.

The ambiguity in Anjali's narrative, even as per Žižek's theorisation, is reminiscent of truthfulness, but it is the irony that the construction of a perfect truth is the only thing holding credibility in the narrative. Anjali's kiss with Vinay puts a moral question mark on her character even though it was done with consent, and even characters like Aji, who was on her side, utter things like "What if you get the feeling that I did it?" The revelation of the entire truth only backfires for Anjali.

The drama hinges on finding the culprit in a typical whodunit genre format. Even though *Aattam* seemingly unravels that logic during the initial phase of the building drama, the director completely subverts the generic expectations in the final segment where the woman who takes charge of the narrative of the play, the metanarrative, refuses to see the culprit even when he comes forward to reveal his identity. This sequence precedes fragments of actual dialogues and actions that have taken place before the spectator, including the final brawl in Anjali's absence among the eleven men following Hari's revelation. When even this brawl is portrayed by Anjali in her play, it brings forth a question of ambiguity as to how she could have come to know about it because the spectators have seen it in parallel editing in Anjali's absence from the space. It also raises the question of whether someone had indeed come forward to confess his crime or if that was a fictitious decision on her part. However, even this final segment echoes what the film has been echoing throughout quite directly- it does not matter who committed the crime because the passivity of the onlookers makes them equally responsible for it.

In a somewhat similar trajectory as Žižek's argument, Lisa Fitzpatrick acknowledges how "women's representations of rape tend to emphasise the pain and violence of the crime, rather than its proximity to intercourse" (Fitzpatrick, 196). This becomes significant in the final act, in which Anjali uses her agency to recount her experiences.

> Realism presents an image of human agency that neutralises male experience as universal and reinforces patriarchal hegemony while naturalising the objectification and commodification of the female body. (Fitzpatrick, 185)

The language used in the final act, the play and the metanarrative, perpetrates an ideology of poetic or artistic expression as opposed to the rest of the film, which employs a realistic framework in its depiction and framing with no exaggerations whatsoever, almost mirroring the male-dominated mise en scene throughout. Thus, this final act expresses both direct and formal resistance to the gendered nature of violence that is central to the story.

To trace a simple poetic pattern within the film begins with a play and ends with one, but the implications of both plays are vastly different. *Aattam* works almost as a case study

in understanding how covert violence works within the gendered sphere.

Comedy and counter-violence in *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*

JJJJH tells the story of Jaya, a young woman who is married off to a poultry farm owner, Rajesh, who turns out to be abusive, leading Jaya to retaliate by learning *Kalaripayattu* via Youtube and other online mediums to fight back the repeated domestic abuse.

The most popular understanding of counter-violence is offered within the decolonisation perspective of resistance, as put forward by Franz Fanon as a kind of "cleansing force" that allows the oppressed to be emancipated from the systemic oppression of the coloniser. When this notion is taken in the context of feminist readings of resistance, it is interesting to note that prominent feminist writers like Bell Hooks consider confronting resistance vis-a-vis confronting the very roots of oppression. In talking about this concerning feminist screen theory, Joseph Kupfer identifies (in the context of martial arts films) how the traditionally assigned masculine version of violence often allows "symbolic liberation" for the female characters. Under this line of argument, the incredibly graphic sequences of "counter-violence" in *JJJJH* become an amalgamation of Jaya's resistive force. She also concludes in a dialogue as she recounts the number of slaps she had to put up with and the hypothetical number she will have to put up with when told she should accept it quietly.

According to James Kendrick, action films often infuse humour to formulate an acceptable degree of deviance regarding violence. It can also be observed that since satire, by definition, deals with topics of transgression, the humour infused in the violent subservience forms a commentary on the desolate nature of domestic violence. The film offers a direct commentary on violence, especially the gendered nature of it when the video of Jaya defeating Rajesh in a parody match goes viral, and there is a montage, offering a barrage of various reactions from people to it across social media platforms. However, there are also instances of direct dialogic interventions, almost instructive, as they come in direct dialogues from authoritative figures. One such example is the female judge telling the crowd of people as well as the spectators in a comically structured exchange with the men during the hearing for Jaya and Rajesh's divorce that a woman needs 'justice, equality, and freedom to live a good life.'

Unlike *Aattam*, however, the depiction of violence relies heavily on the formal features of the film, which is similar to what J. Kupfer identifies as contributing to the "rhythm and form of film story" (Kupfer, 27). The argument of the premise is close to placing a series of violent incidents as spectacles that thrust forward the narrative. An obvious sign of violence at the very inception is the crescendo that builds into a slap from a seemingly progressive professor of Jaya. The dialogic paradox, from stating

the independence of Kollam women to subtly then overtly controlling Jaya's independence through societally well-established gender expectations, such as limiting interaction with male friends, among others, culminates in the physical act of violence.

During the later part of the film, where Jaya is being slapped, there are graphic depictions, followed by a repetitive action of Rajesh taking her out to eat. The first time around, he offers her a choice of dish but rejects it immediately upon hearing and asserts his wish instead. This repetitive action of the physical manifestation of violence followed by lack of verbal agency, when read in the context of 'gender performativity' (Butler), especially for the doubly marginalised colonial woman (Spivak), becomes a visual motif of the ideological violence inherent to the household besides the obvert physical violence.

However, in the logic of films, the way in which the counter-violence frames and surrounds the female protagonist is also relevant here. In light of Mary Ann Doane's theorisation of transgression, gender performativity associates violence with men. Therefore, comedy, as a form interplaying with violence, creates a loose transgressive space of its own. Jaya's counterviolence thus ensues from her parody of an action hero. The emasculation that the husband has to go through in terms of public humiliation and his own internalised sense of degradation essentially sheds light on the socio-cultural norms of expected gender roles in the given society, but the film actively counters it. Jaya is depicted in what can be best understood as the antithesis of "fetishistic idealisation" (Gledhill, 167), exhibiting characteristics of both culturally masculine and feminine roles without one attribute stripping her of the other. Jaya's first kick parodies the masculine action hero of the Malayalam film industry. How it is aestheticised is a direct cue, bringing us back to the original argument that the counter-violence is hinged on spectacles, but not necessarily spectacles that the spectator is used to seeing. The form becomes a mere familiar bearer of subversive signs of catharsis. Likewise, the film's ending also resorts to a drastic plot twist by allowing Jaya to be an independent equal in the financial realm, which is especially important, even as per Žižek's theorisation in countering ideological violence. However, the form is that of an action comedy, with subversive, meaningful twists rather than subtle nuances offering a proper character arc to the masculine hero.

***Conclusion*:**

While it is difficult to demarcate the socio-political influences which have actively contributed to this depiction of violence in Malayalam films, specifically because not one perspective can hold predominance in a society which is macrocosmically rooted in patriarchy, there has been a persistent trend of making socially conscious films in this particular society at a commercial level. The depiction of violence falls within that category itself.

Comolli and Narboni suggest that a text can offer a critique of itself through the contradictions that appear between its overt ideology and its formal properties of image, narrative, and dialogue. In such texts, 'an internal

> criticism is taking place which cracks the film apart at the seams' (Choudhuri, 27)

While future cultural theorists countered the theorisation offered by Comolli and Narboni, it is interesting to note that all the examples taken in this article were directed by male directors and had an overwhelming majority of male crew involved in the production process. Going by the gaze theory, however, the depiction of violence is not male-centric or catering to a predominantly male audience looking for a titillating experience of spectacular violence and the pleasure derived from it. Hence, despite the production not matching the standards of the female majority, these Malayalam films can conclusively be found to be offering a perspective of violence surrounding women in what can be perceived as a progressive and sensitive manner, with the form offering as much resistance to the conventional notion of violence as much as the narrative itself.

Both *Aattam* and *JJJH* resist the violence in differing formal languages. What remains common in the given films is how each depicts gendered violence in a reversed form, countering the dominant ideology through form and narrative. The layers of resistance are complex, not unidimensional. Interestingly, in both cases, realism is not treated as the linguistic paradigm to communicate the female experience of violence, which befalls the theoretical demarcation that irrespective of the maker, the language of the portrayal of violence among women is bound to be expressed in a language other than realism.

Contemporary Malayalam films have often talked about the subtle nuances of gendered violence hinged on the whole notion of heteronormative hegemonic patriarchal institutes like family (think of *GIK*, where the husband is teaching a class of girl students the definition of family) and the conversation around violence has taken several turns across genres.

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