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**Gazing at the Obvious: A Critical Analysis of the Male Gaze in Superhero
and Fantasy Literature**

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Abstract:

The genre of superhero literature has made its mark all across the milieu. From the 60 mm screen, to merchandise, to online fan portals, there is no space in popular culture and the public sphere that has been left untouched, or rather unaffected by superhero and fantastic literature. This massively growing penchant for superhero literature is well exemplified by incidents like *Avengers Endgame* becoming the highest grossing film of all time, and Jacquin Phoenix's *Joker* practically making a clean sweep at all the important film awards. This paper attempts to undertake a careful consideration of superhero films and literature, so as to highlight the male gaze prevalent in superhero and fantasy literature, as well as appreciable attempts to move away from the same.

Keywords: Fantasy, Male gaze, Superhero literature

Peter Coogan, in his book *What Makes a Superhero*, encapsulates four essential elements that make up a superhero- “mission, identity, powers and generic distinction.” (12) The first of these elements is self- explanatory. Superheroes are necessarily expected to transcend the usual, to move beyond ordinary life, to answer a higher calling, to become bastions of hope and catalysts of change. Mainstream research delves deeply and critically into this complex of superheroes because it explains their modus operandi.

“The people who find resonant heroic themes of challenges and questing in their own lives, in their goals, creative outpourings, in their day- and night-dreams—are being led to a single psychic fact. That is, that the creative and spiritual lives of individuals influence the outer world as much as the mythic world influences the individual. By restating this primordial understanding,



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Campbell offers hope that the consciousness of the individual can prompt, prick, and prod the whole of humankind into more evolution.”

This introduction written by Clarissa Pinkola Estes for the 2004 edition to Joseph Campbell’s iconic work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* adequately epitomizes the cosmic, psychological, physical, and mental journey that all heroes, irrespective of their genre, or age, must undertake.” (Arora, 1) Identity too, becomes a pressing issue for superheroes, because more often than not, they tend to lead double lives- one that of your average, regular person, and the other life being a “secret” one wherein they don the guise of superhero-hood to save the world from a terrible fate, which creates ambiguity regarding the “true” identity of these superheroes, and the actuality of their being. In this quest to save the world, powers are either thrust upon the unwilling shoulders of recalcitrant commoners, who while saving the world, grow into their own, or honed through careful acumen, intellect and perseverance, as in the case of Batman. Looking at the last two elements in relation to each other, it can be reasonably argued that the most important quality of a superhero is their special powers, after all, this is what makes them “super” , and what sets them apart. They cannot just be ordinary. These characteristics attributed to superheroes ensure, or at least try to, in-depth stories and well rounded characters to exist within comic book literature and cinematic universes, but more importantly, they symbolize empowerment, and holistic betterment. Or at least they should, strive to. Any piece of art or literature cannot be looked at in isolation. Superhero literature is no exception. An exhaustive analysis of the same brings to the fore a very disturbing issue- a disturbing and continuous clouding of superhero literature in and by the “male gaze.”

Initially introduced as a concept by Laura Mulvey in an essay called, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*(1975) the male gaze as a blanket term has undertones, if not overtones of scopophilia and voyeurism, as said by Sam Kim (Kim). Women are seen as objects of desire to facilitate, further and fulfill lascivious longings. Mulvey's main argument in "Visual Pleasure and



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Narrative Cinema" is that Hollywood narrative films use women in order to provide a pleasurable visual experience for men. The narrative film structures its gaze as masculine. The woman is always the object of the reifying gaze, not the bearer of it. (12) Overtly sexualized clothing, helpless submission to their male counterparts, body dysmorphia in both male and female superheroes, among other things, are a few concerns that arise with the contemplation of superhero cinema under the ambit of a fixed male gaze. How a subject is represented in any particular genre is crucial.

Through this paper, an attempt has been made to stratify, delineate, and work towards a better understanding of the creation, execution, and attempts, albeit few, to subvert the male gaze in superhero literature, and work towards a more inclusive "female", if not "intersectional" gaze.

In her *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Laura Mulvey utilizes psychoanalysis theory as a "political weapon" to demonstrate how subconsciously, patriarchal notions of society have shaped our film watching experience and cinema itself. According to Mulvey the cinematic text is understood along lines that are corresponding to the collective cultural subconscious with is essentially patriarchal in nature. Mulvey argues that the popularity of Hollywood films is determined and reinforced by pre-existing social patterns which have shaped the fascinated subject. (8)

Mulvey's analysis in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* combines a semiotic methodology of cinematic means of expression with psychoanalytic analysis of desire structures and the formation of subjectivity. The semiotic end of Mulvey's analysis enables the deciphering of how films produce the meanings they produce, while the psychoanalytic side of the article provides the link between the cinematic text and the viewer and explains his fascination through the way cinematic representations interact with his culturally determined subconscious. (15)

Continued Perpetuation of the Male Gaze



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At the outset, let us take into account three well- established female superheroes- Diana of Themiscira, better known as Wonder Woman, Natalya Alya Romanov/Natasha Romanoff, better known as Black Widow, and Wanda Maximoff. Taking into consideration just their physical appearance for the movement, the obvious conclusion that one can arrive at is that are female superheroes only characterised by the spillage of their abundant cleavage over a plunging décolletage and an ample derriere encased in latex. It is highly reductionist to relegate women, and women superheroes in particular to mere sexualized anatomical objects.

Women look at themselves being looked at. The surveying woman is a man, the surveyed woman is a woman, and by this the woman objectifies herself as a subject of a gaze.

Iconic as the character may be, Wonder Woman is mostly portrayed as saucy-minx, vixen-esque character, whose “superhero” attire is far from practical, and leaves little to the imagination. It is interesting to note that Wonder Woman as a character was the conception of one particular Moulston Marston, a man whose penchant for fetishization of women, and affinity with bondage and sado-masochism was publically known. The artist breathed a little bit of his own persona into his art, because Wonder woman, while otherwise nearly invincible, has as her one weakness, bondage. Were she to be tied up or lassoed, Wonder Woman immediately concedes and becomes submissive to her captor.

In the poster with which she was introduced into the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Scarlett Johansson’s Black Widow is clad in a body hugging leather cat-suit, with her posterior angled towards the camera, and only part of her face showing. Iron Man 2, the movie for which the said poster was made, sees Tony Stark and Happy Hogan looking up pictures of Natasha online, where she is scantily dressed, because of her cover as a lingerie model. Even when her cover is blown, and she is revealed to be a fierce and deadly assassin working for S.H.I.E.L.D., there is still an undue focus when she is being



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driven by Happy, and needs to change into superhero gear from cocktail party wear. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, a major reason that Natasha feels her romance with Bruce Banner is doomed is because of her inability to have children, thus perpetuating the stereotype that unless they have the ability to bear children and be dutiful hasfraus, women cannot have self- worth or functional romantic relationships, even if the woman in question is a super-spy, with astounding intellect and a skill set so varied and extensive, that enemies are taken down, and rival organisations are dismantled with seeming ease. However, of late attempts have been made to make Black Widow a more rounded and nuanced character, with agency over her own sexuality and body-image that she presents to the world, which the later part of this paper will discuss.

With her red bodysuit that displays to perfection an ample bosom and a sculpted behind, and her devil-horns perched jauntily on her flaming red hair, Wanda Maximoff, better known as Scarlett Witch looks like sin and temptation incarnate. But the question to be pondered upon here is that must a woman who is so powerful in her own right, that she manages to tilt an entire universe on its axis because of her powers of telekinesis and mind control, and a woman who looks Thanos squarely in the eyes, and forces him to call for backup (*Avengers Endgame*), be relegated to the role of a provocatively dressed sultry- seductress, who can be powerful only when she is “sexy”? And this merely so as to not disturb the delicate balance of fragile masculinity that exists in the superhero universe. When talking about fragile masculinity, another example that can be cited is that of She- Hulk. Born as a result of second wave feminism, She- Hulk is shown as someone as who is sexually liberated. But to “compensate” for this sexual liberation, she is shown to have bulging muscles, because popular perception decrees that someone with oestrogen and “feminine” attributes is incapable of being a sexual entity, with active sexual desires and needs. As a critic of the male gaze, one would also



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frown upon She –Hulk’s hapless dependence on Dr. Bruce to save her life by giving her gamma radiation.

Cady Monroe Conway (Conway) makes a valid point when she says that prior to the introduction of Scarlett Johansson as Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow, in *Iron Man 2* (2010), the only women in these films were love interests: Gwyneth Paltrow as Pepper Potts, the secretary turned CEO turned girlfriend of Tony Stark; Natalie Portman as Jane Foster, astrophysicist and love interest of Thor; and Hayley Atwell as Peggy Carter, MI6 spy and love interest of Captain America. Of the three, Paltrow went on to reprise her role five times after her initial performance, Portman only once more. Atwell kept Peggy Carter alive in the television series *Agent Carter*, which would grow the character into a fan favourite, but was cancelled after two seasons. While these women are all powerful, successful, and great role models, that is all ‘bonus,’ as their main role in the films is that of the love interest. Potts is a successful CEO in her own right and kills 11 percent of the total villains in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Carter is an absolutely feisty, no-holds-barred fierce agent who not only meets head on the challenge of everyday casual sexism she faces in the workplace, but also goes on to found S.H.I.E.L.D. Foster is an astrophysicist who has the Nobel Prize conferred upon her. And yet, the credit that is due to these women is hardly given. They are remembered primarily as romantic liaisons, as opposed to determined human beings in their own right. So the argument here stands that no matter how successful or accomplished women may be, ultimately, they are only viewed through the parochial and restrictive lens of the male gaze.

The male gaze dehumanizes and sexualizes not just women, but also men. Most male superheroes, are usually endowed with bulging muscles and an exaggerated air of bravado and machismo. If a character like Steve Rogers (Captain America) who is initially a scrawny and sickly kid from Brooklyn has to be made into a superhero, he must necessarily be given a serum that



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transforms him from an undernourished and asthmatic weakling into a muscled and bronzed Apollo.

The euphemism “Man of Steel” does not just apply to Clark Kent a.k.a. Superman and his chiselled physique. It also applies to how men, and male superheroes in particular must always keep their emotions under check with a steely, impeccable and impregnable air of fortitude and resilience. Male superheroes are expected to be stoic and unemotional to the extent that nothing that happens, good or bad, is meant to sway them. In the twenty first century, it seems to be a virulent example of our own shortcomings as a society that we cannot let our men cry, or display emotion of any sort. Arthur exemplifies poignantly in the 2019 movie *Joker* how society is inhumane and cruel to everyone, even more so to a person with mental illness and trauma, and mostly so to a man who suffers from mental health issues or tries to display emotion of some kind. In *Iron Man 3* and in *Avengers :Infinity War* to some extent, Robert Downey Jr’s Tony Stark is reeling with Post –Traumatic Stress Disorder, but feels he cannot confide his fears to anyone for fear of being deemed weak, emasculated, or “un-superhero” like. Thor, in *Avengers Endgame*, is seen to be suffering from debilitating loss and trauma, but an insensitive handling of mental illness is once again displayed when Rocket Raccoon slaps Thor at a time when the latter is clearly having a panic attack and yells at him to “Get it together!” In *Avengers: Endgame*, it is deeply disheartening to see that when Natasha, who was one of his closest friends and confidantes, dies, Steve Rogers’ only display of emotion is a single, forced tear rolling down his cheek? In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, when Bucky Barnes, who is the oldest friend of Steve Rogers, and part of the Howling Commandos dies, Steve does not shed a single tear, and instead tries to drink his sorrows away, because a “manly” catharsis of grief, like extensive drinking is seen as socially acceptable, while crying or display of emotion by men is not.



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Subverting the Norm, with reference to Post-Modernist and Feminist Theoretical Constructs

Every coin has a flipside, and while for years, the male gaze has been the predominant way through which superhero cinema has been viewed, of late there have been attempts to subvert the male gaze, and move towards a more inclusive and intersectional lens through which to view and represent superheroes in print media and the silver screen.

The impact of the post-modern condition was to provoke scepticism about universalizing theories. It can be argued that it is impossible for meta-narratives to identify any fundamental truth about human society. Theorists influenced by the likes of Gayatri C. Spivak argue that there can be no one “correct representation.” Instead, what must be advocated and propagated is a pluralism of representations, where inclusivity and cohesion are key terms. In a post- structuralist and post -modernist era, literary works open perceptions of structure, texture, and the layering of meanings that challenge superficial comprehension, expand understanding, and hone analytic skills. The literary subject offers itself to observation and deciphering through narrative techniques, internal clues, and external references that beckon the curiosity and intelligence of readers. According to Kathleen Tyner, as students practice questioning media and other information, they begin to internally question information every time it appears in the environment, without external prompting. She writes, "It is the hope of critical pedagogists that this habit (...) will create critically autonomous citizens, who question information and authority as a matter of course." (342)

Since feminist intervention in the field of cultural studies, many splendid studies have appeared under the rubric of feminist Cultural Studies. A 1999 collection called ‘Feminism and Cultural Studies’ has attempted to “register the power and range of work by feminist critics working with Cultural Studies over the last twenty years” and also illustrates how feminists addressing



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gender issues have stressed on issues different to those expounded upon by male-centric Cultural Studies. (262) Feminist scholars have investigated how technology has transformed women's lives differently than men's, focusing their attention on the work of female film directors and producers, women's depiction in film and media, and the role played by gender, race, and sexuality in cinematic spectatorship, including various kinds of counter-hegemonic practices of film viewing as undertaken by women, people of colour, and the LGBTQ community, and the use of photography by communities that have almost always been typically ostracized and marginalized to reproduce and challenge ideologies of the family, femininity, leisure, and fun.

Let us take for example the character played by Australian actress Margot Robbie- Harley Quinn. Numerous cinema critics were critical of her portrayal in the 2016 film *Suicide Squad*, where she was shown wearing a ripped t-shirt, with the words "Daddy's lil monster" scrawled in blood red across her bosom, and the camera primarily focussing on her chest, as opposed to her face. Compare this to Robbie's portrayal of Harley Quinn in the recently released *Birds of Prey*, and the difference is fairly evident. Joanna Robinson, an online blogger, pulled up two stills from both films, and had the following observations to make regarding the change in appearance and representation of Harley Quinn as a character:

- i) Her pigtails aren't long enough to "pull" anymore.
- ii) Her bangs are choppy and fun as opposed to "seductively" framing her face.
- iii) Her breasts aren't half a foot off her ribcage (Here Robinson arrives at the conclusion that Robbie was probably made to wear a padded bra in *Suicide Squad*, or that her proportions were digitally altered.)
- iv) Her skimpy clothing looks more like a choice rather than the tired "women's clothes strategically ripped" trope.
- v) She's not wearing a dog collar.
- vi) The camera is centred on her face, and not her chest.



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vii) Her t-shirt now has her own name written on it, as opposed to a statement that sexualizes and subjugates her. (Robinson)

As a piece of art, *A Bird Of Prey* makes a conscious attempt to deconstruct and delineate from the male gaze. The movie acknowledges the existence of the male gaze and adamantly rejects it, providing an entertaining but still thoughtful alternative. Female authorship is prominently and proudly on display in the film, both in how it was made and how Harley's character has evolved. Even the title itself is a refreshing change with "The Fantabulous Emancipation of one Harley Quinn." scrawled in what is clearly supposed to be her own handwriting. Even the villain Quinn has to outwit is a man who has pictures of trussed up naked women with bounteous assets plastered across the walls of his home. In a lot of ways, *Birds of Prey* tries to subvert the male gaze. The Tumblr cinematic audience agrees that it looks like Quinn dressed herself and had fun with it as opposed to it being painfully obvious that a man dressed her. This observation in turn leads to the deduction that in women directed and women- helmed films, and sometimes, films under the supervision of People of Colour (POCs), there are radical attempts to break away from the male gaze, as opposed to films helmed by white men, that more often than not conform to the male gaze and the stereotypes associated with it.

Let us take into consideration *Wonder Woman* , the 2017 DCEU film that went on to become one of the highest grossing films of all time, which was a directorial venture of Patty Jenkins. It was beautifully refreshing to see women as fierce warriors, without having to resort to sexiness or flirting to achieve a desired end. In an article for the Guardian, Zoe Williams writes, "Yes, she is sort of naked a lot of the time, but this isn't objectification so much as a cultural reset: having thighs, actual thighs you can kick things with, not thighs that look like arms, is a feminist act. The whole Diana myth, women safeguarding the world from male violence not with nurture but with better



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violence, is a feminist act. Casting Robin Wright as Wonder Woman's aunt, re-imagining the battle-axe as a battler, with an axe, is a feminist act. A female German chemist trying to destroy humans (in the shape of Dr Poison, a proto-Mangle before Nazism existed) might be the most feminist act of all. Women are repeatedly erased from the history of classical music, art and medicine. It takes a radical mind to pick up that being erased from the history of evil is not great either. Wonder Woman's casual rebuttal of a sexual advance, her dress-up montage ("it's itchy", "I can't fight in this", "it's choking me") are also feminist acts. Wonder Woman is a bit like a BuzzFeed list: 23 Stupid Sexist Tropes in Cinema and How to Rectify Them. I mean that as a compliment." (Williams)

Even other little things in *Wonder Woman* were lauded by critics of the male gaze. It was a cinematic victory when one sees Gal Gadot (who incidentally was 5 months pregnant when she filmed the movie) run, and her legs quiver with the effort or when Diana does the superhero landing, and her thighs jiggle. It's little things like these that help a film break away from the confines of the male gaze, and become more real and diverse in their representation.

Black Panther, of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, is arguably the first major film to have a primarily black cast, and it is the first MCU film to have a black director. There are many ways in which the film breaks away from both tradition, as well as the male gaze. To cite a few examples, let us begin with discussing how the king, T'Challa is protected by a legion that is fierce, feisty, and all female. The elite Dora Milaje, the elite all female military of Wakanda, is a resounding slap to proponents of the male gaze. General Okoye, played by Danai Gurira, is as accurate with her spear and sword, as she is with her advice and words. Every time King T' Challa goofs up and has to be rescued, Okoye and her fierce team negate the trope that men are strong, and women weak, and that it is men who must protect women. The women are not relegated to mere love interests. In fact, Okoye has no qualms in telling



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W'Kabi, her husband, that if it ever came to choosing between him and Wakanda, she'd do the latter without batting an eyelid. Nakia, the woman King T'Challa loves, admits freely that while she loves T'Challa, she cannot agree to marry him until Wakanda is safe from all threat. Shuri, a 16 year old, is the smartest person in the world, as confirmed by MCU president Kevin Feige, and makes a great role model for people all across, with her superior technology, and dismissal of corsets as useless and unnecessary. Even the costumes, are authentic, utilitarian, and not sexualized in the least. Even the hair of the women characters is a refreshing change, with the military going bald to avoid useless frills and fancies, and all the other women proudly flaunting natural hair and traditional headgear. The constant reference to Martin Freeman's Commander Ross, one of the two white men in the entire film, as "Colonizer" is both tongue in cheek humour, and a satiric reproof against hegemonic control in and presuppositions about African countries under colonial rule. Through all these incidents, and many more, *Black Panther* moves away from the confinement of the male gaze.

Taika Waititi, of New Zealand descent, changed the way movies about a Scandinavian, Norse- God superhero were earlier made, with his *Thor: Ragnarok*. Similar to *Black Panther's* elite female warrior force, the Dora Milaje, we see in this movie the Valkyries, a formidable legion of all female warriors. Even the casting choice for Brunnhilde (Valkyrie) must be lauded, for Tessa Mae Thompson, being a person of colour, would probably not have been the first choice to play the female lead in the *Thor* franchise, for many directors. Valerie is bold, unapologetic, and has no qualms standing up to Thor, who is the God of Thunder, and ruler of Agar. Waititi also perhaps hinted at Valerie being bisexual, in the scene when she mourns the loss of a fellow Valkyrie, and possibly a love interest. In *Avengers Endgame* too, Thor passes on the mantle of king to Valkyrie, because he understands that her capability and foresight as a leader far exceeds his own.



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Let us now take into account the 2019 movie, *Captain Marvel*. Like in *Black Panther*, there is no overt and unnecessary sexualizing of outfits in this movie. Chauncey K. Robinson writes, “While making history as the first woman-led film of the franchise, the movie has many elements of superhero films that audiences have come to love, yet does so with a heavy dose of female power, successfully avoiding overused tropes in this genre that often cater to the male gaze. *Captain Marvel* unapologetically ejects the centralizing of the straight white male narrative, without sacrificing good storytelling.” (Robinson) The focus on the female friendship between Carol Danvers and Maria Rambeau is central to the plot, and a refreshing break from a heterosexual romance being the focus of relationships in movies. Even Carol Danvers’ character arc in the movie is impressive. A female pilot facing sexism everyday, who then goes on to fly fighter planes under another female pilot, and ultimately goes on to save herself, her family, friends, planet, by telling Jude Law’s antagonist Yvon Rogg that “she has nothing to prove to him.” The big theme of *Captain Marvel* is Carol’s struggle against those who wish to delegitimize, redefine, marginalize or break her at every turn her entire life and Carol’s refusal to be cowed by them. As she recovers her lost self and uncovers the truth about violence, the truth only purges her and makes her stronger, instead of making her diminutive. It is movies like *Captain Marvel* that literally and metaphorically tell us that if we fall seven times, we must get up eight. “Higher, further, faster” is the way to go.

Furthering the argument that superhero literature is slowly moving away from the male gaze, let us take a look at the upcoming *Black Widow* movie. From her foray into the MCU with a derriere accentuating poster, to one that focuses fully on her face, Natasha Romanoff has come a long way indeed. From the stereotypical femme fatale in the initial films, she now becomes a more layered, complex character. She is no longer just a pretty face, but is now a super spy, the glue that holds the Avengers together, and most importantly, a character with substance as opposed to one just put there



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to fulfil male fantasies. Without a doubt, Black Widow absolutely grows and changes for the better over the course of the Infinity Saga. It was a tumultuous ride that did not always reap desirable results. “But, Romanoff manages to find absolution in the debt of her crimson ledger paid.” , Sheryl Oh. (Oh.)

Lastly, with a landmark shift in perspective, it must be noted that Sony has been in talks with Harbinger comics to bring the first plus-size superhero to the silver screen, by the name of Faith Herbert, a.k.a. Zephyr, who is your quintessential geek, but with telekinetic powers. The depiction of a plus-size superhero that is female is definitely an appreciable attempt to move away from the fetters of the male gaze.

The winds of change are blowing. Slowly, but surely. Efforts are being made every day to wean superhero literature away from the male gaze. Today more than ever, there is a need for movies that are more diverse, inclusive, and intersectional. One can hope in no small measure that soon there will be a time, when the male gaze will not just be outright rejected, but will not even need to be discussed, and its absence will certainly not be a glaring one, for it will no longer be normalized and internalized. In keeping with an audience that is more cognizant, aware, and seeking to move away from stratified methodologies of over-imposing and over-arching structures of normalized and hegemonic discourse, film-makers and producers are definitely trying to create films that appeal to broader sensibilities, and not confine them to both parochial and patriarchal structures.

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