

Being in love with one's language

Mahfuzur Rahman makes some points on a volume of poetry

Most of us Bengalis profess to love our mother tongue. Most of us also think of the language movement as a quest for national identity. Twenty-first February 1952 stands out as a symbol of both. It speaks for Bengali language and identity. Does it also speak for other languages in the world?

Muhammad Habibur Rahman, eminent jurist, writer of scores of books, and himself a veteran of the language movement, apparently thinks so, as do many others. The United Nations declaration of the day as the International Mother Language Day underlined the symbolism. There is poetic hyperbole in the title of the book. In less rhetorical terms, how do other nations and communities see and feel about their own language? Are they perhaps as emotionally attached to their mother tongue as we think we are to ours? One is tempted to turn the title of this book on its head and ask: Do all languages speak for themselves? Muhammad Habibur Rahman (the strange use of the initial H does not disguise the well-known author's middle name from well-read Bengalis, to many of whom he is Justice Habibur Rahman) sets out to explore.

The first of its kind, the book is primarily an anthology of poems about the mother tongue of the poet. Justice Habibur Rahman leaves his readers in no doubt about the importance he attaches to the mother tongue and his highly discursive introduction is strewn with quotations to show how others have valued their language. The anthology itself contains some one hundred and fifty poems, mainly translations into English and some written in the English language. The author humbly writes that he has been able to explore "only" seventy languages in this "pitifully incomplete" anthology. There is little need for this modesty, however. Nobody has attempted a work of this nature and seventy is no mean number in this case. The book is a result of painstaking search and tenacious labour of love. He fully deserves our congratulations.

The poems have, of course, to be read in order to see the range of feelings that the mother tongue evokes and no summary can be adequate. The range is wide. As poems, many of the pieces do not make the grade, though some do. There is a wide variety of sentiments expressed in a wide variety of ways. There are notes of despair: "Our language is shedding tears all over/ because its own children are deserting it" (p. 44); bland prescriptions: "Be proud not because you speak English/ Be proud only if in your mother tongue... you think and / express your thought" (p. 3), or simplicity: "And I love my language very much" (p. 66); defiance: "And we shall preserve thee, our dear Russian speech" (p. 4) or "You can beat my skin/ You can eat my flesh/ But you cannot take away/ The right to my language" (p. 104); overdone sentimentality: "One who does not love the native tongue/ Is

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worse than putrid fish and beast" (p. 143); an almost comic piece (p. 55); playfulness (p. 102). Something close to chauvinism appears on p. 105; a fine poem on the rich diversity of world languages is on p. 153; on page 115 the poet wants to write in a foreign language to "lose myself in the world"; mother tongue is seen in all its splendour, from the scream of the mother in labour pain to the language of first love. One could go on, wading through seventy languages, from Albanian to Yiddish, to Zulu.

Most of the poems are by little-known writers. But there are some well-known names: Anna Akhmatova, Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Brodsky, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Jalaluddin Rumi (though in only two lines), Carl Sandburg, and Czeslaw Milosz. Bengali stalwarts Rabindranath Tagore, Michael Madhusudan Datta, and Atul Prasad Sen appear on these pages, the latter with "Moder gorob moder asha" in translation, as does Abdul Hakim with his famous rebuke of those Bengalis who despise Bangla.

The anthology presents the pieces in the original English as well as translations into English. It is, as usual, difficult to say how much of the original has been lost in translation. It is fair to say, however, that in the majority of the cases the English translation is palpably unsatisfactory. The worst example is, perhaps, the piece on page 86, a translation from Japanese.

But what do we mean by language? In the present context the answer is language used as a means of communication, spoken or written, within a given community, distinguishing it from languages of other communities. In plain words, it is national language we are talking about. It is closely linked with national identity but obviously they are not identical. There are a number of poems in this anthology that have more to do with national identity than with language per se. The poems on pages 10-11, 53, 69-70, 117 and elsewhere talk about national identity rather than the mother tongue. A more serious concern is the inclusion of poems that have little bearing on national language or even identity. In the poem on page 8 the sea has nerves, waves write poems and pebbles clatter words, which is language in a special sense; the art of writing is the theme of the poem on page 9; Joseph Brodsky's piece on page 25 is not on national language, despite the allusion to "Russian language"; Lu Chin (p. 29) talks of language in general and how "the poet crafts ideas/ into elegant language"; the word the poet forgot (p. 45) has nothing to do with his mother tongue; the language that the piece on page 164 speaks of is the language of flowers, not national language. Far from illuminating, as the author suggests in the introduction, this is confusing. Neither is it necessary to be overly attracted to the word "language" without the context. Omission of such poems would have meant a slimmer volume, but a much neater one. I note incidentally that the most famous lyric on twenty-first February (Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, p. 34) has no mention of "mother tongue" or "language" and is still a poem on language.

The book suffers grievously from lack of proper editing, a fate that afflicts most publications in the country. Mistakes abound and cannot all be attributed to the printer's devil alone. Reading a poem, the reader would also wish to find out without great difficulty what language the original was written in. On many pages he would be disappointed and would need to go to the notes about the authors at the end of the book for help. A further problem arises with some of the poems written with the tragedy of twenty-first February as the background. For non-Bengali readers, I think it was essential to explain that background, even at the risk of repetition. In its absence, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury's piece, for example, would perhaps seem rather perplexing to foreign minds. Finally, the blurb of the book is wholly perfunctory and quite meaningless.

None of these are meant to detract the value of this unique book. For those who care about the mother tongue and the rapidly diminishing diversity of world languages, it is well worth reading.

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Perceptions on a complex issue

Shahid Alam goes through a strenuous exercise

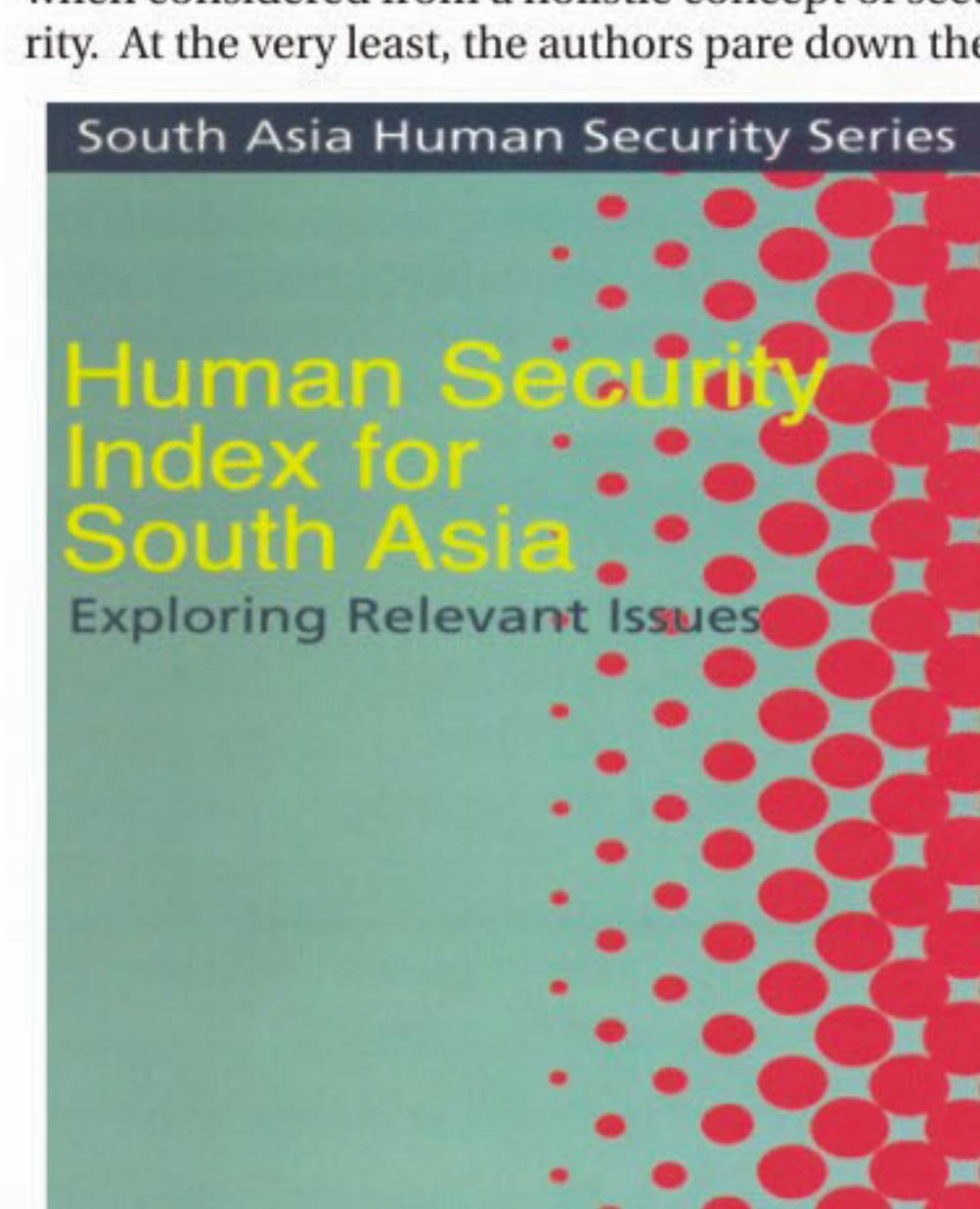
You could choose to expend this effort: propose in a scholarly undertaking that the security of an ant is a function of human security, send it to UNDP and a host of human security theorists, and the possibility cannot be ruled out that your hypothesis could figure prominently in the glittering array of human security theories and what they entail that have been offered down the years. Or, maybe not! I am being cynical, but, upon going through *Human Security Index for South Asia: Exploring Relevant Issues*, I am totally bewildered at just how vast a range of topics human security theories cover. Seemingly, almost anything and everything under the sun! Pardon the hyperbole.

Just consider what Abdur Rob Khan and A.K.M. Abdus Sabur, security and conflict studies specialists both, have to say: "...the ever-expanding human security agenda have come to include issues as diverse as economic security, personal security, violence, intra-state conflict, ethno-religious conflicts, landmine, terrorism, democracy, human rights, gender, crime, consequences of underdevelopment, poverty, hunger, deprivation, inequality, diseases and health hazards, unchecked population growth, human development, education, market, water, energy, migration, environmental degradation and so on. As a matter of fact, a process of 'securitisation' of a wide range of issues is continuing unabated, while simultaneously, a degree of caution persists with regard to how far the process can proceed." How far it can proceed will depend on how far theorists come up with new additions to the list, and, as things stand, there is no guarantee that the process will end anytime soon.

The slim volume does dwell on human security in South Asia (particularly in Chapter 3, "Profiling Human Security in South Asia", and Chapter 5, "A Framework for Human Security Index in South Asia"), but also allocates around the same space to theoretical constructs (Chapter 2, "Human Security: Concept, Scope and Issue Areas", and Chapter 4, "Progress in Constructing a Human Security Index"). Chapters 1 and 6, "Introduction" and "Conclusion", respectively, as the titles indicate, begin and round off the book. A fairly large bibliography would help the interested scholar explore the works cited for gaining further insights into the subject matter. The authors, at the outset, generalize the concept of human security into two broad dimensions of foreign policy: economic development and military security. Elaborating on these aspects, while restricting them within sensibly focused attributes, they go on to say: "The whole gamut of security needs of the individual and people is encapsulated in two fundamental concerns: 'freedom from want' and 'freedom from fear'. The first one emphasizes remedies to all sorts of deprivation --- socio-economic, politico-cultural, health, environmental and so on, while the second one emphasizes on the safety from violence, violent conflicts and their consequences.

UNDP, in its Human Development Report 1994, first attempted to articulate human security. While cautioning that a precise quantification of human security might not be possible, it still strongly advocates that it should be carried out in order to determine likely problem countries as "an essential part of preventive diplomacy and an active peace policy." The report defined human security in fairly broad terms: "It means, first, safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease and repression. And, second, it means protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the pattern of daily life." And that has spawned a slew of definitions to the point where Andrew Mack argues with good reason that "overly broad definitions of human security can block investigation of the very phenomena that need to be understood." Khan and Sabur carry out a partial review of the existing literature on the topic, and, in the chapters on "Profiling Human Security in South Asia", "Progress in Constructing a Human Security Index", and "A Framework for Human Security Index in South Asia", attempt to answer these questions in order to differentiate between human and traditional security: Security for whom? Security of what values? Security from whom? Security from what threats? Security by whom? Security by what means?

Noticeable in the literature review is the perplexing array of attempts to define human security that cause more confusion than provide clarification when considered from a holistic concept of security. At the very least, the authors pare down the



Human Security Index for South Asia
Exploring Relevant Issues
Abdur Rob Khan, A.K.M. Abdus Sabur
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two security dimensions to their essentials: "While national security needs investment in military, human security needs investment in human development and humane governance." Furthermore, while taking notice that, in the post-World War II period the concept of state security being sustained by military power dominated security studies, and in the post-Cold War period the notion of human security through human development and humane governance has gained prominence, the authors are canny enough to acknowledge that, even in the current world system, "the state-centric security concerns with emphasis on military aspects have not disappeared altogether."

To their credit, Khan and Sabur acknowledge that "Perception of the vital core", 'all human lives', 'critical and pervasive threats', 'human freedoms' and 'human fulfillment' varies across individuals and societies, in certain cases, considerably." They also do a competent job in taking the reader through some of the institutions dealing with human security existing in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, India, and Pakistan, but also introduce the caveat that there are no institutions and individuals particularly dedicated to carrying out research, advocacy and policy planning on human security in South Asia. Presumably, the institutions they have identified have a piecemeal or ad hoc approach to the matter, but the apparent contradiction discerned in the caveat and the discussion of the institutions is not explained.

The authors draw attention to certain realities existing with regard to human security in South Asia. There are other sobering realities that they bring up, which indicate the long-term paramountcy of traditional security thinking in the region: "...even in ensuring human security, the role of the state is of crucial importance.... Its power is hardly controlled or diluted by the effective functioning of civil society. Notwithstanding globalization and privatization, it still controls and, by all indications, will continue to control a significant part of economic resources in very poor societies." Finally, showing up the difficulties associated in developing a universally acceptable and credible Human Security Index, "Apart from objective methodological constraints...different countries and cultures have interpreted risks differently and have attributed varying degrees of significance to them. As a consequence, researchers from a wide diversity of background have not been able to agree on methods for measuring the subjective aspects of human security in a way that can be compared." One might find going through *Human Security Index for South Asia: Exploring Relevant Issues* a somewhat strenuous exercise, but s/he might also find enough to further explore the relevant issues associated with human security.

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Of real life drama

Tulip Chowdhury identifies with a story

Not all old people could go to the Palm, a retirement home in Tampa, Florida. Those who had saved up for the retirement nest were the lucky ones for it was a special home for the old. And it became even better after Dr. Andy Zorn joined as its director. *Recessional* is the story of the retirement home with its different occupants. It is the story of the old people's joys and sorrows and their hopes and disappointments. It is the story of how the protagonist Dr. Zorn makes the home lovable for everyone; the quiet and subdued ones, the boisterous and noisy ones. It is also a home for the octogenarians who get together to build a wooden airplane. It is the story of old ladies who were glad that a whole battalion of rowdy grandchildren visiting them left at the end of the day. Dr. Zorn was determined to make the old home a success story as he started his work with a team of efficient staff, especially Krenek, the manager who was the backbone of the place and Nurse Varney, the nurse who worked miracles with the occupants.

The retirement home had the Duggans, husband and wife married for sixty-one years. Among the well-to-do couples at the Palms, they were unquestionably the wealthiest, the best dancers, the freest with their money and the best hosts. Having lived in Wisconsin all their lives they had decided to leave the cold winter and move to Florida, the sun-shine state. They were very happy at Palms. When Zorn wanted information about a kind of palm tree he had seen at the Palms he was taken to Mrs. Oliphant, the widow who occupied one of the most inexpensive rooms. However, Krenek explained that she was the "do gooder" among them because she had a fantastic moral conscience. Her role in life has been to make things better than they are. And she knew all about the eleven kinds of palms that Florida boasted of. Like Mrs. Oliphant each occupant of the Palms had a special trait. The Mallories, an affluent couple had the habit of going off to a new place for a few days when friends informed them of a more promising home. But they always returned saying, "Nothing beats the Palms". Dr. Zorn had a cure for them. He made it a rule that they would have to pay in advance for two full years and that they would not get back their wonderful rooms with view of the ocean if they came back. The Mallories, called the "Yo-Yo Mallories" stopped their annual flights!

The Palms had an incredible intellectual bridge. Senator Raborn was in his eighties; two of them, Ambassador St. Pres and President Armitage were in their late seventies and one, the editor Jimenez had just turned seventy. They were men who (still called according to their titles though all were retired) met every week and spanned out their philosophies. Ambassador St. Pres once said that he found his real identity when he met a Spanish ambassador and was impressed by the man's medals. Ever since he met the man he had been relentless in his drive for recognition. So he summarized that people can flourish when they find inspiration. He had also observed that as we grow older the intensity for such emotion is lost because people seem to become absorbed with the aging process. Muley Dugan another member of the group said,

"The two sorriest days of a man in this joint is when his wife dies and the day he has to give up his driving license."

One day Mrs. Oliphant joined the intellectual group. Talking about her childhood as an orphan and how her aunt brought her up summed up her wisdom about parenting saying,

"The job of parents is not to browbeat the child into kind of adult they would prefer, but to give the rebellious one all the love in the world and the encouragement to become the kind of productive human being the child aspires to become."

Dr. Zorn heard of an exceptional good therapist in Alabama. He decided to bring him to the Palms. He drove out to meet the Bedford Yancey and his wife Ellen. The wife was also known as an excellent nurse. He offered them a highly paid job at the retirement home and came back with the couple. Yancey could perform magic with disabled old people and soon the newspapers were hot with the news of the new therapist at the Palms. He could even convince wheelchair bound people to get up and walk on their own. He drew out people out of depression until they were up in the dining hall offering to play games of bridge long after dinner. After the arrival of Yancey Dr. Zorn got a call from Oliver Cawthorn, father of the young woman he had pulled out of a car crash a month earlier. Betsy, the young woman had lost both legs in the accident. Cawthorn wanted to put Betsy in the Palms for the young woman was sure that Dr. Zorn could help her since he had saved her life. Deciding that Yancey could help Betsy Dr. Zorn took her into the retirement home.

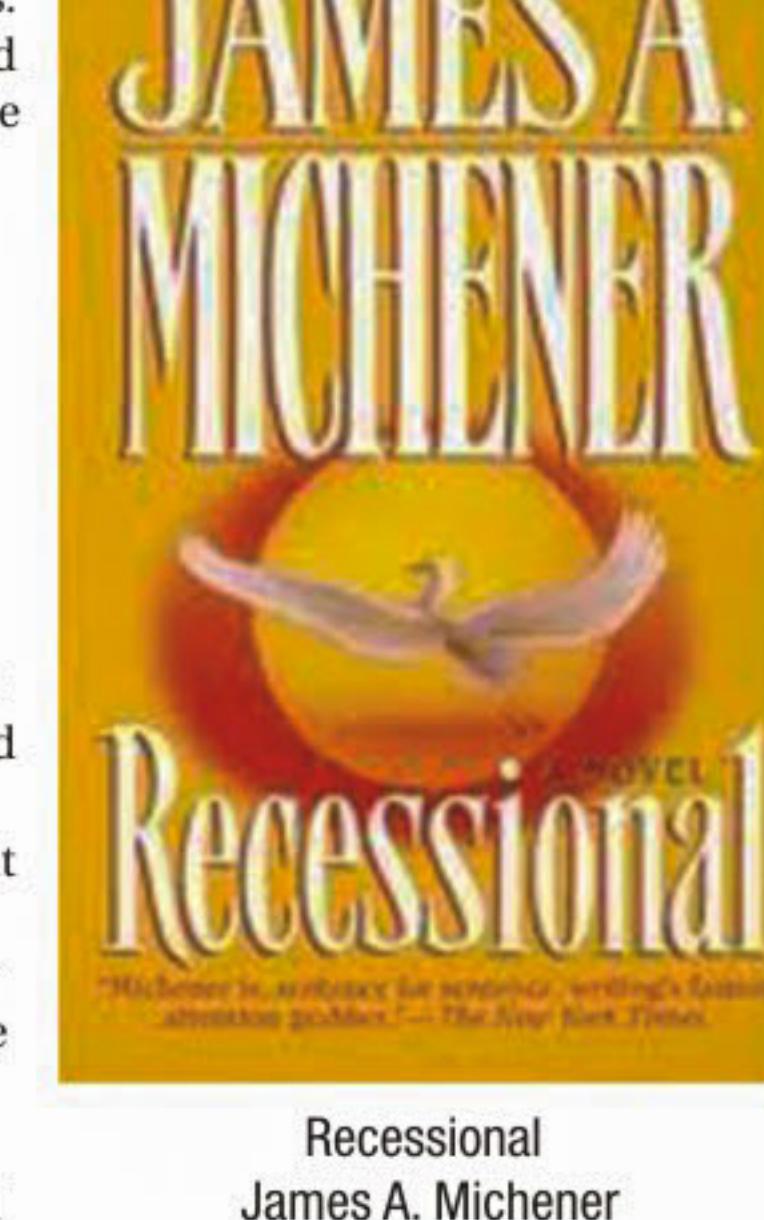
On the first day of their meeting Yancey assured Betsy that she had no need for the wheelchair because she would soon be having her metal leg with the fine knees she still had. On the second day Betsy had joined the other occupants for dinner and was looking forward to walking around the whole Palms. Every morning when Yancey met Betsy he had some life saving sermons ready to boost her up and then he would commence on his therapies. Yancey's wife helped her husband work the miracles on his patients. One day Betsy found herself surrounded by people with one leg, one hand and even a woman who, like her had lost both her legs. They people narrated to Betsy of the amazing activities they were engaged in. One was playing tennis, the other were dancing in competitions, fishing, playing golf. Betsy learned that she had to believe in herself to live an active life without her two legs and thus Betsy was saved from wasting away her life. Very soon Betsy was playing tennis on her new artificial legs!

The Palms was a blessed place for patients of devastating old age disease like Alzheimer. They provided monitored care and loving attention till the end. The Palms had stories of love and devotion. Two old gentlemen Muley and Pidcock had their wives with advanced Alzheimer's disease living at the Palms. Every evening they had their wives dressed and brought them to dinner treating them like queens. The wives did not even recognize their husbands and yet days after the two gentlemen continued to attend their wives with love and devotion.

However, all was not beautiful at the retirement home. Some occupants had notorious relatives who went to the court stating that the old people were spending the family money on retirement homes when they could be looked after at home. Dr. Zorn had to chase after lawyers to have the settlements in the old people's favour, to keep them with dignity and pride in the twilight years of their life. And there were sad days when an old person died. Dr. Zorn did his best to put the life story of the deceased on the newspaper so that the public would be enlightened of a life that has been lived with dignity on his own.

The writer of *Recessional* does not deviate from real life. And we see that everything is not perfect at the Palms. There was a savannah on the huge land belonging to the Palms. And in the savannah lived a vicious rattle snake. One day Richard St. Pres walked into the grassy land and he was bitten by the rattle snake. He died there, under the vast sky, in a field of tall grass and weeds! The man had come to live in the Palms to live the secured, safe life and yet how fate had designed otherwise! The irony of fate did not escape the realities of life and death!

Recessional is like a box of assorted chocolates and holds the story of so many different lives! The reader is astounded at how diverse human lives can be. In the midst of it all came romance too. Betsy and Dr. Zorn found themselves in love with each other. To the joys of the whole retirement home they tied the knot with the heartiest blessings of all. Both, Betsy and Dr. Zorn vowed to make the Palms yet more special for all those who come to them for the last years of their life. They wanted to bring smiles to the people who reached out to others for companionship and peace. The Palms continued to flourish, its name spreading wider and wider! Indeed *Recessional* is a saga that seems to set the reader on a breath taking path full of real life drama!



Recessional
James A. Michener
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