

## Representation of Women's Image in Iranian Contemporary Painting (A Study Based on Michel Foucault's Concept of Power)

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### ABSTRACT

By examining the representation of women in Iranian painting, it is presumable that through Iranian painting history the perspective toward role of women was often passive. This representation is somehow symbolic and idealistic defining stereotypes attributed to women. What is notable is permanency of the idealist and symbolic attitude toward women, while these roles are sometimes far from the personal experiences of women. One major constitution which can form and classify people is community. The society's Dominant cultures impact on the way identities of individuals reveal in a society. Since the art is intertwined with a society created in, it can be stated that the rise of dominant paradigms on women social and cultural conditions can be reviewed in art and specifically in this study in contemporary art. Therefore, it could claim that governor social power has an effective role for shaping identities in a community. Many theorists presented their insights about power and argued about different shapes and organs of power. Michel Foucault was equally a philosopher a psychologist and a historian. The power concept is central to his thinking regarding the relations between society, individuals, groups and institutions. Foucault had an aim to examine how power operates in daily interactions between people and institutions. This research tries to answer the question that how power relations define woman as human being subjects in Iranian contemporary painting, and what's more, how women resist power applying to their lives, besides how they develop their strategy in their painting? The results of this research which are gained by analytical- descriptive method indicates that female painters unlike male artists, when depicting a woman, do not consider well-known features beauties of a woman, showing their body, hair and lips etc. They avoid pointing out formal feminine features. Instead they focus on inner configuration.

**Keywords:** Representation, power, woman, Michel Foucault, Iranian contemporary painting.

### INTRODUCTION

Iran following dominant patriarchal culture saw fewer women artists in comparison to men. Although recent years have been completely different, for years the number of male artist were much more than female artists. Despite the fact that the presence of female painters cannot be denied, a comprehensive survey of female painters of that period will not be achieved because resources are mostly devoted to male artists. This is quite understandable that female artists were actually less in number, in fact they were receiving less professional accomplishments. This can brings out the question that how this classification develops. In other words how separated groups creates in a society and how this impacts on the art of a community. «Existence of an artwork relates to characteristics of a period of time, a social group or a person, the artwork is found in communities with different human relations. To evaluate how

deep art roots in society it is necessary to specify social factors in relation to artistic attitude in a particular society»(Duvignaud, 2007: 76). Power concept is one important issue in a community which can refer to relation between individuals of a society. Many scholars like Machiavelli<sup>1</sup>, Hobbes<sup>2</sup>, Montesquieu<sup>3</sup>, Hegel<sup>4</sup>, also Arendt<sup>5</sup> and Habermas<sup>6</sup> have many ideas regarding power concept, But Foucault considered power in the center of his thoughts. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is the writer of well-known books like *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, *The History of Sexuality*, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language, Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* and etc.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault constructs his signature, meticulous style of enquiry into the actual mechanisms of power. Foucault understands power in terms of “strategies” which are produced through the concatenation of the power relations that exist throughout society, wherever people interact. He asserts power is a system, a network of relations encompassing the whole society, rather than a relation between the oppressed and the oppressor. In philosophy of art Foucault has an essay, «This is not a Pipe», his contemplation on a famous painting by René Magritte (1929) which can be read as a follow-up to his earlier analysis of the much larger painting by Diego Velasquez, *Las Meninas* (1656). Both essays was the introduction to *The Order of Things* (1966) and *This is not a Pipe* is a small book in its own right—are about the same length and are concerned with the question of representation.

Regarding women issue and as mentioned power concept, feminists were thinkers who followed Foucault and inspired from him and referred to his ideas many times. Also his ideas can distributed in arts. This study focuses on the image of women whether by male or female artists and tries to analyze them considering Foucault’s power concept. This research tries to answer the question that how power relations in Iranian contemporary painting impose force on being a women and how does it define woman as subjects, moreover, how women resist power applying to their lives and how they develop their strategy in their paintings?

In this article figurative aspects is highlighted over non-figurative approaches, because they have different features which needs longer discussion. Considering paintings containing an image of woman, 22 items have been selected and one eminent work has been analyzed. Case study of this research are well-known artists who have considered women figures in their painting, though it doesn’t mean their whole work is considered to women figures. Moreover it has been tried to choose artworks which are repeated in the artists’ collection of painting. One particular artwork is selected and analyzed due to specific features in Table 1 and Table 2. Selected artists are: Jalil Ziapour(1920- 1999), Hanibal Alkhas(1930- 2010), Mahmoud Farshchian(1930), Naser Owisi(1934), Manouchehr Motabar(1936), Mehdi Hosseini(1943), Kazem Chalipa(1957), Khosrow Hassanzadeh(1963), Rezvan Sadeghzadeh(1964), Afshin Pirhashemi(1974), Tali’e Kamran(1940- 2016), Niloufar Gahdernejad(1957), Shohreh Mehran(1957), Masoumeh Mozaffari(1958), Shadi Ghadirian(1974), Rozita Sharaf Jahan(1962), Afshan Ketabchi(1966), Neda Razavipour(1968), Samira Eskandarfar(1980), Nikoo Tarkhani(1980), Saghar Daeiri(1985). Female artists do not afraid deform woman’s

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<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli (1469- 1527)

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Hobbes (1588 1679)

<sup>3</sup> Montesquieu (1689-1755)

<sup>4</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770- 1831)

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Arendt (1906- 1975)

<sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas (1929)

body. They break the rules and beliefs about feminine beauty when it comes to their feeling and expressions.

### **The Concept of Power by Michel Foucault**

The main concern for Foucault is about how the subject get formed in the special cultures, also he wants to figure out the way human being gets his identity via power and present himself as an individual in a community. Foucault's main question was about the main feature of power in communities and the impact of this power on people's dignity and individuality. In Foucault's idea, power is not dominant and limited by government or royal class, but it is like strategic network which covers all matters and human beings, IDs and structures will be small part of a whole which obeying this. For Foucault, power and knowledge are not seen as independent entities but are inextricably related—knowledge is always an exercise of power and power always a function of knowledge. «In either conception, power is a force. The notion of power as a negative force- one that violates, censor, obstructs- suggests that the absence of that force would allow a natural order of things to flourish in its true, raw being. Negative power is trickery, an evil, spellbinding force that distorts and manipulates, casts dark shadows on a pure reality (Wandel, 2001: 375)».

He believes such power forces on daily routine lives and will classify people, make them specified based on special individualism, make them stick to their identities. The power impose a law to people to arrange them on separate classes, as they should accept it and in this system people will recognize each other by this classification. This is the power type which turns a person to a subject (Foucault, 1389: 414). Foucault underscored the discursive basis of power, social relations, and institutions by showing how the so-called «objective» disciplines like the sciences relied upon underlying assumptions about the object to be investigated. In Foucault's idea, power relations do not just create subjects, first they produce it then they represent it.

Foucault after defining his notion about power, introduces another term, resistance. In his opinion, there is no power and strength which does not make any resistance against itself. So, power creates complete scopes of responses, reactions and possible actions against each relation. «He believes that some groups of societies are against other groups. He clarifies his point mentioning conflicts between women and men, children and parents and etc. » (Ashrafnazari, 1391: 300). Foucault states that from eighteenth to the early twentieth century it was believed that the investment of the body by power had to be heavy, ponderous, meticulous and constant. Hence those formidable disciplinary regimes in the schools, hospitals, barracks, factories, cities, lodging, families. (Foucault, 1980: 58)

Foucault's main question is not about what power is, or what the main power organization is, but the question is about what is the main feature of power in today society? How does it get revealed and published? And finally, how power impacts our dignity, individuality and mentality.

### **Iranian Painting**

In Iran's constitution period, simultaneously to the arrival of modernism, Iranian community experienced changes in governments and these changes impacted on the art in this country. Gaining social freedom and escalation of World War II to this country prepared a foundation for advent of the modernism. But some conflicts between modernity and tradition brought by the arrival of modernity resulted inconsistency in art. Also Benchmarking from western art and at the same time being proud of Iranian heritage could intensify these contradictions. Gradually some painters were fully copying western styles. The artists who were trying to work same as western artists presented artworks like a joyful and colorful game along with too

much sound and color and news. Avant-garde artists who create artworks did not pay attention to the traditional context of the community. As a consequence considering the distance between artists, intellectuals and ordinary people, they became the only consumer of their artworks.

The dramatic change in Iranian government happened in 1979, when Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was overthrown and replaced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Critical art was created everywhere, in streets as wall painting, posters and paintings by Tehran University Art students, who became pioneers of the new art. This movements were somehow common in 1970s which turned into revolution art. This alteration occurred in all fields of arts as literature, music and painting. Modern attitudes in painting faded by victory of Islamic Revolution in 1979. Following the formation of the new currents of thought and religious revolution, painting founded a broader mission accordingly. At the beginning of Iranian Islamic revolution, artistic movement rejected pre-Islamic art. In order to achieve social commitment in art, abstraction-oriented approaches in painting were rejected. In this period woman presence in artworks is joined with ideological messages accompanied by spiritual attitudes. Furthermore this image tried to demonstrate true example for Muslim woman who considers hijab and Chador as a matter to deny western cultures which were popular in pre Islamic society. In general, a new character created based on revolutionary thoughts to show the idealistic woman for Islamic revolution period (Haddadi, 1390: 93). Different themes like religious, ethnic, political and social displayed which could best convey messages to the community. The Islamic revolution was followed by an eight year war (1980-1988). Consequently after this period, art making became a form of resistance, the subsequent Iraq-Iran war furthered the gap in art education, activity and institution between 1979 and 1990, the absence of an artistic space. The home studio and home showrooms soon become the main spaces of artistic production and display. Iranian society needed human resources, development and growth in various aspects. «rebuilding the remaining ruins of war in various fields, development and implement of huge national plans in order to gain economic expansion, serious engagement with foreign countries particularly European union, recognition of Iraq as the invasion of war were important events in these years» (Bahrani, 2011: 125).

The first cabinet after the war aimed repairing the damages. Since Khatami's presidency in 1997, there has been a shift in the place occupied by artists and their work in Iranian society. The relation between public and private spheres in Iran have felt the pressure of artistic identity, the art market and the political implications of art production (Heidari, 2015: 14). A safe environment for the exchange of ideas created and the president placed culture and art at the core of Iranian politics. The young artistic generation could divorce themselves from the burden of art history and western imposed paradigms. The atmosphere was a great fortune for women artists to show up. Gradually the public culture accepted presence of women. Once again modern attitudes appeared in painting, but these approaches were not consistent, since modern art replaced by some other art variations. Figurative art got popular again, however they were completely different from the art presented during Islamic Revolution Art; not only the concept but also visual arrangements were different. Later different type of styles like photorealism, Expressionism, video art and etc. have been introduced in Iranian Painting. Besides, within the advent of contemporary approaches in art women gain the opportunity to express themselves in artworks with different techniques and Medias. (Haddadi, 1390: 84).

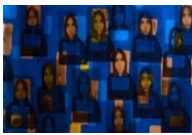
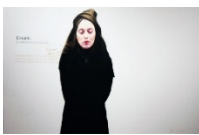
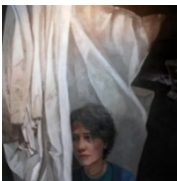









In the 90's, a new generation of young painters began to work. Artists who used new statements and thoughts. «the question of identity has, moreover, led individuals to react to it in various ways: on the one hand, from a nostalgic psychological return to the past or an imagined historical identity- ethnic, native, local or even national or societal collective identity-

to, on the other hand, a self-identity and embodiment of cultural memory, this latter mainly being practiced by new generation» (Keshmirshakan, 2015: 115). Artists were successful to discover new world based on their access to modern art and sync their artworks with the international art. New worlds bring insolence and venture, sometimes they have creativity to show their inner thoughts but sometimes the most they can do is imitating others. In these years the number of female artist raised and now women have a great contribution in artist's population. In their efforts to introduce themselves to the world, they have focused on the issue of women more than anything else. Criticizing social status, their coverage and contradictions between tradition and modernity are methods they benefit.

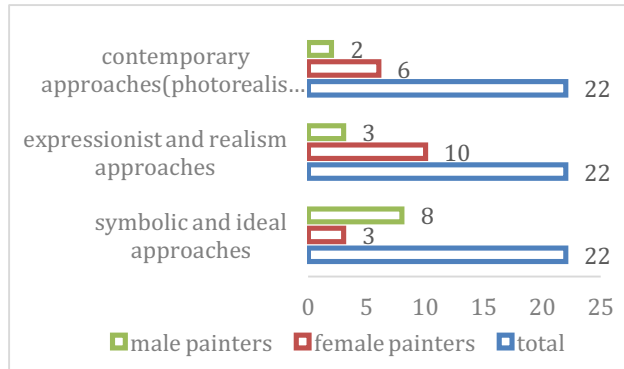
To classify the data authors have designed 2 tables. Table 1 contains artists, their approach and an image of artwork. The approaches and methods includes, Modernity (accompanied by symbolic or eastern Art or mythical aspects), Saqqakhnaeh School, Expressionism, Realism, Photorealism, Surrealism and Video Art is. This classification is not definite and where needed more than one attitude is mentioned. The results of this table is shown in Chart 1.

**Table 1: Artists' approaches and the artwork regarding female presence (Reference: authors)**

Artist	Artwork	The image	Approach in Painting	Artist	Artwork	The image	Approach in Painting
Jalil Ziapour	Kurd Ghouchan Female 1332	 <b>Image</b>	Modern	Hannibal Alkhas	Anti-sequential History (2000)	 <b>Image</b>	Symbolism-Modern
Tali'e Kamran	Untitled (1971)	 <b>Image</b>	Modern (Pop art)	Naser Oweisi	Queen in Rest (2009)	 <b>Image</b>	Saqqakhaneh
Kazem Chalipa	Mother of Martyr (1984)	 <b>Image</b>	Realism	Mehdi Hosseini	Untitled (2003)	 <b>Image</b>	Symbolism/Modern
Mahmoud Farshchian	Singing Harmony (2009)	 <b>Image</b>	Iranian painting-Miniature	Bahram Dabiri	Untitled (2008)	 <b>Image</b>	Symbolism-Modern
Rezvan Sadeghzadeh	Untitled (2007)	 <b>Image</b>	Symbolism-Far East	Manouchehr Motabar	Srom Series Women in Chador (1998)	 <b>Image</b>	Realism

Khosrow Hassanzadeh	Prostitutes (2002)	 <b>Image</b>	Realism-Photorealism	Afshin Pirhashemi	From BMW Series (2009)	 <b>Image</b>	Photorealism-Relaism
Masoumeh Mozafari	In The Presence Of Others Series (2014)	 <b>Image</b>	Realism Expressionism	Nolufar Ghadernejad	Untitled (2003)	 <b>Image</b>	Symbolism-Eexpressionism
Rozita Sharaf Jahan	Sixth Desire (2011)	 <b>Image</b>	Photorealism-Realism-Symbolism	Shadi Ghadirian	from Qajar series (2000)	 <b>Image</b>	black and white photography
Saghar Daeiri	When It Hurts (2011)	 <b>Image</b>	Expressionism	Shohreh Mehran	From School	 <b>Image</b>	Photorealism-Realism
Nikoo Tarkhani	Metamorphosis (2008)	 <b>Image</b>	Realism-Surrealism	Afshan Ketabchi	Self-portrait 2008)	 <b>Image</b>	Photorealism
Samira Eskandarfar	From Clowns Series (2009)	 <b>Image</b>	Surrealism-Expressionism-Symbolism	Neda Razavi pour	Notes of a House Wife (2005)	 <b>Image</b>	Video Art

Female painters when depicting women, do not consider beauty criteria such as shape of the body, hair and lips. They avoid depicting formal feminine features. Instead they focus on inner expression. There are some strategies which female painters employ in order to deny dominant norms. Some of them try to fade away some parts of women's body, in contrast they bold some other parts. Displaying female figures from the backside and covering females with curtain and hijab are other procedures (Images 18, 19, 20). In addition there are some other attributes like utilizing Persian sentences like: «I don't belong anybody», or «birth giving is difficult» in order to contact the audiences and invite them to see fragments of artists' life (Image 21).



**Chart 1: Artists approaches regarding female presence (Reference: Authors)**

In order to have more accurate reviewing of artworks there are other indicators which have been taken into the consideration: past dominant culture recreation, ideology, showing appearance or ignoring the appearance, pointing out formal feminine features (body, hair, lips), containing decorative aspect, Pointing out the clothing are criteria discussed in the Table 2.



**Table 2: Features analyzed in artworks (Reference: Authors)**

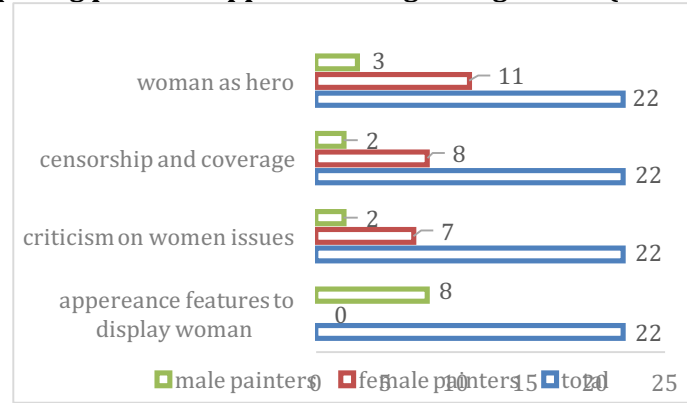
the artist	Gender	Recreation the dominant culture of the ideological	the appearance	Refers to the formal features (body, hair, lips)	Decorative	Reference to coverage	Critique of women's issues
Afshan Ketabchi	female	×	×	×	×	✓	Social critique
Afshin Pirhashemi	male	×	×	✓	✓	×	Mentioning the contradictions between society and women. Paying attention to social and political identity.
Jalil Ziapour	male	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	No issue
khosrow Hassanzadeh	male					✓	Show and criticize the relation between the gender and the power
Rozita Sharaf Jahan	female	×	×	×	×	×	Criticizing the war, weapon, and time passing by feminist approaches of sewing.
Rezvan Sadeghzadeh	male	✓	×	×	×	×	No issue
Saghar Daeiri	female	×	×	×	×	✓	Show urban contradictions, mentioning suppress and rebels.
Samira Eskandarfar	female	×	×	×	×	✓	Asking questions about the identity formed. Referring to social narrations of women.
Shohreh Mehran	female	×	×	×	×	✓	Reference to latency and veil, ambiguity which has political and social interpretations. Taking or ruling on social authority is a theme in her works.
Shadi Ghadirian	female	×	×	×	×	✓	In cultural context, arguing the contradiction between modernity and tradition.
Tali'e Kamran	female	×	×	×	×	✓	No issue
Kazem Chalipa	male	✓	✓	×	×	×	The presence of women in the form of a complete, meaning-oriented message with social commitment.
Mahmoud Farshchian	male	✓	×	✓	✓	×	No issue
Masoumeh Mozafari	female	×	×	×	×	×	No issue
Manouchehr Motabar	male	×	×	×	×	×	No issue
Mehdi Hosseini	male			×	×	×	No issue
Naser Oweisi	male	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	No issue
Neda Razavipour	female	×	×	×	×	✓	Using symbolic language and To implicate routine life and repetition and relying on the invisible life of the woman
Nikoo Tarkhani	female	×	×	×	×	✓	Questioning the body and coverage.
Niloufar Ghadernejad	female	×	×	×	×	×	Women as heroes
Hannibal Alkhas	male	✓	×	×	×	×	No issue

As it could be reviewed in the Chart 2, men's view toward criticism on women's social issues is generally neutral with some exceptional ones. An example for this can be Pirhashemi Critics consider his works refer to social matters but even in this work there is an image which demonstrates proportionality compliance to beauty. But in women's painting social critic aspect is highlighted, meanwhile, there are some female painters who does not have specific critical approach. On contrary, they have mentioned some of verbal features and more indirectly which seems to be social feedbacks (Images 3, 13, 14).

The self is not a fixed identity that implicates us in the domination over us of a regime of power «Whereas Foucault had seen the subject as a product of episteme, he now saw it as the product of power/ knowledge- 'the individual is an effect of power'. What is more, regimes of power are not a result of the actions of individuals but of power itself. Power exists throughout society, appearing in innumerable micro-situations is a given regime of power. The subject too, therefore, is produced by the external and internal constraints of regimes of power» ( Bevir, 1999: 349). External controls preclude certain identities, notably by defining a number of bodily desires as unacceptable. Internal controls provide technologies of the self by which individuals can construct themselves in accord with the ruling configuration of power/ knowledge.

Female artists do not afraid deform woman's body. They break the rules and beliefs about feminine beauty when it comes to their feeling and expressions. As an example, Nikoo Tarkhani figures mostly prepared in cold colors (blue theme) and without any feminine beauty elements even hair and when needed she fades away some women's body parts. Mostly, women have curtain and hijab in men's works, in return, women mostly ignore display themselves in hijab and when using it they refer to a special group with specified features. For instance, in Daeri works, there is a critic for girls fashion attitude and on the other hand it considers some other factors which made pre-adult girls prompting such reaction. In Image 17 the artwork is full of untidy and clumsy figures, faces are exaggerated and represent forms to express mental states of oppression, repression and rebellion. Ghadirian incorporated the imagery into her own photography, by dressing female friends with clothes from the late 1800s, and posing them in front of painted backdrops to look like the women in the antique photos. But her women appeared with a touch of the contemporary: a newspaper, a tape recorder, a Pepsi can, or a vacuum cleaner. She believed her pictures became a mirror reflecting how she felt to be stuck between tradition and modernity (Khakbaz, 2015: 41).

Shohreh Mehran cuts the frame and figures and put them behind veil which makes figure to become unknown and also mysterious. Watching Mehran's artworks arise the question that whether figures are hiding themselves from something or they are made to be hidden. (Image 18). Afshan Ketabchi's main theme relies on social critics and clothing types (Image 20). She has been inspired by Andy Warhol artworks. By drawing herself in opposite conditions, she provides a social class due to expectations of her surroundings. «Such representation is an irony form of this idea that women always were object cognition rather than being subject. Today, if there is an opportunity for women to become the subject, there is no truth which artist can discover. «As Baudrillard states, reflections and signs in such a situation are purely self-simulation and it has no relation to reality. Simulation is both real and not real, and difficulty is recognition of these two-sides» (Moshghzad, 1384: 108).

**Chart 2: Comparing painters approaches regarding table 1(Reference: Authors)**

### CONCLUSION

Image of woman in Iranian painting has experienced various approaches. In the beginning of the 1980 decade there was a conventional perspective toward women and this was intensified by social changes happening in Iran. They were less in number and had little opportune to take part in art atmosphere. However it cannot be denied there were artists who could go further these limitations they were few. Later in 1990s, due to termination of Iraq-Iran war the mainstream viewpoint toward women has changed. During the last years of this decade, self-expression and individualism became highlighted in art works. Female painters deny cliché characteristics to display females against dominant cultures. This attitude can be analyzed and interpreted by Foucault's power concept. He believes Power is everywhere, in every relationship and people are constantly subjecting it and being objects of it. The power impose a law to people to arrange them on separate classes, as women and men are among these classification. Some painters try to depict this limitations and express their feeling toward power relations. In other words, they try to present their own identity in artworks, some of them attempt to deny known beauty features in women. They try to have an active role in defining their identities. They do not consider pre-defined traits. However female artist find classified identity in the society, she questions the formed identities and this is the opposition to dominant perspective in society. It could be claimed in reviewing painting styles for males and females artists. Women's approaches is closer to expressionism and they tend using new methods more when it comes to female subject. It seems they are dealing with conventional interpretation of female's image by using new forms to display new aspect of a woman experience. Putting female figures in vague and unknown situations, using gray and pale colors, covering and fragmentation of body, introducing social criticism on the impact of women's issues in society, referring to the challenge of coverage is method which female painters use in their artworks. Therefore, it is hypothesized that female painters in recent years oppose the use of strategies defined against women's identity; by examining the data it became clear that this view seems to be correct considering the criteria considered.

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