

Environmental Imaginaries: The Role of Climate Change and Ecological Conversations in the Works of Nnedi Okorafor

Dr. It. S. Ravibalan^{1*}

^{1*}Professor in English, St.Peter's Institute of Higher Education and Research,
ravibalan.english@spiher.ac.in
Orcid id: 0009-0004-3154-856X

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ABSTRACT

This article is on the 'environmental imaginary' in the science fiction of Nnedi Okorafor: *Who Fears Death*, the *Binti* trilogy, and *The Book of Phoenix*. These novels subvert traditional ways of thinking about climate change and ecological loss by offering new stories grounded in Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism. This paper delves into the criticism of Okorafor's modern environmental practices, which include environmental degradation, resource consumption, and human interaction with the environment. The analysis utilises African indigenous knowledge and its relationship with the land and the natural environment to provide two examples of different paradigms of sustainability and ecological recovery. Okorafor's characters are involved in environmental protection, and the book shows an ecofeminist viewpoint that deals with community, tradition, and technology in solving worldwide environmental issues. In addition to this, the study questions how literature constructs environmental imaginaries that can enhance the public's awareness of climate change and nurture environmental justice. This work broadens the current discussions on postcolonial speculative fiction and ecological futures while examining how Okorafor's works influence the discourse on capitalist resource exploitation.

Keywords: Nnedi Okorafor, Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, environmental imaginaries, climate change, ecological conversations, speculative fiction.

I. Introduction

In the last few years, the idea of environmental imaginaries has entered the sphere of literary criticism, especially concerning climate change and environmental pollution. Environmental imaginaries meant how people, cultures, and societies perceived and conceptualized their interactions with the environment. These imaginaries were not only indicators of the dominant environmentalism but also bearers of the strategies through which societies engaged and addressed environmental urgencies. Environmental imaginaries in literature provided a lens through which authors and readers could view the world and the future it was shaping as it grappled with climate change (Adeniyi, 2023). In particular, African speculative fiction has been instrumental in enriching this discussion by presenting the ideas rooted in African epistemology and cosmology. Nnedi Okorafor's term, African futurism, emerged as the most pertinent lens to interpret these stories, emphasizing African-centric narratives with speculative elements rooted in cultural ties to the land.

It was only as the world started to experience the impact of climate change that there was a need to analyse climate change and ecological discourses in literature (DeLoughrey, 2011). Science fiction and other forms of fiction have always been effective means of social critique, and climate fiction became a

genre that addressed the most pressing issues of climate change, depletion of resources, and climate injustice (Trexler, 2015). These accounts depict a future world where an environmental crisis results in devastating consequences. Through these two elements, which are fictional worlds, the authors examined not only the effects of human activity on the physical environment but also the political and social systems that enabled this destruction. In this regard, literature has played a role in mimicking existing environmental issues and the consequences of inaction.

Importantly, Okorafor's treatment of the natural world addresses and evokes climate change, coloniality, the postcolonial retrieval of indigeneity, and practical encounters with technology as a means of manipulating and exploring nature. In her works, she deals with how high technologies, especially biotechnologies, relate to nature—a portrayal of a sort of rebellion against the commodification of life by technology. *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) effectively illustrates this theme by using biotechnology to manipulate the environment, yet the characters resist this exploitation, embodying the struggle between nature and technology.

Okorafor also applies environmental themes of resistance in writing about post-societal collapse, where civilizations are to face the consequences of what they have done to their environment. *Who Fears Death* (2010) presents the story of the world turning into a desert due to climate change, the effects of climate change, and the relation between climate change and the social degradation it causes. In this regard, ecological resistance is the struggle against annihilation on the physical and social fronts of environmental destruction and dominance.

Another aspect to consider is the significance of Indigenous knowledge, which Okorafor focuses on as a solution to most environmental problems. In the *Binti* Trilogy (2015), Okorafor navigates between cultural preservation and the cosmos to connect sustainability to the tribal realm. The protagonist's struggles underscore the earliest wisdom for sustainable solutions to the ecological crisis, articulating the Indigenous perspective on the current crisis. In total, Okorafor's books blend fantasy with socio-political messages related to contemporary problems of climate change, environmentalism, and the impact of technology on the Earth and its inhabitants.

Nnedi Okorafor's speculative fiction provided an abundance of texts for studying environmental imagination about African traditional knowledge. Her novels *Who Fears Death* (2010), *Binti* (2015), and *The Book of Phoenix* (2015) brought into focus relationships with nature and the repercussions of industrialism and its products. In her previous works, Okorafor consistently blended speculative and cultural elements, primarily focusing on African diaspora traditions that intertwine the human, the natural, and the divine (Ellis, Martinek, & Donaldson, 2018). In African cosmological systems, land and other forms of nature were not just assumptions but had spiritual values; hence, human interactions were in sync with nature (Nathaniel & Akung, 2022). This was a world point of view that was diametrically opposite to capitalist modes of exploitation and was key to demystifying how Okorafor built her environmental imaginaries.

The *Binti* trilogy also explores the challenges and freedoms of technology, as well as the use of indigenous intelligence in space travel. *Telegraph Binti*, the main character, is a Himba girl residing in Namibia. Her tribe has a strong connection to the earth, and they cover their bodies with a red clay known as *otjize*. Despite leaving her home and travelling into space, Binti maintained her connection to her Indigenous culture through the *otjize* (Okorafor, 2015). The trilogy showed the conflict between progressive society's technology—in Binti's case, technology that helped her get to university—and traditional environmental ethics. Although outright state censorship was not the issue, Okorafor's African culture, which envisioned a world where advanced technology could coexist with the protection of the environment, overcame an external cultural ethos that believed technological advancements necessitated the destruction of nature.

The Book of Phoenix is presented as an alternative perspective on environmental degradation and the misuse of the environment and human life by corporations and scientists. The science fiction novel under discussion chronicles the life of Phoenix, a genetically engineered woman who was a part of the

illicit experiments conducted by a behemoth multinational conglomerate. As Phoenix understood her creation, she witnessed firsthand the damage that corporate indifference, greed, and ignorance can inflict on the planet, its ecosystem, its resources, and all life. (Okorafor, 2015). Like in other works, Okorafor employs the Afrifordist cosmological perspective, emphasizing the interconnectedness of life, energy, and elements, which endows Phoenix with earthly powers. The novel suggests that approaching the concept of environmental justice requires upholding the value of natural resources and the human-like commodities of the country's land and life.

Self-futuristically, the environmental imaginations created through Nnedi Okorafor's speculative fiction had contested canonical paradigms of exploitation and environmental enclave. Her works represented an African postcolonial imaginary, locating her visions of the future within the Afrocentric epistemologies and ontologies that recognized the environment as an integral part of the African people. As the threats of climate change became more apparent, such literature as that of Okorafor became necessary to address the global environment (Forde, 1999).

II. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach to analyse the environmental narratives in selected works by Nnedi Okorafor. We can combine a close textual analysis of eco-critical theory and African futurism to examine how the novels depict climate change and environmental degradation. This article examines Okorafor's characters in terms of their environmental activism, indigenous knowledge, and resistance to technological exploitation. The research employs a postcolonial lens to analyse crucial themes like environmental justice, depicting marginalized communities as environmental victims and protectors. The analysis draws upon secondary sources and theoretical frameworks such as ecofeminism and Afrofuturism to critically examine contemporary environmental practices.

Climate Change in Literature

Climate change has been a part of literature for the last few decades and has become a part of speculative fiction. Climate fiction, also known as cli-fi, is a genre that depicts the severe effects of global climate change on people and the planet, popularizing postmodern apocalyptic and dystopian narratives (Trexler, 2015). These were not merely stories based on real-life environmental issues; instead, they called for change. Specifically, as climate change progressed, cli-fi often depicted motifs such as an increase in sea level, the emergence of new resource wars, and migration, all of which have become realities. The authors present the analysis of human anthropogenic impact on the environment through fictional worlds, thereby posing questions about the ethical and political platforms that contribute to ecological degradation. Dark and bleak futures were the most common literary depictions of climate change. Often these stories were portrayed with a bleak view of a world where environmental collapse ravages human societies and the practice of unsustainably unsustainable behaviours. Nature was portrayed as a force that continually overtook spaces and territory that had been polluted or done away with in these dystopias. The landscape of the desert state served as the representation of the state of the African continent following an apocalyptic disaster in Nnedi Okorafor's novel *WHO Fears DEATH* (Okorafor, 2010). The author used the post-apocalyptic Sudan as the backdrop for tracing the effects of climate change. The decaying worlds depicted in these dystopian books reminded readers of the vulnerability of human life on Earth due to climatic change, thereby calling for a shift toward environmentally sustainable lifestyles.

Besides, the social and political dimensions of the environmental disaster have received significant attention in climate fiction. Most authors explained the uneven distribution of environmental damage, emphasizing the impact of climate change on people of colour, particularly in the Global South. The premise of this critique was that climate change disproportionately affects the world's most vulnerable populations, who bear the least responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions (Nixon, 2011). Okorafor's work demonstrated how African communities both resisted and cherished environmental negativity. The *Book of Phoenix* illustrates how corporate and scientific misconduct can lead to environmental destruction and dehumanization, serving the greedy sector's maximum interests (Okorafor, 2015). CLIF has been painting a picture of environmental decline to demand a fairer way of addressing climate change from a climate justice perspective.

It provides an opportunity to explore these dystopian futures and critiques of human impact on the

environment, and in doing so, it helps to think about the relationship between technology and ecological collapse. Many narratives about climate change have raised concerns about the use of technology, both as a cause of environmental problems and as a potential solution. Where technological progress made industrialization and resource exploitation more efficient, it also provided opportunities to begin to invent solutions for global warming. In the Binti trilogy by Okorafor, the protagonist, Binti, for example, held on to indigenous cultural practices even as she embraced advanced technology (Okorafor, 2015). The transcendent concerns of the trilogy repeatedly emphasized that if people did not respect elemental forces and traditional Indigenous knowledge about the environment, technological progress could not stop the devastating forces from destroying the global environment. One recurring theme in climate fiction was the duality of technology, presenting both a threat and a potential solution.

An examination of dystopian futures and critique of the human impacts, as well as a preoccupation with themes of hope and resilience, emerged. While most sci-fi works were about the disastrous effects of climate change, others were about how people could live through such conditions (Conradie, 1997). These business stories are culturally relevant to addressing the climate crisis through engagement, courage, and sustainability. Self-Reliance in the works of Okorafor depicted several characters who, despite suffering from inadequate environmental factors, could conquer the situation using traditional endowment, group cohesion, and innovation (Pahl, 2018). This analysis, with its positive undertone, served as an antidote to the massive hopelessness that people working on climate change issues or those who have embraced this noble course were likely to experience at some point due to the enormity of their task.

The depiction of climate change in literature, especially with the help of cli-fi, has developed to embody the increasing and diverse character of the crisis. Climate fiction explored dystopian futures, critiqued human influence on the environment, and explored themes of resilience to create vital space to imagine environmental catastrophes and possible sustainable futures. It was in this context that writers such as Nnedi Okorafor offered their input to this discussion by drawing on African animist epistemology and pointing out how the oppressed groups might be at the heart of addressing the climate emergency.

Ecological Conversations in Literature

Ecological conversations about the intricate connections and dependencies between humans and the natural world have long been present in literature. Through literature, authors encouraged readers to revisit their human interaction with the environment and to reconsider their roles in ecological systems. Rather than simply taking nature as their backdrop, these narratives put the environment on centre stage, making nature an active player in the story – one that is shaped by the actions of humans (Buell, 2009). Eco-conversation appeared in Nnedi Okorafor's speculative fiction, and few have challenged Westernized minds more about our perceptions of nature than Nnedi Okorafor's works, which obsessively engage African Indigenous perspectives of nature's interconnectedness and balance (Buell, 2005). Portrayal of human-nature relationships was a key theme in ecological conversations in literature. Many literary works present not a passive setting but an active force that can resist, nurture, or even punish human action. The idea that human survival depended on maintaining equilibrium in its interactions with nature underscored this reciprocal relationship. Operators 'ks, such as in the Book of Phoenix and Who Fear Death, demonstrate the symbiosis between decision-making humans and fertile land, which suffers greatly from human decisions but still retains its agency. For example, the destruction and exploitation of natural resources by humans combine to create post-apocalyptic desertification in Who Fears Death – with a particular emphasis on water (Okorafor, 2010). Based on this portrayal, the ecological systems were interrelated to persuade the readers to see their connections to involvement in ongoing environmental degradation.

The study of Indigenous perspectives on the environment occupied a central place within Okorafor's ecological conversations. They did not emphasize the exploitation of nature like Western ideologies have often done but rather the connectedness of all living things and the importance of stewardship of the natural world (Heise, 2010). Okorafor combined motifs of respect for the environment and nonhuman entities from African indigenous philosophies in her stories. For instance, in Binti's trilogy, the protagonist's intrepid connection with the land and her capacity to engage with extraterrestrial

people reflected an Indigenous sense of nonhuman agency (Okorafor, 2015). Having these Indigenous perspectives in the foreground, Okorafor's writing challenged dominant ecological narratives that rendered conservation an unsustainable, exploited, and preserved phenomenon. It may promote traditional ecological knowledge as a solution to the environmental crisis.

The other major theme of such conversations in literature concerned the critique of capitalist exploitation of natural resources. An examination of many works of speculative fiction, especially those about environmental degradation, found that these often attacked the capitalist view of the environment as an inexhaustible source of profit. The growing body of ecocritical literature that emerged to critique how corporate greed and industrialization combined to bring about environmental collapse is also in evidence. The Form and Function of Techno Speciation in Okorafor, *The Book of Phoenix*, and Dreyer and Kofoed's *Underwater*: Exploitation serve as evidence. The plot of this narrative parallels real-world concerns about the impact of unrestrained capitalism on the environment, as well as public awareness of the social and environmental harm associated with heavily capitalist economies (Kearnes & Kay, 2015).

Environmental conversations in literature also critiqued capitalist exploitation and often pointed to how this exploitation fell most harshly on marginalized communities. African countries bore the brunt of climate change and resource exploitation. Okorafor used her depiction of African landscapes and communities to show the destructive hand of colonial legacies and how contemporary exploitation of their lands has ravaged the environment (Cajete, 1999). For example, in *Who Fears Death*, Okorafor used war and corporate greed to destroy the ecological backdrop of African characters who did more than survive; they fought to protect their lands (Okorafor, 2010). This focus on marginalized communities paralleled broader ecological conversations in the literature, advocating for environmental justice and the inclusion of Indigenous voices in discussions about ecological preservation.

Another important theme in speculative fiction is the role of nonhuman entities in ecological conversations. Many of Okorafor's works depict trees, animals, and alien beings as perfect characters with agency and voices within the stories. This technique has charted a broader course in the literature that uncenters human exceptionalism and situates the contribution of non-human actors to ecological systems (Haraway, 2008). Okorafor's narratives, which give 'voice' to nonhuman entities, challenge readers to understand that humans actively interact with the environment, rather than passively interacting with it as a backdrop to humankind.

Furthermore, ecological conversations in literature provided a critical perspective on human-nature relationships, indigenous ecological perspectives, and the environmental impact of capitalist exploitation. Okorafor's speculative fiction articulated these conversations by utilizing her omninominalism to transcend African Indigenous knowledge, critique environmental injustice, and highlight nonhuman entities as active participants in ecological systems (McHugh, 2013). Her work added to a larger literature in which the authors envisioned reimagining human relationships with the environment and enabling more sustainable behaviour in the context of the global environmental crisis.

Literary Theory Opted for Discussion

This study applies ecofeminism as a literary theory to examine the intersections of gender, nature, and power structures. Okorafor's female protagonists (Binti in the Binti trilogy and Onyesonwu in *Who Fears Death*) are similar to the environmental protection and ecological recovery that ecofeminism seeks to promote. These characters resist patriarchal and capitalist exploiters of natural resources and embody resistance through their Indigenous knowledge and connection to the land. This study uses ecofeminism to show how Okorafor rewrites traditional African ecological knowledge to critique modern environmental destruction, using Afrofuturism.

Analysis of Selected Works

The discussions on Nnedi Okorafor's works elucidated the complicated effects of climate change, environmental conversations, and the role indigenous knowledge can take in addressing

environmental problems. Novels like Okorafor's *Who Fears Death*, *The Book of Phoenix*, and the *Binti* trilogy have built stories about how environmental degradation led technology innovation to fail alongside the loss of cultural wisdom, which we must have both to solve ecological crises. Comprising themes, characters, and plot lines (among other things) that pertain to climate change and ecological conversations, these selected works contrast her work to that of other authors in the speculative fiction genre.

When it comes to Okorafor's writing, one can see certain tension between technological, ecological, and cultural motifs. Technological control and the use of natural capital become major themes, resulting in a deterioration of the environment and a disruption of ecosystems. We have often heard the familiar story that technology, when misused or left unchecked, exacerbates ecological issues rather than providing solutions. Conversely, ecological balance and cultural wisdom serve as powerful foundations for harmonious solutions, drawing from the valuable knowledge and traditional practices of indigenous people. The construction of Okorafor's narratives interlinks all three of these domains, enabling the characters to transcend the boundaries of technology, environment, and culture to discover new paths to survival. Thus, we can understand the necessity of returning to a balanced state, emphasizing the breakthrough application of science, technology, culture, and environmental respect as the driving forces for people.

First and foremost, Okorafor has primarily focused on climate change as both a cause and a result of war. According to Okorafor in *Who Fears Death*, the post-apocalyptic Sudanese context is characterized by desertion, which fuels already present ethnic animosity (2010). The protagonist, Onyesonwu, had to travel to a world where climatic collapse resembled social estate insufficiency, describing how ecological disaster contributed to the desirability of people from marginalized groups (Nixon, 2011; Okorafor, 2019; Simpson, 2017). The portrait bore similarities to other tropes in the climate change discourse, frequently associating pollution with prejudice and the expulsion of vulnerable populations (Nixon, 2011). By transforming the desert into more than just a setting for suffering, Okorafor establishes it as a constant force, emphasizing the interconnection between the environment and human biology.

In *The Book of Phoenix*, Okorafor continued her theme of manipulation via bioengineering and corporate exploitation. Phoenix was a genetically engineered human, part of the creation of a powerful corporation ready to take advantage of her to make money. As Phoenix's story unfolded, it became evident how unchecked scientific experimentation had underfunded ecological branches (Okorafor, 2015). The narrative critiqued the hubris of humanity's endeavour to control nature and echoed through speculative fiction a warning for humanity on the dangers of technological unwieldiness (Canavan & Robinson, 2014). Okorafor's cautionary tale with Phoenix was about the point where environmental exploitation meets corporate greed and possible catastrophic consequences.

Two main figures in the fight for environmental preservation are the characters Onyesonwu in the novel *Who Fears Death* and Phoenix in *The Book of Phoenix* by Nnedi Okorafor. Onyesonwu actively opposes desertification, which is a result of both climate change and human exploitation. *The Book of Phoenix* stars Phoenix, a genetically engineered being for whom the war against corporate greed and environmental destruction are no foreign concepts. Like Binti in the *Binti* trilogy, she serves as a protector of indigenous environmental practices. Her tribe's traditional clay creates a symbiotic relationship with nature as she moves into advanced technological realms. These are characteristics of cultural resilience and ecological justice.

A second important aspect of Okorafor's work was the indigenous knowledge to address the environmental crisis. In the *Binti* trilogy, we see reading and culture as physical spaces, with cultural knowledge being vital for external and internal struggles faced by our titular character, Binti. Online, she expressed that those traditional ecological practices, a mixture of clay and oils, serve as powerful ways to counter the threats of the modern environment (Okorafor, 2015). Binti's reliance on indigenous wisdom has often been a topic of critique of the dismissive attitudes toward indigenous knowledge in contemporary environmental discourse (Smith, 1999). Binti brought front and centre in Okorafor's

depiction of how Indigenous ecological practices could offer alternative ways of responding to global environmental problems and the importance of preserving and respecting cultural knowledge.

Okorafor's works, *Who Fears Death*, present an environmental course that depicts a sequence of interconnected events, exemplified by the sequence of events that ensue after the ecological catastrophe of desertification in a post-apocalyptic world. This extreme degradation of the environment provides a basic framework for subsequent technological and biological advancements. Starting with the period 2030, biotechnology and its ramifications turn it into an object of interest. In *The Book of Phoenix*, scientific breakthroughs lead to a worsening of environmental pollution. *The Book of Phoenix* enters the 2040s, a time when people and populations are elaborating on the concepts and ideology of ecology and culture as a means of resisting exploitation by commerce.

The timeline then changes to the futuristic setting of the *Binti* trilogy, where preserving Indigenous knowledge becomes the highlight. People followed and adapted Indigenous ecological practices to the new problems when travelling to space in the mid-century. Lastly, in the 1960s, cultural sustainability and preservation of respective cultures and their lore became defining factors for achieving a sustainable ecological balance based on local knowledge. These shifting circumstances necessitate a shared dynamic understanding of environmental collapse, technological patriarchal violence, and survivalist cultural insistence, all characterising Okorafor's fictional realities.

Another distinctive feature of Okorafor's writing is the portrayal of non-human participants as active participants in ecological conversations. In *The Book of Phoenix*, Phoenix herself was a hybrid being – a human and nature hybrid. As a tree, her connection to the environment symbolized the human and natural world merging to do away with the predominant way of seeing people in Western literature – anthropocentric views (Haraway, 2008). This emphasis on nonhuman agency aligns with broader ecological theories. Her works aim to decent humanity and acknowledge the role of non-human actors in shaping ecological systems. Okorafor gives voice to non-human entities, prompting readers to contemplate their relationship with the environment and its non-human inhabitants.

Okorafor's works provided a rich analysis of climate change and ecological conversations from an African and indigenous knowledge perspective. Cultural tradition and ecological wisdom significantly determined the characters' relationship to the environment rather than outside forces. Okorafor uses the blending of her traditional knowledge with speculative technology to offer a hopeful vision of how humanity could overcome the environmental crises of the future (Seow, 2022; Thomas, 2015; Winchester III, 2018; Yaszek, 2006). Her narratives resisted dominant Western narratives of ecological degradation and were careful to highlight the crucial contributions of women – notably Indigenous and marginalized communities – to the crafting of ecologies.

Future Studies: Environmental Imaginaries

Researchers can conduct additional studies to explore the similarities between African futurism and other developing regions. Indigenous futurism works from regional literature can shed light on the need for environmental protection. The potential application of traditional wisdom and advanced technology will reveal the severity of ecological issues due to climate change (Okorafor, 2015). Further studies could explore Okorafor's contributions to contemporary environmentalism, particularly climate justice and sustainable resource management activism in the Global South (Nathaniel & Akung, 2022). A comparative study of Okorafor's environmental ideas with those of other science fiction books will assist the researcher in identifying ecological subversion and liveability (Trexler, 2015). Integrating imaginary ecological imaginaries into a practical solution for environmental equity could also provide a fresh perspective on global environmental issues. (Buell, 2009).

Limitations of the Study

This study relies solely on the work of a single author and a limited selection of works from a broader body of African literature. It underrepresents the full range of environmental narratives within this genre. Okorafor does not concentrate on other theoretical fields like feminist theory and posthumanism, which could offer different perspectives on her portrayal of environmental issues. The profound

translation barrier may result in a loss of indigenous knowledge during the interpreting process.

Conclusion

This paper has endeavoured to explore ways in which speculative fiction can address environmental degradation, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources. Through her novels *Who Fears Death*, *The Book of Phoenix*, and the Binti trilogy, the author employs social justice, ingenography, and techno-scientific literacy. The post-apocalyptic portrayal relates us to the environmental issues, the displacement, and the sufferings endured by the communities. (Gibson, 2020). Her characters serve as an embodiment of inspiration from the past to address the contemporary climate change problems we encounter. They vividly depict the interplay between man and nature with stress on memories of deep-rooted soil spirituality.

Okorafor incorporates African epistemology into the environmental discourse through her protagonist, who resists the capitalists' appropriation of abundant environmental resources. They even speak out against the effectiveness of indigenous ways of understanding the environment and local sufferings. Afrofuturism and African futurism fix the dependency injection of ecology in Okorafor's speculative fiction and her response to the dystopian climate change discourse. Ultimately, Okorafor's works present a more sophisticated and constructive approach to resolving ecological catastrophes, utilizing technological and spiritual solutions. Okorafor's fiction disrupts the meta-narrative of environmental decline and provides an insight into the environmental imbalances and climate change done by humans. Her work also presents an application of native understanding and science fiction technology.

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