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Use of Clever Linguistic Tactics in Harold Pinter's Play the Room

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"One of the most naturally gifted dramatists to have come out of England since the war," (Kerr 29). Harold Pinter (1930-2008) has emerged as the most original theatre talent who gave fresh life to the British theatre in the second half of twentieth century. In 2005, the most prestigious literary award - the Nobel Prize was conferred upon him for his contribution to theatre. He occupies the position of a modern classic and the same is illustrated by his name entering the language as an adjective used to describe a particular atmosphere and environment in drama: 'Pinteresque'. Pinter, along with his predecessor Samuel Beckett, has been known for his experimentation and innovation in the dramatic action and language.

Pinter appears to have admiration for human intelligence. He sees human beings as shrewd fighters. His characters fight at various levels; and a fight with the help of the tool called language is an interesting fight. Notwithstanding his characters' habit of fighting with words, if we look at our daily lives, we find people using language as a tool – either to defend themselves against possible allegations or to prove themselves superior to others or to prove their innocence. Being a keen observer of life and language around him, Pinter must have seen this and has done an outstanding job by bringing to the fore how people use language to garner benefit out of it. His characters use language in a unique manner - as a smokescreen to hide behind, as a shield to protect themselves against dangers, as a riddle not to allow others to understand reality, and as a weapon to hurt and defeat others. With Pinter's characters language "is a highly ambiguous business. So often, below the word spoken, is the thing known and unspoken. . . The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear" (Pinter, "Introduction" *Plays: One* 13-14). Thus, Pinter has made clever linguistic tactics of his characters the central point of his plays.

In Pinter, the room that his characters occupy becomes a refuse from the menacing world outside. The conflict in Pinter's plays arises when some outside force penetrates into the cosy world of the occupants' room. The terror of this unknown outside force drives the occupants to hide themselves inside the room. In one of his interviews with Kenneth Tynan, Pinter was asked - 'what the people in the room are afraid of?' and his answer was: "Obviously they are scared of what is outside the room. Outside it there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening, I'm sure it is frightening to you and me as well" (Hollis 21). Actually, the stance of the occupants of the room, against the fear of the outside forces, creates an impression that these occupants are offenders of the law of the land. It seems that these occupants are wary of facing the outside world because it may have some knowledge of the offence. Thus, a battle is fought between the insiders of the room and the outside intruders. While the former try to safeguard their secure position, the latter do their best to expose the possible

offenders of law of the land. This battle is fought with the sword of language, making the situation, characters and dialogues interesting.

Pinter's characters exchange words. Their talk is usually absurd as there is no direct and logical relationship between questions and answers. Hence, it appears that people are not able to communicate. It was so in Samuel Beckett where characters failed to communicate. But in Pinter it is a case of deliberate evasion from communication. The words do not end in failure of communication, rather language is manipulated in such a way that only the required meaning is obtained out of it. About this type of habit of his characters, Pinter has declared:

"I feel . . . that instead of any inability to communicate, there is a deliberate evasion of communication. Communication itself between people is so frightening that rather than do that there is a continual cross-talk, a continual talking about other things, rather than what is at the root of their relationship." (Esslin 274)

Here Pinter clearly admits his characters turn and twist language in such a way that it becomes an oblique language. They speak, they speak continuously, but they do not mean what they say. They empty the words of their meaning and create mere sounds with them. These characters mean something else than what their words say.

Though the above noted perceptions are based on the study of Pinter's plays such as *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1958), *The Caretaker* (1960), and *The Homecoming* (1965), the present paper proposes to study his first play *The Room* only. The paper attempts to explore what linguistic strategies of escape the characters adopt for survival in the play – how they escape from their self, what they hide and how they hide under the linguistic garb, how they evade relevant questions, and how they fight the battle of survival with linguistic weapons against powerful forces. Apart from this, it is to be seen to what extent these characters succeed in their strategies.

The Room (1957) is Pinter's first play. It was written in just four days at the request of his friend Henry Woolf who was studying in the Drama Department of Bristol University and wanted to stage a play. All ingredients of later dramas of Pinter like fear, insecurity, uncertainty, memory of the past, inconsequential talk and creation of illusions are found in this very first play. In the beginning of *The Room*, the protagonist Mrs. Rose appears to be frightened of the people in the basement. The idea of someone's presence in the basement seems to haunt her throughout. It seems that there has been something unsolicited in her past the memory of which is not welcome to her, but the people in the basement remind her of that past. Therefore, she seems to weave a web of words to keep the harsh reality at bay. Her too much emphasis on the cosiness of the room makes us think that she is hiding something and not pronouncing what she is actually thinking.

It appears that Rose speaks incessantly to her husband to hide her fear of the people in the basement. She seems to convince herself, as well as her husband, that they are safe and warm in their room, that no one knows of her whereabouts and that the room they live in is the best in the house. Meanwhile Bert has to go out because of some important assignment. Now a young couple Mr. and Mrs. Sands visits Mrs. Rose and claims that her room has been proclaimed vacant for letting in. Again, Rose's landlord Mr. Kidd comes and informs her that a certain man has been waiting for the whole week in the basement to see her. First she refuses to meet this man, a Negro named Riley, but when she meets him willy-nilly, he tells her that her father wants her to come home. In the meantime Bert comes back and hits Riley making him fall down. Now Rose cries and says that she cannot see. It appears that in this play there is some conflict between past and present, and that Rose's self-consolation regarding the cosiness of the room has some deeper meanings.

When the play opens, we find Mrs. Rose speaking to her husband Bert. She appears terrified. She asserts that she is safe in her room but her body language reveals that the things are the other way round. To avoid the onslaught of fear, she talks incessantly. She speaks for the sake of speaking and does not want silence to descend on her. She begins to address Bert: "Here you are. This'll keep the cold out" (Pinter, "The Room" *Plays: One* 15). However, Bert does not respond. To put a lid on the harsh and horrid reality of her fear, she hides behind the smokescreen of words again: "It's very cold out, I can tell you. It's a murder" (I, 101). This second attempt of bonding with Bert goes in vain and she tries again: "That's right. You eat that, you'll need it. You can feel it in here. Still, the room keeps warm. It's better than the basement, anyway" (I, 101). She speaks out the train of thought going in her mind: "I don't know how they live down there. It's asking for trouble. Go on. Eat it up. It'll do you good" (I, 101). After this, Rose turns to another topic, and talks about the weather outside the room: "Just now I looked out of the window. It was enough for me. There wasn't a soul about. Can you hear the wind?" (I, 101). Bert does not answer this 'yes' or 'no' question even, and Rose's attention is again captured by the room in the basement. Her fear, sense of insecurity and anxiety are all demonstrated with the help of pauses:

ROSE. I've never seen who it is. Who is it? Who lives down there? I'll have to ask. I mean, you might as well know, Bert. But whoever it is, it can't be too cosy.

Pause.
I think it's changed hands since I was last there. I didn't see who moved in then. I mean the first time it was taken.

Pause.
Anyway, I think they've gone now.

Pause.
But I think someone else has gone in now. I wouldn't like to live in that basement. Did you ever see the walls? They were running . . . (I, 102) With every pause, Mrs. Rose tries to reassure her silent husband and herself that they are better placed than the people in the basement. She is anxious about the identity of the people living in the basement. She tries to give a false consolation to herself that the people are gone from the basement. But the fear reasserts itself and she has to admit to herself that someone else has come in. The three pauses, which punctuate the entire dialogue quoted above, help us go closer to her heart and read her feelings even before they are expressed in the last dialogue uttered by her. Apart from the fear of some outside intruder, she struggles with the silence of the insider, Bert, who never responds to her conversation. The pauses allow her some space to make her linguistic skills better and use them to some effect. Thus, the pauses make her language cleverer and work like an aid in the hour of adversity. The pauses intensify the conflict in her mind.

When all of Mrs. Rose's efforts to earn a reply from Bert end in fiasco, she has to gather strength again and keep the conversation going. She wants a meaningful dialogue with her husband but he fails to respond to her call. The fear of outside forces keeps knocking at the door of her heart constantly. She wants conversation to avoid the hard reality. She seems to hide something. First, she does not enjoy happy conjugal relationship with Bert, and still she tries to show that all is well. Bert's silence is not empty, it is full of answers; it speaks volumes about his relationship with Rose. Lest silence should transport her into the world of reality, Mrs. Rose continues to speak to her husband in spite of his silence. She believes in Pinter's opinion that "when true silence falls we are still left with echo but are near nakedness" (Pinter, "Introduction" *Plays: One* 15). Therefore, she avoids silence and gives a false consolation to herself: "Bert, I'm quite happy where I am. We're quite, we're all right. You're happy up here . . . And we're not bothered. And nobody bothers us." (I, 103) Second, her repeated

emphasis on her happiness underlines her insecurity, which she is trying to forget. Though she consoles herself that neither they bother anyone nor anyone bothers them, yet the more she tries to forget "anyone" and "them" the more intensely they visit her memory. "But I think someone else has gone in now. . . ." (I, 102) reveals that Rose's awareness of someone's presence in the ominous basement below makes her uneasy as it arouses in her knowledge of the past, which she wants to hide or rather forget. She tries to put her fear under the rug: "Anyway, I think they've gone now." She appears to know that "there is something in your past . . . which will catch up with you" (Hobson 83). That's why the restlessness caused by her knowledge that "someone has gone in now" exposes her fear of getting her past revealed in spite of her attempt to maintain a bold face by saying that "we're not bothered". Pinter has designed Rose to be so, and has himself explained how fear haunts her:

This old woman is living in a room which she is convinced is the best in the house; and sherefusesto know anything about the basement downstairs. She says it's damp and nasty and the world outside is cold and icy; and that in her warm and comfortable room her security is complete. (Esslin, *The Peopled Wound* 35-36)

Thus, Rose considers herself safe in her room. However, her surrounding, especially the basement, repeatedly reminds her of her past but she tries to pose to be happy in her present thereby evading from her dreadful past. The spectator/reader can easily guess that the function of the words that Rose utters is not the same as it appears to be. Here "under what is said, another thing is being said" (Pinter, "Introduction", *Plays: One* 14). She seems to guard the secret in her heart closely. Her monologue type of chat with her husband shows that she is trying to escape from uncomfortable self. She tries to evade the realities that surround her, her room and her relationship with her life partner. Thus, she uses language as a weapon to fight the adversity, which conversation on any relevant issue or even silence may bring with it. Thus, language becomes a shield behind which Rose protects herself.

If we look at the words uttered by various characters, including Rose, we find that they are used not for revealing but for concealing realities. Similar to Mrs. Rose's treatment of language as a smokescreen or weapon is the case of Mr. Kidd, the owner of the house. He does not want to reveal his reality to others. He answers to the questions put to him in such a way that the inquisitor fails to make any idea what he actually means. Perhaps he believes that if others are informed about his position and status, they can exploit the same for their benefit (it is so in Pinter's another play *The Caretaker*). Hence, Mr. Kidd deems it fit to reply in vague terms. To Mrs. Rose's inquiry 'how many floors he has got in the house' he replies: "Well, to tell you the truth, I don't count them' (I, 108). As if the number of floors keep on changing daily! Moreover, at the top of this all Mrs. Rose does not counteract the absurd answer, accepts it and responds: "Ah" (I, 108). Perhaps she does not counteract the strange answer because she, being a shrewd user of language herself, understands what he means. This type of questions and answers we come across in our daily life also. You must have seen people asking "How much salary you get every month?" and the other one answering: "It is enough for two square meals" rather than telling how much he earns. People do not give the desired answer because they know that if the inquisitor gets desired answer, s/he will put more questions and will probe deeper into the personal matters. Hence, this type of answer is a polite way of telling the other one that s/he is not interested in telling his reality to others. This is what Mr. Kidd does when he explains his not counting the floors to Mrs. Rose: "when my sister was alive. But I lost track a bit, after she died. She's been dead some time now, my sister" (I, 109). However, Rose believes it to be a right opportunity for his unburdening his heart to her and in a hope asks: "When did she die then, your sister?" (I, 109). But Mr. Kidd comes up with an unrelated answer: "Yes, that's right, it was after she died that I must have stopped counting" (I, 109). However, Mrs. Rose tries to probe again:

ROSE. What did she die of?

MR. KIDD. Who?

ROSE. Your sister.

Pause.
MR. KIDD. I've made ends meet. (I, 109)

Mr. Kidd's response with an irrelevant answer to Rose's questioning and the 'pause' he uses to think and reply after preparing a concocted answer confirms that the memory of Mr. Kidd's past is not real. Moreover, Rose also believes that he had no sister. Mr. Kidd's memory is somewhat similar to Mick's memory of his uncle's brother, which is contradictory in itself, in the play *The Caretaker* where Mick says:

You remind me of my uncle's brother. He was always on the move, that man. Never without his passport. Had an eye for the girls. Very much your build. Bit of an athlete. Long-jump specialist. [. . .] Had a penchant for nuts. That's what it was. Nothing else but a penchant. [. . .] Had a marvellous stop-watch. Picked it up in Hong Kong. The day after they chucked him out of the Salvation Army. [. . .] To be honest I've never made out how he came to be my uncle's brother. I've often thought that may be it was the other way round. I mean that my uncle was his brother and he was my uncle. But I never called him uncle. As a matter of fact I called him Sid. My mother called him Sid too. [. . .] Your spitting image he was [. . .]. (*The Caretaker* 40)

This splendid series of disparate anecdotes appears to be purposely planned by Mick to defeat Davies in verbal contest for ascendancy. Here the uncle's description, who resembled Davies, as claimed by Mick, is so blurred and baffling that it perplexes the tramp. The perfect blend of thesis and antithesis in the comparison leaves Davies badly confused and totally deflated. He is not able to decide what Mick thinks about him by comparing to the 'uncle's brother'. Further, Mick's use of words like 'penchant', with which perhaps the tramp is hardly familiar, not only distances him from Davies but also gives the tramp a shiver of inferiority. Thus, Mick's narration of the past is to confuse and dominate Davies while Mr. Kidd's recollection of past is an indirect refusal to give a straightforward answer to Rose's enquiries. But the two cases are similar as both the characters try to use memory of their past quite strategically. The above quoted dialogue between Mr. Kidd and Rose highlights a clear case of deliberate evasion. Mr. Kidd is not interested in revealing the reality to Rose. He knows that "to disclose to others the poverty within us is too fearsome a possibility" (Pinter, "Introduction" *Plays: One* 15). Moreover, we can confidently draw this conclusion if we look in Pinter's oeuvre where his characters have to pay the price of revealing their true identity, position and status. In *The Caretaker* Aston reveals his reality to Davies that he suffers from some mental disease. Later Davies considers him a mentally weak person and tries to grab his house. Thus, revealing one's true position and status in Pinter's world is inviting trouble. Hence, use of words as a smokescreen or as a weapon by his clever characters is deliberate and strategic, and it is not a case of absurdity or failure of communication.

Refusing to agree with one another is one more linguistic strategy. Characters choose to differ so that the other may not collect confidence. During his visit to Mrs. Rose, Mrs. Sands time and again requests her husband to sit down. But he never agrees to sit down because following the instruction of his wife means surrendering to her ideas and losing his own self-respect.

ROSE. Come over by the fire, Mr. Sands.

MR. SANDS. No, it's all right. I'll just stretch my legs.

MRS. SANDS. Why? You haven't been sitting down?

MR. SANDS. What about it?

MRS. SANDS. Well, why don't you sit down?

MR. SANDS. Why should I? (I, 112)

However, it is not an issue of controversy – to sit down or not. Behind this disagreement is a battle of domination. Finally, he sits on a table and Mrs. Sands points out:

MRS. SANDS. You're sitting down!

MR. SANDS. (*jumping up*) Who is?

MRS. SANDS. You were.

MR. SANDS. Don't be silly. I perched.

MRS. SANDS. I saw you sit down.

MR. SANDS. You didn't see me sit down because I did not sit bloody well down. I perched. (I, 116)

Here agreement and refusal are two parties and Mr. Sands joins hands with refusal so that Mrs. Sands may not feel like a winner in the linguistic battle. Again, Mr. Sands does not agree with Mrs. Sands that she saw a star in the sky. He asks: "You think you saw what?" and she replies "A star" (I, 113). He strongly refutes her claim: "When" . . . "Go home" . . . "You didn't see a star" . . . "Because I'm telling you you didn't see a star" (I, 114). Actually, in the war of words Mr. Sands tries to prove that Mrs. Sands is wrong and he is right. It is a game of domination.

In Pinter's dramatic world, it is always significant to read between the lines. What the characters say is important, but what else they mean in saying something is more important. We have already seen that Rose speaks about insignificant issues constantly. A kind of fear is obvious in her unending chatter. However, the readers/spectators are left wondering throughout what is the secret that Rose is trying to evade. Her refusal to reply in a clear way to the questions put by different characters establish her as an escapist; though what she is trying to escape becomes clear only in the end. First when Mr. Kidd, her landlord, wants her to see Mr. Riley, she refuses to meet him. And when he actually comes to meet her, she refuses to recognise him. And when Riley calls her by a different name, Sal, a sea change occurs in her inner self and she touches his eyes. The following dialogue between Mrs. Rose and Mr. Riley is significant:

RILEY. I have a message for you.

ROSE. You've got what? How could you have a message for me, Mister Riley, when I don't know you and nobody knows I'm here . . .

Pause.

What message? Who have you got a message from? Who?

RILEY. Your father wants you to come home.

Pause.

ROSE. Home?

RILEY. Yes.

ROSE. Home? Go now. Come on. It's late. It's late.

. . . .

RILEY. Come home, Sal.

Pause.

ROSE. What did you call me?

. . . .

RILEY. Come home now, Sal.

She touches his eyes, the back of his head and his temples with her hands. . . . (I, 124-25)

Rose's words "nobody knows I'm here . . ." confirms that she has been hiding herself. Now it is clear that she has a problematic past behind her, which visits her consciousness repeatedly. Nevertheless, she tries hard to escape this past and refuses to bring memory of it in her mind. Mrs. Rose talks about irrelevant issues, gets involved in words about trivial things so that she can save her real self from being exposed. With her linguistic jabber, she pushes the harsh reality of her unstable existence behind the curtain. She keeps others at bay and barricades them from entering into her life by bombarding words in all directions. She admits that she wants to keep others at arm's length: . . . I don't know him at all. We're very quiet. We keep ourselves to ourselves. I never interfere, I mean, why should I? We've got our room. We don't bother anyone else. That's the way it should be. (I, 115) By keeping "ourselves to ourselves" Rose wants to protect information about herself. She is fearful of letting others have information about her. She knows that once her information is out, it can be used against her. Hers is a fight for personal security and existence that she fights with linguistic camouflage and verbal weapons. It is an evasion against the invasion from both the 'outside' as well as the 'inside'. In her struggle for survival, she fights against the menacing outside world, the silent husband and the weak inner self. She has to chatter breathlessly to keep her attention away from the terrible issues that come to her mind. She has to dodge the questions put by others. She answers them in such a way that words fill the gap and no information is leaked. She evades her past because even the recollection of it torments her. Her uneasiness throughout the play, and her suspicion regarding someone's presence in the basement seems to hint that she is nervous about someone's ominous presence in the basement. In the beginning of the play, she is apprehensive of someone's entrance in the basement and in the middle, she again appears to be very curious about the presence in the basement as she penetrates deeper into the minds of her visitors Mr. and Mrs. Sands through a volley of questions about what they saw in the basement. In the end of the play, the mystery about Rose's past gets resolved as it becomes clear that Rose is an escapist who tries to keep her secrets under the carpet. Riley's conversation with her in the dialogue quoted above, confirm that the past of which Riley reminds her is very painful for her to relive. It is for this reason that she was full of fear throughout and has been guarding her past so insistently. Her refusal to recognise Riley suggests that she wants to ignore and forget her past completely. However, Riley, a better user of words, seeks her out of her illusions. His assertions drag her out of her elusive existence to the hard and horrid reality when he calls: "Come home, Sal". The detection that Riley knows that she is Sal proves catastrophic for Rose. She feels defeated as she knows that her linguistic stratagem cannot help her anymore. Now her refusal to be called Sal does not serve any purpose and ultimately she has to succumb to the terrifying reality of her past. She is totally defeated and terrified and cries "Can't see. I can't see. I can't see" (I, 126). Here her blindness appears to be purporting her break with the illusory world and the beginning of a new reality. Though Rose loses the linguistic battle, yet she had stretched her survival for a long time with the help of linguistic tools. Moreover, it is truth that wins; and a more powerful user of language Mr. Riley becomes the winner.

During the linguistic journey of these characters, pauses and silences appear communicative. These devices make the play subtle. They provide amazing economy to the dialogues, and make the situations emotionally charged. The frustration and anxiety of the characters can be seen deepening

during these pauses and silences. Pinter uses silences and pauses to perfection. There is hardly an instance where a pause or a silence is superfluous. These devices fit into the environment of the play. We have seen how Mrs. Rose speaks continuously and pauses for response from her husband Bert, who never answers. In addition to this, his pauses have different functions from those of his silences. During a pause, a character thinks deeply and then replies to the other character after a well-calculated thought. A pause reflects the thought processes in the inner self of a character, the rise and fall of ideas and calculation of possible result of whatever s/he is going to reveal next. Therefore, the sentence uttered after a pause is very significant. Indeed pause is the storehouse of linguistic manipulation. During a pause, a character moulds his speech to drive it to a desired destination, and thus garners a desired result. Silences are much deeper as compared to pauses; they indicate the end of a movement and often the fresh start of a new one. Thus, it can be said that silences and pauses are capable of communicating the inexplicable and incomprehensible. In the face of confusions and conflicts, these devices help the characters in sharpening their linguistic weapons, which they are to use against their opponents. Apart from the dramatic device called 'silence', there is another kind of silence in Pinter's plays, including the one under study. The silence observed by Bert is terrible and ominous. Mrs. Rose almost craves for a word from his lips. She uses all possible types of sentences that the English grammar allows but he never utters a word. Her fear of the outside world is multiplied by his silence. The adverse weather, the ominous presence in the basement and the silence of the life partner combine to create a horrible existence for her. Again, he remains taciturn to all the calls made by Mr. Kidd, his landlord. However, Mrs. Rose replies in place of her husband:

MR. KIDD. . . . You'll be going out soon then, Mr. Hudd? Well, be careful how you go. Those roads'll be no joke. Still, you know how to manipulate your van all right, don't you? Where are you going? Far? Be long?

ROSE. He won't be long.

MR. KIDD. No, of course not. Shouldn't take him long.

ROSE. No.

MR. KIDD. Well then, I'll pop off. Have a good run, Mr Hudd. Mind how you go. It'll be dark soon too. But not for a good while yet. Arivederci.

He exits. (I, 110

This silence on the part of Bert Hudd is a strategy to discourage visitors like Mr. Kidd. And Mr. Kidd uses words very cleverly. He tries to explore how long will it take to Mr. Bert Hudd to come back, without making him aware that something significant is being dug out: "Where are you going? Far? Be long?" Actually, Mr. Riley is waiting downstairs and Mr. Kidd wants him to meet Rose in Bert's absence. Realizing that Bert is not interested in his talk, Mr. Kidd decides to depart, and silence succeeds.

Most of Pinter's characters use language as a barrier, which they erect between themselves and others. They "reveal what they choose to reveal and confuse each other with language" (Randisi 12). They want to know the secrets of others but are not ready to share their own secrets, exactly in the manner as an armed battalion does against its enemy. With the words these characters utter, they protect themselves. In addition, with the words made of same alphabet they try to dig deep into the lives of others, thus making language a tool rather than letting it be a medium of communication. By keeping the ball of conversation rolling, they conceal their true self. Thus, the life of Pinter's characters is controlled by clever use of language. In this way, the human world represented in his plays is a hostile world rather than it being a world of love, peace and understanding. A prominent commentator on

Pinter's plays Peter Hall, while explaining why he used vocabulary of hostility in describing activities of Pinter's characters, admits that the world of Pinter's people is a wild and dangerous world:

My vocabulary is all the time about hostility and battles and weaponry, but that is the way Pinter's characters operate as if they were stalking round a jungle, trying to kill each other, but trying to disguise from one another the fact that they are bent upon murder. (Hall 22)

For survival in such a territory one needs all kind of tools. Hence, apart from other tools, language is used as a garb behind which people hide their secrets, and as a weapon with which they fight the battle of their continued existence. With the help of such innovation and experimentation, Pinter has not only pushed drama forward, but also has made us witness the real language of masses being used in drama. Moreover, he has thrown light on complexity of human nature and human life through his oeuvre.

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