

Book Review

(Too?) Many Ramayanas

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Ramesh Menon, *The Ramayana, A Modern Retelling of the Great Indian Epic*. New York, North Point Press, 2003. 697 + xx pages.

Ashok K. Banker, *Prince of Ayodhya, The Ramayana, Book One*. New York, Warner Books, 2003. 389 pages.

A. K. Ramanujan, commenting on the rich profusion of the *Ramayana* tradition, liked to cite Kumaravyasa, a 14th century Kannada author who claimed to have written a *Mahabharata* rather than a *Ramayana* because “he heard the cosmic serpent which upholds the earth groaning under the burden of *Ramayana* poets” (Ramanujan 1991: 24). Poor Shesha’s load would only increase in subsequent centuries, and what we may now term the “*Ramayana* industry” shows no sign of slackening in the 21st — which is not surprising given the cultural and political capital that continues to reside in Rama’s exalted name. Yet one of the most striking features of this three-millennia-old storytelling tradition has been the absence of an authoritative written text, in the literal (and literary) Western sense. Thus, despite the prestige of the Sanskrit epic attributed to Valmiki and its acceptance as the *adi*-text of the tradition, accurate shloka-by-shloka translations of this text (itself found in numerous variant recensions) into vernacular languages were virtually non-existent prior to the late colonial period, when Western orientlists became interested in identifying an *Ur-Ramayana*. Instead, each generation of Indian narrators assumed the right to retell the beloved story in an original manner, invariably beginning with praise of the Valmikian archetype, but then freely departing from it in numerous significant ways, altering details of plot and character and sometimes reordering the chronology of events. And the influences on would-be Ramayanis (as the storytellers in this tradition are often called) have not been confined merely to earlier versions of the Rama tale, but have included other literary works and narrative traditions, as well as the cultural and political circumstances of the eras in which they were composed. Thus it has been argued that Kampan’s Tamil epic *Iramavataram* displays the

literary conventions of ancient *cankam* poetry (as in, e.g., the description of Shurpanakha's lovesickness after her first glimpse of Rama, or in the characterization of Ravana as an idealized, though flawed, Tamil monarch) while also reflecting the imperial ambitions of the Chola dynasty. And a whole set of 17th and 18th century Hindi retellings reflect the impact of the *Bhagavata purana* and the devotional cult of Krishna by re-imagining the famously-monogamous Ramachandra engaging in erotic sports not merely with Sita but with 16,000 nubile *sakhis*.

Given such precedents, it is hardly surprising that early 21st century *Ramayanas* composed in the new Sanskrit—the international Father Tongue of English—will reveal (if not explicitly identify) a whole new set of influences, both cultural and literary, derived from Western literature and storytelling. Such is the case with novelists Ramesh Menon's and Ashok Banker's recent additions to the burden of Shesha. These influences are understandable given the apparent Anglophone background of the two authors, yet since the influences come from far beyond the homeland of the Indian *Ramayana* tradition, they give rise to what may be characterized as a distinctive new sub-branch of its spreading tree, akin to (though yet more alien than) that of the Buddhist and Islamic-influenced *Ramayanas* of Southeast Asia. The dominant influence in these new works is the modern tradition of literary fantasy, both science fiction and (especially) neo-medieval saga à la Tolkien, with its ethos rooted in Greek epic and Celtic and Teutonic legend and its morality and cosmology derived from Semitic and Christian sources. The result of grafting this cultural baggage onto the Rama story is (to me) both intriguing and unsettling, particularly given the likelihood—the cachet of English in India being what it is—that not only Western readers but new generations of Indians may now get their primary exposure to the *Ramayana* through such texts.

Ramesh Menon's preface identifies his retelling as a “novelist's re-creation” and notes that it is based entirely on “other English versions” of the story—this surprising admission, coming from a Kerala-based author, is amply expressive of the cultural hegemony that English now enjoys among the Indian elite. Menon's aim is to write “an impassioned English Ramayana that is true to the spirit and story of the original” (xiv). The “original” would appear to be Valmiki, since Menon's storyline and occasionally

even specific dialog mostly follows available English renderings of the Sanskrit epic. But by “spirit” Menon seems to mean a pious religiosity in the peculiarly Western sense in which the “religious” is opposed to the “secular”; indeed he criticizes existing English renderings of the Sanskrit *Ramayana* as “rather too secular,” dismisses Arshia Sattar’s recent book-length synopsis of Valmiki as “secular and scholarly,” and bemoans the fact that modern Indian education is “irretrievably secular” (xiii). Given the success of Hindu communalists in turning “secular” into a dirty word in recent years, Menon’s explicit agenda of de-secularizing the *Ramayana* initially raised a saffron flag in my mind. Yet the “spirit” that he seeks to re-inject into the Anglicized Rama saga seems to me to be anything but Hindu; rather, his word-choice is regularly redolent of Judeo-Christian ideology, right from Valmiki’s asking Narada whether “any man born into the world was blessed with every virtue by your Father in heaven” (3), and Indra’s complaint that, due to Ravana’s influence, men now “deny their gods” (10). Demoness Tataka is “waiting for her savior to come to deliver her” (22), and her son Maricha’s minions appear before Rama with “the flesh of some of them obscenely bared” and emitting “heathen screams” (29). The Ganga is said to offer “baptismal waters” to the immolated sons of King Sagara (41), and the monkey king Vali is reported to have achieved “redemption” as Rama’s arrow “delivered him to eternal life” (247). Even Hanuman sounds like an Evangelist when he perceives Sita as “she who suffered in the asokavana for the sins of the world, that it might be redeemed from the Rakshasa by her anguish” (326).

As if to compensate for the Christianizing effect of such idioms, Menon peppers every page with Sanskrit words, sometimes oddly or inconsistently transliterated (e.g., srarddha for *shraddha*, Pitama for Pitamaha; the term for cosmic illusion or artifice is rendered “maya,” but the name of the asura Maya, with two short vowels, becomes “Mayaa,” etc.). Their density will be off-putting to an Anglophone reader without prior knowledge of Indian culture, who will have to retreat frequently to an appended glossary that offers terse and frustratingly vague definitions (e.g., “*vidyadhara*: A magical being”). Add to this Menon’s penchant for looting the thesaurus of hundred-rupee words like “stertorous,” “coruscant,” “xanthic,” and “calescent,” and it should be clear why I would not choose this particular *Ramayana* to place before unsuspecting undergraduates.

Menon's Christianization extends to details of the narrative as well. Since he regards Rama's conflict with Ravana as a specimen of "the eternal war between good and evil" (384), his Ravana must be unrelentingly bad and his Rama unwaveringly good. Indeed, the former is regularly burdened with epithets like "the Lord of evil on earth" (31), the "Sovereign of evil" and "Master of Darkness" (183), and he sports "ten satanic heads" (184). Lucifer comes to mind, of course, but so does (in other passages) the evil galactic emperor of *Star Wars*, and Menon's graphic descriptions of Ravana's physique—topped by a grotesque pyramid of heads, some animal and some reptilian, that whirr, hiss, and jabber at one another—evoke a sci-fi creation of Industrial Light and Magic Inc. Even Ravana's well-attested skills in the bedchamber succumb to a grotesque Victorian gothic reading that presents the King of Lanka as a sexual vampire, who extends his own life at the expense of his partners: "...his lovemaking was a diabolic ritual: he drained a woman of her precious years" (184). The presence of this malefic being looms over the entire story, even the early *Ayodhyakanda* episodes that, in Valmiki, contain no reference to him, and this feature of Menon's narrative (which serves to constantly remind the reader of Rama's divine mission) sometimes evokes the fateful glimpses of the Dark Lord Sauron that punctuate the first two books of *The Lord of the Rings*. As Rama departs for forest exile, we are warned of "an awesome and sinister sovereign" waiting for him Out There, and are even told that "the evil that possessed Kaikeyi, in some mysterious way, had its source in his terrible soul" (147)—an especially odd innovation, given that vernacular *Ramayanas* have more typically blamed the mischief of Manthara and Kaikeyi on the intervention of the Ravana-hating devas, who want Rama out of Ayodhya and into the woods for their own ends. When Shurpanakha (whose name Menon misspells) is disfigured, Sita too receives a premonition of "a terrible Being who turned his baleful gaze on them across vast spaces" (177)—a veritable Eye of Mordor. (Incidentally, another Tolkienesque touch is Menon's description of gandharvas as "elfin folk" who "sang in tongues that had passed out of the use of men long ago" [669]—though elsewhere his account of "colorful woodland spirits, lovely dryads and forest gods" [30] seems more to evoke Shakespearean fairies.)

Menon's diabolical Ravana is countered by a Rama who is uniformly good and whose penumbra of goodness extends to all his immediate male kin—a move that

cumulatively smoothes away most of the rough and provocative edges of the Valmikian narrative, as well as much of the poignancy of its *Ayodhyakanda*. Menon's Dasaratha decides the date for Rama's consecration as heir-apparent "impulsively...carried away by the crowd's excitement" (68), expressing no fears about possible intra-family jealousies. Moreover, he is entirely reasonable with the pouting Kaikeyi, making none of the chilling overtures that Valmiki puts into his mouth ("Is there some guilty man who should be freed, or some innocent man I should execute?," etc.; 2.10.10; Pollock 1986:103). Lakshmana expresses only lukewarm denunciations of his father, stepmother, and brother Bharata, and says nothing at all on parting from Sumantra in the forest (105)—where Valmiki's enraged Lakshmana threatens to kill all of them. Rama, similarly, is denied the range of his emotional responses to the news of his exile: his understandable fears for his mother and Sita in the aftermath of an apparent coup d'état, his anguish over Lakshmana's threats of violence, his impassioned rejection of bloody "kshatriya dharma," and his stoic and even joyous acceptance of the raw deal he has been handed. Instead, given Menon's agenda and tone, we get a Rama who blandly accepts exile as "no tragedy but God's way for me," and a manifestation of "fate working toward her own inscrutable ends" (83, 87)—the latter an allusion to the already-looming war with Ravana. Indeed, once in the forest, Rama repeatedly muses about the call of "a powerful destiny...that I do not yet understand" (165), and of "an implacable enemy who waited...beyond the sunset" (170).

Traditionally problematic episodes are morally airbrushed: Rama and Lakshmana do not cruelly tease Shurpanakha, and Rama merely tells her that his brother is "alone" (176)—not (as in Valmiki) the troubling lie that Lakshmana is "unmarried." Menon's Rama feels anguish over having to slay Vali, and the latter's speech denouncing his killer is much reduced, yielding quickly to a beatific vision of Rama-as-God (247). And although Rama speaks with Valmikian cruelty to Sita during their reunion in Lanka, he makes a decidedly un-Valmikian apology for it afterwards, asking his wife's forgiveness (497)—he will apologize again later when he banishes her to the forest because of his people's suspicions (649). Although these controversial episodes have troubled audiences for centuries and have often been rationalized in similar ways, especially in devotional *Ramayanas*, Menon's relative allegiance to Valmiki makes such departures

more telling of his sanitizing agenda: the recasting of what he sees as a “secular” epic (in which heroes can be complex and even flawed) as a “religious” one (in which such complexity must yield to a consistent and saccharine holiness).

I do not wish to give the impression that Menon’s effort is entirely without merit. Like William Buck’s older and decidedly Americanized retelling, it may appeal to some readers as an entree into the tradition. When I was asked by the publisher to provide a one-paragraph cover review based on an advance copy, I emphasized the often lyrical quality of Menon’s writing and his evident sincerity, but stressed that his is yet another retelling in a diverse and multi-vocal narrative tradition. Re-reading the text for this review, I was generally pleased by Menon’s complex and protean Hanuman, a being who (unlike the author’s Rama) can be comical and vulnerable, as well as immensely and almost monstrously powerful, occasionally sagacious, and emphatically simian. Indeed, Menon’s *Sundarakanda* seems to me the most effectively rendered of the book’s sections—perhaps not surprisingly, given the high regard in which it has long been held by *Ramayana* lovers. It is also to Menon’s credit that he occasionally mentions common variants in the story, though his appended “Southern Tale,” the story of Sita as Ravana’s daughter (665-668), departs strikingly from other versions of this story that I have encountered to offer an idiosyncratic psychological portrait of a husband-hating Mandodari that contradicts the usual explanation for her abandonment of Sita: that astrologers have predicted the infant will cause her father’s death.

At first glance, Ashok K. Banker’s *Prince of Ayodhya*—the first installment in a projected multi-volume *Ramayana* series to be published by AOL-Time-Warner—would appear to represent an altogether different sort of retelling of the Rama legend. The cover art depicts an eerie night scene in which a long-haired, blue-skinned youth stands in a turret of a vaguely Moorish palace, gazing down on a burning city over which griffon-like winged monsters hover—a scene that (although it suggests no incident in any known *Ramayana*) fairly shouts “FANTASY SAGA”—and the jacket blurb accordingly promises “a masterwork as imaginative as the greatest creations of J. R. R. Tolkien, David Eddings, and Terry Brooks....” Indeed, although Banker, unlike Menon, includes no preface in which he identifies his influences and aims, one does not have to read far to

discern these. The man who (judging from the dedication page) gave his son the middle name “Yoda” evidently seeks to craft a *Ramayana* for a generation reared on cinematic sci-fi epics, Middle Earth fantasies, and computer simulation games. Book One’s fifteen-year-old Rama is a lean, mean, fighting machine reminiscent of *Matrix* hero Neo, with a bit of Luke Skywalker’s ingenuousness. But since Banker situates his tale long, long ago in a “Bharat-varsha” far, far away, Rama’s workouts earn descriptions such as: “He forced himself to stand down from the martial asana of full alertness, changing the pattern of his pranayam breathing, dialing down his heartbeat using yoga techniques” (5). As is the case in Menon’s version, the predominant influence of Western narrative genres is compensated for by a barrage of often bizarrely chosen Indic vocabulary. Banker’s kings and gurus are said to speak Sanskrit, but since the author’s knowledge of *Devabhāṣa* appears limited to a few phrases picked up from Doordarshan serials (“*Ayushmanbhav!*”) and he makes such predictable Anglophone gaffes as supposing that “Kali Yuga” is named for the goddess Kali, compensatory cultural authenticity is provided by having characters lapse into Romanized Hindi, often grammatically incorrect and liberally peppered with Perso-Arabic terms (King Dasaratha presides over the “Diwan-Khaas” and the soldiers in one of his legions have “the Sanskrit letters P.W.”, for “Purana Wafadars” — “old loyalists,” the latter term of Mughal provenance — embroidered on their uniforms). As a result, Banker’s Ayodhya, proud capital of the “seven Arya nations” emerges as a weirdly anachronistic bricolage, in which Indo-Saracenic watchtowers loom over Mughal pavilions and gardens of “bougainvilla” (sic) vines (a plant introduced into India during the colonial period), people quote the *Laws of Manu* and the *Kamasutra*, and the two “national holidays” are Deepavali and Holi (the latter described by Rama as “a day when all Aryas embraced their fellows and celebrated the completion of another year of their proud civilization” [134]). Kausalya’s palatial apartment (site of a torrid love scene between herself and Dasaratha early in the narrative) features a dome of translucent glass, “candelabras,” a marble statue of Kamadeva that doubles as a fountain, and “intricately embroidered Eastern carpets” (34); the palace walls bear giant, twice-lifesize portraits of “Suryavansha” monarchs and their “seer-mage” gurus.

All this might appear to be just good fun and the poetic license of fantasy fiction, except that Banker's vision is strongly flavored by a totalitarian nationalism and often resonates with the orientalist-fueled fantasy of an ancient Golden Age lionized by Hindu extremists. There is much loose talk of "race"—the proud, clear-eyed Arya races and their arch-enemies, the dark Asura races of Lanka and the Netherworlds, of whom Vishvamitra reminds Dasaratha, "Remember: *They are not human!*" (123, emphasis in original), as well as of "Vedic science," especially Ayurveda, weaponry, and the arcane skills of the seer-mages, whose manipulation of the cosmic Force called "Brahman" generally takes the form of bursts of blue light that can paralyze enemies or hurl them into other dimensions of space-time. There are approving allusions to indigenous-Aryan theory, e.g., when Dasaratha, addressing the people of Ayodhya (who ostensibly have full "democratic" rights, but usually end up deferring to the judgment of their rulers and sages), invokes, "...the tradition and heritage of the Arya forefathers who seeded this mighty nation before venturing northward to foreign lands, where they settled the Germanic wildwoods" (175). Caste divisions are soft-pedaled as "efficient divisions of labor equivalent to the guilds of Western nations" (170), social mobility is said to be merit-based ("...even a sudra could rise to kshatriya status through diligent effort...", 61), and we regularly see the city's people "totally united, all caste, class, and other petty differences forgotten" (183)—this, of course, in the face of external menace, of which there is no lack. There is also patriotism galore, as when Rama prevents an urban riot by singing an anthem in praise of the Motherland, in which everyone is gradually and irresistibly impelled to join (only the wicked Manthara gives vent to a secular-rationalist skepticism: "What was a country anyway? Just a land occupied by different people. What was there to get so emotional about?" [137]). Though Hindu gods periodically appear and are regularly invoked by Anglicized exclamations (e.g., "What in Siva's name was that!," "Holy Vishnu!"), Banker is at pains to explain that the enlightened Arya religion has evolved "...from a primitive age when the thousands of deities in the Vedic pantheon were regarded not as manifestations of the One True God but as individual gods in their own right—a polytheistic outlook that was considered blasphemy in these civilized times" (24). This is contrasted to the religion of the Asuras, who worship "primordial spirit-lords," and to the small but dangerous sect of "tantric" heretics in the

capital, against whom Draconian measures are sometimes required: black clad cultists whose faith is “predicated on doom and the surrendering of all life to meet the coming apocalypse” (130).

The apocalypse is, we soon learn, the invasion of the Arya nations by the alien Asura hordes, led by the monstrous king of Lanka. This Armageddon-like conflict looms over the story from the very first line, which introduces a nightmare in which young Rama beholds the lurid “rape of Ayodhya” by the Asura races: a gruesome sci-fi spectacle of blood, fire, and oozing slime (Banker identifies “Pisacas,” for example, as giant insect-like aliens who lay “greenish-black crystalline eggs” in the bellies of human victims, who are then paralyzed and left to suffer agonizing deaths when the babies hatch and devour their innards [9]). This looming catastrophe, being planned by thousands of spies whom Ravana has planted among the unsuspecting Ayodhyans, is long denied by their war-weary king Dasaratha, and he must be shaken out of his lethargy by fiery Brahmarishi Vishvamitra, whose mission to Ayodhya is in fact to warn its people of “the greatest crisis in the history of the Arya nations” (108), and whose own *yagna* has no other purpose than to prepare Rama and Lakshmana for the coming war.

Even while crafting this Hindutva Youth-friendly vision of Arya triumphalism (including a tightly-orchestrated Holi festival that resembles nothing so much as a Nuremberg rally), Banker takes other liberties with the story that might offend the sensibilities of those more familiar with the *Ramayana*, especially in its pious popular versions such as Tulsidas’ *Ramcaritmanas* or the Amar Chitra Katha comic. In a few cases, these innovations seem to creatively expand on recessive themes in Valmiki, such as the rivalries and tensions concealed behind the idealized public façade of the Ayodhyan royal family. Banker’s Dasaratha is an aging warrior turned sybaritic dotard, who as the tale opens is already dying of a mysterious disease that, given his behavior, might well be syphilis. His chief queens get into cat fights in which they hurl terms like “slut” and “whore” at one another, and his ministers and sons express public reverence but often private disdain for their Brahman spiritual guides. Other innovations are more gratuitous and jarring. Kaikeyi is an alcoholic, nymphomaniac, and glutton with a slovenly *paan* habit and the intelligence and vocabulary of a Valley Girl, and Manthara is

a Lankan spy who secretly worships Ravana in sexually-tinged tantric rites. The characters' speech oscillates between neo-Shakespearean platitudes and modern slang, and there are even ribald jokes about the Raghu boys' passion for the princesses of Mithila, who are already known to them and are in fact their cousins (e.g., Lakshman teases Rama that the latter has "...always had a soft spot for Maharaja Janak's eldest.... Or should I say a *hard* spot!" [208]). The order of events is reshuffled: Rama is declared heir apparent even before he and Lakshman depart for the forest with Vishvamitra, and Dasaratha's physical collapse, and his recollection of the curse he incurred after killing a young ascetic, immediately follows this. And right from the beginning, Kaikeyi and Manthara plot to make Bharata the next king.

But as in Menon's narrative (and to a far more extreme degree) the single most striking transformation in this *Ramayana* is the looming presence of Ravana and his hellish minions throughout the narrative. Banker is not shy about naming his influences here: his Lankan ruler is constantly called "the Dark Lord," and his slime-dripping, shape-shifting *rakshasas* (who seem like a cross between Tolkien's orcs and the monsters of the *Alien* films) are countered by Gandalf-like Vedic sorcerers wielding glow-in-the-dark staffs; both sides draw on Brahman, a neutral cosmic Force that has "light" and "dark" sides. Although there are some authentically Indic precursors to this scheme, the chronicle of *deva-asura* conflict in the Sanskrit epics and puranas is characteristically more complex, displays considerable moral ambiguity (particularly from the perspective of human beings caught in the cosmic crossfire), and seldom forgets the fact that these two dueling clans of self-interested supernaturals are in fact cousin-brothers. Yet here this complex cosmology is starkly simplified into a Manichean scenario in which absolute evil wages unrelenting war on perfect good, and in which the first goal of the dark Asuric hordes is total human genocide. Although we learn in Valmiki's *Uttarakanda* of an attack on Ayodhya by Ravana some generations before Rama's time (which resulted in one of several prophecies of the *rakshasa* ruler's eventual demise at the hand of a mortal Raghu king), latter-day Ayodhya does not appear, in the Sanskrit epic and most of its vernacular retellings, to warrant Ravana's notice (nor, oddly, does he seem to be known to the Ayodhyans) until Rama's encounter with Shurpanakha in *Aranyakanda*. But in Banker's scenario all this is changed: Dasaratha still bears the

scars of an “Asura war” with Ravana twenty-two years earlier, the Dark Lord’s spies throng the Kosala kingdom (one of them, incidentally, is Shurpanakha in the guise of a deer, who takes a shine to Rama when he rescues her from some hunters), and Vishvamitra’s mission to the court is solely to warn its people (through a horrific “light show” again depicting the city’s “rape”) of an impending attack by Lankan forces, which he hopes to forestall through a desperate foray into the southern forests, assisted by Rama and Lakshmana. While this is in progress, Vasishtha (a.k.a. Vashishta, here) fights his own hair-raising battle with Lankan aliens in a slime pit in Ayodhya’s deepest dungeon—a scene apparently cloned from Gandalf’s battle with the balrog in the Mines of Moria.

Banker’s Book One ends with a gore-splattered battle sequence in which Rama and Lakshmana, armed with Vishvamitra’s mantras and weapons, decimate Tataka’s army of mutant beasts, “...abominations of nature and creation, mules synthesized by a corruption of brahman power and dark tantric acts of cross-species engineering” (313), before slaying the titanic demoness herself. Against such foes there can of course be no mercy, and Lakshmana’s perception that his battling brother, eyes blazing with blue light, “didn’t even look human” but rather had become “a perfectly efficient fighting machine” (323-324)—Rama as Terminator—evokes the thrill of video-game mayhem...or of a communal riot seen through the eyes of an enthusiastic adolescent Bajrang Dali. News of the brothers’ victory and of the successful completion of Vishvamitra’s *yagna* is promptly carried (by Jatayu, who is a Bad Bird here!) to the Dark Tower of Mordor—oops, I mean Lanka, where a vast, demonic fleet is anchored in preparation for an imminent invasion of the Motherland. It is unclear how many more volumes of this stuff Banker intends to spin out, but the promised next one, which will presumably see Rama and Sita wed, will also evidently see more heavyweight military action, since it is to be titled *Siege of Mithila*. Go figure.

Their differences notwithstanding—and Banker’s free-form fantasy obviously makes Menon’s retelling seem comparatively scholarly and conservative—these two neo-Ramayanis share a common and, I fear, unconscious agenda: to bring the ancient story into conformity with a dualistic worldview that now appears, through the economic and cultural politics of the post-Cold War period, to be inevitable, natural, and even

“scientific.” In their fateful Clash of Civilizations, they evoke not simply the heritage of Western epic and scripture, but the more ominous strains of a rabidly chauvinist nationalism linked to the entertainment values of globalized American-style capitalism. They suggest that, although Ayodhya’s finest will invariably defeat the Dark Lord, the crowded and interdependent mythological ecosystem maintained by some three millennia of Indian epic storytellers has, for the moment, succumbed to the simplifying imperatives of an apocalyptic narrative mono-culture—a Force that is, alas, with us all.

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