



# Identity and Writing: the Case of Eastern Sephardic Women

Identidad y escritura: el caso de las mujeres sefardíes de Oriente

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### Abstract

Access to written culture, which began to be widespread among Sephardic women in the former Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, opens a new perspective in gender studies of the Jewish minority in Muslim societies. Writing constitutes one of the main vehicles through which individuals appropriate their own identity and culture. In this sense, female Eastern Sephardic writers represent a fascinating example of how a cultural minority elaborates its consciousness and the awareness of its past. This article deals with this specific issue: the way that both the first Sephardic female writers and those who followed were able to elaborate a new identity through the act of writing and the awareness of its multiple possibilities. The first Sephardic female writers (Reina Hakohén, Rosa Gabay and Laura Papo) show us their contradictions: the identification with the traditional roles of women, the continuous justifications of their work as writers, the redefinition of what means to be a female writer in the context of Eastern Sephardic societies.

**Key words:** Eastern Sephardic women; Female Sephardic writers; Identity and Writing.

### Resumen

El acceso a la cultura escrita, que se difundió entre las mujeres sefardíes del antiguo Imperio otomano a finales del siglo XIX, abre una nueva perspectiva en los estudios de género de la minoría judía en las sociedades musulmanas. La escritura constituye uno de los principales medios a través de los que las personas se apropian de su identidad y su cultura. En este sentido, las mujeres sefardíes de Oriente representan un ejemplo fascinante de cómo una minoría cultural crea una conciencia de su propio pasado. Este artículo explora el modo en que tanto las primeras escritoras sefardíes como aquellas que las siguieron fueron capaces de elaborar una nueva identidad a través de la escritura, desde la conciencia de sus múltiples posibilidades. Las primeras escritoras sefardíes (Reina Hakohén, Rosa Gabay y Laura Papo) nos muestran sus contradicciones: la identificación con los roles tradicionales de las mujeres, las continuas justificaciones de su trabajo como escritoras, la redefinición de lo que significa ser una escritora en el contexto de las sociedades sefardíes orientales.

**Palabras clave:** Mujeres sefardíes orientales; escritoras sefardíes; identidad y escritura.

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## 1. INTRODUCCIÓN

Access to written culture, which began to be widespread among Sephardic women in the former Ottoman Empire at the end of the nineteenth century, opens a new perspective in gender studies of the Jewish minority in Muslim societies. Here I shall analyse the impact that this fact had upon the construction of their collective memory.

The concept of cultural capital, coined by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, refers, generally, to a person's education (knowledge and intellectual skills) that provides advantage in achieving a higher social status in society (Bourdieu, 1977: 46-50). In the case of Sephardic women, access to the formal educational system and to literacy represents a turning point in their capacity to participate in the public sphere. But, at the same time, it is essential to keep in mind the 'embodied cultural capital' of Sephardic women in traditional communities, which is indissolubly linked to their social evolution. In Bourdieu's words, this embodied cultural capital comprises

the knowledge that is consciously acquired and the passively inherited, by socialization to culture and tradition. Unlike property, cultural capital is not transmissible, but is acquired over time, as it is impressed upon the person's habitus (character and way of thinking), which, in turn, becomes more receptive to similar cultural influences. Linguistic cultural capital is the mastery of language and its relations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1986: 114).

I shall also focus on the interrelations between the traditional embodied cultural capital of Sephardic women (language, customs, ways of living, literary oral tradition) and the emergence of new social spaces in which they could participate.

Writing constitutes one of the main vehicles through which individuals appropriate their own identity and culture. In this sense, female Eastern Sephardic writers represent a fascinating example of how a cultural minority elaborates its consciousness and the awareness of its past. This article deals with this specific issue: the way that both the first Sephardic female writers and those who followed were able to elaborate a new identity through the act of writing and the awareness of its multiple possibilities.

First of all, I shall briefly summarise the situation of Sephardic women at the beginning of the modernization process at the end of nineteenth century<sup>1</sup>. Access to literacy was limited and, for the most part, knowledge followed an oral transmission; Sephardic women, for centuries, were granted a preeminent role in the creation and preservation of oral

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<sup>1</sup> For more information about Sephardic women and the changes in their traditional role, see Díaz-Mas, Ayala & Barquín (2009); Ayala (2006, 2008); Quintana (2009); Díaz-Mas & Martín Ortega (2016).

literature: ballads and songs, but also tales and sayings. Through this tradition they could cultivate their creativity and collaborate in the collective process of creation of these ballads and songs<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, due to their nature as oral and anonymous compositions, we do not find in this activity any of the aspects regarding the writer's identity that I shall discuss in this article.

However, it is interesting to confirm that some of the first Sephardic women who left us a written legacy were compilers of the oral tradition: they had notebooks in which they copied the songs that they had learnt from their mothers, with the goal of preserving them from oblivion. This necessity has been configuring since the first irruptions of Sephardic women in written culture until today one of the main elements of their vocation. We could cite here the names of Halia Isaac Cohen, Luna Bennaim, Clara Benoudis or Azibiena Barujel among many others. Paloma Diaz-Mas affirms in this sense:

La cultura oral era, por tanto, en las comunidades sefardíes tradicionales, patrimonio de todos, hombres y mujeres. Lo que sucede es que, cuando se implantaron entre los sefardíes los nuevos sistemas educativos a la manera occidental, fueron los hombres los que primero y mayoritariamente accedieron a esa formación letrada laica; las mujeres se incorporaron más lenta y tardíamente y, por tanto, conservaron durante más tiempo la cultura tradicional, de la misma manera que el judeoespañol se preservó en el ámbito doméstico, cuando ya otras lenguas (sobre todo el francés, el alemán, el turco o las lenguas nacionales balcánicas) se habían convertido en los vehículos de expresión habituales en las relaciones sociales y laborales y en la enseñanza [The oral culture in Sephardic traditional communities was a collective heritage, belonging to both men and women. What happens is that, following the institution of the Western educational systems, men were the first to accede to this laic and modern schooling. Women joined later and slowly, and that's why they maintained longer the traditional culture, exactly in the same way as Judeo Spanish was preserved in the domestic domain, when other languages (French, German, Turkish or national Balkan languages) had become the usual vehicle of expression in social relationships and in education] (Díaz-Mas & Martín Ortega, 2016: 29).

The literacy of women at the end of nineteenth century, especially of those from higher social groups, is linked with the spread of schools from Alliance Israélite Universelle, but before the arrival of this institution some of the first Sephardic writers were educated in Christian schools, basically protestant ones, which offered an education for girls adapted to the new ideas coming from Western Europe<sup>3</sup>. In the meantime, an audience of female

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<sup>2</sup> On the role of women as preservers and transmitters of Sephardic literary oral culture until the 20th Century, see Seroussi (2003); Cohen (1995); Díaz-Mas (2007, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the changes in education, see Rodrigue (1983, 1990); Madrid Álvarez-Piñer & Díaz-Mas (2016).

readers emerged: we find press sections and advertising<sup>4</sup> devoted to women, but also moral texts with the purpose of instructing and educating them.

## 2. THE FIRST SEPHARDIC FEMALE WRITERS: ROSA GABAY, REINA HAKOHÉN AND LAURA PAPO

The first Sephardic female writers reveal to us their contradictions: the identification with the traditional role of women, the continuous justifications of their work as writers, the redefinition of what it means to be a female writer in the context of Eastern Sephardic societies. Here I shall analyse three paradigmatic cases: Rosa Gabay, Reina Hakohén and Laura Papo. All of them are authors of essays in which they address women and discuss from different points of view the situation of Sephardic women.

Rosa Gabay<sup>5</sup> was born around 1850 into a famous family of bankers, politicians and writers, very well connected with Ottoman bureaucracy and linked to modernization tendencies. Her father was personally involved in her education. In 1871 Rosa Gabay published the book *La Kortesiya o las reglas del buen komportamyendo* (Courtesy or the Rules of Good Conduct), which is 179 pages long. It was printed in the newspaper *El Telégrafo*, from Istanbul, which was founded by her father. It is a manual of good manners addressed to young Jewish ladies. Its originality lies in the link that it establishes between the improvement of feminine education and the role of women as mothers and wives. The author highlights that a better feminine education will be beneficial for both the children of these women and for society as a whole.

In one of the prologues to this work, which was edited by Michael Alpert, we can appreciate an emerging concept of equality between the sexes expressed by the writer Rosa Gabay:

Mis companyas muchachas! Mos despertemos del esfuenyo ke nos azieron dormir por fuersa! Bushkemos de adelantarnos! Muestremos ke el Dyo kreyo la mujer igual mente al ombre en meolyo i en intelijensa, i en poko tyempo mostremos muestra valor i averguensaremos a los ke no presyan las mujeres, i el Dyo de los syelos estara en nuestra ayuda i todo nuestro saver i entender sea adjuntado a la temor y amor de nuestro kriador. (Gabay, in Alpert [2010: 280-281]).

It is very important to highlight that this new identity as writer attained by some Sephardic women encourages them to write for other women: that is the case of Rosa Gabay,

<sup>4</sup> See Bürki & García Moreno (2016).

<sup>5</sup> About this author: Alpert (2010); Romero (1992).

Reina Hakohén and Laura Papo. The feminine question is at the centre of their concerns, and strongly determines their vocation as writers.

We should remember, in this sense, the three phases which are described by literary analyst Eliane Showalter (1997) in the development of a literature written by women: 1) feminine literature (1840-1880), in which the female writer accepts the common rules and imitates men; 2) feminist literature (1880-1920): the woman bursts into the public space and demands the same rights as men; and 3) literature written by women (1920- ), in which the female writer liberates her creativity.

The three Sephardic writers we cited before place themselves in an intermediate point between the first and the second period. Rosa Gabay, Reina Hakohén and Laura Papo cannot be considered openly feminist writers, but they show a pronounced consciousness of their position as women and they defend, in their way, the dignity of their gender. But, at the same time, as we shall see, they share and even advocate very conservative ideas about women's role in society. Rosa Gabay, in the next fragment, again highlights the importance of education to eradicate the ignorance which prevents women from having a deep knowledge of Jewish religion and law:

Por desgrasya las mujeres estan mankas i de saver la ley. Pero en meldando este libro tenemos la esperansa ke les kitara la lyaga de la inyoransa i les metera en su lugar un dezeo de sensya i sivilizasyon i meldaran los libros mas adelantados ke este, syendo este nuestro libro no es ke una puerta a la entrada de la edukasyon (Gabay, in Alpert [2010: 280]).

Reina Hakohén<sup>6</sup>, our second author, manifests a deeper concern about the role of religion in women's lives. She is the writer who adopts more conservative positions from an ideological point of view. She is an author divided between the preservation of the traditional role of women and the cultural and social transformations that are happening. Reina Hakohén had a wide religious culture, and she published a commentary on the Biblical book of Daniel (*Comentario a Daniel*, Salónica, Ets Hayim, 1901), written in the style of the Sephardic traditional commentary developed in the last books of the series of the *Meam Loez*, the main Biblical commentary in Judeo-Spanish. Some years earlier she had published two polemic essays, very interesting for our purpose here: *Las muchachas modernas. Una buena lisyón a siertas muchachas de muestra époka por kitarlas del kamino yerado* (Modern young ladies. A good lesson for certain young women from our time in order to avoid taking the wrong path, Salónica, Ets Hayim, 1898) and *Por los modernos: Un razonamiento kontra la mansevez de muestra époka* (To the Moderns. An argument against the youth of our time. Salónica, Ets Hayim, 1899). I translated and edited both works in Martín

<sup>6</sup> About this author: Martín Ortega (2013, 2017).

Ortega (2013). In these texts Reina Hakohén criticises the way of life of modern young people, setting herself up as advocate of traditional Sephardic society. Nevertheless, she addresses a feminine audience, and, with her emergence on the literary public scene, she shows that something is changing in the traditional role assigned to women. Reina Hakohén is also the author of an unpublished autobiography, in which she relates mystical experiences.<sup>7</sup>

Reina Hakohén, as Rosa Gabay, explicitly addresses women:

Es a vozotras, senyoritas modernas, ke me adreso. El esprito moderno trokó enteramente vuestras naturas. Si los savyos antiguos, ke avlavan tanto por la maraviosa fuersa de la mujer enverso el ombre, se toparían en esta époka i verían vuestra flosura de korasón, kómo vos estásh deshando sombayer de los ombres i estásh cayendo en sus redes, ivan a dezir: ¿es esto posivle? ¿Puede ser ke el fiero se abolte por kalay, i el kalay por fiero? ¿Kómo la mujer, la krianza más fuerte ke egziste en el mundo, devenir agora tanto flosa? (*Las muchachas modernas*, Reina Hakohén, in Martín Ortega [2013: 156-157]).

Reina Hakohen's thesis, which coincides with the ideas presented by Zemach Rabiner in his famous work *Las madres judías de la época bíblica* (Jewish mothers in the Biblical era, 1913),<sup>8</sup> is that traditional Jewish religion offers women a privileged position. According to Rabiner, Biblical heroines such as Sarah or Judith were women with a huge influence on men: they were strong and from their feminine position, sometimes manipulating men, exercised great power. Reina Hakohén changes up the emerging feminist discourse and uses her ability to write to argue in favour of the maintenance of traditions against modernization. She considers that the role of women at home and in the religious education of children is a fundamental link for the cohesion of Sephardic communities. As we have seen, she warns women against westernization and modernization, because, in her view, these ideas will weaken them and they will eventually be humiliated by men.

Nevertheless, it is paradoxical that the tool she uses to express these ideas is somehow the result of this incipient modernization: indeed, she criticizes the social changes that had granted her access to education and literacy, and even the publication of her works. It is thus an example of the contradictions of first Sephardic writers, because she uses an emancipatory tool, such as writing, to renew traditional values. We could say that she is an anti-feminist writer, as the aim of her polemic texts is to persuade young women not to be seduced by modernization.

She is especially worried about the new relationships between men and women. She warns young ladies against thinking that they will be freer being "modernas": according to

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<sup>7</sup> Hadar (2016).

<sup>8</sup> Rivlin (2016).

her, it is exactly the contrary, these changes lead to a complete submission of women, something that did not happen in traditional society. She focuses her discourse on the idea that young women are being deceived:

Agora me vo aboltar por avlarvos a vozotras, o senyoritas modernas. Ke i a vozotras vos topo mucha kulpa. Prima ke vos afeitásh kon todo modo de afeite, i vos afermoziguásh kon ermozuras falsas i vos enlusásh kon mucho lukso i fantazía para azer buyir la sangre de los mansevos, ¿no sabésh ke kyen mal pensa para sí se\_lo pensa? Ke este buyor está kayendo en vozotras propyas, ke lo ke pensásh de azerles a\_lo mansevos vos azen los mansevos a vozotras, ke kon sus artífisyos i flaterías vos enganyan i vos aferan en sus redes fin ke se enfastían i vos abandonan. I todo lo ke perkurásh de afeitarvos i de afermoziguarvos para azervos amar de eyos es embaldes, la ermozura falsa ke merkásh es baldía. Las parás vos kedan gastadas i no ganásh nada. Los mansevos modernos no se deshan sombayer de la ermozura, ni de los afeites, ni de los luksos (*Las muchachas modernas*, Reina Hakohén, in Martín Ortega [2013: 159]).

After these two pioneer incursions in the essays written by Rosa Gabay and Reina Hakohén, we are going to shift our attention to Laura Papo<sup>9</sup>, who is the first great female writer in Judeo Spanish, with an extended work in different literary genres and a full consciousness of her duty. She was born in Sarajevo in 1891 and died in 1942. She signed her works with the pseudonym 'Bohoreta' (which means the oldest sister). She was educated at the school of the Alliance Israelite Universelle of Istanbul, but she spent most of her life in Sarajevo, where her sisters ran their own business, a fashion boutique. She is thus an example of modern and emancipated Sephardic women. The fact that she lived in Sarajevo helps to explain her economic activity, as it was the place where the situation of women changed faster. She cultivated poetry, narrative, theatre and essay.

In this context, the essay *La mužer sefardi de Bosna* (1932) (The Sephardic woman from Bosnia)<sup>10</sup> is particularly relevant. Laura Papo describes the situation of Sephardic women in traditional society and the changes undergone in the last fifty years (since 1889), women's access to education and remunerated work, the end of arranged marriages and the adoption of new habits and customs.

The first text that we choose by Laura Papo again stresses the importance to women of education and literacy. The author denounces that some younger women are not aware of the privileges that they enjoy in comparison with their grandmothers, being able to read and write. The act of reading is conceived as a liberation but also as a source of pleasure, something that has considerably improved the lives of women. In addition, Laura Papo

<sup>9</sup> About this author: Papo (2010, 2012, 2016); Jovanović (2015); Kovačević (2010); Sánchez (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Muhamed Nezirović published a facsimile edition of the manuscript of Laura Papo (2005), accompanied by a Bosnian translation: *Sefardska žena u Bosni*.

affirms that illiteracy was a source of suffering for the majority of women, who were jealous of the few that could read. Literacy is conceived as a source of empowerment and self-satisfaction.

Se puede dizir ke ea tuvo interesu por saver y el analfabetismo las izo sufrir, el no saver meldar las gulio mu'cho. Konte ke las pokas mu'zeres ke merecieron a saver meldar "ladino" hueron envidadas komo oj no se envidia a "milioneras". Oj en dia kuando las mansevas las e'can en kara las vie'zas ke keren mas gozar ke las 'zovenas, eas dan una ripuesta muj original, y esto una komo la otra: "Eei mis fi'zikjas vozotras viviteš en buen dor, sabeš medar akejos livros, ooh alma mia!" Eas ja dubian ke el meldar puede ser un buen kompanjero en la soledat, y dizen los savios ke akel ke melda kon plazer tiene algo mas de la vida (Papo, in Kovačević [2010: 287]).

The final words seem to be an appeal to young women not to forget the liberating nature of the act of reading. However, Laura Papo also shares some of the ambivalences of the women from her time. On the one hand, she adopts quite advanced ideas regarding the traditional feminine role, but on the other hand she does not identify at all with feminist theses (note that she already uses the word "feminists"), which she criticizes openly. In the next passage the writer focuses on the difficulties of reconciling domestic and working life, and she does so whilst criticizing those women who neglect their family obligations to work outside the home:

Ea, la ganadera, si komo es mu'zer deve multiplikar sus huersas. Es lazdrar en kaza y ahuera de kaza y ansina trebika, presto, y los nervos se aflakan, y ea mal y malanjo piedra por kaveza. Es enganjar la natura, y la natura se venga kuando no se tiene cuenta de sus leyes. Es kontra la natura ke la mu'zer peleje por el pan! Ea apartiene en su kaza ke sea la ke guardia de sus kriaturas, de estos 'cikos ke el Bendi'co la konfio, y su lugar no es ni en las kancelarias ni en las botikas! Y ke avlen las feministas loke keren, este pleto por el pan, de la mu'zer aflošo el kazamiento. Un poko de esta dezgrasia empeso a gostar y la mu'zer sefardí (Papo, in Kovačević [2010: 289]).

It is remarkable that Laura Papo uses an essentialist argument about the nature of women to criticize those who neglect their marital duties; it is also surprising that she does this from her position of a working woman. But once again we have to bear in mind that the process of literacy of women runs in parallel to a redefinition of their identity both as women and as members of the ethno-confessional community, and that process is often full of ambivalent thoughts and feelings, and what we could consider contradictions, such as writing to stand up for traditional values, or showing constant fluctuations between the desire to participate in social spheres not long before reserved to men and the will to preserve the specificity of the woman's world. It should be remembered that these processes

are not exclusive to Sephardic women, but can be observed in almost all phenomena of women's emancipation.

### 3. MEMORY BOOKS AND RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST THROUGH WRITING

The political and social changes that occurred in the former Ottoman Empire during the first half of the twentieth century transformed, as we have seen, the traditional role of women, but they also contributed to the dispersion and disintegration of Sephardic communities. In this context, which is parallel to the rapid decline of Judeo-Spanish as a vernacular language, we find a good number of Sephardic women who decide to write in Judeo-Spanish, even though most of them already live in other countries (Israel, Europe, United States, Latin America). Their purpose is to preserve the memory of an irrecoverable past.<sup>11</sup>

Among them I am especially interested in the authors of memory books. The sense of the decline of their own culture, emigration and the loss of roots prompted a good number of Sephardim to write about their memories of childhood and youth in traditional communities. The memories of the tragedy of the Second World War occupy a very important place among these works.

The autobiographies of women, widely studied by a researcher, Pilar Romeu Ferré<sup>12</sup>, are full of critical references to patriarchy, and their authors construct a faithful mirror of the subordination of Sephardic women and their struggle to overcome this situation. Most of these works are not written in Judeo-Spanish, but we can find some cases of memory books in this language. I shall mention only one case, the memories of Jamila Kolonomos (2008), a Macedonian Jew born in 1922, *Monastir sin djudios* (Monastir without Jews), published in Judeo-Spanish and in English, and studied by Krinka Vidaković-Petrov (2016).

Feminist literary criticism has attracted the attention via-à-vis the relevance of intimacy and the domestic sphere in women's narratives.<sup>13</sup> Social phenomena and political facts are reflected through private experiences, and very often memory is linked to objects of daily life, such as food, furniture or clothes.

At the beginning of the book, the author describes the diglossia of her childhood: "In my childhood, I knew only Ladino. At school I began to learn Serbian and French. Ladino was used at home, only with relatives and friends we spoke in that language" (Kolonomos, in

<sup>11</sup> On the poetry written by Sephardic women in Judeo-Spanish after 1945, see Martín Ortega (2014).

<sup>12</sup> Romeu Ferré (2012, 2016); Díaz-Mas & Romeu Ferré (2011, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Didier (1999); Cixous (1975).

Vidaković-Petrov [2016: 249]). The fact that convinces the author to return to Judeo-Spanish as a written language is the Shoah. Jamila Kolonomos was one of the few Macedonian Jews who avoided deportation and death. In the next passage we see how the memory of objects is essential in order to understand the tragedy and the author's feelings. Jamila has returned to liberated Bitola, in 1945, and she owns nothing. In order to eat, she has to sell the only thing she has: some dresses which had been kept by a neighbour:

Finally, the time came to sell the last dress, the one that was much loved and beautifully embroidered by Madame Dudu. With a heavy heart I took it, pressing it to my bosom, and with tears in my eyes, I walked the streets. I felt my mother's breath, and I saw before my eyes the holidays and imagined how she was dressed. I wavered: "Ke lo vende, ke no lo vende?" (Shall I sell it, shall I not sell it"). Then a voice was telling me, "Va, los chikos stan frambrientos" ("Go ahead, the little ones are hungry"). At that moment, a young woman passed in front of me, wearing an expensive blue dress, which I recognized. I started to turn right, and she turned around, and what did I see? A dress of mine with the monogram embroidered by me. I was shaken and embittered, as if hit by lightning – I was out of my mind. Running I went to the bazar and sold this last dress to the first village woman I met, for a little flour, two eggs, and a scoop of butter. How much I wanted to hold the dress against me! But worse pains and indignities that we can never forget had befallen us – our loved ones who would never return... (Kolonomos, in Vidaković-Petrov [2016: 255-256]).

Krinka Vidaković-Petrov points out that the principal elements of this passage are representative of women's narrative: the central image (a dress), the female characters, a feminine social role (the provision of food) and where the scene takes place (a market). This kind of analysis could apply to other memory books written by women, in which the authors try to rescue the elements of intimacy that characterized the life of Sephardic women in traditional communities.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

We could find many more examples of the emergence of a literature written by Sephardic women either in Judeo-Spanish or in other languages. My purpose in this article has been to show how the fact of being writers has changed women's self-perception, and how their feminine world is reflected in literary works. There is no doubt that women write from their particular condition, with the complexity of their own contradictions, and consciousness of their particularities. In the case of Sephardic culture, they are privileged witnesses of the changes that have occurred in the last 150 years, and they have led literary production in Judeo-Spanish since the Holocaust. After being precluded from written culture for centuries, they have conquered this space at the time of the decline of Judeo-Spanish, once again becoming the keepers or preservers of collective memory.

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