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Representations of Westerners in Contemporary Arab British Women's Fiction: Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*

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Abstract: *Western characters are quite prominent in the works of Arab novelists in diaspora since the events of these novels are mainly set in European and American urban spaces. European and American characters have been rendered differently from one period to another and from one Arab writer to another. In this context, one may suggest that the portrayal of Westerners by Arab British women writers may be described as ambivalent as some writers represent them favorably while others depict them in unfavorable ways. Moreover, one can find both favorable and unfavorable representations of Western characters in the same literary work. This study investigates how Westerners are portrayed in the works of two Arab British women writers. Specifically, this paper investigates how Ahdaf Soueif's The Map of Love and Fadia Faqir's My Name is Salma ambivalently depict Western characters. In her representation of Westerners, Soueif aims at producing a Western voice which speaks for the colonized against the colonizer while Faqir aims at highlighting her protagonist's mental and psychological dilemma as a vulnerable refugee through her interactions with various Western characters. Overall, negative representations of some Westerners are certainly counterpoised by positive depictions of some others. Both Soueif and Faqir carefully portray their Western characters in a way that reflects the two novelists' astute artistic and creative powers.*

Keywords: *Arab British, Westerner, Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Literary representations*

1. Introduction

In his book, *The Arab Atlantic*, Yousef Awad (2012) delineates the thematic differences between the works of Arab American and Arab British novelists (p. 7). Awad's argument is based on the idea that Arab communities in the US and Britain have undergone divergent immigration and settlement experiences, and hence, the literary works by respective Arab authors reflect two different socioeconomic, political cultural and historical realities (p. 8). Awad insists that there is a tendency among Arab British women writers "to foreground a cross-cultural dialogue and represent a cross-ethnic identification strategy [. . .] to create links between the Arab characters they depict and other characters from different ethnic backgrounds" (p. 26). The works of Arab British women writers, Awad concludes, positively portray non-white ethnic characters and give them major roles in the fictional worlds they create (p. 26). In this spirit, this study investigates

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how two Arab British novelists, i. e. Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqir, represent white British characters in their novels *The Map of Love* (1999) and *My Name is Salma* (2007), respectively.

A careful look at the works of Arab British women writers shows that, in each work, there is at least one Western character (i. e. white British) that plays a relatively significant role in the development of the plot. This is quite natural if one takes into account that most of these novels are set in Britain. Additionally, one may view Arab British women writers' tendency to include Western characters in their works as a continuation of a long history of the representation of European and American characters by Arab writers in their works. In fact, Westerners have been continuously portrayed in the works of Arab writers in various ways. This portrayal has differed from one period to another and from one Arab writer to another and could be described as ambivalent since some Arab writers represent European and American characters in favorable ways while other Arab writers depict them unfavorably. Moreover, one can find both favorable and unfavorable representations of Westerners in the same literary work.

Rasheed El-Enany (2006) has thoroughly studied the depiction of European and American characters by Arab writers. He states that this depiction could be described as having "a sense of dichotomy, of ambivalence, of simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards their object, and towards modernity in so much as it is a Western thing" (p. 8). The portrayal is a kind of debate which depends on how Arabs view the West. According to El-Enany, this portrayal is the result of the encounter between the West and the East (p. 8). El-Enany maintains that the West and Westerners have always been both a "malady" and "remedy" (p. 3). He adds that during the 19th century, Arabs admired Europe because of its Enlightenment and its improvements in science and industry which the Arab world lacked (p. 33). El-Enany explains that most of the representations of the West by Arab writers in the 19th and early 20th centuries were related to Europe. But after the Second World War, the power moved to the United States. El-Enany summarizes Arab representations of Westerners in two manners. Some Arab writers still represent the West, whether Europe or the US, as an oppressor and a tyrant, while, others represent the West as a savior and a refuge from their country and a place of freedom (pp. 185-186).

Mansour Dhabab (2005) states that Arab intellectuals' interests in the West increased in the 19th century due to imperialism and colonization during that time. Arab intellectuals who were educated in the West supported the idea of adopting the practices of the West and applying them in the Arab world (pp. 67-68). Dhabab also states that some Arab intellectuals represent the colonizer (the West) from the point of view of the colonized (the East). Novels which were written in the time of the occupation are "confrontations" which are written from the perspective of the occupied (p. 101). Arabs awoke on the negative image of the West due to the impact of the occupations in the East but still they were fascinated by the materialistic civilization of the West which helped the West rule the world (pp. 208-209).

This study investigates how Westerners are portrayed in both favorable and unfavorable ways in the works of two Arab British women novelists, Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* (1999) and Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007). More specifically, this paper examines how Soueif

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and Faqir portray white British characters since the two novels are partly set in Britain. Both novelists have ambivalently depicted white British characters in their fiction. Through her representation of Westerners, Soueif aims at producing a Western voice which speaks for the colonized against the colonizer while Faqir's representations of Western characters highlights her protagonist's mental and psychological dilemma since she is stuck in-between the East and the West. Overall, one may argue that the representation of Western characters in the works of both is marked by ambivalence, malleability and indeterminacy.

2. Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*

Soueif's novel narrates the story of Lady Anna Winterbourne who travels to Egypt at the turn of the 19th century and gets married to Egyptian aristocrat, Sharif Pasha. The novel also tells the story of Anna's great granddaughter, Isabel, who travels to Egypt at the turn of the 20th century and reconnects with her roots. In the novel, Soueif represents many Westerners in favorable and unfavorable ways. She depicts two main Western characters unfavorably, Emily and Lord Cromer. Emily is Anna's maid who accompanies her to Egypt. Anna decides to stay in Egypt, but Emily decides to go back (p. 348). She does not enjoy her stay in Egypt, nor can she cope with living there. Emily is represented by Soueif as a Westerner who looks down on the Arabs and views them as inferior creatures. For instance, when Anna goes to the bazaar with Emily, Emily is afraid she might be abducted. In her letter to Charles, Anna says, "Emily was much relieved to get back to the Hotel for she constantly feared we would be abducted and dragged into one of the dark, narrow alleys […] she said we should be sold as slaves" (p. 68). In the same letter, Anna shows her frustration with Emily's isolationist approach as she is "determined that neither she nor I will venture again into Old Cairo except under British guard!" (p. 68). It could be noticed from Anna's words that Emily despises Arabs and consider them as violent savages and barbarians who abduct people and sell them as slaves. This is why Emily thinks that they only have to walk in the streets of Cairo under the British guard.

Emily's prejudice against Egyptian natives can be understood within the context of social class discourses in colonial Britain. Emily is a white working class British woman. According to Alastair Bonnett (1998), people from the working class in Britain were stigmatized and marginalized, but because of imperialist expansion and immigration, a hierarchal classification existed even within the working class because it consisted of white and non-white people (p. 317). Both were stigmatized and marginalized by upper class Britons, but the white people from the working class were considered white British in colonized settings. Although they were marginalized in Britain, in colonized settings, they felt superior to indigenous people in the colonies (p. 321). Hence, Bonnett's argument explains Emily's repulsive attitudes towards the natives in Egypt.

The second character who is unfavorably represented by Soueif is Lord Cromer, who is a historic and significant figure to the novel. Elsayed Ahmed (2010) explains that under the British occupation of Egypt, Cromer ruled Egypt from 1883-1907. Ahmed also adds that Cromer

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improved the country's economy but ignored society and its people which greatly contributed to the increase of anti-imperialist "nationalistic sentiments" among Egypt's educated elites (pp. 66-67). In the novel, Soueif focuses on Cromer's shortcomings. For instance, Cromer adamantly opposes the education of women in Egypt (p. 248). Ahmed explains that Cromer tried to deprive the Egyptians from their rights, such as education. The Egyptians were only allowed a primary education because the British were afraid of the Egyptian enlightenment (p. 67). Cromer, according to Ahmed, looked down on people in the East because he believed that they were barbarians and backward (p. 67). This explains why Cromer, in the novel, opposes the marriage of Sharif and Anna. He believes that Sharif is not a suitable husband for Anna. In short, Soueif's representation of Cromer focuses on anti-Arab attitudes and sentiments. As a colonial ruler, Cromer epitomizes injustice, exploitation and oppression.

On the other hand, Soueif represents two Westerners in favorable ways, Isabel Parkman and Anna Winterborne. Isabel and her great grandmother, Anna, come to Egypt at different periods. Isabel is an American journalist who comes to Amal's house in Cairo to deliver Anna's trunk (p. 11). According to Ahmed, this intimate relationship between the East and the West which Soueif presents removes any kind of difference between them and shows that they are the same (p. 105). Commenting on this distinguished transnational relationship, Catherine Wynne (2006) commends Soueif for destabilizing the homogeneity of patriarchal and imperial narratives (p. 56). This is particularly demonstrated in presenting open-minded and empathetic Western characters like British Anna and American Isabel.

According to Ahmed, Anna and Isabel are two Western women who respect the traditions of Egypt and want to know everything about it (p. 97). Anna is represented as a Westerner who respects Egypt's religious and cultural difference and diversity. As an example, Anna enjoys wearing the veil and says, '"Still, it is a most liberating thing, this veil. While I was wearing it, I could look wherever I wanted and nobody could look back at me. Nobody could find out who I was"' (p. 195). Ahmed adds that Anna wears the veil as a sign of respect and she wants to live the moment of any native woman wearing it (p. 99). As Awad (2012) succinctly puts it, Anna's "ability to understand the empowering dimension of her experience of wearing the veil makes her identify with other Arab women" (p. 138). Another example which shows how Anna respects the traditions of Egypt is when she goes to the Khedive's Ball. She tries to wear a dress that gives her "adequate covering and would not cause offence" because she knew some Muslim notables would be attending (p. 94).

El-Enany states that Soueif portrays Anna as the voice of the Westerners who sympathize with the oppressed. It is the Western voice against the British Empire which is hardly heard all through history. El-Enany asserts that Anna believes that the occupier has no right in what it does and knows that the occupied is a human who has rights (p. 203). He adds that Soueif depicts a Western woman who accepts cultural difference and is open to it without giving a sense of superiority of herself as a Westerner (p. 204). According to Awad (2011), Soueif uses Anna to represent the real image of a new generation of Westerners who show how cross-cultural

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negotiation and dialogue could happen. Awad adds that Soueif positions Lady Anna in the "Mezzaterra" which is a place where many cultures meet and interact with each other (p. 134).

In a letter to her father in law, Sir Charles, Anna writes that she understands what the British are doing to the Egyptians. They are trying to deny that they "have consciousness of themselves" (p. 247). She shows how the British believe that the Egyptians cannot rule themselves. Muna Abd-Rabbo (2016) states that Soueif tries to correct the image of the Arabs in the West through Anna and Isabel. Anna is portrayed as anti-imperialist. She is against what the British Empire conducts in its colonies even before she goes to Egypt (p. 65). Al Doori and Awad (2018) also comment on how Soueif aims in her novel to show the real conflicts between the colonized and the colonizer to represent life during the British Empire and show the colonizer's hypocrisy through Anna's eyes (p. 2). By marrying Sharif Pasha, Anna shows that she has no bias or prejudice towards Arabs. Unlike Emily and Cromer, who look down upon Egyptian natives, Anna is tolerant and open-minded.

Isabel is also favorably depicted by Soueif. Isabel befriends Amal and other Egyptian women and does not look down on them. Isabel also respects Egyptian traditions and cultural values. She wears a long-sleeved top and a long skirt with a scarf when she goes out with Amal (p. 165). Awad (2011) states that Isabel is portrayed as a flexible and open-minded Western woman who upholds and accepts cultural differences (p. 135). Isabel is represented by Soueif as a Western who is so keen to know Egypt and learn Arabic (p. 82). Soueif also favorably depicts other minor Western characters such as Sir Charles. Abd-Rabbo asserts that Anna is influenced by Sir Charles, who is a staunch opponent of the British Empire and the violence it perpetrates in the colonies (p. 65). Mr. Willcocks is also favorably represented by Soueif. He stands up for the Egyptians and says that little has been done for educating people in Egypt. He also criticizes the British Empire for believing that the Egyptians are unable to rule themselves (p. 99). Overall, Soueif's unfavorable representation of Emily and Cromer is counterbalanced by favorable depictions of Anna, Isabel and a host of other minor characters.

3. Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma*

Similarly, Faqir depicts a number of Western characters in favorably and unfavorably ways in her novel *My Name is Salma*. In other words, ambivalence marks her representations of Western characters. The novel narrates the story of Salma who, due to illicit pregnancy, flees her home village to Britain with the help of missionaries. In Britain she begins a new life but remains nostalgic to her country and her daughter whom she has never seen. Faqir unfavorably depicts two Western characters - Elizabeth and Max. Elizabeth, or Liz, is the owner of the house where Salma stays. Liz always calls Salma a foreigner and an alien and considers her an illegal immigrant (pp. 23-24). According to Nayera El-Miniawi (2016), Faqir depicts the West as non-welcoming since Westerners look at Arabs as strange aliens (p. 3). These unwelcoming attitudes are experienced by Salma, who feels alienated and detached:

> '"It was like a curse upon my head; it was my fate: my accent and the colour of my skin. I could hear it sung everywhere: in the cathedral, "WHERE DO YOU

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> COME FROM?" […] Sometimes even the cows on the hills would line up, kick their legs in unison and sing, "Where do you come from, you? Go home!" (p. 167)

As Salma's words clearly show, she is estranged in the new society where everyone feels she is an outsider. She expresses her annoyance with how people around her perceive her. She feels that every object which surrounds her is aware of her being alien and strange. Thus, one may argue that upon arrival to Britain, Salma feels alienated and displaced.

According to Dallel Sarnou (2016), Faqir's representation of Liz should be read within the context of British colonialist heritage and how Orientalists have traditionally looked at the Orient (p. 8). At the beginning of the novel, Salma portrays Liz as "Liz, Elizabeth, Queen Elizabeth I, Her Highness, my landlady" (p. 10). Sarnou adds that such representation symbolizes British imperialist power (p. 10). One day Salma is whipped by Liz while Liz was shouting, "'Slaves must never breathe English air'" (p. 185). Since Liz's father used to be a colonial administrator in India, Liz, according to Sarnou, looks down on everyone who is considered as an "other" and she considers him/her backward and invisible (p. 8).

Roger Louis (2013) states that the colonists dominated and ruled the lives and the opportunities of people in British colonies. The Empire offered many jobs for the British in the colonies, especially India where they lived a luxurious life. During the British reign, according to Judith Brown, less than 157,000 Britons lived in India and most of the men who lived there were in the British army serving the Empire or as civilians working in the Indian government to rule the Indians or officers of the Indian army (p. 136). According to Simon Potter, they were called administrators whose job was to rule the British colonies (p. 54). After the British rule ended, these administrators were pulled back to Britain and retired to "segregated enclaves" (p. 57). Liz's father was one of these administrators in India and was served by Indian servants.

Faqir, according to Sibyl Adam (2017), presents the fact that "Britain's disillusionment with multiculturalism and anxiety over immigration is part of a national amnesia about colonial history and the unmourned lost power" (p. 15). This could be applied to the personality of Liz in the novel who still mourns her past status during the British Empire. According to Adam, Liz's xenophobic attitudes result from the loss of power which she, as the daughter of a colonial administrator, used to enjoy over Indian servants (p. 15). This could be seen in the words of Liz to Salma in the previous quotations and when she says, "'You know, ayah, I wish I had never set foot in India. Everyone looked up to me and served me. Servants carried me to school, you dressed me, Hita cooked for us'" (p. 176). Liz addresses Salma as one of her servants, using the word ayah. Then in another scene, Salma says, '"Liz would speak to me as if I were her servant in India"' (p. 48).

Faqir, as Adam states, represents the relation between Salma and Liz in a significant way. Liz, like Salma, is an immigrant but what differs is her status in India. She had the privileged position unlike Salma in London. Liz is aware of this difference and still maintains this difference by her physical and verbal abuse of Salma (p. 15). Although Liz looks at Salma with contempt, Liz herself has been a victim of patriarchal prejudice presented by her father who

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refused to marry her to her Indian servant/ boyfriend, Hita. Liz describes her relation with her beloved servant to Salma and says, "'He became the master and I the slave girl attending to his every need. He whispered orders and I, the English lady, obeyed'" (p. 261). So Liz suffers from being a victim of patriarchal oppression when she is prevented from marrying the man she loves because of ethnic and racial boundaries. Overall, although Faqir depicts Liz as obnoxious, haughty and hot-tempered, she also portrays her as a victim of a patriarchal colonial system that crushes personality and defaces her true feelings. The second white British character that Faqir represents negatively is Max, who is Salma's boss at the tailor shop. Max scorns Salma as an Arab. This could be noticed from his words while talking to Salma. For instance, he says, "'Who was it? One of them Arabs?'", then he continues, "'You know what bugs me about them. They come here like an army, buy houses and cars then sell their houses and cars without us hard-working English people making a sodding penny out of it. They don't go to estate agents or dealers, no, they buy off each other'" (p. 152). Max's words imply that he harbors racist thoughts about Arabs who, according to Max, come to Britain to make money. Awad states that Max is portrayed by Faqir as a working class Englishman who believes that Arabs are materialistic who prefer to live in isolation from the larger British community (p. 59). In another episode, Max comments on Princess Diana's picture in a swimming suit and criticizes her. Max says, "'Sal, you don't know anything about us, the British, do you? […] I don't blame you being foreign and all'" (241). Max's words indicate that he does not accept Salma as a British citizen who belongs to British culture. Indeed, Max attempts to push Salma to the margins of the nation and exclude her from what constitutes Britain. Ahlem Belarbi (2017) states that Max is racist because of how he judges Salma in a bad way because of being an Arab (p. 28). Shaffira Gayatri (2015) also states that Max is portrayed by Faqir as an Englishman who feels that Salma is inferior to him because of her skin color and ethnic origins (75).

However, these negative representations are offset by the depiction of some white British characters as welcoming and tolerant saviors and rescuers. These four main Westerners are Miss Asher, Rebecca, Minister Mahoney and John. Miss Asher is a British nun who saves Salma from being killed by her brother by taking her to England as a new person. Rebecca meets Salma on the ship and starts to teach her how to communicate efficiently and teaches her table manners (p. 108). According to Sally Karmi and Ayman Yasin (2017), Faqir depicts Miss Asher and Rebecca as "civilized, independent, supportive and very kind" (p.4). Belarbi points out that when Rebecca teaches Salma table manners, a kind of intercultural interaction occurs between the two which removes any kind of cultural difference (p. 30).

The other Westerner represented by Faqir is Minister Mahoney who tells Salma that she is welcomed to stay in his house (pp. 34-35). Minister Mahoney calms Salma down when she tells him that she has done something bad and tells her, "'We have all done things we regret… it's part of being human'" (p.39). Karmi and Yasin argue that Minister Mahoney is depicted as "tolerant", "understanding" and noble (p. 5). He does not even try to convince Salma to convert to Christianity, unlike Miss Asher who talks to her a lot about Christianity and Jesus. Mark Thomsen (1996) states that the role of Christian missionaries in the Middle East is to inform the

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Muslims about Jesus Christ to convert them to Christianity. They inform them that Jesus is the power of God and is the one who represents "the cosmic Lord of the universe" (p. 196). Thomsen also states that the role of the missionaries is to introduce Jesus to Muslims as a "servant" and as "crucified" (p. 196). He adds that their role with Muslims is so challenging because Muslims are introduced to Christianity by the Qur'an, which is different from what Christians really claim.

Heather Sharkey (2004) argues that many Muslim thinkers and writers in the Arab world consider the role of the missionaries as part of Western anti-Islam attitudes in the Middle East in the late 20th century. They write from the perspective of being anti-imperial, anti-missionary and postcolonial. They try to urge Arabs not to be influenced by such beliefs (p. 98). Sharkey also adds that the role of the missionaries is dangerous not only because they want to convert people to Christianity, but also because they aim at expanding Western values (p. 100).

In *My Name is Salma*, Miss Asher tells Salma about Jesus and how it is better for her to take her veil off. When Salma tells Miss Asher that she must not eat pork because she will be burnt by God, Miss Asher replies, "'Not the Christian God, he is love. He loves and forgives'" (p. 165). Then she continues "'Jesus Christ loves you, child. It says so in the Gospel. Here is a copy. Read it sometime'" (p. 165). Miss Asher tries to convert Salma to Christianity and convince her to follow Western life style. Despite her pitfalls and shortcomings, Miss Asher is generally portrayed throughout the novel in a favorable way because she saves Salma from being killed. One may convincingly argue that Faqir's portrayal of Miss Asher is quite complex and multidimensional. Still, any negative traits that Faqir attributes to Miss Asher are certainly cancelled out by Faqir's representation of Minister Mahoney as the epitome of grace, kindness and tolerance.

The fourth Westerner represented positively in Faqir's novel is Dr. John Robson, Salma's professor at the university (p. 166). Salma marries John and gives birth to a baby boy whom they name Imran (p. 262). According to El-Miniawi, Faqir tries to create a kind of reconciliation between the East (Salma) and the West (John) through marriage. The result of their marriage is a baby boy which is considered as a "coronation" to the rebuilt relationship between the East and the West (p. 48). It is apt here to point out the stark differences between John and Hamdan, the man with whom Salma had sex out of wedlock in her home village. Unlike John, who physically and psychologically supports Salma, Hamdan immediately deserts her once he finds out that she is pregnant. In contrast, John actually converts to Islam to marry Salma. He is a refined person who loves Salma and supports her wholeheartedly. He has no exotic fantasies about Arabs; he is open-minded and extremely empathetic. His position as a Geordie, a native of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, makes him better under Salma's precarious and uncomfortable position as a stigmatized immigrant in Britain.

There are other Western characters that help Salma throughout the novel and are depicted positively such as Gwen. She is Salma's Welsh friend whom she helps in her housework (p. 83). Whenever she sees Salma upset, she tells her that people must be proud of who they are and must follow their roots (p. 217). Gwen cares about Salma and always tries to

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comfort her. Gwen and John are kind to Salma. Mr. Wright (Allan) is also portrayed as a favorable Westerner by Faqir. He is the bar manager in Royal Hotel where Salma works. He does not like it when someone tries to touch Salma or harass her, so he keeps her behind the bar away from the drunken men (p. 160). He cares about Salma and tells her that she has to wear decent clothes (p. 160). Allan is represented as a caring Westerner who does not find Salma different. He treats her with respect as a lady, and not as an alien.

4. Conclusion

Arab women in diaspora depict in their writings divergent Western characters who express heterogeneous and diverse Western attitudes and views on Arab people and Arab culture. Some of these Western characters are favorably depicted while others are unfavorably represented. In fact, a careful examination of Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Faqir's *My Name is Salma*, two novels which are set between Arab countries and Britain, shows that in each novel there are examples of favorable and unfavorable depictions of white British characters. Both Arab British women writers take credit for presenting a variety of Western characters in their novels. Multidimensional as they are, these characters are nuanced portrayal of existing European and American attitudes towards Arab people and Arab culture. El-Enany postulates that Arab writers have traditionally represented the West and Westerners in an ambivalent way. This can be clearly seen in the works of the two Arab British novelists as this study has shown. Some of these writers aim at producing a Western voice from within the Western civilization that condemns imperialism and colonialism and speaks on behalf the colonized against the colonizer as Ahdaf Soueif does in her work. Others, like Fadia Faqir, aim at highlighting the mental and psychological limbo that Arab people experience as they immigrate to the West and settle there. Overall, negative representations of some Westerners are certainly counterpoised by positive depictions of some others. In other words, both Soueif and Faqir rigorously and meticulously portray their Western characters in a way that reflects the two novelists' acute attentions to minute details.

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