

## The Portrayal of Women: Feminist Analysis of A Hologram for The King

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### **Abstract:**

This research paper attempts to investigate the representation of women, their character and their rights in Dave Eggers' novel *A Hologram for the King* (2012), according to the feministic approach to literary works. Gender bias has been reflected in many literary works from classical canonical works to contemporary literary ones and has been dealt with in many critical pieces. The theme of self-objectification, which is closely tied to gender bias to some extent, has not been analyzed, independently and fully, especially in the literature of the post-colonial era. The current study scrutinizes the writer's portrayal of women characters in order to uncover the replication of the same stereotypes and gender bias categories against women, dominant in the literary works before the post-colonial era. Based on the feminist approach, *A Hologram for the King* is identified as a misogynist work although it is written in postmodern era. The author of the novel, is inspired by men's superiority, creates a completely distorted image of women by introducing them as people who turn themselves into objects of pleasure for men. The novelist further deprives women of their rights and misrepresents them as unprincipled humans, disparaging them as naïve and sexually licentious creatures. After all, this study becomes a means of writing back against marginalization of women, in their picturization and their subordination to men.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Dave Eggers' *A Hologram for the King*, Patriarchal Society, and Self-Objectification.

## **I- Introduction:**

### **I.I- Background**

Dave Eggers (1970) is an American literary writer who produced many works from the beginning of his career, including *A Hologram for the King* in 2012. The author has also penned some other fictional, nonfictional and memoir work, but what brought him to the spotlight was a novel named *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* in 2000.

Nevertheless, *A Hologram for the King* is another work of the writer which has attracted much attention. Eggers explains that the novel sprouted from a conversation in 2008 which he had with his brother-in-law who had joined an international corporation journey to King Abdullah Economic City the same year (Eggers, 2012). The novel revolves around the life of Alan Clay, who travels to Saudi Arabia to ease his financial problems. He seeks to exhibit a hologram for the Saudi King. After many attempts, he finally manages to introduce his project. Although the King admires Alan's project, he would contract one of the Chinese companies and Alan's team would soon dismantle and pack their equipment. "Then load(ed) all of it and themselves into the shuttle. They saw no point in staying, so they left Saudi Arabia the next day". However, Alan decides to stay in Saudi Arabia after being offered a new job. "He wasn't being sent away, after all, and he couldn't go home yet, not empty handed like this. So, he would stay. He had to". And in so doing, he wins not only a job but also a beloved, called Dr. Zahra Hakim (Ibid, pp. 230-1).

### **I.II- A Survey of Tendencies Against Women**

Since their creation, men and women have been bound to one another by various ties and for different reasons as an inevitable consequence of living together in the community. Throughout the centuries, the nature of this relation and the status of each sex in this relation, in all arenas of life, be it cultural, political or economic, has remained a very controversial subject. As it will be shown in the following examples, philosophers and scholars have reacted differently to this subject. It comes as a shock to many when they read about the Western civilizations' attitudes towards women in the ancient times. During the classical period and more specifically with the ancient Greeks, Plato (c.427- c.347 B.C. E) attributed weakness to women and thanked gods for two sorts of blessings. Plato referred to these blessings as not coming into existence either as a slave or as a woman. The idea of men's superiority over women was carried into the Renaissance period as the English playwright William Shakespeare suggested that most of women do not have character at all (Bressler, 2007). The advocates of this disparaging view against women were not only men but also women themselves. For instance, the French critic and playwright Valentine de Saint-Point maintained that claiming equality between men and women is sheer madness, asserting that "feminism is a political mistake. Feminism is a mistake made by a woman's intellect, a mistake which her instincts will recognize" (Ibid, p.170).

The prejudice against women is sometimes linked to the religion which is deep-rooted in the Western culture. In her controversial book, *Why the Catholic Church Must Change: A Necessary Conversation*, the American author Margaret Ralph (2007, p.82) explains that "some prejudices are so deeply embedded in one's culture that they are not recognized as prejudice; they are accepted as God's own order.... prejudice against women has deep roots in Western civilization". Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is hardly controversial to claim that women are living up to their own rights. There is still a strong tendency to sideline women, as procreators

confined to house, in the same traditional approach which has kept men and women apart, men as the breadwinner of the family and women as housewives. “The work of caring and nurturing is normatively assigned to women” (Scott, Crompton & Lyonette, 2010, p. 2). Although nowadays women are drawn out of the house zone into different bread-winning opportunities and businesses, practicing high and low professions, this further participation in the social life should not be interpreted as a turning point in the original discriminatory attitude against women, because modern life conditions necessitate women’s participation. Many women all over the world are still responsible for housework despite being employed. The renowned American politician Sheila Ruth (2001, p. 349) labels this obligation as a “double burden”. In short, gender inequality has had different levels and paths in the previous centuries, but in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it has obtained “new forms that are partly shaped by the economic and socio- political and cultural climate of the global society in which we live” (Scott, et al., 2010, p. 11).

Although the feminist movement was introduced to fight down these forms of discrimination against the females, it is not always easy to make a definite statement about the concrete conditions of feminism because “there is no single feminist theory but many theories, so, there exists not one but a variety of feminist approaches to a text, wishing to challenge and change Western culture's assumption that males are superior to females” (Bressler, 2007, p. 170). Yet applying any feminist approach, one can observe that in *A Hologram for the King*, the author meets the conditions for being regarded as a pro-male novelist. There are many clues that Eggers has reinforced patriarch mentality in his novel which will be discussed in the following subsections.

## II- Misrepresenting Women

### II.I Self-Objectification

Within the feminist approach to literary work, self-objectification is a recurrent theme. Self-objectification means that women observe their own body via the perception of others, especially men. The well-known professor of philosophy and gender Sandra Bartky (1990, p. 26) argues that self-objectification occurs in a woman “when her sexual parts or sexual functions are separated out from the rest of her personality and reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her”. Self-objectification is used by many literary writers to degrade women in two ways. “One approach is to manipulate the level of self-objectification by exposing participants to a sexually objectifying or control situation and then evaluate the impact of this manipulation on criterion variables” and “[t]he second approach to operationalizing self-objectification is to assess self-reported levels of self-objectification or body surveillance” (Moradib & Huang, 2008, p. 2).

The marginalization and the concept of self-objectification in *A Hologram for the King* are embodied by the female characters, Dr. Zahra Hakim and Hanne. Self-objectification takes place in the text gradually, from the moment when the protagonist, Alan, and Zahra meet for the first time until the time, she invites him to a house. When Alan meets Zahra for the first time he finds that there is something in her eyes which he cannot express it. Rather than a human, she becomes a sexual object for Alan. Using trivial pretexts, Zahra indirectly tells him that she is eager to meet him again, “I actually might have left something. I’m thinking of a sponge? Maybe part of a snack I ate during the surgery? We were all snacking, so I can’t be sure. I think I need to see you again. Perhaps out of the hospital? We don’t want to worry your insurers” (Eggers, 2012, p. 210).

Self-objectification is evident when Zahra and Alan travel together and she steps “into the car, in full view of a dozen bellmen and attendants, to all eyes a Western man invited into the car of a Saudi woman. How did it work?” (Eggers, 2012, p. 212). Here one can argue that the female character is marginalized twice. First, by being pictured as a sexual object for offering a man the chance to enjoy her company and second by stressing the fact that she is no more than an Eastern woman in the eye of the Western men. The Indian scholar and literary theorist Gayatri C. Spivak deliberates over the connection between colonialism, race and women’s picturization in some of the Western novels, arguing the end purpose in those works is marginalizing the Third World over the First World in different aspects. She is extremely critical of the attitude propagated by the European colonizers about “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1999, p. 287). This notion of white men becoming saviors is evident in *A Hologram for the King* when Alan in effect replaces Zahra’s husband. The writer intends to portray Zahra as a lustful woman to trivialize her career as a physician. So, the generalization here is that no matter what the status of an Eastern woman is, low and highly educated women might be equally subject to self-objectification.

Alan is less concerned with what Zahra says because in reality he is highly obsessed with his wild thoughts: “She lifted her water glass to her lips, and seeing her like that, eyes closed, gave Alan a flurry of wild thoughts... She told him about high school in Geneva. A former boyfriend who was now trying to overthrow the government of Tunisia.” (Eggers, 2012, pp. 213-214). In this novel, Zahra endangers herself by helping and inviting a Western man in whose eyes she is nothing but a tool for entertainment. Self-objectification goes on in *A Hologram for the King* when both Alan and Zahra go to one of the houses and swim together in the tricky pools. This seduces Alan.

Another means for disparaging women in Eggers’ novel proves to be attributing unfaithfulness to them; the women are not loyal to their husbands and the marriage oath in the same way that Zahra not only betrays her husband but also objectifies herself for Alan and persuades him to take her as his mistress. Through the representation of Zahra’s disloyalty to her marriage bond and social norms practiced in her society, the author props the misconception and the unrealistic portrayal that women are irresponsible, imperfect and villain, as it can be seen here:

No one was watching, and no one outside of he and Zahra cared about what would happen in this room — such strength born of insignificance! — so he might as well do as he wished, which was to kiss her.... He moved his face toward hers, toward those exuberant lips. He closed his eyes, taking the risk he would miss.... (Ibid, p.222).

The second character through which the eastern women are portrayed as self-objectifying individuals is Hanne. Though she holds a high position in King Abdullah Economic City as a consultant, by character she is too weak to realize her strength by herself. Thus, she turns to Alan and tries to identify and find herself in view of Alan’s perception. Much like Zahra, after meeting together several times, Hanne invites Alan to her house. The desperate protagonist who is plunging in his futile adventures in Saudi Arabia and feels extremely lonely in his room with a mirror, a bed, and moonshine, accepts the invitation. The incentive is his loneliness not love. Hanne represents women’s sexual stereotyping as she tries to seduce Alan; “the door opened and there she was. She wore a sleeveless silk blouse and black pants. She was sleek, composed, her face aglow”. The motive of seduction becomes more plausible when they bath together and Hanne starts to self-objectify and treat herself as

an object to be viewed and evaluated by Alan on the basis of her appearance, but Alan doesn't comply; "she'd thought she was doing him a favor tonight. And the other night. He wasn't the most handsome man in the world, and she'd figured he was an easy catch. But now that he was not within reach, she was annoyed" (Ibid pp. 129,133). English novelist John Berger (1972, p.41) puts this pattern of self-objectification in this way: "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight".

Eggers, consciously or unconsciously, contributes to what Western societies do in general by treating people, especially women, as objects, tools, products, or commodities. "Yet, because Westernized societies are saturated with heterosexuality, whereby gender acts as a pervasive organizer of culture, objectification is most often apparent within heterosexual relations" (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 2011, p.5). So, women are manipulated as tools, first and foremost, looking at them as sex objects, as amusement and sexual satisfaction tools (Ibid). In his novel, Eggers endeavors to characterize women as individuals with an innate compulsion to self-objectify for men.

## II.II- Silencing Women

If Zahra and Hanne are considered as passive angels by Alan, Ruby and Kit could be regarded as active monsters because each causes big headaches for Alan. Ruby as Alan's ex-wife and Kit as his daughter are two other female characters of *A Hologram for the King* who are identified only through Alan. When readers go through the text, they realize that Alan did not like Ruby, and he was very pleased to get rid of the bond of his marriage with her. On the other hand, Alan's daughter studies at a very expensive college, putting pressure on Alan for paying off her schooling fees. Alan's life is already troubled with his short-sighted decisions and he cannot shoulder more responsibility, to an extent that when he thinks he has cancer, he wishes for death: "If the bump was cancer, and he was dying, he would not have to worry anymore. Bankruptcy would not be a concern. Kit's tuition and future would not be a concern" (Eggers, 2012, pp. 4, 116). Of course, if Alan had a true compassion for his daughter, he wouldn't have even considered of an excuse like cancer to evade his responsibilities towards his daughter. Additionally, one of the main reasons for which Alan hates his ex-wife, Ruby, is that she is not supporting Kit financially; "an unholy pain in the ass who now lives in California and contributes nothing financially to Kit's finances" (Ibid, p. 11). So, *A Hologram for the King*, as a product of the American literature, seeks to tell readers that women can't survive by themselves and their survival is strongly bounded to men. Kit cannot attend college without her father's financial support, though she is an adult by now.

In her essay entitled *Introduction on the Politics of Literature*, the American literary scholar Judith Fetterley (cited in Warhol and Herndl, 2009, p. 136) argues that the American literature is male-centered and women characters in literary works are passive. "American literature is male....Our literature neither leaves women alone nor allows them to participate. It insists on its universality at the same time that it defines that universality in specifically male terms (Ibid).

The reason behind bad impression about Ruby might be related to the fact that she is not given a chance to represent herself. Whatever readers know about her is through Alan, her husband. It seems that Eggers

deliberately marginalizes her and projects her negative aspects more. She is portrayed as yelling, glorifying her history against which Alan's only weapon was silence (Eggers 2012). Her annoying and problematic behavior is not confined to the domestic environment only. Ruby would be taken to jail and sentenced because of driving while intoxicated. The portrayal of this character is so negative that readers might wonder how Alan could survive with Ruby. At the same time, since the story is retold from the perspective of one partner, readers might not be certain whether Alan tells the truth. Contributing these negative attributes to Ruby underpins the idea that women are toxic. According to the author, Alan's ex-wife, who cannot shoulder her responsibility towards her family on a small scale, takes very big strides and exerts her energy on something unrealistic on a much larger scale:

She was exasperated by the persistence of global crises that seemed to her imminently solvable. She wrote letters to senators, to governors, to people of influence at the IMF..... She thought, each time, that she'd written the Magna Carta. Afterward, his job was to tell her that Senator Y or Z would be insane not to see the logic in her reasoning, all while trying to temper her expectations. But this was impossible. There was no middle ground in what she wanted for the world, for herself, for a husband (Ibid, p.125)

The above examples show how androcentric Eggers is because he portrays Ruby as a woman overlooking her very foremost family obligations, endangering her family while thinking about saving the whole world. "In patriarchy, masculinists decree that the only acceptable work for women is care of children, including teaching, childcare, and nursing... housekeeping, and related work, including food preparation...and obedient worship, including maintenance of moral rules for one's self and one's household" (Ruth, 1990, p. 255). Eggers especially makes fun of what Ruby is doing like sending letters to senators or talking about global change. For the author, it is not a woman's to involve in social and political issues. His portrayal resonates with what the 19<sup>th</sup> century French socialist professor Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (cited in Bressler, 2007, p. 170) reflected about women writings, saying "The woman author does not exist. She is a contradiction in terms. The role of the woman in letters is the same as in manufacturing; she is of use when genius is no longer required" In this way, Eggers narrows down Ruby's activities to the space of home, husband and family, and deprives her from a rightful prestige.

There are other silenced female characters like Jameela, Noor and Amina. Again the readers are presented with only the negative aspects of the personality of these characters through Yusef's narrations. The case of Amina here is more attention-grabbing because she is in love with Yusef, Alan's drier, but her parents refuse to allow them marry each other. Although she is an adult but she is deprived of exercising her right to choose her life partner at her wish.

### II.III- Unfaithful Women

“All the Married Women, ...have a Second Phone. It’s a Big Business in Saudi Arabia” (Eggers, 2012, p.92). This is an over-generalized statement about Saudi women’s disloyalty in *A Hologram for the King*. While Yousef rejoices in talking about his affairs with several women, especially Jameelah, Amina and Noor, he utters such an over-generalization. All these women are married and cheat on their husbands by having an affair with Yousef. Jameela, who is Yousef’s ex-wife, now cheats on her new wealthy husband for Yousef. The practice of cheating among Saudi women, as the novelist depicts, is so systematic that Alan has no fear of being discovered. When Alan warns him about the risk of such behavior, Yousef articulates that his ex-wife, Jameelah, “has a different phone now. She has two — one for regular calls, which he can monitor, and one she uses for me” (Ibid). Other than Jameela, Yusef has relations with Amina and Noor, simultaneously. In his conversation with Alan, he describes them as his properties. Amina was in love with Yusef before she was obliged by her parents to marry someone else. But her marriage did not end her love and relation to Yousef who celebrates these affairs for sexual gratitude not love. Alan and Yousef amuse themselves by talking about these women and the exaggerated way they treat Yousef. In describing Jameela, Yousef says she “sends me ten texts a day. Some of the texts are just boring, like, ‘What are you doing,’ blah blah. And some are, like, really sexy. I wish I could show you some.” When Yousef scrolls through the messages on his phone, Alan wishes he was able to see the sexy texts (Ibid, p. 90-91).

Eggers intends to over generalize the notion of disloyalty or infidelity among the Saudi women and writes that: “[t]he whole country seemed to operate on two levels, the official and the actual” (Ibid). So, Saudi Arabia from a holy land changes to a land cursed by cheating and sin. The fact that the reader does not directly encounter any Saudi women, except Zahra (who betrays her husband and resorts to self-objectification) has proved to be a good technique serving the negative exaggerations about the character of females in Saudi Arabia in particular and the east in general. As the women characters are silenced in general, no one can be sure about the honesty in Yousef’s accounts. One more point that the author of *A Hologram for the King* seeks to underline is the ability of men to control women emotionally and physically and this in turn means the innate helplessness and weakness of women.

### II.V-Linguistic Aggression against Women

Language is a product of the patriarchal system and plays a great role in the social organizations, so, it is a tool for legitimizing male power, as stated by the feminist linguist Deborah Cameron (1985, p. 2). According to Cameron, the way to express a subject embodies the implied mentality behind that subject. In *A Hologram for the King*, there are some allusions which are reinforcing Cameron’s viewpoint about linguistic patriarchy. For example, Eggers mocks and ridicules women through jokes during his conversations with Yousef and this could be regarded as a form of verbal aggression. The two following excerpts support this claim.

Okay, Alan said. A woman’s husband has been sick. He’s been slipping in and out of a coma for several months, but she’s been staying by his bedside every single day. When he wakes up, he motions for her to come nearer. She comes over, sits next to him. His voice is weak. He holds her hand. ‘You know what?’ he says. ‘You’ve been with me all through the bad times. When I got fired, you were there to support me. When my business went sour, you were there. When we lost the

house, you gave me support. When my health started failing, you were still by my side... You know what?' 'What, dear?' she asks gently. 'I think you bring me bad luck!' (Eggers, 2012, pp. 31. 32)

Okay. A husband and wife are getting ready for bed. The wife is standing in front of a full-length mirror taking a hard look at herself. 'You know, dear,' she says, 'I look in the mirror, and I see an old woman. My face is all wrinkled, my hair is grey, my shoulders are hunched over, I've got fat legs, and my arms are all flabby.' She turns to her husband and says, 'Tell me something positive to make me feel better about myself.' He studies her hard for a moment, thinking about it, and then says in a soft, thoughtful voice, 'Well, there's nothing wrong with your eyesight.' (Ibid, p. 88)

The language of these two passages leaves no doubt about Eggers's prejudice against women. He explicitly gives the impression that Alan tries to make fun of women through language as a great tool in favor of "male supremacy" (Bartky, 1990, p. 35). Alan's outlook with regards to women is the offshoot of his culture and environment. In the first joke above, the woman's great sacrifices for her husband and their marriage are underestimated and unappreciated by her being depicted as a sinister creator. It seems that women are looked at as powerless objects and most importantly a burden to men. "Whatever style a culture deems appropriate to the public arena, women are said to be less skilled at using; whatever style is considered natural in women is deemed unsuitable for rhetorical use" (Cameron, 1985, p. 155). The idea of male supremacy grows bolder in the readers' mind after considering the fact that in this joke it is an old sick and penniless man who looks down and downgrades a woman. So, one may wonder if the man was in perfect health and perfect physical conditions how he would evaluate women.

The mockery, disrespect and insult are very sharp. The woman not only does not deny her coming to age but admits that by her tongue. The only reason she shares this knowledge with her husband is that she desperately seeks a kind word to soothe her worries about coming to age. Though her husband tells her the truth but this frankness hurts the woman more. It is driven by aggression and rudeness.

Both men in the above jokes trivialize their partners differently, one by overlooking his wife's sacrifices and the other by not consoling his spouse. It can be seen that the author of *A Hologram for the King* on purpose leads the characters to verbally humiliate women. Eggers employs jokes as a powerful weapon to suppress and oppress women in his novel. According to the American philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky, when one hears a news or a joke or sees a cosmetics advertisement, they are not just what they are, but each carries a hidden meaning; "Each reveals itself, depending on the circumstances in which it appears, as a threat, an insult, an affront, as a reminder, however, subtle, that I belong to an inferior caste. In short, these are revealed as instruments of oppression or as articulations of a sexist institution" (Bartky, 1999, p. 17).



### III. Conclusion

Examining *A Hologram for the King*, penned by Dave Eggers, in the light of the Feminism approach to literary works, it can be concluded that the novelist exercises bias against women through over-generalization and exaggeration. The bias is more directed against the women in eastern communities in general and those in Saudi Arabia in particular. Female characters are discriminated against in the novel by being portrayed as self-objectifying individuals, as in the case of Hanne and Dr. Zahra. They are in the novel just for the sake of saturating the instinctual desires of men. When they fail in fulfilling such desires, they are represented as challenging issues and burdens to the closest male family members, as in the case of Ruby. The image of the eastern women is distorted in the novel to a degree that the reader might conclude all the women cheat on their husbands in the eastern part of the world. Jokes also prove to be a very productive means to serve the aggression against women in Eggers's work. Through marginalizing and silencing the female characters who are said to have no marital ethics, the novel not only promotes patriarchy but also indirectly endorses misogamy and reinforces concerns over starting a married life.

## ویناکردنی ژنان: خویندنه و هیهکی فیمه نیستی بۆ وینهیهکی سێ دووری بۆ پاشا

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### پوخته:

ئهو بابته باسی چۆنیتهی ویناکردنی رۆل و مافی ژنان دهکات له رۆمانی وینهیهکی سێ دووری بۆ پاشای دهیف ئیگه‌رز که سالی ۲۰۱۲ بۆ کراوه‌ته‌وه به گۆیهی قوتابخانهی ره‌خنه‌یی ئه‌ده‌بی فیمه‌نیزم. دژایه‌تیکردنی ژنان له زۆر له کتیبه ئه‌ده‌بیه‌کاندا ره‌نگی داوه‌ته‌وه ههر له سه‌رده‌می نووسینی کتیبه کلاسیکیه‌کانه‌وه هه‌تا‌کو ئیستا، ئهو ده‌قه ئه‌ده‌بیانه‌ش به‌شیوه‌ی جیواز لیک‌دراوه‌وه. بیره‌که‌ی خۆکردن به‌کالا که به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی دیار په‌یوه‌سته به جیاوازی ره‌گه‌زی، تا راده‌یه‌کی زۆر که‌متر قسه‌ی له‌سه‌رکراوه به تایبه‌تی له سه‌رده‌می پۆست‌مۆدرنیزمدا. ئهو بابته‌ی ئیستا باسی چۆنیته‌ی خراپ پێشاندانی ژنان و جیاوازی ره‌گه‌زایه‌تی دهکات له سه‌رده‌می پۆست‌مۆدرنیزمدا. به پتی بیردۆزی ئه‌ده‌بی فیمه‌نیزم، وینه‌یه‌کی سێ دووری بۆ پاشا، به‌ره‌مه‌یه‌کی ئه‌ده‌بی دژی ژنانه هه‌رچه‌نده له سه‌رده‌می پۆست‌مۆدرنیزمدا نوسراوه. نوسه‌ری رۆمانه‌که وینه‌یه‌کی خراپ ژنان نیشانداده‌ت، ده‌یانکات به کالا بۆ چێژی پیاوان. له هه‌مان کاتدا، ژنان بیه‌ش دهکات له مافه‌کانیان و وه‌کو ساویله‌که و بیره‌وشت پێشانیان ده‌ت. له کۆتایدا، ئهم توێژینه‌وه‌یه، بریتیه‌ی له نیشاندانی وینه‌ی خراپ ژنان و چۆنیته‌ی بیه‌شکردنیان له مافه‌کانیان له رۆمانه‌که‌ی ئیگه‌رسدا.

**کلێله ووشه‌کان:** فیمه‌نیزم، وینه‌یه‌کی سێ دووری بۆ پاشای دهیف ئیگه‌رز، کۆمالگای پیاوسالاری و خۆکردن به‌کالا.

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