

**EGYPTIAN WOMEN AS DEPICTED BY A DIASPORIC  
WRITER: A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTIONS OF AHDAF  
SOUEIF**

*Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University for the award of the degree of*

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**LUNGHILANG PAMAI**



**CENTRE FOR AFRICAN STUDIES  
SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES  
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY  
NEW DELHI 110067**

**2011**



Centre for African Studies  
School of International Studies  
**Jawaharlal Nehru University**  
New Delhi - 110067

Phone : 011-26738761  
E-mail : cas.sisjnu@gmail.com

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DECLARATION


I declare that the thesis entitled “EGYPTIAN WOMEN AS DEPICTED BY A DIASPORIC WRITER: A STUDY OF SELECTED FICTIONS OF AHDAF SOUEIF” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

  
LUNGHILANG PAMAI

CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this thesis be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
Professor S.N. Malakar  
Chairperson, CAS

  
Professor Jay k. Dubey  
Supervisor



Chairperson  
Centre for African Studies  
School of International Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi-110067



Centre for African Studies  
School of International Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi-110067

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*Lunhilang Parmai*

*New Delhi*

## Preface

The experience of colonization and the challenges of a post-colonial world have produced an explosion of new writing in English. This diverse and powerful body of literature has established a specific practice of post-colonial writing in cultures across various parts of the world and has challenged both the traditional canon and dominant ideas of literature and cultures. The writers involved in post-colonial studies, open up the debates about the interrelationships of post-colonial literatures, investigate the powerful forces acting on language in the post-colonial context, and show how these texts constitute a radical critique of Eurocentric notions of literature and language.

Colonialism is not just about conquest of geographical territories, but rather about subjectivation whereby postcolonialism is not merely a reconstruction of the historical domination of 'the Orient' by 'the West' through economic and military force, but a critical analysis of the construction of 'Europe' and its 'Other' as an 'effect' of colonial discourses. This implies that the analysis of colonial workings of power in the non-West as well as within Europe are also deeply interconnected, so that there is scope for concept-tools employed in the analysis of one context to be transported and operationalized in other contexts. At the heart of the working of colonial discourses is the politics of representation, whereby postcolonialism is not only critical theory, but an identity politics where the historical analysis of processes of colonisation and decolonisation must focus on questions of representation; namely, deal with who speaks for whom along with what is being said. To this end, my paper seeks to address the challenges of representation and the problematic role of the postcolonial feminist in recovering and representing the perspectives of those who have not been able to represent themselves in colonial structures of power: in the non-west as well as the west.

As a participant in critical processes that seek to articulate the voices of the marginalized, the postcolonial feminist functions as an agent of resistance. She performs the skilled act of translation from one culture into the idiom of the other, thereby facilitating the process of interrogation of colonialism and its consequences. But the postcolonial feminist, who speaks in

the name of the 'silenced Other' is susceptible to being 'co-opted', for even in the interrogation of 'the dominant West' she is situated within institutions that bind her to western locations and its 'enabling constraints'. There is somehow an intrinsic paradox in the relation between the representing/postcolonial feminist and the represented 'marginalized' who 'cannot' perform the act of self-representation. The subject position of the postcolonial feminist is parasitic on the inability/prohibition of the 'marginalized subject's' self-representation. And although the entire attempt of the postcolonial feminist is to erase/dissolve 'subaltern space', in doing so she entails forfeiting her own legitimacy as the representing intellectual. And exactly at the crossroads between the responsibility of representation and 'permission to narrate', namely, licence/honour of being the voice of the 'victim', is the politics of her praxis. The efforts to give marginalized perspectives a voice in history by the postcolonial feminist is open to dangers of essentialism or further of the representatives themselves becoming 'token victims' and thereby instruments of dominant structures that block processes of decolonisation. The postcolonial feminist is, thus, caught in a double bind as she inhabits 'intimately' the very structures that she seeks to critique, so that the critic-as-subject is herself complicit with the object of her critique. The solution is not a post-representationalist politics, but the persistent interrogation of one's complicity in the re-colonisation of 'counter-spaces'. Representation as an act of reading of silences is always fraught with dangers of producing anew regimes of truth and forms of violence. Counter-discourses themselves risk silencing those in whose name they claim to speak. My paper seeks to explore the dynamics between speech, silence and power from a postcolonial, feminist perspective.

The term post-colonial embraces the historical reality of colonialism and also focuses upon the relationship between colonizers and colonized apart from providing the creative and psychological stimuli to such writings. Although the term doesn't specify that this discourse is limited to works written originally in English, it does not point towards grouping of the common past and also towards the vision of a liberated, redemptive future.

Ahdaf Soueif, a prolific Egyptian novelist, critic and short story writer is truly post-colonial for she raises a legitimate voice to reclaim her identity lost on account of the British rule, and also on account of the patriarchal subjugation. In Ahdaf Soueif's fiction, the imprint of feminism is visible in the colonial expression too. Her fiction articulates a definitive national consciousness that questioned the European cultural ascendancy and also aimed at reclaiming the canonical

voices suppressed and de-legitimized under the British regime. Likewise, she portrays women struggling against the power politics of the patriarchy so as to secure a legitimate place for them. Her works are an expression of an enlightened consciousness, as they best explore the hidden consciousness of the self, be it that of a colonized individuals or a woman or both.

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# **INTRODUCTION**

## Introduction

Fiction by women writers particularly in Egypt goes back sixty years. In this relatively short time we can trace a remarkable pace and breadth of development in theme, form and technique. Beginning with a preoccupation with bicultural anxiety and loss of identity the genre moves to working with the thematic of the self. Although the works often seem to reflect the most self-centered aspects of Western romanticism, such preoccupation is understandable in the face of legalized oppression and social degradation. The first concern of women novelists has been their female characters' private struggles for a personal identity and representation.

The romantic egotism of 1950s and 1960s fiction gives way, in the works of many of the writers like Aisha Abd al-Rahman, Eman Karam Sayed Abdel Ghaffar, Mansoura Ez-Eldin, and Doria Shafik to clear rebellion in the face of newly recognized oppression. Personal rebellion, however, is of little use when the entire structure of the surrounding society militates against the exercise of individual freedom. It becomes clear that not only individuals, but also the society in which they live, must be reborn. It is because of this progression that the fiction of many of the women writers has achieved a true maturity of vision, a realization that the self and its freedom cannot be separated from the social context. Obviously, this evolving vision has important political implications. Because of their overwhelming concern with finding a personal identity, the early novels of these writers were not always warmly received by critics.

The next stage in the evolution of the genre is rebellion against the oppression that women undergo in their societies. Writers like Nawal El Saadawi, Alifa Araifaat, and Suzy Kassem were the prominent ones. The pattern is brutally simple in Egypt: women are born to fill the roles of daughter, wife, and mother, and to be successively subservient to their fathers, husbands, and sons. In most cases the legal status of women is determined by Moslem religious codes. Often merely by stating aloud that he repudiates her and the law permits a husband or father to force his wife or daughter to remain at home, often literally under lock and key. Revolt against such customs and conditions leads to political awakening, engagement is often mixed with a sense of nationalism

because the countries from which the women write are either struggling against foreign domination or striving towards national identity and development. Later, the writings express disappointment that these political movements also use women and do not work for their liberation.

### **1.1 A Brief Highlight of Fiction Writing by Egyptian Women**

Ever since Plato, it has been acknowledged that literature mediates between the real and the imaginary. Literary texts do not simply reflect dominant ideologies, but encode the tensions, complexities and nuances within colonial cultures. Literature written on both sides of the colonial divide often absorbs, appropriates and inscribes aspects of the 'other' culture creating new genres, ideas and identities in the process. It is also an important means of appropriating, inverting or challenging dominant means of representation and colonial ideologies. Whether the dominant language, literature, culture and philosophic ideas can be used for subversive purposes has been much debated within postcolonial, feminists and other oppositional discourses.

Nawal El Saadawi is a leading Egyptian feminist, sociologist, medical doctor and militant writer on Arab women's problems. She is one of the most widely translated contemporary Egyptian writers, with her work available in twelve languages. El Saadawi's books have concentrated on women, particularly Arab women, their sexuality and legal status. From the start, her writings were considered controversial and dangerous for the society, and were banished in Egypt. As a result, El Saadawi was forced to publish her works in Beirut, Lebanon. In 1977, she published her most famous work, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, which covered a host of topics relative to Arab women such as aggression against female children and female genital mutilation, prostitution, sexual relationships, marriage and divorce and Islamic fundamentalism.

Alifa Rifaat is an Egyptian author of short stories. Her works pose challenges to what it means to be a Muslim women living within a traditional Muslim society. Her writing has progressed from an early romanticism, often marred by sentimentality, to a more recent sparse realism. Her reading has thus been restricted to Arab writers of fiction and such

foreign fiction as has been translated into Arabic; in addition she is deeply read in works of religion, in particular the Quran and the Hadith. Most of her stories express, implicitly, rather than explicitly, a revolt against many of the norms and attitudes, particularly those related to woman and her place in society. Her revolt remains within a religious framework. She does not look for change for Muslim women in the models of the Christian west. She shows that men have the job of behaving towards women with kindness and generosity and that if a man's behavior falls short of what is expected of him, the woman's natural acceptance of her role is likely to change to contempt and rebellion. Her revolt is against certain man-made interpretations and accretions that have developed over the years and remain unquestioned by the majority of both men and women. Two subjects predominate in her stories: sex and death. Some of her works include *The Long Night of winter*, *Distant View of a Minaret*, and *Bahiyya's Eyes*. In her works, women's wish and right to be sexually fulfilled are openly stated.

Aisha Abd al-Rahman was an Egyptian author and professor of literature who published under the pen name Bint al-Shati /"Daughter of the Riverbank". In 1942, Aisha began work as an Inspector for teaching of Arabic literature for the Egyptian Ministry of Education. She wrote fiction and biographies of early Muslim women, including the mother, wives and daughters of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as literary criticism. She was the first woman to undertake Qur'anic exegesis, and though she did not consider herself to be a feminist, her works reflect feminist themes.

The blunter and more open treatment of the oppressive aspects of Arab societies that we find in more recent literary inscriptions by Egyptian women is not simply a more daring exercise of literary freedom, although one must never lose sight of the courage that these authors have consistently shown. The recent fiction of Egyptian women may well become a force for positive and creative change in North Africa and the Arab world

The works of Egyptian novelists like Khanata' Bannuna, Assia Djebar, Marguerite Taos-Amrouche, Nawal Al-Saadawi and Ahdaf Soueif reflect a greater commitment to the political, social, and sexual issues facing Egyptian women today. Although they share

thematic concerns, the writers exhibit a range of approaches to the problems and greater stylistic differences. In general, the various approaches taken by women recently are courageous and daring. They not only describe women's dilemmas, but also seek to find new ways for them to escape their entrapment. This boldness is reflected in the lifestyles of the writers themselves: many of them have tried to break away from the tradition-bound circles around them. They have asserted themselves as single women or divorcees despite the prejudices voiced against them. A few have had to seek refuge in Lebanon. Some live abroad: France, England, and the United States.

These writers move between two worlds, infusing their Anglophone novels with the essence of their native languages and cultures. Ahdaf Soueif is a case in point: the Egyptian national spent many years of her childhood in England, and then returned to Egypt for her PhD in linguistics. Her marriage to an Egyptian ended, and she later married English poet Ian Hamilton from whom she eventually separated. She has been described as a "hybrid" writer, a tense and sometimes intellectually painful role to play; however, it is a suitable adjective: she blends Arabic rhythms and idioms into English.<sup>1</sup>

Her literary corpus, usually described as consisting of two short books, *Aisha* and *Sandpiper* and two long novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love*. These two novels generally explore the misconceptions that exist in the spaces between East and West. Soueif is also a prolific essay writer and socio-political commentator, and has written discursive articles on themes ranging from the meaning of the veil in Islam to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Like her fiction, her non-fiction demonstrates that she both perceives herself and is perceived as an Englishwoman as much as an Egyptian of the hybrid writer.

Despite being a culturally sandwiched artist, caught in the middle of an East-West face-off, she seems to have created a hybrid identity that, in turn, complements both her English and Egyptian roots. True to the meaning coined by Homi Bhabha, Ahdaf Soueif's

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<sup>1</sup> Soueif writes in English because she feels more comfortable in it, but occasionally she gives readings in Arabic as if to satisfy those who think she has forgotten her roots. Her lush style is described as exotic and foreign by her Western readers, while her sexual imagery and themes arouse the ire of some Egyptian readers who do not want to claim her as "one of their own."



"hybrid" work is intensely post-colonial in nature. Bhabha describes 'Hybridity' as the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal, that is, the production of discriminating identities that secure the "pure" and original identity of authority. Soueif subverts the colonizer/colonized hierarchy by presenting England a picture of its colonial past and postcolonial present, complete with all accompanying tensions, thus turning her Egyptian postcolonial gaze on England's eye of power. Woman's voice is more than a physiological faculty. It is the narrative instrument that permits her to be a literary medium, to vie with the male in the process of textual creation. Many of Soueif's characters are pulled between the polar forces of East and West, but only achieve balance when they carve out a place for themselves in the midst of that cultural intersection. The theme of reclaiming one's narrative pervades.

Ahdaf Soueif's novel, *The Map of Love*, may be read as an attempt to "write back" against western constructs of the so-called "postcolonial" or "third world woman" and of the "first world woman" to whom she is the "other". *The Map of Love* moves to eradicate "third world woman" from the constraints of academic dogma, restoring her to history, forestalling the end of the world through narrative. *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif's first novel, which details the "coming of age" of Asya Ulama, a young, upper-class Egyptian woman who studies for a doctorate in England, marries a Westernized Egyptian husband, and becomes embroiled in an affair with an uncouth and possessive American. Steeped in sexual politics, it was banned in Egypt for its "lewd" descriptions.

Ahdaf Soueif's novel navigates East-West tensions by condemning the Western stereotype of Arab women with an Arab woman who must shed the burdensome skins of both England and Egypt and create her own identity. Her work gives the colonized a voice not only to be heard, but to influence the English /Arab and more importantly Egyptian literary landscape as she describes Arab women exposed to British culture and influence (and vice versa), who seek to find their own voices and take control of the narrative of their lives.

## 1.2 Conceptualising Postcolonial Feminism

The orbit of the post-colonial studies includes those literatures that particularly feature the expression of the ascendancy/ reign and the decline of the British imperialism. Rather than being concerned with the stylistic quotations, the term post-colonial applies to literature that came into existence as a result of colonialism in its overt as well as covert and insidious form. Post-colonial theory bears a close resemblance to feminism, as both tend to explore their radical, revolutionary potential in relation to the politics of power and dominance. Both subject the complex relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed to a rigorous, sustained scrutiny, though in vastly different ways. In a way, dominant patriarchy in feminism can be equated to the colonizer and the oppressed women to the colonized. To that extent, the women who went through double oppression that of imperialism along with the patriarchal one could be called 'doubly colonised'.

Most of the works from once colonized nations are seen as an act of writing back; they create a postcolonial situation or a postcolonial literature. Postcolonial literatures were deemed to post direct challenges to the colonial centre from the colonized margins, negotiating new ways of seeing that both contested the dominant mode and gave voice and expression to colonized and once-colonised peoples. Postcolonial literature thus actively engages in the act of decolonizing the mind. Ahdaf Soueif's attempt to narrate her characters' experiences entails the act of writing back and at the same time explores the loopholes within this discourse. This process was crystallized by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. Inspired by Salman Rushdie's argument concerning the need to decolonise the English Language, *The Empire Writes Back* ( Bill, Griffiths and Tiffin 1989) orchestrated the issues; the increasing popular view that literature from the once colonised countries was fundamentally concerned with challenging the language of colonial power,, unlearning its worldview, and producing its new modes of representation. This is to look at writers from once colonised countries as to how they express their own sense of identity by refashioning English in order to enable it to accommodate their experiences. English was being displaced by different linguistic

communities in the post-colonial world who were remaking it as an attempt to challenge the colonial value-system it enshrined, and bear witness to these communities' sense of cultural difference. This expresses the belief that that the 'crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonised place'( Bill, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989: 38)

This refashioning worked in several ways. The writers were creating new 'englishes' through various strategies: inserting untranslatable words into their texts, by glossing seemingly obscure terms; by refusing to follow standard English syntax and using structures derived from other languages; of incorporating many different creolized versions of English into their texts. Each of these strategies was demonstrated operating in a variety postcolonial texts, and in each the emphasis was on the writer's attempt to subvert and refashion Standard English into various new forms of 'english' as a way of jettisoning the colonialist values which Standard English housed.

This asserts that postcolonial writings were always written out of 'the abrogation of the received English which speaks from the centre, and the act of appropriation which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterize the local language. (Bill, Griffiths and Tiffin, 1989: 39) The new 'english' presents the difference through which an identity created or recovered can be expressed. The new 'englishes' could not be converted into standard English because they have surpassed its limits, broken its rules. As a consequence of this irredeemable difference, new values, identities and value-systems were expressed, and old colonial values wholeheartedly rejected. This shifted the approach to literatures from the once-colonised nations away from the abstract issue of a text's universal and timeless value and towards a more politicized approach which analysed texts primarily within historical and geographical contexts. Postcolonial writing challenged generally-held values rather than confirmed them. Their 'local' concerns were fundamental to their meanings, not of secondary importance.

However like many other theories, postcolonial theory too has its shortcomings. Several criticisms have been made of this approach, the chief one being that it is remarkably totalizing in its representation of how literatures from many different areas function according to the same agenda. Postcolonialism at times neglects gender differences and class difference between writers. How does one impact on these issues? As Anne McClintock argues in her essay ‘The Angel of Progress: pitfalls of the term “post-Colonialism”’ (McClintock 1994: 253-66). Gender differences and important social facts of a writer’s identity are passed over by the authors in an attempt to isolate a identifiable, common mode of postcolonial writing.

Similarly, there is little attempt to differentiate within or between writings from divergent nations. Did colonialism happen in the same manner in divergent locations? Can we assume that the writing from countries with such different historical and cultural relationships with the ‘centre’ functions in the same way? What we see here is that for all its good intentions postcolonialism might ignore diversity, variety and that it might not be so remote from the homogenising and generalising tendencies. The attempt would therefore be to skillfully identify the salient literary these and preoccupations that have crossed both time and space, without sacrificing an awareness of local and historical contexts.

### **1.2.1 Postcolonialism and Feminism**

One important aspects of postcolonial discourse is the attempt to locate feminine voices within the postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial feminism is extensive and variable. Its analyses range across representatives of women in once-colonised countries and in western location. Some critics have concentrated on the constructions of gender differences during the colonial period, in both colonial and anti-colonial discourses, while others have concerned themselves with the representations of women in postcolonial discourses, with particular references to the work of women writers. Postcolonial feminist critics have raised number of conceptual, methodological and political problems involved in the study of representations of gender. These problems are at once specific to feminist

concerns, such as the possibility of finding an international, cross-cultural sisterhood between ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ women, (Spivak 1993) as well as more general problems concerning who has the right speak for whom, and the relationship between the critic and their object of analysis. Some of the most groundbreaking thought –provoking and influential work within Postcolonialism has come from debates concerning representations of gender difference in postcolonial contexts.

However, in such context, it should be seen that feminist work is a constitutive part of the field of Postcolonialism and not anterior to Postcolonialism. This suggests that Postcolonialism and feminism are sometimes seen to share tense relations with each other. Feminist working out of different locations have also questioned the extent to which Western, or the ‘First World’ feminism is equipped to deal with the problems encountered by women in once colonised countries or those living in western societies with ancestral connections or those living in western societies with ancestral connections to these countries (such as the migrants and their descendants). So, by using the terms ‘Postcolonialism’ and ‘feminism’ the attempt is to maintain a sense of the potential tensions between postcolonial and feminist critical practices, while, on the other suggest their rapport.

### **1.2.2 Feminism and Patriarchy**

Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore argue that “a feminist that a feminist reader is enlisted in the process of changing the gender relations which prevail in our society, and she regards the practice of reading as one of the sites in the struggle for change” (Belsey and Moore 1989: 1). They suggest that a feminist reader might ask of a text questions such as how it represents women, what it says about gender relations, how it defines sexual difference. In addition, those texts which do not mention women at all are interesting for this very reason. In talking of the struggle for change, we can understand that feminist reading practices are involved in the contestation of patriarchal authority. The term refers to those systems-political, material and imaginative, which invest power in men and marginalise women. Like colonialism, patriarchy manifests itself in both concrete ways

and at the level of the imagination. It asserts certain representational systems which create an order of the world presented to individuals as normal' or 'true'. Also like colonialism, patriarchy exists in the midst of resistances to its authority. Furthermore, as a singular term, 'patriarchy' can be misleading (Belsey and Moore 1989). As much feminist criticism has shown, there are many different forms of patriarchy, each with its own specific effects: indeed, this latter point is particularly important in postcolonial feminist criticism. So feminism and postcolonialism share the mutual goal of challenging forms of oppression.

### **1.2.3 First World Feminism and Third World Women**

First World Feminism and Third World Women relate to a system of ways of mapping the global relationships of the world's nations which emerged after the Second World War. The 'First World' referred to the rich, predominantly western nations in Europe, America and Australasia; the 'Second World' denoted the Soviet Union and its communist allies; while the 'Third World' consisted in the main of the former colonies such as countries in Africa and South Asia. This mapping of the world has remained influential, for better or worse, in a variety of discourse. In terms of postcolonialism and feminism, the phrase 'First World' feminism is an unhappy generalization which glosses over the variety of feminisms, and the debates within and between them, in Europe and America. Yet the naming of 'First World' feminism has proved a productive means of acknowledging and questioning the limits of feminist scholarship in the West, particularly its relations with the 'Third World' women.

There is this challenge to address recurring questions: who is able to speak for or about 'Third World' women? Can Western women ever adequately deal with the experiences of others? Or do only 'Third World' women occupy this position? How can 'Third World' women intervene in First World feminist debates? These questions have been recurrent preoccupations in the deconstructive criticism of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She sees her tasks as a deconstructive one, where conceptual categories such as 'First World' and 'Third World' are brought to crisis by exposing their limits, shortcomings and blind-

spots. Spivak has consistently advocated that critics must always look to the specifics of their own positions and recognize the political, cultural and institutional contexts in which they work. Chandra Mohanty exposes the production of a singular category of 'Third World' women in western feminism which damagingly creates the 'discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third world (Mohanty 198).

Mohanty recognises that Western feminism's attention to 'Third World' women is valuable and laudable, not least in its attempts to forge international links between different women. However, by conceiving 'the average third-world women' western feminists construct a template for female identity in the 'Third World' based on a series of questionable conceptual and methodological maneuvers, with scant regard for context. This is tantamount to a colonial act, in the imposition of a homogeneous identity on 'Third World' women without regard to the historical and cultural differences which inevitably exceed this category. Furthermore, the assimilation of 'Third World' women within western feminist discourse suggests that Western feminism remains the principle means by which patriarchy, sexism and chauvinism are challenged, as objects of western feminist analysis; 'Third World' women are robbed of their agency.

#### **1.2.4 The 'Double Colonisation' of Women**

Kirsten Holst Peterson and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase 'a double colonisation' to refer to the ways in which women have simultaneously experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. They argued that colonialism celebrates male achievement in a series of male oriented myths such as 'mateship, the mounties, explorers, freedom fighters, bushrangers, missionaries' (Dangaroo 1986: 9), while women are subject to representation in colonial discourses in ways which collude with patriarchal values. Thus, the phrase 'a double colonisation' refers to the fact that women are twice colonised-by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too. Much postcolonial feminist criticism has attended to the representations of women created by 'double colonisation', and questioned the extent to which both postcolonial and feminist

discourses offer the means to challenge these representations. This beckons an important general question: do postcolonial representations perpetuate or question patriarchal values? Or can they be complicit in oppressing women? Peterson and Rutherford argue that a male ethos has persisted in the colonial and post-colonial world'. They crucially point out that both colonialism and resistances to it can be seen as male-centered. This complicates the extent to which they offer freedom to women.

Perhaps the work of Fanon, Said, Bhabha and others has become so prominent in discussions of postcolonial theory; Carole Boyce Davies has become suspicious of the male-centered bias of postcolonial critique, and asks "where are the women in the theorisation of post-coloniality? Although there are growing numbers of titular identifications of post-colonial feminist discussions, it seems so far that the discourses of post-coloniality are not, at this point in history, overly populated by 'postcolonial women'" (Davies 1994: 80). The challenge here is to remain sensitive to the issues of gender differences in their work if postcolonialism is significantly going to challenge dominance of the male discourse. Otherwise, postcolonialism will, like colonialism, be a male-centred and ultimately patriarchal discourse in which women's voices are marginalised and silenced.

### **1.3 Review of Literature**

Most of the literature available on women's identity and representation either on Egypt or other North African countries focuses mainly on the misrepresentation/misconceptions of female Arab/African identity in the West and the domestic concerns particularly strong patriarchy, female silencing and gender inequities within both western and eastern cultures. The review will be divided into four themes.

#### **1.3.1 Decoding the Exotic Eastern Female Representation**

Edward Said (1978) examines how "Orientalism" is used many times as a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the Middle East marked by a subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their



culture. He argued that a long tradition of romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as an implicit justification for European and the American colonial and imperial ambitions. However he ignored much on issues of gender who were the most misrepresented group. Rana Kabbani (1994) explores the use of male-dominated discourse at the service of Orientalism. The imagery of seduction, conquest, ravishing, and rape emerges clearly in her analysis as one of the instruments which attuned western collective consciousness to the notion of an Orient awaiting penetration by the West. It explores the eroticization of colonialism and the feminization of the Orient; and underscores the peculiar convergence of race, class, and gender biases in colonial ideology.

Anouar Majid (2000) issues a challenge to the West to reimagine and reunderstand Islam as a progressive world culture and a participant in the building of a multicultural and more egalitarian world civilization. Highly critical of capitalism, European colonialism, patriarchy, nationalism, and secularism, the author also challenges "Arab and Muslim intellectuals to imagine a postcolonialist, post- Eurocentric future," and argues that Muslim feminists may point the way forward. Majid replicates Samuel Huntington's thesis by constantly counterposing "Western" and "Islamic" and essentializing these categories. For Majid, secularism, the nation-state, modernity, and capitalism are Western and bad; in contrast, Islam is essentially tolerant, essentially good, and egalitarian.

### **1.3.2 Relocation of Discursive Female Identity**

Anne McClintock (1992) argues that by subsuming all formerly colonized individuals under a single rubric of postcoloniality, postcolonial studies erase the traces of gender inequality, further entrancing it within the society. She goes on to assert that within the heterogeneous gendered institutions, men and women do not share the same singular postcolonial condition. Thus, an empty, non specific term, 'postcolonial' functions in the academy to denote all peoples, regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, or creed, within all formerly colonized territories. At its worst, the term forecloses any need for further investigation into historical and political specificities of those peoples to whom it is

meant to refer and in fact it's the women in the former colony are the most vulnerable to the term's devastating impact.

Chandra Mohanty (1988) argues that the current mode of discourse produces the image of the average third-world woman as being ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domesticated and victimized. This is in contrast to the implicit self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and the freedom to make their own decisions. This homogenized, ahistorical generic extends the disempowerment that contemporary humanist discourse proposes to eradicate by postulating a gender-based stasis that robs women of agency and subjectivity in the accommodation of the set paradigm

Both Michel Foucault (2003) in his theory of resistance and Homi Bhabha (1994), in his description of ambivalence, locate the possibility for an alternative, subaltern, speech within the interstices of the dominant discourse. The concept of non-specific 'third world' or 'postcolonial woman', through dishistoricization or iteration of the real, culture specific conditions which render women silent in certain societies.

### **1.3.3 Engaging the Self: Representation and Autobiography**

Leigh Gilmore (1994) presents a productive, feminist way of reading autobiography and interpreting the autobiographical elements in texts written by those whose lives have been placed on the margins of history, society, and literature. She examines how women throughout literary history have coped with a subject position in autobiographical texts. Gilmore demonstrates how her feminist theory of autobiography accounts for women's self-representation in a way that exposes the limitations of traditional readings of the autobiographical. She defines autobiographies as "a reading practice," as well as "a description of self-representation by which the self may be represented and where it challenges and expand the boundaries of truth, locating it in other forms of self-representation, such as fiction, poetry, and biographies of others.

However, Ellen Summers (1994) opines that, Gilmore does not articulate a theory of women's self-representation. This is mainly because of the ungainly scope of the historical and social contexts of the texts considered. The book follows several recent feminist treatments of autobiography, and some of its faults may have resulted from forcing a niche for yet another book on or near the subject.

Evelyne Accad (1978) raises the question as to whether literature can serve as a vehicle for social change. The demand for fictional solutions intensifies with the need for a new social order and reflects unresolved or irreconcilable cultural realities. The feminist prerequisite for change thus relates directly to the nationalist movements of cultures where literature has only recently become manifest. In the nascent literature of North Africa and the Arab World, writers retrace the age-old schism between literature and reality. Through their fiction a literary "veil of shame" continues to obscure the pressing reality of women, "deprived of personal and social freedom, subjected successively to the will of their fathers, husbands, sons, economically dependent, intellectually circumscribed" Evelyne Accad carefully underscores the inherent irony in these writers' failure to present the picture of women documented by social scientists. Almost all of the works surveyed are fully or semi-autobiographical.

#### **1.3.4 Female Discourse: Writing against Patriarchy and Social Conventions**

According to Nawal El-Saadawi (1991) the oppression of women, the exploitation and social pressures to which they are exposed, are not characteristic of Arab or Middle Eastern societies, or countries of the 'Third World' alone. They constitute an integral part of the political, economic and cultural system, preponderant in most of the world. However, she points out that Islamic society was characterized by a patriarchal system built on private property, authority being in the man's hands alone as a head of the family. The author launches the revolution against male hegemony, not only in the Arab world but wherever men still lead society and consider women as followers, not leaders. This leads Saadawi to discuss the delicate matter of love and sex in the Arab world.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas (1991) shows how El Saadawi comments on gender by borrowing from and rewriting classical and traditionally male genres of Arab/Islamic writing. These subversive gestures challenge the hegemony of her male counterparts, whether literary or political. Malti-Douglas effectively illuminates the complexity of El Saadawi's engagement with the themes of writing, the body, gender and patriarchy, by demonstrating a vast knowledge of classical Arabic narratives.

#### **1.4 Rationale and Scope of the Study**

The paper discusses the effects of feminism, nationalism and colonialism on modern Egyptian women. These three elements are seen as interconnected as in many other developing countries. The attempt is also to see early Egyptian feminist consciousness that developed hand in hand with national consciousness and also to see the colonialist and counter-colonialist representations of Egyptian Arab women from the context of Egyptian's women's need for positive change which is not less than that of women anywhere else.

The paper is going to examine the themes and narrative features that Soueif employs with a view to draw attention to unresolved questions within the debate of female representation, identity and on asymmetrical intercultural relationships, the historical reasons for the present cultural conflicts as well as the role played by the visual and/or literary stereotyped representations of the oriental otherness compared with the Western tradition. Soueif's challenge lies in mapping out the complex conditions of querying oneself and the possible processes of transformation while maintaining one's own cultural diversity.

#### **1.5 Objectives of the Study**

- The deconstruction of 'third world woman' in general and Egyptian women in particular the attempted restoring of fluidity of identity and historical specificity.
- To see discursive trajectories involved in Soueif's narration.

- Examine the negotiation of space and identity construct against western stereotyping.
- To study the politics of romance and desire as possible transnational representation and complex process of unfolding desires, sexual taboo, love and feelings rooted in social, economic, and political institutions and to see the shaping of the characters against patriarchal challenges.
- To understand the hybrid representation of women.

### **1.6 Hypotheses**

- Soueif's use of English in her writing or the appropriation of language or literary form provides discursive resistance.
- Soueif's female characters and their characterization portray the inner struggle between the authentic desire as an individual and the patriarchal concepts of desire and also a defiance of what is traditionally expected of a married woman.
- Ahdaf Soueif's characters represent hybrid identities, carving out a place for themselves in the midst of cultural intersection.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## Chapter 1

### **Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Female Identity in Ahdaf Soueif's Novels**

In his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said writes: "Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their 'others'...the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an 'us' and a 'them,' each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident" (Said 1994: 20). Recent critics of postcolonial and feminist theory such as Anne McClintock, Chandra Mohanty, and Gayatri Spivak have endeavored to analyze the extent to which such academic theoretical discourses are themselves implicated in the conceptualization of the "foreign" as a monolithic, static, and fundamentally unknowable (or, paradoxically, as the west's negative self-reflection, eminently knowable) "otherness." Within this context, Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif's novel, *The Map of Love* (Soueif 1999) may be read as an attempt to "write back" against western constructs of the so-called "postcolonial" or "third world woman" and of the "first world woman" to whom she is the "other." The narrative's emphasis on cultural reversals, feminine Hybridity, and the inversion of western literary and social tropes disrupts the essentializing tendencies of feminist and postcolonial theories by restoring to its subjects the fluidity of identity and historical specificity such ideological constructs deny them.

#### **2.1 Deconstructing Western Paradigm of the "Third World Women"<sup>2</sup>**

In order to analyze the extent to which Soueif's *The Map of Love* deconstructs western paradigms of the "third world women," it is useful to first consider the nature of the concept in feminist and postcolonial discourse. In her essay, "*The Angel of Progress*,"

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<sup>2</sup> Mohanty exposes the production of a singular category of 'Third World Women' in western feminism which damagingly creates the discursive homogenization and systematization of the oppression of women in the third (Mohanty 1991: 28-41) she recognises that western feminism's attention to 'Third World' Women is Valuable and laudable, not least in its attempts to forge international links between different women.

(McClintock 1992: 84-94) Anne McClintock argues that by subsuming all formerly colonized individuals under a single rubric of postcoloniality, postcolonial studies erase the traces of gender inequality, further entrenching it within the society. She writes:

“Not only have the needs of ‘postcolonial nations’ been largely identified with male conflicts, male aspirations and male interests, but the very representation of ‘national’ power rests on prior constructions of gender power”

(Mohanty1991: 92)

She goes on to assert that within these heterogeneous gendered institutions “men and women do not live ‘postcoloniality’ in the same way or share the same singular ‘postcolonial condition’.”(Mohanty 1991:92) Thus, an empty, nonspecific term, “postcolonial,” functions in the academy to denote all peoples, regardless of gender, class, ethnicity, or creed, within all formerly colonized territories. At best an irrelevancy in the so-called “third world,” at its worst the term yields pernicious results in that its use forecloses any need for further investigation into the historical and political specificities of those peoples to whom it is meant to refer. As McClintock argues, women in the former colonies are the most vulnerable to the term’s devastating impact.

### **2.1.1 Redefining the Image of the ‘Average Third-World Woman’**

A similar danger exists in feminist discourse in the concept of the “third world woman.” In “Under Western Eyes,” Chandra Mohanty argues that the current mode of discourse “produces the image of the ‘average third-world woman’ as being ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound...domesticated...victimized. This...is in contrast to the implicit self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanty1988: 65-88). This homogenized, ahistorical generic extends the disempowerment that contemporary humanist discourse proposes to eradicate by postulating a gender-based stasis that robs women of agency and subjectivity in the accommodation of a set paradigm. Moreover, this conceptualization also appropriates an



image against which western theorists come to define themselves, thereby perpetuating the colonization of the “other” that it was formed to repudiate.

This concept of an essentialised “woman” (Irigaray 1997: 308-315) in theoretical discourse is the inevitable offshoot of constructions found in French High Feminism, particularly as conceived by two of the school’s leading avatars, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. In of *The Other Woman*, Irigaray argues in favor of “a culture of two sexes” and later asserts that:

“Women’s liberation, and indeed the liberation of humanity, depends upon the definition of a female generic, that is, a definition of what woman is, not just this or that woman.”

(Irigaray1997: 308-315)

The paradigm in which all women are shriven of their cultural and political particularity in order to assume a gender-based identity accomplishes two things: First, despite Irigaray’s dream of dialectic, this model perpetuates a binary opposition-- the basis of all systems of oppression. Second, it negates First and Third World differentiation, presuming an identical experience of patriarchy in every culture. A similar effect may be found in the theories of Helene Cixous. In her study of the author entitled “*Love, Mourning, and Metaphor*,” (Cixous1997 :292-297) Kadiatu Kanneh writes:

“Cixous legitimizes her use of black historical metaphor, based on references to colonialism, slavery, and racism, by claiming that ‘In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history.’ The call for a feminine culture which sees itself as separate from the history of wars and colonialism is validated by the assertion that woman had nothing to do with all this.”

(Cixous 1997: 295)

### 2.1.2 Locating the Possibility for an Alternative Speech within the Dominate Discourse

The feminist discourse which seeks to liberate in actuality accomplishes the same paralyzing effect as does the term “postcolonial” by denying women historical particularity because of over generalization for either convenience or lack of sensitivity. Both Michel Foucault, in his theory of resistance, and Homi Bhabha, in his description of ambivalence, locate the possibility for an alternative, subaltern, speech within the interstices of the dominate discourse. The concept of a non-specific “third world” or “postcolonial woman,” as an essentializing factor through dehistoricization, forecloses any possibility for the understanding or iteration of the real, culture-specific conditions which render women silent in certain societies.

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This theoretical discourse provides a critical reference point against which to situate Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*. As has been shown, academic constructs whose ostensible purpose is to facilitate the representation of the oppressed in reality perpetuates a silence that Julia Kristeva says “is a seemingly peaceful coexistence that hides the abyss: an abysmal world, the end of the world” (Kristeva 1991: 97) *The Map of Love* moves to eradicate “third world woman” from the constraints of academic dogma, restoring her to history, forestalling the end of the world through narrative. In her essay *Geographies of Pain*, Françoise Lionnet writes:

“Literature encodes, transmits, as well as recreates ideology...to create new mythologies that allow the writer and the reader to engage in a constructive rewriting of their social contexts”

(Lionnet 1993: 32-152)

### 2.1.3 Recreation of ideology: a rewriting of social context

*The Map of Love* enacts just such a recreation of ideology, a constructive rewriting of the social context, in its treatment of its female protagonists. Soueif’s appropriation of “oriental” literary tropes—plotlines including kidnapping, masquerade, romance—boldly



signifies intent to dismantle constructions of Egyptian society in the western literary canon. Soueif then reverses these tropes, stripping them of the fantastic and supernatural inflections which contribute to the continued perception of “the east” as a phantasmagoric no-place. Distancing, disempowering tropes in Soueif’s hands become portals through which readers enter into a more realistic treatment of the “east,” as a living geopolitical entity, with specific—and diverse—histories, peoples, and projects.

As an attempt to “write against” western literary and presumably theoretical constructs, a primary concern within this text appears to specifically relate to the restoration of women’s narratives. Soueif’s protagonists discuss women in the context of the Arabic language on two separate occasions in the text. The word “woman” is found to resemble the word “mirror,” (Soueif 2000: 375), while the etymology of the word “mother” is described as closely correlating to concepts pertaining to “nation” and “religion.” These considerations, along with Isabel’s wish that she had listened to her mother’s stories before Alzheimer’s disease ravaged her memory and Amal’s desire for a letter from her own mother are intended to touch upon one of the central themes of the novel—the regenerative effects of women’s narrative for both the individual and society. (Soueif 2000: 118-119)

The similarity of the women’s hunger for traces of their past confounds the binary opposition of “western self” and “eastern other.” This must not be confused, however, with the stultifying paradigm of a womanly essence at work in much of western feminism. Though their affective needs are the same—indeed, are the unifying force of humanity—and function within the text as a basis of common ground upon which to meet while greater paths to mutual understanding are forged, the context in which these needs are experienced are radically different. Soueif’s emphasis on historical context as a means to disrupt paralyzing concepts such as “postcolonial” and “third world woman” nevertheless must not negate the complementary theme of the oneness of humanity in the need for love. The experience of regret and the fear of loss here are posited as being among the host of universal human experiences which may serve as a potential point of communion when all other venues are blocked. Soueif writes:

“I (Amal) lift my head and look at Isabel...A dead father and a mother as good—or as bad—as dead. We are both orphans, she and I. A dead brother and an absent brother...A broken marriage—we share that too.”

(Soueif 2000: 81)

The women’s call for the memories of their lost mothers acknowledges the silences in which women of both societies have been locked.

Coincident with the personal hunger for maternal representation is the argument, symbolized by the etymological discussions, of the socially-penetrative quality of women’s language. Women’s narratives in the form of journal entries, correspondence, and the couching of texts from the public domain (usually written by European males) within a female-provided context are the primary source of social information given the reader. The breadth, complexity, and comprehensiveness of this information refutes the feminist concept of the insular life of women, even as it addresses a problematic at work both within the traditional academy and in many patriarchal societies: that of the separation of the spheres<sup>3</sup>. Postcolonial theory’s trope of “postcoloniality” and western feminism’s paradigm of the “third world woman” leave no discursive room through which a theoretical refutation of the separation of the spheres could be enacted so that women’s narratives could be recuperated within the global canon and indeed it might be fair to surmise that, with the exception of burgeoning attempts to conceive a new method of so-called “feminist ethnography,” a covert belief in an intrinsically less valuable ‘woman’s world’ continues to inform “first world” discourse as well. Soueif’s narrative implodes the separation of the spheres. As women, Isabel and Anna and Amal and Layla are marginalized within their respective societies. Such liminal positions seem to grant them a freedom of movement which is often denied men of the same class. While Sharif Basha and ‘Omar are hemmed in by the political exigencies of their day, forced to play roles not of their own choosing—Sharif as the political reactionary, ‘Omar as the

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<sup>3</sup> The separation of the spheres in male-dominated societies affords women little or no opportunity for self-representation because of the lack of social prestige ascribed to the private sphere.

Kalashnikov Conductor—the women in their lives enjoy a relative freedom to transcend the social circumscriptions of their time. Anna’s and Layla’s blossoming friendship is not the social bombshell that is Anna’s and Sharif’s marriage. Isabel’s and Amal’s closeness does not carry with it the political connotations that an American woman conceiving a child with a Palestinian activist does. Thus, the relative isolation in which women conduct their relationships affords a greater opportunity for transgressing the social code. In her journal describing her first meeting with Anna, Layla writes:

“I found myself forgetting that she was a stranger. And what a stranger: the British Army of Occupation was in the streets and in the Qasr el-Nil Barracks, and the Lord was breakfasting in Qasr el-Dubara. Because of them my uncle had been banished and my father was cloistered in the shrine these eighteen years and now my husband was in jail. And here I sat with one of their women, dressed in the clothes of a man, snatched in the night by my husband’s friends and imprisoned in my father’s house—and we sat in my mother’s reception room and felt our way towards each other as though our ignorance, one of the other, were the one thing in the world that stood between us and friendship.”

(Soueif 2000: 136)

The most intimate foundations of Layla’s personal life—husband, brother, father, uncle—are imbricated in the political realities of the world outside. Similarly, events within the home produce a ripple effect in the world beyond its four walls—a friendship between women catalyzes a taboo love affair which then leads to a marriage flouting social proscriptions that in turn progresses to the greatest insurrectionary movement of all—that of a British Victorian woman using the English language to agitate for the Egyptian nationalist cause. Anna’s observation that “here, I have come to see, Society exists behind closed doors—but it is no less Society for that” (Soueif 2000: 160) seems to be Soueif’s most urgent assertion that women’s political consciousness must no longer be denied in social discourses simply because society mandates it be hidden.

## 2.2 Clearing a Discursive Space for Women's Narrative

The repudiation of an enforced women's silence predicated upon the separation of the spheres is not the only, or even primary, step in Soueif's process of clearing a discursive space for women's narrative. Perhaps the most fundamental tactic employed by Soueif in wresting a woman centered story of Egypt from the grasp of patriarchal narrative is the appropriation of the western archive. Historical documents from the era of British imperial domination of Egypt are interspersed within the narrative, thereby couching in a polyphonic conversation a discourse whose power depends upon monologue. The prejudice of Thomas Cook and the opportunism of Lord Cromer ring hollow amid a cacophony of other voices, those historical as well as fictional, whose narratives in Soueif's work when juxtaposed against the tenets of the western archive illustrate perhaps more powerfully than any nationalist polemic could do the absurdity upon which imperial (and neo-imperial) notions of hegemony are based. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, M.M. Bakhtin locates the singular power of the novel as an instrument for cultural awareness and potential social change in what he terms heteroglossia, that is, the coexistence within the set space of the text multiple competing discourses. He writes:

“The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.”

(Bakhtin 1981: 276)

The incorporation of fragments of western historical texts into a novel authored by an Egyptian woman and narrated by various women from diverse social backgrounds allows the discourses of patriarchy, male and female imperialism, and “third world” speech to play against one another, forming a dialectic in which the strengths and weaknesses of each are revealed. Thus, through a carnivalesque intermingling of speech, Soueif transforms the language of the text into something entirely new and eminently suited to

the complex lands and peoples each endeavors to define: multifaceted, fluid, free. Bakhtin describes this as the process of appropriating language. He writes: “The word exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from this that one must take the word and make it one’s own”

(Soueif 2000: 294)

### **2.2.1 Nonlinear Storyline Reversing the Epistemic Violence Enacted upon the “Non-West”**

In addition to an empowering multiplicity of voices at work in *The Map of Love*, the intermingling of past and present in this nonlinear storyline reverses the epistemic violence enacted upon the “non-west” by postcolonial and feminist theorists. This saturation of the present with historical narrative returns political and historical specificity to subjects robbed of it in the development of western theory. Soueif writes of Amal’s desire to visit with her expatriate son: “If he stays long enough she can show him Anna’s story...they will feel the presence of ...their ancestors and perhaps sense—however dimly—the pattern of the weave that places them at this moment of history on this spot of land” (Soueif 2000: 100). Ancestral memory plays a critical role in this text, as, according to Frantz Fanon (1963), it does in all colonized and formerly colonized societies.<sup>4</sup> That Amal’s sons’ ancestors were leaders in the movement for Egyptian nationalism is dangerous information even in an era of ostensible freedom, when the neocolonialist forces of capitalism operate on a subterranean level under the guise of a supranational new world order.

The restoration of memory thus gives back to the Egypt’s scattered children a sense of rootedness, of belonging, the absence of which appears to be a defining characteristic of this text. As Fanon argues in *Wretched*, and Soueif seems to imply throughout her narrative, the absence of a specific historical, social, and cultural reference point renders

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<sup>4</sup>Fanon argues in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, that while colonization installed itself in a territory most frequently through sheer military brutality, the process of legitimizing colonial presence depended upon the eradication of collective memory.

the individual vulnerable to an ascribed identity, such as those imposed upon “non-western” women through the discourse of the academy. Amal, the political activist, lives herself for twenty years in the heartland of the former colonizer, London, in a home she describes as “out of a Victorian novel.” Likewise her sons are most notable for their absence and her brother, though also an activist for the rights of his homeland nevertheless leads a nomadic, hybrid existence. Amal’s exploration of Anna’s journal leads her to reflect on her people’s relationship to the land of their birth. Soueif writes:

“Egypt, mother of civilization, dreaming herself through centuries. Dreaming us all, her children: those who stay and work for her, and those who leave and yearn for her and blame her with bitterness for driving them away.”

(Soueif 2000: 100)

The return of the familial—and cultural—archive gives substance to the dream, routing forever the British colonial assertion that the colonized are “without consciousness of themselves. The fact that the archive is to be mediated through the narrative of an Egyptian woman furthers the suggestion within the text of the importance of women’s language in bringing about healing. The history of Amal’s family, and of the nation for which they struggled, will pass through this woman down to her sons with her stories of their ancestral history and also out into contemporary society in various forms of political activism as well as in the narrative she writes for Isabel and may someday write for her nation as a whole.

Collective memory also counters the fallacy of colonial cultural supremacy, identified by Fanon in *Wretched*. According to Fanon, colonial, as well as current neo-colonial, orthodoxies assert their ideological supremacy upon the premise of a pre-colonial cultural blankness in the “third world”. (Fanon 1963: 238) The notion of an absence of culture outside of the west erases from the collective memory the history of the ideological violence perpetuated upon the colonized even as it threatens subordinated peoples with a cultural abyss in the absence of the colonizer. Amal’s recreation of her family’s history gives the lie to the colonial and neo-colonial paradigm by refuting the idea that the colonial period in Egypt’s history was one of native stasis, one in which the only dynamic



participants were the colonizers themselves. Indeed, though the western archive is—consciously or unconsciously—mute on this point, the *fin de siècle*<sup>5</sup> sees an Egyptian renaissance despite, not because of, British occupation. Amal’s weaving together of the story of this renaissance from the artifacts of her ancestors sparks in her the hope—however fragile—of another rebirth. Soueif writes:

“the renaissance must surely come. If she can open up the school, she’ll whitewash the walls and put bright posters up on them. She’ll record the children’s songs and learn to make bread. She’ll find some old man who still has an Aragoz and a Sanduq el-Dunya—and a storyteller.”

(Soueif 2000: 297-298)

In *The Map of Love*, it is with the storytellers that the greatest hope lies. In this novel, an authoritarian, monolingual discourse exists in the consecutive forms of British imperialism and American neo-imperialism. In the social climate in which the novel was written, the monologue occurs in the ideological constructs of western academic theory. Soueif’s text suggests that social and cultural restoration can come only in the form of the prevailing discourse’s antithesis—that is in the multi-vocal chaos of circus showmen, singing schoolchildren, and storytellers. Because women are the traditional transmitters of a culture, and because they are also the first to be silenced in any oppressive regime, the fact that Amal is to be the source of this potential rebirth signifies an idea within the text that a society’s renewal must include—indeed, must begin with—its women.

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<sup>5</sup> Characteristic of the ideas of the late 19th century, particularly of the Modernist movement and a decadent society; French, meaning 'end of century or era'

### 2.2.2 Thematizing Identity Formation

In addition to reversing the dehistoricizing and depoliticizing tendencies of western theory, *The Map of Love* thematizes another problematic aspect of contemporary academic discourse, that of identity formation. In his analysis of postcolonial theory, R. Radakrishnan writes, “the First World is in a state of counter mnemonic innocence, freely and unilaterally choosing what to remember and what not to remember from the pages of history...it insists on a dominant role for itself in projects of identity the world over”. (Radakrishnan 1993: 750-771) Soueif’s narrative arrests this trend by placing Egypt’s archive in the hands of an Egyptian woman. More radical, however, is the means through which the narrative also performs a reversal in that Amal assumes the power not only to oversee a formulation—or reformulation—of her own identity but also that of her American counterpart and cousin, Isabel. Through Amal’s translations Isabel comes to know her history. Rather than the onus falling upon the educated “first world woman” to define and classify her “third world sister,” as both feminist and postcolonial theory assume, the opposite occurs in a manner strikingly reminiscent of Gayatri Spivak’s call to western feminists regarding their “third world” subjects.<sup>6</sup>

If there is to be any hope in the project of knowing the so-called “other,” then *The Map of Love* here illustrates a transformation critical to that process: the critical gaze is inverted. Rather than being perpetually an object of the colonizing stare, an Egyptian woman is seen here evaluating and naming “western women,” first the young American Isabel, and then, through her artifacts, the British colonial, Anna. At last, a “third world” woman’s identity is seen to break free of the image of the negative self-reflection of the western female feminist. Her subjectivity is revealed in her ownership of the gaze. Simultaneously, the identities of the colonial Anna and the neocolonial Isabel are remodeled under the appraising glance of this newly-empowered Egyptian woman. Of Anna’s first correspondence upon arriving in Egypt, which echoes in form and tone the travel diaries ubiquitous in the Europe of her day, Amal reflects:

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<sup>6</sup> Spivak argues that the western feminist must learn to ask “not merely who am I? But who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How is she naming me?”

“I forgive her the mannered approach as she feels her way into my home. What else does she know—yet?...I find myself curious...wondering what she will make of Egypt, how much she will see—really see”.

(Soueif2000: 58-59)

Amal reserves her final judgment on the character of this colonial woman until the true test of her vision has ultimately been passed, a test which obtains to an argument crucial to the reevaluation of the trope of “third world woman” in this text. While the critical gaze is reversed when the proprietorship and duty of translation of the familial archive falls into the hands of this Egyptian woman, a similar reversal of perspective is required if the colonial woman, and her neo-colonial descendant, are ever to understand the society to which they have come. For Anna, this reversal comes with the trip into the Sinai desert. For Isabel, it is accomplished from a visit to the village of Tawasi, through a road which “led into the heartland of the terrorists. Or at least that was what it said in the papers”. (Soueif 2000: 166) Such instances of dislocation, of breaking away from the society that one knows, of delivering oneself into the care of the unknown “other,” initiates within the story a process of defamiliarizing these western women from their native social context. In this manner, Anna and Isabel at last shatter the model through which British colonials at the Agency commune only among themselves, the paradigm in which the only Egypt American ambassadors see is through the locked and tinted windows of their black limousines or behind the high fenced gates of the embassy.

### **2.3 Unveiling Stereotypes inherent in Western Perceptions of Women in the Arab World**

While such a radical estrangement with one’s cultural context is rarely feasible outside of the realm of fiction, the narrative structure of *The Map of Love* traces for readers this process of defamiliarization in order to unmask prejudices and stereotypes inherent in western perceptions of women in the Arab world. Perhaps the two most important of these tropes are the veil and the harem. In her journey through the Sinai, Anna at various moments must assume the traditional garb of the Arab woman, including the article

which remains today the symbol in the west of Islamic women's oppression. In her journal Anna describes her experience of seeing British colonials while wearing the veil:

“the oddest thing of all was that I suddenly saw them as bright, exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them, at ease, chattering to each other as though they were out for a stroll in the park, while the people, pushed aside, watched and waited for them to pass.”

(Soueif 2000: 194-195)

Anna here undergoes a double reversal. First, she assumes—to as great a degree as possible—the perspective of a native. Second, she echoes what Amal is doing in her appraisal of the archive and of Isabel, appropriating the critical gaze for use by one ostensibly forbidden to it—the “other” as woman and “foreigner.” Anna's surprise at the freedom of observation, and of the insights gleaned for her by it—her countrymen's thoughtless command of the sidewalk as native-born men and women are “pushed aside” and made to wait for the procession to pass—leads her to comment: “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” (Soueif 2000: 195). While it would probably be an error to describe Soueif as an apologist for the veil—this text argues both sides of the issue equally well—this moment seems directly engendered to refute automatic assumptions of women's oppression using this figure as its emblem. What is deemed in western society as the symbol of subjugation is described in the mouth of a western character from the pen of an Egyptian woman writer as “liberating.”

Similar events inform the experience of the harem in *The Map of Love*. In her journal, Anna describes sitting with Layla in the haramlek, listening to the men's discussion of women's rights below. Soueif writes:

“And when I saw Layla's face pressed against the wooden grille, illuminated in patches by the light from the room below, why, my head was filled with the notion that here was the perfect painting of a beautiful woman at the confessional in some Italian church. In the real confessional there would be no light, but the light in the painting would be the light of His all-encompassing Forgiveness and Grace.”

(Soueif 2000: 378)

Once again, Anna describes this foreign scene in the cultural terms she knows best, that of western Christian art. However, the fundamental difference here lies in the distinction Anna draws between the artificial illumination of the painting and the real light that brightens her friend's face. This subtle difference echoes an argument made by Chandra Mohanty in the essay previously discussed asserting that, contrary to popular western theoretical discourse, women are not homogenized entities experiencing male domination in the same way, nor are western women the avatars of feminine liberation that feminist discourse often presumes them to be. The light flowing into the haramlek is genuine, natural light, while the light falling upon the Christian woman in the confessional is fictitious, the product of an artist's design. This moment seems to symbolically encapsulate the realities of the political situations at which Soueif hints throughout the novel, in such details as the news of the jailing of Lord Cromer's suffragist wife reaching Anna at a political discussion she—alongside her Egyptian nationalist husband—leads at Sharif's former home.

### **2.3.1 The Rewriting of the Schema of the 'Veiled Woman' and the 'Harem'**

This direct confrontation with the “west's” hallmark symbols of an ostensibly “universal” subjugation of Arab women through the experiences of “western” characters subverts the prevailing ideological schema that automatically ties the emblems to a “known” pattern of oppression. In her essay, *Revisioning our Kumblas*, Rhonda Cobham argues that Caribbean women writers have traditionally had to combat disempowering “first world” stereotypes in ways similar to what Soueif appears to be attempting here.<sup>7</sup> (Rhonda 1993: 44-64) Soueif seems to assert a similar agenda here—the rewriting of the schema of the “veiled woman” and the “harem” lays bare the reality that often what is truly “known” is

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<sup>7</sup> Cobham argues that the “Caribbean woman writer has had to look for ways of accommodating her subjectivity as well as that of her oppressors to confront the whole notion of otherness and the allocation along racial or gender lines of specific properties and values.

not the Arab world to which this web of references is meant to apply, but only a discursive regime defined largely, if not wholly, by the “west.”

All this is not to suggest that Soueif’s novel should be read as an assertion of the Arab world as some sort of feminine utopia, however. Indeed, the question of women’s rights is a central issue throughout the text. Nevertheless, an important consideration at work within the narrative is the degree to which colonial–and neo-colonial–intervention arrests social progress in the colonized–and formerly colonized–world. Soueif writes:

“People, who would have tolerated the establishment of secular education, or the gradual disappearance of the veil, now fight these developments because they feel a need to hold on to their traditional values in the face of the Occupation. While the people who continue to support these changes have constantly to fight the suspicion that they are somehow in league with the British”.

(Soueif 2000: 384)

These sentiments resound nearly a century later in the narrative, as Soueif ascribes the advent of Islamic fundamentalist groups to a need within the diverse Arab communities of the “east” for an assertion of resistance to and unity in the face of American socioeconomic hegemony. Passages such as these call attention to the realities informing political movements outside the so-called western world. Anne McClintock traces the often strained relationship between the ideological schools of the metropolitan world and those of the former colonies they seek to mold in their image. She uses as an example a declaration made at the 1985 Nairobi Conference on Women: “It would be suicidal for us to adopt feminist ideas. Our enemy is the system, and we cannot exhaust our energies on women’s issues” (McClintock 1991: 118). That this form of “suicide” was viewed in part as a betrayal of nationalism through a capitulation to an imperialist doctrine seems manifest in a statement of reversal made four years later by another ANC representative, this time at the South African Youth Conference:

“How good it feels that feminism is finally accepted as a legitimate school of thought in our struggles and is not seen as a foreign ideology”

(McClintock 1991:119)

These global events echo what Soueif’s text seems to assert in passages such as the one quoted above: that western interventionists—including, presumably, those feminist and postcolonial theorists who assume for themselves alone the role of rectifying the oppression of the “third world” woman—little consider the extent to which their own hubris helps to perpetuate the very social conditions they wish to eradicate.

### **2.3.2 Advancing a Positive Model of Womanhood by a Variety of Social and Cultural Contexts**

In addition to disrupting the social discourses which have served throughout the years to freeze women within the various rubrics of the “first,” “third,” and “postcolonial world,” Soueif’s narrative advances a positive model of womanhood as dynamic, complicated, interpenetrating and interpenetrated by a variety of social and cultural contexts. The women in this narrative are hybridized, like the palimpsest Soueif describes Egypt to be (Soueif 2000: 644). Isabel and Anna accumulate identities in their experience of Egypt, learning to speak Arabic, forming familial relationships outside of their native culture, gradually acquiring enough distance from their known cultural and political contexts to appraise them with a critical eye. Similarly, Amal, when the reader meets her, already embodies the commingling of “east” and “west,” a Cairo native having spent half her adult life in London, alternately spouting passages from the British literary canon and Arabic pop songs, who, even as she agitates for the rights of unmediated self-determination for Arab communities within the region nevertheless identifies as her primary cultural role model George Elliot’s quintessentially British heroine Dorothea Brooke.

This reading of Hybridity as an antidote to paralyzing social discourses, the politico-economic and, its corollary and accomplice, the academic/theoretical seems to be most strongly evinced by the ubiquity of museums in this text. Hours spent in the British Museum among romantic, stereotypical depictions of Egypt instigate Anna's flight there. Numerous critical moments in Isabel's life—the announcement of her divorce, the commencement of a love affair with Omar—occur in New York museums. More critical, however, are the depictions of Egypt itself as being archived. Various structures, from Anna and Sharif's home to the military outpost at Alexandria, have been converted into museums by the time of Amal's narrative, while transportable Egyptian relics most often find themselves in British and American collections. These monuments to a dead, often idealized, if not utterly fictitious, history contrast with the frenetic multiplicity of selves reiterating in the symbolic economy of the text the stasis of identity imposed upon "the other" by western ideology. Just as the narrative systematically disrupts the notion of a fixed, western-prescribed essence of "the east" by inverting and rewriting the texts that defined it, so too does the narrative embed within these emblems of ideological paralysis the "germ of their overthrow". Soueif writes:

"The entrance of MOMA is lit and welcoming. (Isabel) turns into the doorway and walks around aimlessly. You can do that in a museum. Not thinking, just being. When she comes to, she is standing in front of a Miro. It makes sense: "The vivid blue, the bright one-eyed creatures floating, darting, alert, untethered".

(Soueif 2000: 50)

Shortly following this scene, Soueif describes a particular shade of blue as the "blue of transformation" (Soueif 2000: 65), its beauty arising from its position on the precise borderlands between blue and green. Miro's bright blue, untethered creature, therefore, suggests the amorphousness, the fluidity that is the hybrid's power. Hybridity figures in this text as a state of being neither rootless (hence the importance of the ancestral archive), nor utterly bound (thus the danger of institutions of memory and discourse), of



being capable of straddling two worlds at once, embracing some elements of both, denying all aspects of neither. The novel culminates with the restoration of Anna's tapestry's third-and central-panel. Only then does the first panel's inscription "It is He who brings forth," and the final panel's "the dead," acquire meaning—in a pharonic scene is written a Koranic verse: "It is He who brings forth the living from the dead" (Soueif 2000: 491). In *The Map of Love's* symbolic economy, the mingling of the two worlds—mosques and church, east and west, tradition and modernity—brings forth a third, a living world to replace the dead.

The vision of some future third space, a place of potentiality that transcends the devastating political contradictions of one's day—emblemized by Nur and baby Sharif, by Anna and Sharif's use of a neutral language throughout their marriage, by the blue space of transformation that is the hybrid's domain—functions throughout the text as an aspiration already at least partially achieved by the main characters. Nevertheless, Soueif remains cognizant throughout the text of the problematic aspects of this solution, its unlikelihood to effect significant positive change within the lifetimes of the majority of her countrymen and women. In the conversation among Amal's friends and colleagues, the participants acknowledge a sense of helplessness, of being merely "a bunch of intellectuals" talking and writing only to each other (Soueif 2000: 222) Similarly, at the novel's conclusion, Soueif describes the difficulty—"nearly impossible really"—of translating from one language, and one culture, into another. The means through which *The Map of Love* subverts western concepts of the "postcolonial" and "third world" woman are highly class-based. Just as Amal and her colleagues are ever-mindful of their privileged positions within their society, Soueif herself remains conscious of her status as a wealthy, western-educated woman writing in English. Neither Soueif nor her characters in *The Map of Love* fail to remember that such an empowering freedom of choice—of language, culture, nationality—is open to the very few.

Nevertheless, Amin Malak argues that Soueif's use of English in her writing "dehegemonizes and transforms it into an instrument of resistance to the discourses of both arrogant colonialism and exclusionist neo-colonialism" (Malak 2000: 161)

Discursive resistance occurs not simply in how Soueif writes but also in what she writes. Soueif's inversion of tropes, traditional narrative forms, even of the hegemonic archive all function as a "writing back" to disempowering, stultifying western ideologies. Through the appropriation of language and literary form, Ahdaf Soueif implodes the fallacy of the "postcolonial" or "third world" woman even as she demands the reevaluation of "first world woman" ideal.

#### 2.4 Re-positioning Anglo-Egyptian Cultural Crossings

"Soueif does not fall for the East versus West, or Arab versus European, formulas. Instead, she works them out patiently .... Soueif renders the experience of crossing over from one side to the other, and then back again, indefinitely, without rancor or peachiness.... The fine thing, though, is that Soueif can present such a *Hegira*<sup>8</sup>...thereby showing that what has become almost formulaic to the Arab (as well as Western) discourse of the other need not always be the case. In fact, there can be generosity, and vision, and overcoming barriers, and, finally, human existential integrity."(Said 2002: 410)

The above lines are the words of Edward Said, in "The Anglo-Arab Encounter", with regard to the writer Ahdaf Soueif. In fact, Soueif's fiction flits between various cultures and languages, crossing over representative and formal frontiers. Our considerations regarding the writer Ahdaf Soueif issue from the tension directed towards this area of possible trans-cultural exchange, where ethnic and racial identities are continually called into question.

Soueif's writing takes its place within the theoretical and critical apparatus representative of post colonial feminism, and what emerges is an assertive, and not at all placid, reflection on the building of identity on the part of the Egyptian (middle-class and

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<sup>8</sup> The Arabic term *Hegira* means Emigration

intellectual) protagonists, who find themselves hovering between two cultures, in an “in-between” (Bhabha 1990:1) area of conflict; this complex contact zone is called “mezzaterra”<sup>9</sup> by the writer. The term “mezzaterra”, as Soueif explains in her preface to the homonymous collection of essays, refers to “common ground”, to a “theoretically constructed” territory, where different cultures can combine their knowledge and ideas, rather than clash in the name of cultural dominion. It is to this “mezzaterra” that the author alludes in projectual terms, whilst referring to processes of productive symbiosis that in other ages marked the countries on both sides of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, for the purposes of Soueif’s critical discourse, it is important to stress the author’s utilisation of the Italian term “mezzaterra”, which stemmed from the fact that, in Italy, she noticed forms of Mediterranean “synthesis” between Europe and the Middle-East. Consequently, Soueif’s texts are essential for both a precise analysis of the discursive variations with regard to literary representations of “otherness” and the objective articulated by the writer at the textual level, of establishing sounder relations between East and West.

#### **2.4.1 References of Travel Writing as an Act of Writing Back: Re-reading of Canonic Texts**

In fact, ever since her collection of stories, Soueif has been examining the complexity of the continual process of identitary construction of de-colonised subjects in contexts far removed from their place of origin. One of the principal aspects of her writing is the conscious attempt to use her characters to create multi-sided figures, who counter those culturally, ethnically and racially defined subjects present in the Western tradition. On the one hand, these characters proclaim their marginalisation, whereas, on the other, we see them emerging from this marginalisation in a quest to build up a life for themselves. The aim is to give rise to a narrative generated from the perspective of these people’s specific historical and cultural experiences, via a process of *writing back*, which entails speaking

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<sup>9</sup> The term “mezzaterra”, as Soueif explains in her preface to the homonymous collection of essays, refers to “common ground”, to a “theoretically constructed” territory, where different cultures can combine their knowledge and ideas, rather than clash in the name of cultural dominion.

out in conjunction with a revision-process that, through the re-reading of canonic texts or literary genres, calls into question the discriminating Western representative apparatus. For these reasons her works are defined as counter-narrative (Thieme 2000). This definition characterises her approach to writing, in which she calls into question images of subordinates, pursuing these images via specific formal and stylistic strategies and tending to overturn Western narrative canons at the very moment of their re-utilisation (Griffiths and Tiffin 1995). Therefore, in her intent to critically de-construct these representative mechanisms, and in accordance with the denunciatory methodology of post-colonial *writing back* and the practice of revision influenced by Western feminism, the author consciously falls back in *The Map of Love* on literary genres (e.g. travel writing) from the Western tradition, with the aim of de-constructing stereo-types present in 19th century English travel-writing, such as representations that tend towards the exotic depiction of the Eastern woman. Revision of travel writing and specifically travel writing by 19th century Englishwomen, has as its primary objective the re-examination of the relationship between this literary form and the modalities of cultural imperialism; its secondary objective is the re-examination of the specific role of English women-travelers' written works in relation to levels of complicity with imperialist ideology or resistance to it (Chaudhuri *et al.* 1992). These aspects are clearly emphasised by Soueif herself in an interview: "There's a genre that I really am very interested in, which is travel writing, done by women, English women, mostly Victorian, and of course they are very varied, from people with very set, very colonial attitudes, to people who were very broad-minded and opened themselves up to the culture that they were coming to see, like Lucy Duff Gordon who ended up living there until she died." (Soueif 2000: 102-03)

In *The Map of Love*, the reference to travel writing, and especially travel-writing by 19th century English women-travelers like Lucie Duff Gordon and Anne Blunt<sup>10</sup>, seeks to highlight the forms and role of this writing about "otherness", which contributed so

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Blunt was to become the first western woman to make a recorded journey to central Arabia. She also wrote two of the best known books of Arabian travel and exploration and translated into English the pre-Islamic verse of the great Arabian writers.

crucially in the 19th century to the spreading of “orientalising” clichés; this is done with the aid of Orientalist painting, which materialises in the novel through the works of John Frederick Lewis.<sup>11</sup> Travel-writing about Egypt was subsequently critically recomposed in *The Map of Love* by a 20<sup>th</sup> century Egyptian, and for Soueif’s female figures, these works become multi-sided, superimposed mirrors of their own personal and ethnic identity. Through these multiple mirrors, the Egyptian woman re-interprets her own image, and the way this was constructed and conveyed to her, whilst, at the same time in this act of critical re-reading, searching for a more conscious identitary relocation. The protagonists are constantly redefining themselves in the comparison and friction with those external, imposed images; however they never manage to see themselves, in the various contexts, as integrated subjects in a relationship that is always either denunciatory or critical, of both Western imperialism and its new forms of neo-colonialism, and of their place of origin. Soueif addresses the cultural role of the travel-narrative as an important representative modality supporting imperialism; on the one hand she employs it in order to profitably overhaul the past and, thus, once again give voice to those who had no place in the historic transmission, and on the other, to call into question the discriminating representative forms that endure in the present:

“Appeals to the past are among the commonest strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeal is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty whether the past is really past, and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps”.

(Said 1994:11)

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<sup>11</sup> John Frederick Lewis (July 14, 1804 – August 15, 1876) was an Orientalist English painter who specialized in Oriental and Mediterranean scenes.

#### 2.4.2 Soueif's fiction represents a Space to be crossed

Soueif's fiction represents a space to be crossed that is imaginatively aware of the historical and colonial relational modalities. This is Soueif's intention in *The Map of Love*; in fact, in the novel, in order to show how the effects of the colonial period have endured into the modern era, she compares contemporary events with those from the distant family past, via a bi-partite time structure. In her novel the forms of past discrimination are those passed on from the travel-diaries of the 19th century English protagonist and seen as "imperial archives" (Spivak 1997: 51-55). It is therefore necessary, through the archives of the imperial authorities, to retrieve the discourses and representative and literary models structured on power relations and proceed to deconstruct them. Soueif re-examines them and turns their cultural significance upside down in order to provide the Egyptian women with their own voice, so that it is they who tell their own stories, rather than continue being represented in line with homologating clichés from the Western cultural tradition. These Egyptian women are problematic but aware, and the author assigns them the role of critical, post-colonial observer; on the one hand, this highlights the connivance of Egyptian society side by side with the disruptive effects of English colonial policy, and, on the other hand, goes back over the historical facts and re-constructs the hushed-up and subordinate, Egyptian cultural tradition. The stylistic and linguistic symptoms of this cultural retrieval are also interesting: from epigraphs based on Arabian poetry to Arabic terms running through the text; these elements acknowledge the cultural and linguistic tradition of the community of belonging, which, writes Said, survives in an "amphibious" manner but also contaminates it (Said 2002: 409). Soueif's actual fiction is analysed as a sort of palimpsest of identity, in the sense that it represents a space to be crossed that is imaginatively aware of the historical and colonial relational modalities. Thus do troubled female protagonists travel across the centuries back and forth from London to Cairo; then, at a ripe age, they return to their countries of origin with an image of themselves that has altered but hovers in a position of instability.

## **CHAPTER 2**

## Chapter 2

### **The representation of body and desire in the realm of Egyptian fiction**

In Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*,<sup>12</sup> the protagonist Asya's emotional journey sheds light upon many sensitive and complicated issues, such as desire, sexuality, love and mutual understanding, all of which constitute the basis for a healthy relationship and a solid viable marriage. Furthermore, this chapter focuses on serious questions posed by Asya's story. Do married Arab women have the right to speak out about sexual needs? Can marriage based only on love ensure happiness? Should or can the married woman feel only for her husband even if she feels lonely and sexually unsatisfied or should she suffer in silence to uphold a socially sanctioned marriage? (Accad 1990: 44-45) The patriarchal Egyptian society from where Asya comes holds certain views concerning marriage, fidelity, infidelity, love and feelings rooted in economic, legal, and political structures, as well as social and cultural institutions that oppress women through the assertion of male power, dominance and hierarchy. In other words, Asya's journey moves through the complex process of unfolding desires, sexual, social, economic, and political and how this is shaped by the character herself and all that surrounds her.

Representation in Soueif's novels is the terrain on which transnational affiliations takes place. Within the novel, characters marginalized within national political conflicts turn to representation as an alternative discourse of resistance, reaching back across several generations to construct intensely imagined transhistorical, political and artistic alliances with other women. As the novel's contemporary women lose themselves in the stories of their foremothers, the novel dramatizes the effective intensity and private pleasures offered by romance, only to demonstrate how that effect can provide the springboard for renewed social action. Ahdaf Soueif explores the major aesthetic and political themes in

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<sup>12</sup> Ahdaf Soueif's honesty in exploring the sexuality of the Arab woman, a topic which has been rarely handled before with too much frankness, has led to the banning of her novel in many Arab countries.



her novels Soueif's and there is so much honesty in exploring questions of sexual desire, intercultural dialogue, and the politics of language.

It was Soueif's first novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (Soueif 1992), that launched this talented writer onto the international scene. Soueif's writings investigate the possibilities of cultural dialogue as well as the politics of desire, both within and outside this dialogue. Desire, in Soueif's work, always exists in a context of politics, history, and geography, all of which are intermeshed and cannot be disentangled. She works through this intricate web, tirelessly portraying the difficulty and ease of negotiating desire on such dangerous terrain. Central to her investigations is the encounter of East and West, of Arabic and English, and of men and women in an intercultural context. Soueif explores the lives of middle class and poor Egyptian women (Muslim, Christian, Arab, and Greek), as well as the lives of foreign expatriates, American, Canadian, English, Turkish, black, white. These characters and their psychologies emerge as the effects of all that surrounds them—culture, domestic and international politics, economics, society, family, and above all desire and love. Everything about them is over determined in intricate and simple ways and rendered in a prose of high aesthetic quality. Soueif identifies strongly with her characters. The heroine of her first collection, Aisha, shares with Soueif the first letter of her first name (as it is spelled in English), as do her subsequent heroines, Asya al-'Ulama in *In the Eye of the Sun* and Amal in *The Map of Love* (Soueif 1992) giving these characters an autobiographical bent. Soueif's aim is to cut through the confusion and stereotypes of society; the dissimulation of international, national, and family politics; and the secure matrix through which life and its desires are defined. The journey of her characters is not one where liberation is the necessary telos, but rather the complex process through which the unfolding of desires—sexual, social, economic, and political—is shaped by the characters themselves and all that surrounds them. It is this complicated picture that is painted by Ahdaf Soueif's meticulous brush.

### 3.1 Desire in Soueif's writings existing in a context of politics, history and geography

Soueif's temporal organization of her novels adds to both the Bildungsroman aspects of her novels and to her implicit discussion of the possibilities and pitfalls of cross-cultural dialogue. *In the Eye of the Sun* begins in medias res in July 1979 and goes back to May 1967, only to proceed chronologically again to April 1980. In doing so, Soueif is telling a story that is still happening. This is quite different from the way she sets up a dialogic of past-present juxtapositions in *The Map of Love*. *The Map of Love* begins with the present (1997) and then transports the reader into a series of back-and-forth temporal peregrinations between the last fin de siècle and the current one. This playing with various time frames to organize narrative allows Soueif to explore another of her central concerns more effectively, namely, geographic dislocation. If *In the Eye of the Sun* she took Arab women and girls to the heart of Empire, and in *The Map of Love* transports European and North American women to the colonies.

*The Map of Love* transports Anna Winterbourne, an English woman, from London to Cairo, and Isabel Perkman, an American woman from New York to Cairo and back. Moreover, it transports the Egyptian-Palestinian Amal from London to Cairo and then from Cairo to Tawasi in Upper Egypt, and takes Amal's brother 'Omar from New York to Palestine and Cairo and back to New York. *The Map of Love* ushers in moments of intercultural understanding and dialogue. Soueif, however, is all too aware of the rarity of such achievements. She understands that the predominant Western journalistic interest in the Arab world is not aimed at cultural dialogue and understanding, but rather at exoticizing the Arab and Muslim other through covering topics like "the fundamentalists, the veil, the cold peace, polygamy, women's status in Islam, female genital mutilation which would it be?" (Soueif 1999: 6) Still, the two Western characters in the novel, Anna and Isabel, who fall in love with Arab men, Sharif Basha al-Baroudi and 'Omar al-Ghamrawi (thus reversing the gender course that desire took in *In the Eye of the Sun*, where it was an Arab woman who desired an Englishman), are fully capable of understanding the other. Their understanding is not necessarily based on the obliteration of radical alterity and the transformation of the other into an approximation of the self;

rather, it is based on understanding the other on the other's own terms. *The Map of Love* does not have the same autobiographical bent of Soueif's other writings. This is a fictional love story that evolves within the context of real historical events. It begins at a moment when the British Empire was an Empire and ends with the indefinite and unchecked growth of the American Empire and its current "globalization." The old colonial order, when the British roamed the country freely, is compared with the present neocolonial globalized one: "It must be hard to come to a country so different, a people so different, to take control and insist that everything be done your way.

“To believe that everything can only be done your way.... I read the memoirs and the accounts of these long-gone Englishmen, and I think of the officials of the American embassy and agencies today, driving through Cairo in their locked limousines with the smoked-glass windows, opening their doors only when they are safe inside their Marine-guarded compounds?”

(Soueif 1999:70)

One wonders if the American limousines and their smoked- glass windows are the veil that Americans must wear in public spaces inhabited by dangerous, yet seductive, locals!

### **3.1.1 Examining the Politics of Love and Desire with the Entanglement of Patriarchy and Religion**

*In the Eye of the Sun* examines the politics of Asya's quest to combine love and desire with the entanglement of patriarchal domesticity, family and religion. Within this context, Suad Joseph defines desire as the broad range of experiences of wanting, erotic and non erotic (Joseph 2005:79). In this study, we would like to use the broader term of desire which covers the erotic and non erotic since desire *In the Eye of the Sun* always “exists in a context of politics, history and geography all of which are intermeshed.” (Massad 1999: 74-90)

For Suad Joseph, the patriarchal organization of familial culture means the privileging of the assertions of desire by males and elders and a sense of responsibility by females and juniors to assimilate and act upon the assertions of desire by males and elders (Joseph 2005: 79). For example, Asya's desire to marry Saif Madi is met with her father's objection, who insists that she should not marry until she finishes college. "For these grave things it is best to wait" (Soueif 1992: 146).<sup>13</sup> Her decision to marry Saif at the age of eighteen is also challenged by her mother, Lateefa Mursi, who is supposed to have more faith in her daughter's decisions rather than playing a conformist role.

"But you can't make such an important decision just like that. You can't determine the rest of your life suddenly one night when you are not yet eighteen. And I felt suddenly and for the first time in my life that I was wiser and stronger than she was, and I kissed her and said, ' Don't worry, Mummy. I know what I am doing".

(Soueif 1992: 108)

It is worthy to note that women in many parts of the Middle East continue to be staunch supporters of traditions and social relations that constrain and limit women's lives (Kandiyoti 1988). The most critical role of the mother is to uphold the patriarchal image of women. Since it is the mother's explicit role to bring up her daughters according to the values and standards of society, she herself must not adopt any constructively critical attitudes toward those standards. In other words, women are not encouraged to think independently. Parents rather decide for them what "they will eat, when they will eat, what they will wear, how they can plan."(Rubenberg 2001: 82) depriving them from the right to decide and choose for them.

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<sup>13</sup> Suad Joseph defines patriarchy in the Arab context as the prioritizing of the rights within kinship values which are usually supported by religion.. She goes further to argue that patriarchy is powerful in the Arab world because age-kinship values and relationships are crucial socially, economically, politically, ideologically and psychologically.

Moreover, Asya's quest to combine both desire and love is resisted by her future husband, Saif, who refuses to consummate their sexual desires before marriage despite Asya's insistent requests.

"Please, Saif, I want you so-'  
I want you too, Princess, but-.....  
No. Not one day, Saif. Now. Please. You want me. I know you do. And I want you so much. And it's right, I know it's right-'  
No, it isn't.'  
She sat back. 'Why? Why isn't it?'  
'Because we are not married.'

(Soueif 1992: 190)

Interestingly enough, the moment their passionate love receives patriarchal social sanction, it has stopped to be the organizing principle of their relationship. That is seen through the failure of sexual consummation on the wedding night as narrated through the conscience of Saif.

"I braced myself and gave two strong shoves, and I felt her tremble all over, and she started pushing with her heels against the bed to try and unhook herself, and she was whispering frantically that she couldn't bear it and she couldn't breathe and could I please stop just for a moment for one moment - and I lifted myself off and let her go and she rolled over on her side away from me and curled up into a little ball and pulled the sheet over herself and lay there trembling. I lit a cigarette and lay on my back smoking and after a bit she uncurled herself and came to lie against my side and I knew that she was crying so I stroked her hair and she said she was sorry oh she was so sorry. And after a bit, with her face against my arm, she asked do you want to - do you think we - I just really did not know - and I said hush, it doesn't matter, it does not have to be tonight".

(Soueif 1992:258)

### 3.1.2 Revealing Unfolding of Desires-Sexual, Social, Economic, and Political

The scene reflects both the fear and the psychological pressure Asya undergoes, taking into account that Asya as an Arab woman has been taught nothing about sexuality since it is a taboo subject not allowed to be discussed. In this regard, Simone De Beauvoir argues that the wedding night changes the erotic act “into a test that both parties fear their inability to meet, each being too worried by his or her own problems to be able to think generously of the other. This gives the occasion a formidable air of solemnity.” (Soueif 1992: 443)<sup>14</sup> To add further, the subject of the patriarchal concepts of sexuality takes us to Asya’s memories of her childhood and the restrictions imposed on her by her patriarchal father who dictates how she should act, move, and dress. For instance, one can observe Asya’s father’s furious reaction when he sees her dancing and shaking her head in front of the mirror.

"Daddy would freak out if I just shook my head in front of the mirror. Remember the day he saw me tossing my hair around when I was ten and I had to go the same day and have it cut? And I had to wear it short for seven years after that until I went to university? And how he came home one day and heard me practicing the zaghrouda and almost sacked Dada Zeina on the spot?"

(Soueif 1992: 351)<sup>15</sup>

This scene highlights the patriarchal views towards women’s sexuality, seen as an extension which is to be controlled and kept under surveillance, since women are seen as a menace to the social order and that they may bring shame to the family.

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<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Rubenberg argues that “it is women who teach girls the rightness or the truth of their traditionally defined roles, responsibilities, relations, and restrictions.

<sup>15</sup> Arab women are not taught about their bodies and their sexual life. Regardless of age, women enter marriage in complete ignorance of such fundamental issues. Hence, “making love” in the sense of mutually satisfying pleasurable part of married is rare..

However, for Asya, the failure to consummate the relationship functions as “an indefinite detriment of the combining of love and desire” (Massad 1999: 76). In other words, the unconsummated relationship signals Asya's journey toward loneliness, toward questioning the validity of marriage, toward wanting and desire out of wedlock which has been aggravated by the indifferent attitude of her husband, Saif, who travels all the time leaving her for long periods without at least caring about her emotional and sexual needs in spite of her pleading. This is presented in the scene when Saif calls Asya to tell her, “I am leaving Damascus tomorrow” (Soueif 1992: 341). He calls her and hangs up the phone before Asya can finish her sentence and express her terrible loneliness.

Asya's feelings of loneliness acutely intensify when they are together after long periods of separation and loneliness, shivering under a thin blanket in a small room waiting for her husband to finish his reading. “She would be patient while he read, and she would count her blessings, for here he is with her. No longer alone.”(Soueif 1992: 392) She waits. Saif throws the magazine to the floor, switches off the light and whispers “Good night, Princess.”(Soueif 1992: 392)

### **3.2 Desire and Culture**

Asya's journey of learning teaches her the difference between love and desire. When she finally consummates her sexual desire with Gerald Stone, an overbearing uncouth English hippie: who is the antithesis of the debonair, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan Saif, she realizes that only desire, not love, was involved. She is also attuned to how race and sex are intertwined in the West. She questions Gerald: “Why have all your girl-friends been from 'developing' countries?” “What?” “You've never had a white girl-friend, why?” “I don't think that way, man.” “Yes you do-and the reason you've gone to Trinidad- Vietnam-Egypt-is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss-you are a sexual imperialist- “You don't even believe what you're saying,” Gerald laughs. “Yes I do. You pretend-to yourself as well-

that it's because you don't notice race-or it's because these cultures retain some spiritual quality lost to the West-you pride yourself that you dance 'like a black man'-but that's all just phony" (Soueif 1992: 723) There she was, hopelessly in love with her husband Saif, who would not, could not sleep with her, while being utterly desirous of the unlovable Gerald. Asya finally rids herself of both, gets her Ph.D., and returns home to Cairo, love and desire remaining separate and ununifiable.

*In the Eye of the Sun* is far more than Asya's emotional journey. Soueif meticulously documents not only Asya's emotional life but also that of the Arab world. *In the Eye of the Sun* takes us from the devastating defeat of the Arabs in the 1967 War and the shock of Nasir's sudden death to the massacres of Palestinians in Jordan, Sadat's new era, the bread riots of 1977, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Washington Post's list of foreign leaders on the CIA payroll. She is also a chronicler of cultural politics. We listen to Umm Kulthum's "al-Atlal" and its political overtones and read the incomparable explication of al-Shaykh Imam's "Sharraft Ya Nixon Baba" as an instance of the possibility of a certain type of cultural dialogue. We listen to Western pop and rock. Even film actors such as Mahmud Mursi and Ahmad Mazhar make an appearance, as do directors and films, including Pasolini, Fellini, and Rossellini's *Roma, Citta Aperta*. The reader is also subjected to a litany of technical aspects of Asya's linguistics dissertation. These are not simple props that carry the narrative; they are all integral to Asya's emotional journey of learning and knowledge. Edward Said has described Soueif as "one of the most extraordinary chroniclers of sexual politics now writing." That she indeed is. Soueif explores desire not as a Western binary of hetero- and homosexual desire, but rather as a fluid set of possibilities existing on a continuum

In tracking these inter- and cross-cultural rhetoric of desire and discovery, Soueif's literary techniques are varied, including a sophisticated use of stream of consciousness. She uses letters, diaries, flashbacks, and political communiqués to contextualize, layer, and interrupt the narrative, creating prose of shimmering complexity. Soueif is unwilling to close the book on her major characters or on important episodes in their lives. There is always something that exceeds the characters and that Soueif still wants to explore. This



is evident in the reappearance of a number of incidents and characters from Aisha in *In the Eye of the Sun*. Asya al-'Ulama herself, as well as other characters from *In the Eye of the Sun*, spill over beyond the perimeter of that novel and into a number of short stories in *Sandpiper* and in Soueif's upcoming novel *The Map of Love*. In these reincarnations, the reader is introduced to other aspects of these characters' lives, to different angles from which to view certain of their experiences, or to more detail in narrating the same experiences. Time here is not necessarily chronological.

### 3.2.1 Bridging Cultures via Love and Desire

*The Map of Love* is a love story about an English aristocratic widow (Anna Winterbourne) who decides to travel the empire and a middle-aged aristocratic Egyptian bachelor (Sharif Basha al-Baroudi). Anna, already influenced by her English father-in-law's opposition to imperial expansion and racism, is receptive to liberal ideas of anticolonial nationalism. Her friendship with Sharif's sister, Layla, is one of the main bridges of cultural dialogue in the novel. Almost a century later, Isabel, the young New Yorker, falls in love with 'Omar al-Ghamrawi, a renowned New York-based Egyptian-Palestinian musician. Her friendship with Amal parallels that of Anna and Layla as a contemporary cultural bridge. An important element that Soueif uses to affect a cultural dialogue is her creative use of etymology in explaining Arabic words, which constitutes one of the many delicate pleasures that the novel offers the reader. Here is Amal teaching Isabel Arabic: "Qalb: the heart, the heart that beats, the heart at the heart of things. Yes?" She nods, looking intently at the marks on the paper. "Then there's a set number of forms—a template almost that any root can take. So in the case of 'qalb' you get 'qalab': to overturn, overthrow, turn upside down, make into the opposite; hence 'maqlab': a dirty trick, a turning of the tables and also a rubbish dump. 'Maqloub': upside-down; 'mutaqallib': changeable, and 'inqilab': coup...." So at the heart of things is the germ of their overthrow; the closer you are to the heart, the closer to the reversal. Nowhere to go but down. You reach the core and then you're blown away (Soueif 1992: 82).

The novel is a sort of investigative story. Isabel finds an old trunk in her dying mother's belongings containing mounds of paper written in Arabic and English. It is said that the trunk had traveled at the end of the previous century from London to Cairo and back and then to New York. Isabel, an American journalist on assignment in Egypt (1997/1998) writing an article on the millennium and Egyptian youth, brings the trunk with her so that Amal can help her unravel its mysteries. It turns out that the trunk belonged to Isabel's great-grandmother, Anna, and contains her journal entries, letters, and other papers as well as Layla al-Baroudi's letters and writings. As the story is unraveled, we live, through these letters and memoirs, the love story of Anna and Sharif, whose love persevered against many odds—the ostracism to which Anna was subjected by the English colonists in Cairo on account of her marrying an Egyptian and the questions raised about Sharif's nationalism by Egyptian nationalists on account of his marrying a colonizer. This love story is paralleled by the more complicated and fragmented love story between 'Omar al-Ghamrawi and Isabel.

On the sidelines of these two love stories is Amal, the investigator and unraveler. Whereas Anna and Sharif's love ends in tragedy in the context of colonialism and anticolonial nationalism, the novel ends with Amal's hallucinatory apprehension that a similar fate might be awaiting her brother and Isabel in our neocolonial globalized context. As the fictional and the real are intermingled in terms of family relations and historical events, the fictional characters become real historical figures that could very well have existed. The Baroudis, although fictional characters, belong to a real family. Their paternal Uncle Mahmoud Sami Basha al-Baroudi, in addition to being an important poet, is one of the Egyptian heroes of the Urabi revolt. Other fictional characters belong to the real Palestinian family of Khalidi. Although politics sometimes overpower the narrative of *The Map of Love*, this perhaps was unavoidable in maintaining the integrity of the text. Yet this beautiful and at times surreal novel, too, explores the politics of desire and love.

The amount of historical research that Soueif must have undertaken to produce this novel is truly monumental. She has familiarized herself with minute details about a period of

Egyptian history (Autumn 1897-December 1913) that is not particularly well studied, as it is bracketed between two revolutions-the 'Urabi revolt of 1882 and the 1919 revolution to which it is subordinated. The Mashriqi and Palestinian histories of the period are also meticulously revisited. From the beginning of the Zionist colonial project to the apex of Arab anti-Ottomanism, Soueif transforms history into a guide to the present. She renders historical actors real by giving them a tangible human dimension. Characters that play a role or make an appearance include Shukri al-'Asali, Rashid Rida, Yusuf al-Khalidi, Theodor Herzl, Rabbi Zadok Kahn, Cattaoui Pasha, and Shaykh Muhammad 'Abduh. Even a number of current characters are either real or based on real people. 'Omar al-Ghamrawi, for example, is a fictionalized character loosely based on Palestinian intellectual Edward Said. The depth of Soueif's historical research, her enlivening the history she traverses in the novel, as well as her concern with negotiating the problem of difference across the boundaries of culture, are evident in her remarkable attention to clothes. Whereas her fastidious descriptions of clothes provide the reader with a tactile feel for the characters, they also play another crucial role. As in "The Apprentice," where sartorial change produced an epistemological change for Yosri, gender and cultural crossdressing in *The Map of Love* (Anna wears the clothes of Western men as well as that of Arab women and men in order to travel incognito) signal a complete epistemological break. When Anna dresses as an Egyptian Muslim woman in public, not only are her looks transformed but so are her perceptions as well as those of others toward her. Thus disguised, she sees a number of English aristocrats pass her by unawares at Cairo's train station:

“But the oddest thing of all was that I suddenly saw them as bright, exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them; at ease, chattering to each other as though they were out for a stroll in the park, while the people, pushed aside, watched and waited for them to pass”

(Soueif 1999:194-95)

It is experiences like this one that helped Anna maintain her culture and identity and understand-not appropriate as many do-that of the Oriental other. French, not English or

Arabic, is the medium of communication between Sharif and Anna (who was being taught Arabic by Layla). French, it would seem was the most "neutral" of available languages for both. Soueif's talent has been praised by a large number of Arab and Western literary figures and scholars. These include Leila Ahmad, Radwa 'Ashur, Victoria Glendinning, Sun'allah Ibrahim, Frank Kermode, Hilary Kilpatrick, Penelope Lively, Hilary Mantel, and Edward Said and Gabir 'Asfur. Soueif is a product of a middle-class quintessentially Cairene intellectual milieu. Her mother, Fatmah Musa, is a well-known professor of English literature at Cairo University, and her father, Mustafa Soueif, a professor of psychology at Cairo University who used Ahdaf, when she was a child, as a case study in his dissertation. When she was born in 1950, they named her "Ahdaf" to express their commitments to the aims and goals of the revolution to come. Soueif's interest in language and psychology are perhaps the direct effect of her lineage. In *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif writes that a "middle-aged spinster from Manchester came out to Cairo in the Thirties to teach English. A small untidy 12-year-old girl fell in love with her and lived and breathed English literature from that day on. That girl was my mother." This may be so, but Soueif's feel for and understandings of language-any language-derive from a rare intellect that is entirely Soueif's own achievement.

### **3.2.2 Understanding Women in the Patriarchal set up and its Politics**

Soueif sheds the light upon the psychological pain and feelings of despair and loneliness felt by Asya in a marriage which is supposed to liquidate such feelings and assure an emotional and sexual satisfaction. To add more, we observe the psychological confusion and pain Asya feels to the extent that she starts questioning whether Saif loves her or not. "Now she watches him. I know you love me. But you don't want me. You did once, but you don't any more. But stop. Stop, she tells herself. Be grateful. You are grateful. Grateful that he loves you enough to come and live here with you. Think what it was like just four months ago and be grateful." (Soueif 1992: 392-393) She goes to question further why Saif stops loving her, why he should be here with her, why nothing really happens when he is really here but to be repulsed by him many times.

“But to be repulsed, turned away so many times – but that is what he thinks you did to him- at first. But she wants to want him. She badly wants to want him. She wants him to make her want him; make her want him like she used to. But he won’t. He will have nothing to do with it at all. So what’s the answer, then – what? Wait. There will be an answer, of course there will. Just wait. One thing at a time.”

(Soueif 1992: 393)

Here, we find the psychologically tormented Asya waits to find an answer to her question. Asya’s word “Wait” poses tangible questions for every woman. Is marriage a trap which is hard for women to extricate themselves from? Do feelings die once they are licensed and socially sanctioned by a patriarchal society? In other words, Asya finds herself in a frustrating situation where she feels that she has painfully been trapped. Within this context, De Beauvoir argues that the husband respects his wife too much to take an interest in his wife’s psychological well being that “ would be to recognize in her a secret autonomy that could prove disturbing, dangerous; does she really find pleasure in the marriage bed? Does she truly love her husband? Is she actually happy to obey him? He prefers not to ask; to him these questions even seem shocking.”(Soueif 1992: 473) These questions indicate the unspoken sufferings of many married women like Asya.

### **3.3 Debating on what Patriarchy expect of Women to do and what Women want**

The struggle between what the patriarchal societies expect of women to do and what women want continues. For instance, Asya’s desire not to have a child has been

challenged by the patriarchal culture surrounding her which glorifies the role of the married woman as a mother.<sup>16</sup>

However, Asya's resistance not to be complacent or silent about her painful, distressing situation has been manifested in facing her husband with the reality of their stalemate marriage. An attitude which informs arguably of Asya's feminist consciousness of her needs. "I think if we made sure that when we are together we are really really together. That we'd –do things, and- talk, and stuff- you know, we should be all right, really." "Of course we will be all right. Because it would be such a shame...." (Soueif 1992: 397-398)

In spite of facing him, Saif takes Asya's feelings and the painful situation she lives in for granted. He is ignorant of her dreams, nostalgic yearnings and the emotional climate in which she passes her days.

"Man fails to realize that his wife is no character from some pious and conventional treatise, but a real individual of flesh and blood; he takes for granted her fidelity to the strict regimen she assumes, not taking into account that she has temptations to vanquish, that she may yield to them."

(Beauvoir 1989: 473)

Here, we may say that Saif is a symbol of the patriarchal man who just thinks of himself and his work and whatever progress he has is just a blessing for his wife. That is seen through his continuous and cold behavior in bed which has left its deep impact on Asya's inner psyche "When he switches off the light, she turns back to the view outside. She knows that if she goes to bed nothing will happen." (Soueif1992: 409)

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<sup>16</sup> Simone De Beauvoir argues that the tragedy of marriage is that it not only fails to assure woman the promised happiness but it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine.

“A husband who turns his back on her every night , who speaks of looking forward to the day when, in the courtesy of advancing years, they will address each other as 'Asya Hanim' and 'Saif Bey' and take gentle strolls round the garden of the house he will build for them in the desert- and wait to die. And what about life? What about all the years that still has to pass? Emptiness. And then age, and then the only end of age .How will she bear it? What can she do? She cannot claim coercion. No one forced her to do anything .She chose. She chose English Literature, she chose Saif Madi, she chose the north of England.”

(Soueif 1992: 353)

We can observe that something substantial is missing in Asya's married life She questions what is the meaning of living in pain and suffering. Undoubtedly, her thoughts shed the light upon the unspoken sufferings of many women who suffer within the confines of marriage and accept their painful destiny silently.

### **3.3.1 The Politics of ‘Desire’ as taught in the Context of Intimate Patriarchal Relationships**

Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* stands as an example where desire is taught and practiced in the context of intimate patriarchal relationships. Religion also serves as a critical component of women's identity as well as providing highly significant legitimating for the subordination, oppression and positioning of women. (Hale 1997). For instance, Soueif takes us deeper into Asya's psychological struggle as a lonely married woman. She wonders whether it is fair to desire and think of another man other than her husband. Within this context, Nawal el Saadawi argues that Islam made marriage the only institution within which sexual intercourse could be morally practiced between men and women. “Sexual relations, if practiced outside this framework, were immediately transformed into an act of sin and corruption.” (El Sadaawai 1980: 139) Asya's tormented soul is revealed when she imagines another man in her bathroom and struggles to dismiss these thoughts.

A struggle between recognizing her own desire and how the patriarchal society and its oppressive culture, symbolized by her mother and relatives, shape for her the concept of desire and sexuality. "All your life they tell you – that a woman's sexuality is responsive, a woman's sexuality is tied up with her emotions. Her mother says she has never thought of any man that way except her father. Dada Zeina claims she had never desired any man but her husband – and then only because he had taught her."(Soueif 1992: 390)

For Rubenberg, women attain honor primarily through passive conformity and dishonor falls exclusively on women. The discourse of honor functions to reinforce and reproduce the hierarchical structure of the family, while the dialectic between the individual and society functions quasi- automatically to maintain the institutions of the social order. Society has a variety of means from gossip to honor killing to enforce the honor code. (Rubenberg 2001) Asya's words portray the inner psychological struggle between her own authentic desire as an individual and the patriarchal concepts of desire which dictate how a married woman should desire, feel, and think.

To elaborate further, it brings to the surface the concept of sexuality (Frouz 1986: 45-46) and desire (Brooks 1995) in the Middle East where desire is organized in a patriarchal family culture that values the family above the person. Joseph states that "desire often became invested as a property of relationships rather than singularly the property of a person in a society in which the most important asset of ownership was not one's self but one's web of relationships." (Joseph 2005: 79) In this regard, both girls and boys are explicitly taught to put the interests of the family before the interests of the individual. Most girls "are discouraged from having independent opinions or expressing ideas that contradict parents' admonitions." (Rubenberg 2001: 79-80)

### **3.4 Soueif's Process of 'Self Actualization' as an Act of Resistance**

However, in an act of resistance of her painful situation, we find Asya think of Mario, one of Saif's friends, which indicates her quest to look for desire out of wedlock which she lacks miserably in her own marriage.



“Look at her: in Italy she is friends with Umberto but desires some unknown man with a broken nose who is handling a blonde in a corner – even while she is in love, in love, with Saif; and tonight, to want to press up against Mario, to want his hand to slide down from her waist-oh.”

(Soueif 1992: 391)

After thinking of more than one man other than her husband, she has met Gerald Stone, an English man, with whom she has a complicated affair. An affair which has a sweet taste at the beginning but ends in frustration due to the absence of genuine love. One may argue that Asya’s inner feelings may reflect not only a sexual satisfaction which she has never experienced before with Saif but also a defiance of what is traditionally expected of a married woman. For a woman to be moral that means “ she must incarnate a being of superhuman qualities : the “ virtuous woman” of Proverbs, the “perfect mother,“ the honest woman”...Let her think , dream , sleep , desire , breathe without permission and she betrays the masculine ideal.” (Beauvoir 474)<sup>17</sup>

It is also important to contend that Asya’s experience with Gerald, though sexually liberating, has helped her discover that those feelings of desire only can't make her so happy without love. Therefore, she has come finally to face the bitter truth which is to choose between a hopeless love with Saif or unsatisfying relationship with Gerald, an inner struggle which has left its heavy toll on her physical and mental health. “I just want this to stop. I am so tired, and there is not a single night when we go to sleep before four, and I am just exhausted, and I don’t want this to be happening here anymore.” (Soueif 1992: 560)

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<sup>17</sup> Concerning morality, El Saadawi argues that moral values are in fact the product of social systems or, more precisely, of the social system imposed by the ruling class with the aim of serving certain economic and political interests, and ensuring that the situation from which that class draws benefit and power is maintained.

Asya's courage and stark honesty by being always true to her pulse and inner feelings in her constant resistance of the patriarchal society's suffocating culture is also manifested when she has confessed to her mother about her own affair with Gerald Stone. When her mother, Lateefa Mursi, asks her if she doesn't feel worse or guilty sleeping with this man, Asya surprises her by saying that it is her business and something which is private that belongs to her only. Besides that, she doesn't feel guilty since Saif doesn't care about her in this way anymore. "No. I don't .... It's as if sleeping with him is – private- it's my business... 'What do you mean it's your business? Isn't it a matter of concern to your husband if you sleep with another man?" But Saif doesn't care about me in that way – anymore." (Soueif 1992: 568)

Here, this reply represents Asya's resistance to the patriarchal culture imbibed by her mother's teachings based on hypocrisy and pretence. In other words, a lie which is called marriage, as in Asya's case, cannot be accepted silently to please society, at the expense of her own identity and individuality. Asya seeks to assert her own identity which the patriarchal society always tries to blur and takes it for granted by searching for self actualization through practice rather than theory having the agency and will to fulfill her needs without being afraid of how she will be viewed by society.

### **3.4.1 Asserting Identity by searching for Self Actualization through Practice rather than Theory**

Asya's life was tangibly beset by appalling patriarchal limitations which she has to resist continually. For example, with her husband Saif, we notice a long sequence of choked sexual impulses followed by a merciless torture and humiliating interrogation of Asya when he finds out about Gerald. Ironically enough, we find Saif expects from Asya to be a traditional, silent, obedient wife "I expected my wife to be loyal. I expected my wife to have some sense of honor. I expected."(Soueif 1992: 623) but, at the same time, he is not ready or willing to give her the emotional companionship she needs. "This is not fair, " cries Asya. For years I begged you- I begged you – to make it happen-and you wouldn't."

(Soueif 1992: 623). In other words, he traps Asya in a painful situation where he can "neither be with her as a husband nor let her go as woman." (Said 2001: 409)

Instead, he batters and shames her in a humiliating manner poignantly shown when Asya's mother sees her battered daughter face. "He did this to you?" she says. „ He did this to you? "... The bruise has faded to a sort of olive green shading off into yellow along the borders; the eye itself is almost completely open again with only one red splotch radiating out from the inner corner." (Soueif 1992: 667) Asya's impasse and pathetic situation resolves when she decides to free herself from both Saif who "is no longer her friend or any part of her life." (Soueif 1992: 775) and Gerald for whom she makes it clear that she cannot live like this anymore "Gerald. I am not going with anyone. I don't want to go with anyone. I want to go on my own." (Soueif 1992: 717)

One may say that certain values of escape are open to women but in practice they are not available to all.<sup>18</sup> Asya's story sheds the light upon the unspoken sufferings of married women who are silenced out of fear of divorce or the social stigma of the patriarchal society, in particular, the Arab societies, patriarchal societies which victimize women through blurring their identities and the necessity to fight against the patriarchy and its suppressive culture like Asya. Asya conveys a message to all women that self actualization is more important than living on pretence to please the patriarchal society at the expense of one's own identity.

In spite of her failed marriage with Saif and a disastrous affair with Gerald, Asya has eventually attained her own individuality and self- actualization of one's self , a woman who is able to draw her own destiny and move forward to serve her community positively without the suffocating restraints of a frustrating and hopeless marriage. Asya eventually completes her doctorate and then returns to Egypt, not only to teach English literature at the American university in Cairo, but to work in a program offering help to the Egyptian

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<sup>18</sup> Patriarchy mandates that females be denied the possibility of an independent life experience outside the family confines. The more confined a woman can be kept , the less exposure she has , and the less she is able to think for herself , the less likely she is to challenge her husband's authority and decisions.

village women. A step is courageously taken by her in spite of the domestic pressures in a patriarchal Arab society where marriage is seen as a fundamental foundation of society and where divorced or separated woman are looked upon with little respect. (Beauvoir 1980: 205) In other words, a price Asya has to pay to assert her own identity rather than suffer in silence even if it implies facing the menaces and aggression of society since for a woman to regain her self respect is much more worthwhile than pleasing the male dominated society. (El Sadaawi 1980)

## **CHAPTER 3**

### Chapter 3

#### **The Narrative of Hybridity and Hybrid Representation in Ahdaf Soueif's fiction**

“It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor.”

(Bakhtin 1981: 358)

Bakhtin's astute dialogical notion of linguistic, novelistic Hybridity can be extended to the spheres of politics, culture, and commerce in our post-industrial era. As individuals cyber link, economies “globalize,” and cultures cross-fertilize, hybridity manifests an inevitability that at once destabilizes entrenched exclusionist ethos and entails a message of competing or conflicting values that interbreed and give birth to, in Rushdie's flamboyant phrase, “bastard children of history” (Rushdie 1991: 393-414). It is within this fluid flux of a context of cultural hybridity that the fiction of Egyptian Ahdaf Soueif needs to be examined. Her work fuses a number of discursive trajectories involving such complex polemics as Arab and Egyptian nationalisms, gender politics, and Muslims' response to both modernity and hegemonic prejudices emanating from the West.

As an Arab-Muslim woman who writes in English, Ahdaf Soueif connects with two currents in contemporary literature: Muslim women from diverse parts of the world who write in English and the feminist literature in Arabic represented by writers such as Colette Khuri, Layla Ba'albaki, Ghadah al-Samman, and, more recently, Nawal el-Saadawi, Hanan al-Shaykh, and Salwa Bakr. These writers move between two worlds, infusing their Anglophone novels with the essence of their native languages and cultures. Ahdaf Soueif is a case in point: the Egyptian national spent many years of her childhood in England, and then returned for her PhD in linguistics. Her marriage to an Egyptian ended and she later married English poet Ian Hamilton. She has been described as a

“hybrid” writer, a tense and sometimes intellectually painful role to play: however, it is a suitable adjective: she blends Arabic rhythms and idioms into English; she writes regularly for England’s *The Guardian* as well as for Egypt’s prestigious newspaper, Al-Ahram; her two sons from Hamilton have combination Arab-English names. Her lush style is described as exotic and foreign by her Western readers, while her sexual imagery and themes arouse the ire of some Egyptian readers who do not want to claim her as “one of their own.”

As a hybrid of numerous East-West, classical-modern, and, to a lesser degree, urban-rural literary trends, the writings of Ahdaf Soueif reveal fascinating features in contemporary Arab and Muslim literature produced in English and deal with crucial motifs in postcolonial/third-world literatures such as representation, migration/exile, and colonial/neocolonial/postcolonial transitions.

The foregrounding of women betraying women signifies that, for Soueif, apportioning blame in the dynamics of sexual politics cannot be gender-specific. Moreover, one cannot disavow or condemn the entire culture and civilization of Islam, in whose name several cruel practices are done against women. This attitude in Soueif’s writing is a shared feature with the works of other Middle-Eastern and Muslim women writers. While these writers speak with assertive, affirmative voices about the confinement, marginalization and even abuse of Muslim women, their discourse tends to be conciliatory not confrontational, paradoxical not absolutist, polemical not totalizing. As Edward Said would say, “such works are feminist but not exclusivist... engaged but not demagogic, sensitive but not maudlin about women’s experience” (Said 1994: 24)

The works of almost all Arab and Muslim women writers in English reveal an unequivocal sense of affiliation with their Islamic culture, while at the same time condemning and combating the abusive excesses of patriarchy when it appropriates and exploits the religious argument to preserve its own spiritual and material hegemony. As

Sara Suleri has succinctly put it, "it is difficult to renounce the elegance of Islam" (Suleri 1992: 193)

Alternatively, the discourse of these writers strives, with varying degrees of militancy, for an agenda that is quite distinct from Euro-American feminism, however we may perceive that to be. In her impressive 1992 study *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Leila Ahmed cautions against the attitude some of, western feminists who adopt and "uncritically reinscribe the old story . . . that Arab men, Arab culture, and Islam are incurably backward and that Arab and Islamic societies indeed deserve to be dominated, undermined, or worse" (Ahmed 1993:246-247). Earlier, Nawal el-Saadawi, in her 1979 preface to the English edition of her book *The Hidden Face of Eve* (El Saadawi 2009), takes a similar stance emanating from a lucid, leftist perspective:

“Influential circles, particularly in the Western imperialist world, depict the problems of Arab women as stemming from the substance and values of Islam, and simultaneously depict the retarded development of Arab countries in many important areas as largely the result of religious and cultural factors or even inherent characteristics in the mental and psychic constitution of the Arab peoples. For them underdevelopment is not related to economic and political factors, at the root of which lies foreign exploitation of resources, and the plunder to which national riches are exposed. For them there is no link between political and economic emancipation and the processes related to growth, development and progress”.

(El Saadawi 1980: 1)

Moreover, in a critique of reductionist generalizations about Arab and Muslim women, Chandra Mohanty exposes certain feminist a priori Eurocentric assumptions: "This mode of feminist analysis, by homogenizing and systematizing the experiences of different



groups of women, erases all marginal and resistant modes of experience”<sup>19</sup>. Their patriarchal family is carried over from the times of the Prophet Muhammad. They exist, as it were, outside history.” (Mohanty 1988: 70)

Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*, a quasi-autobiographical bildungsroman<sup>20</sup>, develops several of the motifs introduced in *Aisha* (Soueif 1996), except here more densely and expansively. As with *Aisha*, the titular heroine of Soueif's first book, the liberated, privileged, cosmopolitan heroine of *In the Eye of the Sun*, Asya, is portrayed candidly and sympathetically. In fact, Soueif is the only Egyptian novelist who has dared to treat the topic of sexuality with such courage and clarity, sparing nothing and describing everything in the minutest detail.

Significantly, the heroine's name, Asya, is a multi-layered hybrid. Apart from the duality of emotions that the name suggests, the fact that an Egyptian, whose country is situated in Africa, is given a name that recalls another continent while the explanation is given in a third continent suggests that Asya's feelings, experiences, and worldviews extend beyond her geographical borders. Also “Asya,” in the Muslim tradition, is the name of the Pharaoh's childless wife who adopted and loved the baby prophet Musa (Moses), found adrift in a basket in the Nile near her palace; she saved the baby from a certain death and raised him to healthy youth. Asya is thus a name that integrates Pharonic Egypt with Judaism and Islam.

#### 4.1 Living in ‘in Between’: Reimagining History

Moreover, Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* integrates the private history of a woman and her family with the political history of the nation between the years 1967 and 1980, done

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<sup>19</sup> She further argues, Not only are all Arab and Muslim women seen to constitute a homogeneous oppressed group, but there is no discussion of the specific practices within the family, which constitute women as mothers, wives, sisters, etc. Arabs and Muslims, it appears, don't change at all.

<sup>20</sup> The term *Bildungsroman* denotes a novel of all-around self-development. A *Bildungsroman* is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order

with detailed depth, definition, and ideological vision. We feel the pulsating drama of the senseless defeat of the Egyptian army during the six-day war of June 1967, together with the puzzlement and despair of ordinary Egyptians who were initially led by President Nasser's monstrous propaganda machine to believe that Egypt was winning to be told later that the loss had been immense and humiliating. The image of Nasser, the anti-colonialist patriarch-dictator, is complex: tyrannical, mysterious, but charismatic, popular, and dedicated. Needless to say, this integration of the private and the political is one of the fascinating features of postcolonial writing as illustrated by the works of writers as diverse as Achebe, Gordimer, Rushdie, Anita Desai, and M.G. Vassanji. What is particularly engaging about the heroine, Asya, is that her sharp political sensitivity extends beyond Egyptian nationalist concerns to embrace other dispossessed peoples of the Middle East such as Kurds, Palestinians, and Armenians. To further nuance the novel's political discourse, Soueif uses disease/surgery as a metaphor for the crisis/cure of the tyrannical regimes in the Arab world. The incident in which an Egyptian army truck, heading for the front shortly before the six-day war, maims Asya's beloved uncle is yet another potently symbolic metaphor of a self-injurious army that damages the same people it is supposed to defend.

While Asya reveals an acute political awareness, derived from an active, hybridized intellectual life straddling Middle-Eastern and European cultures, she is not without paradoxes. She espouses Marxism, yet she belongs to a privileged class: "we see how privilege shackles those who enjoy it, and how restrictive are the expectations placed on women of this stratum" (Booth 1992: 401). She is a woman of conscience, yet she loves and is married to a man who installs the computer system for the Syrian secret service. More important, the feminist, sexually-liberated Asya finds "under certain circumstances ... polygamy acceptable." She says "I don't 'believe' in polygamy.... but I don't condemn it out of hand" (Soueif 1992: 401). Asya's complex stance here is, to borrow Alfred Arteaga's reinscription of Bakhtin, "inherently polyglot" whereby her "hybridized discourse rejects the principle of monologue and composes itself by selecting from competing discourses". (Arteaga 1994: 8-33)

#### 4.1.1 Paradoxes of Hybridity: Fusing Conflict and Paradoxes

Accordingly, for the modern Arab and Muslim woman, Soueif suggests, the task is not to deny conflicts or paradoxes, but to accept, comprehend, and even, when possible, fuse them. Such ambivalence and tentativeness, and such a set of complex, composite paradoxes evoke what Homi Bhabha calls: ‘the Third Space of enunciation’ which ‘destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code’ (Bhabha 1994: 37). In one sense, the roots of these paradoxes seem to stem from the ambivalent affiliations to Arab-Muslim cultural ethos on the one hand and to acquire European intellectualism on the other: often Asya reads the ‘West’ from an ‘Eastern’ perspective and she sees the ‘East’ through ‘Western’ eyes. For instance, walking along the Thames evokes scenes from the Nile for her; and the recurrent references to Middlemarch give us the impression that she sees herself as Dorothea.

Significantly, in the novel's ‘Epilogue,’ when Asya returns to Egypt, Soueif chooses an excerpt from Kipling's *"Song of the Wise Children"* to signify a resolution of sorts of the east/west, north/south binary oppositions to undo what the North has done" (Soueif 1992: 737). In a published interview with Soueif, a provocative question is put to her claiming that ‘Asya is not really Egyptian, is she?’ The author's response is tellingly revealing:

“Yes, she is, in the sense that I am Egyptian. There are so many hybrids now, people who are a little bit of this and a little bit of that. The interesting thing is what we make of it, what kind of hybrid we become and how we feel about it”.  
(Pakravan 1995: 275-86)

In other words, despite all appearances to the contrary, Asya-polyglot, well-travelled, and academically accomplished-is simultaneously Egyptian, Arab, and Muslim, as well as other things. Of course, Asya's return to Egypt does not entirely resolve her paradoxes of hybridity; it shifts the locale to allow for other paradoxes to emerge, while enabling her to face and fuse them maturely.

These paradoxes notwithstanding, Soueif's daringly candid portrayal of her heroine makes her, as Edward Said observes, "one of the most extraordinary chroniclers of sexual politics now writing" (Said 1992: 19). Thus with Ahdaf Soueif's impressive achievement in *In the Eye of the Sun*, Muslim fiction in English and Middle-Eastern women's writings break taboo terrain, one of whose manifestations is that the female characters in her fiction often discuss, uninhibitedly and minutely, complex sexual matters among themselves. Articulate and protective, the nurse Dada Zeina, who appears in both *Aisha* (Soueif 1996) and *In the Eye of the Sun*, discusses in detail with Asya the coital conundrum between the heroine and her husband, Saif Madi, whose sexual paralysis, it seems, is due to his phobia of causing her pain during intercourse. This openness is also reflected in the affectionate, instructive relationship between Asya and her mother; indeed, the mother, in both *Aisha* and *In the Eye of the Sun*, represents a figure of comfort, stability, and guidance in crisis situations<sup>21</sup>. In one significant instance, Asya, after the emotional and sexual estrangement from her Egyptian husband, dabbles in an extramarital affair with an insecurely possessive English man who never calls her by her real name and constantly addresses her as "baby," "babe," or "man". Characterized by a dynamic of ambivalent attraction/revulsion, this bizarre, hostile liaison between the sophisticated Egyptian Asya and the crude English Gerald typifies the antagonistic structure of the racial model, that Robert Young describes, in which

“the races and their intermixture circulate around an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion: a structure of attraction where people and cultures intermix and merge, transforming themselves as a result, and a structure of repulsion, where the different elements remain distinct and are set against each other dialogically”.

(Young 1995: 19)

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, Soueif's first work of fiction, *Aisha*, is dedicated to her mother, the critic-academic Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud. On the other hand, the latter wrote Soueif's biography in *The Bloomsbury Guide to Women's Literature*.

#### 4.1.2 Dislocation Between two Realms as a Leitmotif Dimension in Soueif's Fiction

Asya does not hesitate to let her mother know about this damaging affair, a gesture that is quite exceptional when put in a Middle-Eastern cultural context. While the mother does not approve of the extramarital affair, she stands by her daughter and, as ever, gives emotional and moral support, while the aloof, meticulous, but not uncaring, academic father is kept in the dark. The mother, who is a prominent university professor of English literature in her own right, astutely highlights one of Asya's fundamental failings by reminding her that life is more messy and complex than the plots and characters of the European novels with which she identifies herself and that Asya needs to develop a sharper perspective over her reality: "This is life, not a novel: you can't sit around being in a dilemma. Things move, people change" (Soueif 1992: 578), the mother exhorts Asya. This statement echoes an earlier observation made by Asya's close friend, Chrissie: "It's never the 'right time.' This is not a novel; you can't time things in life. This is how things happen" (Soueif 1992: 263). This dislocation between the realm of Western literature and the reality of the Middle-Eastern world assumes a leitmotif dimension running throughout Soueif's fiction. We see an earlier manifestation of it in the short story "Nativity" in *Aisha*: in an intensely focused, psychologically charged moment the heroine, Aisha, admits her tendency to see events and figures in her life through literary allusions: in a stream-of-consciousness mode, she reflects thus upon her sinister seducer and subsequent rapist in terms of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*:

"It is due to his presence that this dance is palpably more charged than the previous ones. "And all shall cry Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his-" Well, his hair isn't floating, she interrupts herself-stop being so silly. It's true. She shakes her head. Aisha, you know so much more about Art than Life. Here is Life. Life surrounds you, clamours at your ears and eyes and nostrils and you crouch in your corner beside your nurse and quote poetry".

(Soueif 1992: 136)

## 4.2 Home as a problematic concept, both in the past and the present

The most pointed awareness of reality comes to Asya on her return to Egypt as a professor of English literature at Cairo University. She becomes immediately conscious that a visible number of her female students, whose class affiliations are not as privileged as hers, wear a conservative Islamic dress, popularly called *hijab*<sup>22</sup>. An Islamist female student among them refuses to participate in class discussions because she considers her own voice as ‘*awra*’ (literally means a private part not to be revealed). This is, of course, a revealing moment for the aspiring neophyte woman professor fresh from Europe:

“The voice of woman a ‘*awra*. Of course, she'd always known that theoretically, but she'd never come across anyone for whom it was a living truth before. So, as far as this girl-and the other who thought like her-were concerned she was doing a sort of porno-spread up here on the podium for the world to see. So now it was not only a class that wasn't bothered about literature, that didn't know English, that didn't know about sentences, that was too numerous to be taught properly anyway, but also a class holding people who were sitting and scrutinizing her and thinking she was doing something shameful by merely being there-something worse than shame something for which the fires of hell were being stoked in readiness.

It seems here that Asya, privately preoccupied with her image, misses the wider social and symbolic implications of a woman silencing her own voice. This self-censoring, whether a result of genuine theological conviction or misogynous manipulation, is an acute epiphanic moment that the narrative regrettably does not fully explore. In other words, the discourse here takes a solipsistic signification rather than a collective concern. In her concise review of the novel, Leila Ahmed critiques this segment in the novel by highlighting the social divide between Asya and her students:

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<sup>22</sup> The word "*hijab*" refers to both the head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women and modest Muslim styles of dress in general.

Asya is of middle-class background; the Islam of the middle and upper classes, an urbane, cosmopolitan, secular or near-secular Islam, is of course not the only Islam there is. Moreover, it is an Islam that differs from the Islamic habits and attitudes of other classes. While it is entirely appropriate for the middle-class heroine to direct a hostile and Western-like gaze toward the habits, attitudes and political perspectives of other classes, it might have been more satisfying if the author, as distinct from the heroine, had shown some awareness of Asya's class biases.

#### **4.2.1 Blend of Fictional and Historical Characters: a Conscious Attempt of Hybrid Narration**

The privileged-class perspective becomes even more dominant, if humanely refined and historically justified, in Soueif's second novel, *The Map of Love*. The narrative interlinks three strong, sensitive, and sympathetic women: Anna Winterbourne, Amal al-Ghamrawi, and Isabel Parkerman, and foregrounds two cross-cultural love affairs separated by almost a century. In the symbolic dawning year of 1900, the English Lady Anna Winterbourne, recently widowed, visits British-controlled Egypt where she falls in love with the Egyptian nationalist-aristocrat Sharif Basha al-Baroudi, a land-owning lawyer and Amal's great uncle, and spends eleven years of matrimonial bliss with him in Cairo. In the mid-1990s the young American Isabel Parkman, the divorced great granddaughter of Anna and Sharif's, falls in love in New York with Amal's brother, Omar al-Ghamrawi, with whom she has a son, named Sharif. Through this tightly knit web of a hybrid family extended over three continents, the novel focuses on Amal who has separated from her British husband, after spending twenty years in England with him, and opted to return to her roots in Egypt. Amal's encounter with Isabel in Cairo involves receiving a trunk that contains, among other symbolically significant contents, Anna's diaries, whose discovery initiates a fascinating recall of both personal and political histories, anchored on a warm, empathetic affinity between Amal and Anna across time and text.

Anna's trunk, now an heirloom to Isabel, involves a multitude of objects and documents: Anna's detailed diaries of her life in Egypt; period newspaper cuttings in both English

and Arabic covering the first two decades of the twentieth century; a testimony from Layla al-Baroudi, Amal's grandmother, on family events concerning her brother's, Sharif Basha's, marriage to Anna; and a tapestry, made by Anna in Cairo, symbolically conjoining Pharonic and Islamic ciphers. The trunk, which has travelled from Egypt to Europe to the United States and then back to Egypt, represents not only an inventive plot device but also a signifier of the novel's salient cross-cultural appeal.

As Amal rearranges and deciphers the contents of Anna's trunk, echoing the domestic life of the Egyptian elite in the 1900s, and as she reflects upon the political problems of Egypt in the 1990s, a pattern of juxtaposition and analogy emerges involving the dual history of life in Egypt in the first and last decades of the twentieth century. In the 1900s, Anna's seemingly neutral reporting graphically details the arrogance of the British colonialists and their smug self-serving mentality; the British justify their hegemony over the Egyptians on the supremacist assumption that "it would take generations before the Natives were fit to rule themselves as they have neither integrity nor moral fibre, being too long accustomed to foreign rule" (Soueif 1999: 99). In the 1990's, a parallel situation is intimated in the American neo-colonial corporate domination over the Egyptian economy: blaming the country's economic hardships on the United States, a woman farmer in Amal's ancestral village expresses it simply but poignantly by asking rhetorically, "Isn't Amreeka the biggest country now and what she says goes?" (Soueif 176: 1999). In the 1900s, religious traditionalists oppose all aspect of cultural modernity in Egypt such as establishing a national university or educating women; Sharif Basha decries their mentality by pointing out that "their interventions are always in a negative direction-everything in their book is haram" (Soueif 1999: 265). In the 1900s, ordinary Egyptians, but especially the Fallaheen, bore the brunt of British domination with the most brutal act being the massacre and hanging of the villagers of Denshwai in 1906-an episode that has left its mark in the folkloric imagination of Egyptians till today. In the 1990s, the descendants of those same Fallaheen are once again paying the heavy penalty being caught in the cross-fire between armed Islamist militants and the government's heavy-handed security forces whose practice is based on the assumption that "everyone is suspect" (Soueif 1999: 439).



Another pattern that also emerges in this novel is the skilful blending of fictional and historical characters. Thoroughly and thoughtfully researched, *The Map of Love* portrays dramatically some of the prominent political players in Egypt of the 1900s, such as Lord Cromer and his entourage of colonial functionaries, Egyptian princes and aristocrats, as well as leading cultural and nationalist figures of the period, with special endearing attention given to the enlightened Grand Imam (Sheikh of al-Azhar), Muhammad 'Abdou-Sharif Basha's friend who happily officiates his wedding to Anna. 'Abdou's disciple, the French-educated Kurdish-Egyptian intellectual Qasim Amin wrote a book entitled *The Liberation of Women*, in which he called for respecting women's rights and the necessity of their education. At a gathering at Sharif Basha's, Amin makes his point firmly but politely, linking women's liberation with the nationalist movement:

“We cannot claim to desire a Renaissance for Egypt... while half her population live in the Middle Ages. To take the simplest matters, how can children be brought up with the right outlook by ignorant mothers? How can a man find support and companionship with an ignorant wife?”

(Soueif 1999: 380-81)

#### **4.2.2 Arab-Muslim Feminism: Locating Nourishing Sources from the Culture of Islam**

Significantly, Amin's pioneering book is still embraced as a landmark in Egyptian cultural history, and Soueif's reference to his passionate plea in the 1900s for liberating women and educating them—modest demands by the norms of the twenty-first century—signifies, in the novel's inclusivist discourse, that Arab-Muslim feminism solicits and celebrates support from enlightened men of the calibre of Amin. (Indeed, the agency of progressive men as feminist allies is an inspirational phenomenon in many "third world" societies.) Moreover, the novel's discourse suggests that Arab-Muslim feminism can find nourishing sources from within the culture and civilization of Islam, as the pioneer Amin was pursuing in his polemics. From the series of encounters that Elizabeth Warnock Fernea conducted with a number of women activists in diverse Arab and Muslim communities, she too discerned such a stance:

“In Egypt, Turkey, Kuwait, and the United States, Islamic women begin with the assumption that the possibility of gender equality already exists in the Qur'an itself; the problem, as they see it, is malpractice, or misunderstanding, of the text. For these Muslim women, the first goal of a feminist movement is to re-understand and evaluate the sacred text, and for women to be involved in the process, which historically has been reserved to men.”

(Fernea 1998: 416)

Soueif not only succeeds in her dramatic and discursive integration of the fictional characters with the historical ones like 'Abdou and Amin, but she also models one character, Amal's brother Omar, as a converse Edward Said figure. Omar is a famous musical conductor in New York who writes books on politics and culture. Having both Egyptian and Palestinian family ties, Omar is a member of the Palestinian National Congress and a ferocious opponent of the Oslo Accord; on a visit to Jerusalem, he decries the venality of Arafat's Bantustan-like mini-state "with eleven security services" (Soueif 1999: 356). For his activities in the United States on behalf of the Palestinians, Omar earns the derogatory badges of the "Molotov Maestro" and the "Kalashnikov Conductor" (Soueif 1999: 17); this is an obvious ironic evocation of the infamous label of "Professor of Terror" that appeared in *Commentary*, referring to Said's supposed "double career as a literary scholar and ideologue of terrorism" (Shohat 1999: 125). In yet another instance of analogy, the contemporary figure of Omar parallels the figure of Shukri Bey, Sharif Basha's cousin, in the 1900s who passionately militates against the colonization of Palestinian land by the richly financed Zionists. Shukri Bey pays for his indefatigable activism with his life; similarly, we are obliquely told that Omar has been eliminated by his too many powerful enemies.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>While *The Map of Love* contains references to sympathetic Jewish figures, the discourse is decidedly against the organized Zionist colonization of Palestine in the 1900s culminating in the successful creation of the State of Israel in 1948; moreover, the novel's discourse is opposed to the suspect Israeli infiltration into Egyptian economic life in the 1990s. This political slant in the novel might have been a factor in not awarding the shortlisted novel the 1999 Booker prize.

#### 4.2.3 Allowing Space for Figures outside the Privileged Political and Cultural Elite

The fashioning of Omar's agency as an uncompromising activist endows the novel's political discourse with a political dimension beyond past and current Egyptian concerns towards wider regional issues such as the plight of Iraqis and Palestinians. While Asya in *In the Eye of the Sun* reveals a remarkable political awareness by reflecting dejectedly on the suffering of other persecuted peoples of the Middle East, her sympathies seem confined to the abstract level. In *The Map of Love*, Amal makes a conscious attempt to shift from concern to at least partial praxis. We witness her meeting with human rights activists, Palestine sympathizers, and supporters of the Iraqi people-being betrayed, brutalized and taken hostage. As Deena al-'Ulama (a recall from *In the Eye of the Sun*: Asya's sister) articulates it forcefully:

“What normalization is possible with a neighbour who continues to build settlements and drive people out of the land? Who has an arsenal of nuclear weapons and screams wolf when someone else is suspected of having a few missiles? And it is our business-because what is happening to the Iraqis or the Palestinians today will happen to us tomorrow”.

(Soueif 1999: 230)

Interestingly, the mature, self-assured Amal, when compared with Asya, seems not only more acutely committed to her nationalist ideals, but is also less preoccupied with her marital separation and sexual concerns. In a marked departure from *In the Eye of the Sun*, the handling of sexuality seems remote, restrained, and refined. Unlike Asya's occasional near-neurotic sexual frustrations, Amal, while not entirely ignoring sexual attraction, sublimates the preoccupation with the body toward a genuine concern for those she could help in her ancestral village, Tawasi. Her taking residence in the village is more than a sentimental retours aux sources, but a sign of committed agency that tries to shield the villagers whom she loves from the transgression of a callous, cruel government, frightened by village volunteers running a school and a clinic, labeling them as "terrorists." Indeed, Amal's emotional closeness to the Fallaheen--especially to 'Am Abu el-Ma'ati: a caring avuncular figure, as his name suggests, and one of the novel's most memorable constructs--foregrounds her serious attachment to the village not only as an escape from crowded Cairo, but as an edifying, empowering source for coping with the

dislocations of her private and public reality. As well, Amal's friendship with the down-to-earth Tahiyya, the doorman's wife in her building in Cairo, and with the female Fallaheen in the village redresses the balance in the novel by allowing space and forum for figures outside the privileged political and cultural elite. In other words, there is a conscious design operating here to give voice to ordinary, yet intuitively astute, people and to let them air their concerns directly, effectively, and, at times, even humourously.

#### **4.3 The Hybridity of the Text to Advance a Feminine-Friendly Muslim Perspective**

Moreover, Soueif's conscious attempt in *The Map of Love* to capture the linguistic patterns of the Fallaheen of Upper Egypt parallels her attempt to capture the idiom of an educated English lady of the calibre of Anna Winterbourne writing her diaries in the 1900s. Soueif's rendition of Anna's intelligently inquisitive sensibility revealed in journals, diaries and letters recalls the English literary tradition of epistolary fiction, especially Samuel Richardson's two eponymous novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*.

One can easily detect fascinating double or triple layers of translation operating in a text written by a female Egypt-born, Britain-resident author, whose first language is Arabic, capturing in English the nuanced thoughts and emotions of a female Britain-born, Egypt-resident character, with an the novel, as a text in English, becomes in effect hybrid on multiple levels, involving not only two rich and resilient languages, Arabic and English, but also different social, class, period, and geographical variations within each of them. To further enrich the layered pattern of juxtaposition and analogy, a motif of hybrid metaphors is skillfully established: Anna's tapestry with Islamic and Pharaonic imprints; a 1919 Egyptian flag emblazoned with the Crescent and the Cross, symbolizing the unity of the Egyptian Muslims and Christians in their uprising against British occupation; the mosque nestling inside a monastery, a heart-warming image of each holy sanctuary protecting the other from demolition at times of tension; and the three calendars followed simultaneously in Egypt: Gregorian, Islamic, and Coptic. This ambitious undertaking of text-hybridization rewards the reader with a narrative that is not only hybrid linguistically but also discursively, leading subtly towards humane, positive perspectives on Arab-

Muslim culture in its most tolerant illustrations and in its openness towards the Other. Despite its potent anti-colonial discourse, the novel reveals a conscious progression towards a reconciliatory universalist stance. In an article addressed to readers in Europe, Sharif Basha sums up his vision: "Our only hope now-and it is a small one-lies in a unity of conscience between the people of the world for whom this phrase itself would carry any meaning" (Soueif1999: 484). The novel reveals numerous instances of this "unity of conscience," but one moving moment of warmth and generosity suffices: on his wedding day to Anna, Sharif Basha's mother instructs her strong, adoring son about treating his English bride:

"You will be everything to her. If you make her unhappy, who will she go to? No mother, no sister, no friend. Nobody. It means if she angers you, you forgive her. If she crosses you, you make it up with her. And whatever the English do, you will never burden her with the guilt of her country. She will be not only your wife and the mother of your children-insha' Allah-but she will be your guest and a stranger under your protection and if you are unjust to her God will never forgive you".

(Soueif 1999:282)

More importantly, Soueif uses the hybridity of the text to advance a feminine-friendly Muslim perspective through the two most empathetic non-Muslim voices in the novel: the American Isabel and the British Anna. After studying the linguistic structure of the Arabic language, Isabel observes that the etymology of words with positive and dignified connotations is often associated with a feminine root, and she therefore asks rhetorically: "So how can they say Arabic is a patriarchal language?" (Soueif 1999: 165). Anna registers in her diary that a Muslim woman "does not take her husband's name upon marriage"(Soueif 1999: 137). Anna is also informed by Layla that when a Muslim woman is married, "her money is her own and her husband, if he is able, is obliged to furnish her with all the money she needs for her personal expenses as well as any household expenses she might incur" (Soueif 1999: 352). Anna's integration into Egyptian culture becomes so solid that she, when describing her invisibility in a situation requiring her to wear the veil, sounds like an apologist for it: "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" (Soueif 1999: 195).

#### **4.3.1 The Hybrid Text: a Site for a Potently Positive Image about Arab-Muslim Culture**

The hybrid text, carefully constructed by an Arab woman author writing in English by choice, becomes a site for foregrounding gently but assertively a potently positive image about Arab-Muslim culture that is seldom witnessed in such an appealingly humane and cogent context. In essence, what we are witnessing here is an elegantly poised novelist who demonstrates her mature control of craft and clarity of vision. Significantly, her loving, lively depiction of the idiom and perspective of the Fallaheen of Upper Egypt proves that she can enlarge her canvas with figures beyond the type of the "Westernized bourgeois intellectual" that the heroine of Soueif's first book, *Aisha*, identifies with. Accordingly, in *The Map of Love*, the author bridges the dislocations between a hybridized, privileged intellectual like Amal and the reality of her people. Ahdaf Soueif thus circumvents a common critique that is directed at Arab feminist writing of the sixties and seventies, specifically as it pertains to its ellipsis or dim, distant depiction of serious social problems facing contemporary Muslim women, problems such as polygyny, crimes of "honour," and the denial to women of equal rights in matters of divorce, education, and employment.

Interestingly, Evelyne Accade in her pioneering 1978 work *Veil of Shame* registers these omissions in the fiction of men and women of the Arab Middle East and of North Africa, observing that "the literature of these areas, whether in French or in Arabic, failed to present the same picture as that reflected in the data of the social scientists" (Accade 1978: 12). While the creative process of producing literary works veers, as indeed it should, from pamphleteering and socio-anthropological documentation, the mostly mimetic mode deployed in the fiction of Arab and Muslim women provokes our eager anticipation of a candid, courageous unveiling of some of the chilling acts of violence perpetrated against women in several Muslim societies, at times even in the name of

religion, acts such as the hideously gruesome practice of female circumcision or genital mutilation. As we have seen, in Soueif's oeuvre a few of these issues are indeed treated, but in a second-hand fashion, through the indirect narrative of family servants. The inability or reluctance to convey such grisly realities may be attributed partly to the fact that these women writers belong to privileged, urban elites. Muslim women from poor, rural families are usually worse off than their counterparts who come from urban, middle-class ones. Besides, some Muslim and Middle-Eastern women may, consciously or otherwise, be self-censoring and cautious so as not to antagonize the often politically powerful religious purists. In this respect, Michel Foucault's insights about the prohibitive, indeed nullifying, nature of power over sexuality becomes illuminating:

“Power acts by laying down the rule: power's hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the act of discourse that creates, from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law. It speaks, and that is the rule. The pure form of power resides in the function of the legislator; and its mode of action with regard to sex is of a juridico-discursive character”.

(Foucault 1980: 83)

Foucault's astute pronouncement about power's "juridico-discursive character" recalls Simone de Beauvoir's tenacious statement about patriarchy's self-serving deployment of the law for codifying the politics of sexuality and delimiting its discourse:

“History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers; since the earliest days of the patriarchate they have thought best to keep women in a state of dependence; their codes of law have been set up against her; and thus she has been definitely established as the Other.”

(de Beauvoir 1974: 157)

### **4.3.2 Deployment of hybridized English to Infiltrate Taboo Terrains, both Sexual and Political**

Despite the limitations and lacunae and however we may perceive their causes, one should not underestimate the solidity and sincerity of the gender and cultural allegiances of Arab and Muslim women writers<sup>24</sup>. They all recognize that religion and nationalism are active forces to engage with: for them, the discourse of liberation passes not through ridiculing or rejecting their Islamic heritage, but through appealing to its most enlightened and progressive tradition. In this context, change and progress are arguably possible not through current institutional and traditionalist practices, but through certain retrieved, reinterpreted, or revised theological or political frameworks that are sympathetic to women's aspirations. To assert their will, to claim a space for themselves, and to achieve their liberation, Arab and Muslim women, as suggested in their writings, need not only to maintain courage and perseverance but must also be ready to compromise. In essence then, the agenda propounded is relatively reformist, not radical. Nevertheless, we may see a more militant and confrontational response to the alarming discourse of the religious zealots and fanatics-such as the Taliban of Afghanistan, and their espousal of oppressive male-made theocracies-as we currently see in some Muslim women's narratives in French and in Arabic. As well, the feminist discourse of younger women that emerged in the eighties and nineties has "come to realize that the male revolutionary discourse, which tied women's liberation to national liberation and the growth of democracy, has failed to produce any concrete results" (Moussa-Mahmoud 1992: 213). This situation becomes specifically pronounced in the Algerian, Iranian, and Palestinian revolutions. Moreover, we are even witnessing a few feminist writers enlarge their focus beyond mainly urban, mainly middle-class concerns. Accordingly, one can see no closure to this refreshingly assertive, writerly process that keeps evolving.

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<sup>24</sup> Their works reveal an acute awareness of their own distinct and delicate exploration of a troubling terrain; their critique and/or combat of patriarchy is conjoined with a loyalty to abstract, at times even romanticized, ideals of either Islam or national identity, or both.



While the fiction of Ahdaf Soueif is an integral part of this evolving Arab-Muslim feminist discourse, the fact that it is written in English carries with it specific characteristics.

The hybridized English that Soueif deploys and produces allows the conscious feminist narrative voice to infiltrate taboo terrains, both sexual and political, that might be inaccessible when handled in Arabic. Removed emotionally and culturally from the local scene, the English language accords a liberating medium to the author to broach and delve into issues such as feminine sexuality, politics of power and gender, and the disfranchisement of the poor: English here accords a liberating lexical storehouse and semantic sanctuary. While the hybridized English provides this idiomatic advantage, it maintains the distinctiveness of the composite cultures, ethos, and predilections involved. As Robert Young astutely observes, "hybridity is itself an example of hybridity, of a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation" (Young1995: 22). While the author's, as well as most of her characters', first language is Arabic and the action in her fiction takes place in mostly non-English speaking settings, the reader feels that the English text is actually a translation whose original, once existing in the author's mind, is now non-existent. This palimpsestic thus straddling cultures, interfacing texts, and redefining enunciation to fit the requisites of the reinscribed version in English. Of course, this complex discursive reconstruction stretches beyond the Bakhtinian model of linguistic, novelistic hybridization towards the politics of gender, identitarian religion, nationalism, and postcolonial/"third-worldist" representation of the erstwhile silent, marginalized, or misrepresented colonized subject. Accordingly, even though the English language is readily associated in the collective memory of many "third-world" nations with the colonialist and neo-colonialist experiences, Soueif's adoption of it as a medium of expression dehegemonizes it and transforms it into an instrument of resistance to the discourses of both arrogant colonialism and exclusionist ultra-nationalism. Soueif's polyphonic discourse thus dramatizes complex and messy situations that are at once provocative, challenging, and inspiring.

### 4.3.3 Soueif as a Culturally Sandwiched Artist, Creates a Hybrid Identity

*In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love*, both explore the misconceptions that exist in the spaces between East and West. Soueif is also a prolific essay writer and socio-political commentator, and has written discursive articles on themes ranging from the meaning of the veil in Islam to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Her non-fiction shows her to be an astute and sensitive observer and chronicler of current world events and cultural, social, and political issues. Like her fiction, her non-fiction demonstrates that she both perceives herself and is perceived as an Englishwoman as much as an Egyptian one – the bane of the hybrid writer. Despite being a culturally sandwiched artist, caught in the middle of an East-West face-off, she seems to have created a hybrid identity that, in turn, complements both her English and Egyptian roots. True to the meaning coined by Homi Bhabha, Ahdaf Soueif's "hybrid" work is intensely post-colonial in nature, Bhabha describes hybridity as:

“The name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminating identities that secure the “pure” and original identity of authority)... It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the, discriminated back upon the eye of the power”

(Bhabha 1994: 112)

Soueif subverts the colonizer/ colonized hierarchy by presenting England a picture of its colonial past and postcolonial present, complete with all accompanying tensions, thus turning her Egyptian postcolonial gaze on England's eye of power. Her work gives the colonized a voice not only to be heard, but to influence the English/ Arab literary landscape as she describes Arab women exposed to British culture and influence and vice versa, who seek to find their own voices and take control of the narrative of their lives.

The notion of “narrative” is one of the overarching plot lines that encompass the various themes of gender issues, Orientalist clichés, postcolonial politics, and centuries-old

tensions between East and West in Soueif's work. Her female characters have a tendency to attempt to express, control or reclaim their narratives. It is informed by both the famous and maligned legend of Scheherazade and by Fadwa Malti-Douglas' observation that:

“Woman's voice is more than a physiological faculty. It is the narrative instrument that permits her to be a literary medium, to vie with the male in the process of textual creation. To control the narrative process, however, is no small task. Shahrazad demonstrates to her literary cousins and descendants that an intimate relationship must be created between writing and the body”.

(Malti-Douglas 1995: 5-6)

Many of Soueif's characters are pulled between the polar forces of East and West, but only achieve balance when they carve out a place for themselves in the midst of that cultural intersection.

#### **4.4 Reclaiming One's Narrative through Hybrid Narration**

The theme of reclaiming one's narrative pervades *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif's first novel, which details the “coming of age” of Asya Ulama, a young, upper-class Egyptian woman who studies for a doctorate in England, married a Westernized Egyptian husband, and becomes embroiled in an affair with an uncouth and possessive American. Steeped in sexual politics (indeed, it was banned in Egypt for its “lewd” descriptions), Ahdaf Soueif's novel navigates East-West tensions by condemning the Western stereotype of Arab women with an Arab woman who must shed the burdensome skins of both England and Egypt and create her own identity. Asya inherits the strong voice of the Arab heroine and becomes a refreshingly non-Orientalist “literary cousin” of Scheherazade, as described by Malti-Douglas.

Asya struggles between being the subject of her story and telling her story herself, of being the narrator. By the end, Asya understands that the integrity of her narrative is threatened not only by Orientalism, but also by gender inequities within both Western and Eastern cultures. With this realization, she seizes full control of her narrative, thus articulating her hybridized identity.

On the surface, Asya's existence seems terribly superficial and trite; she worries about painting her toenails and fixing her hair. However, there is much more to this protagonist – she plans to earn a PhD in English literature and to become a university professor, like her parents, a career which is neither debated nor discussed, simply assumed and accepted by her family. The Ulamas, part of Cairo's urban elite, insist upon the higher education of their daughters as well as their sons. Asya fulfills their wishes; she graduates with a Bachelor's degree, gets accepted into a Ph.D. program in English Literature at an elite British university, and marries Saif Madi. She becomes the subject of their neatly-arranged narrative, ironically, her mother often tells Asya. "This is not a novel: this is your life," although Asya merely plays her role in an already-scripted tale (Soueif 1999: 568),

Furthermore, she submits to Saif's narrative as well, especially to his habit of telling lies or fibs that retell the truth of the narrative in subtle ways. When they receive guests – his British friends – for dinner one night and are asked how they discovered the apartment, 'Asya smiles and looks at Saif and carefully waits for his account' (Soueif 1999: 180). Furthermore, in relating how he and Asya met, he remakes a simple meeting in front of the university library into an encounter during a mass student demonstration against the Egyptian government – all in an attempt to impress his British friends with pseudo-exotic and Eastern-flavored stories. Saif is extremely Westernized himself, but he succumbs to Orientalist embellishments to please his Western associates. Only Asya remains true to the narrative of their meeting, and thus true to her identity, though she outwardly accepts Saif's retelling of it (Soueif 1999: 186-187). Her powers of narration are immature as yet. An argument they have in which he ridicules her high opinion of George Eliot only confirms her long-held, newly-articulated notion that Saif loves her only when "I behave the way he wants me to behave" (Soueif 1999: 299), a realization that demarcates the old Asya from the new.

That confirmation is not attained until the latter half of the novel, when Asya begins an affair with an American student, Gerald Stone. By the time that Asya meets Gerald, she has been married to Saif for five years and has been unable to consummate their marriage, a psychological block that causes her to reject him repeatedly. She is fully

convinced that Saif does not and never did love her, and even that he cares little about her as a human being. Communication between them is rare, as Asya lives in a cottage in England while she works on her dissertation and Saif works in Damascus. In frustration, Asya thinks that God has “relieved” her from having sexual desires because she has not used them (Soueif 1999: 456).

While in this state of mind, she meets Gerald Stone, wearing, at their first meeting, a shirt plastered with Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe. Their first sexual encounter leaves her in emotional turmoil, mostly because she initiates the affair. However, Gerald’s love for Asya is laced with orientalist fantasies: If Saif sees her as a lovely Arab woman whom he can coddle and protect. Gerald envisions her as an exotic, eastern princess, and himself as a foreign usurper, and Asya finds herself stuck yet again in the midst of someone else’s fantasy. Even Saif, when he is told about the affair, feels most insulted by the fact that Gerald lived in the cottage for which he himself paid and kept maintained (Soueif 1999: 632), as if Saif were the Sultan and the cottage were his harem. Gerald enjoys his fantasy as a usurper; he poses her before a mirror as if for a portrait – though, of course, it is a portrait for his sole viewing pleasure. He leaves her topless, with her hair down, wearing only a jeweled necklace, and says, “I never want you to get dressed when we’re married. Be like this for me, babe: naked and perfumed, your hair falling over your shoulders, wearing only your jewels –”. Recognizing his Orientalist fantasy, she responds, “An odalisque you want?” (Soueif 1999: 563). Gerald does not know what “odalisque” means, and his lack of precise knowledge captures the essence of Orientalism: it is a pervasive force in Western culture, of the type that one knows but cannot identify by name. Asya’s recognition of Gerald’s desire to shape her into his warped perception of Arab womanhood signals an impending confrontation with Orientalism.

#### **4.4.1 Soueif’s Reclaiming of the Narrative Symbolizes her Post-Colonial Image Reconstruction**

Asya herself finds Gerald’s usurpation stifling. At one point in the novel, she writes down her true feelings in a narrative of her own: I don’t really care what becomes of G. I don’t even like him much anymore. He’s cheap. He’s envious. He’s an opportunist...” (Soueif 1999: 591). This is the first step Asya takes to rid herself of Gerald and reclaim her

narrative. The act of writing solidifies her own position against what he represents: the consumption of the stereotype of Arab women by the West. Her reclaiming of that narrative also symbolizes her post-colonial image reconstruction. By rejecting the image that Gerald embraces as well as Saif's desire for a silent and dutiful wife. Asya subconsciously recreates for herself an identity that is wholly her own and free from the projections of other people. Her new identity is based on her own strengths and abilities, which grows out of the acceptance of her hybridity as an Arab and an Englishwoman. Later in the novel, for example, Gerald insists on reading Asya's mail. His insistence represents his intrusion in her personal life, as well as his obsession with possessing her. Two of the letters, from her father and her friend Chrissie, are both in Arabic, so Gerald demands that Asya translate for him. In one of Soueif's most playful and brilliant scenes, Asya deceives Gerald in the translation, as she "reads" and "says" two different things (604-605). She limits his knowledge of her life through lingual and narrative control. Her recognition of Gerald as a "sexual imperialist" marks a crucial beginning in the seizure of her narrative:

"I hate people who go around trying to change people. The hypocrisy of it. I know you better than you know yourself" – shit – what you mean is that the way you think I should be is better for you than the way I am."

(Soueif 1999: 723)

Though Asya leaves Gerald, the final test of her narrative control is the confession of her betrayal to Saif. He attempts to seize narrative control once again. Refusing to express herself in the way that he demands and refusing to allow him to mold her words into a form that he prefers, she retrieves a packet of letters that she had written to him, letters that "are as honest and as truthful as I could make them" (Soueif 1999: 637). This is a meaningful moment, when Asya shows her need to share her thoughts – her narrative – with Saif, the man she thinks she loves. In a typical Saif gesture, he puts them in the stove and "Asya watches as the flames spring up, bright orange with yellow and blue tips, and

the envelopes curl and blacken” (Soueif 1999: 637). He returns to the table and again demands, “Let’s be serious. Draw me a flowchart” (Soueif 1999: 638). When she refuses and instead tries to explain a point, he punches her, bruising one of her ribs. Saif’s violence increases throughout the novel always sparked at the times that Asya attempts to speak and explain her actions. At one point, he blackens her eye. Later, he rapes her, making their first real act of intercourse a violent one. And yet, she refuses to submit to his version and to his narrative, resiliently speaking the truth in her own voice, and their marriage comes to an end.

#### **4.4.2 Soueif’s Control of Narrative as a Signal to Speak from the Weaker Position**

Asya’s control of her narrative signals her ability to speak from the weaker position of the culturally linguistically, and sexually colonized. She can only do so from that nebulous space between Egypt and England, as represented by her parents. Saif and Gerald, respectively, though it is clear that East and West already act, and perhaps do so based on grave misconceptions of the other. Those misconceptions are dangerous for Asya: to be attached completely to either one renders her silent, so she must free herself from both and accept that the tension of being trapped between these contrasting terms offers a broader vision. Once she has freed herself from the narratives of others. Asya becomes a Scheherazade and reconstructs that image.

While *In the Eye of the Sun* brought Soueif critical acclaim, it was *The Map of Love* and its selection as a finalist for the Booker Prize that made that praise official. Soueif was the first Arab or Muslim to be so recognized, and her novel’s treatment of post-colonial themes, especially Orientalist cliché’s, was well received. *The Map of Love* is a textual tapestry that weaves together several parallel stories: the titles of the book’s four units “A Beginning,” “An End of a Beginning,” “A Beginning of an End” and “An End” hints at the epic proportions and tremendous historic scope of the tale about to unravel.

Soueif’s novel is also divided into two time periods, each with its own central theme: Amal, an Egyptian-British woman, has recently separated from her husband and is afraid that her sons are maturing too quickly for her to keep pace comfortably. She maintains a close friendship with her brother ‘Omar, who lives in the United States and who has met

Isabelle, a young American woman. Before long, it is revealed that Omar and Amal are distant cousins of Isabelle, related through the marriage of lady Anna Winterbourne (Isabelle's great-grandmother) and Sharif basha al-Baroudi (the great-uncle of Omar and Amal). They find a perfect opportunity to explore their ancestral links when Isabelle delivers a trunk filled with Lady Anna's letters and diaries to Amal, who has traveled to Egypt to recuperate emotionally from her broken marriage. Discovering the secrets of the trunk provides an appropriate distraction for Amal, who becomes intent on piecing together the unlikely love story of a British lady and an Egyptian nobleman. What she discovers is a colonial past rife with hidden movements, scandals, dangerous politics - and also, evidence of the beginnings of the formal Arab feminist movement. As Amal herself ruminates, "What difference do a hundred years - or a continent - make?" Indeed as she retells the story of her and Isabelle's common ancestors, Amal becomes a reincarnation of Scheherazade, who does not create stories herself, but retells them and highlights their magic.

What Soueif tries to show is that, while Egypt had, indeed, colonized Egypt for decades, the Egyptian people, especially the intellectual class, prevented that colonization from being complete. There was a thriving anti-colonial movement, as well as recognition by the Egyptians of the Orientalist veil England attempted to thrust upon them. The colonization was not a complete victory, as the Egyptians refused to be colonized quietly. Instead, there existed an almost two-way relationship, and when England finally left Egypt, it was not totally unchanged by its experience.

#### **4.4.3 Hybrid Narration: Transcending the Differences of Language, Culture and Religion**

*The Map of Love* gives voice to the untold story of women - both colonizers and colonized - during British imperialism and their ability to transcend the differences of language, culture, and religion that the "spirit of the age" forbade. This is a truly post-colonial novel in that it reshapes, rethinks, and re-evaluates the colonial period in the Middle East. Amal finds herself sympathizing with Anna Winterbourne, who rejected her country's Orientalist and racist notions of the Arabs and tried to understand Egypt on its own terms one hundred years ago. Anna says, upon first entering the harem in Sharif's



house, “It seemed so odd to just sit there – in one of my beloved paintings, as it were, or one of the Nights of Edward Lane.” Anna’s reference to the paintings and to the British translation of *The Arabian Nights* indicates how deeply England was drowning in its culture of Orientalism – a culture that allowed the English to imagine the Arabs as exotic “other,” and thus as people who lacked morals and dignity.

However, Anna has penetrated the stereotype: now she is in the paintings, she is in the tale, and she can bear witness to its accuracy.

Perhaps the most telling example of Anna’s dismantling of the Orientalist stereotype of Arabs comes in a conversation with her husband:

“Weren’t you afraid of me? The wicked Pasha who would lock you up in his harem and do terrible things to you?”

“What terrible things?”

“You should know. They’re in your English stories”.

(Soueif 1999: 397)

Sharif’s last comment stresses the idea that Egyptians under the colonial rule of England were aware of their portrayal to the average British citizen. In both examples, Soueif speaks back to the colonialist vision of the Arab in order to correct it, and the fact that she does so in the voice of a British woman testifies to the novel’s feminist undertones.

*The Map of Love* is as much a feminist work as it is a post-colonial one: as Amal pieces together the story of Anna and Sharif, her narrative circle is joined by Anna herself, Layla, and Isabelle. It is the women who contribute their voices to the story, and Amal is like a tapestry weaver who keeps them intact.

In what is probably the novel’s greatest contribution, Soueif gives her female characters rein to testify to the existence of “Arab feminism,” a term that strikes many in the West as a non-reality. However, in *The Map of Love*, Anna and Layla detail in their journals the meetings they hold with famous Arab feminists at the beginning of the century. The sisters-in-law describe their plans to start a political and social magazine for both British

and Egyptian women. Anna and Layla also describe Sharif's friendship with Qasim Amin, author of the controversial book, *The New Woman* (1901), which called for an end to forced veiling and greater opportunities for women's education in Egypt. Soueif's novel offers a subtle history lesson in the movement for women's rights in Egypt throughout the past century.

## **CONCLUSION**

## Conclusion

How can a novel be both a Harlequin romance and an example of post-colonial counter-discourse? In the same stroke, how can Spivak proclaim herself not learned enough to be interdisciplinary? Surely interdisciplinarity has become an integral part of post-colonial theory and investigation and to proclaim oneself not scholarly enough is to put the practice of casual interdisciplinary action into question on ethical and scholarly grounds. And yet a post-colonial study thrives on its interdisciplinary methods and we are certainly not all philosophers, social scientists or professional politicians. In fact, it is possible to argue, that postcolonial literary works can also be interdisciplinary, thereby challenging us to reveal the inherent interdisciplinary nature of the field itself. In this case, breaking rules is not difficult and, where much can be learned from this action. So, as well as demonstrating a post-colonial textual analysis indebted to an interdisciplinary approach, as this whole project calls for, it will further reveal how, often, writers themselves are already involved in utilizing an interdisciplinary approach in their fiction. This can make it difficult to separate the authors' intentions; are they writing in their capacity as authors, critics or both? This difficulty may reflect the fact that, although post-colonial theory is heavily reliant on fiction, there is also a strong counter-reliance of fiction writers on theory and interdisciplinary theory at that. Thus, a novel can be read from a political, social and feminist perspective all available for use within the realm of post-colonial theory and yet can itself, quite explicitly, contain a mixture of political tirade, social criticism, feminist opinions, orientalist imagery etc. Also, the novel's structure can borrow across genres such as the travel writing model and historical fiction. The discussions have illustrated how Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif in her work *The Map of Love* and *In the Eye of the Sun* not only integrates post-colonial theory into her writing but also manages to expose the tensions that lie within post-colonial theory by further revealing its unavoidable complicity with differing disciplines. Inevitably, then, the work is sometimes buried under theoretical references and allusions, an accusation that has been hurled at post-colonial theorists themselves. Rather than pose a definitive conclusion as regards Soueif's motives for doing this, I propose that we look at the use

and exposition of the interdisciplinary nature of post-colonial theory through the investigation of what emerges as an interdisciplinary novel.

In *The Map of Love* Amal's imaginative reconstruction of a genealogy of the political possibilities of art follows us to read Amal's primary identification with Amal as another woman living in between, produced by multiple, and at times antagonistic, aesthetic and political traditions, including colonialism, nationalism and romance. Just as Amal reads Anna through the lens of European characters such as Anna Karenina and Dorothea Brooke, Anna's Western training in painting and epistolary writing leads her to the Egyptian artistic renaissance and anticolonial movement. In this sense, we can see *The Map of Love* as a hybrid subject's meditation on the subtlety and complexity of identity, drawing cultural genealogies across borders and genres even as she attempts to find her place in local politics as a transitional subject. The interplay of romance in Soueif's novels provides her with an opportunity to resurrect a new Egyptian hero out of orientalist schlock, and her romance with the past through Anna points her toward a renewed sense of a transnational political community even as it problematizes the idea that anyone can ever truly know anyone else.

The complex interplay among national, international, and sexual politics in the novels raises the question: what political possibilities does reworking the colonial romance genre open up, and what possibilities does it foreclose? Soueif's self-conscious deconstruction of the genre's codes, in particular her transformation of the destructive woman, produces a nuanced transitional engagement with the relationship between art and political activism. That it ends with women artists is perhaps itself an argument about the failures of nationalism for those not defined as its ideal citizens. As the novel seems to conclude, what would be the use of dedicating all of one's energy to electoral politics when the very framework of nationalism writes women out of the political picture? These women find a different space for themselves to engage with politics by turning to representation grounded in particular political coalitions. Amal represents her turn toward storytelling as emphatically not a turn away from political engagement, moving to her chosen site of political struggle to begin her artistic work and to nurture her new family. Amal's genealogical project signals her need to imagine models for continued political struggle.

Because, as she demonstrates, we need representations to inspire us, even if the ideals they represent are unattainable. Soueif's interest in the possibilities of representation, in particular her transformation of politically maligned genres such as the romance and desire, points towards the potential for destabilising the gender, class, and race formations associated with particular narratives of both art and politics without offering any easy formulation of representation as politics (Loomba 1998: 243-244) her experiment with the desire and romance raises the question of whether its utopianism and nostalgia, so closely associated with reactionary politics, might in fact be put toward more subversive ends.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Soueif's novels is that she in effect stages how Western readers should read it. The novels dramatize several acts of reading in which the reader acknowledges the limitations of her ability to truly grasp what she is reading. For instance, in *The Map of Love*, in approach to Amal's letters and journals, which are themselves attempts to read Anna's new surroundings. By presenting Anna's growing horror at her own implication in the British imperial project, as well as the ongoing thematic of how women's history gets passed down through ephemeral and frequently neglected art forms such as journals, letters, and tapestries, Soueif not only challenges the erasure of women from the historical and artistic record but also presents an alternative ethics for approaching narratives about others. In other words, Soueif presents her own overt challenge to a model of contact as 'the clash of civilisations' (Huntington 2000) through a feminized narrative mode that highlights precisely the masculinist underpinnings of that antagonistic political model. The interplay of desire and romance provides a useful vehicle for staging this drama about reading and knowing, because it is all about the consuming desire for access to another.

However, Soueif's use of agencies like desire, romance, Hybridity proved particularly difficult for some critics to stomach and for sure there are important reasons for this. First, Western readerships have been trained to expect the "political novel" from postcolonial writers, in part because they are encouraged to read novels about the rest of the world as transparent historical documents rather than aesthetic experiments of any kind. Simon Gikandi, writing about Western readers of African literature, reiterates the

danger of this assumption that literature is “a mere reproduction of reality, and language a tabula rasa that expresses a one to one correspondence between words and things” (Gikandi 1987: 149). Soueif’s partial satisfaction of this expectation made for an ambivalent reception: the novel includes the kinds of historical and political discussions considered appropriate for postcolonial fiction, but her romance’s theatricality and overt artifice call into question the transparent factuality of the rest of the novel.

Perhaps the most fundamental tactic employed by Soueif in wresting a woman centered story of Egypt from the grasp of patriarchal narrative is the appropriation of the western archive. Historical documents from the era of British imperial domination of Egypt are interspersed within the narrative, thereby couching in a polyphonic conversation a discourse whose power depends upon monologue. The prejudice of Thomas Cook and the opportunism of Lord Cromer ring hollow amid a cacophony of other voices, those historical as well as fictional, whose narratives in Soueif’s work when juxtaposed against the tenets of the western archive illustrate perhaps more powerfully than any nationalist polemic could do the absurdity upon which imperial and neo-imperial notions of hegemony are based.

The incorporation of fragments of western historical texts into a novel authored by an Egyptian woman and narrated by various women from diverse social backgrounds allows the discourses of patriarchy, male and female imperialism, and “third world” speech to play against one another, forming a dialectic in which the strengths and weaknesses of each are revealed. Thus, through a carnivalesque intermingling of speech, Soueif transforms the language of the text into something entirely new and eminently suited to the complex lands and peoples each endeavors to define: multifaceted, fluid, free. Bakhtin describes this as the process of appropriating language. He writes: “The word exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from this that one must take the word and make it one’s own” (Soueif 2000: 294)

Nevertheless, Amin Malak argues that Soueif’s use of English in her writing “dehegemonizes the language and transforms it into an instrument of resistance to the

discourses of both arrogant colonialism and exclusionist neo-colonialism” (Malak 2000: 161) Discursive resistance occurs not simply in how Soueif writes but also in what she writes. Soueif’s inversion of tropes, traditional narrative forms, even of the hegemonic archive all function as a “writing back” to disempowering, stultifying western ideologies. Through the appropriation of language and literary form, Ahdaf Soueif implodes the fallacy of the “postcolonial” or “third world” woman even as she demands the reevaluation of “first world woman” ideal.

Soueif’s challenge lies in mapping out the complex conditions of querying oneself and the possible processes of transformation stemming from them. Her novels are, in this sense, considered terrain for the narrative representation of Egyptian, female, raising of consciousness, both conflictual and identity, in which the protagonists perceive themselves as subjects bereft in a no-man’s land between two cultures: one of which is beloved and reclaimed as an expression of one’s ethnic group of belonging, and the other denounced because of the practice and effects of colonisation. Soueif subverts the colonizer/ colonized hierarchy by presenting England a picture of its colonial past and postcolonial present, complete with all accompanying tensions, thus turning her Egyptian postcolonial gaze on England’s eye of power. Her work gives the colonized a voice not only to be heard, but to influence the English/ Arab literary landscape as she describes Arab women exposed to British culture and influence, who seek to find their own voices and take control of the narrative of their lives.

While the fiction of Ahdaf Soueif is an integral part of the evolving Arab-Muslim feminist discourse, the fact that it is written in English carries with it specific characteristics. The hybridized English that Soueif deploys and produces allows the conscious feminist narrative voice to infiltrate taboo terrains, both sexual and political, that might be inaccessible when handled in Arabic. Removed emotionally and culturally from the local scene, the English language accords a liberating medium to the author to broach and delve into issues such as feminine sexuality, politics of power and gender, and the disfranchisement of the poor: English here accords a liberating lexical storehouse and



semantic sanctuary. While the hybridized English provides this idiomatic advantage, it maintains the distinctiveness of the composite cultures, ethos, and predilections involved. As Robert Young astutely observes, "hybridity is itself an example of hybridity, of a doubleness that both brings together, fuses, but also maintains separation" (Young 1995: 22). While the author's, as well as most of her characters', first language is Arabic and the action in her fiction takes place in mostly non-English speaking settings, the reader feels that the English text is actually a translation whose original, once existing in the author's mind, is now non-existent.

Accordingly, even though the English language is readily associated in the collective memory of many "third-world" nations with the colonialist and neo-colonialist experiences, Soueif's adoption of it as a medium of expression dehegemonizes it and transforms it into an instrument of resistance to the discourses of both arrogant colonialism and exclusionist ultra-nationalism. Soueif's polyphonic discourse thus dramatizes complex and messy situations that are at once provocative, challenging, and inspiring.

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