

The Politics of Representation in Ahdaf Soueif's 'The Map of Love'

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Introduction

Since the publication of her first short stories, Ahdaf Soueif¹, an Egyptian writer who presently lives in London and Cairo, has been widely acclaimed as one of the most gifted writers on the international literary scene. In 1992, the novel *In the Eye of the Sun*² came out as a follow-up to the collection of short stories *Aisha* (1983)³, a finalist for the “Guardian Fiction Prize”. *Sandpiper* (1996)⁴, won the “Cairo International Book Fair Best Collection of Short Stories”. It was however *The Map of Love* in 1999⁵, a finalist for the “Booker Prize”, that brought her worldwide acclaim. Her works continue to get a wide range of critical responses⁶.

- 1 Ahdaf Soueif, the daughter of an intellectual Muslim family, was born in Cairo in 1950 and studied at Egyptian and British universities. She has been dividing her time between London and Cairo, crossing national boundaries and occupying multiple locations. She is one of a number of Arab authors who moved to Europe in the second half of the twentieth century and who, from their adopted homes, attempt to describe their encounters with cultural otherness. Consequently, she is inevitably caught in the net of power relations that govern interactions between East and West.
- 2 A. Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun*, London, Bloomsbury, 1992.
- 3 A. Soueif, *Aisha*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1983 and London, Bloomsbury, 2000.
- 4 A. Soueif, *Sandpiper and Other Stories*, London, Bloomsbury, 1996.
- 5 A. Soueif, *The Map of Love*, London, Bloomsbury, 1999. (It. trans. by L. Crepax, *Il profumo delle notti sul Nilo*, Casale Monferrato, Piemme, 2001). *The Map of Love* has been translated into 18 languages.
- 6 In 2000 she translated *I Saw Ramallah* by Mourid al-Barghouti, Cairo, AUC Press; Random House, New York and London, Bloomsbury. The collection of stories *I Think of You* came out in 2007, London, Bloomsbury. As well as being a novelist, Soueif also writes for prestigious newspapers including the English *Guardian*, and the Egyptian *Al-Ahram*.

This volume analyses *The Map of Love* with specific reference to the forms and narrative solutions regarding the awkward identity crises of Soueif's female characters (divided between nineteenth and twentieth century Egypt and England); the writer makes reference to assumptions and currents from the critical and creative world of postcolonial studies which form the basis for this work. The study aims to examine Soueif's principal (non-pacifying) solutions, by focusing on stylistic elements and major themes in the author's work (overturning the interpretative 'gaze', deconstructing stereotypes⁷, juxtaposing temporal planes, injecting linguistic contamination and overhauling literary genres in the English canon). The themes and stylistic elements are linked to issues that are still open to debate as regards the political necessity of inter-cultural and inter-ethnic, non-asymmetric relations (not to mention the historical reasons for the existing conflicts), the role of stereotyped representations of oriental 'otherness' (in comparison with western tradition) and their literary and cultural overhaul (and transmission). The analysis is also concerned with the various processes of awareness, on the part of the protagonists, of specific forms of identity crisis differentiated in the narrative on temporal, contextual and generational planes. These are all experiences in which the female characters' search, in the wake of their acquired awareness, remains an unresolved issue narratively-speaking, since the protagonistes are each time in a hazy area on the boundaries between Egyptian and English culture.

7 The term stereotype, coined at the end of the 18th century indicated the "reproduction of images printed from a fixed matrix (*stereòs*: 'rigid' e *tùpos*: 'imprint')"; it was used in the psychiatric field to define pathological behaviour distinguished by obsessive repetitiveness of gesture and expression. O. De Zordo, "Le mille vite dello stereotipo: riscritture del sé tra gotico e romance", in M. Farnetti (ed.), *Grafie del sé. Letterature comparate al femminile. Canonizzazioni*, Bari, Adriatica editrice, vol. II, p. 99. Here it is used differently, with the meaning of cultural construct linked to the depiction and description of the 'other' subjectivity.

Soueif opens up a critical discussion that exposes the workings of the western mechanisms involved in the production of stereotypical representations that produce an ‘inferior’ perception of otherness based on asymmetrical identitarian paradigms. She makes her position clear in a collection of critical essays she published in 2004 entitled *Mezzaterra: Fragments of a Common Ground*. Although dealing with a number of different social and political issues, Soueif’s essays in *Mezzaterra* share the common aim of demystifying and de-alienating Arab/Muslim cultures by presenting an alternative point of view on current affairs from the perspective of a woman who has an insight into both the Arab/Muslim and the western world⁸. She expresses concern about the fact that in nearly every book, newspaper or magazine article, film, TV or radio programme that “claimed to be about the part of the world that I came from I could never recognise myself or anyone I knew. I was constantly coming face to face with distortions of my reality”⁹.

In order to denounce the use of decontextualised stereotypes she examines examples of monolithic images taken from the western literary tradition as well as the western media to demonstrate how dominant representations of Arabs, Muslims and especially, Palestines are defined by a homogenizing otherness put out of their historical context, that is ethnically and racially determined¹⁰. They, even if they come from various social contexts, are not differentiated according to ethnicity, race, class and gender. She refers to Jean Genet’s concept of the “mask” of the image thereby alluding to the fact that an image can be deceptive, that it can lie,

8 In the vein of her close friend Edward Said she works at several crossroads.

9 A. Soueif, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (Essays), London, Bloomsbury, 2004, p.2.

10 For an analysis about the working of this mechanism related to media, see S. Hall *et al.* (eds), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972-79*, London, Hutchinson, 1980.

hide the truth and therefore be used to manipulate reality in a way that suits the aims of its creator. In the “Political Essays” section in *Mezzaterra* written between 2000 and 2004, Soueif takes an inquisitive look at the destructive influence of the neocolonial¹¹ politics of the US (and its allies Israel and the Arab dictatorships). “Under the Gun: A Palestinian Journey”, the first of the articles that are collected in *Mezzaterra* was written in 2000 when the Guardian offered Soueif the opportunity to go to Palestine. What motivated her was the discrepancy between the news coverage by the BBC and the CNN on the one hand and al-Jazeera on the other, which were so different as if the political events had been happening on two different planets. In this article, like in “The Waiting Game”, Soueif explores various towns, different communities as well as individual points of views in order to open a kaleidoscopic window that gives the reader a vivid impression of how the occupation and its ramification has been affecting every aspect of people’s lives. Her aim is to present a more balanced picture than mainstream news coverage. Thus, when collecting information for her articles she does not shy away from meetings with her opponents. She portrays Jewish Palestinian-Rights campaigners that whole-heartedly believe in their campaign as well as Palestinians that are trying to make quick money selling off their compatriots’ property. Although Soueif was referring specifically to the situation in 2004 this misrepresentation is still a topical issue today. She argues that this degrading mechanism of representation doesn’t only tend to hide the powerful forces that control the poli-

11 “Neocolonialism” is a term coined in 1961, four years after Ghana had won its independence. In 1965 the Ghanaian leader, Kwame Nkrumah, elaborated it in theoretical terms in his book *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*. Nkrumah suggests “[...] neocolonialism represented the American stage of colonialism, that is an empire without colonies”. R. Young, *Postcolonialism*, USA, UK, Blackwell Publishing, 2001, p. 46. K. Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, London, Heinemann, 1965. See also D. Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, London, New York, Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

tical battlefield but ends up revitalising the old dichotomic opposition between westerners/orientals. Soueif claims that by doing so the old language of colonialism is brought back from the past. She also emphasises the cultural and ideological revitalisation of these images and the consequent political implications that these rhetorical devices involve.

According to Soueif it is exactly the presence of this colonial past that has made it so easy for the West to construct a powerful but untrue picture of the Islamic, Arab and Palestinian worlds. She argues that when the West identified the USSR as “the enemy”, the image of the “Evil Empire” had to be constructed from scratch as preconceived ideas did not exist in the West. However, when it came to representing the Islam, it was easy for the ideologues and propagandists of the West to revive old colonialist and orientalist ideas of the Islam as a fundamentally fanatical, violent ideology that is strongly opposed to modernity and therefore poses a threat to western ideology.

If the New World Order was a mechanism to control the Arab and the Muslim worlds then I felt that the media of the West was complicit in it; for they always represented those worlds in terms that excused or even invited the imposition of control.¹²

Therefore, in her intent to critically deconstruct these representative mechanisms in *The Map of Love* the author deliberately falls back on travel writing from the western literary tradition, with the aim of de-constructing, on a textual level, stereotypes present in nineteenth century English travel writing, such as representations that tend towards the exotic depiction of the Eastern woman. Through such analysis and her narrative, Soueif aims to relocate in particular Egyptian women in their historical, social and cultural context, giving ‘voice’ to these figures absent from the British literary tradition.

12 A. Soueif, *Mezzaterra*, cit., p. 3.

For the purposes of this study, the theoretical and methodological references are relative to significant theses and hypotheses from the critical currents of western feminism, post-colonial studies and feminist viewpoints within these latter areas. The volume aims to highlight the way that the characterisation of the nineteenth-century figures in *The Map of Love* contrasts sharply with the identity-modelling rife in imperialist discourse in nineteenth-century Britain. This book is divided into five chapters. In the first the theoretical co-ordinates are outlined (along with the critical stance of the writer herself); these provide the structure for this analysis and function also as interpretative instruments for deconstructing the representative mechanism of nineteenth-century 'otherness' and the powers, which (according to Soueif) support them now just as they did then.

The second chapter places an emphasis on the peculiarity of the reconfiguration of the decolonised female subject's identity within the theoretical, critical and representative apparatus of postcolonial feminism. This framework consents an appreciation of the representative practices that Soueif activates in the novel; these introduce into the British literary scene female modelling that can deconstruct the semantics of the English literary canon and, specifically, nineteenth-century travel writing (with the aid of orientalist painting from that time).

The third chapter examines the literary form of travel writing which Soueif specifically employs in *The Map of Love*. English odeporic literature in the nineteenth century was an important vehicle for colonial ideology and is characterised, above all, by the exaltation of *Englishness* as compared to 'otherness', in accordance with a model presented as 'natural'; this is in line with imperialist discourse, which is based on the idea of the superiority of the white races, and within this, the superiority of the British. The writer's intention is to deconstruct critically this representative system, utilising the denunciatory methodology of postcolonial

‘writing back’¹³ and by revising western feminist ascendancy. She thus makes conscious recourse, above all in *The Map of Love*, to literary forms (from the western tradition) such as travel writing, which more than any other has contributed to the construction and preservation of that model of ‘inferiorisation’ of ‘otherness’. The emphasis will however also be placed on the role played by certain Victorian female travellers, in particular lady Lucie Duff Gordon and lady Anne Blunt, who, according to Soueif, seem somehow to break with traditional dominant models.

In the subsequent chapter attention is also drawn to the visual component of this representative construction of the ‘other place’ and its inhabitants, constituted by orientalist painting, which contributed to the creation in England of stereotyped images of the Egyptian female. For the purposes of our study of Soueif’s fiction, the effects of pictorial clichés regarding the ‘gaze’ of certain western female travellers visiting the Orient in the nineteenth-century are in fact relevant to the construction of the image of the ‘other’; this is also the case of the Victorian traveller Anna, the protagonist of *The Map of Love*.

Finally, the fifth chapter concentrates on a reading of *The Map of Love* as a specific critical revision of travel writing, with

13 The term ‘writing back’, which entails speaking out in conjunction with a revision-process, was first promulgated by Salman Rushdie in the early 1980s, when he had a newspaper article about British racism published under the title of “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance”, paraphrasing the title of one of the films in the original *Star Wars* trilogy (*The Empire Strikes Back*). Since then this term has generally been associated, in the words of Thieme, with the project of “dismantling” the Eurocentric literary hegemony; this was particularly true for Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin availing themselves of it as a title for their influential volume (*The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*). J. Thieme, *Postcolonial Con-texts. Writing back to the Canon*, London, New York, Continuum, 2001; B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin (eds), *The Empire Writes Back*, London, New York, Routledge, 2002.

the aim of illustrating the mechanisms that went towards building up the image of the oriental woman.

The interview with the writer (to be found in the appendix) was crucial for analysis of certain aspects of the novel.

This study intends to demonstrate how this narrative (and also political) operation led to a redefining of the portrayal of Egyptian women.