

# Crossing the borders of time, space and language

By Daniel Rolph

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After Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif's first, triumphant novel *In the Eye of the Sun* appeared in 1992, many must have considered it a tough act to follow. But her latest novel, *The Map of Love*, now out in paperback, has quickly assuaged those fears.

Hailed as "a second Anglo-Arab masterpiece," the novel, written, like the author's other work, in English, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1999. And while Soueif's fame continues to grow, with interviews on issues of post-colonialism, translation, authenticity and Arab identity appearing in both the English and Arabic press, *The Map of Love* itself is still making the headlines more than a year after its publication.

Like *In the Eye of the Sun*, Soueif locates *The Map of Love* in both Egypt and England. But while her first, semi-autobiographical novel was fiercely contemporary, her latest - with equally undiminished power - is set at both ends of the 20th century. It is in fact, the story of two stories.

In 1900, Lady Anna Winterbourne, recently widowed, travels to Egypt, where she falls in love with and marries Sharif Al Baroudi, an Egyptian nationalist from a noble family campaigning for his country's independence from British colonial rule.

In 1997, Isabel Parkman, an American divorcee and great granddaughter of Anna and Sharif, meets and falls in love with Omar Al Ghamrawi, a New York-based Egyptian who also has blood-links to the Anna and Sharif marriage. She travels to Egypt, taking with her a trunk containing the notebooks and journals in which Anna set down the story of her love affair with Sharif and with Egypt. Isabel gives the trunk to Amal, Omar's sister, who not only reveals the old story but, in so doing, also contributes to the new story - the story of Isabel and Omar. The two tales unfold side by side, and as they develop we become aware that they are intricately - and mysteriously - intertwined.

The novel is, on one level, a classic romance - the story of two great romances separated - and brought together - by a hundred years of history. Soueif creates, quite unashamedly, two undeniably dashing Egyptian heroes: "the character of Sharif Al Baroudi was based on the image of Ahmed Mazhar [a famous Egyptian actor of the 1950s and 60s], I was thinking of him all the time!" she remarked in a recent interview with Alaa Karkouti in *Akhbar Al Adab*. And Soueif's prose luxuriates in every stage of the two couples' relationships, their passion, their uncertainty, their tenderness.

At the same time, however, the book is also a hard-hitting and critical account of a century of Egypt's troubled history and politics, taking in feminism, nationalism, colonialism and post-colonial discourse as well as the Arab-Israeli dispute and the question of normalization.

The research for the novel took two years, Soueif searching the SOAS Library for the precise chronology of events at the beginning of the 20th century as both British imperialism and Egyptian nationalism gathered strength.

From the Denshawai massacre of 1906 and its aftermath to the Cairo bus bomb and Luxor massacre of 1997 and the subsequent rounding up of villagers in [Upper Egypt](#), Soueif gives us a fascinating and disturbing account and analysis of the forces that continue to shape Egypt.

But this account is always personalized, Soueif making clear how enmeshed her characters' lives are in political events. The personal is an integral part of the political or historical, and it is this expert shift of focus from the grand sweep of history to the detailed and intimate, coupled with an unerring accuracy, that not only characterizes Soueif's work but is in fact the hallmark of her brilliance.

Thus, aside from the more overt political exposés, Soueif for example weaves a snapshot of a Cairo street, instantly recognizable for anyone in Cairo in 1997, into her narrative:

On the bonnets of the cars parked on the street, young men sit in groups, chatting, watching, waiting for action. The latest Amr Dyab song, the tune vaguely Spanish, spirals up at us... Beloved, light of my eyes/who dwells in my imagination/I've loved you for many years -

Elsewhere, Soueif's descriptive genius is apparent in a passage about a color card:

...it lobs you gently into the heart of the rainbow, and turns you loose into blue; allows you to wander at will from one end of blue to the other: seas and skies

and cornflower eyes, the tiles of Isfahan and the robes of the Madonna and the cool glint of a sapphire in the handle of a Yemeni dagger. Lie on the line between blue and green - where is the line between blue and green?... Lie, lie in the area of transformation - stretch your arms out to either side.

These lines reveal, subtly, the essence of the book's message, and what appears to be a preoccupation for Soueif: a fascination with the concept of the border line, or rather the lack of a border line - with transitions.

Just as in her short story *Sandpiper*, where she used the line where sea meets land as a metaphor for the transitions in a young woman's life, Soueif in *The Map of Love* reveals the shifting sands in the history of Egypt and in people's personal lives, but also the paradox of the perceived continuity that runs through the human experience. Where does one thing end and another begin? Are the two love stories one?

The Egypt of 1900 has shaped the Egypt of today: Dr. Ramzi, when questioned by Isabel about Egypt's future in the new millennium, answers "It will be the same." And what role does Fate play in all of this? Anna's first entry in her journal reads: "My name is Anna Winterbourne. I do not hold (much) with those who talk of the Stars governing our Fate."

This voice, cautiously allowing the possibility of the inexplicable into people's lives, could also be Soueif's. In the novel, it is in this mystical force of continuity, ironically comforting and unchanging in its fluidity, that Soueif ultimately finds beauty and solace. Across time and space, the eternal light of love shines again for Isabel and Omar, and no less brightly and with no fewer complications than it did for Anna and Sharif.

Linguistically too, Soueif in *The Map of Love* breaks down borders between languages, in order to accommodate the Arab experience as expressed through Arabic in her writing. Thus Arabic words are used regularly in dialogues. For example, *Yakhti* (my sister), a phrase often used among women, appears firstly, Soueif says, because there are conversations between Egyptian characters in the novel, and secondly because the emotional sense and effect would be lost in translation.

In fact, whole dialogues give the impression of being literally translated from Arabic, a quality which Jenine Abboushi Dallal referred to in a recent article as writing "in translation." Soueif herself states that she hears the dialogue in her

head in Arabic when writing, and the overall effect is that any reader who knows Arabic will find themselves translating sentences like  
Yakhti, have some shame, you and her! Are your tongues loose or what?  
Have we said anything? We're women together. Or is the Sett a stranger?"  
back into Arabic as they read.

Not only does this technique impart a unique depth of character, it also enables the reader who knows English and Arabic to receive the full cultural and emotional impact of both languages simultaneously, and is thus a highly significant and groundbreaking achievement.

Towards the end of the novel, Amal, reading Anna's story, says "I know I am close to the end and I have slowed down. I don't want it to end." It appears that readers of *The Map of Love* have been feeling the same way. Ahdaf Soueif, the consummate cartographer of emotion, has won our hearts once again.