

Different readings

The most dramatic interpretations, too, must draw on life,

Profile by Pascale Ghazaleh

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What if it were true? Not just the "string of now- taken-for-granted pearls" around her neck: those are true enough. But the flat filled with dim coolness, the hours spent crying in the loo, the borrowed memories of date jam sandwiches? "If you want to know about Ahdaf Soueif," someone says, "read 'Returning.' That, and '1964.' Those two stories -- those are about the early years." Someone else asks cattily: "Why meet her at all? Just read her books."

It must be a little tiring, this: you are speaking to someone, someone who has heard of you but whom you have never met, and all the time you speak your interlocutor's eyes gleam, and you hear the unspoken questions: "Is it true that...? Was he really...? Do you...? Did he...?"

There is the problem of being an Egyptian woman, who has written, in English, about an Egyptian woman, who happened to have sex, in the book, with an English man, while she was still married to her Egyptian husband -- a matter of 10 pages out of a total of maybe 800, but all this was, as she laughs despairingly, "a *fidiha* (disgrace) on two levels": linguistic *and* sexual treason. Well, just look at Ahdaf Soueif: she is a novelist, an Egyptian novelist, and a woman, and she writes in English, and some of what she writes (only a little really, but still) is quite racy, and she's very toothsome to boot: well, there you have it, a recipe for disaster. Here, we will be proud of her, if a little sheepishly -- proud that one of ours can speak just like them, in terms they understand, about us (we may disregard a minor point: that she is speaking, precisely, of things we and they have in common). There, they will regard her with fascination, for some of the same reasons.

And one aches to tell her: you will be wrong- footed, always. You will never belong, even if you make a profession out of not belonging. You will always end up, as someone's grandmother would have put it, *les fesses entre deux chaises*: Not quite out of place, but not really all that comfortable. This will be true no matter whose daughter or sister or wife or mother you are, no matter who you are, even if you think you have mastered your feelings of strangeness and detachment from yourself, have integrated them so that they have become you. They will never give you a sense of coming home, no matter how many times you travel back and forth, no matter how accustomed you grow to your hotel rooms or your houses, here and there. You will even try to *become* the watchful,

judging eyes. You will let them write their own story (no less chilling because it is impregnated with the very clichés of exotic fiction you seek to avoid). None of this will work.

Surely, though, there is no need to tell her all this. Surely Ahdaf Soueif can take care of herself. Watch her, for example, reel an audience in, slowly, gently, almost inadvertently: this is quite enthralling. They have waited for almost half an hour, squeezed ever more tightly into the scheduled venue, then been herded out and into a much larger hall that will accommodate their growing numbers. They may be expecting too much, by this point: a triumphal entry, a bugle call, a revelation. What they get is a woman of medium height in a grey suit and sensible black heels, who climbs the awkward stairs carefully, as if willing herself not to show she is afraid of tripping and who, clutching a large handbag and a sheaf of notebooks, wends her way through the bongo drums set up for the performance that will follow this one: Czechoslovakian jazz, another cross-cultural encounter.

She is introduced, and a list of the illustrious novelists who have preceded her here is read out. Then she begins to speak, standing behind the lectern. Her voice is pitched perfectly. She moves thick, shiny black hair out of her face, and does not look up often. She implies she is feeling intimidated, cowed by the weight of her predecessors. She speaks of "an urge to get up and run." The audience titters, and settles down -- a first shifting, as concentration enters the listening phase. She comes across as unassuming: her sentences do not match the cadences of her breath, somehow, and she will gasp sometimes mid-word. She ums and ahs, prefaces many of her statements with a schoolgirlish "I think."

The result -- if this is a device, it is fiendishly effective -- is that the listeners like her very much. They hang on her every word, laugh almost before she has finished each of her cool ironic little jokes. By the end of this first lecture -- she would prefer a conversation, but everyone is hustled out of the hall at the end, to make room for the Czech musicians -- waves of amusement wash through the auditorium as she reads an extract from *In the Eye of the Sun*. Ahdaf Soueif is speaking, tonight, of translation, and lampooning the translation of much Arabic fiction into English. Does an English reader, she wonders, feel pleasure in reading a translated Arabic novel? Does translation convey authentic, human culture? Does it afford the pleasure of recognition and empathy? Generally, she believes, a reader closing an Arabic novel rendered in English is more likely to sit back and reflect with satisfaction: "Well, I've learned something about the elusive Arab mind."

(photos: Randa Shaath)

The transition is smooth, and now she is discussing Mohamed Atta, the letter allegedly left behind by the suicide bombers, the absurdities of the English rendition. In the West, she explains, believers do not take the Lord's name in

vain, and so see the omnipresence of God's name in Arabic, the way it permeates discourse, as evidence of a religiosity so excessive as to tip into the fanatical. She evokes the legacy of the *Arabian Nights*, cites examples of archaic terms and turns of phrase used in modern translations, underlines how these serve as "stumbling blocks to empathy, to entering the spirit of the book." How, then, does one translate, not words or information, but an entire culture? How is it possible to avoid misunderstanding -- not of a linguistic but of an entirely epistemological nature? She does not say it, but implies the question: how do we know what we really mean?

So she reads a long passage from *In the Eye of the Sun*, to illustrate this difficulty. Asya, the protagonist, is attempting to explain a song by Sheikh Imam. The audience laughs; the laughter grows louder. It seems to escape us all that the anecdote, ultimately, argues for the impossibility of translation -- for the need to "get up and run."

Perhaps her listeners feel she is speaking to each one individually, much as though we were all at a dinner party, and she held the table spellbound with a mixture of intimacy and unassuming intelligence. In one breath, she begs our indulgence and shows she has no need of it, makes excuses and waves away protests. Is it an acquired gift, a party trick? If so, Ahdaf Soueif is not one of those people who can only shine warmly in a crowd. Meeting her face to face, one is thrown off guard by her initial timidity, her girlish tics, the absence of hard lacquer. This is a woman who knows all about image -- she is conscious that both the cultures in which she feels at home will tend to pigeonhole her; and really, she should be more on her guard. Perhaps, though, Ahdaf Soueif is not worried, because hers is the best defence of all: she does not try too hard. She does not really bother with irony. She is not desperate to be taken too, too seriously. Her signature (one discovers, peeping over her shoulder as she autographs copies of her books proffered by eager, perspiring students and earnest professors) is a bilingual flourish: she writes her family name first, in Arabic, and nestles her first name, in English, within it. Her children are called Omar Robert and Ismail Richard. Because she has found herself writing in English, she will explain, she has had to come up with a political manifesto to justify herself. One senses her exasperation.

Today, she marches out of the lift wearing large dark glasses that eat up half her face, and, when we sit down, orders croissants and tea and complains in soft, generous, deploring tones of having smoked too much the previous night. She can manage not to smoke when it is just her, she explains -- though not when writing; when writing, she has to smoke -- but of an evening, with friends, she will indulge. Now she is paying the price. Her face stays on the safe side of pretty, because it is not a little face: she is not cute. It looks a bit tired; it can rumple in understanding, but will not soften. She is wearing, yes, the string of pearls, and under the dark grey suit, today, a small white-on-white striped satin fisherman's vest. Her eyes have an almost glassy quality; they seem about to overflow, like

ink pools before the paper absorbs them. From a distance, they could be bright blue. She takes a small, neat bite of croissant, wipes her fingers on the paper napkin, stirs the tea, looks up blankly, apologises ruefully. "I'm not really awake yet." The teapot malfunctions; she digresses for a moment about its technical defects, promises to stop fiddling in a minute. Scandal, disappointingly, does not emanate from her every pore.

To write about Ahdaf Soueif, one inevitably looks for her in her books. There are two slim volumes of short stories -- *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1994) -- and two fat novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and *The Map of Love* (shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1999). These are books one could enjoy on the beach, while still feeling virtuous: each of them is a good, solid read. And all of them contain hints. Soueif went to England with her parents, aged 14. In the short story titled "1964," she recounts the trip from Port Said on the *Stratheden*, her mother's disapproval of the "disappointed returning would-be Australian settlers and hopeful Indian would-be immigrants" with them on the ship. She hoped for potential adventures, but had to settle instead for a morning in church with the vicar's children, and the vicar's attempt at a public conversion. She "felt excessively small and dark and was agonisingly conscious" of appearing alien. She realised, already, that she was "a misfit," with "the manners of a fledgling Westernised bourgeois intellectual and the soul... of a Rocker." Today, in a different era, she reflects on her two dreams -- being a writer or a rock star -- and remarks that both had to do with art and individual effort. The only obstacle in her path to fame as another Janis Joplin was that she didn't know quite how one went about becoming a rock star; "oh, and I sing flat -- according to my children."

Becoming a writer seems to have been the easier of the two choices, then, involving a simple act of will: not so much an epiphany as a conscious decision. She had finished her PhD dissertation, and was on unpaid leave from her teaching job at Cairo University for a semester. One afternoon, the thought suddenly occurred to her: "You've always thought you'd be a writer. There's no excuse now. Here you are, sitting on the sofa. Either become a writer now or stop thinking about it."

This, one suspects, is Ahdaf Soueif's "sensible voice," the no-nonsense tone one would adopt to tell one's child to stop sniffing and pull up her socks. This is the inflexible accent she must have taken, time and again, while suffering through the agonising solitude of her PhD years: "You finish what you start." It never occurred to her to say what she felt: "This is killing me, could I at least do something else?" -- not even when she was offered a place at Oxford to study comparative literature. No; she had chosen linguistics at Lancaster, and "once you take something on you do it."

Her parents -- both renowned professors, Fatma Moussa of English literature and Mustafa Soueif of psychology -- set great store by academic success. By the time she was three, Ahdaf knew she would be a *duktura* one day, because "that

is what you did." She has internalised the imperative of excellence, like many chronic overachievers; no matter what the task she assigns herself, she tries to live up to a Platonic ideal of how it should be performed. The problem, of course, is that each task has a different master and that, attempting to satisfy each of them, one necessarily falls short: housework, for instance, is the province of a particular aunt, who is looking disapprovingly over her mind's shoulder every time she washes a dish. Obviously, cutting corners is always out of the question. "Well," she laughs, "I haven't had a nervous breakdown yet."

That first attempt at fiction yielded stories built around her nanny, Dada Aziza. These came out in English. When she tried to write in Arabic (how did she make this attempt? "You are Egyptian. There's no excuse. Here you are, writing. Either write in Arabic or don't bother"?), she found she could not use it as a tool sufficiently sensitive to render the meaning for which she was fumbling. The narrative would not happen. Only the dialogue came out in Arabic -- and in that sense, "a lot of my fiction is in fact translation." She has often been asked whether she has a problem with English as the "language of my oppressor," she wrote in the *Guardian* in December 2000. "I understand the question but I do not feel it; the British occupation was out of Egypt before I was born. English was the language of my first reading and I love it."

Since she has written only fiction (presumably at least) thus far, it should be interesting to read the book Soueif *should* now be writing. It is a project she has been working on for some years, a book on Cairo, not a guide or a history but part of a series by Bloomsbury's authors on cities that they love, and she is so late. She's late because she's busy, because she can't find the time to sit down and make the proper start. To begin with, she's got to put the bulk of the thing down and spend time thinking, a solid chunk of time, perhaps three or four weeks when she's not rushing around doing other things. This new book will be personal, felt, and she has to give a sense of the city, of course: she can't just do something about the trees, say. These are roughly the same reasons she's not working on a novel -- the victim of her own success, perhaps; but if they're listening she will talk, and write, and sit still for pictures. And if they're listening because she is all the abovementioned exciting things, well, she will take the kindly offered opportunity to talk about issues that matter to her. "What can I do," wrote Ahdaf Soueif in the *Guardian* last year, after her much-publicised trip to Palestine, "except bear witness?"

The novel she would also like to be working on is more of a problem. Because *The Map of Love* was so successful, she says, it generated more work: work to nurse it through, talking here, talking there. When she eventually got herself started -- well, at least on exploring which idea she would go with, which idea would give her something -- she found she was lacking that bit of time and space she needed so desperately. She had almost organised it when the Intifada happened and the *Guardian* asked her to go to Palestine, to write about it, and that was such an intense experience she couldn't imagine what possible topic

she could come up with that would have the same kind of weight. At the same time, of course, "it would be almost insolent to go there for a week and come back and write the Palestinian novel." So she was stuck.

Her account of the week or so spent "Under the Gun" (the title of the first article in the two-part series) was first-hand, personal, not analytical. It was very well received, apart from a few extreme letters of protest that described it as "Goebbels-like ranting" ("I didn't understand how it was ranting," she gasps in astonishment; "underneath it, there was absolute rage, but there was no sort of shouting at all"). She feels that using the novelist's style was important, and effective in bringing ordinary readers immediately closer to the tragedy occurring in Palestine. She ventures that her pieces "broke something," that the reaction made it possible for the newspaper to take a firmer stance against Israel's policies.

Soueif's books are strewn with references to politics and the life of the Cairene intelligentsia -- *The Map of Love*, memorably, contains what appears to be a verbatim transcript of a discussion at the Atelier, and it is to her credit that she has not rendered lethal what must have been tedious enough experienced life. It could be argued that such conscious injections of gravitas detract from her greatest strength: the telling of tales bereft of any pleasingly explicit moral.

Yet she is at pains to point out that she has "always been political" and, growing up here, what was going on in Palestine just seemed the worst injustice in the world. She also felt impotent, until the *Guardian* suggested the series on the Intifada. That seemed like a contribution; the possibility, for her, of playing a role. If she could, she would have stayed -- not least for the personal transformation she underwent, writing at the time: "I am shedding aspects of me which are superfluous to the situation. I do not wonder for a second whether I should or should not ask a question: I have no concern to be liked. Not once have I had to drag my usually unruly mind back to the business in hand. Every time I glance at it, it's working: completely focused, recording, recording. Maybe I'm shedding 'me'. And the bits of me that remain are the bits that cry as I write down the stories I hear..."

And now, she remembers almost wistfully: "I'm always having to catch my mind and bring it back. During the eight or nine days I was there, every time I caught a glimpse of my mind it was steady. I was working to my best ability, for something I really believe in and feel is of crucial importance."

But Soueif concedes readily that she "can't just be a political writer." A major part of her credibility, she knows, comes from her novels. This is her strength; and besides, she gets "ratty and nasty and nervous" when she is not producing. Edward Said has described her as "one of the most extraordinary chroniclers of sexual politics now writing," and this politics is most pointed, most moving, when she paints it most delicately, relating conversations between an estranged wife

and her perplexed, hurt, loving mother-in-law (in "Satan," one of the short stories from which *In the Eye of the Sun* was born), or the appalling loneliness of a woman confined to a hospital bed as she waits to give birth and suffers the loss of a beloved friend (in "I Think of You"). So when Ahdaf Soueif writes of losing innocence, she can mean a child's simple, awful discovery that her parents are powerless to protect her from the terrors her imagination breeds.

In a sense, she still inhabits this narrative universe, even if it is no longer possible to disregard the very real dangers posed by her precarious position. The tension between the imagined and the real, the truth of her feelings and the fiction of her characters' pseudonyms, could easily be devastating -- unless one decides, as she seems to have done, that the difficulty of remaining a cultural hybrid is always a question of invention: of "drawing on life with varying degrees of strictness." Only that; all that.

And if one grows uncomfortable, perched between two chairs, never fully ensconced in acceptance -- well, one simply smiles, and tells oneself: "You finish what you start."