AHDAF SOUEIF

Talking about *The Map of Love*

Ahdaf Soueif introduced her most recent novel, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, to Paula Burnett and an audience at Brunel University, London, on 28 February 2000

AS The basic structure of this book is that it's two stories, one happening at the beginning of the century and one happening contemporaneously with the writing of the book. There's a narrator. She's an Egyptian woman who's lived in the west for a long time and then eventually she's gone home, back to Cairo, and while she's there an American woman, Isabel Parkman who is…Let me explain. The Egyptian narrator Amal has a brother Amer, who lives in New York. Isabel Parkman has met Amer and has started to fall in love with him, and also, as she has emptied out her parents' flat, she has found a trunk. She showed it to Amer and it's full of material both in Arabic and English, as well as objects. He sees the significance of this trunk and he says, since you're going to Cairo, take it with you, and they'll interpret it – my sister will interpret it for you. And that's where the map of love starts to unfold. The old story, the one that's a hundred years old, is told by Amal from the contents of the trunk. So she pieces together a story of the past. At the same time she tells the story of what's happening now. The story in the past is a love story in which the woman is an English

patriot, Sharif al-Baroudi, and marries him. The story in the past takes place over fourteen years, while the story in the present takes place over fourteen months and the book constantly cuts between the two stories.

> [The reading began with this passage:
>
> "Cairo, April 1997
> Some people can make themselves cry. I can make myself sick with terror. When I was a child – before I had children of my own – I did it by thinking about death. Now, I think about the stars. I look at the stars and imagine the universe. Then I draw back to our galaxy, then to our planet – spinning away in all that immensity. Spinning for dear life. And for a moment the utter precariousness, the sheer improbability of it all overwhelms me. What do we have to hold on to?…"
> (*The Map of Love*, p.10)]

That sets the scene for Amal to tell both stories, the old story and the new story, and in both there is a western woman and an Egyptian man, and in both stories there is the sister of the man, so you have a kind of triptych which, as the story goes on, reflects the ancient Egyptian triptych of Isis, Osiris and the sister who helps Isis collect the body of Osiris, and mourn him, and bring him back to life.

[After reading from several parts of the book, Ahdaf Soueif took questions from the audience.]

PB

knows nothing about Arabic. But I suppose one obvious question is, as a writer, why English not Arabic? Do you also write in Arabic? How does that happen?

AS Well, it was not a choice. I'd known that I wanted to write fiction, and it was in 1979, having finished studying, finished with university, and feeli(t)148?95.5(s)-7.1( )14.9(a7(ityl)15.1,i

not good enough. It becomes a blunt instrument in my hand. It won't do what I want. So I write in English.

But as you say, the question of language is one of the things that interests me. It's quite useful to be writing about Arabic from the perspective of English. In a way you can do that in a more interesting way, I suppose, than if you're writing from within. But there is this whole question of language. And as you saw in one of the passages that I read, Leila and Anna's friendship is conducted in French, and when Anna meets Sharif al-Baroudi and falls in love with him, the language that they use is French, and they have a little discussion about that and about what it means that neither of them is speaking their own language, and that maybe it's better that way. Maybe it's sort of neutral ground, and not one of them is making the great shift, as it were, and both are having to interpret the other one, rather than taking things for granted. So that raises this whole question of language—language which we obviously use as a means of communication, but also, when does language become actually an impediment to communication, when we assume too much, because somebody else speaks the same language?

PB *Yes, that's something you say, I think, that maybe we make the mistake too often that, because similar terms are being used, we mean by them.6(e)16.9(d)-1(mTD 023.8(e)1.3(6.9( )14.9(*

Q *How much does the history of your country come into it? Because my little knowledge of your country is that the pyramids were built by the stars. And you mention goddesses and gods. How much does the history of Egypt come into it?*

AS The history comes into the book a great deal. The pyramids were built by the ancient Egyptians, so the mythology of the ancient gods comes in here a bit and is interwoven with Coptic images, and also with Muslim belief, so that there is a tapestry which plays a key part in the book—which embodies the three: the ancient religion, the Christian religion, and Islam. And certainly one would not be able to understand the problems surrounding Anna and Sharif's relationship and marriage without knowing that Egypt was under British occupation at the time, and knowing a fair bit about it—well, knowing that, anyway. But it is to an extent explained. It is possible to come to the book with very little knowledge and still figure it out. In fact there is a family tree at the beginning of the book. This family tree—these are the

AS After *In the Eye of the Sun* was published, I met up with a friend who had become a literary agent, and she wanted to talk to me about possibly switching agents and going with her. And she said, “Why don’t you write a best seller? Why don’t you write a pot-boiler—big thing, sort of East-West, and romance, and so on? I can get you a huge advance for that. And bits of *In the Eye of the Sun* show you can do sexy scenes. You can do this—just do it!” And I went away and thought about it. And I said no. I mean, in the end, obviously I couldn’t do it. But it got me thinking along romantitnrh1 5.1194 0 TD 0.(h)-2.6(n)-3.3(d2582 0 TD 0. TD 0Tc -0.00186Tw [(t)140.3(.)-1.3(o)1.3(S))-

see, like Lucy Duff Gordon

So these were all questions that were in my head, but then of course once the story started happening it had its own impetus, and it more or less went where it wanted to go, after that.

Q *Did you write it consecutively?*

AS Yes. When I started, I wrote three scenes that appeared more or less fully formed in my head. And then I used them to plot my position, as it were. So there was one scene where Isabel, the American woman in modern Cairo, goes into the old Baroudi House, and has a kind of vision, a kind of epiphany. That was one. And there was the kidnapping scene of Anna—not exactly the kidnapping, but when Sharif al-Baroudi first comes to the house and finds her there, and their first meeting, with sparks flying, and so on. And the third one. And so I sort of placed these and worked out around them what the time frames would be, and what the structure would be. And then having done that, started at the beginning, and then discovered how much research I would have to do, and more or less went away and did research for about, I don't know, twenty months or something. And then having really taken it all in and arrived at the point where one knows that you're just reading in order to not write, that you really know as much as you need to know, but there you are, sort of finding yet another book, and so on. I then just started writing from the beginning and didn't stop for, I think, about eighteen months, beginning to end. And had these three scenes as my little islands that I was sort of aiming at—you get to that achievement, and then you've got to get to the next one, and so on, until it was done.

Q *When you start writing, do you rewrite a lot?*

AS No, I print out what I've done, like tonight, and leave it, and then next day I read it, and any rewriting that's to be done is done then, and then carry on from there. But I need those pages, and they have to be on the page, not on the computer, and that's the starting-point—and if they are good, then carry on from there. And if they are not, then it's a rewrite. There was one chapter actually where Anna in Cairo goes out with the agency lot, and they have a picnic at the base of the pyramids, and they discuss Egypt while the Egyptian donkey boys and translators and so on are standing at the side. And I had done that from the point of view of an outside narrator, and there was something not right with it. And I tried to ignore that, and went on to the next chapter, and the next, but I was uncomfortable, and eventually I showed it to my husband, who said, this doesn't work, and it's just going to have to be done from Anna's perspective, and from a journal, or a letter—and it's going to be hard, but that's how it's going to have to be done. And I went back and re-did that until it worked. But that was the only big, big rewrite that I had to do.

Q *I want to ask you a question that's personal to me. You talk about the British empire. You come from an African background, but you have the privilege of being of both continents, of Africa and Europe. Do you see an advantage to being educated in Europe—is this a bigger advantage than having an African education?*

AS

university careers in Egypt and are doing fine, so I think it really depends where you want to live your life. If you want to live your life in the West, then it's an advantage, of course, and you can't do it without having some form of educational time here. But if not, then there's no necessity, I suppose, unless…I don't know, maybe there are things like medicine or something where you get more advanced teaching in the West. But in the arts I don't really see—I think is all just depends what you want to do with yourself later.

PB *One of the interesting things in the book, I think, is that story from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of the founding of the school of art in Cairo, which was done as something to which there was some resistance, but at the same time it did go through. And I thought it was very fascinating, for me as somebody who knows virtually nothing about the history of Egypt, the sense in which so many modern things, so many things which one might have thought would have happened later, were actually happening at the very end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. And the story of the art institute is in itself part of the story of the book, isn't it?*

AS

it were, two battles to fight, because if you were an Egyptian who wanted to modernise, you were open to the charge of being with the colonials, of wanting to be western, and therefore of being on the side of the occupying powers, and that, of course, gave a lot of strength to the reactionary forces, who could then say that they were the true patriarchs, in that they wanted to hold on to everything as it is—and let's not educate our girls, and let's not have a university—and so, in a sense, any true patriot who wanted to see the country modernised, and develop, had to fight on two fronts: to say, "We have

a Muslim society behave, and are expected to behave. And if a reader says that is oppressive, as in fact some readers have—one reviewer said Sharif al-Baroudi, for all his liberal talk, is content for his wife to live in a harem; now I can't see what else he

AS My role model? Well, I read George Eliot and loved her work, so that's as novels go. And then there were two other people. One was an Egyptian writer who was a friend of my mother's. She wrote a book in 1962, or was it 1964? I read it when I was about fifteen. It was called *The Open Door,* and it was the first modern Egyptian novel that would take a modern Egyptian girl as its heroine. It was somebody I could identify with, and the fact that I knew this woman, and that she was a friend of my mum's, and that I used to see her around, and I used to think she was amazingly wonderful…! She used to sit putting one leg under her. Most women sit very decorously, and she—she was a professor of English at the university and she was a leftist, and a member of the opposition to the government, and so on—and yet when she sat down, she'd bend one leg under her. And that seemed so free and casual to me. And also she'd laugh very loudly, and I really adored her. And then there was Colette. I love Cole

So I think what I would say is that I'm not bothered about whether I appear modern or not. I don't mind being part of the nineteenth century, if you like. I like big novels that actually take you into a world, and give you all the details, and make you feel like you really know the characters, and just sort of go on. And I like novels that entertain

PB *Whether it's Horus between Isis and Osiris, as it is in the tapestry which is part of the book too, or whether it's any of us today with our families, I think that sense of the generations coming is something that is a wonderful stimulus. So thank you very much, Ahdaf Soueif.*