

# All strings attached

## Maggie Morgan listens for signs of the developing public persona of Ahdaf Soueif

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Ahdaf Soueif came to speak at the American University in Cairo (AUC) on Thursday, 6 April, accompanied by her son and her mother. She was on familiar terrain. Most of her audience either knows her, knows someone who knows her, had read her works and/or had previously heard her speak. Ferial Ghazoul, professor of English and Comparative Literature at AUC, introduced the speaker as "an in-between, a hyphenated persona". Years ago, Ghazoul introduced her students to *Aisha*, Soueif's collection of short stories, and even back then spoke of her as an Egyptian writing "in English, as opposed to writing an English" novel. Later, as students, we crammed into a small room to hear Soueif talk about her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*. She signed our books in what must have been a thoroughly pre-pondered, Arabic-English signature. Soueif's public identity even then was a careful construct -- an Anglophone Arab, talking about "us, here" but being published "there". Last year she published *Mezzaterra : Fragments From the Common Ground* -- a collection of political essays, articles, and book reviews -- released to "mark time between novels". In the introduction Soueif explains the title (and her self-chosen niche) as, "this territory, this ground, valued precisely for being a meeting-point for many cultures and traditions -- let's call it 'Mezzaterra'. This common ground, after all, is the only home that I and those whom I love can inhabit."

Soueif was slated to give a public lecture in Ewart Hall at AUC on the image of Arabs in modern Western literature. This choice of subject matter is directly tied to one of the key themes taken up repeatedly in her novels and similarly linked to her identity as a public intellectual and author: the idea of representation. As an Egyptian woman, living in London and writing in English, she returns time and again in her works to the idea of self-representation and the representation of the "Other". In this regard, she was right to begin her talk by placing herself under the "umbrella of Edward Said". From what I could tell the audience was largely comprised of people who were much like Soueif, Anglophone adherents of "the common ground," squashed in the current political atmosphere. What new could she possibly present?

She began her talk by discussing the evolution of her own reception as an Egyptian in Britain. Initially, she encountered questions like, "Do you go to school on camels?" This gave way to "Tell us how oppressed the women are" and, later, "What are the censorship obstacles that you had to face as a writer?"

and "Tell us about the conflict of identity you feel, are you an Arab or a Westerner?" Nowadays, she is expected to be the emblematic Muslim woman, invited to photo-shoots to represent "creative Muslim women". She sees herself as continuously trying to fit "under the lines of a grid".

Soueif studiously stayed within the realm of literature, referring only briefly to an occasional film or article. In her discussion of the representation of Arabs in Robert Stone's *Damascus Gate*, Soueif points out that there are only three Arab characters in the novel "who are given a line", even though the action takes place in Palestine. The rest of the Arabs are presented as a mob. The readers know little about Rashed, the main Palestinian character, beyond his being a doctor trained in the West and a communist. In the end he is killed because he is in the gun-running business.

In taking up Richard Zimler's *The Search for Sana*, Soueif abandons the cool, polite tone and analyses the novel in a cynical and even slightly bitter manner. In the novel, Stone, using his real name, is researching the story of Sana, a woman who committed suicide literally at his feet -- but never said a word. Her brother, a mentally disabled young man who walks dogs for Israeli settlers, is used by Hamas to bomb his benefactors. Describing him, Soueif says "the second Arab character is nothing other than a retard, an idiot, who plays with a goat that is for some reason called Aisha." With the same wit and irony Soueif takes up the similar representation of Arabs in *Lunch in Bethlehem*. By now the audience of "Arab Mezzaterrans" has got the idea. Had the evening ended there it would have been no more than a witty and poignant reiteration of what most of us already knew.

To her credit, Soueif did not simply pinpoint negative images and label them "bad". She further argued that, in order to engage the readers, the author must give a character a back story, context, details, history and, most importantly, "agency" -- the ability and will to act, to be a doer, an actor in one's own story. The failing of Western writers portraying Arabs is that they often, as in the case of the three works she chose to discuss, do not show Arab characters with a story or agency.

Soueif also made an interesting observation regarding the ways in which past Orientalists represented Arabs and Arab culture. Earlier, she noted with a bit of irony, Western writers made a distinction between Arab Muslims, Arab Christians and Arab Jews, "each despised in a different way." Contemporary Western literature, in contrast, shows that "there is a binarism that is presented between Arab and Jew and the two categories are mutually exclusive. The racial-religious terminology is rampant." However, she qualified her assertions by mentioning two examples of "Western literature" that are exceptions to this trend: South African Nobel Prize-winner Nadine Gordimer and African-American novelist Kim Jensen's first novel, *The Woman I Left Behind*. Soueif commends the authors for their sympathetic rendering of Arab characters,

"because observing accurately is an act of sympathy, taking someone seriously enough is an act of sympathy".

More significant, though, than the obvious content of Soueif's talk was her attitude. As I understood it, she was re-drawing the lines of her persona. In her introduction, Ghazoul described Soueif as a "linguist, author, critic, translator and activist". The "activist" is relatively recent. At last Thursday's talk Soueif demonstrated how she has crossed over from being a critic and a novelist to becoming an activist -- not to say that the notions are mutually exclusive. She was more ironic and more involved than I have ever heard her before. But she also made more generalisations, more "us" and "them" statements. She simplified to make a point as activists often must; in order to critique racist imagery she resorted to a polemic based in absolute binaries.

In some ways Soueif abandoned her hyphenated persona and took sides -- with the Arabs, Palestinians, and the misrepresented. All strings attached. Maybe she would say that she was always on this side, maybe others would say it was the natural side for her to take. No matter. Her own journey and politicisation, so to speak, mirrors, and perhaps will serve as, a catalyst for a similar journey into the light among her readership. It was almost predictable that she would translate *I Saw Ramallah*, the memoir of Mourid Barghouti, the Palestinian writer and poet. It was just as fitting that she would accept the *Guardian*'s offer to go and write about Palestine. Soueif is a testament to the ways in which a radically anti-Arab political climate can force a reflective intellectual to let go of the intriguing questions and adopt an agenda. An activist has a plan of action, because she answers the question "What can we do?": "We don't have to make nice to the West, but we have to be agents, each in his field, each one to do what he or she does best. And you here, as inhabitants of a common ground, must act."

Checks and balances to Soueif's sweeping statements came in a question raised by an Egyptian-American graduate student. Wasn't she dividing the grid a little too neatly? What about Arab and Muslim writers who write reductively of Arabs? He specifically mentioned Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and the work of Carmen Bin Laden as examples of Arab and Muslim writers who problematise her basic premise. In fact her own work, made possible largely through the Western literary establishment, is similarly problematic. Samia Mehrez, professor of Arabic Literature at AUC, asked Soueif if some of her critics were right to say that the *Map of Love* objectifies its Western characters, and suggested to her that maybe the issue is, at heart, one of representation in general.

Surely Soueif must have already known that the question of representation is extremely complex. She must have been aware of the difference between her talk versus a post-modern-dismantling-of-Western-discourse type argument. Ultimately -- for whatever reasons -- she chose to do what activists do: to

convince and perhaps inspire her audience. Instead of flaunting ivory-tower academic jargon to impress her listeners, last Thursday Soueif took sides -- our side. That takes, at the very least, humility.