

# Left Unsaid

## THE BOX OF LIVES

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Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif has written another epic that blurs more boundaries between cultures and nations and between history and fiction.

The Map of Love has recently come out in paperback. Rather than attempt another review of it, I wish to only share the thoughts it has evoked in me about women's relationship to their history.

The narrator, Amal Al Ghamrawi, is given a box by her American/English friend containing letters that belonged to her great-great-grandmother. The letters and diaries trace Anna Winterbourne's life through the death of her husband and her ensuing love affair and marriage to Sharif Al Baroudi. Baroudi was a distinguished lawyer and nationalist in the 1900s whom she met during her travels to Egypt.

Isabel, Amal's friend, is the third generation descendent from that mixed marriage, and Amal herself is a descendent of another branch of Sharif Al Baroudi's family.

The journey Amal undertakes with the memoirs represents many things, but most importantly it traces part of her own history. She becomes so familiar with Anna's deepest feelings and most intimate details of her life that she can see her as she moves, knows what she looks like.

The relationship between the two women, others may wish to call it subject and student, is so intimate that Amal feels entitled to write her story because she has come to know her so well.

When Isabel tries to present a different version, Amal resists this and while not exactly censoring it, sticks to her own vision. At one point, Anna's written life becomes an integral part of Amal's own memoirs, thus reinforcing the latter's sense of ownership and entitlement to constructing that life in writing as a history. Debate is ongoing on as to whether there is such a thing as women's

history/histories, and if so, which women we mean. But this is not about the life history of Huda Shaarawi or Nabawiya Moussa or any other "prominent," "historical" figure. Our endeavor here is about constructing the lives of unknown women, but who nonetheless represent a piece of history.

Attempting a social history of women of whatever class or era means removing the shroud of privacy, digging into whatever source you can find, and that includes oral culture and memories.

It is, however, crucial that we claim this history, feel both ownership of and belonging to it, document women's oppression and resistance, what their relationship is to the big "events" we have termed history, and their successes and failures, as they are our own. It would give us a fuller picture of the society we live in and all its power relations.

You may think it odd that we are using a work of fiction as a model in a history-writing endeavor. That is another debate. All I can do is invite you to read *The Map of Love* and decide for yourself how much of it is fiction.