

# On the threshold of Maat

By Nehal el-Sherif

**A** NEW novel by the Egyptian author of the bestselling *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is certainly big news for many.

In her father's flat in Cairo, novelist Ahdaf Soueif sits in the cosy living room, contemplating how to fit as many things as possible into her busy timetable.

Two shelves on the wall are stuffed with books and papers are scattered everywhere, while the London-based writer sits in front of her computer trying to sort out her meetings during her brief stay in Egypt.

For those who like the way she connects the past with the present in *The Map of Love*, her new novel will be just as alluring, as it's written in a similar vein.

"In fiction you are more free to go in and out of the facts. Facts are your scaffolding, and you move the characters within it trying to reach a bigger truth, not just a factual truth," says Ahdaf Soueif.

Only this time, Soueif has gone further back in history, moving between the present and the Ancient Egyptian Middle Kingdom.

"The Middle Kingdom is the richest period in ancient history in terms of culture and art," she explains. "The people were able to reunite the country after an era of decline."

One of the most important things in the Middle Kingdom is Maat, the goddess of truth, law and order.

Maat was the personification of the fundamental order of the universe, without which all of creation would perish. The Pharaoh upheld this order by maintaining the law and administering justice. To reflect this, many Pharaohs took the title 'Beloved of Maat', emphasising their focus on justice and truth.

In the underworld, the heart of the deceased was weighed by Anubis against Maat's feather. If the heart was heavy with wicked deeds, it would outweigh the feather, and the soul would be fed to Ammit. But if the scales were balanced, indicating that the deceased was a just and honourable person in life, he would be welcomed by Osiris into the Blessed Land.

Soueif seems fascinated by the crowned woman who has huge ostrich wings. Believing that "we are in a state of crisis", she refers to Maat in search for some order and truth.

Although Soueif has already started her novel, some things have kept her away from finishing it. Her mother's death last October was very hard on Soueif, who had thrown herself into the Palestine Festival of Literature project. She was among 15 international authors who went to the West Bank to put on a series of literary events.

"The festival had just ended and I was finishing a few reports about it. I hope that when I go back to London, I'd close the door



Mail photo

**COSY IN CAIRO:** Through her fiction, Ahdaf Soueif has unintentionally played a role in cutting through the stereotype of Arabs, especially women, in the Western mind. Will her new still-in-progress novel have a similar effect?

and isolate myself in order to get back into the world of the novel," explains Soueif, adding that she's finished her research which is half the battle when writing a novel.

"When things start to be created inside my mind, I have to enter the world of the novel. Every time I leave that world, it takes me more time and effort than before to get back inside, because I have to clear my mind from these new interruptions," Soueif told the *Egyptian Mail*.

The Egyptian novelist has raised eyebrows for writing in English. People ask who her audience is, especially in the Arab world.

"My audience is everyone who can read in English, Westerners or in the Middle East. And now the language is no longer a problem, since translation links the world," she says.

Yet Soueif has never thought of language as a barrier, as it has always been a means of communication, especially for her journalism. "There are so many people who write what I write in the press in Arabic, but in English no," she adds.

Soueif has little reason for writing fiction in English. When she first learnt to read, she read in English. She was with her mother, who was doing her PhD in London.

She returned to Egypt when she was eight and she was already reading in English. "As a child, English children's books were more attractive than Arabic. There is also no difference between colloquial and *fusha* [classical] like there is in Arabic. In English, basically what I read is what I speak."

She has also studied English Literature at Cairo University.

"Arabic is my daily life language, it works at a level of communication, but not at a level to phrase a sentence that leaves a certain impression," continues Soueif, who, when she writes fiction, imagines the narrative in English while the dialogue comes in Arabic; a confession that justifies what some of her Arabic-speaking readers say about hearing the Arabic through the English.

"I haven't practised writing Arabic. I can edit but I can't generate in Arabic."

May be this is why her translation of Palestinian poet Mourid el-Barghouti's *I saw Ramallah* was widely acclaimed. She managed to transfer the poetic feeling conveyed by el-Barghouti in Arabic into English.

Soueif's late mother, Fatma Moussa, an acclaimed translator and English Literature professor, translated one collection of her short stories and *The Map of Love*.

"I was totally in awe: if I were able to write the text in Arabic I would have done it the same," Soueif says with sparkling eyes, as she remembers her mother.

"I was also honoured because she translated [Naguib] Mahfouz's *Miramar* into English and Shakespeare's *King Lear* into Arabic.

"So to be with those... it felt great. She was always supportive and my first reader," she says.

Soueif's texts appeal to Westerners as much as to Arab readers. She has established common ground between both worlds. Her fiction has even played a role in changing the stereotype of Arab women in the eye of Westerners.

"In fiction it is never my aim to

propagandise," she explains. "I create what I think of as authentic characters. But they go against the stereotypes."

"One reader told me: 'I'm French and I never thought I'd empathise with an Egyptian character, but I find that her feelings and ambitions are the same as mine.'"

She wonders for how long the stereotypes will prevail.

"I guess my fiction has worked against the stereotypes and I hope my journalism has as well. But I have always been interested in writing the truth, not just writing against the stereotypes," she stresses.

Her fiction has also changed the lives of many: some for better some for worse.

"Once I attended a play by some Egyptians in London and after the show one member came up to me and told me that his wife had read *In the Eye of the Sun*.

"He explained that it took her a few days to read the 800-page novel and, when she finished, she told him she wanted a divorce."

"I was shocked and I kept apologising, but the man said it was for the better. If it were for the better then that would be good. I really hope it so."

Looking back at the sixties, she thinks that nowadays there's a cultural revolution going on in Egypt.

"There are a lot of cultural centres and many events are being held. In the 1960s, this was a way of expressing the optimistic spirit of the people. Nowadays I think this is a form of self-defence, as well as a way to rekindle this optimism, to help people endure the harsh economic conditions they are suffering from."

## Upbeat

Amr Hussien

**I** CAN'T thank you enough for all the e-mails you sent me last week. When I included my e-mail address the feedback was amazing. I believe it had to be, since last week's article was about some of the mistakes "I" made in my career as a journalist and as a singer. Maybe I was so hard on myself by mentioning many mistakes, which made me look as if I were the clumsiest creature in the universe. I think it's only fair to mention mistakes that made an impact on my work; although they were made by others. Again, no names will be mentioned. It's not because I care about them – it's just that when I kill them I don't want anyone to believe I had the motive!

Most of these "scandals" were made on stage, like the time we were playing one of our originals called "Like A River." Each song has its music scale and key. The singing should be in the same key as the music or else it will be what we call "out of key," which is totally unacceptable. That particular track starts with a guitar riff, played by the man who composed it. The instant our genius guitarist burst into the song, we realised there was something wrong. I was thinking "that's not the right key" and I was right. I felt so uncomfortable with the transposed vocal line. A minute later or so, which is a long time in the life of a song, he suddenly switched back to the original key and did so while I was singing. Of course I had to follow the music and sing in key in the middle of one musical phrase. At least he could have waited till the verse was over. Can you imagine that he didn't even know where to start his own composition from? Remind me to send him a copy of this article.

Another original is "Baby," which has a piano intro. When the singing starts the piano playing should change to go with it, but during one of our concerts the pianist just kept repeating the intro! I had to start singing and I was thinking to myself "I have to sing in key. I will not mess up this number." I tried very hard and just as I was about to lose it there was an unbearable noise in the speakers, caused by the sound engineer. We had to interrupt the performance till that technical problem was solved. Luckily the pianist got it right the second time around.

Something even worse happened while playing the original "I'm Leaving U," which is one of the simplest songs the world has ever known. It basically moves back and forth from "A" to "D," starting with the former. Two band members started it in "A" and the other two decided to begin with "D"! Suddenly I was stuck in the middle trying to isolate myself from that horrible noise and just hang on to the original key and sequence in my head. I had no solid music to sing to. I felt as if I were walking on yoghurt! It took them ages to get their act together.

I also remember the time I had to face the same problem twice in one concert. Naturally, one of the basic elements of any music is the tempo, which should be kept steady, unless changes are required. In this case the changes are well-rehearsed by everyone beforehand. If the tempo is changed without a prior notice, the result could be disastrous. Imagine not being given enough time to catch your breath because the number you are singing is so fast that you don't even have the chance to inhale properly! The same could also happen if the track is too slow that you have to extend every bar or maybe every note till you run out of breath. As I told you, it happened on two songs we were covering – Bee Gees' "Spicks and Specks" and Elvis Presley's "I Can't Help Falling in Love with You."

It's really strange that many musicians never memorise their parts properly. I was asked millions of times by numerous band members to give them some kind of a sign as a reminder – "time for the solo," "here comes your backing vocal line," "the song is about to end," etc. Still sometimes it doesn't work. One day the drummer was too hungry to keep playing or something, so he cut Oasis' "Don't Look Back in Anger" short and ended it before the guitar solo, the chorus and finale! That concert was reviewed by another publication and the critic mentioned that I look at the other band members more than I should. True, but now you know why.

One of my most embarrassing moments in my life was when we were doing the Beatles' version of "Rock 'n' Roll Music" and the whole band, except yours truly, thought that we reached the end of the song and suddenly stopped. Little did they know that they ended it one verse and one chorus too soon and ironically they all stopped together! I went on singing on my own for what couldn't have been more than one second and everyone, except yours truly, laughed. They thought it was my mistake but it wasn't. The band members were counting on me to wave to them so that they would know the song was about to end and I didn't mind, but they weren't even looking at me as I was waving. It seems that each one of them thought he needed no reminders on stage! They were wrong. Well done.

As long as I live, I'll never ever forget the day I sang a whole concert in a drum mic! I do have a very deep voice but that doesn't give any sound engineer the right to treat me as a bass drum. I didn't know that the mic wasn't designed for human beings and I was really annoyed by the sound. After the concert some explained it all to me and I really wanted to chase that engineer... with an axe.

Now I have to make a confession – I didn't receive a single e-mail from anyone! You want to know why? Because I didn't type my e-mail address correctly last week! There you go. Another silly mistake to be added to my very long list! But actually it shouldn't count because this week's article is not about my mistakes. The right e-mail is: [thisisamrhussien@gmail.com](mailto:thisisamrhussien@gmail.com)

## Obituary

# Fashion icon Saint Laurent dies

**P**ARIS – French fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent has died at the age of 71, hailed as a 20th century cultural innovator who revolutionised the way women dressed.

The couture creations of the reclusive Saint Laurent won global fine art status and he was widely considered to be one of an elite club of designers including Christian Dior and Coco Chanel who made Paris the fashion capital of the world, reported Reuters.

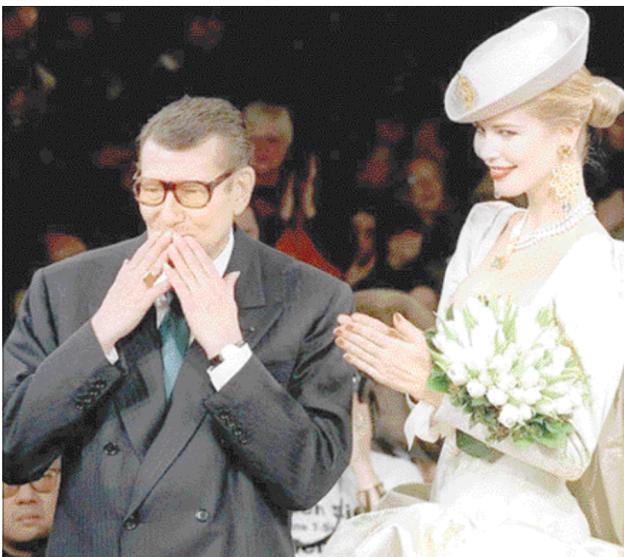
His long-time companion, Pierre Berge, told RTL radio the designer had been diagnosed with a brain tumour last year and had died on Sunday in Paris.

From Princess Grace of Monaco to the actress Catherine Deneuve, Saint Laurent's creations adorned many famous women but he was also the first designer to make luxury labels accessible to a wide audience through innovative ready-to-wear collections. He made his appearance on the world stage at just 21 and built up a clothes, perfumes and accessories empire that resulted in a 1989 stock market flotation – the first by a fashion house. But Saint Laurent also suffered from severe depression and underwent treatment for alcohol abuse and became increasingly withdrawn later in life.

The daily *Le Figaro* gave over its whole front page to the man it called "the world's greatest couturier" and President Nicolas Sarkozy praised Saint Laurent as a creative genius. "He was convinced that beauty was a luxury that every man and woman needed," Sarkozy said.

Berge told France Info radio: "Chanel gave women freedom. Yves Saint Laurent gave them power."

"(But) he was someone who was very shy



**FAREWELL MY FASHION FANS:** Yves Saint Laurent with model Claudia Schiffer, who is wearing a wedding gown designed by him, in 1997 after the presentation of his 1997 spring-summer Haute Couture collection in Paris.

and introverted, who had only very few friends and hid himself from the world."

A memorial mass will be held on Friday in the church Saint Roch in Paris, the traditional church of artists and musicians.

Saint Laurent, who retired in 2002, was credited with changing forever what women wore, making the trouser suit a daytime staple and the tuxedo an elegant option.

He also popularised safari jackets and thigh-high boots, and his transparent blouses made

near-nudity acceptable in high society.

"He completely revamped a woman's wardrobe," luxury underwear designer Chantal Thomass told French radio. "His fashion was full of colour and inspired by art."

The eldest child of a wealthy French industrialist, Saint Laurent was born and grew up in the then French colony of Algeria and showed a talent for design, making clothes for his younger sisters' dolls.

At 17 he entered a Paris fashion school, and

his sketch for a cocktail dress won first prize in an annual contest. Introduced to Christian Dior, the gangly Saint Laurent was hired on the spot by the creator of the "New Look" and became his chief assistant. On Dior's death in 1957, Saint Laurent became chief designer and swiftly outshone his mentor.

After his first collection introduced the widely copied "trapeze" silhouette with narrow shoulders and flared skirt, the shy 21-year-old was pushed out on to the Dior building balcony and crowds in the avenue below hailed him like royalty.

Saint Laurent directed Dior for three years, until drafted for military service during the Algerian war.

For a sensitive person whose homosexuality had made his school years a torture, army life was an ordeal. He had a nervous breakdown and spent nearly three months in hospital.

Berge arranged financial backing, and Saint Laurent presented his first collection under his own name in 1962.

The "YSL" empire grew steadily and Saint Laurent showed an instinctive ability to sense what the mood on the streets was and turn it into high fashion.

But by the late 1980s his health problems were an issue.

Insiders said Saint Laurent, who never read newspapers or listened to the radio, became increasingly cut off from reality and lost touch with all but a tiny group of friends.

"Fame has destroyed him," Berge once said. Despite the personal demons, his business empire thrived. The 1989 flotation was a runaway success.

But when the Gulf War erupted and the world economy slumped in the early 1990s, Berge and Saint Laurent sank into debt.

In 1992, YSL was absorbed by cosmetics and drugs company Sanofi, with Saint Laurent retaining creative control. Then in 1999 it was bought by the Gucci group, itself controlled by French luxury giant PPR.

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