

Mapping the divide

Growing up in Egypt, Ahdaf Soueif experienced the six day war which shaped her political outlook. She studied in Cairo and Lancaster before marrying the writer Ian Hamilton. She taught before starting to write fiction in English, and was translated into Arabic by her mother. Her pro-Palestinian views have attracted critics as well as admirers

The Guardian, June 11, 2005

A few weeks ago, as she often does these days, Ahdaf Soueif ascended a stage, and addressed a large crowd. This time it was the premiere of the Palestine Film Festival, in London, and though she was somewhat hesitant, and shuffled her papers nervously, her voice was clear, her message clearer: when she was six years old, she told the assembly, her father took her to a film in which a little boy entered a forbidden room and encountered a monstrous robot. It advanced and advanced and advanced, and entered her nightmares for years to come.

"Sometimes it seems that that's what's happening in Palestine." The documentary she was introducing, Arna's Children, about Jewish pro-Palestinian activist Arna Mer Kemis, is moving, but also troubling: in her zeal to teach them to express themselves, to channel their anger, Arna seems to be encouraging the children in her theatre group to participate in the intifada; by the time they reach their 20s many are dead.

Soueif has just returned from speaking engagements in Qatar, Santa Fe and Vienna when we meet, and is looking forward to a few clear months working on fiction at home in Wimbledon before the annual summer trip to Egypt, where she was born. She perches on the edge of a blue divan in the bay window of her living room. Traffic sweeps past outside. The low table in front of her is piled high with books - Letters from Lexington: Reflections on Propaganda by Noam Chomsky; Human Cargo by Caroline Moorehead; Derailing Democracy: The America the Media Don't Want You to See, by David McGowan; an exhibition catalogue, Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth; various volumes in Arabic. Soueif is like a weathervane, open to gusts of passion, of emotion, just controlled; she smokes furiously, talking through the deep breaths, pushing heavy black hair away from her face. But intensity also switches quickly to laughter; she is warm, and empathetic, and generous, and when her son Ricki, 16 this month, gets back from school, loving and sharply solicitous about his GCSE art coursework.

"I think it's OK to find it troubling," she says, about Arna. "It is a problem for Israelis who support Palestinian rights to place themselves in exactly the right position. Do you support in a relatively passive way, or do you stoke up anger and try and push it forward? I have heard some Israelis say that Palestinians are too patient. And then someone goes and blows themselves up. People have to work out for themselves the ways in which they can really be useful."

Although the first thing you encounter when you enter her home is a placard proclaiming Freedom for Palestine, over the past few years she has attempted to be useful mainly by bearing witness: in 2000, when this intifada began, she went to the West Bank for the Guardian, and wrote two long, shocked pieces of reportage. That year she also translated Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*, an account of his return to the city after 30 years, and a meditation on exile. Last year, she published her first volume of non-fiction, *Mezzaterra*, which includes these pieces, as well as book reviews; read together, they have one overwhelming urge: to isolate and attempt to neutralise the damage the west inflicts on the Arab world at the level of the word - the thoughtless objectifications, the passive constructions, the essentialisations and impositions that go towards subtly dehumanising and creating an enemy.

Not everyone approves of her activities: Jewish peace activists have complained that she plays down their efforts; and there are Palestinians who would rather she directed her energies elsewhere. "She is a typical Arab intellectual who wants to send Palestinians anywhere apart from their own countries," says Samir el-Youssef, a Palestinian writer exiled in London. "I cannot trust it. Nothing is easier than to attack Israel, but are you willing to look at your own society? This is the real challenge." He says he was "appalled" by a 2004 Guardian piece in which she asked Palestinian authors how the occupation affected them: "It's a typical Arab attitude to Palestinian literature, that Palestinians don't write literature, they are just there to do propaganda, to make people feel sorry for them. It's supposed to show solidarity, but what it shows is superiority."

Furthermore, "I don't find very flattering" the idea that she'd go around "championing Palestinians in the west as victims. That's taking something away from Palestinians, and I don't feel very comfortable with that."

Radwa Ashur, an Egyptian novelist, critic and professor of English literature who has known Soueif for more than 30 years and is married to Barghouti, defends her. "We might criticise Arab governments, and they should be criticised, because they have all the problems you can imagine. But when it comes to the Israeli occupation, it's a matter of emphasis. It's like, during apartheid, highlighting the attitude of an African neighbour and not the policies of the regime. It's a roundabout way of trying not to identify the number-one opponent, and it's very dangerous." Besides, "Arabs do not really conceive of themselves as separate. What happens in Palestine is happening to us. What's happening in Iraq is happening to us."

Ashur knows el-Youssef's opinions from Arabic newspapers, she says, "and if any literary work seems committed or concerned with politics he'll attack, as if a writer must not have anything to do with politics". One of the things she admires most about Soueif is her ability to mix the two, particularly in her Booker prize-nominated *The Map of Love* (1999), in which "she went back to the roots of the problem. What we see happening now in the West Bank has been happening since the end of the 19th century. It's something we know from our history books, our parents, our grandparents. But I think it was courageous, on her part, to write that in English, in a novel published in England." John Sutherland, one of the judges, later wrote that a perceived anti-Zionism gave them pause; Boyd Tonkin, also a judge, has since denied the issue ever came up.

The Map of Love, Soueif's fourth and most recent book of fiction, is a sweeping, knowingly Mills and Boone-ish tale of two cross-cultural love affairs, one modern-day, between an American woman, Isabel, and a half-Egyptian, half-Palestinian man, Omar; one set at the dawn of the 20th century, when Ottoman rule still nominally held in Egypt, but was being superseded by British empire. Sharif al-Baroudi, Egyptian nationalist, falls in love with Anna Winterbourne, English noblewoman and widow of an English soldier who fought bloody colonial wars in the Sudan. They marry, and she becomes absorbed in his quest to overturn British sovereignty; in the background, Zionists buy land from the Turks so it can be held in Jewish hands in perpetuity.

The Map of Love is the only one of her two novels available in Arabic. Her first, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), has so far proved too long, at 800 pages. For a while it was also too controversial - its frankness about sex and adultery, especially with a westerner, led to calls for it to be banned. But parts are available in literary journals and are studied by Egyptian university students, along with Virginia Woolf. Young educated women, those doing English degrees especially, says Ashur, "look up to her. They feel she tells part of our story."

The Map of Love was translated by Soueif's mother, Fatma Moussa, professor emeritus of English literature at Cairo University, who also translated a selection from her two volumes of short stories, *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1996). Initially they had arguments, laughs Soueif, about things like "Whose novel is this anyway?" But once they agreed Fatma would do a rough draft, and Ahdaf would finesse it, the arrangement seems to have worked admirably: *The Map of Love* has been reprinted four times.

Soueif's maternal grandfather, an irascible, much-loved presence in her work, was a furniture manufacturer, a self-made man; her paternal ancestors were teachers and religious scholars. She had a happy and privileged, though not especially luxurious, childhood in Cairo, surrounded by family who were always wandering in and out, discussing politics. "That's what people talk about. All the time." This was the first flush of Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1952 revolution, and the

beginning of socialism in Egypt. Soueif's parents, always independent-minded (her father, who became a professor of psychology, spent a year in jail for anti-British activities when he was 18; he passed the time translating Aristotle's *Poetics*) cautiously agreed with the revolution, but refused to go as far as party membership: they believed a socialist state should have been achieved organically rather than by military coup.

There were two breaks, both in England. The first, for four years, was while her mother completed a PhD at the University of London; Soueif learned to read, in English, forgetting her Arabic, and had to start again when she returned. The second sojourn, for a sabbatical year when she was a well-read 13-year-old wannabe rock star (or opera star or flamenco dancer) with two small siblings, was much less happy. Her story "1964", collected in *Aisha*, tells of casual racism, homesickness and, finally, a refusal to go to school.

Her early fiction, particularly, is a love letter to her Cairene childhood, to, as she wrote in a review of her friend Edward Said's memoir *Out of Place*, "Crossing the golf course at the Gezira Club, hearing one's name called at dusk as you played in the rock hideaways of the Fish Garden, family excursions for tea at Mena House or picnics at the Barages... American films at the Cinema Metro... the life lived simultaneously in English and Arabic, the imagining of oneself into the comics or novels we read... And underneath it all, the gradual shifting of literature" - as she raided her mother's library, devoured the 19th-century novelists, Eliot, Dickens, Balzac - "into central position, the dependence on it, the almost belief that it can save us."

"Growing up Egyptian in the 60s," she adds, in her introduction to *Mezzaterra*, "meant growing up Muslim/Christ-ian/Egyptian/Arab/African/Mediterranean/non-aligned/socialist but happy with small-scale capitalism". "Mezzaterra" for her means the resulting creative space, a common, generative ground. But then came 1967 and the six day war, which disrupted her all-important school-leaving exams: the 17-year-old watched as Egypt's airforce was destroyed, its armies decimated, as Israel annexed the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. "We are still paying its bills to this day," writes Barghouti in *I Saw Ramallah*. "There is nothing that has happened in our contemporary history that does not bear a relationship to '67." "Ahdaf's sensibility is the sensibility of her generation," says Ashur. "It is a consciousness formed in the late 60s, a consciousness of the occupation of the Arab world."

That year Soueif also met the man who would be her first husband: they married four years later, in 1971, when she had finished her first degree, in English literature, at Cairo University. Ashur, who was about four years ahead - both were taught by Soueif's mother - remembers her as "sweet", idealistic, fragile and clever, and her husband as handsome, "the sort of guy who'd appeal to a very young and romantic girl. But it didn't work." Soueif won't talk about it at all - "Shall we not? I just feel that he's had enough - let the guy live his own life, yalla?" - but

given the degree to which *In the Eye of the Sun* cleaves to the details of her life, it would not be farfetched to imagine the marriage as fuel for the deeply felt, absorbing engine of the novel: the difficulty of achieving a balance between developing one's own mind and being subsumed by someone else's, of discovering desire, of being torn between east and west, mismatched but in love, and wishing desperately this weren't so. This, in many ways, is what she's best at: cultural dislocation as filtered through a feminine, lived Arab experience, refreshing in its opposition to western prejudices of what this experience might be. This is true of *Aisha*, with its melancholy, lightly drawn stories of sexual discovery, jealousy, betrayed innocence; of *Sandpiper* and of *The Map of Love*.

Career-wise, Soueif was following a future mapped out for her, to become a professor of English at Cairo University. After her first degree, she did an MA and taught. Tackling poetry with students working in their second language, who viewed English only as a passport to better jobs, she discovered Geoffrey Leech's *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry*, which argued that you could use linguistics to prove, "with numbers", whether a poem was good or bad, and decided this was the way forward. So despite an opportunity to study comparative literature at Oxford, she chose Leech and Lancaster for her PhD - and was spectacularly unhappy for four years. She hated the town, was lonely and homesick, and couldn't understand the linguistics at all. "I developed this whole thing where I'd only eat if I understood something, and so I lived for weeks on bran and water as punishment." By the end of her first year she would sit in the library, "just weeping, and I wouldn't even know - tears would just be flooding down my face".

Susan Glynn, an undergraduate then and now her best friend, remembers Soueif as a polished, glamorous woman who once prompted a passing schoolgirl to exclaim to her friends, "Look! It's Miss World!" She says Soueif, whose husband was abroad, put up such a good front, and was so kind, that she only realised later, from *In the Eye of the Sun*, how bereft she must have been.

In Egypt, the 70s saw Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat dismantling the public sector, encouraging foreign investment, working his way towards peace with Israel, and, to dissipate opposition to these moves, encouraging Islamist groups (whose ongoing anti-western actions include the 1997 Luxor bombing, which features in *The Map of Love*). The 1978 Camp David accords regained for Egypt the Sinai Peninsula and earned the fury of other, less militarily powerful Arab states, and especially of the Palestinians, who could not see how they would now exert pressure on Israel to relinquish the Occupied Territories.

Meanwhile, in Lancaster, Soueif sat shivering under a one-bar electric heater, imagining every brick, every step, every shaft of sunlight in her grandfather's house. She had never written a single story, hadn't even kept a diary until, in 1978, just after her viva, suddenly free and living in London for a few months before she returned to Cairo to take up her professorship, she found herself

thinking one afternoon that if she were ever going to write, there was no better moment to start.

In Arabia, his 1979 account of travels through the Middle East, Jonathan Raban writes that he "tried to learn Arabic, taking a crash course of a dozen lessons from a lovely Egyptian girl who had a voice that sounded like spring rain and a PhD in linguistics. We stared solemnly at each other's uvulas, she inspecting mine to find out why I wasn't making the right noises, I inspecting hers for the sheer pleasure of looking at a piece of apparatus which was capable of producing such enchanting sounds." He calls her Fatma, but this was Soueif, who had met him through a friend of her mother's, and one day brought him a couple of stories to read. "I steeled myself, given her academic background, for a sort of stiffened language. But I was just astonished by their fluency, their intelligence, their assuredness. She was very clearly a writer who had already found her own voice" and "a language of great eloquence and great simplicity that was not entirely English in the way an English person would write. She was able to somehow have an outsider's Egyptian eye on the language, and somehow prune it, simplify it, treat it almost as an object."

Soueif says it surprised her that she was unable to write fiction in Arabic, although she thinks and dreams in Arabic, and is most comfortable using Arabic and English simultaneously. But at the very point of setting words on paper she discovered that learning English in England, studying English literature in English, had come to mean that English was her literary language. However, her dialogue especially, says Ashur, "is in an Arabic English. It is in the tradition of the African and Indian writers who push back the frontiers of the language so as to express their own experience. And it's not done superficially, by inserting Arabic words. You can feel the cadence of an Arabic sentence. It's a very skilful kind of translation." Arab reviewers of the English versions can even hear differences in register between street Arabic and the dated, classical Arabic used by some characters in *The Map of Love*

Raban's most vivid memory of her at that time is "her face bent under a mane of splendid hair, and her saying, in a remarkably soft voice, incredibly intelligent things". He invited her to the launch party for *Arabia* and there, in a garden in Kensington, she met a friend of his, the poet, biographer and editor Ian Hamilton. "How could Ian not have fallen in love with Ahdaf?" Hamilton called her the next day, and after two years, during which she taught at Cairo University and he flew back and forth, they married. Hamilton converted to Islam; the centrepiece at their wedding party was a looped video of Spurs winning the 1981 Cup Final. Clive James wrote them a (quite Orientalist) poem.

Soueif "absolutely adores parties", says her friend and editor Liz Calder, who, when at Jonathan Cape, was shown some of the stories by their mutual friend Susannah Clapp, and has published Soueif ever since. She's still amused by Soueif's reaction to her plans for the launch of *Aisha*, in 1983 - 20 to 30 people,

in her flat in Kentish Town. "She looked aghast. 'But that's not a party!'" She thought several hundred, at least. "And it was a proper party - none of your standing round politely. She seems quite quiet, but she has a fabulously robust sense of humour. It just bubbles up." She's "a great storyteller," says Glynn, "just things that happen in an ordinary day." It has always been important to Soueif to have as much family around as possible, and Glynn remembers big dinners where Soueif and Hamilton told stories - "he too, in the right mood, was a great raconteur". "They were both, and she still is, great people to have on your side. Any hint of trouble, they're there." There is a sense, though, that she was overshadowed by Hamilton; she has spoken of being ignored because she was just his wife and a mother, or discovering she had only been invited to lunch because someone wanted to meet him.

In 1984 their first son, Omar Robert, was born, and for three years she disappeared into motherhood - it "was so powerful!" But by 1987 she badly needed to find a job. When nothing turned up in London, she went to teach at King Saud University in Riyadh for two years, taking Robbie with her; it was there that she began *In the Eye of the Sun*. In 1989 Ismail Richard (Ricki) was born, and she returned to London. This time she found employment with Al-Furqan, a non-profit foundation founded by Sheikh Ahmed Zaki Yamani, devoted to cataloguing, preserving, and contextualising ancient Arabic manuscripts, such as those that survived the burning of the library in Sarajevo. She still works there, though she's recently reduced her hours to three days a week.

In the Eye of the Sun, *The Map of Love*, and half the stories in *Sandpiper* were written "after hours", in two intense bursts, from 1987 to 1990, and 1995 to 1999. "I'd sit down at 9pm, and work until three in the morning - and then I'd have to get up, of course, at seven to get the boys sorted and take them to school and go to work. It practically killed me. What kept me going was the writing... it's not exactly the only thing that was me, because me is also the mother and so on, but that's what I do. I write. And if I don't write I get very edgy and can't quite see what I'm about." The children were very accommodating: "Towards the end, when I was doing almost 24 hours, Ricki made himself a nest of blankets on the floor, and slept there to keep me company."

As for Hamilton, "his effect, as far as the writing goes, was just tremendously positive", says Soueif, who speaks haltingly, hesitantly, about this time in her life, "because if he read a chapter and thought it was good, you were home and dry. In a sense, I wrote for him." She remembers, for example, a moment when she was working on the title story of *Sandpiper*, on commission for *Granta*, and got stuck, looking for a word to describe the dark arcs waves leave behind them on sandy shores. Hamilton dropped by her study on his way somewhere else, and they ended up spending three-and-a-half hours discussing exactly what the right word would be. The next day she found a note on her desk, thanking her.

Sandpiper is written in a minor key, about an Englishwoman married to an

Egyptian man. Their love has run into the buffers of their difference, and she is staying for the sake of their child. Cracks and desolations were appearing in her own marriage, too, and one of the striking things about *The Map of Love* is that although it was written at an emotionally difficult time, it is generous, warm, imbued with a belief in love. "Somebody said to me about *The Map of Love*," says Soueif, "that they felt the first couple, Anna and Sharif, were aware of what they had been given, and were careful of it. I think that is very important, but maybe it's something you only learn when you've been not careful enough. And of course both people have to look after it - which is the usual pattern: there's one looking after it and the other not, and then it's all tilted. You can take it for granted for a couple of days or something, but not on the whole. The other person is always other, and there's things happening in their minds and in their hearts that could go any which way." Hamilton died of cancer on December 27 2001.

One criticism of Soueif's fiction, and especially of *The Map of Love* - levelled by her mother, among others - has been that it romanticises the Arab world. She is fierce in self-defence. "I guess one is informed or influenced partly by missing it - simply physically not being there - but also by feeling that it is being unjustly dealt with, unjustly treated, unjustly spoken about. Partly also that you no longer are able to whole-heartedly count on good faith. If I write in English about something bad in Egyptian culture, that is used to condemn Egyptian culture as a whole. Well, why do it, if what you say or write is not going to be treated with the subtlety that you're employing? And of course there is this bandwagon, of sitting out in the west and talking about what's wrong with the Arabs and the Arab mind, and it's a bandwagon I'm not in the slightest bit interested in. I think it's harmful right now, because we're not on a level playing field."

She has always kept one foot in Egypt, has returned with her children, who speak some Arabic, every summer, is thinking about making it her principal home when Ricki finishes school in a couple of years. But she is increasingly troubled by her, and their, dualities. "I think in happier times one would think of oneself as living in both. It was possible - it continues to be possible, a bit. But when they're in conflict things become very difficult." As she wrote in *Mezzaterra*, "I have seen my space shrink and felt the ground beneath my feet tremble." So she is fighting for it.

Ahdaf Soueif: Life at a glance

Born: March 23 1950, Cairo.

Educated: 1971 BA, Cairo University; '73 MA, American University in Cairo; '78 PhD, University of Lancaster.

Career: 1971-79 Associate lecturer, Cairo University; '79-84 lecturer, Cairo; '78-84 Cassel, London and Cairo; '87-89 Associate professor, King Saud University; '89- Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, London.

Family: 1981 Ian Hamilton (two sons, Omar Robert and Ismail Richard).

Books: 1983 Aisha; '92 In the Eye of the Sun; '96 Sandpiper; '99 The Map of Love; 2004 Mezzaterra.

Awards: 1996 Cairo International Book Fair Best Collection of Short Stories.

• Mezzaterra by Ahdaf Soueif is published by Bloomsbury.