

# Translating Egypt

***The Map of Love, Ahdaf Soueif, London: Bloomsbury, 1999.***

*Reviewed by Hala Halim*

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"It is strange that this period [1900-1914] when the Colonialists and their collaborators thought everything was quiet -- was one of the most fertile in Egypt's history. A great examination of the self took place, and a great recharging of energy in preparation for a new Renaissance. Gamal 'Abd el-Nasser, *The Covenant* 1962"

As the epigraph to Ahdaf Soueif's second novel, *The Map of Love*, the above quotation is remarkably well-chosen. The novel weaves together two temporal strands: events set in the first two decades of this century with their heaving national turmoil, and those taking place in the late 1990s. But the epigraph is also revealing in terms of Soueif's own formation and the project that her fiction, which includes two collections of short-stories, has so far unravelled. *The Covenant*, or *The Charter* (a manifesto of the revolution in its newfound socialist guise, widely distributed at the time and learned by rote in schools) left a strong nationalist, if now nostalgically-tinged, mark on the generation whose consciousness was being formed in the 1960s.

Soueif, who now lives in England and returns regularly to speak at Cairene cultural forums, has more than once confided to the public her sense of outrage at the stereotypes that the Western media currently peddles about Egypt -- fundamentalism, female genital mutilation, persecution of the Copts, as she has repeatedly cited them. Soueif's own fiction, written in English and mostly favouring cross-cultural encounters, would seem to have set itself the task of demystifying stereotypes about the country and "promoting" what she sees as a more truthful image of Egypt. Patriotism, as such, is of course not the monopoly of any given generation -- as indeed *The Map of Love* demonstrates; it is just that Soueif's writing, in tone and texture, betrays her individual variation on a 1960s nationalism further conditioned by her awareness of the cultural baggage a Western reader might bring to the text.

At the core of *The Map of Love* are the diaries and letters of Lady Anna Winterbourne, an English woman who had come to Egypt in 1900. Recently widowed, her husband having lost all desire to live after witnessing the barbarities performed by the British in the battle of Umm Durman, Anna is not content to recuperate among her compatriots, but actively seeks to acquaint herself, often disguised as a man, with Egypt. It is in this guise that she is

kidnapped by two blundering young nationalists and taken to the house of the princely Sharif Pasha al-Baroudi, a lawyer and nationalist activist who is the nephew of Mahmoud Sami Pasha, prime-minister during the nationalist revolution of 1881-82. Via a detour through Sinai, Anna and Sharif fall in love with each other and eventually marry. Anna chronicles her life with Sharif Pasha, her growing sympathy for and active participation in the nationalist movement and attendant "enlightenment" project, and her friendship with her sister-in-law Layla who tutors her in Egyptian customs. After Sharif's assassination in 1911, Anna takes her daughter by him and leaves the country.

At the close of the twentieth century, the diaries, letters, and various relics are brought to Cairo in a trunk by Anna's great-grand daughter, Isabel, an American, who asks Amal, Layla's grand-daughter, to help her piece the story together. It is Amal's brother Omar, the charismatic New York-based conductor and author with whom Isabel is in love, who has put the two women in touch. As Amal sifts through Anna's papers, imaginatively filling in gaps in the English woman's narrative, she guides Isabel through contemporary Egypt. The parallels drawn between Egypt then and now -- the novel's most distinct theme being continuity and/or recurrence in Egyptian history -- are borne out through the survival of physical objects, through the return to the same places, and through the suggested correspondence between the earlier couple, Anna and Sharif, and the latter-day pair, Isabel and Omar.

In creating the early twentieth century cross-cultural couple and their nationalist activities, Soueif has obviously done a great deal of research which she carries off for the most part with ease. Not only does Soueif prove herself a shrewd reader of canonical Orientalist texts, but she is also cognizant of the new wave in post-colonial theory with its rejection of the colonizer vs. colonized binary in favour of a more nuanced understanding of the colonial experience. Aspects of Anna's life in Egypt -- the initial sympathy she brings, her cross-dressing experiments, the tone of her letters home, her later espousal of the Egyptian cause -- call to mind those of figures like Lucy Duff Gordon, Sophia Lane-Poole, and perhaps more importantly the two famous British ladies who supported the Egyptian national movement, Lady Anne Blunt and Lady Gregory.

Soueif lends further credibility to Anna's activities on behalf of the nationalist cause with frequent references to such pro-Egyptian figures as Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (author of the *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* and a campaigner on behalf of Urabi and his fellow revolutionaries). The disquisitions on colonialism, the itemisation of national projects and causes in which Sharif is involved (the establishment of the National University, the School of Fine Arts, education for women) and the cameos of historical figures such as Lord Cromer, Sheikh Mohamed Abdou, Mustafa Kamel, Mohamed Farid, and Qassim Amin are generally made palatable. And it is not only the broad historical outlines of the period that are recapitulated, but also little-known nuggets, as when we read in Layla al-Baroudi's diary that the National University held weekly classes for

women in its first year (1908). If one's attention does not stray it is primarily because, without the difficulties attendant on a mixed British-Egyptian marriage at the time being glossed over, the relationship between Anna and Sharif is fleshed out and given substance. It is this that takes the Englishwoman's chronicles beyond being a series of history lessons or a "manners and customs" account. The same cannot be said, however, of the contemporary portions of the novel.

Amal is a recluse; Isabel is the wide-eyed American; the relationship between Omar and Isabel, despite the best intentions, comes across as flimsy and amounting to little more than an affair that has resulted in a child. The *raison d'être* of the late 1990s episodes, it would seem, is to provide an update on Egypt and an exorcism of Western stereotypes that have accrued around it. Isabel has come to Cairo to do research on Egyptian perceptions of the millennium. This premise is essentially a pretext for what one might call a series of ethnographic tableaux arranged by Amal, the insider or "native informant", for the benefit of Isabel, whom one is tempted to read as a stand-in for "the Western reader". Thus we get sketches of village life, mostly on the Baroudi estate in Upper Egypt; a transcript-like report of a discussion of Egyptian and Middle Eastern affairs among a group of intellectuals at the *Atelier du Caire*; portraits of the urban poor in the form of the doorman's put-upon wife; sight-seeing expeditions to the Mu'allaaqa Church and a mansion that once belonged to the family and has now been converted into a museum.

In all this, Amal's "editorialising" comments, particularly in view of the centrality of her voice to the novel, sometimes grate. Meditations that begin with phrases like "Egypt, mother of civilisations, dreaming herself through the centuries..." are unlikely to strike a chord with any but a reader steeped in nostalgia for a long-gone age of (willed?) innocence with its sloganeering flavour. Her exhortations to the doorman's wife to practice birth-control are too visibly thrown over the shoulder in the general direction of "stock Third World problems". Likewise, there is something patronising about the city-bred lady of the manor explaining -- "part embarrassed, part amused" -- to a roomful of peasant women that "It's not Amreeka" that's behind the cancellation of subsidies on sugar and oil, but "It's the, like, the World Bank [...] It's more complicated than that." Ample attention is given to the plight of today's fellaheen, the ramifications of the new rent laws and the tyrannies to which they are arbitrarily subjected by the police on account of fundamentalism. However, the casting of the fellaheen as the eternal victim is securely written into the text. Anna's account of the Dinshiwai episode is followed by the en masse police clampdown on Upper Egyptian villages in the wake of the Luxor massacre, and Amal comments that "Anna's world seems a world away. Or does it?". The image the text offers of fellaheen unwittingly and ironically creates a point of interface between socialist realism and Orientalism's "Eternal, Unchanging Egypt".

The reactivation of myth and legend sometimes partakes of the magical. A long-

missing panel of a tapestry Anna had woven is miraculously deposited in Isabel's handbag; complementing the Isis and Osiris panels, it shows Horus. A little while later, Isabel, whose name, we have been told, etymologically translates into "Isis the beautiful", becomes pregnant by Omar. The child is named Sharif.

Rummaging for something with which to shade little Sharif during a stop on the way back from the countryside, the first thing that comes to Amal's hand is the flag of the 1919 Revolution, with the cross and crescent, belonging to her grandmother. Too many coincidences spoil the novelistic broth, and self-reflexive, criticism-deflecting statements like "Bad art?", put in the mouths of characters, don't save the day. The contemporary characters, never more than silhouettes, fairly bow under the weight of all this mythological resonance.

Due credit, however, should be given Soueif for the rich texturing of language in *The Map of Love*. Anna's papers -- and Soueif is adept at recreating the stylistic flourishes and idiosyncrasies of a Victorian gentlewoman's prose -- gain by being counterpoised against Layla al-Baroudi's diaries, which even in English carry a whiff of the dated classical Arabic in which they would have been written. At one point, Amal wonders: "How do I translate 'tarab'? How do I, without sounding weird or exotic, describe to Isabel that particular emotional, spiritual, even physical condition into which one enters when the soul is penetrated by good Oriental music?" *The Map of Love*, even more than Soueif's first novel *In the Eye of the Sun*, shows a writer struggling to devise various stratagems to infuse the English language with different registers of Arabic. Her zestful literal translation of 'amiya (colloquial) Arabic dialogues is perhaps a more resourceful move than the frequent transliteration of certain formulaic expressions, like *misa' al-khairat*, which is likely to send the non-native speaker of Arabic all too often to the glossary. The infusion of 'amiyya into English is indeed most successful when subtly infiltrated into the language, as when Amal observes a woman neighbour shaking out a vest and "peg[ing] it by the shoulder next to its brother."

An Arabic translation of *The Map of Love* is in the pipeline. Granted, the sense of layering of language in the English original will be lost as the Arabic is transposed back into the original. Nevertheless, given the current trend of translating nineteenth-century Orientalist texts into Arabic, *The Map of Love* will provide an admirable example of how one Egyptian writer has re-written this material to produce her own counter-narrative.