

Feminism in Ahdaf Soueif 's Fiction

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النسوية في قصص و روايات أهداف سويف

خلاصة البحث

هذه الرسالة معنية بـ (النسوية) لا بشكل عام وإنما كما وردت في أدب أهداف سويف كما يبين العنوان، و قد قسمت الدراسة إلى مقدمة تتبعها ستة أقسام و قائمة بالمراجع. تتحدث المقدمة عن النسوية كحركة سياسية و اجتماعية و أدبية حديثة هدفها الرئيسي هو مصلحة النساء و الدعوة إلى المساواة بين النساء و الرجال في مختلف المجالات، ثم تتحدث المقدمة عن تاريخ النسوية من خلال أربع موجات : الأولى و الثانية و الثالثة ثم " ما بعد النسوية " و عن المواضيع النسوية التي ركزت عليها كل مرحلة، و يتحدث الجزء الثالث من المقدمة عن النسوية في الإسلام و كيف ساند الإسلام المرأة و عن النسوية العربية من منتصف القرن التاسع عشر مع الإشارة لبعض الأعلام الهامة في هذا المجال مثل طه حسين و قاسم أمين و هدى شعراوي . أما الجزء الأخير من المقدمة فيلقي نظرةً موجزة على موقف أهداف سويف من النسوية قبل الوصول إلى أقسام لاحقة تعالج موقفها هذا بالتفصيل عندما تصل الدراسة إلى قصص سويف القصيرة و رواياتها و مقالاتها الأدبية.

الجزء الأول من البحث يتناول أهم " المواضيع المرتبطة بالنسوية " و التي تكون في مجملها صورةً عامة للقضايا التي تواجهها هذه الحركة و منها الإجهاض، النسوية الأفريقية الأمريكية، الشهوة، النسوية الفرنسية، الحركة التحررية المثلية، الحركة السحاقية، النسوية الليبرالية، النسوية الماركسية، الأخوة الأنثوية، و النسوية في المجتمع العمالي. و هذا الجزء من البحث هو تلخيص و اقتباس يعتمد على كتاب سارة جمبل النسوية و ما بعد النسوية، و قد

أضفت لذلك موضوع " النساء الكاتبات " كجزء مهم مرتبط بالنسوية على أساس أن النساء الكاتبات يطرحن مشاكل و هموم و تطلعات النساء في كتاباتهن.

الأجزاء الثاني و الثالث و الرابع و الخامس تقدم تحليلاً نقدياً لمجموعتي أهداف سويف القصصيتين القصيرتين: عائشة (١٩٨٣) ، زمار الرمل (١٩٩٦) ، و روايتها في عين الشمس (١٩٩٢) خارطة الحب (١٩٩٩). و من المهم هنا أن أبين أنه بعد تقديمي فكرة سريعة عن أهداف سويف ككاتبة نسوية في المقدمة فأنتني هنا أقدم نظرةً شموليةً عنها من خلال اختيار الأحداث والوقائع والمشاهد من كل قصة قصيرة أو رواية تبين مواقفها النسوية مستثنياً التفاصيل غير الضرورية و التي لا علاقة لها بموضوع البحث .

الجزء السادس يتعلق بكتاب أهداف سويف الأخير ميزانتي (أو الأرض المشتركة) الذي يمكن تقسيمه إلى قسمين : سياسي و أدبي، و هنا فأنتني ركزت فقط على موضوع " النساء الكاتبات " كما و رد في القسم الأدبي من الكتاب . تلك الكاتبات هن من العالم الإسلامي و العربي بشكل عام ويقدمن مختلف الألوان النسوية التي توسع مداركنا فيما يتعلق بمشاكل و طموحات النساء في العالم الثالث عموماً و في العالمين العربي والإسلامي على وجه الخصوص، و قد لا تكون معظم تلك الكاتبات شهيرات أو معروفات على نطاق واسع، لكن هذا لا يقلل من أهمية كتاباتهن و الإضاءات التي يقدمنها في موضوع النسوية.

و من الجدير بالذكر أن أهداف سويف هي كاتبة إنجليزية من أصل عربي تحمل درجة الدكتوراه في اللغويات من جامعة لانكستر بانجلترا، و قد رشحت روايتها خارطة الحب لجائزة بوكر الأدبية الرفيعة عام ١٩٩٩، كما أن سويف فازت بجائزة أورانج للأعمال الأدبية الروائية للعام ٢٠٠٣ ، و قد نشرت أعمالها في العديد من الصحف و المجلات البريطانية كما ترجم العديد من تلك الأعمال لأكثر من لغة أجنبية مما يجعلها – من وجهة

نظري – جديرة بدراسات أكثر و أكثر خاصة اذا علمنا أنه لم ينشر عن أدبها أي كتاب نقدي
أو أطروحة حتى الان مما يجعل هذه الأطروحة هي الأولى التي تعالج أعمالها الأدبية
الكاملة.

الطالب

عدنان الريماوي

In the name of Allah, The Compassionate,
the Merciful

Does there not pass over man a space of time his
life is blank?

We have created man from the union of the two
sexes so that We may put him to the proof.

The Koran

Sura: Man, 67:1-4

To My Dear wife,
Children and Grandchildren

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to introduce an English female writer and feminist of Arab origin called Ahdaf Soueif. The study is divided into an introduction followed by five chapters, a conclusion, a glossary of feminist related terms and a list of references. The introduction gives a definition of feminism and a brief history of this movement.

The following chapters present a critical study of Soueif's short stories, novels and essays, aiming at finding the feminist concerns in each one. Chapter five differs from the other chapters in the sense that it presents a number of women writers talking about women's concerns in the Arab and Muslim world in particular. The glossary consists of a number of terms I selected and paraphrased from Sarah Gamble's Feminism and Post-feminism, which gives a wider vision of feminism such as its main objectives and movements.

It is necessary to highlight two important points in this study. First, I felt that it was important to express my opinion and to show my stand wherever necessary. Second, I selected from each short story or novel the incidents or scenes that were necessary to lead to the feminist concern addressed here and there leaving out any irrelevant details.

Introduction

Although women writers often believed that they did labor under innate handicaps of mind and body, they nonetheless felt pressured to prove both their reliability and their physical endurance.

Elaine Showalter

A literature of their own

Feminism as defined in Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia (1) is "a collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies largely motivated by or concerned with the liberation of women from subordination to men. In simple terms, feminism is a belief in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes, and a movement organized around the conviction that biological sex should not be the pre-determined factor shaping a person's social identity or sociopolitical or economic rights". This definition shows that the main objective of feminism is achieving women's goals of equality with men. These goals, anyhow, were not always unanimously agreed upon, as we will see when we discuss the history of feminism.

Recently, there have been a number of theories, trends and movements that call for the equality between women and men. These movements argue that women have been treated unfairly throughout the human history in male-dominated communities, and it is time for women to get their human, political, social and economic rights.

Feminism, then, calls for treating women as human beings, not inferior to men, by respecting them, allowing them to express their opinions, giving them the right to choose their husbands, to divorce, to have equal opportunities in education and employment, and so on. We will notice later that different movements dealt with different feminist concerns. Prof. Yowell Y. Aziz in A Symposium on Feminism Revised (33) says, “It has been claimed that a brand of feminism which is suitable for the West might not suit in the East.”

A Brief History of Feminism

The history of feminism, as presented in Sara Gamble's Feminism and Postfeminism (233-327), falls into four waves: the first, the second, the third and postfeminism.

The first wave started in the 1850s, when feminist organizations began to form in Britain. Its activists were mainly concerned with the issues facing the middle-class women, but not the issues of the working-class ones. The main concerns of this wave were education, employment and

marriage. The achievements of the first wave activists were opening higher education for women, making better access to jobs, improvement of women's rights of property and child custody.

The second wave started in the 1960s when women in America called for women's equality with men, but these wave activists were not united, and a number of differences erupted between the liberal, the social and the lesbian groups.

In Britain, feminism activists of this wave focused on working-class social issues and on the struggle for women's rights not only in Britain but in the whole world.

The third wave can be traced back to the 1990s, when groups of young women began to appear adopting new feminist attitudes. Its activists' main concerns were racial discrimination and economic equality between women and men. Some activists argued that Western women were presented by the third wave activists as educated and intelligent, while women of the Third World were portrayed as poor, uneducated and ignorant. This wave could not achieve what the second wave could for women.

Postfeminism: This term was used by its activists to attack feminism in its present form which they saw as inadequate for women's struggle, concerns and experiences. Postfeminism started during the third wave by some French feminist groups which saw that the concerns of the former

movements were limited and short-sighted. They wanted feminism to be more comprehensive and to include all women's concerns, whether social, political or economic. They saw that the previous movements focused on some concerns and failed to address all women's concerns such as abortion, lesbianism, desire and sisterhood as a few of many examples.

Elizabeth Lee in her essay “Feminist Theory – an Overview” (1), mentioned that Elaine Showalter “ described three stages in the history of women’s literature. First comes androgynist poetics (1840-1880). Next, a feminist critique and female aesthetic accompanied by gynocritics (1880-1920), followed by gynescic postculturalist feminist criticism and gender theory(1920-).”

Showalter noticed that during the first period women’s writings were an imitation of men’s writings. During the second period, women started to express protest against men’s attitudes and values. In the third period, women’s writings started to deal with self-discovery rejecting both imitation and protest.

Arab and Islamic Attitude Towards Feminism

It is known that Arabs used to bury their new-born daughters for fear of potential shame or disgrace. Islam came to put an end to this inhuman tradition when the Koran said, "When the infant girl, buried alive, is asked

for what crime she was thus slain" (The Koran-Sura: The Cessation, 81:8-9).

Regarding inheritance in Islam, the Koran says, . "Men shall have a share in what their parents and kinsmen leave; and women shall have a share in what their parents and kinsmen leave" (The Koran-Sura: Women 4:32-33). When Islam ordered that a woman could get half of what a man gets, it is because the man, and not the woman, would be responsible for taking care of the family. Feminists in the West may take this Islamic approach as ' antifeminist' since they call for full equality between women and men.

Islam also called for women's education. Prophet Mohammed said, "He will go to heaven who has two daughters, raises them up well and educates them well" (Hadeeth).

The veil has been one of the controversial issues whether in the Islamic or the Western World. Susan Muaddi Darraj in "Understanding the Other Sister: The Case of Arab Feminism" (1-8), a Palestinian Christian writer, talks about her experience as a teacher in America when she was asked by one of her female students about why women in the Middle East had to wear the veil. Darraj responded that not all women in the Middle East are Muslims, and that many Muslims do not use the veil. The student expressed her sorrow that Muslim women walk three steps behind their husbands (sic).

Darraaj goes on to talk about the wrong image of Muslim women as represented in the Western media which show them as pitiful creatures who walk behind their husbands like a dark shadow and are forced to remain silent and obey their husbands at all times since their job is only to deliver more children, perhaps even in competition with their husbands' other wives. In her interesting study, Darraaj argues that American women think they have achieved all feminist goals, so they focus on Arab women's issues with a good intention.

In modern times, we can go back to 1923 when Hoda Sha'arawi, an Egyptian lady of an elite family, threw her veil away challenging the social traditions at that time. Soueif in Mezzaterra (266) refers to this as "a first step in Sha'arawi's campaign for women emancipation in Egypt and consequently in the Arab and Muslim world".

Qasim Amin (1865 – 1908) was one of the prominent feminists. He declared that the veil was not Islamic. He called for women education and emancipation in his book The Liberation of Women in 1899. Amin had studied in Europe and came back to see the differences between women's lives in Europe and Egypt.

Taha Husein (1889 – 1973), the foremost Arab writer of his time, encouraged women's education when he was minister of education and among the famous women writers whom he taught and encouraged to learn were Suheir Al-Qalamawi and Fatima Abdul-Rahman (Bint Al-Shate').

Among the well-known contemporary Arab feminists is Nawal Al-Saa'dawi who stood firmly against female genital mutilation. Some think that Saa'dawi is well received and welcomed in the West because she presents the stereotype of Arab women as ignorant, silenced and suppressed. Saa'dawi faced a lot of difficulties in her country because of her views, and that made her leave for America where she currently works as a physician and writer.

Concubine is an image that stuck to the minds of the Western people about Arab and Muslim women. This may be a result of some old books such as The Arabian Nights, which talk about the harem where tens of women lived in castles and palaces waiting for the Sultan.

Ahdaf Soueif as Feminist

In his essay "Transcultural Writing: Ahdaf Soueif's Aisha as a Case Study" (5), Trabelsi asked Soueif if she was feminist. She answered, "Yes, I am. I think that it is sad that a lot of women, particularly Arab women, reject feminism."

Soueif expresses her feminist stand in almost all her short stories and novels. She adopts women's right to choose their husbands. She attacks patriarchy, calls for equality between men and women and stands against polygamy which, according to her, leads to catastrophic results.

In Mezzaterra she introduces a number of women writers who may not be well known or famous, but they present Arab and Islamic feminism. Joseph Massad in an article entitled “ The Politics of Desire in the Writings of Ahdaf Soueif” (74) describes Soueif 's writings saying that they "investigate the possibilities of cultural dialogue as well as the politics of desire".

Wherever we go into Soueif 's fiction, we find feminist motifs defending women, particularly Arab and Muslim ones, and implicitly calling for their emancipation and giving them better chances to live freely and equally to men, as we will see later in the critical analysis of her fiction.

Chapter 1

Aisha

1983

(A Collection of Short Stories)

“Returning”

“Returning” is the first story in Aisha. It talks about woman as a victim of her husband’s indifference which can be regarded as a reaction of the husband originating the wife’s behaviour.

Aisha, a teacher, went back alone to Egypt with images of her husband sitting alone, smoking, reading, listening to music, and travelling to Sinai with his friends. She yearned to be with him. Though he was far away from her, she sent his shirts with the laundry boy to iron them (14).

She wanted him to come back to her and to find his shirts cleaned and ironed. What shocked her first was that she found that the green areas had been lost and replaced by buildings to add more to her sadness and frustrations.

The author did not explicitly explain the reason behind the indifference and negligence of Aisha’s husband, but we can deduce that the wife, as an educated woman apparently from an elite family, could have behaved in a way that did not satisfy or please the husband. She might not have satisfied him sexually, or she might have behaved in a superior way since she must have been economically independent, and this made him day after day look for a sanctuary in solitary places away from her rather than

live with a haughty wife spending her days with her students and her nights with her books and her students' notebooks.

Soueif used the flash-back technique to portray how Aisha felt, comparing the past to the present. "Looking at the mirror, she could not feel the contours of her face. Her expression, too, was different here" (10).

Things around her also played an important role in expressing her agony. "She touched his fur-lined coat and looked at her wedding dress with nostalgia, then she put to the fire her old veil and the pearl-embroidered Juliet's cap" (12). Finally she left her house picking up speed as a sign of her wish to escape from her present life where she was alone without the husband who was a lover at the beginning of their marriage, then turned by time to a person who no longer cared for her or for her emotions, but she did not ask herself why he did so or about her role in that change. Hechmi Trabelsi* comments on Aisha's situation saying, "Aisha here expresses female pain and agony." She wanted even to escape from the new situation where the door-man had changed and the women she knew in the past were not the women she saw after her return.

"Returning" is an implicit call for sympathy with women abandoned by their husbands or treated indifferently by them. At the same time the author urges women, in an artistic and not an explicit way, not to blame

* *ibid.* 7

only their husbands for their attitudes towards them, and to be aware of their husbands' needs and what they miss in their marital life before blaming them.

“1964”

In “1964”, we meet the teenager Aisha falling in a net of complications. She was fourteen when she moved to England with her younger sister, brother, and her parents who were pursuing their higher studies there.

Her adventurous spirit and imaginative mind that was full of fictional characters like Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary, pushed her to her first 'adventure', and this threw her into trouble from the beginning of their sea-journey to England. On the ship, she met an Indian boy and gave him her address. Later, the boy sent her a letter and his picture.

Parental intervention appeared when her parents opened the letter, something which they used not to do, and scolded her angrily for her deed. They considered themselves better-educated and from a higher class. We can conclude that it was the father, more than the mother, who used to take the decisions and the tough attitudes towards Aisha. "What on earth will your father say? He'll be very angry" (38), the mother asked her daughter.

In England, her parents would choose her friends with whom she was allowed to go out. She was not allowed to go out with the Teddy boys and the Rockers with their motorcycles though such boys were nearer to the spirit of the teenage girl. She was allowed to accompany the Vicars'

children to the church despite the fact that she was Muslim, but it seems that her parents felt that it was safer for her to accompany such decent religious boys*.

Aisha's frustration became more when she was sent to a girls' school and not a mixed one like her school back in Egypt. At school, she had to suffer a lot, first, because of religious problems where she was excused from assembly, and second because of occasional problems with some of her teachers due to their misunderstanding of her original background which led to humiliating her on more than once.

The teacher would ask her if she used to go to school in Egypt on a camel and whether she lived in a tent. Aisha, too, had to play sports which she hated in the very cold weather. The lessons, which were of course in English, were not easy for her, a matter which added to her misery. For her, school was a disaster which made her finally refuse to go to school despite her parents disapproval. Instead, "every morning my parents went to the university and my sister and brother to school, I would draw up my father's large armchair in front of the television, carry up some toast and butter and watch the races" (39). She, then, found some books which she didn't know

* Prof. Asfour in "Notes on Soueif's Fiction" (4) argues that "it [feminism] is a prerogative of the highly educated", and adds saying, "It is a prerogative that will cost them dearly in psychoses and frustration" (4).

about before hidden in her father's room and enjoyed reading them more than reading her school text-books.

She could not adjust to the situation she found herself in and to the problems and conflicts that she faced. She felt that she did not belong here, and the solution was to isolate herself and stay at home watching TV, reading her favorite books and listening to music.

Through depicting parental hypocrisy and the father's dominance, Soueif could, in this short story, present another example of her feminist attitude.

“The Suitor”

Since the main concern of feminist activists is women's happiness, freedom and equality, can 'religion' sometimes be regarded as a stumbling block in the face of such goals? Can it hinder achieving women's freedom in choosing their husbands? Can it lead to destroying their social lives?

This is one of the questions that “The Suitor” raises. Another question is how societies of more than one religion build the relations of individuals with one another and which item is stronger in these relations, is it religion or social norms?

The story tells us that Sahar, a Coptic girl, married a Muslim. The result was that "her family cut her off completely and behaved as though she were dead. Or rather, as though she had never existed" (44).

When we come to Marianne, the heroine of the story, also a Coptic, we can easily imagine that what happened to her, as we will see, could happen to any Muslim girl, which shows that religion is not as strong as community culture and traditions. It is Aisha, the Muslim, whom Marianne's mother turned to for help. "Please, Aisha, wait for her and speak to her", the mother says (46).

Marianne was turning twenty-nine, living in a patriarchal community after her father's death. To her family, she should marry, or she would be too old for marriage, but her perspective of marriage was romantic rather than realistic. She cared mostly for the suitors' appearances, and she wanted to 'live' and to marry someone who knew 'how' to live and who would make her enjoy her life. Father Boulous, the priest, worked as a matchmaker. He would provide the family with one suitor after the other playing a social role in addition to his religious duties. Marianne's mother had nightmares because of her daughter's attitude. She was afraid that Marianne might follow Sahar's route since "there were far more Muslim than Coptic men in Egypt, and besides, the most eligible young Coptics were emigrating in great numbers to Canada and the U.S.A." (44).

Marianne's romantic view of marriage led her to fall in the trap of a pimp who deceived her in a cunning way and convinced her to come to his apartment, or rather to one of his three elegant apartments. She saw in him the knight of her dreams with his elegant clothes and attractive appearance. He would sleep with her but preserve her virginity. He might have kept her virgin to get a higher price for her from one of his customers.

After six months of her visits to him, she became suspicious of his behavior. She told her sister and asked her for her advice. Her sister's husband, who happened to be a police officer, made investigations and was horrified to know the reality of that man as a person involved in a vice ring.

Marianne promised not to see that man again and accepted a professor of economics, far from her romantic hero, without protest this time. Can't this happen to a Muslim girl? Hechmi Trabelsi* comments on "The Suitor" saying that it "highlights the social interrelations between Copts and Muslims, suggesting an open multicultural Egypt".

"The suitor" raises more than one feminist question. It shows that feminist problems are not related to religion since what happened to the Christian Marianne could have happened to a Muslim woman. Besides, the story addressed patriarchy as shown in the intervention of Marianne's family in her life and choice.

I personally stand by Soueif and see that neither religion nor patriarchy should stand against women's choice of their husbands. Women should be given full freedom in this regard no matter what their religion is, and patriarchy should be erased in order to leave women free to choose the life they prefer.

* *ibid.* 8

“Knowing”

In this story, Soueif presents to us a woman recalling her childhood in two different countries and two different cultures. First, she was in Egypt pampered by her relatives in more than one house in Cairo and Alexandria. Older men and women were always around her covering her with love and tender kisses. When her grandmother prayed, Aisha, the child, went jumping on her back and the grandmother was not angry. On the contrary she was pleased with her active playful granddaughter. Ramadan was an occasion for nice food and sweets. Days to the child carried nothing but warm love and happy occasions wherever she went whether to her relatives' houses or shops.

The family then moved to a foreign country, England, and there the whole atmosphere changed and the change had its impact on the female child. She no longer had this number of loving relatives around her, nor the charming days and nights of Ramadan and Bairam.

To compensate for this 'loss' she found sanctuary in reading books of vampires and Count Dracula and his castle. These books threw her into nightmares and hysterical nights which even her parents could not save her from.

The feminist item in “Knowing” is implicit in the paternal unkind behaviour when her parents deprived her of her lotus world to bring her to a nightmarish one without any consideration of her feelings and without even explaining to her the reality of the world they were moving to. If this applies to a feminine child, it can apply to an older girl or woman when subjected to parental or husband's indifference to her feelings.

Commenting on this story, Prof. Asfour* says, "This piece is another version of the school experience in “1964”, and adds saying, "Some of the Islamic stuff is not quite accurate". Maybe he refers to the child climbing her grandmother's back while praying, which is something not unexpected from a child, or to depicting Ramadan as a month of food and sweets when Soueif describes this holy month saying, "And Ramadan lasts a whole month. A month of winter evenings spent round the fire cracking nuts and roasting chestnuts. A month of exotic sweets and communal breakfasting at sunset" (72). I personally think that this is what is expected from a child of five years still unable to understand or appreciate the holiness of this month to Muslims and the meanings it carries to them.

* *ibid.* 6

“The Wedding of Zeina”

Feminist activists' ultimate main concern is women's happiness which can be achieved by equalizing them with men in giving them the right to choose. What more oppression can be there more than depriving them of this right when it comes to marriage and choosing their future spouses?

In “The Wedding of Zeina”, Soueif introduces us to the fifteen-year-old Zeina's rituals of marriage in a way that fills us with sympathy for this young girl who did not even know what marriage was, and whose husband was chosen for her by the others and not by her. Not only this, but also the preparations for the marriage were no less than terrible torture, and the wedding night was a scary nightmare.

_ "Zeina, you are going to marry Sobhi".

_ "But, setti, how do I marry him?" I asked.

_ "You'll be his wife, and he'll be your husband, and you'll serve him and do what he tells you". (85)

Zeina and Sobhi were given a room on the roof of the house where rabbits and chickens were usually bred, a matter which made them no better than animals. Before the wedding night Zeina received the torture of pulling off the hair on her body by using the candy. "It was fire. I tried to struggle up, but they held me down" (89).

Soueif goes on and on depicting the agony and torture Zeina faced at her wedding night. This night was supposed to be a night of happiness and pleasure for the bride but let's see how it was for Zeina. "Her groom had a thick white bandage wrapped round his middle finger, and she was pushed inside the room. Her aunt was pinching her thighs. The women held her arms while she lay crying in gasps. He knelt on her and forced his bandage fingers into her" (91). The men of the family were waiting outside with their guns either to shoot her if she was found to have had lost her virginity, or to shoot in the air expressing their pride and happiness if she was found to be virgin. Hechmi Trabelsi* comments saying, "The bride groom is a butcher, and Zeina is the sacrificial lamb".

In "The Wedding of Zeina", with all the details that we find in this short story, Soueif presents a panoramic picture of the social traditions and their horrible impact on some Arab women, as she sees them, where they

* *ibid.* 14

are besieged in a frame of humiliation and loss of freedom, though this phenomenon is rare now. She does not explicitly call for giving women a chance for a better life but she certainly adopts this attitude implicitly as she does in all her fiction whether in her novels or in her short stories.

“Her Man”

Polygamy is not a problem discussed by feminist activists in the Western World in general and the Christian world in particular since it is not allowed according to the Christian religion. This is not the case in the Islamic World where man has the right to marry up to four wives. This is the feminist theme we find in the sequel to “The Wedding of Zeina”, the short story entitled “Her Man”. Here we meet Zeina ten years after her marriage. She had born a boy now nine years old and a dead daughter. She was still attractive and flattered by young men on her way to the market. She obeyed her husband and exerted all her possible efforts to please him, but he married another woman above Zeina.

Zeina felt angry and jealous of the new wife who, according to her and to most of the other women, was an idiotic woman who was afraid of the wind, afraid to sleep alone and who went to sleep with her mother when Sobhi, the husband, was away.

Zeina's grandmother advised her to accept Sobhi's marriage as something normal and not to revolt against him, but to try to attract him to

her. Another woman said to her, "He's still your husband. He hasn't left or neglected you. He still holds you dear" (98).

Zeina, anyhow, went on planning to get rid of the new unsophisticated wife, and Zeina's plan proved to be devilish and effective. Sobhi was away and Tahiyya, the new wife, was afraid to sleep alone.

Zeina invited her to sleep with her, and in bed Zeina began to stroke Tahiyya's back and thighs in a lesbian way which pleased Tahiyya then Zeina bit her buttocks. When Sobhi came back, Zeina told him, in a cunning way, that Tahiyya had told her about a mark that he had left on her buttocks. Sobhi called Tahiyya and saw the mark and thought that she was adulterous and immediately divorced her.

Zeina had done everything required from her towards her husband, but this did not save her from polygamy. She defied the traditions imposed on her but this defiance led to a tragic result on the naive woman who had done nothing wrong whether from her own perspective or from the view point of society.

She was an orphan and Sobhi, "preserved Sheikh Mahgoub's [the deceased father's] honor by marrying Tahiyya" (99), so neither Tahiyya nor Sobhi were blamed by the community, but Zeina did not care for these justifications and all that mattered to her was her wounded pride which she took revenge for.

Soueif gives many details which are not of our concern. Our main concern is that polygamy is a problem in the Islamic world despite the fact that it is religiously allowed. It is a problem that faces Muslim women and which may lead in some cases to tragic results.

What reasons can be there behind polygamy? If we take Zeina and Sobhi's case, we can come up with a number of probabilities behind Sobhi's second marriage as a case:

First, He could have married Tahiyya out of chivalry after her father's death to keep her honor and to help her and her mother in their life.

Second, The horrible wedding night could have stayed on Zeina's mind and left her sexually cold, or that her feeling of her beauty made her feel superior to that 'butcher', the matter that pushed him towards the simple orphan girl who would make him feel superior and prove his masculine feelings.

Third, This poor girl would not cost him much, so why does not he marry her and gain the appreciation of his community that will consider him a savior?

There are a number of reasons behind polygamy and in many cases there are grave consequences for it. It is interesting to note that if man is entitled to one wife in Christianity, to four in Islam, Sarbashi Ghosh (30) tells us that in some parts of India 'man is entitled to thirty or forty wives'. He adds saying, "The polygamous husband did not take any responsibility

for his wives". This reminds us of some African tribal chiefs who marry a number of wives and have uncountable number of children and grandchildren. Commenting on "Her Man", Hechmi Trabelsi* remarks that "Zenina's total submission to the social rules imposed on her likes has not spared her the plague Egypt shares with other Islamic societies: polygamy".

* *ibid.* 15

“The Apprentice”

Most of Soueif 's fiction is feminist through its implicit call for supporting women and backing their rights. “The Apprentice” comes as a surprise when we find Soueif supporting the man's right, this time, to work and lead a decent life.

The story introduces our hero, Yosri, as "Small and dark, dressed in nylon tee-shirt. He wears brown plastic sandals, and he is gazing at the vision on the billboard, his mouth half open in a dazed smile" (117).

The boy, as described in the story, was jobless, poor, and even looked foolish. His mother was a maid-servant cleaning and washing clothes at this house and that. One of the rich ladies at whose house Yosri's mother used to work, helped him find a job as an apprentice at a ladies' salon and day after day he learned how to wash the ladies' hair in a way that made most of the ladies there praise him, like him, and even prefer him to do their manicure and pedicure.

The boy's appearance became far better than before and the ladies helped him buy nice clothes. They, too, bought him a necklace. He was happy with his job and fascinated by the glamorous ladies, their hair, skin and conversations in Arabic and French.

One evening on his way home after cleaning and closing the salon, a mechanic boy, who used to work in a garage near the salon, attacked him severely and snatched his gold chain. We can imagine Yosri's loss on one hand and the difficulties he would meet later on the other.

Yosri represents a case of short-lived happiness. The mechanic and the other boys working at the garage with their oily dirty clothes must have felt jealous of him and would not allow him enjoy the work that he liked and mastered. He would also lose the feminine atmosphere that he loved and exerted all the possible efforts to please the owner of the salon and the female customers.

The enemy of 'man' here is 'man' when jealousy or hatred leads to depriving one of his happiness, and the story implies a call for better understanding and cooperation between men so that life becomes a better environment for all.

"The Apprentice" may look irrelevant to our subject, but in this story Soueif defends the right of men to live happily. This shows her broad mindedness and her comprehensive humane attitude. Here, we can notice that the range of her sympathetic attitude encompasses not only her own sex but also the other. She does not defend the rights of women at the expense of men but regards both sexes as complementary partners who should be treated equally without discrimination.

“The Nativity”

In “The Nativity” we meet Aisha as a woman who does not love her husband, but still can't leave him. "I am no longer in love with my husband, but he's a good man [and] he's very fond of me. I want to have children" (162).

The reason why she wanted to stay with him is not convincing or clearly shown in the story especially when we notice that they had different mentalities. She loved rain, but he walked on dry, maybe as a sign of his infertility. Besides, he had a scientific explanation for everything, while she believed in superstitions such as 'the evil eye'.

Aisha, the heroine, was a well-to-do woman. She had a car and went to parties, so what forced her to stay with a husband whom she did not love can be related only to social traditions where a woman feels embarrassed sometimes to ask for divorce or to face her community as a divorced woman who has no reasons for asking for divorce.

Aisha wanted to have a child, and again one wonders why, since a child would intensify the family ties and make her stick more to her home and husband. While she was walking with her husband, a foreseer met them. She told Aisha that she "carried darkness" (138). Again, we notice

the husband's scientific attitude, since he stayed away from his wife and the foreseer.

Zeina, Aisha's old nurse convinced her to go to a far away mosque where certain ceremonies were held to help women surmount their plights with the help of supernatural powers which Zeina called 'masters'. Aisha was reluctant at first, but because of her wish to have a child and her inner belief in superstitions, she accompanied Zeina to one of these ceremonies. There, a cunning young butcher noticed that this woman was different from the other women who, to him, were vulgar and of low class.

He then convinced Aisha to come alone not accompanied by her nurse. Although Zeina warned her of that young man, Aisha did go alone where he convinced her to go to a further place and raped her despite her attempts to free herself from him. Aisha's wish to have a child, and her going alone expressed her hidden wish to be raped and made her an accomplice in the rape.

Rape is one of the feminist activists' concerns, but in this story Soueif did not present it as a 'forced rape' as much as a 'wished one'. Besides, the author could not convince me of Aisha's reasons to stay with a husband whom she did not love, though he did love her. Her wish to have a child, too, contradicts with her situation where she would have looked for a reason to leave and not to have a child who would keep her leading such, supposedly, intolerable life.

Chapter 2

Sandpiper

1996

(A Collection of Short Stories)

“Melody”

In “Melody” women of different cultures were living in one compound in an Arab Gulf country. Innocent love was demonstrated between two children: a boy from America and a girl from Turkey. A car accident smashed this pure love when the girl was hit by a dashing car. This symbolizes the first aim of the story, namely that the barriers between cultures are too strong to break.

Feminism appears in the way women are treated there. "We're not allowed to use the pool: us women, I mean. It's only for the kids - and the men of course. They can use anything. And they do", says the American woman (3).

Then we are introduced to more and more cultural differences and criticism. The American husband Rich vasectomy done to him after he had a child, while the Turkish husband wanted as many children as he could have. His wife, anyhow, used to take pills without her husband's knowledge.

The American woman did not stop criticizing Muslims and Islamic rituals and matters of life and death. "That's what these Muslim men are like. They can never have enough children", and "The way these Muslim women treat their husbands just makes me ill. They actually want to be

slaves." Even when the friends and the relatives of the Turkish family came to condole with it after the death of the Turkish girl, the American lady went on in her criticism of the way these people behaved.

Belief in superstitions is also another matter related to Muslim women. The Turkish woman used to take pills simply because a fortune-teller had told her that she should not have more than three children or she would face a tragedy. Consequently, she started taking pills after having two children, a boy and a girl. The fortune-teller's prophecy proved to be false since that Turkish woman faced a tragedy though she had only two and not three children.

Men's dominance appeared in the attitudes of both the Turkish and the American men. The first one wanted more children contrary to his wife's wish, and the American man wanted no children, again despite his wife's wish. Feminism calls for equality between man and woman and between husband and wife, but here we find an anti-feminist attitude of both husbands though they came from different countries and belonged to different cultures. Women's submissiveness is a matter which seems to belong to different cultures and not only to the East or the West. It can result from patriarchy or from husbands' harsh behavior towards their wives. Feminist activists call for women self-esteem through respecting them and granting them their rights.

“Sandpiper”

In this short story, Soueif focuses on cultural and social differences that lead to the destruction of marriage even when this marriage was first built on love.

The protagonist, as a first narrator, was a foreigner. She told how she met her husband at a bus stop. "Eight years ago, I married him. Six years ago, I gave birth to 'his' child" (24). The mother felt that the child belonged to the father and the father's country rather than to her. "She [the child] has her father, her uncle, her two aunts, her five cousins; a wealth of playmates and protectors" (30).

When she tried to do the shopping the prices tripled. Her marriage started to collapse. "I watched him [her husband] vanish", and "My foreignness, which had been so charming, began to irritate him" (33). He wanted her to remember names, language, and to follow the political news and developments, but it was beyond her abilities, and now she found herself coming back to Alexandria with her daughter, while the husband was in Europe. Even her trips to Africa were ominous. Once a lion was about to attack her when she was photographing it, and once the plane she was on was going to crash.

We notice here that the husband's disillusionment did not come suddenly, but with time and year after year, he discovered that his wife did not belong to his culture, and that he needed a wife who could fit in the mosaic of his community. Her sixth summer with him witnessed the end of their happiness despite her efforts to maintain their marriage.

The ultimate goal of feminism is surely the women's happiness, and it seems that Soueif regards cultural differences to be sometimes stumbling blocks in the way of a happy marriage. Lim Hwee Chin in his essay "And Therefore to Exist: The Study of Existents in Sandpiper" (2), argues that "if she [the protagonist] were still in her homeland, she would perhaps have her family and friends to share the burden of her broken marriage with her".

Soueif, on the other hand, seems to be claiming that if the husband could find a wife from his own community, or at least if his foreign wife could adapt to the norms and requirements of her husband's society, their marriage could go on happily for both the husband and the wife.

Soueif ,here, argues that foreign wives' inability to adapt to their new circumstances after they marry and move away from their original countries, may sometimes lead to marital complications.

“Chez Milou”

If the heroines of “Returning” and “Sandpiper” had lost their love, they were still young, and whether it was they or their husbands to blame, they could compensate for their lost love. Their wounds could be healed in the future by the possibility of finding another lover or husband one day since life was still in front of them.

The case of our protagonist here was different. Milou was an old Greek woman sitting behind the cash desk in her restaurant with her old father sitting behind her. Milou loved a Greek boy when she was young, but for unknown reasons she did not marry him and this is ‘what’ concerns us rather than ‘why’ she did not.

Milou first saw Philippe "amid the incense and the burning candles in The Greek Orthodox Cathedral and thought he looked like an angel" (43). That was during one of her friend's wedding, after which she went on and on shopping from his grocery, but he did not notice her love or respond to it. Now "Milou might have married Philippe, but that was long ago" (40). The old woman never smiled even at the customers that she knew. The shock came to her when a Muslim woman, Farah, who was divorced, came

to tell her that Philippe was going to convert to Islam and marry her. Milou's father had also lost his wife who had escaped with a Turkish soldier when Milou was just a child.

The story involves the reader in a world of lost love where there is no hope of retrieving it or having a compensation that may heal its wounds. It also sheds light on 'religion' which Soueif does not regard as a difficulty in the face of love, or may be she is hoping so. Philippe the Christian as we saw, was ready to convert and marry a divorced Muslim woman, all for the sake of love. This is reminiscent of Sahar in "The Suitor" who was a Coptic and married a Muslim young man despite the rigid stand of her family against that marriage.

We need to remember here that Islam gives the right to the Muslim male to marry a Christian female, while it does not give the right to the Muslim female to marry a Christian male, a matter which can be regarded as antifeminist since it does not give the female her full right to choose her husband.

“The Water-Heater”

“The Water-Heater” is a stark example of patriarchy where man dominates and imposes his power even if this power leads to the destruction of the females' aspirations and hopes. The story shows how females have to pay a dear price for male dominance when females' feelings are not taken into consideration, or even when they are not asked or consulted in one of the most important or vital aspects of their lives, namely marriage.

Here we meet Salah, his mother, and his sister Faten. Salah was a university student. He was very religious. Faten was still at school. One day he saw her coming out after having a shower. He felt sexually lusty for her and went contemplating her skin, eyes, and the drops of water on her hair and neck. Coming back to his senses, he felt a great remorse and went on blaming himself for his evil thoughts. He even felt that all his college colleagues saw through him and knew what was conflicting in him.

His mother had asked if Faten could marry one of her relatives and Salah had refused saying that Faten had to complete her secondary school then go to university before marriage.

Now to free himself of the situation he found himself confronting, he called his mother and told her that it was better for Faten to marry. Faten "accepted everything he did and everything he said – without questioning" (70).

Joseph Massad* argues that Salah "makes his sister pay for his sinful thoughts by marrying her off to a cousin sabotaging her plans to continue her university education".

We notice, in this story, that neither the mother nor Faten would question Salah's decisions. The father was dead and Salah was the man of the house. He would refuse Faten's marriage at first, then decide that she must marry. The mother's and Faten's complete submissiveness and obedience can be related to social traditions in male-dominated societies, and Salah's stand expresses patriarchy in such societies where women have to obey men's decisions no matter what the consequences are.

* *ibid.* 78

“Mandy”

“Mandy” is one of the few stories of Soueif's written in a comic style, but a critical study of this story shows deep implications. The main goal here is that women's problems are almost identical in many aspects. Consequently, feminist activities need to be addressed to women at international scale that is whether they were from the East or West.

The story is written in the style of letters, two by an Eastern woman, supposedly Egyptian, called Asya, and one by an American one called Mandy. Both women were no more than toys in the hands of the Egyptian handsome young man, Saif. Asya and Saif were not divorced when he fell in love with Mandy, and Asya described him saying that "he does what he wants and screws the rest of the world" (95), which shows how selfish he was.

Asya felt a bang of jealousy (91), but she did nothing except criticizing Mandy who, to her, was not pretty enough, and who was weird in her casual clothes. Mandy, on her side, went on criticizing Asya who was so friendly that she, Mandy, could have thrown up, and who invited both Mandy and Saif to a cheap restaurant in a dirty area, where "everybody else there was either some bearded old woman (sic) or a harassed young mom" (93).

Saif who fell in love with a woman while he was still married to another one, was earnest in his new love. The story ends with him taking Mandy “to meet her folks, or he could be getting rid of her.” (101)

The feminist element here appears in the fact that both women were treated unfairly by one man despite their different cultures and nationalities which shows that women, no matter where they come from are likely to fall in the same trap, namely the deception of the other sex. Deception, any how, can not be regarded as an exclusive behaviour of men, who may also be the victims of women’s infidelity.

“Satan”

We have already witnessed family interference in women's lives in “The Suitor” where the family went on and on urging Marianne to marry, and in “The Wedding of Zeina” where the family and the relatives chose Zeina's husband without even counseling her or asking for her opinion.

In “Satan” we again meet Asya and Saif, whom we had met in 'Mandy'. This time, they had separated for about a year after their nine-year marriage. Saif was at that time living in a hotel with Clara. "She isn't the first, There were others before her and there are going to be others after her", says Asya (111).

Asya did not seem sad or even annoyed to get rid of this man who, though married, went from one woman to another, from Mandy to Lady Caroline and now Clara.

This is the first feminist element in the story, namely the man's indifference to his wife's feelings and treating her as a piece of furniture in the house.

But in this story we have another feminist concern. We know that Asya was desperate for retrieving her lost love. Saif was no longer her beloved man, and she was planning her life accordingly, but she was faced with a formidable interference of the family to convince her to go back to

Saif and to get pregnant so that the family ties, between her and Saif, be stronger. Her mother-in-law, Saif 's brother, Hussein, , and her sister-in-law, all came from Cairo to London and went on and on talking to Asya and not to Saif who was away with Clara in a hotel.

Asya tried to convince them that she no longer loved Saif and that she was not sorry to leave him because of his being a womanizer, but none of them showed readiness to understand her stand, and all they wanted and urged her to do was going back to him, no matter what he or his behavior was. Saif 's mother regarded the matter as “just a little quarrel and it will pass” (111). The mother was even ready to 'kill' Clara and called her 'a trot', but Asya objected to that saying that what happened was "a sort of normal behavior . She [Clara] met him and he was a single man-separated" (111).

Asya tried hard to convince her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law to keep away, not to interfere, and to let her and Saif have their freedom in choosing the line of their life but her attempts failed, which made her at the end of the story leave the house and run out of it leaving the intruders argue as they wanted.

In this story, Soueif presents two feminist concerns. First, we meet the husband who was living away in London with his Egyptian wife, running after women, and then we have another feminist concern, namely the rigid stand of the family who was not ready to see the whole picture and the fact that Asya no longer wanted to live with such a husband, and they

went on and on pressing her, and not Saif, to go back to her husband. Asya was besieged with unwanted love and had no alternative but to escape so that she could find her way as she herself planned and not as they planned for her.

“I Think of You”

Economic reasons in general and women's search for economic independence or equality with men in particular are among the feminists concerns since women's economic inequality with men necessarily keeps them dependent on men. Women's search for economic independence may lead to negative consequences instead of positive ones as we can see in this short story.

Here, an Egyptian female teacher was living in an Arab Gulf country with her young daughter, while the rest of her family were in Cairo, and her husband was in London. Our heroine was in hospital, suffering from her family, with no visitors except her daughter on the one hand, and from her feeling that she belonged to another culture on the other. Her doctors were not Egyptians. The women around her in the hospital behaved in a way that she was not accustomed to. In addition to her pains, she was pregnant and worried about her baby. He, the baby, "does not move and I imagine him gasping for breath as the cord that connects us fails to deliver the oxygen he needs" (146).

The Arab women in the hospital criticized her for marrying an English man. "But how can you marry an English man?", asked one of

them, adding "They are all animals there", while the Scottish matron criticized the Arabs saying, "They are animals these people" (144).

The heroine found herself surrounded by conflicting cultures and that added to her feelings not only of pain but also of loneliness. Her economic needs which led her to work away from her husband, her country and her relatives threw her into a complicated situation of pain and a torturing feeling of isolation. "What about tension?" She asked adding, "What about misery? What about loneliness" (144). She, then, was wondering if the price she was paying for money is worth it, and this is what Soueif is asking and leaving the question for women to answer. She wants women to balance their economic needs and the price they will pay in order to gain what covers these needs. She sees that family relations need to be taken into consideration, otherwise women will suffer a lot in their search for money as a sole goal.

Chapter 3

In the Eye of the Sun

1992

(A Novel)

In The Eye of the Sun

In this novel, Soueif expresses her feminist attitude, her sympathy for women, and her understanding of their feelings and desires. Here we have more than one story leading to this end. Issam, the Muslim young man was in love with Chrise, the Christian girl. When he intended to marry her, his family firmly stood against this marriage (91). Asya, one of his relatives, defended this marriage saying that Prophet Mohammed himself married a Coptic woman, and that there would be no harm in such a marriage, but no body would listen to her and the two lovers lost their unfulfilled love.

Here Soueif presents one of her feminist attitudes, namely that religion should not stand as a stumbling block in the face of lovers when it comes to marriage. Issam was killed in the 1967 war, and this is symbolic of the tragic ends of such love in our Eastern societies. Philippe, the Greek Christian in “Chiz Milou” had to convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim woman, and Sarah the Christian in “The Suitor” was deserted by her family when she married a Muslim.

Family intervention in their daughter's marriage was not related only to religion differences. A friend of Asya's called Noora loved a Palestinian young man, but her father did not approve of this marriage simply because

it would lead to needless problems. Noora's father warned that he would disown her if she married that man.

These subsidiary stories lead us to the main story of this novel which is the story of Asya and her torture being divided between unfulfilled love and the search for desire fulfillment. Asya fell in love with Saif, an intelligent and elegant history graduate. Her father insisted that the engagement should wait until Asya had finished her secondary school. During that period Saif behaved in a way that did not satisfy Asya. He would not accept to make love to her though she saw that that was their right. Instead of sitting with her, he would sit with her father, mother and the rest of the family. This educated character had another face which feminist activists stand against. He was a domineering male who neglected his wife's sexual desires. Even after their marriage, he rarely made love to her. She, strangely, got pregnant but then had miscarriage, to make things worse and more complicated between them.

After their marriage, Asya travelled to London to study for her Ph.D. in English literature, while he stayed in Beirut and Damascus working with the United Nations once and with the Syrian intelligence another time, but he would visit Asya from time to time on rare occasions.

Asya, insisting on her right as a woman, fell in a sexual relation with a student called Gerald Stone. Their relation was void of the warm love

which is supposed to be between lovers. She needed sexual fulfillment that she did not have with Saif. Her relation with Stone was merely physical.

Hind Wassef in her essay “The Unblushing Bourgeoise” (2) comments on In the Eye of the Sun saying, "It is with In the Eye of the Sun where Soueif takes her reader on journeys through meticulous descriptions of atmosphere, feeling and movement". Soueif really takes the reader from a historic period like the 1967 war to another like 1973, and from Cairo to London, but what concerns us, as far as 'feminism' is concerned, is the development of our heroine as a secondary school girl then as an adult Ph.D. student, and her perpetual insistence on getting her emotional and sexual rights which is one of the main feminist items.

On one of his rare visits, Saif interrogated his wife asking her if she had any relationship with Stone. Here, we have to remember that he had once said to her, “If you were to take a lover, I would expect you at least to have the decency not to tell me about it” (425), but when she confessed to him he went mad and began calling her bad names and went on and on investigating the details of that relation in a humiliating way. Again, Soueif reminds us of the masculinity some husbands subject their wives to. Even when Asya's mother came to visit her, Saif was not ashamed to describe his wife as 'a whore'. He was depicted as a hypocritic character that was not angry in defense of his 'honor' but for his 'knowledge' of his wife's betrayal.

It was alright for him if she betrayed him as long as she kept the matter concealed from him.

Joseph Massad* argues that "the motor of the novel is Asya's quest to combine love and desire", while Angela Stephens in "Eye Catcher" (2) sees In the Eye of the Sun as "the story of young Egyptian woman's sexual and intellectual awakening from her adolescence in Cairo to her Ph.D. studies in England".

I think that Asya's quest for 'love and desire' was a means to an end, and not an end itself. Asya found that neither her sexually-weak husband nor her unemotional friend could help her build her character as a woman. She defied both and even defied her conservative society, all in a heroic stand to get her rights as a woman.

In the last scenes of the novel we meet Asya with her family then we witness her watching the statue of a woman covered in the sand with only her eyes seen. This is symbolic of Soueif's perspective of women's situation in the East where they are hidden behind bars and bars of social norms. They can see but they can't talk, and this is the tragedy of women in the Third World as Soueif sees it embodied in the eyes of that woman statue.

In the Eye of the Sun embodies a number of Soueif's outlooks regarding feminism. She talks about religion, unfulfilled sexual desire,

* *ibid.* 76

husbands' oppression, and family's intervention. Besides, it talks about wives' infidelity and adultery which cannot be accepted by husbands who do not even look for the reasons behind such kind of behaviour. The novel is too long to be summarized in this study, but I have selected only the incidents related to feminism.

Chapter 4

The Map of Love

1999

(A Novel)

The Map of Love

This is a novel of romance and cultural relations in a historical frame covering a period of about one hundred years, starting from the beginning of the twentieth century and ending at its end. Lindsey Moore in “Translating Desire in Soueif’s The Map of Love” (4) comments on the novel saying that "the Egyptian experience of colonization is placed within a wider and longer narrative of economic and political domination".

The Map of Love is also a feminist novel where the writer depicts masculinity and the harsh behavior of men towards women. Besides, she presents an important feminist item, namely 'sisterhood'. Sarah Gamble talks about sisterhood in Feminism and Postfeminism (315) where she says that "the notion of sisterhood conveys the implicit assumption that all women have certain areas in common on which a sense of identification can be founded".

The novel starts with an American young female writer called Isabel Parkman who came to Egypt in 1997 to write about the new millennium and how it was received and celebrated in Egypt. With her, Isabel carried a trunk which was left in the custody of her sick mother. The trunk originally belonged to Isabel’s great grandmother Anna Winterbourne. It contained a lot of stuff, such as pieces of Arabic and English magazines and

newspapers, old books, and pieces of cloth, but the most important findings were letters sent from Anna Winterbourne while in Egypt to her father-in-law Sir Charles in England, in addition to memoirs written by an Egyptian friend of Anna's called Layla al-Baroudi.

The letters and other sheets of newspapers and magazines introduce to us the first love story and its historical frame. We know that Anna's husband died in 1899 suffering from physical and psychological pain. He had served as an officer in the British army in the Sudan where he witnessed the atrocities of the British army. "An army of 70,000 British and 20,000 Egyptian soldiers loses 48 men and kills 11,000 of the Dervishes and wounds 16,000 in the space of six hours" (34). Anna's husband spent his last years isolating himself, not ready to eat or talk, suffering from remorse and his feeling of guilt until he died.

In 1900, Anna travelled to Egypt where there was a large British community, and Egypt was still under British colonization. There she spent most of her time visiting touristic places. One day she wanted to visit the Monastery of St Catherine. Afraid that she might be caught on the way, she put on men's clothes. On the way, she was abducted by some Egyptian militant youths and taken to the house of Husni Al-Ghamrawi, an influential Patriotic man. The first for her to see in that house was Layla Al-Ghamrawi, Husni's wife and the sister of an important character who was a lawyer and a political personality called Sharif Pasha Al-Baroudi.

Layla described Anna (135) saying, "I opened my eyes and found her looking at me. A beautiful European woman, her hair flowing to her shoulders in free golden waves". Sharif Pasha came. He and Layla apologized to Anna. Sharif insisted that he would take her to visit St Catherine on a trip that would take fourteen days crossing desert areas, valleys and mountains.

Sharif Pasha presents a masculine arrogant character who wouldn't accept a refusal to his instructions. "That was always Sharif's way: to issue firmans" (150). He had divorced his first wife after only six months of their marriage simply because as he said, "I can not live with a woman who has no key to my mind and who does not share my concerns. She can not, will not read anything" (151). Here Soueif gives an example of her feminist perspective leaving us to contemplate how this arrogant man completely ignored his wife's feelings and could not notice the difference in social status between her and himself before marrying then divorcing her, and why he did not ask himself about her destiny in a society that he knew how merciless it was towards divorced women.

During her stay at Layla's house, the two women liked and respected each other despite the religious, ideological and cultural differences. By time they became very good friends talking, visiting places, and exchanging views. This is the first example of sisterhood presented by Soueif to be followed by another example.

Sharif Pasha, as already mentioned, insisted on taking Anna to St Catherine. This was followed by a love story that ended in marriage. Sharif, despite his love to Anna behaved in an oppressive way especially in economic matters. He was angry and scolded Anna when she once withdrew some money from the bank without his permission, though the money was from her own deposit. Later, Sharif Pasha was assassinated eleven years after his marriage. Anna then took her daughter, Nur, and left for England.

On the other hand, Soueif presents another feminist issue addressed by feminist activists, namely 'patriarchy'. Most of the members of the British community stood against Anna's marriage to Sharif Pasha. Even the then-ruler of Egypt, Mr. Cromer did not approve of that marriage. This stand, reminiscent of other patriarchal stands in Soueif's fiction such as "The Wedding of Zeina" and "The Suitor", shows how male-dominated communities do not give women the right to choose their spouses.

Soueif describes this historical period when the British army used to roam the streets, the Denshwai massacre when the British executed a number of the youths of that village in November, 1906 and the riots of the students against the British colonization. She also talks about important personalities of that period such as Saa'd Zaghloul and Mustafa Kamel.

While reading some of Anna's letters, a hundred years later, Isabel found Anna blaming herself for her behavior towards her husband during his illness saying, "If I had loved him better. If I had needed him more". Isabel commented saying, "We [women] are trained, conditioned to blame ourselves. This guy was inadequate, and somehow she, the woman, ends up taking the responsibility" (42). Isabel's comment shows Soueif's sympathy towards women since they end up 'taking the responsibility' even if they spend years with sick men like Anna's husband serving them with patience and devotion.

We can notice parallelism in love and sisterhood between the stories of Isabel and Omar Al-Ghamrawi, Isabel and Amal Al-Ghamrawi, Sharif Pasha and Anna, and Anna and Layla Al-Ghamrawi.

When Isabel came to Egypt carrying the trunk of Anna, she and Amal discovered that they were relatives belonging to the same grandfathers and mothers. Isabel had fallen in love with Omar Al-Ghamrawi, Amal's brother, and it was he who had asked Isabel to take the trunk to Amal since she, Isabel, was travelling to Egypt. Before falling in love with Isabel, Omar had fallen in love with her mother Jasmine, and when he knew that Isabel was Jasmine's daughter, he felt that Isabel might be his daughter especially that he was far older than Isabel. He still went on in his love affair with Isabel. This shows, again, a behavior that Soueif

attacks taking it as unacceptable and selfish since it expresses disrespect for women's feelings.

Gale Reference Team in “Contemporary Authors” (5) argue that the novel is "a romantic saga that spans generations", but I feel that this saga is stained with more than one black spot, as we see in Sharif Pasha’s behaviour towards his first wife, and in the behaviour of the British community towards Anna.

Isabel and Omar, Amal's brother, had met at a musical party. Omar was a conductor, musician and writer who defended Arab causes. He parallels his great grandfather Sharif Pasha. Isabel described him to her mother, who had been in love with him before, saying, "He's older than I. Well, quite a lot older. He's actually in his fifties, but you'd think he was forty. He's tall, and he's got black hair, graying at the temples, very distinguished" (151).

Isabel and Amal became friends, especially after they had discovered they were relatives. Josef Masa'ad* argues that "Isabel's friendship with Amal parallels that of Anna and Layla as a contemporary cultural bridge".

Reminiscent of Sharif Pasha's and Anna's trips in Egypt, Amal took Isabel to different places in Egypt especially to their old village Twasi where her family had built a clinic and a school, and during the land reform

* *ibid.* 80

Period, the family showed no anger or contempt.

Amal herself had her own feminist problems. She and her husband were separated, he living in England and she in Egypt with no explanation, which is another example of some husbands' oppressive behaviour towards their wives.

Back in Egypt, she met an old university colleague to discover that he was not only married but also working with the enemies of her country. Soueif wants to assert that feminism issues are international and not exclusive for this country or that. Andrea Perkins in "Beyond Screen: Ahdaf Soueif's New Novel highlights Changing Cultural Climate in Egypt" (2) argues that, "having grown up both in England and Egypt, Soueif maintains an ideal balance between East and West". He goes on to talk in this regard about Anna saying that "she finds that restrictions on Arab women are not so different from those placed on women back home".

The international scope of feminism is an important factor that Soueif addresses in her novel though it, necessarily, may differ in its details according to the ideological, religious, economic or social backgrounds. The comprehensive goals of feminism remain equality with men and granting women their rights as human beings.

Chapter 5

Mezzaterra

Fragments from the Common Ground

2004

(A Collection of Political and Literary Articles)

Mezzaterra

Introduction

Mezzaterra, Fragments from the Common Ground, symbolizes Cairo in the 1960s as Soueif saw it and lived in its atmosphere where cultures met harmoniously and where people from different countries, religions and beliefs lived with respect for each other despite the political issues that were hanging on the horizon.

Soueif then witnessed her mezzaterra fall apart day after day and year after year, and Soueif saw that it is her duty to defend her mezzaterra by her only possible means, writing. Rahma Bavelaar in “Mezzaterra by Ahdaf Soueif: False Universal or Common Ground?” (2) argues that “the common ground can be defended only when there are justice and equality”, and this is what Soueif yearns for when she remembers her old Cairo when people lived harmoniously despite religious, political, and cultural differences.

The book can be divided into two parts: the first is political essays where she talks about the suffering of the Arab People, and this is beyond the scope of this thesis. In the second part Soueif introduces a number of women writers who talk about different perspectives of women especially

Arab and Muslim ones under different circumstances, which makes this part of the book worthy of reading due to the feminist concerns it introduces.

Women Writers in Mezzaterra

Adania Shibli is a Palestinian writer living in what is known as 1948 Palestine, that is the part of Palestine occupied by Israel in the 1948 war. Shibli wrote a number of short stories in addition to a novella entitled Masas which was translated into French. She currently works at a Palestinian culture foundation. She said that she "can no longer bear to live in it [occupied Palestine] because the Israeli control transforms every place into a complete consumer society" (321). Shibli's own life gives an example of women's life under occupation where they suffer from a variety of economic, social and political problems.

Cherry Mosteshar is an Iranian writer who found it too difficult to adapt herself to the life in her country where patriarchy and traditions gave her no room for freedom whether to dress as she liked, to voice her political, social or religious opinions, or to achieve equality with men in voting, education or employment.

In her book Unveiled, Mosteshar shows how she went back from England in an attempt to stay and work in her mother country, but to her

disappointment, she found that people there "exist in a sort of limbo: the old way of life has been swept away, but no new way has evolved" (243).

The change, after the revolution, was to the worse especially as far as women were concerned. She even asked her husband for divorce since he considered every unveiled woman 'a whore'. Her husband preferred to stay in Iran, but she left for England for good. Unveiled is a stark cry against patriarchy especially when people wear costumes of religion or social traditions to achieve antifeminist goals.

Diane Johnson is a British novelist who talks in her book Persian Nights about the wrong image of the Arab and Muslim women in the Western eyes on the one hand and criticizes what she regards as 'the hypocrisy in the Arab and Muslim world on the other.

A foreign student at Shiraz University asked an Iranian girl student about the veil. - "The veil? The veil?" cried Mrs. Reza "There is no veil. It is over" (213).

The foreign girl commented at the end saying, "They think of women as property. All these Arabs do" (216). She could not know that Iran was not an Arab country.

Fatima Mernissi talks in her book The Forgotten Queens of Islam about the development of 'Khilafa' in Islam, that is how rulers follow one another. The Caliph first used to lead prayers, and here opinions vary on the legitimacy of women to do this job. After that the roles of Islamic rulers

developed and the Islamic empire widened, a matter which made the main ruler in Baghdad or Damascus appoint men rulers for fear that women rulers would not be efficient enough to keep the far away Islamic areas.

Mernissi traces the history of a number of women who ruled in Muslim countries. She argues that, contrary to the image of the Arab and Muslim women in the west, Islam, though in few cases, gives women the opportunities to step to thrones ruling thousands if not millions of men as we can see in some historical periods in Egypt, Bangladesh, and Pakistan.

Jan Goodwin is an American journalist who made a number of interviews with well-known women in different countries of the Arab world and published these interviews in a book entitled Price of Honor. Goodwin's research as Soueif sees it "exhibits courage, determination and fairness" (240). Her main concern was the daily problems of women's lives.

The book signifies in particular that the Middle East is not only in turmoil but also witnessing rapid changes leaving the people in conflict where they want to keep their own culture and identity and at the same time they need to remain a part of the whole world community.

Price of Honor addresses a number of the political and social problems that face women in the Third World, such as polygamy and patriarchy.

Sattareh Farman Farmaian : Soueif introduces a third book about women's plights in Iran. This time she introduces a book entitled Daughter of Persia by Sattareh Farman Farmaian.

The writer talks about the atrocities her family was subjected to at the hands of different and opposing regimes. Their properties were confiscated, and a number of the members of her family were either imprisoned or murdered.

The writer, who holds a degree in social work from the University of Southern California, found herself forced to leave her country for good which is reminiscent of Cherry Mosteshar who did the same under the same circumstances.

The writer tried to know how two governments with different ideologies followed the same line in treating their people, and how the people were supposed to behave to maintain their lives. She gave an example of an educated woman called Farrokhrou Parsa who always struggled against the first regime was executed during the following one. Farmaian found that "If history repeats itself, then the subtle, the open-minded, will always go unheard" (235).

Liana Badr is another Palestinian woman writer that Soueif introduces. Badr writes under the Israeli occupation. She says, "It [the occupation] affects my writing. It affects you like a fever; it is always there" (320).

Badr moved driven by the occupation and its consequences from one country to another and from one camp to another. She argues that "to try to create aesthetic form under such ugly circumstances is a big challenge" (321).

These quotations from Badr show the importance of suitable circumstances for creativity, though this does not apply exclusively to women.

Oriane Fallaci is a journalist from Saigon whose reputation depended upon journalism rather than on fiction. She wrote about hot areas like Vietnam and Latin America. She interviewed some Arab leaders and these interviews express Fallaci's contempt for Arabs in general and Muslims in particular as one can see in her book Inshallah where she depicted Arabs and Muslims as hysterical, murderous and blood-thirsty people deranged by lust, grief and hatred (223).

Soueif must have chosen this writer and her book among many to show our need for better media and other means to 'try' at least to erase our ugly image in the Westerns' minds, this image that has stuck to the Western mentality year after year and generation after generation.

Conclusion

Ahdaf Soueif is not only an English short story writer, novelist and essayist of Arab origin, but also a feminist one defending Arab and Muslim women's concerns by showing these women's sufferings and aspirations. She does not explicitly call for women's emancipation or frankly adopts giving women their right of equality with men, but the reader can deduce these objectives from what there is between her lines, where we face the miseries imposed on them and how vulnerable they are in male-dominated Arab societies.

Feminism can be defined as a recent political, social, philosophical and economic movement that goes back to the 1850's in the West and to the early twentieth century in the Arab world. Its main concern is the equality between women and men.

What is interesting to notice is that Soueif introduces some feminist concerns that are not on the Western activists' agenda. She talks about polygamy in "Her Man" and belief in superstitions in the "Nativity" depicting them as catastrophic means that may destroy women's lives. Even when she addresses the economic concern, she treats it differently from how it is addressed by Western feminists. In "I Think of You", she depicts a woman who left her family in London and came to work in an Arab Gulf country. The result was that she found nothing but sadness and

illness. Soueif wants to say, here, that giving the economic side priority at the expense of one's familial or social ties will certainly be disastrous. This economic approach is not treated the same way by Western feminists who call for economic equality between women and men, regardless of the social implications.

Another important subject that Soueif treats is a sensitive one, namely religion. She differentiates between religion as "a belief" and religion as "a practice", showing that religion as a belief does not stand as an obstacle in the way of women's happiness, but it is the way we practice religion that does so. In The Map of Love, we meet Issam, the Muslim young man, whose family stood in the face of his marriage to a Christian woman. Issam then went to participate in the 1967 war and was killed. This can be taken as symbolic showing the result of such behavior on the family side, which took religion as a reason for depriving their son the woman he loved. We can remember that Prophet Mohammad married Mary, the Coptic. In another story we find the Greek Christian Philippe who married a Muslim woman after he converted.

In Mezzaterra, Soueif introduced a number of women writers presenting different views and concerns. There are Adania Shibli and Lina Badr from Palestine talking about the difficulties of living under occupation, Cherry Mosteshar, Fatima Mernisi and Sattareh Farmaian from Iran talking about the oppression their families were subjected to under

different regimes, in addition to other women writers presenting other feminist concerns.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Ahdaf Soueif holds Ph.D. in linguistics from The University of Lancaster. Her Writings appear in *Cosmopolitan*, *The London Review of Books*, *The Observer*, *The Sunday Telegraph*, *The Times Literary Supplement*, as well as other well-known publications.

In 1999, her novel, *The Map of Love*, was nominated for the acclaimed Booker Prize, and in 2003, she was awarded Orange Prize for Fiction. Besides, a number of her books were translated into many foreign languages, which makes her, in my point of view, worthy of more studies, especially when we know that so far there have been no critical books or theses that have studied all her works, and that this is the first thesis to try to do so.

Glossary

Feminist Related Terms*

Abortion

One of the prominent goals of feminists has always been women's right to control their own reproductive process. Abortion comes as one of the most important items in this regard, and the number one of the concerns of the Second Wave Feminism. We can find, any how, that not all feminists adopt this approach. Among those we can refer to are Adrienne Rich, Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millet. Religious organizations also regard abortion as an anti-life stand.

I personally regard abortion as a crime and the embryo as a creature that should be taken care of and not to be killed by abortion.

African-American Feminism

This movement can be traced back to 1851 when Anna Cooper, an African-American feminist, talked at the Women's Convention in New York about the unwritten history of slave women who lived in a patriarchal society where they neither owned their bodies nor their right to own their children

* Selected and paraphrased from Sarah Gamble's Feminism and Post-feminism

who were sold from one master to another and were moved from one plantation to another.

Alex Halley's Roots (1976) is one of the well-known novels that describe the slavery period of the American history when slaves were treated as if they were animals bought and sold from one master to another.

Desire

This concept is related to Freud's notion of 'penis envy' originating, as Freud saw it from women's feeling that they lacked penis and their desire to own one.

This feeling presents women as 'incomplete men'. This identifies them as an object of men's desire. This term is well-depicted in Soueif's In The Eye Of The Sun as we will see when we discuss feminism in this novel.

French Feminism

Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron collected a number of essays and texts issued during the students' revolt in France in May 1968 and published them in a book entitled New French Feminism. The anthology highlights the main elements of what came to be known as French Feminism.

This movement was highly affected by the second wave of feminism in France which focused on the working-class women and their right of

equality with men seeing that these women were deprived of their rights though they were an important factor in the French economy. The activists of this movement saw that Marxism presented a way of breaking the barriers between women and men.

French Feminism activists questioned Simon DeBeauvoir's feminist demand for social equality where she saw that the differences between women and men were not related to sex but to other factors such as education and mental abilities.

Gay Liberation Movement *

This movement started in New York in 1969 calling for the right of gay men to be treated as normal men in employment and in joining the army without being discriminated against for their gayety. Lesbian feminists criticized this movement considering it a movement representing homosexual men only, and that it did not take other movements into consideration.

* Gayety is extremely abhorred in the Arab and Muslim World. There are no known organizations or groups that defend it, frankly at least.

Lesbian Feminism

Activists of this feminism regarded heterosexuality as an indication of women's oppression. This movement goes back to the 1970s, and its activists regarded lesbians as the only true feminists since they chose women as their sexual partners, and that lesbians were more oppressed than other women because they were not given their right to love their own sex.

Lesbianism is an extremely shameful act in the Islamic or Arab World. It is out of the question for a woman in this world to announce frankly that she is lesbian. We can easily notice that there are no lesbian or gay organizations in the Arab or Islamic world, and this shows how important social and religious norms are in the feminist concerns and activities that are addressed in the different countries of the world.

Liberal Feminism

The main concern of this feminism is everybody's right to fulfill their potentials. Its final goal is the individual's freedom away from restricted social traditions or norms in particular. Other feminists criticize liberal feminism since, to them, it does not focus on ideological forms as much as on superficial ones. Beside, it is criticized for ignoring the needs of minorities in the Western countries. Liberal Feminism, anyhow, was behind welfare, education and health reforms in America and Britain.

Marxist Feminism

According to this feminism, it was class division and not gender that stood behind women's oppression. Marxist feminism activists pointed out that women in the Western capitalist countries were paid less than they deserved, and this led to keeping women in a lower economic and social class compared to men.

Engels, a well-known Marxist philosopher and theorist, noticed that Western families lacked equality between husband and wife. The Communist Manifesto (1848) showed that Western feminism called for the advantage of 'some' women but not the vast majority of them, which resulted in one class of women bosses who exploited the other female workers.

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is the dominance of men and the inferiority of women. In India, for example, Meera Kosambi in Ideals, Images and Real Lives (108) says, "The birth of a daughter is at best a disappointment, and at worst a calamity. In our country [India], the birth of a daughter makes parents very unhappy." It is natural for feminists to stand firmly against patriarchy since it deprives women of their social, political and economic equality with men.

We can notice Ahdaf Soueif 's stand against patriarchy in “The Suitor” and “The Wedding of Zeina” where it is the men who control women's lives and decide their destinies without taking their opinions or wishes into consideration, as I am going to show later.

Some feminists regard patriarchy as a result of the long history of male control of women's labor. Marxist feminists put patriarchy among the materialist relations that originated from male exploitation of women's work. Radical feminists categorize patriarchy within a historical system when feudalism shifted to capitalism, both of which did not care to give women their right of equality with men.

The Third World, one can claim, is a patriarchal world in general, and the more educated a country is the less patriarchal. In some Arab countries, women are not allowed to drive cars. In other countries women have failed in securing the right of franchise.

Patriarchy denies women their right of equality with men, and this deprives societies where patriarchy prevails on half of their working force, and this is a fact which seems to be ignored by such societies.

Sisterhood

Sisterhood is a concept that focuses on female solidarity and cooperation since women have common experiences different from those of men. According to this concept, the relations that exclude men can be as, or more, important for women than those that do not.

I regard this concept as a short-sighted one. It is true that 'women have common experiences', but societies do not include only women living on isolated islands. Women should regard themselves as a part of societies and their feminist activists should not ignore this fact. Sisterhood is all right at an individual level but not on the whole as a comprehensive item that calls for sisterhood among all women in a society neglecting the presence of the other half, namely men.

Working-Class Feminism

This feminism dates back to the 1970s when feminism activists called for equal rights of women especially in the field of employment, the difficulties women faced to get jobs and the little salaries they got.

Working-Class Feminism highlighted the ideological issues with regard to ethnicity and class in addition to the discrimination not only between women and men, but also between women of different social classes and ethnic groups*.

* I daresay the question of 'salaries' is no longer valid as a feminist concern since salaries in most cases depend on qualification and experience rather than on one's sex.

Women Writers

Another item related to feminism is 'Women Writers' since women in different parts of the world express their aspirations in writing as one of the main means to achieve these aspirations and goals.

In her book A Literature of Their Own (4), Elaine Showalter surveys women writers' history, attitudes and perspectives. She argues that "during the intensely feminist period from 1880-1960, women explored the theme of an Amazon Utopia, a country entirely populated by women and completely isolated from the male world", while "since 1960, there has been renewed enthusiasm for female self-awareness" (8).

In Mezzaterra, Ahdaf Soueif introduces a number of Arab and Muslim women writers from different countries. In their books, they depict Arab and Muslim women facing different kinds of political, economic and religious problems.

Soueif presents critical studies of these books that reveal almost identical problems these women writers face despite the geographical distances that separate them.

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