

## AHDAF SOUEIF

### Talking about *The Map of Love*

**Ahdaf Soueif introduced her most recent novel, shortlisted for the Booker Prize, to Paula Burnett and an audience at Brunel University, London, on 28 February 2000**

**AS** The basic structure of this book is that it's two stories, one happening at the beginning of the century and one happening contemporaneously with the writing of the book. There's a narrator. She's an Egyptian woman who's lived in the west for a long time and then eventually she's gone home, back to Cairo, and while she's there an American woman, Isabel Parkman who is...Let me explain. The Egyptian narrator Amal has a brother Amer, who lives in New York. Isabel Parkman has met Amer and has started to fall in love with him, and also, as she has emptied out her parents' flat, she has found a trunk. She showed it to Amer and it's full of material both in Arabic and English, as well as objects. He sees the significance of this trunk and he says, since you're going to Cairo, take it with you, and they'll interpret it – my sister will interpret it for you. And that's where the map of love starts to unfold. The old story, the one that's a hundred years old, is told by Amal from the contents of the trunk. So she pieces together a story of the past. At the same time she tells the story of what's happening now. The story in the past is a love story in which the woman is an English widow, a Lady Anna Winterbourne, who goes to Egypt, falls in love with an Egyptian

patriot, Sharif al-Baroudi, and marries him. The story in the past takes place over fourteen years, while the story in the present takes place over fourteen months and the book constantly cuts between the two stories.

[The reading began with this passage:

“Cairo, April 1997

Some people can make themselves cry. I can make myself sick with terror. When I was a child – before I had children of my own – I did it by thinking about death. Now, I think about the stars. I look at the stars and imagine the universe. Then I draw back to our galaxy, then to our planet – spinning away in all that immensity. Spinning for dear life. And for a moment the utter precariousness, the sheer improbability of it all overwhelms me. What do we have to hold on to?...”

*(The Map of Love, p.10)*

That sets the scene for Amal to tell both stories, the old story and the new story, and in both there is a western woman and an Egyptian man, and in both stories there is the sister of the man, so you have a kind of triptych which, as the story goes on, reflects the ancient Egyptian triptych of Isis, Osiris and the sister who helps Isis collect the body of Osiris, and mourn him, and bring him back to life.

[After reading from several parts of the book, Ahdaf Soueif took questions from the audience.]

**PB** *Perhaps one of the questions that naturally comes to mind is the question about the language. And of course language is very much the subject of the book itself, that particular book, where you talk a lot about Arabic, and about the construction of its root words and the way that the language has then embroidered within those core sounds to produce terms which on the one hand are this way, and on the other, suggest the complete opposite. I found that absolutely fascinating, as someone who*

*knows nothing about Arabic. But I suppose one obvious question is, as a writer, why English not Arabic? Do you also write in Arabic? How does that happen?*

**AS** Well, it was not a choice. I'd known that I wanted to write fiction, and it was in 1979, having finished studying, finished with university, and feeling free, I sat down and started to try and write. I had assumed that I would write in Arabic. And I didn't. The sentences kept coming in English, and what was happening was that dialogue came to me in Arabic but narrative came in English. After a while of this I just gave up, and decided that the stories were coming in English and there we were. What would happen would be that I'd write in English, and then when it came to a bit of dialogue, the dialogue would be happening in my head in Arabic, and I'd be typing it out in English. I don't know why this happened. There could be several reasons. But one is that I was in England when I first learned to read. So when I was five, or whatever, and started reading, I read in English first. And though I learned Arabic and learned to read in Arabic when I was eight, I continued to read in English a lot more than I read in Arabic. This could be because in Arabic there's a difference, as I'm sure at least some of you know, between the spoken Arabic and the written Arabic, so the classical standard Arabic is a written language which you only ever hear in formal lectures or on the news, and so on, but the language that you use every day is the colloquial, and it's quite a bit different. So the fact that you can use colloquial Arabic well doesn't necessarily mean that you can write well in classical Arabic—or it's a distancing thing anyway. I then went on to study English literature, and so what that meant was that all my written work was done in English. So again, that could be part of the reason. I operate in Arabic perfectly well. I write essays and criticism and letters and reports and so on, but I simply cannot write fiction in Arabic. It's as if I'm

not good enough. It becomes a blunt instrument in my hand. It won't do what I want. So I write in English.

But as you say, the question of language is one of the things that interests me. It's quite useful to be writing about Arabic from the perspective of English. In a way you can do that in a more interesting way, I suppose, than if you're writing from within. But there is this whole question of language. And as you saw in one of the passages that I read, Leila and Anna's friendship is conducted in French, and when Anna meets Sharif al-Baroudi and falls in love with him, the language that they use is French, and they have a little discussion about that and about what it means that neither of them is speaking their own language, and that maybe it's better that way. Maybe it's sort of neutral ground, and not one of them is making the great shift, as it were, and both are having to interpret the other one, rather than taking things for granted. So that raises this whole question of language—language which we obviously use as a means of communication, but also, when does language become actually an impediment to communication, when we assume too much, because somebody else speaks the same language?

**PB** *Yes, that's something you say, I think, that maybe we make the mistake too often that, because similar terms are being used, we mean by them the same thing, and perhaps we don't.*

**Q** *Poetry, do you write poetry? I find your writing very beautiful.*

**AS** Well, that's as close as I come. No. I love reading poetry. Poetry's such a very special genius. It's just something else.

**Q** *How much does the history of your country come into it? Because my little knowledge of your country is that the pyramids were built by the stars. And you mention goddesses and gods. How much does the history of Egypt come into it?*

**AS** The history comes into the book a great deal. The pyramids were built by the ancient Egyptians, so the mythology of the ancient gods comes in here a bit and is interwoven with Coptic images, and also with Muslim belief, so that there is a tapestry which plays a key part in the book—which embodies the three: the ancient religion, the Christian religion, and Islam. And certainly one would not be able to understand the problems surrounding Anna and Sharif’s relationship and marriage without knowing that Egypt was under British occupation at the time, and knowing a fair bit about it—well, knowing that, anyway. But it is to an extent explained. It is possible to come to the book with very little knowledge and still figure it out. In fact there is a family tree at the beginning of the book. This family tree—these are the characters, some of which we’ve looked at today. But everybody else, everybody else in the book, is actually real. They are all historical characters who sort of walk on and do their bit. And what I did was, I spent quite a while researching those years at the beginning of the century, and plotted them so I had a month by month schedule of events that took place. And then I hooked my story onto those events, so it was really as if these characters were alive at the time—attending the opening of this bridge, attending this ball at the palace, taking part in these demonstrations, and so on. So the history matters.

**Q** *In terms of your process, what started you writing this particular novel?*

**AS** After *In the Eye of the Sun* was published, I met up with a friend who had become a literary agent, and she wanted to talk to me about possibly switching agents and going with her. And she said, “Why don’t you write a best seller? Why don’t you write a pot-boiler—big thing, sort of East-West, and romance, and so on? I can get you a huge advance for that. And bits of *In the Eye of the Sun* show you can do sexy scenes. You can do this—just do it!” And I went away and thought about it. And I said no. I mean, in the end, obviously I couldn’t do it. But it got me thinking along romantic lines, and what I became interested in was the idea of the romantic hero, the Byronic hero, as in Mr Rochester and Heathcliff, and all the characters that we find in Mills and Boon novels—tall, dark, handsome, enigmatic, a stranger, proud, aloof, yet you just know that if you can get close you’ll find these depths of sensitivity and empathy and passion and tenderness, and so on. And this hero is very often kind of Eastern, but he isn’t ever really Eastern. And I’ve read novels and stories where he’s meant to be Egyptian and he really isn’t at all. He’s completely fake. Or you have somebody, they have to make him Christian because they can’t go into the whole Muslim bit, but yet he’s called Ali or Mohammed because that’s what Easterners are called—very odd, pastichey things like that. And I thought, what if I make a hero who’s larger than life, who’s somebody I would think, Wow! —and he’s a real, genuine Egyptian, of that time, with the concerns of that period, and so on. So that was behind the making of Sharif al-Baroudi.

And then there’s a genre that I really am very interested in, which is travel writing, done by women, English women, mostly Victorian, and of course they are very varied, from people with very set, very colonial attitudes, to people who were very broad-minded and opened themselves up to the culture that they were coming to

see, like Lucy Duff Gordon who ended up living there until she died. And you can see them changing as you go through the letters, you see a different character evolving, and I really like that whole genre. And so I thought, what if you found a way to make a lady traveller like that meet and fall in love with my hero.

So there was that, but of course there was also the whole business of being at the end of the century, and looking back and wondering how we've got to where we are—and how much of it is determined by what happened before, and how much have we been able to shake free. This is in a sort of political sense really. And I thought, there's all this talk about the internet and the global village and how close everything is, and at the beginning of the century they suddenly had the telephone, and it must have seemed very like that then—a new machine there, and you could speak to somebody. And so I just had this idea that there is a feeling at the end of a century that maybe is replicated, but at the same time, things are different—and how different are they?

And of course there's the whole multicultural thing, and the business of falling in love and marrying across cultures. And we see so many more people doing it. And of course English is the *lingua franca* now, and people seem to think that it's an easy thing to do. And I wondered whether, in fact, people who married across cultures that were fairly well divided, whether they stood more chance of happiness now, or whether they stood more chance then—whether maybe now things weren't taken too much for granted, whereas then you approached the other person with an assumption of strangeness, with an assumption that this is something you didn't know about, and that a certain amount of effort would have to be made.

So these were all questions that were in my head, but then of course once the story started happening it had its own impetus, and it more or less went where it wanted to go, after that.

**Q** *Did you write it consecutively?*

**AS** Yes. When I started, I wrote three scenes that appeared more or less fully formed in my head. And then I used them to plot my position, as it were. So there was one scene where Isabel, the American woman in modern Cairo, goes into the old Baroudi House, and has a kind of vision, a kind of epiphany. That was one. And there was the kidnapping scene of Anna—not exactly the kidnapping, but when Sharif al-Baroudi first comes to the house and finds her there, and their first meeting, with sparks flying, and so on. And the third one. And so I sort of placed these and worked out around them what the time frames would be, and what the structure would be. And then having done that, started at the beginning, and then discovered how much research I would have to do, and more or less went away and did research for about, I don't know, twenty months or something. And then having really taken it all in and arrived at the point where one knows that you're just reading in order to not write, that you really know as much as you need to know, but there you are, sort of finding yet another book, and so on. I then just started writing from the beginning and didn't stop for, I think, about eighteen months, beginning to end. And had these three scenes as my little islands that I was sort of aiming at—you get to that achievement, and then you've got to get to the next one, and so on, until it was done.

**Q** *When you start writing, do you rewrite a lot?*



**AS** No, I print out what I've done, like tonight, and leave it, and then next day I read it, and any rewriting that's to be done is done then, and then carry on from there. But I need those pages, and they have to be on the page, not on the computer, and that's the starting-point—and if they are good, then carry on from there. And if they are not, then it's a rewrite. There was one chapter actually where Anna in Cairo goes out with the agency lot, and they have a picnic at the base of the pyramids, and they discuss Egypt while the Egyptian donkey boys and translators and so on are standing at the side. And I had done that from the point of view of an outside narrator, and there was something not right with it. And I tried to ignore that, and went on to the next chapter, and the next, but I was uncomfortable, and eventually I showed it to my husband, who said, this doesn't work, and it's just going to have to be done from Anna's perspective, and from a journal, or a letter—and it's going to be hard, but that's how it's going to have to be done. And I went back and re-did that until it worked. But that was the only big, big rewrite that I had to do.

**Q** *I want to ask you a question that's personal to me. You talk about the British empire. You come from an African background, but you have the privilege of being of both continents, of Africa and Europe. Do you see an advantage to being educated in Europe—is this a bigger advantage than having an African education?*

**AS** I think it depends really what you're going to do. I mean, I was educated in Egypt up until the M.A., and I came here to do a Ph.D. because Cairo university does not grant Ph.D.s in English literature unless you go abroad, or didn't then. On the other hand my brother and sister are both completely educated in Egypt, and they both have

university careers in Egypt and are doing fine, so I think it really depends where you want to live your life. If you want to live your life in the West, then it's an advantage, of course, and you can't do it without having some form of educational time here. But if not, then there's no necessity, I suppose, unless...I don't know, maybe there are things like medicine or something where you get more advanced teaching in the West. But in the arts I don't really see—I think it all just depends what you want to do with yourself later.

**PB** *One of the interesting things in the book, I think, is that story from the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of the founding of the school of art in Cairo, which was done as something to which there was some resistance, but at the same time it did go through. And I thought it was very fascinating, for me as somebody who knows virtually nothing about the history of Egypt, the sense in which so many modern things, so many things which one might have thought would have happened later, were actually happening at the very end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. And the story of the art institute is in itself part of the story of the book, isn't it?*

**AS** Yes, absolutely. So of course the big schools of engineering and agriculture, I mean colleges of engineering and agriculture, and so on, were all instituted by Mohammed Ali, back in the thirties and the forties of the nineteenth century. The great drive toward modernisation was being carried out bit by bit during the nineteenth century, and it was really with the British occupation that it came to a stop. And you have the story of the creation of the school of fine arts and later on of the creation of Cairo university, but from the time of the occupation onwards you had, as

it were, two battles to fight, because if you were an Egyptian who wanted to modernise, you were open to the charge of being with the colonials, of wanting to be western, and therefore of being on the side of the occupying powers, and that, of course, gave a lot of strength to the reactionary forces, who could then say that they were the true patriarchs, in that they wanted to hold on to everything as it is—and let's not educate our girls, and let's not have a university—and so, in a sense, any true patriot who wanted to see the country modernised, and develop, had to fight on two fronts: to say, “We have to do this,” and to say, “and I am anti-imperialist and I would like to see an end to the occupation of my country.” And in a sense, of course, that sort of dilemma, that sense of being caught in the middle, continues until now, with progressive moves being labelled western—and, you know, you have a hard time, because you're not being able to develop your country and your society in a neutral space. It's all politicised. And that's very, very difficult.

**Q** *I appreciate that you're trying to promote awareness, among presumably mainly western women, about how poor people who are uprooted could be driven to sympathise with Islamic fundamentalists, partly because of their economic problems now, and possibly partly because of the atrocities committed in the not so distant past by the British government, for example. But I partly expected for you to comment much more on how Islam oppresses women, and on the fact that they're segregated. Do you tackle that much more in the book?*

**AS** It really depends what you mean by oppressors. I mean, Anna, when she marries Sharif, lives her life in the harem. That was the system then, and there was no other way to live, except in the domestic circle. I think that the book depicts how women in

a Muslim society behave, and are expected to behave. And if a reader says that is oppressive, as in fact some readers have—one reviewer said Sharif al-Baroudi, for all his liberal talk, is content for his wife to live in a harem; now I can't see what else he could have done in 1902—but it can be taken that way. But you see my feeling is really that I don't see the Islam that I grew up with in Egypt as being particularly oppressive. And if there are oppressive things about it, then there were things that were being changed, from within, anyway, as society developed, and as more women had to go out to work, and so on. So things were developing in an organic way from within, and that's really how I see it. And I really regret—and this was what I was trying to say—that I regret that there is this powerful drive, as it were, to see Islam as essentially an anti-women religion, because at core it isn't, and because I think that actually puts back the case of women.

And to take one very telling example, the whole question of clitoridectomy, of genital mutilation, or circumcision for girls—now this is a practice which was widespread in Egypt and in the Sudan and further down in Africa. In Egypt we had a movement against this practice, starting in the thirties when the women's societies started forming. And so you had an indigenous movement against this practice, and it was starting actually to take root, and the practice was starting to be less widespread. And we had even the religious speakers, Imams, saying that this was not an Islamic practice—that this was an African practice and it's not Islamic—witness Muslims in Turkey, Iran, and so on, don't do it, and therefore it is not part of religion. That was important, because then people could see that in order to be good Muslims they didn't have to do this. And the movement was really taking hold, and it was, in fact, the minister of health who outlawed the operation. Some people saw that as good, some people saw it as bad, because it would drive the practitioners into back alleys.

But then with the big drive, there was a big women's and family planning conference that was held in Cairo five years ago, and it was an international conference, and one of their great big banners was about clitoridectomy, and this whole issue became connected in people's minds with the West trying to impose its views on Egypt and on Muslim countries. And it got tied in with all the things that they don't want about the West. And therefore you actually had a backlash, and you had more people going back to doing it—whereas if it had just been left alone, it was going to go. We were working at it.

And so this business of, you know, our sisters abroad taking up our fight for us, in a way that is not entirely in tune with the way that the mass of people think, actually does harm to the causes that it promotes. It's a very subtle point, and it seems very difficult. Who was it, some completely unlikely person—Ted Turner of CNN—just suddenly came out with a statement in which he cites world poverty and genital mutilation in Egypt as causes that he wants to stamp out! Well, you just want to say, just go away, we'll do it in our own time.

**PB** *I think one of the beautiful things about the book is the way, in fact, it does allow outsiders to actually enter the woman's experience of that traditional Egypt, and to perceive its richness—and that there is a whole community and a culture and a way of being and sharing things, and a society, in a sense, which may happen at that date separately, but it doesn't lack anything, it isn't poverty-stricken in any way, I think, and that was an important dimension of the book for me.*

**Q** *When you were growing up, were you influenced by any famous novelist? Who was your role model?*

**AS** My role model? Well, I read George Eliot and loved her work, so that's as novels go. And then there were two other people. One was an Egyptian writer who was a friend of my mother's. She wrote a book in 1962, or was it 1964? I read it when I was about fifteen. It was called *The Open Door*, and it was the first modern Egyptian novel that would take a modern Egyptian girl as its heroine. It was somebody I could identify with, and the fact that I knew this woman, and that she was a friend of my mum's, and that I used to see her around, and I used to think she was amazingly wonderful...! She used to sit putting one leg under her. Most women sit very decorously, and she—she was a professor of English at the university and she was a leftist, and a member of the opposition to the government, and so on—and yet when she sat down, she'd bend one leg under her. And that seemed so free and casual to me. And also she'd laugh very loudly, and I really adored her. And then there was Colette. I love Colette's novels, and I was always entranced by the freedom she seemed to have—that she worked as a dancer, that she went round the theatres, that she set up a stall selling cosmetics, and meanwhile also wrote these brilliant books, and I just think that's pretty amazing.

**Q** *When you write a novel do you have your own style? Or do you base your work around others' writing, such as nineteenth-century novelists, or twentieth-century novelists?*

**AS** I think that maybe at the very beginning when I was writing my first short stories, one remembered the short stories one had studied, Chekhov and Maupassant and so on, but you find your own voice, really, after a bit, otherwise there's not much point.

So I think what I would say is that I'm not bothered about whether I appear modern or not. I don't mind being part of the nineteenth century, if you like. I like big novels that actually take you into a world, and give you all the details, and make you feel like you really know the characters, and just sort of go on. And I like novels that entertain people. You know, I like a novel that I want to go back to, rather than think "Oh no, better finish that." So those are really my constraints, but within that I'm pretty free.

**PB** *I think perhaps we should leave it here. You've given us a fascinating insight, not only to taste the flavour of the work itself, but the understanding about where it's coming from and the thought that goes behind it all, and some illuminating thoughts, generally, about what it means to write, and what it means to engage with those complex stories that we all share—that the history belongs to all of us, in a sense, those histories cross and re-cross, and we're all involved in different ways. And one of the lovely things for me is that there is that sense of the millennium in the book. You do mention it. The dates are very present. There is the sense of the journalist who is wanting to write something for the millennium, the American young woman, and I was wondering, I think, when I first read it, where is it going to go: is it going to be a terribly bleak ending, or are we going to be left, in a sense, on the cusp of something which is really very sad, where it's very difficult to see any sort of way out, any sort of future—but you somehow manage to be incredibly optimistic without being naively so, and that was something I found very moving too, that there is a sense of impetus into the future, particularly in that sense of generations, and the children.*

**AS** Children are always an image of hope. I just find them enormously moving.

**PB** *Whether it's Horus between Isis and Osiris, as it is in the tapestry which is part of the book too, or whether it's any of us today with our families, I think that sense of the generations coming is something that is a wonderful stimulus. So thank you very much, Ahdaf Soueif.*