In the Eye of the Sun Short Guide

In the Eye of the Sun by Ahdaf Soueif

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Contents

Characters

In the Eye of the Sun is a story about home, a story about enduring ties to family. Soueif delves into the meanings of home, exile, and the various types of relationships an individual has in society through the illuminating portrayals of Asya, her family, and her friends.

The heroine's parents belong to the elite; both are professors at Cairo University. The sophisticated pair have set high standards for themselves as well as their children.

Within their slightly atypical family, boys and girls are equally entitled and strongly urged to pursue higher education. Based on their education and standards, the family ideology blends Eastern and Western customs and manners. Although the governing body of behavioral rules is not drawn from the Koran, traces of religion as well as Egyptian custom are seen here and there throughout the narration and specifically in the parts dealing with Asya's friendship with Saif. Thus Asya is fortunate to enjoy relatively more freedom than her friends Chrissie and Noora, but even her educated parents cannot totally dispense with the restrictive societal norms of the country in which they live.

In a similar way, Asya bears within her character traces of both Eastern and Western upbringing. Having been brought up in an extended family in Cairo, yet exposed to a European lifestyle, she bears affiliations to both cultures as seen in the enduring love she bears for her family and her infatuation with Western culture and freedom. Chrissie and Noora, as well as Asya's few other less intimate friends, share with her the love of freedom and romance. Indeed, as the novel opens they are characterized as a group of naive girls in search of romantic adventures only. As the narration proceeds, however, their attitudes undergo major changes as they confront the hard realities of life, including war with all its drastic effects on their romantic lives. Soueif also highlights the significance of trans-cultural issues in the modern world through Asya's encounter with people of different origins. The people the heroine comes to know in the course of her few travels are people from such diverse countries as Greece, Italy, England, Turkey, and Iran.

Asya's romantic encounter with Saif results in their marriage. Saif, handsome, clever, and successful in his profession, is also a generous, affectionate husband, who does not fail to call Asya "princess" any time he talks to her. Yet like any other realistically portrayed character, Saif too has his own flaws, the most important of which is his failure to address the outstanding problem in their marriage as well as his selfish preference to pretend that all is well between them. Saif is, moreover, a smart manipulator of women, not particularly in favor of adopting the traditional, chauvinistic tools of his class, but rather in command of more sophisticated methods of exploitation. Knowing how to behave and how to make them fall in love with him, he even succeeds in making Asya—who has a much broader vision than him—feel intellectually his inferior.

Gerald, on the other hand, is a foil to Saif's character in every possible way. Awkward and unrefined, the Englishman does not reveal a single trace of Saif's sophisticated taste and manners. Asya initially responds positively to his interest in her, as she was experiencing sex for the first time in her life with him. Yet from the beginning of their illicit affair, Asya knows that her uncouth lover, selfish and exploitive as he is, can never take the place of her sophisticated husband in her life. As the affair proceeds, Asya discovers that Gerald's unrefined manners are more intolerable than Saif's detached attitude in their marriage.

Gerald is merely a caricature in the novel; he is basically a bridge in unconsciously helping the still inexperienced heroine to come to terms with her natural female impulses and to discover herself.

Social Concerns

Ahdaf Soueif begins her multidimensional novel, In the Eye of the Sun, by reflecting on the cancer operation of Hamid Mursi, Asya al-Ulama's beloved uncle. The introductory episode and a host of other impressive family scenes focusing mainly on the extended nature of the family of Soueif's beautiful protagonist, Asya, are all set against the backdrop of the Arab-Israeli War. As Asya gradually develops from a charming, albeit naive girl into a more mature and well-educated young woman, the detailed dynamics of her relationships with parents, siblings, friends, husband, and, subsequently, lover, are all defined and colored by the complicated Middle East situation.

Regional politics in general and Egyptian politics in particular parallel the events in Asya's personal life. The author implies that vital experiences such as love, friendship, and education in the life of her protagonist are inseparable from what takes place on the larger scale of international politics and conflicts. It is undoubtedly politics that ultimately affect the lives of the novel's characters—as conspicuously highlighted in the lives of the partners of Asya's beloved girlfriends, Chrissie and Noora. In a 1999 interview with Joseph Massad of the Journal of Palestine Studies, Soueif comments on how politics are intermingled with all other issues in the novel: In the bildungsroman, in Asya al-Ulama's life, there is a large event, which is the 1967 War. She is also a child of the revolution and is shaped by it, but these are not the central problems of her life. [Asya's] awareness, her consciousness is much more about her personal predicament, what she's going to do with her life.

However, in the continuation of the same interview, Soueif states that politics take on a more fundamental role in her second novel, The Map of Love, functioning as the most "essential part of the engine that drives it," mainly because the novelist's more mature pen has come explicitly to describe how politics has become the most decisive element in our lives at the dawn of the twenty-first century (1999).

As the narration proceeds, however, the analogy assumes greater sophistication. The macrocosmic feud between Arabs and Israelis and the implicit note of anti-colonial cri tique in the course of the political events dealt with in the novel will function as an efficient metaphor for explaining the nature of Asya's perplexing relationship with her husband, Saif, and her British lover, Gerald. Thus, while in the midst of an illicit relationship with Gerald in England, Asya asks him: "Why have all your girl-friends been from 'developing' countries?" As Gerald does not agree in principle with her perspective, she continues, "The reason you've gone to Trinidad—Vietnam—Egypt— is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss—you are a sexual imperialist." Asya's marriage to Saif and her affair with Gerald, her physical as well as emotional relationship with both men in her life can ultimately be more comprehensively interpreted as parallels to and consequences of devastating international politics.

Owing to the novelist's exact portrayal of Egypt's troubled situation, one can consider the narration as a substitution of any faithful coverage of the country's political history over the last thirty years. This historic account becomes ever more fascinating by the

fact that it is being narrated from the viewpoint and consciousness of a sensitive young woman not eminently preoccupied with politics, but rather drawn to it inevitably by its presence at all levels of society.

The Arab-Israeli War with all its drastic social, economic, and political consequences is masterfully interwoven into the life stories of the characters in the novel, lending greater weight to what could have been merely a mundane romance.

On a more social level, Soueif's realistic and detailed portrayal of everyday events in the lives of Asya, her family, and her friends opens an illuminating window into the culture, tradition, and customs of the Egyptian people, particularly the Egyptian middle class. The novel's graphic descriptions of houses, hotels, streets, and sights, as well as memorable accounts of weddings and funerals highlight the fundamentally different lifestyles of the social classes at each extreme—the rich and the poor—and consequently elucidate their social and economic distance.

Drawing upon the lives of the members of the al-Ulama family with their Muslim background, educated, familiar with, and immersed in Western culture, Soueif juxtaposes Egyptian and European lifestyles, emphasizing the smoothness of one such blending. In other words, the family's adaptation to the European lifestyle, considered from this perspective, is not a mechanical process; it is by no means superimposed on their Eastern way of living. While Asya and her friends enjoy the Western manner of socializing with friends of the opposite sex, they are also obliged to observe and respect — though reluctantly, especially in Chrissie's case—the societal norms upheld by their upper-middle-class parents immersed in their rich Eastern tradition.

Exploring the limitations of the lives of today's Arab women in a Moslem country as well as abroad is undoubtedly of the novelist's most significant concerns. The feminist note of protest revolves mainly around the incompatibility between a woman's emotional desires and the space society allows her for self-exploration and self-expression. Soueif masterfully places Egyptian society against its more secular counterpart in Europe to highlight the restrictive codes operating and controlling Arab women's lives in their own countries.

However, the novelist succeeds in balancing the appeals and limitations of both cultures by repeatedly stepping back to comment on events in Asya's life. In other words, as Edward Said aptly observed in his review article in the Times Literary Supplement, "Soueif does not in the end fall for the East versus West, or Arab versus European formulas. She renders the experience of crossing over from one side to the other, and then back again, indefinitely without rancour or preachiness" (1992).

In the Eye of the Sun is also a story about England. Asya's decision to do her doctoral studies at a university in northern England leads the protagonist to a series of unforgettable encounters with the British people and environment. Having left her country, family, and husband behind, Asya suffers increasingly from pangs caused by the cold climate of the English countryside and the bleak atmosphere of the institution where she has chosen to study. Among the most memorable scenes of the novel are

Asya's first night in the dormitory and her initial encounter with her supervisor, both of which unfold contrary to expectation. Yet as her stay in England is prolonged and she makes herself comfortable at her cozy little cottage, much of the bleakness of the place subsides to the background. It is, moreover, during her residence in England and in the course of brief visits to countries such as Italy that Asya gets the chance to meet with people of a variety of nationalities and cultures.

Among the other main concerns of the novelist is elucidation of the generational culture gap experienced by characters in the story. The novel, like its predecessor, Naguib Mahfouz's The Cairo Trilogy, embraces the lives of three generations with warm references to the past. Throughout the narration, Asya's marital situation and her relationship with Saif is paralleled with the relationship between her parents as well as her grandparents. Although of a different kind, the lack of mutual understanding persists in Asya's marriage and results in its sad disintegration while her grandparents continued to live together. The cultural gap between the second two generations of the al-Ulama family, however, is narrower than the one in the other Egyptian families portrayed in the novel, mainly due to the former's more sophisticated way of thinking. Thus both Chrissie and Noora have problems communicating with their families because their parents are not open enough—as contrasted with the al-Ulama family—to empathize with the problems their daughters experience. Asya's parents similarly insist on a long period of courtship before the couple can finally get married; an arbitrary condition that Asya considers as the main cause of the subsequent deterioration of her marriage. Asya says to her mother: "And anyway, you always want to minimize things. When I was desperately in love with him and terribly wanted to marry him it was, 'Oh, it can't be that bad. What's wrong with waiting till you graduate?'"

Yet in addressing the question of Asya's education, her parents are presented as liberal like any other sophisticated pair of parents, while for Chrissie's father, for instance, education is mainly a tool to control his unruly daughter whenever she deviates from the family's accepted norms of behavior. Thus Chrissie is banned from attending university on the false grounds that she is having a friendship with someone of the opposite sex.

Techniques

Among the most interesting and effective techniques Soueif uses in her novel is the incorporation of real events in the body of her fictional account, primarily to add credibility to the story she is narrating.

Parallel to the turmoil in the Middle East and the implicit reference to the unreliability of the politicians involved in the events of the time, the novelist tells the story of Asya's encounter with Saif and later with Gerald, thus commenting on the unreliable characters of both men.

The way. these extraneous political events are inserted into the narrative flow is yet another fascinating technique adopted by Soueif. The novelist's documentary coverage of the war in the Middle East and the journalistic method of incorporating them into the life story of her beautiful heroine is, in fact, quite revolutionary. By adopting this method, Soueif seems to be implicitly referring to the significance of these events in the life of someone as immature and uninterested in politics as Asya al-Ulama— a character who is initially introduced to us as a naive, romantic young woman only waiting to fall in love. The heavy journalistic coverage of the events of the war interrupt the narrative flow and make it quite tedious and difficult to follow. This technical flaw does, however, embody a symbolic significance in highlighting the disrupting character of war in real life. In other words, does not war as a disturbing external factor also interrupt the everyday routine of real people's lives? In this connection, and in the 1999 interview with Massad, Soueif says: I used to think that maybe I, as the writer, had not found the ideal way of merging the political information necessary for this book into the narrative. That the method I chose—of cutting to documentary, as it were—was not ideal. Now, I wonder if it would have been possible to do it any other way. How do you integrate something that is, in a sense, extraneous to the inner life of your characters?

Parallel to the blocking function of the documentary pieces in the narration is the detailed, tedious description of Asya's Ph.D.

dissertation. The considerable amount of space thus allotted to these details symbolically reflects the importance of education in Asya's life, as discussed earlier in the course of this analysis.

In the discussion of the techniques used by the novelist, the blurring line Soueif draws between fiction and reality is also worthy of consideration. The notion of life not being a fictional narrative is central to the novel as the more important people in Asya's life, i.e. Gerald, Saif, and Lateefa, keep reminding her. All three characters, under different circumstances, of course, point out to Asya that her life is not a narrative and that she is not one of the many characters in the stories she knows as a student of English literature. In reply to Asya's complaint that she has become Saif because he is always in her mind, her mother says: "Asya, stop it. This is not a novel: this is your life." In a

similar way, Gerald reminds her that all of her ideas are second hand and "derived from art—not life."

One strong point of Soueif's technique as a popular novelist is her insistence on presenting her characters through long, interesting dialogues. The novelist's close attention to detail in the lives of her characters owes much to the impossibility of distinguishing between details and non-details in a person's life. In close connection to this philosophy, she often shifts the reader's attention from the main events in the life of her heroine to marginal characters, the details of whose lives seem not necessarily related to the major events in the narration.

Yet she succeeds in balancing the two-sided movement between the central and peripheral characters by placing them in long, lifelike and entertaining dialogues. "Actually, when I'm doing dialogue, I sort of hear it in my head" says Soueif herself in the interview with Massad (1999). The high caliber of these conversations may well be owing to this natural gift of the novelist.

A highly resourceful technique is the flamboyant use of letters and diaries that contributes to the author's "sophisticated use of stream of consciousness" (1999), as highlighted in "The Politics of Desire in the Writings of Ahdaf Soueif." Massad writes in the same article: the goal of incorporating a variety of narrative kinds is "to contextualize, layer, and interrupt the narrative, creating prose of shimmering complexity."

Themes

In the interview with Massad of the Journal of Palestine Studies, Soueif herself has classified In the Eye of the Sun as a "classical novel of education" (1999). The novel's main theme, no doubt, is the coming of age of a beautiful young Arab woman and her efforts to make her existence meaningful.

This theme, coupled with a host of other related and delicately treated subjects, runs throughout the narration and produces a network of interesting episodes in the life of a protagonist in search of happiness. Issues of friendship, love, and happiness are among the most conspicuous motifs Soueif touches upon through the portrayal of her heroine.

As a woman in general and as an Arab woman in particular, Soueif presents Asya as a character striving to come to terms with her natural female impulses. The novel explores the boundaries of love and sex through the touching and painful scenes between husband and wife and between the two lovers. Asya's marriage incorporates the most essential ingredient of any ideal marital relationship, i.e. love. However, the couple cannot physically relate to each other.

Despite Asya's constant endeavors to overcome the barrier between Saif and herself, the problem persists until she decides to consummate her desire with the vain Englishman, Gerald, who claims to be madly in love with his beautiful "Egyptian butterfly." With him, Asya experiences sex for the first time, but as the relationship proceeds she discovers that it lacks the one essential ingredient, love. By highlighting the difference between love and desire as manifested in Asya's respective relationships with Saif and Gerald, Soueif explores the gulf that exists between the partners in a marriage and the mere carnal nature of the relationship between Asya and Gerald in their illicit affair. In Asya's own words, "She wants to be in love. She wants to be making love, to be wanting to make love and doing it." Asya's quest to combine love and desire in either relationship fails, and the bitter lesson she learns in this regard is of the most central issues in the novel.

In the Eye of the Sun is about a journey, a journey from immaturity to adulthood, from naivete to self-realization; a journey from Egypt to England and then back again to Egypt to reach self-fulfillment. The novel addresses the important issue of identity: what is it to be a woman in the East as well as in the West? Who is Asya al-Ulama as a modern Egyptian woman and one in search of happiness? To whom among her contemporaries is she compared and how realistic and justified are her views in life? In the long run, how does Asya succeed in reconciling her emotional, physical, and professional expectations with the facts of her life? The story's central focus, therefore, is to answer these questions by way of delving into the slightest events in the life of the heroine in the process of her growing up. The lesson Asya learns and the story of her gaining experience in life are symbolically dealt with in the epilogue of the story and in a moment of epiphany reflecting on the recently discovered stone figure dating from the time of Rameses the second; a statue of a woman who is "delivered back into the

sunlight still in complete possession of herself—of her pride, and of her small, subtle smile."

Another important theme for Soueif is the question of prioritizing love and duty and the importance attached to education in an individual's life in the modern world.

Education in its literal sense is the key to understanding the story. The novel's chronological order—after the introductory scenes in London and through the use of flashback— begins with Asya in her teens and in the grip of exam fever, getting ready for the Thanawiyya, and eventually her post-secondary education. After completing college and marrying Saif, Asya is to make one of the most crucial decisions in her life: would she be ready to leave her husband and home behind to pursue her doctoral degree in northern England, and what would be the consequences of such a decision in regards to her marriage? The significance thus attached to education is, from this perspective, highlighted by the challenging thin line Soueif draws between love and education in the life of her heroine. Once Asya's decision is made and during her stay in England, the heroine is seen in a continuous struggle to finish writing her dissertation. Throughout this part of the novel, the tedious nature of the work is emphasized by the detailed accounts of the mechanical task of grouping different types of metaphors as the raw material for that dissertation. Among the most memorable scenes in the novel, indeed, is the short trip Asya's mother, Lateefa, makes to England to help her daughter out of an emotional dilemma and to urge her, at the same time, not to lose her focus on the task at hand, regardless of her critical emotional crisis.

The novel ends with Asya having attained her goal. With a Ph.D. in linguistics, the heroine is presented to the reader happy, satisfied, and "still in complete possession of herself" in spite of all the hardship she has come to experience during the long years of studying: a broken-up marriage, mixed feelings of affection and sorrow for her ex-husband, and remorse and regret for having indulged in the illicit relationship with her uncouth English lover, Gerald.

Key Questions

The variety of subjects dealt with by Soueif in In the Eye of the Sun opens it to a comprehensive analysis addressing issues as diverse as love, desire, and sex; friendship and trust; meanings of home and exile; duty and obligation to one's family; the ultimate value of education; the gulf between husband and wife, rich and poor, and younger and older generations; and, of course, politics at its coldest and most brutal reality. The following are among numerous possible questions that can help a reader better comprehend and elaborate on the exact nature of the novel.

1. What do you think could be the main reason Asya and Saif's marriage deteriorates, despite the fact that they love one another?

2. How does Asya herself regard her adulterous relationship with Gerald Stone?

Does she try to justify it at any point in the course of the narration?

3. What exact parallels exist between politics operating on the regional/international level and those that shape the relationship between Asya and her husband, and later on, her lover?

4. What is the significance of Asya's completion of her dissertation in relation to one of the main themes of the novel?

5. Why are the details in Soueif's work often perceived to be as important as the main events?

6. How important are Asya's parents in her life? What issues are longstanding and irreconcilable between the two generations? How are the outstanding issues between Asya and her parents different from similar problems Chrissie and Noora have with their families?

7. What Soueif is implicitly seeking to impart in this novel is the impossibility of including love and sex at the same time in any relationship. Apart from Asya, do any other characters in the novel have the same predicament?

8. How is In the Eye of the Sun different from its literary predecessors, especially the nineteenth-century novels credited with having directly influenced the novelist?

9. How can the symbolic scene at the end of the novel be related to the story's main theme? In other words, what is the significance of the long-buried statue?

10. How do you think Soueif mainly succeeds in bridging the superficial gap between West and East? Which characteristics in Soueif's heroine contribute to the novelist's goal of reconciling the two cultures?

Literary Precedents

With the publication of her fictional works, Ahdaf Soueif is among the very few Arab authors who write in English and have succeeded in gaining world-wide fame.

Her work has been translated into Arabic as well as Dutch, French, German, and Italian, gaining her a recognition achieved by only few other writers in the Arab world. Among the most well-known Arab men of her profession also writing in English are the Lebanese Jibran Khalil Jibran with his worldwide fame both in the English-speaking world as well as its Arabic speaking counterpart. The Palestinian authors Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and Fawaz Turki, as well as the Egyptian writer Waguih Ghali are the other three main contributors to the group. However, the Egyptian feminist Nawal el Saadawi is generally credited with being the first Arab woman writer to catch the attention of Western readers with her al-Wajh al-ari lilmar'a al-Arabiya (The Hidden Face of Eve) and Woman at Point Zero.

Considering the content of Soueif's first novel, In the Eye of the Sun, which captures the lives of three generations of an Egyptian middle-class family in the midst of the social and political turmoil of the present century, Naguib Mahfouz's The Cairo Trilogy can be considered as the novel's major predecessor. Soueif specifically names Mahfouz as an author with whom she was well acquainted as she was growing up. AlTayyib Salih, Yusuf Idris, and Fathi Ghanim are among the other Arab authors Soueif has particularly enjoyed reading.

An Arab woman novelist Soueif admires is Latifa al-Zayyat. Al-Zayyat's work, alBab al-Maftuh is the first novel Soueif says she could identify with in Arabic. Inayat alZayyat's book al-Hubb wa al-Samt is yet another main source of influence for Soueif and the second book she says she identified with in Arabic. Huda Barakat, Radwa 'Ashur, and, of course, Sahar Khalifa, can be shortlisted as Soueif's favorite writers.

Soueif, however, states that in spite of the attraction Arabic literature has had for her, she has read mostly in English. Writers who have directly influenced her work are "the nineteenth-century novelists—George Eliot, Tolstoy, Flaubert." "Theirs" she explains in the interview with Massad, "are the books that I read when I was growing up and go back to again and again—the books that do for me what I want a novel to do, which is to open up a new world and seduce me into it, to make me feel that I am living there and getting to know these people" (1999). Traces of Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, and Daniel Deronda can be easily detected within Asya's character, and their dilemmas have left decisive marks on the portrayal of the psychological development of Soueif's heroine. Of the novelists the writer explicitly mentions in the abovementioned interview, she feels closest to Colette because of her interest in romance and personal relationships, as well as in the close attention she pays to clothes and makeup, what to Soueif is "all the fripperies that make so much of our lives" (1999).

The motif of journey undertaken as a means of attaining self-actualization is nothing new in the literature of any people.

Arabs among all other nations have witnessed the fictional quests of heroes and heroines since the beginning of their recorded literature. Thus Soueif too, and mainly for reasons discussed previously, sends her heroines on journeys that culminate in illuminating moments of self-realization. Many other works, including al-Tayyib Salih's Mawsim al-Hijra Ila al-Shamal, Tawfiq alHakim's 'Usfur min al-Sharq, Yahya Haqqi's Qindil Umm Hashim, Baba' Tahir's Bi alAmsi Halimtu Bika, deal in a similar way with the central character's psychological quest within the framework of a journey.

Related Titles

Soueif's world-wide fame dates back to the publication of her 1992 novel In the Eye of the Sun. Following the tremendous success of her debut novel, Soueif's first collection of stories, Aisha, which had been published in 1983, brought her more popularity and resulted in the publication of a second collection of short stories entitled Sandpapers in 1996. In the same year, Soueif published Zinat al-Hayyah, a collection of short stories translated into Arabic that won a 1996 literary award. Soueif's second novel and fourth book, The Map of Love, was published in 1999 and was among the titles short-listed for the 1999 Booker Prize for Fiction.

Not only do the characters and events Soueif portrays live on in the mind of the reader once the narrative comes to its end, but also they extend to her subsequent works as well. The central characters Aisha in Aisha, Asya in In the Eye of the Sun and Sandpaper, and to a certain degree Amal in The Map of Love are autobiographical sketches who, according to Massad's interesting observation, share with the author the first letter of their names (1999). By adopting this technique Soueif, of course, seems to be emphasizing the significance of the continuous psychological construction of her characters.

Moreover, in all four works it is either desire or politics that helps shape the lives of her characters and, by so doing, either brings them together or else sets them apart.

The only difference in the function of these two operating engines in her two novels is that desire, according to the novelist herself, is more under control in her latest work, The Map of Love, primarily because she is now more mature. The other reason, in Soueif's own words in the interview with Massad, is that "the late 1960s and 1970s was a time of breaking old conventions and old taboos. Romance and sex seemed to be the focus of general concern, whereas now, it feels as if that's been done and there are more general issues that people are concerned about. Coming close to the end of the century," Soueif adds, "there is also a historical nerve exposed that makes you think in historical terms: to examine where we are and why" (1999).

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