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Aisha, London: Bloomsbury, 1995 (out of print) and **Sandpiper**, by Ahdaf Soueif. London: Bloomsbury, 1996. Hb Pp156. £14.99.

REVIEWED BY SALLY BLAND

Like her life, Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif's fiction spans the cultural divide, moving between Europe and the Arab World, particularly Britain and Egypt. The other main divide she addresses

is that between man and woman. After publishing her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, in 1992, Soueif was singled out by Edward Said among the new generation of Arabs writing in English for her ability to dissect sexual politics.

In the Eye of the Sun also had political-historical overtones, showing a young Egyptian girl coming of age in the time of Nasser and the turmoil of war. Soueif's next novel, *The Map of Love* (1999), was even more ambitious politically and was short-listed for the Booker Prize. A full-blown historical novel, *The Map of Love* spans a century of Egypt's encounter with the West, from the time of British colonialism until the present, counterpoising two cross-cultural love stories.

Even before Soueif gained international recognition, the roots of her twin themes of gender and cultural diversity, the excellence of her prose, and the prototypes of some of her novels' characters were apparent in her short story collections: *Aisha* and *Sandpiper*. Recently, selected stories from these two books have been released by Bloomsbury in a new volume entitled *I Think of You*.

Aisha, who lends her name to Soueif's first collection, appears and reappears at different stages of her life, though not necessarily in chronological order, each story giving a new perspective on her. A precocious child, she grows into an intelligent young woman with great expectations. "The world has undreamt-of possibilities," she believes (p. 79). She anticipates magic, adventure, meaning in life and love, but on her own terms. It is not that she is unwilling, but she is actually incapable of molding herself to fit neatly into the shadow of the man she loves. Yet, this is what is expected of women (and not only in Egypt).

Soueif doesn't tell the reader all this directly. The genius of her writing is that she conveys a strong sense of women's independent being and their need for open, sensitive lines of communication and equal recognition, obliquely, without any overtly feminist fanfare. Though Soueif is obviously an intellectual, the feminism that courses through her writing is not based on rational arguments about what should be. Rather, it seems instinctive, as natural as breathing.

From Aisha's disappointment in love, from her inner conflicts, and the larger picture of conflict between women's needs and social conventions, arises the tension in the stories. Subtly, through small incidents, scraps of conversation, minute reactions and descriptions of natural and man-made settings, Soueif draws her female characters and their emotional world. Aisha and other women in the stories are not unfulfilled because they are unattractive or unloved, but because they are unable to settle for an apparently successful marriage without their spiritual needs being met. This has little to do with abuse, though there are some instances of it, but everything to do with the incompatibility that grows if one's partner is overshadowing, condescending, or self-centered. When Aisha suggests going on an exciting trip with her husband, he replies that he has already done that. "And it was true. He had already done it. He had already done a lot of things. His memories were more vivid to her than her own. She had no memories. She had had no time to acquire a past and in her worst moments, locked up in some bathroom, it had seemed to her that his past was devouring the present" (p. 17).

Some stories highlight how class figures into sexual politics. Overprotected by her well-to-do, highly educated parents, Aisha learns about the facts of life and the battle of the sexes from Zeina, her nanny, whose experience reveals the compromises and devices to which women of lesser means must resort to keep their social standing and marriages intact. Frustrated by her husband's dry scientific certainty and lack of empathy, Aisha also ventures into mysticism, far outside her own social milieu, to attend a zar-like gathering at a saint's shrine, thinking, "Let things come to a head. Let them all know she would do as she pleased and there was no harm in it. Let them know there were more ways of being in the world than the way they chose. And let them know she was not content with the way mapped out for her" (p. 169). Seeking a cure to restore her love for her husband in order to conceive, she gets caught up in the charged

atmosphere of unabashed sensuality and follows a lead that leaves her broken. Overall in these stories, Soueif sets up an interesting contrast to suggest a rethinking of marriage. Marriage is portrayed as necessary for survival and often empowering for women who are unable to go beyond prevailing social norms, but restricting for women who aspire to be independent and creative.

Aisha and her husband reappear in *Sandpiper*, Soueif's second collection of short stories, and are joined by other characters of diverse origins, each giving voice to a specific experience. In these stories, sexual politics are infused with cultural differences, motherhood plays a prominent role, and Soueif's tone is sometimes sharper.

The first story takes place in an expatriate compound in an unnamed oil state, which Soueif uses as a laboratory to explore different faces of the oppression of women, whether from East or West. Another story exposes the potential for sexual abuse within the family and how it can be covered up by a forced marriage. The weakness of the women in these stories sets Soueif's typically strong-willed female characters in sharper relief, and tellingly the stronger women express themselves in a more gentle way, like the woman in *Sandpiper*, the story that gives the book its name.

The beach of Alexandria provides the setting for this most beautifully written story. Looking out to sea, "I was trying to work out my co-ordinates," says a woman who is coming to terms with leaving her husband and thus giving up her daughter. This is not because of any wrong doing on his part; she simply can't fit into the new culture of his family's life style. She cannot "love this new him, who had been hinted at but never revealed when we lived in my northern land, and who after a long absence, had found his way back into the heart of his country" (p. 25). Too late, she realizes that she should have left earlier, when she could have taken her child with her. Now this is impossible, for the daughter is at home in Egypt, and no longer needs her mother. Employing imagery from the sea and the sand, Soueif expresses the organic bonds of motherhood and this woman's sense of loss in an unparalleled fashion. While Soueif's instinctive feminism postulates women's independence, it does not ignore or aspire to dissolve the emotional bonding of family and love, despite the conflict and sorrow this may entail.

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