

“Ahdaf Soueif- Taking on the Modern World’s Challenges”

In the Eye of the Sun, by Ahdaf Soueif
New York: Vintage International, 1994, 2d ed. 785 pages
Reviewed by Patricia F. Roland

This novel delineates a young Egyptian woman’s search for self-knowledge, identity, and independence. Soueif uses as a starting point her heroine’s coming of age as a Muslim in Egypt. The author follows her heroine, Asya, as she moves from the sphere of her native country to a larger, international arena, expanding her circle of reference. In the course of these travels, Asya explores her womanhood, testing her boundaries and capabilities—intellectual, emotional, and sexual—all of which are portrayed candidly.

The novel encompasses various locales including Beirut; Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt; New York; Italy; and England, where Asya attends graduate school. As a counterpoint to the heroine’s maturation, the author uses headlines and press-release-type notations from all over the Middle East to focus on the complex drama unfolding there. Since the novel covers May 1967 through April 1980, there is no shortage of compelling political activity in the Middle Eastern theater: the 1967 Six Day War and the 1970 ousting of the Palestinian Resistance from Jordan, for example.

Another counterpoint used effectively is the insertion of the protagonist’s pursuit of a PhD in linguistics, which coincidentally mirrors the author’s own academic resumé. The author uses the protagonist’s thesis as a metaphor for the latter’s personal development: while Asya deconstructs language to its parts, then analyzes the interplay of those parts, both she and the author use this tearing down and rebuilding to point up the fits and starts in Asya’s own life.

This novel is built around the dynamics of a relationship Asya entered into as a teenager, one condoned by her extended family and that of her intended. As in so many Middle Eastern novels, the protagonist is essentially locked into the relationship early on in life, apparently destined to stay put; and any personal development a young woman can muster will presumably be done from within the boundaries of this situation, in accordance with more-often-than-not strict constraints of both families’

religious beliefs, social standing, *etc.* (Asya’s family, for example, being Egyptian Muslim, upper-class literati).

But in this late-twentieth century scenario, in a world increasingly Europeanized and internationalized, the lives of its inhabitants have necessarily become more complex, and it is incumbent upon them to sort through the complicated issues encountered in the course of daily life. They struggle through the ongoing conflict of traditional versus modern lifestyles/mores, a struggle intensified by all this international boundary crossing, leaping from one culture to another in the midst of political skirmishes. And some of the denizens of this modern world don’t muddle through in the long run: they’re pulled apart and twisted until they can no longer cope, their world implodes. At times, it seems that Asya’s husband may end up as one of these casualties—a victim of the turbulent times and places he visits—while the protagonist shows promise that she’ll manage to not only maintain her integrity, but succeed at establishing her identity in this mutable, confusing world.

The cyclical structure of the novel reflects the idea that the day-to-day life and traditions of one’s family and home country constitute a great wheel that rolls along as life rolls along, ultimately bringing one back around to the things that really matter, that will always be there. What propels life is the transference of this most-valuable legacy from generation to generation, and those familiar stanchions will endure, will be there to support us, whether we choose to acknowledge them or not. Soueif’s description of this all-important day-to-day life evokes the craft of her literary compatriots Naguib Mahfouz, Tawfiq Al-Hakim, and Nawal El-Saadawi.

As the novel develops, the reader realizes that this novel explores more than the usual, straightforward debate of whether the modern Arab woman is right or wrong to discard traditional components of her native culture while moving into the wider sphere of the modern world; one other important thread woven into the tapestry of this story is an examination of the roles played by women and men, a pointed dissertation on sexual politics.

By the end of the novel, the reader is left with this flicker of possibility: Could it be that while the men are so busy mucking about with their power plays—jockeying for financial/social position, and trying to prove that they dominate the sexual battlefield—the women are pushing steadily ahead, quietly discovering and strengthening themselves...proving themselves, in the long haul, to be the conquerors, and men the vanquished—a sort of tortoise and hare scenario?