

Reclaiming the Body: Ahdaf Soueif's *In The Eye of The Sun*

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My Freedom

*I shall carve the words in the earth,
Chisel their sounds
Over every door in the Levant,
Below the slope at every street-corner,
Inside the prison,
Within the torture chamber...*

- Fadwa Touqan, Arab poetess

When Ahdaf Soueif, the Egypt-born British novelist, published her novel *In The Eye of The Sun* in 1992, it was banned in the arab world ostensibly due to its explicit content. As it always happens in such cases, this brought the book greater publicity, and, more importantly, the banning of the novel was seen by many as an act of suppressing the voice of women's self-expression. The novel was read in the original English and came to be known widely. Soueif's explicitness was viewed not as obscene, but as a gesture of self-assertion and rebellion.

Soueif knowingly made a dangerous and radical move in the writing of the novel as she chose to articulate themes and issues about which a tacit silence is observed in Egypt. In the novel, her independent-minded protagonist, Asya, dares to express her desire even though she is brought up in a society where this is considered unthinkable and a matter of shame. To break the stranglehold of appropriations and repressions in a patriarchal society, an acknowledgement of the protagonist's desire and her will to freedom become significant. Soueif focuses on them and by doing so her motivation and purpose are to extract the female body from the obliterating stratagems of Egyptian culture and society.

Even now, the situation in Egypt remains complicated as there are contradictory, even ambivalent, attitudes towards women, many of which are rooted in tribal practices. As a result, in the discourse about gender, women's roles are strictly and rigidly defined. Much of this discourse pertains to the construction and configuration of the female body. In the predominant discourse, even though men and women are considered as complementing each other, women serve a subservient role. Men are supposed to provide sustenance to women, and in return women should be obedient, chaste and faithful. Conjugal relationship is a man's right and a woman's duty, which she cannot refuse.

The Moroccan feminist Fatima Mernissi observes in her book *Beyond The Veil: Male-female Dynamics In A Modern Muslim Society* that in this situation the notion about women's disruptive potential is the key element:

Since women are perceived essentially as carnal beings, their presence provokes fitna (chaos) and disorder. (P. 4)

For patriarchal societies, the public and private spaces are male dominions. The male body defines them with its multiple functions that are economic, political, and intellectual. Therefore, the male body can neither be naked nor shameful. In contrast, women's presence is conceived as an intrusion in the exclusive public and private domains, and as such also viewed as a threat.

In such a situation, the possession and control of the female body is paramount and an important factor to reinforce male dominance. Since in the patriarchal society, the male is the absolute superior, the epitome of perfection, the female body tends to be polarized in negative terms.

In any scenario, where dominance is the ultimate purpose, ideologies are usually manifested in relation to and in terms of the body. Aspects of culture are revealed in the manner in which the body is discussed and represented. The rules and norms prescribed for both male and female bodies represent the cultural values that create the dialectical confrontation between the two.

As the female body becomes the other, it acquires the status of public domain within which interventions occur to reinforce and reaffirm the sense of domination. Rules and norms are prescribed to control and enslave, and to stamp out and suppress any defiance and dissent from the ideological norm. The female body is possessed, manipulated, maimed, and shaped according to entrenched attitudes and beliefs, and the legitimacy for this is always supposed to be provided by customs and traditions, and by religions. Adept and well-versed in the tradition of manipulation, the patriarchal society succeeds in appropriating the female body. One of the ways of doing it is by objectifying and fetishizing it. This is usually done with the specious avowal of the necessity to preserve women's dignity and their sacred status in the hierarchy. And thus elaborate and strict guiding principles are laid down to configure the female body.

Within this rigid power structures of dominance and subservience, possession and possessed, the patriarchal society arrogates to itself the right to code and to brand the female body. As a consequence, guiding principles for the social behavior and conduct of women begin to determine their acts in the minutest detail. The society also goes so far as to define and essentialize female nature - its instincts and desires- to accord with its own preconceived notions.

The direct consequence of all this is that the female body becomes visible only in the form in which it has been constructed in the social, cultural, and discursive practices of the society. It is viewed as abnormal, pathologic, and deviant though still feared for its overwhelming carnality. The strategies to naturalize it include, on one hand, the effort to dichotomize it as sacred and as profane, and, on the other, to put it under erasure. In Egypt, it is this attitude that leads to the sanction of practices like honor killings, virginity tests, the concealment of the female body behind veils, and FGM (Female Genital Mutilation).

These practices may seem as devices and strategies meant to neutralize the sup-

posed and much feared women's- as Mernissi says- disruptive potential in society. But what happens is that the female body is consequently problematized. When girls and women are brought up in a society that constantly inculcates a deeply ingrained feeling of shame towards their bodies, there are devastating effects on their psyche. The culture instills a sense of guilt and sin towards the corporeal self which eventually leads to traumatic feelings about one's worth in life. Further, such cultural practices only tend to encourage low self-esteem and perpetuate lack of confidence in their existence.

Women are forced to observe social codes of behavior and conduct, and their bodies are ordained to follow the societal norms and decrees, all other behavior being considered as deviant and unnatural. In this very obvious misogynist designation, female sexuality is seen as negative, even adversarial and usurping. In Egypt, the quintessential patriarchal society, women's fate is no different and they have to contend with dehumanizing ingrained attitudes.

To contest these attitudes and to change them, feminism began to emerge as a potent force in Egypt since the beginning of the twentieth century. Initially, it was also a part of other social struggles, and invariably joined hands with nationalist forces. In the fifties, after Egypt attained independence, women's rights and feminist issues acquired central importance. This happened because with urbanization and increased educational opportunities for women, there was a shift in socio-demographic patterns, and women began to enter economic work domain regularly, though an awareness of western feminism was also a factor in its own way.

The feminist movement, however, came into conflict with adversaries of different political and religious hues. Not surprisingly, religious fundamentalism proved to be the bitterest opponent, emerging as a strong and cohesive force to denounce feminist aspirations. The fundamentalist discourse that became ascendant in the sixties and seventies was entirely anti-feminist and misogynist.

During this period, feminists like Huda Sharawi, Duriya Shafiq, and Inji Aflatun demanded immediate changes in law so that women could have equal status and respect in society and at home, and could participate in political processes of transformation to a new society. As was the case in the first and second wave feminist movements in the west, their efforts were focused on winning political and legal rights. In the emerging modern nation, women expected to be treated at par with men by law and society. On the cultural front at the same time, throughout this period, poets and writers like Aisha el-Taimuriya, Warda el-Yaziji and Zainab Fawwaz were forging a consciousness about equality and freedom of women.

When women were finally granted the right to vote and contest for parliament in 1956, Rawya Attiya, who became Egypt's first female parliamentarian in 1957, campaigned in military garb, deliberately rejecting traditional women's dress to express her solidarity with the feminist thought that women could neither be configured nor suppressed. Advocating liberation for women, and opposing their corporal and psychological confinement, Huda Sharawi and Saiza Nabarawi removed veils from their faces while attending a conference in Rome as a symbolic gesture of regaining their freedom and the control of their bodies.

In the 1970s, feminist thought was pervasive in Egypt, especially among well-educated and westernized women. Among the new crop of Egyptian feminists, Nawal el-Saadawi, a medical doctor, was a strident voice in the resurgent feminist ideas. She had discovered through her medical practice that many social and cultural practices in her society led to women's physical as well as psychological problems. Her 1972 book *Al-Mara Wa Al-Jins* (woman and sex) documented how the society indulged in violence against women, highlighting fgm as an abominable practice of aggression against female bodies.

Soueif refers to the symbolic significance of the radical gesture of Hoda Sharawi in her essay 'the language of the veil':

[The] image of Hoda Sharawi unveiling in public was present in the school books of Nasser's Egypt, and to us — the school children of the time — the contradiction in it was not immediately apparent. Sharawi was part of the struggle to break free from the grip of a European power, yet she publicly adopted the 'revealed face' code of that same power. (Mezzaterra 270)

With no backlash against Hoda Sharawi, who had relinquished women's customary clothes, or even against Rawya Attiya, who had publicly torn away the veil from her face, women's liberation appeared all set to triumph. Therefore, when Ahdaf Soueif was born in 1950, the position of women in Egypt seemed to be improving. For within a decade, women were acceded the rights to vote, and many of them became part of the workforce. There were great strides in education as well as women were allowed to go to schools and encouraged to be well-educated.

Yet after a brief period of toleration for women's liberation, the age old gender bias against women asserted itself again. Soueif depicts this regress in her essay "the language of the veil":

A picture I'm looking at now shows a leading Egyptian journalist interviewing Indira Gandhi in 1955. The journalist, Amina al-Said, is wearing a sleeveless, almost off-the-shoulder flowered dress. No one thought anything of it. Yet i'd lay odds that no Egyptian journalist working today would allow herself to be photographed so uncovered. Why? What happened? (Mezzaterra 270)

It is obvious that women enjoyed a measure of freedom in the brief transitional period after Egypt's independence. However, even during this period women's bodies remained available for mutilation to the society as ever. Nawal el Saadawi has written about her traumatic experience when she had to undergo fgm at the age of six and after she witnessed her four-year-old sister endure the same fate with the complicity of their mother.

Soueif also witnessed and shared experiences similar to Nawal el Saadawi's. Consequently, she grew up with the realization that for women political and legal victories were small solace until attitudes towards women were completely changed. Her parents were academics, who provided her western education and encouraged her to take up higher studies. That brought her to Britain where she settled after obtaining a doctorate in Linguistics at Lancaster University.

Aware of the experiences of women in her country as well of the work of feminists

like Mernissi and el Saadawi, Soueif became convinced that 'since cultural battles [were] so often fought through the bodies of women,' and seized upon by politicians, fundamentalists, and feminists alike, there was no choice for women but to wage their struggles for liberation and equality through their bodies. In her fiction, this conviction of hers is the driving force, making her novels the expression of her anguish at the cruel treatment of women.

Among her works, *Aisha*, shortlisted for the Guardian Fiction Prize, was her first work depicting lives of young girls and women in the Egyptian society. *Aisha* was followed in 1992 with her first novel *In The Eye of The Sun*, hailed by Edward Said as 'unendingly searing,' her next book was a collection of short stories, *Sandpiper* (1996), in which she showed her sensitivity and perceptiveness in depicting the callous treatment of women in contemporary society. In her second novel, *The Map of Love*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1999, Soueif charted a somewhat different territory depicting love between two set of couples from two different races and cultures.

However, with *In The Eye of The Sun*, Soueif chronicles in uncompromising accuracy the 'sexual politics' of her country. In depicting the efforts of its irrepressible protagonist to escape it, she underscores the difficulties that lie ahead for setting free women's suppressed voice and their brutalized bodies.

The protagonist of *In The Eye of The Sun*, is Asya Ulama, who is born, like Ahdaf Soueif, in 1950. Inspired by the example of her parents, she takes up academics as the chosen career for her. When she meets the computer expert Saif, who is westernized, modern and well-read, she falls in love with him. Initially, she seems to follow the conventional path as she marries a respectable career person. Saif does not consummate the marriage. Asya goes to England to complete her dissertation, while Saif lives in Damascus. Feeling disillusioned and rejected, Asya begins an affair in England with an American student. He loves her just as an exotic being which repulses her and makes her break away from him. After Asya confesses the affair to Saif, who always expected her to behave like other wives in his society, the marriage ends in divorce. Asya realizes that as a woman she is expected to behave in stereotypical manner.

Though contemporary political events form the background of the novel, it is essentially a personal chronicle of a woman, whose life parallels that of the writer herself. The purpose is to provide an insider's perspective on the intimate lives of women in Egypt. The suffering and tragedy of Asya's life stem from the fact that she finds herself unwilling to play the conventional roles prescribed for women in Egyptian society. Refusing to be shaped by her society's stereotypes and prejudices, she decides to break away from their stranglehold by declaring her freedom as a woman and as an individual.

As Soueif grew up in the Egypt of fifties and sixties, she made the shocking discovery that she was living in a society entrenched in rigid patriarchal attitudes. Over the years, social and cultural institutions had developed in which male dominance was the natural order of things. Since women could only conform and accept, they found themselves crushed and humiliated every time they made an effort to struggle against the oppressive power structures. Men's desires and status reigned supreme, and the family determined the life of women.

The protagonist of Soueif's novel, Asya, mounts her own rebellion against the state of affairs by refusing to conform to social norms. She is expected to regulate her desires according to conventions, but she finds this unacceptable and rejects it as an invasion of her privacy and individuality. Asya's mother and father are surprised when she expresses her desire to marry Saif. The personal life of Asya is meshed with the patriarchal family and its social norms, and she does not have the liberty to make her own decisions. Within that framework, Asya's expression of her desire is an act of transgression on her part. For Asya, in fact, this is a step towards regaining her freedom:

But you can't make such an important decision just like that. You can't determine the rest of your life suddenly one night when you are not yet eighteen. And i felt suddenly and for the first time in my life that i was wiser and stronger than she was, and i kissed her and said, "don't worry, mummy. I know what i am doing." (108)

The trepidation of Asya's parents is quite natural. In their society, since women's personal feelings remain unacknowledged, their love and desire become meaningful only in relation to the male. But Asya, educated and westernized, cannot come to terms with the demand of her parents to eradicate her individuality and self. Saif, a creature of the same society, acts, thinks and behaves according to its norms. Asya, who has outgrown it, considers the personal, the private, the self, the individual as sacred and the cornerstone of her existence. She considers love her personal affair, and disregarding social norms wants to consummate her relationship with Saif on an assignation.

Please, Saif, I want you so-'

I want you too, princess, but-

No . Not one day, Saif. Now. Please. You want me. I know you do. And i want you so much. And it's right, I know it's right-'

No, it isn't.'

She sat back. 'Why? Why isn't it?'

'Because we are not married.' (190) .

Saif cannot accept Asya's expression of love and passion as he moves within a rigid domain. When Asya marries Saif, she discovers how patriarchal attitudes and norms have intruded in their lives to wreck their relationship. Within their constricting bounds, Asya discovers relationships beginning to lose their authenticity, since they are no longer based on love and concern. Saif behaves like a patriarch, more and more unconcerned about her needs and feelings, even though he calls her princess and dreams of taking stroll in a garden after many decades as old and happily-married couples.

When she resorts to an affair outside marriage, she finds herself objectified as a female and an odalisque under her American lover's orientalist gaze. The realization dawns on her that as a woman her situation is impossible. She is a victim and a prey of the fraud foisted on her by birth:

It is fraudulent. And the worst sham of all is how they pretend they're normal people with nothing at all odd about their marriage. Not how they pretend to the world- that is necessary- but how they pretend to each other. This is the worst bit. He is living this lie and forcing her to live it too. That's what he is doing-continually. (444)

Since Saif is the quintessential patriarch, only his work and life are important, around which Asya should adjust her entire being to enhance his success and importance. When she tells Saif about the American, he reacts as a conventional husband, incapable of seeing her as an individual and his role in what has happened.

I expected my wife to be loyal. I expected my wife to have some sense of honor. I expected. (623)

As expected of him in such a situation, Saif acts as a brute and gives her a hard thrashing. Asya's mother cries out on seeing her hurt face:

'He did this to you?' she says. 'He did this to you?'... the bruise has faded to a sort of olive green shading off into yellow along the borders; the eye itself is almost completely open again with only one red splotch radiating out from the inner corner. (667) .

This, however, turns out to be symbolic of the fate of women in Egypt if they dare to assert their freedom and feelings. *The Eye of The Sun*, is thus the scorching narrative of the antagonistic and troubling relationships, and the dehumanizing humiliations women have to undergo, whether they conform or whether they rebel.

Asya's unhappiness and estrangement stem from the gap between what is expected of her and how she conducts herself. Her body is appropriated by family and society, its sole function proclaimed to be procreative. As for women motherhood is supposed to be a bliss and the be-all and end-all of their existence, Tante Soraya and Dada Sayyida remind Asya of her duty and define her procreative role in society:

You've always been clever and sweet, Tante Soraya said, 'and now you will give us a beautiful clever sweet little girl just like you and she will be the first grand child in the family just as you were the first child.' Asya had shrugged. Asya had known there was no more to be said. Dada Sayyida filled the little silence. "Children are the ornament of life," truly it was said. Dada Sayyida had seven children, two of them blind. Tante Sorya glanced at Asya's face. "Smooth it out now and stop frowning. This is the greatest gift god can give a human being, and you receive it like this?" (267)

For her family-the proxy for society- Asya does not exist as an individual at all. It is not difficult for her to see how her body has been appropriated, so that her desires and her sexuality are conditioned and constructed to function as a tool in the hand of the patriarchal society:

All your life they tell you - that a woman's sexuality is responsive, a woman's sexuality is tied up with her emotions. Her mother says she has never thought of any man that way except her father. Dada Zeina claims she had never desired any man but her husband - and then only because he had taught her. (390)

Gradually, Asya's defiance and rebellion begin to shape her personality. Wilful, assertive, independent, reflective, demanding, and irrepressible, Asya attains a consciousness that subverts and shatters all stereotypes of women. She becomes an embodiment of selfhood and being that can neither be compartmentalized nor repressed, neither manipulated nor appropriated. Asya knows that she possesses a mind as well as a body-not just a body- and she lets them both speak out truthfully and without compromises with norms and moral conduct constructed by patriarchy.

Deciding to face reality, she dares to question the purpose of her marriage and its impact on her life. She realizes how evil and oppressive the society is that transforms Saif's earlier tender feelings and concern for her into that of brutality. That itself is symptomatic of the malaise in Egyptian society, where men had been conditioned to act that way, and where women are taught to endure their condition without demur or protest. Asya's situation and unhappiness derive from the prerogatives the patriarchal system arrogates itself to devise a formulation of an individual, laying down elaborate rules of conduct, deviance from which brings instant stigma, condemnation, and punishment.

In the novel, Soueif unequivocally reinforces her vision for the dignity and individuality of women, that in no small measure depend on women's right and claim over their own feelings and bodies. To emphasize this, she introduces the taboo subject of female desire and sexuality. When Asya confesses her affair to her mother, she tries to instil a sense of guilt and shame in her, which Asya forthrightly rejects:

'No. I don't It's as if sleeping with him is - private- it's my business...'

'What do you mean it's your business? Isn't it a matter of concern to your husband if you sleep with another man?'

'But Saif doesn't care about me in that way - anymore.' (568)

She has reached that conclusion neither impulsively nor just to ease her conscience. It is a considered decision. In a moment of liberation and self-assertion after her experiences, her mind interrogates the cruelty and crudity of social injustices and hypocritical conformity. Rejecting all conventional ideas about life, she decides to leave Saif who "is no longer her friend or any part of her life." (775)

Soueif depicts a revelatory moment in Asya's life when her entire being cries out against the social injunctions meant to erase women's individuality, mind and soul: All of life reduced to this? Finally, she makes the momentous decision of her life with the words: I am not going with anyone. I don't want to go with anyone. I want to go on my own. (717).

Eventually, Soueif's endorsement of Asya's painful resolve to go on her own becomes the guiding principle for women in a society like Egypt. It is the only means available to them to regain their dignity and individuality as well as the freedom for and control of their body, mind, and soul.

Ahdaf Soueif self-consciously commits an act of sacrilege in revealing how cultural practices that prevail in Egyptian society legitimize barbaric treatment of women. Writing from personal experiences in her own life, she depicts the complicity of the entire society in observing silences that perpetuate the dehumanized status of women. *The Eye of The Sun*, provides fictionalized illustration of how a woman's individuality is crushed and battered continuously and consistently as she grows up. In the novel, after Asya becomes a teacher, she comes across a girl student who wants to learn English, the language of her colonial master: 'I want to learn the language of my enemy.' at this, her fellow student, another girl, reminds her of the stark fact of her existence. She tells her that 'she cannot speak. . . . Because the voice of a woman is an awra.' the Arabic word *Awra* derives from the semantic root *awr*, and one of its multiple mean-

ings is 'nakedness,' to which Soueif alludes in the scene. If a woman speaks, it is as if she is stripping off her clothes- it is an obscene gesture. And so a woman has no choice but to remain silent, or have her voice suppressed.

In another scene in the novel, Asya recalls an incident from her childhood, now perhaps less humiliating because she has rebelled against her family to regain her freedom:

Daddy would freak out if I just shook my head in front of the mirror. Remember the day he saw me tossing my hair around when I was ten and I had to go the same day and have it cut? And I had to wear it short for seven years after that until I went to university? And how he came home one day and heard me practicing the zaghrouda and almost sacked Dada Zeina on the spot? (351)

Zaghrouda is a kind of cry uttered by Egyptian women to express their happiness and joy, but Asya's father is not willing to let her even learn that. Even if the girl is ten years old her voice is obscene and must be stilled, and her hair must be cut or made invisible for within the order of the day she is an aberration to be kept under control.

Since a patriarchal system deems women's independence menacing, and considers their bodies to be shameful, it seizes the female body and inscribes its self-devised discourses on it to keep women enslaved and immersed in self-disgust. Soueif refuses to accept this repressive culture in which the identities of women are erased through institutionalized practices. She makes the protagonist of *The Eye of The Sun*, to not only assert her right on her body, but transforms her into a radical anarchist so that she is wilful enough to voice her desire. Here Soueif considers economic independence crucial for as Asya begins to earn she becomes self-contained and powerful. She refuses to be pinned down as an object under the male gaze, and with her assertiveness deflects and reverses it.

Soueif demonstrates that once women are able to disentangle their formulated embodiments from the oppressive web of relationships, the recovery of their real self and individuality becomes imminent. To achieve a "complete possession of herself" is a sacred duty and an essential goal for every woman, even if that happens at the cost of enduring lifelong loneliness and sadness.

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