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History, Vision and Narrative in Ahdaf Soueif's The Map of Love

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Abstract

In *The Map of Love*, Ahdaf Soueif describes the liberation of the post-colonial subject as a palimpsest of competing claims, histories and painful dismemberments that cannot be separated from painful memories. She weaves post-colonial perspectives on history, memory and hybridity and writes a revisionist and contrapuntal history of Egypt. In this post-colonial novel, Soueif relates two cross-cultural love stories, which are set in different centuries, and structures them as doubles. The story of Anna Winterbourne and Sharif al-Baroudi passes in England and colonial Egypt after the Omdurman War (1898) and continues till 1913. The story of Isabel Parkman and Omar Ghamrawi takes place in contemporary Egypt and USA in 1997. Amal, sister of Omar, integrates the stories and acts as the author-character. In this historically dense novel, the story moves between colonial past and post-colonial present to emphasise overlapping histories, national insecurities and new forms of colonialism.

Keywords: Ahdaf Soueif, Contrapuntal History, Omdurman War, Post-Colonialism, Overlapping Histories, Memory

The Defeat of Narrative by Vision: Edward Said and History

While discussing T. E. Lawrence as Orientalist-the-agent, the concern of Edward Said is the defeat of narrative by vision and his main contention is that there is an insurmountable conflict in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* between a holistic view of the Orient (stable) and a narrative of events in the Orient (unstable). Said describes the monumental and descriptive knowledge on the Orient

*This study is based on my unpublished doctoral thesis.

as the holistic view and observes that the Orientalist stands before the unresisting Orient seeing it panoramically and knowing all of it (Boehmer, 2005, 68) in a way that no Oriental can possibly know. At the centre of his discussions is the comprehensive vision of the Orientalist now turned into a kind of an agent with Lawrence whose personal experiences become an effective and useful knowledge feeding and changing the scientific codes of Orientalism. Said calls this vision synchronic essentialism because if the Oriental is shown to move or develop in the narrative pattern, this compellingly suggests that “diachrony is introduced into the system” (Said, 2003, 240). Curiously then, the essential, unchanging and stable Orient of the Orientalist discourse becomes unstable with history in the form of narrative.

The vision of the Orientalist-as-agent reveals that there is a constant pressure whose source is narrative. Instability in the narrative of the Orientalist shows that history is possible *in* and *for* the Orient and that narrative itself, which is history, reveals that the vision of the Orientalist is insufficient. By comparing the visions of Edward William Lane and T. E. Lawrence, two distinct Orientalists of 19th and 20th centuries, Said shows that, unlike Lawrence, Lane perceives the dangers of narrative and consciously prefers the monumental form of encyclopaedic vision whereas in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* there is a visible conflict between narrative history and vision. Lawrence's Orientalist vision is betrayed by his own imperial narrative that is full of historical inaccuracies and Brandabur and Athamneh also remark that in such imperial narratives “the static perception or “vision” of the Orientalist is constantly threatened by the actualities of the Orient that is contained in the narrative” (Brandabur & Athamneh, 2000, 321). Lawrence thinks that he makes the Orient enter history, but Said shows that his vision defeats his narrative and this perspective shapes what Said will later term as contrapuntality.

Said underlines that Lawrence's writing symbolically shows how the passive, indifferent, lifeless and forceless Orient is first stimulated into action and then an essential Western shape is imposed upon its mobility (Said, 2003, 240). In *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, the Orient is contained in a personal vision that retrospectively includes a sense of failure and betrayal (Said, 2003, 241). It is crucial to see that the Arab Revolt has importance because Lawrence, the Orientalist-as-agent, gives it a meaning. Unlike the secular Orientalists of the 19th century, the fake Muslim Lane for example, the Orientalist-as-agent becomes the representative Oriental in the 20th century who carries an unresolvable conflict of identity. He is self-conscious of his duplicity and sees himself as both the White Man and the Oriental. More importantly, Lawrence's personal voice becomes history with *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and Orientalism is transformed from academic to instrumental with material

ends. He is now the Orientalist prophet and is the representative man of his culture. Lawrence is a policy maker and he no longer sees himself as part of the Orientalist brotherhood. With Lawrence, Orientalism of the 20th century becomes an instrument of policy by which the West continues interpreting itself for itself and rationalising itself to itself and the Orient to itself (Said, 2003, 253), (Boehmer, 2005, 95), (Burke & Prochaska, 2004, 136). Nonetheless, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* demonstrates a conflicting duality that Said describes as the defeat of narrative by vision.

This idea in Said's celebrated *Orientalism* is carried to *Culture and Imperialism* with the theories of Raymond Williams and is at the basis of Said's description of consolidated vision which shows that the paraphrasable imperial content is repeated, maintained, consolidated and copied in and through the culture of the Empire; thereby culture is/as imperialism. Said observes that colonialism (and Orientalism) is recognisable in the cultural formations of the West because it is consolidated through the culture of the West. For him, the culture of any nation is not free of worldly affiliations and literature cannot be cut off from history. His emphasis is that there is no pure past and this can be discerned by writing intertwined and overlapping histories and by contrapuntal reading. With these in mind, the understanding in the present study is that the defeat of narrative by vision in Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* informs what Said later describes as consolidated vision. In this vein, this paper critically looks at how Ahdaf Soueif deconstructs contradictory Orientalist visions with a re-imagined and contrapuntal history in *The Map of Love*. In this post-colonial novel that historicises the period before and after the Arab Revolt, Soueif shows that the stable Orient of Lawrence, and Lane, is unstable and that the history of the West and the Arab Near East overlaps.

Interpretations of the Present: Appeals to Past

Ahdaf Soueif indicates that the only resource of Edward Said while writing *Out of Place*, a historical narrative, is memory and upon being diagnosed with a chronic lymphocytic leukaemia, he returns to his past, Palestine and Cairo (Soueif, 2004, 251). Correspondingly, Said says that "Appeals to past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present", and that what initiates these appeals is "not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past is really past" (Said, 1994, 1). For him, past informs and implies the present and neither past nor present can be understood alone. Said relatedly emphasises that European imperialism is a shadow in contemporary history and the imperial past is not contained within itself because it entered, almost always violently, into the reality and history of

hundreds of millions of people who shared it as a memory, like himself. Imperialism still exercises power and there is no after to colonialism and, to attest to this, Soueif's *The Map of Love* travels between past and present and it is considered a "tour de force of revisionist metahistory of Egypt in the twentieth century" (Malak, 2005, 128). Past is not over in this novel and it continues to have a shaping influence in the present. With its inquisitive approach to history, *The Map of Love* shows that the problems in the past deeply influence present actualities because, as Said states, "there can be no escapes from history" (Said, 1994, 23).

The Map of Love fictionalises post-colonial debates and novelises the overlapping experience of the Westerners and Orientals. Or, as Said describes, "the interdependence of cultural terrains in which the colonizer and colonized co-existed and battled each other through projections as well as rival geographies, narratives, and histories" (Said, 1994, 22). The reconstruction of history in the novel is based on a contrapuntal reading and writing practice that deconstructs the privilege of the West as the sole historical agent. Soueif destroys the dangerous distinction between the centre and the margin to create an interweaved, complex and contrapuntal narrative tied to multiple consciousnesses. The embrace of intersections, of voices, narratives, contradictions and memories unsettles genre borders in *The Map of Love* and it characteristically depicts post-colonial views of language, history and identity.

The Map of Love emerges as a remarkable historico-political text out of the transformative power of memory and it strongly emphasises post-colonial subject's powerful interpretation of written records that is considered a metropolitan and imperial right and act. It can thus be argued that, although hybridity is strengthened and celebrated as a theme in the novel, contrapuntality describes its central argument and informs its historical understanding. To attest to this, Orientalism appears on the book's suggested further reading page and Boccardi indicates that Said's work is "especially resonant with the political and narrative project of *The Map of Love*" because of "his insistence on the discursive nature of Orientalism, whose textual production accounts for a significant part of the imperial archive" (Boccardi, 2009, 107). The importance of *The Map of Love* is its appropriation of the Orientalist discourse and the deconstruction of its essentialism and ahistoricity.

The Map of Love: Contrapuntal Reading and Post-Colonial Rewriting

As an archive of resistance to the British Occupation, *The Map of Love* develops into what Said describes as a comparative novel of imperialism with its contrapuntal history that “destabilise[s] the homogeneity of the archive” (Boccardi, 2009, 110). It is the Empire writing back; the voyage in. It is a difficult novel to grasp because of its historically dense portrayal of Arab nationalism and Egypt’s struggle for self-government that is Egyptian in character, but not distinctly Arab. The effect of this contrast is to show the special place of Egypt for the British Empire and it is necessary to look at, in Said’s criticism, the imperialist rhetoric that orientalises Egyptian Arabs. The present study is therefore informed by Said’s discussions of Arthur James Balfour, Lord Cromer, T. E. Lawrence and Edward William Lane who haunt Soueif’s fiction.

The Map of Love novelises Egypt as a palimpsest with key moments in the history of the nation and Soueif gives a dense depiction of the Occupation of Egypt after the ‘Urabi Revolt (1882), the Omdurman War (1898), the Mahdist Revolt in Sudan (1891) and the al-Nahda movement. The private and the public intersect in the novel and history is transmitted through fragile, personal and traditionally female narratives like diaries, letters and testimonies that turn into a strikingly powerful historical archive. In this neo-Victorian novel, the story travels between late Victorian and Edwardian England and modern day Cairo with Amal, Anna and Layla as multiple narrators. One of the most important purposes of the novel is to critically consider the presence of the past in contemporary history (D’Alessandro, 2011, 31), and to show this, Soueif creates a dual narrative which makes the text contrapuntal and the history that it rewrites a palimpsest.

Palimpsest is originally a term for a piece of parchment on which several inscriptions are made before earlier ones are erased. The traces of earlier inscriptions exist despite erasures and overwritings which make texts dense and layered. Palimpsest suggests a historical understanding because the aspects of a pre-colonial culture and the experience of colonisation affect the developing cultural identity of post-colonial societies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2013, 190-192). Palimpsest also shows how space is transformed into place. As Bill Ashcroft states, “The concept of palimpsest begins to undermine the spatiality of place and the priority of the boundary by re-embedding time and space, history and location, through the agency of language” (Ashcroft, 2000, 155). Robert Young describes the process of palimpsestual inscription and reinscription as “an historical paradigm that will acknowledge the extent to which cultures were not simply destroyed, but rather layered on top of

each other” which makes their translation “into increasingly uncertain patchwork identities” (Young, 2005, 164). For Young, the British Empire did not erase or destroy a culture, but tried to graft a colonial superstructure on it, which is different from deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation.

As a post-colonial palimpsest, *The Map of Love* is a fictional discussion of history and it weaves, as Anna weaves her magical tapestry, the past and the present into a complex narrative. On the one hand, historical characters are fictionalised and fictional characters talk with other fictional characters like Dorothea Brooke. On the other hand, the echoes of a troubling past are heard in contemporary Egypt and the turmoil in the Arab Near East is captured in the novel's contemporary setting that concentrates on US imperialism. It begins with an epigraph from “The Charter” of 1962, the socialist manifesto of the ‘52 Revolution, and the quotation remarkably encapsulates Soueif's purposes. The epigraph introduces the historical scope of the novel and, by opening the novel with a focus on history, Soueif shows that the Orientals, or as Said states, the people without history, “people on whom the economy and polity sustained by empire depend, but whose reality has not historically and culturally required attention” (Said, 1994, 75) resisted the Empire from the beginning. Soueif emphasises that the resistance of the Egyptians; the subject races of Cromer and the Orientals of Balfour, was very powerful.

Edward Said reminds that resistance to the Empire always prevails, but it is very difficult for the post-colonial subject to carry the project further. In its dual narrative, *The Map of Love* fictionalises both the struggle for independence and the failure of the post-colonial subject/state in the path to liberation. This duality creates the political tension of the novel. As Heilmann and Llewellyn state, historical fiction has a strong political resonance for women and ethnic writers (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 2004, 142). Maleh also indicates that the Anglophone Arab discourse in Britain in the past thirty years is heavily female, feminist, politically engaged and diasporic in awareness (Maleh, 2009, 13). *The Map of Love* is politically engaged to a degree that King argues that Soueif sacrifices her characters and story to politics and that the novel's focus is too didactic (King, 2000, 453). Valassopoulos similarly emphasises that Soueif thinks that she corrects history like a revisionist historian (Valassopoulos, 2004, 35).

The Map of Love shows that culture is a battleground in the resistance against the Empire and that the static Orient, the geographical problem of the Empire (and the English novel), is not supine, unresisting, silent and homogeneous as it was imagined and created to be. Although Oriental people have a narrow space in the genealogically useful past of the Empire, *The Map of Love*

shows that the histories of the Oriental and the coloniser overlap. Egypt ceases to be the silent Orient and Soueif introduces metropolitan informants alongside native ones. In its contrapuntal and overlapping histories, *The Map of Love* draws together Egyptian nationalists, British imperialists, British anti-imperialists and the *fellaheen*.¹ The main concern of the novel is history writing and the epigraph from Agathon that opens the novel confirms this: “Even God cannot change the past” (Soueif, 2007, 3). Particularly suggestive is that the imperialist writes the history of the periphery out of imagination and violently on the body of the post-colonial subject. *The Map of Love* also presents a sustained criticism of the post-colonial state and shows that it extends the hegemony and builds up another system of exploitation. In this novel, post-colonial subjects carry both histories as scars –of humiliating wounds– and liberation becomes a more contested issue than independence. Boccardi indicates that History in Soueif’s fiction may be thought of not as a space “upon which migrant individuals move as in the way migrants themselves, their very skin, bodies, humours and expressions, constitute a history that is not so much narrated as assembled, possibly suspended, present, not representable, and non-authoritative” (Boccardi, 2004, 315).

The most definitive moment in the opening of the novel is the death of Edward who witnesses the violence in the Omdurman War and dies a silent death. Edward becomes an emblem of the aggression of the Empire and he pays the debt with his body together with the Sudanese dervishes at Khartoum whose bodies are dismembered by the army of General Kitchener. Like his father Sir Charles, Edward fights for the Empire and perhaps thinks that it is a noble thing, not to say a burden. As Boccardi emphasises, Edward’s “ideals of honour, duty and manliness are defeated when confronted with the reality of the imperial enterprise in all its indiscriminate violence” (Boccardi, 2009, 111). Edward leaves the massacre back in Sudan and returns with General Kitchener. Anna realises that his homecoming is different from Sir Charles’ who gives an account of how the British Navy defeated ‘Urabi and took Tel el-Kebir when Anna was studying the map of Egypt as a ten-year-old. Sir Charles later regrets and Edward’s death is presented as colonial guilt in the novel (D’Alessandro, 2011, 105), (Valassopoulos, 2004, 35). Soueif creates Sir Charles, a strongly anti-imperialist figure, as a very sympathetic character who becomes a metropolitan informant for Anna. He provides a healthily mediated knowledge for Anna that makes her another sympathetic character. Anna writes letters to Sir Charles from Egypt and the information he gives back flows into the historical current of the novel. Hassan emphasises that “Anna’s diary and letters quickly

¹Arabic vocabularies are spelled out as they are found in Western publications including Soueif’s, and italicised. Existing spellings of the quoted materials are preserved. *Fallaheen* (also *fellahin*, sing. *fellah*) means “peasants” in Arabic.

become a historical record of bitter struggle against colonial policies and of dynamic social change' (Hassan, 2006, 762).

With Sir Charles and Anna, Soueif points to the steadily mounting sense of genealogy as history and shows that Empire replicates itself, not to say its history. The Omdurman War results with the Sudan Convention after which Egypt pays the cost and labour of the War. Anna learns that Kitchener's men desecrated the body of the Mahdi (Muhammed Ahmad) and Charles George Gordon cut off his head so that Kitchener might use it as an inkwell.² All means are good for the British Empire to civilise Africa for her interests and the skull of the Mahdi becomes an inkwell out of which the imperialist writes History. Hassan reminds that the desecration of the tomb of the Mahdi and the use of his skull as an inkwell are "reminiscent of the severed African heads adoring Kurtz's hut" (Hassan, 2006, 760). Gordon, an icon of the Empire, is killed by Mahdi's men and Mahdi's plan to exchange him for the freedom of the exiled 'Urabi Pasha fails (Bulfin, 2011, 435). To this imperialist atrocity Soueif posits Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a fierce supporter of the Revolt, who sets up a fund to meet the expenses for the defence of 'Urabi. D'Alessandro indicates that the Blunts were committed to the nationalist movement in Egypt and were considered enemies of the Empire (D'Alessandro, 2011, 77).

Not only does Soueif portray historical characters but she also inserts excerpts from archives. She shows that Omdurman War is a painful memory for the contemporary Arabs and the references to it repeatedly appear in the novel. The War is a moment of collective mourning for the Egyptians and the Sudanese and, after looking at the archives and reading Anna's account of Edward's death, Amal, the principal narrator, thinks that she has never found out how the English mourn in the twenty-odd years she lived in England. *The Map of Love* is a novel about death; and thinking about death, and this is understandable in the Egyptian context. After witnessing the atrocities of the post-colonial state, Amal thinks that they hold on to grief fearing that its lifting will be betrayal. Grief and mourning become memorial practices in the novel and the motor of the story is mourning. As Nash indicates, Arab women writers seek out strategies to enter into narrative and some women poets have recourse to mourning dead husbands and brothers to create a space from which to raise their voices (Nash, 2009, 351).

Anna travels to Italy and Egypt in mourning of Edward and Amal wants to settle in Tawasi, Upper

²Although Gordon is depicted as a Victorian war hero, English tourism companies such as the Thomas Cook and Son profit from tours on the Nile and arranges tours to the war sites. Anna also travels to Egypt with a copy of the Cook's guide. See (Hunter, 2004, 40), (Boccardi, 2009, 109).

Egypt to mourn for Sharif Basha thinking that she has responsibilities to her land and the people who live on it. If she can achieve this, the unfulfilled past will be future. Reading history mobilises the post-colonial subject and Amal says that she will go to Tawasi, record children songs, learn to make fresh peasant bread, and find an old man who has Aragoz and Sanduq el-Dunya. Crabbs indicates that there is an increased attention in Nasser's Egypt to the study of folklore (Crabbs, 1975, 405) that describes Amal's reconciliation with her culture. Boccardi similarly suggests that "the remote country province comes to epitomise the nation within a specifically romantic typology of national narrative, which places the people, rather than their political representatives, as both agents and subjects" (Boccardi, 2009, 114). Interestingly, when Amal thinks about her romantic future, the scene changes to Sharif Basha's house in Tawasi, which is now a museum, and the reader hears the call to prayer. A Sheikh 'Isa recites surah el-Asr (The Time) in the Qur'an and, in this metafictional moment, the surah about time reminds the interpellation of the post-colonial subject by history. Amal then starts to more fiercely narrate the struggle for independence in early 1900³. Mobilised by history, the post-colonial subject remembers memories about certain places in the city and Soueif shows that cultures and histories meet and clash in those (empty) places. Amal's stand at the deserted place, a conceit known as *waqf 'ala al-atlal* in Classical Arabic Literature,⁴ confirms this.

Amal knows the end in the beginning and this might be the reason of the novel's problematisation of endings and beginnings. Soueif shows that history unites the coloniser and the colonised in the empty space of mourning. For Amal, history is reading the death of the ancestors, and perhaps the possible death of Omar, his brother, in Sharif Basha's story. Amal describes the mourning of Anna with absence and mourns for her city that she defines also with absence. She is angry at the city because the post-colonial state does not claim the past, and worse, destroys it. In this city, history sadly reminds itself wherever Amal goes and her personal history intersects with the history of the nation. While travelling with the American Isabel, she passes by a restaurant and remembers that her English husband kissed her hand there and that she pretended not to notice the stares of the Egyptian waiters. After a U-turn with the car, they see the television building barricaded with sandbags since the '67 war with Israel.

³In Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*, the call to prayer helps Sirine, the principal character, "to maintain spiritual and cultural ethos of her of her Arab ancestors" (Mehta, 2009, 206).

⁴Mohja Kahf indicates that memory is connected with space for the classical Arab poet as he establishes his genealogy and stands before the memory site (Kahf, 2006, 35). For the poet, remembering is to stand because he always figuratively stands before the campsite in order to start speaking. This is a conceit in Classical Arabic Literature known as *waqf 'ala al-atlal*/ standing at the deserted site.

Sometimes, city brings back a happy hybridity. When Anna mentions Mu'allaqah in her diary, Isabel and Anna go to this Coptic church and find a series of wavy lines at the baptismal. They look at each other in delight because this is another layer in the palimpsest that is Egypt. Relatedly, Anna says that the religion of the Ancient Egyptians has similarities with Christianity and Amal narrates, as a storyteller, the story of Akhen Atun that is similar to Antigone's story. It is clear that Akhen Atun is placed in the novel to show that the personal history of the post-colonial subject integrates with the history of the country as in this young king's tragic ending. Akhen Atun's story shows that there are sisters like Antigone in *The Map of Love* who mourn the death of brothers. Amal is haunted by these stories, and the colonial past, and dreads that his brother Omar will be killed by the post-colonial state.

Soueif shows that Amal carries a layered and palimpsestual history as a burden and mourns for the country and the past. However, her mourning rises beyond Egypt into another space and she remembers her England and her house there described as out-of-a-Victorian-novel. England, the other setting and the periphery of the novel, has a disrupting presence in the novel because it introduces another history and tries to violently regulate Egypt. The reader slowly learns that Anna's England arouses troubling memories in Amal and problematizes her historical rereading. As a post-colonial subject, she misses her Victorian cottage and perhaps this is the sinister insidious colonialism implanted in the soul of Asya in Soueif's first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*. On the other hand, Amal also yearns to unite with her two sons that she left in England after divorcing her English husband, but she does not even leave her flat. Paralysis is a defining feature of her post-coloniality in the opening of the novel, and ironically, she imagines a scene in which Isabel asks Omar about returns. Amal perfectly knows that Omar will not come back to Egypt for he smoothly and easily describes himself as Egyptian, *and* American (with an official history of and American), *and* Palestinian because he has no problem with identity. Soueif shows however that roots are routes, and by reading history, Amal will go to Tawasi and unite with her ancestors (past) and sons (future) in the empty family house. It is seen that historical readings connect her to past and she overcomes paralysis. Amal also reconciles with future through her act of rewriting history.

History also introduces an absence to Amal. As she reads the diaries of Anna, she thinks about Emily, Anna's maid, who travels with her to Egypt. Cole indicates that the Europeans who live in Egypt "were themselves stratified along class lines, though in general they were the most privileged section of the population" (Cole, 1981, 389). Lost texts are a central concern of Soueif and Amal is sad because Anna's papers give no clue about the life of an English servant in the periphery. She

imagines Emily as a distanced English girl first who is fearful in the Bazaar and her imagination moves from the domestic restriction into the extremes of the threatening Orient:

How old is she? What does she want for herself? Is she saving to start a milliner's business? Does she have an illegitimate child lodged with a foster mother in Bournemouth? Does she want something for herself? Or is Anna her whole life and Occupation? Can she yet do what Hester Stanhope's maid did, who in Palmyra caught the fancy of a sheikh but was denied the permission to marry him? Would she do what Lucy Duff Gordon's Sally did and melt into the backstreets of Alexandria, pregnant with the child of her mistress' favourite servant, Omar al-Halawani? I don't know; so far, nothing in Anna's papers give me any clue (Soueif, 2007, 68).

Anna rarely talks about Emily in her diary and Amal creates a fictional Emily who has voice. Her Emily says that she wants to go back to England when Anna marries an Arab, Sharif Basha, and decides to stay in Egypt. Alongside English servants, Soueif humanises and historicises Arab servants and Anna informs that Mr Barrington, the Third Secretary and another anti-imperialist character, finds secure positions for his Arab servants in British households before leaving for England. Sabir, Anna's loyal manservant, is one of them. He rises from peasant origins up to the office of Sharif Basha because of his knowledge of English. Sabir has voice, background and history in the novel.

There is another address of historical absence in the novel, and a far more important one. The denial of Palestine in history is an important debate in *The Map of Love* and Soueif historicises the plight of the Palestinians that, as Boccardi describes, "punctuates Amal's own life" (Boccardi, 2009, 115). Amal's father, Ahmad al-Ghamrawi, marries Maryam in Palestine and Omar is born in a house in Jerusalem that Amal has only seen in photographs. After the al-Nakba,⁵ families and communities disperse across globe, and al-Ghamrawis lose their family home. They move to Egypt where Amal is born in the year of Nasser's revolution and Maryam has two miscarriages which are clearly meant to be the violence of history inscribed on the female body. Here, the reader first hears the official story of *and* the American part of Omar's identity. He is sent to America in '56 because "America had just stopped Britain, France and Israel bombing Suez and Port Said" (Soueif, 2007, 118). Like the Palestinians whose lives are anchored in distant territories outside occupied Palestine, Omar's life is anchored in New York. Soueif shows how the post-colonial subject makes stories out of histories and Omar, maybe more than any other character in the novel, reveals that history violently

⁵The Catastrophe: Palestinian displacement in 1948.

structures the life of the individual. As for Amal, “her life becomes the story of deflated national aspirations and grubby compromise” (Boccardi, 2009, 115). As Adawalla indicates, she is stuck between al-Nakba and *al naksa* (Adawalla, 2011, 442); between the disaster of the Palestinians in 1948 and the defeat of the Egypt in the Six-Day-War in 1967.

On the one hand is the story of Omar and on the other Am Abu el-Ma‘ati, the old chief of the farm in Tawasi who is a native informant with surprising blue eyes –a legacy of a Turkish seigneur. El-Ma‘ati loses one of his sons in the ‘67 war and the other migrates to Iraq only to come back after the Gulf War. Another is in Bahrain because of the oil boom and one of his daughters is widowed by Islamists. This old man witnesses the dispersal of his family during *Infitah*⁶ and brings the news to Amal that the school that her great-grandfather had built in 1906 is closed because of the political affiliations of the volunteer teachers. He says that the sugar cane field is burned by the government because they think the terrorists hide in it and their clinic is closed down, too. El-Ma‘ati brings real life issues to the almost paralysed Amal and he speaks of “government’s heavy hand, and the new land laws, and the countryside that is boiling (Soueif, 2007, 124-125). When Amal asks whether the teachers are Islamists or communists, he does not have an answer, but that they speak of justice. After all, as he yearns, “the fallah tills his land and the government talks in Cairo” (Soueif, 2007, 126).

El-Ma‘ati is a crucial figure in the novel and he is arrested together with seventeen other *fellaheen* in the village by the police because “Everybody is a suspect” (Soueif, 2007, 439). Everybody is a suspect because of the terrorist attack in Luxor that kills sixty tourists. Amal remembers that, when heading to Tawasi with Isabel, she gets nervous because the road leads “into the heartland of the terrorists. Or at least that was what it said in the papers” (Soueif, 2007, 439). Soldiers constantly stop them for security checks and all they say is that they neither want foreign blood spilled in Egypt nor a harmed American. While going to the police station to ask for the release of the villagers, Amal paradoxically takes her British passport and the local women who come with her are not allowed because they are natives. Soueif connects the plight of the contemporary *fellaheen* to the Denshwai incident and shows that history, perhaps because of untutored nationalism and Islamism, repeats itself. It is clear that the post-colonial state which is supposed to protect its people hurts them the most.

⁶Anwar Sadat’s Open Door policy. *Infitah* can be described as the economic liberalisation policies that contributed to moral laxity, opportunistic capitalism, consumerism and materialism. It is generally argued that the rise of political Islam in Egypt during 1980s and 90s developed as a response to *Infitah*. See (Hatem, 2006, 312).

After this incident, Amal walks through the empty house in Tawasi, disillusioned, unhappy and desperate. The portrait of Sharif Basha is on the wall: “his dark eyes look back at me and behind them lie el-Tel el-Kebir and Umm Durman and Denshwai” (Soueif, 2007, 442). The Denshwai incident remains a painful memory in the history of Egypt and the personal histories of el-Ma‘ati and the *fellaheen* show that past is not past and that the law of the state does not serve its citizens. This recognition also describes the plight of the young Arab nationalists who mistakenly abduct Anna for the release of Egyptian protestors. One of them complainingly says, “the law serves the English” (Soueif, 2007, 138). Soueif shows that these people become the muted subalterns of the unaddressed past (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 2004, 142).

As Amal struggles in Tawasi for *fellaheen* that the post-colonial state calls native, Anna’s diary writes about the Denshwai incident. In a British military force camp near Tantah in 1906, some British officers wish to shoot pigeons, as they did the year before, and send a message to the ‘*umdah*.⁷ They do not wait for reply as supposed by law and settle for the expedition. Heading towards Denshwai because there are large numbers of pigeons which constitute people’s livelihood, they approach the village. An old man asks them to shoot far from the villagers’ home, but the officers pay no attention and shoot within 150 metres of the village. A fire starts in one of the storerooms where wheat is kept and the owner of the house and his wife run out and beat the officers closest to their house. They try to disarm them and the gun of one of the soldiers goes off and the woman falls. Thinking that she is dead, the villagers beat the officers with sticks and two other officers hear the noise and come for help. They shoot low into people, five of them fall, a police officer among them, so the police join in beating the officers. When the villagers learn that the woman is not dead, they calm down and some elder people intervene and they return the officers and their guns to the encampment. In the meantime, two officers go ask for help from the encampment and one faints by the roadside because of the June heat. A villager, Sayyid Ahmad Sa‘d, finds him and, with the help of other villagers, carries him to shade and gives him water. When they see the English force approaching, they hide. However, soldiers find Ahmad Sa‘d and kill him. The English soldier dies later the same day because of sunstroke and the villagers are tried for murder.

Anna’s husband Sharif Basha, a lawyer educated in France, volunteers to defend the case, but is turned down. Four of the villagers are to be hanged, two gets life with hard labour, one gets fifteen years with hard labour, six other get seven years with hard labour, and they are hanged in Denshwai.

⁷Head man of the village. Under Muhammed ‘Ali ‘*umdahs* were given increasing responsibility for tax collecting instead of the Turko-Circassian agents. See (Cole, 1981, 388), (Abu-Lughod, 1967, 336).

After this barbaric imperial act, Boutros Ghali, a member of the Special Court for Denshwai and Minister of Justice by proxy, is assassinated by Ibrahim al-Wardani who calls him a traitor.⁸ It is important to note that Boutros Ghali signs the Sudan Convention after the Omdurman War and his presence in the Special Court makes him vulnerable. Towards the end of 1907, Denshwai prisoners are pardoned, but the widows, orphaned children, and Egyptians, never forget this English barbarity. As Reid indicates, Anwar Sadat⁹ “was among those who grew up with the name of the martyred “hero of Dinshaway” on their lips” (Reid, 1982, 627). These people have what Said calls accumulating history. They enter history, but their history is a troubling one. They do not claim to know the past, but a violent version of the past. Boccardi indicates that “history whose narration had been appropriated by the West ought to be retold from the perspective of the subjects of that history” (Boccardi, 2009, 112). Likewise, Anna’s diary entry about Denshwai points to people who “never had a place in the transmission of history” (D’Alessandro, 2011, 48).

One of the victims of colonialism, Sharif Basha also suffers under the weight of history. Before marrying Anna, he is wed to an Egyptian woman and returns the bride after six months, which creates a scandal. As Layla states in the novel, it all happens because their lives are shadowed “by the Revolution and then the Occupation, the banishment of [her] uncle and ‘Urabi Basha” (Soueif, 2007, 150). As a French-educated *effendi*,¹⁰ Sharif nobly struggles for the independence of the country. He wants an elected parliament and a constitution. But, he is assassinated and no one knows who killed him. Layla mourns for her brother like an Arab Antigone and his death leaves the reader with questions about the challenges surrounding independence and liberation for the post-colonial subject.

Like Sharif, Layla is an important character with whom Soueif reasserts the historical importance of Arab women in resistance against colonial domination in Egypt. In *The Map of Love*, Soueif carefully unearths and pieces together the stories of women in the early 20th century Egypt and domesticates and historicises harem to question the discourses on Oriental and Muslim women.

⁸The word “assassin” comes from Arabic. The killing of Boutros Ghali is the first public assassination of a political figure in Egypt. Ibrahim al-Wardani is a twenty-three years old pharmacist who belonged to late Mustafa Kamel’s Watani party. See (Reid, 1982, 637)..

⁹Confidant and a member of the Free Officers, Anwar Sadat becomes prime minister in 1970 after the death of General Gamal ‘Abd el-Nasser. Sadat is assassinated in 1981 and state of emergency is imposed to be extended every three year till 2012.

¹⁰*Effendi* (pl. *effendiyya*), a popular term with a blurred meaning depending on the social context. Pollard describes *effendiyya* as “bourgeois Egyptians” (Pollard, 2006, 249-269). It means landowner, ruling elite or the Ottoman bureaucrats who adopted Western dress and ideas after the Tanzimat reforms (1839-1876). See Eppel (2009), Amar (2011), (Said, 2003, 306). A Western-style dress distribution outlet in Egypt, Omar Effendi, uses the word *effendi* for the brand and Fandy indicates that this is a conscious move for the word signifies state bureaucrats and thus power (Fandy, 2006, 393).

Boccardi indicates that *The Map of Love* presents knowledge not of but from harem (Boccardi, 2009, 110). This recognition appears in Anna's diary and she is unwilling to talk about her marriage to Sharif Basha in letters to her friend Caroline in London. Anna says that Caroline expresses curiosity, but that she herself is unwilling to provide a detailed picture of the so-called life-in-the-harem. She thinks that Caroline will gain a true picture of her life only if she is to visit Cairo. Similarly, Hassan states that Soueif re-constructs harem which is "revealed to be a space in which educated women live more or less independent lives" (Hassan, 2006, 762).

Soueif sets the novel especially at the end of the 19th century to show that a great social transformation occurs in the Arab East under imperialism and colonialism. Leila Ahmed states that Egypt is the prime crucible of this transformation and "crucial moments in the rearticulation and further elaboration of issues of women and gender in Middle Eastern Muslim societies occurred under the impact of colonialism and in the socio-political turmoil that followed" (Ahmed, 1992, 3). For women, the effects of the European political, economic and cultural encroachment are complicated and mostly negative. It is also positive because the seclusion of women and their exclusion from important domains of activity start to gradually change. Soueif emphasises that the Question of Women emerges as a topic in the writings of Muslim male intellectuals in Egypt and Turkey and *The Map of Love* shows that questions about nationalism, national advancement and political, social and cultural reform are intertwined with gender issues.

For this aim, Soueif historicises the beginnings of women's movement in the Arab world interlinked with the resistance against the Empire. It is important to note that earlier debates about the improvement of the status of women dangerously advocated to replace the misogynistic practices of the native culture with the values of another culture and the link between the Question of Women and nationalism was established in this context. Unsurprisingly, the debate about the status of women is charged with other issues and Ahmed remarkably argues that another history is inscribed in the discourse on women in the Arab East, basically "the history of colonial domination and the struggle against it and the class divisions around that struggle" (Ahmed, 1992, 130). The policies of Muhammed 'Ali are important in accelerating the social transformation in Egypt and his initiatives give impetus to economic, intellectual, cultural and educational developments important for women (Cole, 1981, 388). However, the thrust towards educational expenses slows down after the British Occupation as the British administration spends less on education for economic and political reasons.

At this time in the history of Egypt, nationalist intellectuals like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and his student, the Azhari sheikh Muhammed 'Abdu, urge the importance of education for both girls and boys. Nonetheless, colonial administrators, especially Lord Cromer, introduce interesting measurements to prevent it. Muhammed 'Abdu, like his teacher Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, is a committed religious thinker and he is an important historical figure in *The Map of Love*. 'Abdu vigorously works for the modernisation of Egypt that can be described as a "means of elite resistance" (EzzelArab, 2004, 564), and for the elevation of women's status through intellectual and social reforms. Especially, he emphasises the necessity to get rid of the misinterpretations of Islam concerning polygamy, slavery and divorce. The discussions of 'Abdu importantly enrich women's struggle in Egypt and Soueif creates a fictional 'Abdu to describe the conditions under which the Egyptians resisted the Empire. 'Abdu strongly opposes the simple imitation of the Western culture (Cole, 1981, 404) and it is seen that, by 1890s, Egyptian women start to speak for themselves in magazines and newspapers. They publish a magazine for women edited by a woman. *The Map of Love* shows that the newly emerging ladies' magazine does not confine itself to the Question of Women and that women are historical agents. They can talk about other issues as well, and they vigorously do.

In her diary, Anna says that the magazine is the idea of Zeinab Fawwaz and Malak Hifni Nasif and they plan both Arabic and French editions to attract writers from as many communities as possible. One night, Sharif Basha invites Sheik Muhammed 'Abdu, Mustafa Bey Kamel, Qasim Bey Amin, Tal'at Basha Harb, Ahmet Lutfi al-Sayyid, Anton al-Jmayyil; the noted leaders of the Egyptian public opinion to an *iftar*¹¹ and they discuss Qasim Amin's new book, "*Al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah*", *The New Woman*. Soueif gives an insight into the political stances of the leaders and demonstrates that the Question of Women is an integral part of the resistance: "*Al-Liwa* is against the book: Mustafa Kamel is for education, but wants to keep the veil. Tal'at Harb wants everything to stay as it is. They are both down there now, and the author and Sheikh Muhammed 'Abdu" (Soueif, 2007, 376). Anna informs us that the women are divided, too. Soueif also describes the efforts of the nationalist intellectuals to open a university in Cairo which is founded in 1326/1908. The University holds special classes for ladies on Fridays and Nabawiyya Musa, Malak Hifni Nasif and Labiba Hashim conduct the classes. Anna talks about art and Madame Hussein Rushdi teaches European history. This way, Soueif domesticates the harem of the Orientalist discourse and Anna mockingly

¹¹Breaking of the fast at sunset during Ramadan.

states that the *hareem*¹² makes a working woman of her. She writes for the magazine, teaches at the university and translates from and into English for Sharif Basha.

Conclusion: Palimpsestual Histories and Painful Memories

The Question of Women shows that Egypt is a mobile image of varied histories in *The Map of Love* and the presence of the British officers makes the history of the country a shared and a painful memory. Anna writes in her diary that Lady Cromer becomes a suffragette in opposition to Lord Cromer and it is interesting to note that the Lord combats feminism in the English society, but attacks Islam and Egyptian culture for degrading women. Cromer later writes a book about Egypt, which becomes an imperial exercise of the extension of the Empire, and Soueif depicts his presence in the country as a disrupting influence that hinders attempts to self-government. Ahmed indicates that the Victorian colonial paternalistic establishment appropriates the liberating language of feminism to attack the religion and culture of other people, specifically Islam, to give moral justification to the assault while combating feminism within its own society: “when it came to the cultures of other men, white supremacist views, androcentric and paternalistic views, and feminism came together in harmonious and entirely logical accord in the service of the imperial idea (Ahmed, 1992, 154).

One half of the novel talks about the imperialist attitude of Lord Cromer concerning gender rights and the other discusses service companies sold off to foreign investors, Iraqi children dying, Palestinian homes demolished, gun battles in Upper Egypt, the names of urban intellectuals added to Jama‘at’s¹³ hit lists and Sadat encouraging fundamentalists to destroy the leftist movements. In this historically dense novel, Soueif’s writing moves between colonial past and post-colonial present to emphasise national insecurities and new forms of colonialism. What is interesting for the purposes of this study is that she extends Said’s illuminating discussions on the defeat of narrative by vision and indicates important considerations on overlapping and contrapuntal histories. By deconstructing academic Orientalism, and the holistic vision of the Orientalist(-as-agent), Soueif shows that the people without history are indeed historical agents.

¹²Soueif glosses *hareem* in the novel as “(also harem): women, from h/r/m: sacred” (Soueif, 2007, 522).

¹³Soueif glosses Jama‘at Islamiyyah in the novel as “(Islamist) groups. General name for several factions of Islamist activities in Egypt who believe in armed opposition to the state”, (Soueif, 2007, 523).

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