

THE LIMINAL SELF: ARTICULATING A TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY IN AHDAF SOUEIF'S IN THE EYE OF THE SUN

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Abstract:

With her understated narrative portrayals, Egyptian author and cultural critic Ahdaf Soueif becomes a major voice in postcolonial literature by skillfully dissecting the complexities of cultural hybridity. Her writings, notably *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), offer an important understanding of the delicate compromises of identity, belonging, and cultural intersectionality in a global world. This study explores the intricate connection between cultural hybridization and the emergence of a worldwide identity in Soueif's book, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992). This essay argues that Soueif's characters live in the liminal space based on postcolonial theories by Homi K. Bhabha and his concept of the "third space", zones that lie between East and West, between tradition and modernity, produce a new, hybrid feeling of belonging that challenges the concept of unified national and cultural narratives. These cultural experiences give rise to transnational identities where one becomes the sum of all their experiences. Soueif's travels suggest that identity is a map to be developed rather than a boundary to be preserved.

Key Words: Cultural Hybridity, Transnational Identity, Third Space, Liminality, Identity Formation

INTRODUCTION

The issue of identity has become increasingly complex in an era marked by globalization, migration, and the enduring legacy of colonialism. The basic binary pairs of East/West, colonizer/colonized, and self/other have been dismantled to reveal more sophisticated conceptions of the self as multi-layered and culturally complex. A landmark investigation of this modern circumstance is Ahdaf Soueif's writing. Educated in Egypt and England, Soueif is singularly suited to dramatize the possibilities and difficulties of hybridity. Her works are not only narratives of people caught between two worlds; they are creative, political, and aesthetic projects aimed at establishing a space in between, where a fresh, transnational identity can be articulated and flourish. This study will investigate how Soueif's female characters, especially Asya al-Ulama in *In the Eye of the Sun* and Anna Winterbourne and Lady Amal al-Ghamrawi in *The Map of Love*, negotiate their identities, ultimately building a sense of belonging beyond cultural and geographic borders.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial theory, developed primarily by scholars such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, critically examines colonialism and its impact on culture, identity, and power dynamics in globalized societies (Said, 2003; Bhabha, 2013; Spivak, 2018). "At its core, postcolonial theory challenges Eurocentric perspectives and exposes how colonial ideologies continue to shape social structures, discourses, and representations in the postcolonial world." (Kipng'Etich 2004). The intersectionality theory, first developed by legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, looks at how different social groups, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and national origin, interact to influence a person's experience of privilege and oppression. (Crenshaw 1989). The intersectionality theory offers a framework for comprehending the complexity and fluidity of identity, particularly for those who move through various locations and cultural contexts. Intersectionality theory provides a sophisticated examination of how cultural hybridity interacts with other kinds of social difference by recognizing the intersecting axes of identity in order to influence how people see themselves and their sense of belonging in an increasingly interconnected world.

By examining how Ahdaf Soueif's characters traverse the liminal spaces between cultures, this analysis challenges rigid and monolithic notions of national and cultural identity, drawing on Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of cultural hybridity. Understanding the characters' experiences of displacement, negotiation, and transformation is made easier by Bhabha's concept of the "third space." Soueif's fiction "offers a blend of sociology, history, and political science" and "weaves elements that are directly of interest to postcolonial critics," as noted by Anastasia

Valassopoulos (2008) (30–31). In this context, Soueif's work delves deeply into the dynamics of racial and cultural hybridity, presenting hybridization as an intrinsic feature of all cultural formations, including the colonizer's, rather than just the condition of the colonized. Her portrayal of hybridity, however, is far from celebratory; it emphasizes the tensions and ambivalences that arise within the interstitial zones of cultural encounter. Bhabha's theorization in *The Location of Culture* (1994) provides a critical lens for interpreting this complexity. He argues that the interaction between cultures does not simply result in a synthesis or conflict but produces a "third space"—an ambivalent realm of negotiation, translation, and rearticulation where the authority of any pure or original culture is displaced.

As Bhabha affirms, this third space "displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Bhabha 1994). Soueif's characters live exactly this transformative space: they are neither completely absorbed in Western modernity nor as people bound to conventional Egyptian social customs. Through cultural and linguistic translation, their identities are continuously constructed by negotiating between languages, habits, beliefs, and emotional environments. Furthermore, Soueif's own narrative style embodies this hybridization as her English writing is replete with Arabic phrases, rhythms, and cultural allusions, therefore altering the text itself into a literary "third space", a site where readers participate in the very act of cultural translation that defines her characters' lives.

Transnational identity in "In The Eye Of The Sun"

The novel's protagonist, Asya Al Ulema, represents the quintessential hybrid subject, inhabiting two different cultural worlds, and Egyptian and Western spaces. The process she goes through uncovers the intricate psychological landscapes of the people who are living under the influence of several cultures at the same time. Soueif meticulously shows Asya's struggle with cultural expectations, academic pursuits, and personal desires, illustrating the fragmented yet dynamic nature of transnational identity.

In the Eye of the Sun is a monumental Bildungsroman that traces the life of Asya al-Ulama from her childhood in 1960s Egypt to her postgraduate studies in England and her return to a changing Egypt. Asya is a character of hybrid nature where the East and the West meet to create a personality that is seeking liberation, for the right to reveal her true self, to share her thoughts and feelings. The depicted character of Asya made her different from the former colonial heroines, who were passive and voiceless. The world of Asya is international. Her "sense and sensibility" must always be finely tuned between Cairo and London, Arabic and English, Nasserite nationalism and English academic life. Her choice of lovers, the emotionally distant Egyptian Saif and the sexually attractive but culturally strange Englishman Gerald, is not merely individual; it is symbolic of the cultural extremes between which she is caught. Unlike Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennet, who manages to harmonize perfectly, Asya is not gifted with such a resolution. Her intellectual and sexual fulfillment remains fragmented, reflecting the impossibility of a neat resolution to the problem of hybrid identity. The character of Asya is similar to that of Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* in terms of their sharp intelligence and romantic idealism, but while Elizabeth conquers her social environment, Asya's social worlds are too broad and contradictory to be mastered. Asya's journey is a vivid exploration of her physical and emotional experiences, which are deeply intertwined with her cultural background. At the heart of the novel, her sexual awakening emerges as a central theme, laden with conflict. She finds herself torn between the dreamy idealism of Victorian romance, soaking this up from English literature, and the often repressed, sometimes hypocritical sexual norms of the Egyptian upper-middle class. Her body becomes a battleground where Eastern and Western notions of femininity, desire, and propriety clash. Her unsatisfactory relationships with both the Egyptian Saif and the Englishman Gerald symbolize her inability to find wholeness in either cultural sphere alone. Her body, like her identity, exists in a pained, liminal state. Asya's journey in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* illustrates her gradual struggle to assert authorship over her own life rather than remain a passive object in narratives constructed by men. In the course of her journey in the novel, Asya confronts a fear of merely being "little more than an object in the male consciousness" (Nash 29) and, in doing so, reflects her own delusions or self-doubt, which exemplifies her reliance and submission to the voices of men near her. When she says, "he is the imagination and I am the execution: he is the author and the director of our drama and I am just the cast" (593), her acknowledgement of being scripted inevitably by Saif mimics the conclusion of the project. The marriage to him is representative of a patriarchal system where her identity is boxed in and dictated by him. And as she admits in another part of the book, "I was always adjusting myself to Saif's moods, his silences, his absences. I lived in parentheses" (Soueif 412)

However, Asya's relationship with Gerald to escape Saif's control only brings out another kind of patriarchal control that is masquerading as liberation. Gerald's statement that "you are not like other Arab women" (Soueif 648) is a reflection of a colonial gaze that exoticizes and objectifies her, and therefore, it is a statement that she reasserts the same power structures from which she tried to escape. In a moment of full self-knowledge Asya confesses, "I thought I was escaping into freedom, but I was only moving from one cage to another" (Soueif 701) which is the moment when she realizes that the Eastern and Western males in her life are both trying to have her identity as theirs. Yet, in her mother's reminder that "This is not a novel: this is your life" (Soueif 568), Asya encounters the challenges of transferring fictional forms of resistance into the actual world. Even when she rephrases the words of Cathy in the novel *Wuthering Heights*, "my love for Saif is like the eternal rocks beneath I am Saif". Lateefa's warning, "This is not a novel" (Soueif 568), is reiterated several times, making Asya

realize that she is mixing her own life with literary fantasy. Her eventual thought that “freedom must come from within, not from men or from books” (Soueif 715) signifies the moment she starts to rewrite her life. This marks her transformation, as she moves from being the protagonist in male narratives to being the creator of her own story.

By confronting her true desires and critically examining the patriarchal system she inhabits, Asya takes a decisive step toward self-awareness and emancipation. Her decision to leave the patriarchal marriage and society itself and start fresh in England further marks the beginning of her path toward independence and defining herself. This departure shows that Asya is changing into a new person who wants to solve her inner conflict further and take control of her life. This geographical and psychological departure signals the emergence of a new, hybrid Asya. We are seeing that even though Asya stays married to Saif, she now understands her own feelings and starts a relationship with Gerald Stone, which is the only main change in her fight to break free from male control. As per her pursuit of freedom through Gerald, she gets ensnared in another power system, which is the Western imperial view that sees her as an exotic object to be owned and admired. Asya rejects this Orientalist fantasy that objectifies her, just as she repudiates Saif's controlling behavior. Basically, Asya becomes her real self only when she steps away from both Eastern and Western ways, and then accepts the same dual cultural identity that shows her true desires. In Darraj's observation, this self-aware version of Asya “grows out of the acceptance of her hybridity as an Arab and an Englishwoman” (100). Asya reaches the final stage of freeing herself when she writes letters to Saif about her affair with Gerald, expressing her feelings and speaking her truth in her own voice. This confession further helps her assert herself and find liberation. These letters become her final act of defiance against patriarchal silencing. Saif refuses to read the letters and burns them because he desperately wants to keep the same submissive image of Asya in his mind. However, through this act of articulation—of speaking, writing, and acknowledging her desires Asya achieves her liberation. Her ability to voice her truth signifies her transformation from a silenced subject to a self-aware woman who authors her own narrative.

Asya's bilingualism is both a double-edged sword. While she is fluent in English, she often finds that certain emotions and concepts are untranslatable. Soueif captures her inner monologues beautifully by blending English and transliterated Arabic, which reflects this hybrid consciousness. When she steps into England, she faces the chilly struggle of being seen only as an “Arab student,” which reduces her identity, and when she's back in Egypt, her Western education sets her apart again, marking her as different. Asya's struggle is to find a voice that can authentically express this composite self, a voice that Soueif herself forges through her distinctive prose style. As Nada Ayad observes, Soueif's representation of Asya's “adultery, sexual longing, and alterity is inflected through the language choice,” as English “becomes both a vehicle for self-expression and a site of constraint,” revealing how Soueif's “blending of foreignizing and domesticating strategies allows her to articulate a postcolonial feminist subjectivity” (Ayad 120). Ayad also draws on Robert J. C. Young's work on colonial desire and hybridity to frame Soueif's linguistic project. She positions *In the Eye of the Sun* as a text haunted by the “otherness” that English carries, but also as one that attempts to reclaim English from the center by subjecting it to local inflection and critique. Thus, the novel mediates the tension between assimilation and resistance, between speaking English and resisting its normative dominance. “She thought in Arabic, but the words came out in English.” (*In the Eye of the Sun*, p. 421) This moment captures Asya's divided linguistic consciousness. Soueif uses this to dramatize the tension between thinking as an Egyptian woman and speaking in the colonizer's tongue. The result is a hybrid discourse that never fully belongs to either language. “Ya Allah, how could she have said that? And in front of him!” (p. 387) Soueif keeps Arabic exclamations like *Ya Allah* untranslated. This linguistic choice “foreignizes” the English text, reminding readers that Asya's emotional and spiritual register remains grounded in Arabic culture even as she navigates an English-speaking environment. Her hybrid identity lives in the interplay of these languages rather than in one replacing the other. “With Saif, she was careful, polite Arabic; with Gerald, she was witty, ironic English.” (p. 654) Asya's code-switching between linguistic and emotional registers mirrors her split identity. Her fluency in two languages and her shifting self between them symbolize hybridity: neither fully Egyptian nor entirely Western. Through this linguistic oscillation, Soueif stages the inner struggle of the postcolonial subject. Soueif's linguistic strategy is particularly noteworthy. Her seamless integration of Arabic and English, coupled with her nuanced translation of cultural experiences, creates a unique narrative language that reflects the hybrid nature of her characters' identities. This linguistic hybridity itself becomes a form of resistance against monolingual and monocultural narratives.

Asya's personal turmoil is set against the backdrop of major political events: the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the 1973 War, and the subsequent period of *Infitah* (economic opening). Her sense of national identity is strong, yet complicated by her transnational experiences. Her grief over Egypt's defeats is profound, yet her perspective is nuanced by her understanding of Western media representations and political machinations. She negotiates a space of belonging that is deeply patriotic yet critically engaged, refusing simplistic nationalism. This contributes to how Soueif renders national trauma in images that are both literal and metaphorical. In “But Why Always George Eliot?” Maitzen notes how Soueif integrates private and political history. For example, Chrissie loses a lover in the 1967 War. Noora marries a Palestinian (Bassam) and is disowned by her family, and Deena's husband becomes imprisoned under Sadat's government for leftist activism. These plot elements show how the national events are not just a backdrop but materially affect Asya's friendships and family, complicating her sense of belonging. As Lindsey Moore observes,

“Asya’s England is haunted by memories of Egypt, and her Egypt haunted by scenes, moments, of England; an acute sense of nostalgia for both places pervades the novel ... She reflects on how she is a product of colonialism. Ruminating ..., she wonders if this is because of ‘an insidious colonialism implanted in her very soul’” (Moore 64).

Asya’s personal experiences in *In the Eye of the Sun* are inseparably intertwined with Egypt’s political upheavals, reflecting how national events shape intimate lives and personal identity. Asya’s sense of national identity is filtered through a transnational and postcolonial lens, allowing her to experience both attachment and critique simultaneously. Political events, meanwhile, materially affect her social world. The textual and critical observations reveal a protagonist whose patriotic attachment is deeply felt yet critically mediated: she experiences the sorrow and pride of her nation, while simultaneously analyzing the forces of colonial legacy, Western representation, and state power that shape her identity. In this way, Asya negotiates a nuanced space of belonging, one that is both personally intimate and politically aware, capturing the hybrid consciousness of an Arab woman navigating transnational realities.

Transnational identity in other works of Ahdaf Soueif

In *The Map of Love* (1999), Soueif also redefines the colonial encounter by juxtaposing the story of a British widow named Anna Winterbourne, who falls in love, along with other similar narratives, with the Egyptian nationalist Sharif al-Baroudi and Amal al-Ghamrawi, a modern Egyptian woman who finds their past century later. Both ladies live in developing areas where love represents political and cultural compromise. Susheila Nasta contends that the novel is a site of cultural translation that charts the voids between imperial and postcolonial subjectivities, thereby empowering its women to represent identities that are hybrid and resistant (Nasta 217). Amal and Anna are both ladies living between cultures. Trying to bridge the colonial divide, Anna struggles between her love of Egypt and her British identity. She reads her family’s past through Western archives. Living in the postcolonial liminality of a globalized Egypt, this is mirrored in the very form of the book, which toggles between languages, eras, and narratives. Mirrors and frames show this state of in-betweenness. Amal reflects that “history is made up of personal lives, and the choices of individuals determine the fate of nations,” suggesting that the private and the political coexist in a liminal dialogue. Soueif transforms the liminal in both novels into a creative and emotional terrain where women like Asya and Amal face and alter the stories that patriarchy and empire have forced upon them. Hence, Soueif’s heroines live on the threshold, representing the third area of articulation, as Homi Bhabha defines it as a space that connects East and West and transforms hybridity and agency.

The struggle for identity is also reflected in Soueif’s short story collection. Soueif’s recurring concern with the liminal self, often through women caught between Egypt and the West, or between love and loss, is powerfully captured in her short stories also. The title story, “Sandpiper,” is narrated by an Englishwoman married to an Egyptian man, reflecting on her displacement and emotional exile after divorce. She says, “I am the shore and you are the sea,” evoking a haunting image of cultural and emotional boundaries that touch but never merge. Other stories like “The Water-Heater” and “Her Man” also portray Egyptian women navigating modernity and tradition, revealing an inner hybridity shaped by globalization and gendered expectations. Critics such as Mona Mikhail and Amal Amireh read *Sandpiper* as illustrating Soueif’s postcolonial feminism, where women’s voices articulate the pain and potential of being “in-between worlds.”

CONCLUSION

Soueif’s goal in *In the Eye of the Sun* is to represent the complicated and occasionally difficult process of identity formation in a postcolonial, globalized society. Through her sensitive portrayal of her protagonist, Asya Aal-Ulam, Soueif reveals the rich, complicated, and painful layers of “third space”. This study shows how Soueif’s story is a superb literary portrayal of Homi Bhabha’s ideas and how cultural hybridity is not a condition of a vibrant place for discourse, translation, and continuous self-creation, but also one of misunderstandings to be clarified. Asya’s story shows the difficulties of composing one’s own life; it includes her small life in Egypt, her letdown events in England, and her eventual, painstakingly attained self-awareness goes against the doctrines of patriarchy, colonialism, and literary convention. Her body, her connections, and even her speech are the sites of contention of opposing cultural claims. But from this exact struggle comes a fresh, worldwide identity. Soueif brilliantly brings this study into her other works, such as *The Map of Love* and *Sandpiper* (1995), where women similarly negotiate liminal spaces. Their sense of belonging comes from the very condition of in-betweenness. At last, Soueif’s literary project is a show of cultural hybridity. Her distinctive writing approach, which combines untranslated interjections with Arabic rhythms into English storytelling, produces a linguistic third space that mirrors the thoughts of her characters. A kind of protest, this aesthetic choice challenges single cultural and monolingual stories. Soueif offers a more real and engaging reality by avoiding easy solutions for her characters: identity is not a fixed objective; rather, it is a map. That is fluid and always under plotting. Her work, therefore, adds greatly to our understanding of belonging in the present world, showing that the self might be fixed.

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