



Gender, Nation And Identity in Ahdaf Soueif's Sandpiper

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ABSTRACT

Ahdaf Soueif is a diasporic writer whose work is laced with feministic under tones, portraying the struggle between the identities of lover, mother and individual in each woman. In her short story 'Sandpiper' the struggle between her different identities along with her choice of nationality is portrayed. Soueif was born in Egypt and later moved to England. Her work is a mirror of the immigrant's woes of the land that she adopted and the land that she abandoned. The layers of conflict include the identity of nationality, gender roles, and the struggle for choices. The loss of the self with the birth of a mother is brought out with craft and finesse. The research paper proposes to identify the feministic ideas in the story along with the theme of identity crises that accompanies diasporic writing. The paper attempts to highlight the contrast as seen through the eyes of the protagonist.

KEYWORDS

"Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools." (Rushdie 15). 'Home' is a concept that gives an individual a sense of belonging and the reminder of one's roots. A sense of loss of identity arises when one departs from familiar grounds and moves to another country. Some willingly adopt new cultures while others have little choice. Literature is filled with the stories of such cleft identities and the invisible monsters that they have had to slay. Ahdaf Soueif was born in 1950 in Cairo but has lived in England as well from 1984. She obtained her Ph.D. in Linguistics from Lancaster University. In 1983 her collection of short stories *Aisha* was shortlisted for the Guardian Fiction Prize. (Chambers). Her debut novel *The Eye of the Sun* was critically acclaimed and called " 'The great English novel about Egypt' which is 'The great Egyptian novel about England.'" (Sage 590).

In *Sandpiper* she tells the story of a British woman married to an Egyptian. The protagonist introspects after twelve years, her decision to marry a man from a very different culture and struggles with her inability to adopt his culture or forget her roots. She is forced to make a choice but fails to strike a balance. Apart from the dialectics of diasporic conflict the story also underlines the female identity. Her love for a man has landed her in her present predicament and her love for her daughter doesn't allow her to leave the same. This research paper lays focus on the female identity conflict as well as the individual identity conflict of diaspora. Her writings strongly capture the essence of the dilemma of identity.

The many hats a woman wears and the juggling of these roles and the emotions that the roles carry are deftly sculptured by Soueif. She has been hailed as "one 'of the most extraordinary chroniclers of sexual politics still writing'" (Sage 590) by Edward Said.

The first person narrative connives to take the reader into the mind of the protagonist and views the world through her eyes. Much has been said about the Muslim women and the freedom denied to them. *Sandpiper* however, showcases a British woman who steps into the shoes of her Egyptian sisters. The gradual metamorphosis of her love for the man she married is narrated in retrospect on a holiday to Alexandria where she had visited first - soon after her marriage, sec-

ond- when she was pregnant with her daughter and for the third time at the present moment. The emotions she felt on all three occasions are reminisced. "For eight summers we have been coming here.... The first summer had not been a time of reflection; my occupation then had been to love my husband in this - to me - a new and different place" (Stories of Ourselves 371). The evolution of her relationship along with her realization of her self as a woman in a foreign land is traced through the three visits to Alexandria. She recalls the second visit as "the last of our happiness" and finally the present visit acquainted her with the moment of truth - "I was trying to work out my coordinates." She has come to realize that she does not know where she belongs anymore.

The instincts of a mother kick in when she realizes life within her womb. The mother is born even before she realizes it. The child, created from the love she bore its father soon replaces the father. The child becomes the focus of her attention and her husband gradually fades into the background. Going through the book that she intended to write, she realizes how he has drifted away from her "I leaf through my notes. Each one carries a comment, a description meant for him. All my thoughts were addressed to him." Her need was to comfort him and his role was to be comforted. This was the foundation of their relationship, which seems to come apart at the seams, when she diverts her need to nurture, towards her daughter Lucy. The nameless protagonist is torn between the role of wife and mother, when she soon realizes that her daughter begins to need her lesser as she grows. The absence of the clingy arms introduces the novel idea that she is her own self once again, just as she was before she was a lover, a wife and a mother. "Lucy has no need of me... I look and watch and wait for Lucy" (Stories of Ourselves 373). Soueif uses the mirage symbol to show the meaning of relationships.

'You only think you see it,' he said.

'Isn't that the same thing?' I asked. " My brain tells me there's water there. Isn't that enough?'

'Yes' he said and shrugged. 'If all you want to do is sit in the car and see it. But if you want to go and put your hands in it and drink, then it isn't enough, surely?' He gave me a side-long glance and smiled. (Stories of Ourselves 375)

The mirage is her marriage to this man and his culture that she fails to understand. She appears to be in the country as a mirage but fails to become a part of their culture. The pain and confusion of the diasporic life is expressed through the protagonist. She longs for England. "...grey slate roofs wet with rain. I picture trees; trees that rustle in the wind and when the rain has stopped, release fresh showers of droplets from their leaves...I breathe on the window-pane but it does not mist over."(373-374). She even misses the sparrows which have now been replaced with vultures. She knows that her daughter now belongs to this foreign culture and can never fully be hers. She regrets her decision to stay "But she [Lucy] was born here. And now she belongs. If I had taken her away then, when she was eight months old she would have belonged with me" (Stories of Ourselves 373). The charm of foreigner soon wears away and the longing for home sets in, not only for her but for her husband as well.

"I suppose I should have seen it coming. My foreignness, which had been so charming began to irritate him. My inability to remember names, to follow the minutiae of politics, my struggles with his language, my need to be protected from the sun, the mosquitoes, the salads, the drinking water. He was back home and he needed someone he could be home with, at home. It took perhaps a year. His heart was broken in two, mine was simply broken." (Stories of Ourselves 375).

The urge to return to one own land is so strong in the protagonist that it breaks her marriage. This aspect of diaspora is a clear reflection of life where people are known to try to return to their homeland against many odds like fatwas and political problems. The fantasy for the foreign land gradually fades and the longing for the native land is felt. When she was in love with her husband for the first time she felt as if she was in the center of the continent but now as she sits on the beach she feels that she is at the edge of the continent. Looking out at sea she says about Africa "The vastness ahead was nothing compared to what lay behind me." She accepts that she is unable to understand their culture and imbibe it. She continues to be English at her core being. "...even though I'd been there and seen for myself its never ending dusty green interior, its mountains, the big sky, my mind could not grasp a world that was not present to my senses." (Stories of Ourselves 371) .It was just a mirage.

The only thing that was holding her in this continent was her daughter. Her inability to shake off her maternal instinct causes her to suppress her longing for her native land. She finally accepts her predicament that no matter how long she stays in the foreign land she will never be one of them, but will only grow more foreign even as she sees her daughter becoming one of them. "My Lucy, Lucia, *Lambah*,...Lucy. My treasure. My trap."(376). She brings out the idea that just moving to another land does not make one belong. The influences of the native are very strong is often undermined. The protagonist thinks that she will be able to leave her country behind and adopt the culture of Egypt because of the love she bears for her husband, but her individual identity emerges as her yearning for her homeland is overpowering but her struggle thickens as her love for her daughter overpowers her longing to be herself in her own country. The maternal instinct far outrides the individual assertion and she stay in her adopted country, knowing that she will always remain outside looking in.

"That narrow stretch of land knows nothing in the world better than it does the white waves that whip it, caress it, collapse on to it, vanish into it. The white foam knows nothing better than those sands which wait for it, rise to it and suck it in. But what do the waves know of the massed, hot, still sands of the desert just twenty, no ten feet beyond the scalloped edge? And what does the beach know of the depths, the cold, the currents just there, there, do you see it? – where the water turns a deeper blue." (376)

The pain of being split between family and home is the para-

dox of the diasporic writer which is seen through their works. Soueif, although an Egyptian migrated to England has showcased the life of an English woman living in Egypt. In today's global village, diaspora is a universal theme of anthropocentric literature. As a woman diasporic writer, Soueif has captured the essence of the woman's predicament in a foreign land of choice.

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