



حوليات آداب عين شمس المجلد ٤٨ (عدد إبريل – يونيه ٢٠٢٠)

<http://www.aafu.journals.ekb.eg>

(دورية علمية محكمة)



An Arab Feminist in the Global Arena: The Ideas and Advocacy of Ahdaf Soueif

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Abstract

This research paper examines the political and social activism of contemporary Arab Egyptian feminist, Ahdaf Soueif, an exemplar of dedicated feminist activism for Egyptian and Arab women. It opposes Orientalism which characterises Arab women as in-active and isolated within their communities. The first section discusses the foundations of Egyptian women's social movement in the late 19th Century, facts which contradict the Orientalist stereotype of Arab women. The second section examines Soueif's dual goal of criticising and defending the Arab world. Soueif's criticism focuses on Egypt's political regime and the tyrannical policies of Hosni Mubarak. Simultaneously, she defends the Arab world by criticising western foreign policy, particularly the US. For example, the US's interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. She also condemns US foreign policy for bolstering the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Following Edward Said's principles, she condemns western media and literature for its role in distorting the image of Arabs on a global scale. The third section focusses upon the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict and how Soueif highlights the daily suffering endured by Palestinians. Part four explores Soueif's devoted advocacy of human rights, women's rights, democracy, and peace. In conclusion, the paper contends Soueif's social and political contributions on behalf of Egypt and the Arab world follow the legacy of the pioneering Egyptian and Arab women before her. This paper opposes Orientalist philosophy and rejects its distorted image of Middle Eastern women.

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Introduction

Middle Eastern women, from an Orientalist perspective, have long been depicted as backward, secluded and inactive in their societies. This ideology has always projected the principles of Islam as a monolithic faith, however, the opposite is true. Women in the Middle East, particularly in Egypt, have historically played active roles and been, and continue to be participants in their society. They have key roles in various fields and in this regard, they have been supported by Islamic values and culture. Indeed, Egyptian women's activism can be traced back from the late 19th Century. Their roles were not exclusively internal, they focused on external issues too such as, women's rights in the world. From this point of view, one can argue that there have been misperceptions and misunderstandings regarding the roles of Arab women, especially those of Egyptian women.

Ahdaf Soueif¹ continues to be one of the most prominent intellectuals, novelists, and activists of modern Egypt. She has been a key figure since the late 20th Century and is highly regarded to this day. In a large portion of her publications² including novels and political essays, she has presented authentic images of the Arab-Western relationship without any sense of fear or bias, even though she is an Egyptian. She has also been able to draw the attention of an impressive global audience. Though she to this date is considered an "outside" within Egypt than with in, her activism has helped many Arab social movements dealing with important issues such as human rights, women's rights, peace, democracy, intellectual freedom, etc. In this context, key questions can be raised: Is Ahdaf Soueif a genuine representative of traditional female Egyptian activists? Does she represent the tradition of women's activism and leadership unknown to most Egyptians? Now in the 21st Century, is it significant that she is a woman? What does her example teach us about the social movements within the contemporary Arab World? Does her message successfully reach the many audiences; nationally and internationally, Egyptian and Arab people, and the wider global audience?

This research project will examine Soueif's dual roles in defending and critiquing the Arab world, particularly Egypt. It will also analyse Soueif's critique of Western, particularly in the context of the on-going Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and her comparisons between Arab and Western media. Moreover, this research project will consider her criticism of

Western literature, especially where the authentic image of Arab culture and life has been unfairly distorted or misrepresented. Finally, the project will consider Soueif's advocacy role in a variety of issues such as, peace, human rights, democracy, and freedom.^٣

The Historical Legacy of Egyptian Feminist Activism

Since Egyptian women's activism has been evident in Egypt for a long time, it is important first to provide a brief clear outline of the pioneering Egyptian women who had paved the way, not only for Egyptian women but for all Arab women. These female pioneers have been instrumental in shaping their society and protecting their society's rights. Therefore, it is fair to say, Ahdaf Soueif is not a unique example of women's activism within the Middle East. In fact, her work continues a long and established tradition, a path her predecessors have already forged.

In the late ١٩th Century, mid and upper class Egyptian women had begun to claim their rights^٤ and express their ideas by publishing books, poetry, articles, and journals. Their actions received wide support from male intellectuals, scholars, Muslim activists, and *muftis* such as, Qasim 'Amin, 'Ali Mubarak, Rif 'at al-Tahtawiy, Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, and 'Abdullah al-Nadim.^٥ Between ١٨٩٢ and ١٩٨٣, the first feminist journal, *al-Fatah*, was published by Hind Nufal (Ibrahim, ١٩٩٨, Talhami, ١٩٩٦). It discussed women's rights, such as education. Following this, some other feminist journals appeared and supported women's welfare.^٦ Huda Sha'rawi and Nabawiyya Musa played a crucial role in shaping feminist history in Egypt from the beginning to the middle of the ٢٠th century.^٧ Sha'rawi officially established (*The Egyptian Feminist Union*) in ١٩٢٣ (Arafa, ١٩٥٤). Indeed, Sha'rawi published a dual language journal, *La Egyptian*, between ١٩٢٥ to ١٩٤٠, to give women a voice, and convey the role of the organisation which transformed Egyptian feminist movements, helping their voices to be heard around the world (Rasheed, Asfahani and Mourad, ١٩٧٣). *The Egyptian Feminist Union* had been engaged in several important issues such as, the resistance to British colonialism, boycotting foreign merchandise, supporting Palestine, establishing philanthropist organisations for poor people and orphans, establishing schools for women, training them in various disciplines, and participating in worldwide women's conferences (Sha'rawi: *al-Dhikra al-Mi'awiyya* ١٨٧٩-١٩٧٩). Nabawiyya Musa had succeeded in impeding discrimination against Egyptian women and ensuring equal pay once women had passed their qualifying examinations. She became the first woman in Egypt who earned the same salary a man

received in the same position.[^] However, the deaths of these pioneering women did not the Egyptian feminist movement. These women left a rich legacy not only for Egyptian women but for all Arab women who continue their work, ensuring women's participation in various key areas of society and life. These women continue to positively influence and shape wider Arab society. Nawal Sa'dawi[^] and many others, including Soueif, continue the same path and often go beyond what their predecessors originally accomplished. And yet, in this century, when we consider Egyptian women's involvement in political, social, cultural, and economic life, it is clear their involvement is a direct consequence of the previous generation's women's activism. As Soueif rightly observes, "The solution for development is the pressure from people and their efforts, and in Egypt it is not difficult for women to write and to be famous, indeed, more than fifty percent of those who work in literature and media are females and this process had been established from ١٩٧٠" (Ahdaf Soueif, ٢٠٠٨).

Soueif's Dual Orientations in Critiquing and Defending Arab World

To begin with, Soueif held the dual purpose of both defending and critiquing the Arab world. She discusses several negatives issues which condemned the Arab world's regimes. For example, all Arab countries, according to her, have a state apparatus that is very powerful where its main job maintaining the corrupt and ensure the continuance of its own system. Any opposition movement or attempts to change such a system will be suppressed by them. (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٥).

Indeed, Soueif emphasises that the only concern amongst Arab rulers is to retain their power as long as they can, and that "they have failed in their primary task in protecting their nations' sovereignty and steering their countries' resources towards providing the people with a decent life" (Soueif, ٢٠٠٤). She also critiques the reaction of the Arab world toward the Palestinian- Israeli conflict^{^*} and shows how they failed to stop Israel's campaign, which even many British Jews had condemned, particularly Israel's behavior toward Palestine (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٦). In this respect, she aggressively attacks Husni Mubarak's regime. Even though Husni Mubarak recognises what happens to Palestinians at the hands of the Israelis, he continues to sell oil and the gas to Israel at cheap rates (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٩). Furthermore, Egyptian media, particularly television stations, continue to ignore reality and do not broadcast the images showing

what is really happening in Palestine. For example, Egyptian television does not show the Israeli repression and destruction of the Palestinians specifically to avoid raising the Egyptian people's consciousness and feelings of support for Palestine (Souief, ٢٠٠٤). She had also condemned the internal situation in Egypt because the regime has always promoted democracy using democratic slogans but in practice, the opposite is achieved. Many Egyptian demonstrators have been arrested, jailed^{١١*}, tortured, and repressed, and many have disappeared (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٦) because they chose to oppose their government. In fact, most of the anti-government demonstrations which had raised slogans, such as "Egypt's bounty is for outsiders" and "Husnei Mubarak *batil* or not valid and without legitimacy" were torn down by the police.^{١٢} Soueif summarises the rampant corruption evident in Egypt:

Egypt's political ills are not unique-unpopular privatizations, reshaping of the institutions of states to suit the ruling regime, routine links between politicians and big business. The extra problem in Egypt is that the clampdown on personal freedom and political activity gives free rein to inefficiency and corruption. Workers contract cancer in asbestos industries outlawed in Europe. MPs control the markets in essential foodstuffs and building materials. Schools must accommodate two or three shifts of children. Antiquities go missing from museums. Twelve million Egyptians are unemployed; graduates work as street vendors and car attendants, and must bribe the local police to let them scratch a living. Families are poisoned by fruits grown using fertilizers imported by the Ministry of Agriculture. Over the last ٢٠ years some €١٨٦b of Egypt wealth has been stolen and stashed overseas while the country's debt stands approximately ١٢٦% of its GDP (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٦, al-Tallawy, ٢٠٠٩).

In another article, Soueif shows the conflict between Egyptian society and the regime. Indeed, she asserts that every sector of Egyptian society is in conflict with the regime. For instance, Farmers try to physically defend lands from repossession; industrial workers camp out in great state factories being sold to private investors as well under their value; journalists campaign for the freedom of press; professors and lecturers hold their union meetings on pavements as the authorities lock them out of their universities; and many other sectors suffer from the corruption in the regime (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٦).

Therefore, Soueif^{١٣*} believes the Egyptian's media description of Mubarak as "Egypt's Pharaoh," is inaccurate because "Pharaohs" in ancient

Egypt always respected their people and always spoke truthfully, unfortunately Mubarak does not demonstrate these traits (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩).

For all the criticism of the Arab world, she also loyally seeks to defend it on several issues. From Edward Said's perspective, Soueif is critical of Western literature and media because of the way it portrays the Arab world as "patriarchal, backward, fanatic, inferior, uncivilized, terrorist," etc. In April ٢٠٠٦ Soueif spoke at American University, Cairo, her talk was entitled: *A Matter of Agency: The Image of the Arab in Western Literature*. It explained how the west regards Arabs. What most concern issue that Soueif's raise in that lecture and in her book the *Mezzaterra* is the issue of perception and representation of the western literature to the Arab especially when it comes to questions like: do you go to the school on camel? tell us how oppressed you are as a woman? how oppressed you are as a writer? what is the issue of censorship in your country? Tell us about your conflicts of identity, are you Egyptian or Arab, are you Muslim or Westernized? (*The Image of the Arab in Western Literature*, ٢٠٠٦).

Soueif attitudes toward Islam is positive as defends Islam because she believes Islam has been built on diversity and equality among people. She contends that Islam has never discouraged science and development and in fact Islam always encourages working hard to the very last minute of one's life. It demonstrates Soueif's belief in the Prophet Muhammad's tradition, "that if the end of the world were to come and you were carrying a seed in your hand go ahead and plant it (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٥).

It is clear Soueif believes the west's intervention in the Arab world does not have positive consequences, it has had a negative one. Ahdaf gave an example of western intervention toward the practice of female circumcision in Egypt and its consequences while lecturing in Bahrain. She indicates that female circumcision in Egypt has its historical roots in Egyptian culture. However, the *Egyptian Feminist Union* has made every effort to abolish this practice since the ١٩٣٠'s, and they did gradually achieve positive results for these efforts. However, when two American feminists began to fight against this practice in the ١٩٨٠'s, Egyptian women reacted negatively toward their interference. Some Egyptian women defended the practice as part of their Egyptian cultural heritage, asserting no one from outside Egypt had any right to tell them what to do (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩). She believes that the Egyptian culture is targeted by the western because

they usually took a minor cultural habit or practices as a representative of the entire culture of society, even if large number of people in this society are not contented with this cultural practice. (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩).

Soueif also condemned Western literature, and some Arab intellectuals, all of whom criticised Arabs with extreme bias to draw attention and acclaim with the Western media, and to win western awards (*Some of our Thinkers...*, ٢٠٠٩). The distorted and biased views ultimately contributed to shaping the West's opinion of Arabs, and led to a widely held negative perception of Arabs amongst certain Western decision makers. Therefore, Soueif contends the solution is that all Arabs should accomplish their goals and do whatever they can as successfully as possible, and this in turn would automatically improve the West's impressions of them (*Some of our Thinkers...*, ٢٠٠٩). Regarding her own efforts to change Western perceptions, she usually took advantage to clarify and correct the image via her articles, interviews, lectures and even by all other invitation methods (i.e. TV or Radio talks). (*Yes There is a Red*, ٢٠٠٩).

Soueif has also played an important role in critiquing western imperialism and its role in destabilising the Arab world. She condemns American foreign policy and its intervention in the Arab world, continually disguised under the rhetorical banners of freedom, peace and democracy (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥). Soueif believes that the US has its own interest in the region and uses these interests as justification to manipulate its foreign policy toward the Arabs. The US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, for example, have been justified under the auspices of defeating terrorism and democratising "others" but the US never attempted to resolve the Palestinian conflict first (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥). Soueif also vehemently condemned the dictatorships of Arab rulers, such as Saddam Hussein, particularly the way he tortured and executed his own people. Hussein was never democratic or a man of peace and never claimed to be either. However, the US claims to promote democracy and peace but their actions in *abu ghurīb* contradict their proclaimed mission to civilize and liberate "others" (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥). Westerners continue to present the antagonism between East and West as a religious matter but the truth is, as Soueif argues, it is more a matter of politics, economics, and culture. The West as she argues, has always sought the same thing from the Arab world mainly the resources. They attempt seriously to discredit the Arab culture, especially with the rising of the notion of a unipolar world. (al-Jirsi, ٢٠٠٦).

Western propaganda and media always depicts the Arabs as “terrorist fanatic people.” Soueif believes this view has always been part of an imperialistic ideology and the Western people have paid the price for this imperial game. Soueif provides a specific example to support this argument. For example, When Egypt Air Flight ٩٩٠ fell into the Atlantic in ١٩٩٩ killing ٢١٧ people on board, the US explained within minutes that the Egyptian pilot was an Islamist fanatic who had decided to commit suicide. Even after Egyptian newspapers published a photo of him with his little daughter holding an inflatable Father Christmas, the US insisted that he was an Islamic fanatic (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥).

She also condemned the British media for not fairly covering every aspect of Arab news, particularly subjects relating to the Palestinian-Israeli conflicts. Even when it was reported it was done so with bias against the Arab world. However, when she compares the same incident as it was covered in the Arab media, such as, al-Jazeera, she demonstrates how the latter provides a deeper, clearer and fairer view of the situation and presents a wider variety of opinions. As she states,

In a way, even though the images we saw on al-Jazeera were far worse than the ones presented on British television, it was a relief to see them straight and hear the interviews from the ground rather than getting reports from the British TV point of view (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥).

And yet “For us outside it provides the one window through which we can breathe,” she claims (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥).

Soueif has also revealed how many US soldiers have refused to fight in Iraq because of the difference between the image portrayed by the media and the reality they were witnessing during their military missions (*The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٨). In this regard, what the Egyptian cleric, sheikh Qaradawi, said during an al-Jazeera interview is pertinent. He said, “The American people are the prisoners of their media. They are ordinary people, concerned with their daily lives, with earning a living. We must try to reach them through debate, not through hostility” (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥). Unsurprisingly, Edward Said, the author of *Orientalism*, published in ١٩٧٧, echoed the same sentiment in his preface of the new edition of the classic which was published more than two decades after the first edition. He said, unfortunately, the image of Arabs in the US has not improved when he states,

I wish I could say, however, that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs, and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn't (Said, ١٩٧٨).

Souef believes the extremist Islamic ideology was born as a reaction to injustice within the volatile political atmosphere, and from the fear of Western cultural hegemony toward Islamic societies (*An Interview with Souef*, ٢٠٠٧). It is easy to conclude that Western literature and media has perpetuated the stereotype of Arabs who are backward and terrorise their people.

Souef dedicates most of her works to the subject of the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict in the context of Western imperialism. She has also dedicated most of her activities to this issue,^{١٤*} supporting the Palestinian cause. Before analysing Souef's activities in support of the Palestinian issue, it is important to analyse her attitude toward Israel. She believes that there is no possibility for the two countries (Palestine and Israel) to live as one entity (*Not Possible to Establish Two Countries in One Entity*, ٢٠٠٩). Even though her visit to Palestine had been encouraged by many Arab intellectuals and scholars, such as Edward Said and Mourid Barghouti, she also encountered criticism from the Arab world because of the issue of normalisation with Israel. However, she responded to their criticism, arguing her opposition on the issue of normalisation with Israel (*I Refused Normalization...*, ٢٠٠٩). Souef's six-day journey to Palestine gave voice to the Palestinian people and highlighted the daily misery they endure to the West. These were images of the Palestinian people, their daily lives, and their environment that the West had previously had not via their own governments or media. She exposed cases of discrimination, oppression, the destructions of their homes, and widespread humiliation, killings, and ethnic cleansing. For instance, she described how rubbish and toilet paper soiled with human excrement were thrown onto Arab Palestinian homes by Israeli soldiers to intimidate and humiliate them, and force them to migrate. Furthermore, Palestinians have no rights to lock their homes and prevent access because Israelis' soldiers^{١٥*} have the right to enter at any time. (*Not Possible to Establish Two Countries in One Entity*, ٢٠٠٩). Souef recounted a confession from an Israeli's soldier, Avner Kohavai, who described how he had treated the Palestinians (Souef, ٢٠٠٥).

Moreover, thousands of children could not go to school and many mosques had been closed. Palestinian children were not allowed to study their own cultural history and were prevented from recognising their country

on the world map. They could not live a normal childhood; they did not sing normal songs as other children did. Their songs always related to the war that raged around them. Soueif met Fatima Jibril, a Palestinian woman, during her journey to Palestine. Fatima Jibril told Soueif, “There isn’t a child who doesn’t have a father or brother banished or jailed or killed” (Soueif, ۲۰۰۵). And there are countless human rights violations, no one should have to tolerate as a human being (Soueif, ۲۰۰۴). Unsurprisingly, the Palestinian people live in a state of threat and emergency twenty-four hours emergency day. In Gaza, it is hard for people to gain even an hour of sleep (*The Guardian*, ۲۰۰۹). Soueif correctly questions whether the US and UK are fully aware and recognise what is happening to the people of Palestine. Don’t they regard this as terrorism? The problem is that the actions of both the US and UK have resulted in the support of Israel against Palestinians and Arabs. Soueif provides several examples of how the US has supported and continues to bolster the Israeli government or Zionist project. Since the late ۱۹th Century, the US has supported the Zionist project and indirectly, Israeli government. It had also been financially supported by the US since Israel came into being in ۱۹۴۸. Colin Powell, a former Secretary of State of the US had confirmed this when he addressed the AIPAC on March ۲۰, ۲۰۰۴. He was grateful to President Bush because he had requested one billion US dollars from Congress to help and strengthen Israel military and civil defenses (Soueif, ۲۰۰۵). Condoleezza Rice also said spoke of Israel in a similar fashion. She said, “I have a deep affinity with Israel. I have always admired the history of the state of Israel and the hardness and determination of the people that founded it” (Soueif, ۲۰۰۵). The US had used its United Nations veto ۲۴ times on issues related to the Arab-Israeli conflict, vetoes that were consistently in favour of Israel (*The Israelisation of America*, ۲۰۰۳).

In addition, the US remained silent when Israeli tested new chemicals and nerve gases on the people in Gaza. And it is important to note, Israel is the only state where torturing people is a lawful act protected by their own laws (*The Heart of the Matter...*, ۲۰۰۶). Soueif has made it clear she believes the US and Israeli governments are indistinguishable in their mutual determination to destroy peace in this world. She states,

And the political will of the current White House and the Israeli government seem to be identical. Rather than seeking peace they seek to

expand war. Rather than trying to understand the causes of tension they obfuscate them by positing cosmic conflicts and irrational enemies. Rather than searching for more equitable ways for us all to live on this planet they promote cut-throat—and in my cases fraudulent—global capitalism. Rather than celebrating or at least accepting diversity they preach exceptionalism and seek to force us all in one mold: their own (*The Heart of the Matter...*, ٢٠٠٦).

Accordingly, Soueif believes that the Arab conflict with the US is a direct consequence of their dealings with Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The US projects and image as an “honest broker” in this matter while the evidence suggests the opposite is true; The US continues to support the corrupt regimes operating within the Arab world when it suits their own financial and political interests (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥).

Soueif contends the only solution to this problem is for the US to help establish a fair and balanced agreement between the two rivals. In this context, Soueif sent a message to the then UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, on April ٣, ٢٠٠٢, requesting he use his influence and encourage Israel to stop its massacre in Palestine. She also drew attention to the ٣٨٤ Israeli soldiers who had actively refused to complete their military service in Israel in protest of the inhuman treatment the Israeli army inflicts upon the Palestinian people. She sought his intervention, citing ethical foreign policy and humanity (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥).

Soueif has also been actively involved in various social movements dealing with human rights, women’s rights, democracy, and freedom. She dedicates most of her social activities to serve Palestinian problems. As part of her active political role in this area, she established an organisation^{١٦} called *Engage Events* (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩). which is based in Britain. The organisation’s first act was to invite more than seventeen international scholars and authors from America, Britain, India, and the Arab world, for a panel discussion in the *Dar al-Tifl al-Arabi* museum, (The Center of Arab the Child), under the title of the *Palestine Festival of Literature*. Taking a cue from Said, who believed in the ideology of “the power of cultural resistance,” was the main reason for this festival to promote a culture of resistance. She observed,

Palestine had richly contributed in the heritage of the international culture, and their intellectual thinkers, poets, sons and the daughter of Palestine, had arrived to the first and early innovative Arabs. Even though Palestine considered as a fertile land for the innovators, its richness in its

culture and innovation had exposed to vulnerability however since sixty years ago. The life under military occupation is cruel and plundered. The Palestinians cities striving to reserve its culture under the siege circumstances, escapes and invasions. Indeed, every Palestinians work for his nation in extraordinary effort and in the culture field particularly to keep a connection with outside world... Thus, Palestine Festival of Literature wishes to take its position as a part of this Palestinian effort (*Seventeenth International Scholars...*, ٢٠٠٩).

Soueif also believed this occasion would play a major role in exposing the truth to the scholars, particularly the British. becoming aware of the situation in Palestine would help change the Palestinian stereotypes held by the British. It also gave them an opportunity to meet, work, and connect with Palestinian intellectuals, scholars, and writers (*Palestine Live Inside...*, ٢٠٠٩).

Unsurprisingly, Soueif also reminded the Arab world of eminent Arab intellectuals and scholars, such as Edward Said and Mourid Barghouti. She asserted, at the Shaikh Ibrahim al- Kalifa Center for Culture and Research in Bahrain, that the death of Said^{١٧*} was a great loss because he put the Palestinian issue at the forefront of the minds of educated people in the West (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩). Soueif is also an active member of “Campaign in Supporting Palestine Assembly” and her role in this organisation is seminal. Soueif reported on activities, saying, “We are also organising demonstrations and training volunteers to serve as human shields against Israeli occupation” (*Soueif in a Warrior Coffee Break...*, ٢٠٠٩).

To advance the cause of the Palestinian people, she asks Arabs and all people who believe in human rights, peace, and the right to a decent life, to join hands and work together because she believes division amongst people is the heart of the problem. She asks people to respond to and correct the inaccuracies presented by a misleading Media who have been used as an effective tool to perpetuate unfair stereotypes. Additionally, Soueif gave a speech at the Kennedy Centre of Performing Arts in Washington DC, USA, under the title of *Arabesque: Arts of the Arab World*, which addressed many Arab issues, such as the role of the pioneer May Ziyada and her role in explaining orientalism, and the West’s prevalent stereotypes of the East. She also talks about Arab identity and recited the work of poet, Mahmoud Darwich. She also discussed Salah al-Din al-’Ayyubi, an exemplary Arab

leader who championed the cause of Arab unity. (*Arabesque Succeed...*, ٢٠٠٩) On another occasion, Soueif condemned the European Union (EU) for granting Israel more privileges and access to European institutions, although Israeli had broken its agreements regarding Gaza. The EU's stance was contrary to its declared commitment to human rights and democratic principles. Soueif, along with many scholars, signed a letter condemning the EU (*EU Must Hold Israel...*, ٢٠٠٩).

Moreover, she asked for people to support Palestinians by boycotting Israeli products and products from those countries and institutions which actively supported Israel and instead, buy Palestinian olive oil which whelp them (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩). Finally, she asked people not to be silent on the Palestinian issue because it is their role to tell the world what is happening in Palestine. She asks Arabs and Palestinians to work together and forge unity so that the world can see Arab solidarity on this issue (*Talk Literature with Soueif...*, ٢٠٠٩).

Since Soueif advocates Democracy, she has also played a crucial role in supporting movements struggling for democracy in Egypt. She has participated in demonstrations against police stations demanding the release for arrested demonstrators (*Washington Prepare for a Bloodless Coup to Hamas*, ٢٠٠٦).

Though Soueif does not focus on feminist issues as powerfully as she champions other issues, she still believes in equal rights for both genders. She observes, "I think being a feminist is part of being humanist: believing in the equal value of every human being and in the (desirable) diversity of human beings at the same time" (*Talk Literature with Soueif...*, ٢٠٠٩). She also believes that there is no specific necessity for only women's feminist literature because both genders can focus on the truth of humanity. Pursuing this line of argument, she emphasised that Shakespeare, Najib Mahfuz, and Yusuf Idris were exemplary male writers who successfully presented women (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩). In many of her articles, she has emphasised the important roles and work of the great Egyptian feminists, such as Huda Sha'rawi, Jihan al-Sadat, and Nawal al-Sa'adawi.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Egyptian Feminist Activism Continued.

Ahdaf Soueif is a fine and accomplished example of a Middle Eastern women with an active role in her their society and dedicated activism for several issues. One can argue that women in the Middle East do

not match the stereotype portrayed by Western media and literature. Middle Eastern women, especially in Egypt, have forged great traditions of women's activism for over a century. Soueif is an accomplished and distinguished successor of this legacy and she continues this tradition of strong women in our times. She has broadened the role of women's activism beyond what her predecessors achieved. And, like her predecessors, she has always emphasised women's rights and other feminist issues. However, the thing that makes her a unique, and a prominent activist on the world stage, is that she focuses upon imperialism, orientalism, and political issues, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, freedom of people, human rights, democracy and dictatorship in the Middle East, and cultural issues. She has worked independently and set her own agenda, focusing especially upon the Palestinian issue. As has been illustrated in this article, she has been a strong leader and an active participant in several social movements dealing with a variety of issues in the Middle East. She pioneered "Engage Events" which attracted a leading Western scholars and authors to participate in a panel discussion called Palestine Festival of Literature. She continues to promote an ideology and culture of resistance against powerful establishments. Soueif opposes the orientalist representation of Middle Eastern women and positions herself as a strong and authentic representative of Middle Eastern women. Finally, Soueif has successfully followed Edward Said's ideological goal, to dispel the distorted image of Arab women, created regionally and internationally, over centuries, by the orientalists. Soueif continues Said's legacy of resistance, even after his passing.

نسوية عربية في الميدان العالمي: فكر ونضال أهداف سوييف

محمد حبيب

المستخلص

يناقش هذا البحث النشاط السياسي والاجتماعي للناشطة الحقوقية النسوية العربية المصرية أهداف سوييف، خاصة وأنها تعتبر نموذج مثالي لنشاط المرأة العربية في العالم العربي بشكل عام وفي مصر بشكل خاص. فهي تعطي صورة معاكسة لبعض أفكار المستشرقين التي تُروج على أن المرأة العربية تاريخياً تُعتبر غير نشطة ومنعزلة في مجتمعاتها. تنقسم هذه المقالة إلى أربعة مباحث أساسية: المبحث الأول يتحدث عن الجذور الأساسية لظهور الحركة الاجتماعية النسوية للمرأة المصرية التي تعود لأواخر القرن التاسع عشر الميلادي في مصر، والتي تحمل وجهة نظر تاريخية تتعارض مع ما وُصفت به المرأة العربية من قبل المستشرقين. أما المبحث الثاني فيسلط الضوء على الدور المزوج لنقد سوييف للعالم العربي والدفاع عنه في نفس الوقت. فمن جانب يتركز إنتقاد سوييف للعالم العربي بشكل أساسي على النظام المصري والسياسة الداخلية في عهد الرئيس المصري المخلوع حسني مبارك، ويركز دفاعها- من جانب آخر- عن العالم العربي من خلال نقد السياسة الخارجية الغربية لا سيما السياسة الخارجية الأمريكية للعالم العربي في العديد من القضايا، مثل تدخلها في العراق وأفغانستان من أجل إضفاء الطابعين "الديمقراطي" و"الحضاري" على هاتين الدولتين. كما أدانت سوييف في نقدها للغرب التلاعب بالسياسة الخارجية الأمريكية للصراع الفلسطيني-الإسرائيلي المستمر. ومن خلال إتباع نفس مسار إدوارد سعيد، أدانت أيضاً وسائل الإعلام الغربية والأدب لدورهما في تشويه الصورة العالمية للعالم العربي. أما الصدام الفلسطيني-الإسرائيلي المستمر وسرد ما يحدث للغرب في الحياة اليومية الاجتماعية للفلسطينيين هو المبحث الثالث لهذه الورقة البحثية. ويركز المبحث الرابع والأخير على دعوة سوييف الحقوقية المتمثلة في حقوق الإنسان، وحقوق المرأة، والديمقراطية والسلام. وتتلخص الخاتمة بنقطة أساسية مفادها أن مساهمات الناشطة سوييف وطرحها وتتبعها للقضايا الاجتماعية والسياسية للعالم العربي ومصر - كنموذج للمرأة المصرية المعاصرة - تُقر بشكل خاص على إستمرارية نشاط المرأة المصرية منذ أكثر من قرن، خاصة وأنها إتبعت مسار الإرث التاريخي للحركة النسوية المصرية ودورها في المشاركة في قضايا إجتماعية وسياسية تجاه مجتمعها بشكل خاص والعالم العربي أيضاً. وبالتالي فإنها تعارض ما كان يُوجّهه المشاهد عن قصد لتشويه صورة المرأة في الشرق الأوسط، خاصة المرأة المصرية من وجهة نظر المستشرقين.

Reference

¹All Ahdaf Soueif's works in Arabic, and articles referring to her, have been translated by the author, Mohammad al-Habib

²Some examples of Ahdaf Soueif's publications are, *Aisha* (Cairo, ١٩٨٣), *In the Eye of the Sun* (London, ١٩٩٢), *Zeenat al-Hayat* (Cairo, ١٩٩٦), *Sandpiper* (London, ١٩٩٦), *Mudhakarāt min a' māl Ahdaf Soueif* (Cairo, ١٩٩٨), *The Map of Love* (London, ١٩٩٩). She has also published a book on political essays entitled *Mezzaterra* (New York,

٢٠٠٥), and her book *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (New York, ٢٠١٢) discussed her personal account that associated Egyptians memories during the Egyptian revolution of ٢٠١١. As a journalist, she has written for the British newspaper, *The Guardian*.

^٢From Ahdaf's voluminous works, the reader would be able to recognise her audiences as Egyptian, Arab, and global in the context of issues that she addresses.

^٣Most of the issues related to women's education, suffering, veils, early marriage, polygamy, protection, etc.

^٤In his book *The Liberation of Women and the New Woman* (Cairo, ١٩٩٢), Qasim ' Amin advocates women's emancipation. He rightly observes "In summary, nothing in the law of Islam or in its intentions can account for the low statues of Muslim women", (Amin, ١٩٩٢).

^٥Such as al-Hawānim (The Ladies), Mir' āt al-Hinnā (The Hinna Mirror), al-Jins al-Laṭ īf (The Gentle Sex), al-^٦ Afāf (Virtue). (Talhami, ١٩٩٦)

^٧There are many other Egyptian feminist women who had also contributed to this process, such as Duriya Shafiq, ' Amina al-Sa^٨ id, Siza Nabarawi, and others. For more information, see (Wassef, ٢٠٠١).

^٩For more details about Nabawiyya, see (Badran, ١٩٩٥).

^{١٠}In her book *Qaḍiyat al-Mar' a al-Masriyya al-Siyasiyya wa al-Jinsiyya*, Nawal believes that Egyptian women's emancipation will not be carried out by anyone other than women themselves because history proves the liberation of any repressed group is achieved by the hands of their own members. (Sa^{١١} dawī, ١٩٧٧).

^{١٢*}In *Metzzaterra* Ahdaf implies that Palestinians are not surprised by what the Israeli regime does to them, but they are surprised by the silence from (Soueif, ٢٠٠٥).

^{١٣*}Most of them were unlawfully imprisoned without trial, and there is no paperwork prove where they are. For more details, see (Soueif, ٢٠٠٤).

^{١٤}For more details about Egyptian demonstrations and the government

reaction against these demonstrators, see (Soueif, *The Guardian*, ٢٠٠٦).

^{١٣*}In Middle East Newspaper Soueif emphasises that through her works she tries to present a realistic and true image for the Arabs without courtesy. See (Soueif, Middle East, ٢٠٠٩). And when she was interviewed by Shaikh Ibrahim al-Khalifa Center for Culture & Research, she rightly said “because I am living in England and writing in English, that does not mean I write for British favour and courtesy because neither Britains nor Arabs will read my work, and from my experience, to help the receiver to get the artwork or literature seriously the later should be felt seriously... and there is no place for courtesy.... And no language courtesy, and finally what should be written should rely on convince and already it’s my vision”, consult (Soueif, ٢٠٠٩).

^{١٤*}In ٢٠٠٠ Ahdaf travelled to Palestine through Jordon on commission with the Guardian, the purpose was to convey he daily suffering of the Palestinian people to the west. Their feeling and their voices under the Israeli occupation were revealed to the world. For more information, see (Soueif, ٢٠٠٤).

^{١٥*}There are many Israeli’s soldiers who had terminated their military serving called themselves (Breaking the Silence) had establish electronic website to reveal what the Israel’s government asked them how to deal with Palestinians to humiliate them. See (Cauthrani, ٢٠٠٩).

^{١٦}Engaged Events has cooperated with other transnational organisations to complete this panel, such as British Council Institute, Yabous Foundation for Artistic Production in Jerusalem, University of Beit Lahem, University Beir Zeit and Abdulmohsen Al-Qattan Foundation in Ramallah. For more details, see (*To Revive Nakba...*, ٢٠٠٩).

^{١٧*}Soueif also lectured at University of Warwick in UK for the third annual Said memorial, for more information, see <http://www.ahdafsoueif.com>. Soueif also believes that no one will replace Said. For more details, see (*Soueif in a Warrior Coffee Break...*, ٢٠٠٩).

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