

Subverting Gender Bias: "The Manly Woman" in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*

Safa'a A. Maqableh

Faculty of English Language and Literature, Jordan University, Amman, Jordan

Abstract—This paper examines the representations of the white woman in cross-cultural marriage in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* in a contemporary deconstructive theory. The paper applies Judith Butler's revolutionary theory of gender and identity constructivism and performativity to clarify how the protagonist fights the gender norms and performances by having masculinity codes as a revolting means for emancipation. The paper tends to explore how colonial hegemony can create a cultural distance which is forced against the white woman by this marriage. It investigates the sociopolitical spatial divisions through the eye of the white woman who struggles because she chooses an ethnic husband. The paper applies a feminist theoretical framework to describe the prejudice and bias that appear after this marriage. "The manly woman" is the white woman who wears masculine features to subvert and oppose the gender bias which applies to her femininity.

Index Terms—cross-cultural, performativity, remapping, feminism, marriage, re-conceptualization

I. INTRODUCTION

Women throughout history till now suffer from patriarchy, oppression, discrimination, social injustice and domination. Despite their ethnicities, women struggle to find their own spaces and have an equal peaceful environment in their societies. The representation of women in contemporary fiction is still biased and impractical. Diasporic Arab female writers try to pave the way to the reconciliation between the West and the East by representing stories of women from both arenas to create a historical political construction. These novels are set in Western contemporary societies which display heterogeneity due to several reasons such as globalization, racism, multiculturalism and decolonization. The cross-cultural marriage is the main topic that the selected novel of this paper represents.

Cross-cultural marriages are a controversial phenomenon, which has been triggered by colonialism and immigration to the "New World." Mestizo is an old name for this phenomenon, which is a mixed descent of white Europeans and Native Americans. Cross-cultural marriage is considered one of the aspects of a multicultural society in which groups of people with different traditions, values, religions and languages live together. This marriage may fall under the differences of expectation and reality for the couple. It can be introduced as an approach to accepting differentiation and as an aspect of a tolerant society of racial and cultural heterogeneity. Culture, which represents "people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall, 1990, p. 223), plays a significant role in this marriage. As a result, it might give foreigners a chance to assimilate, to rebel or even to be lost in the new culture of their partners. The cultural identity or the "one true self" (p. 224) could be one of the barriers between the couple in this marriage.

Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian novelist, journalist and political critic. She grants a masterpiece novel which raises many questions about issues of colonization, diaspora, history, politics and cross-cultural marriage. She turns the love theme into a sociopolitical, cultural and historical reference. Many articles tackle different themes within diverse theoretical analyses and this novel succeeds in illuminating researchers' minds with contribution and motivation. *The Map of Love* is a travel family story. It contains different levels starting with the leading female characters. It is also a work that builds a permanent bridge between the East and the West through cross-cultural marriage. In an article written by Emily S. Davis, Soueif is appreciated for breaking the political-cultural conflict through romance; Davis declares that "Soueif's romance serves primarily to bring into contact colonial subjects and members of the populations they rule rather than disparate elements of the postcolonial nation" (2007, p. 2). The article also suggests the political success of this novel as "[i]nstead of bridging gaps to bolster the precarious state, the romance here evokes transnational coalitions—significantly, of women—and unearths genealogies of their resistance to critique and transform the postcolonial state and to comment upon the international balance of power in the wake of British imperialism" (p. 2). Thus, the novel represents a successful cross-cultural marriage especially when the offspring of this marriage successfully cracks the code of their family and creates new perspectives.

The novel portrays a period in which Egypt was under the British mandate in the early twentieth century. The story depicts the tense relationship between the colonized and the colonizer and how the latter applied hegemony and oppression toward the former. However, Soueif might portray the possibility of a healthy successful relationship between two different cultures and identities during the colonial era of Egypt, she "can bring down language and cultural barriers through tolerance, compassion and understanding" (Awad, 2018, p. 4). In this Article, which is titled "Space Transformation and Identity", Dr. Awad discusses space as a method of oppressing colonization, quoting the

work "make use of the characters' journeys and experiences to represent the racial and ethnic tensions and conflicts that separate the colonizer and the colonized" (p. 2).

The Map of Love is a postmodern novel that brings together different aspects of life within a historical cultural framework. Michael Silverblatt, a producer and a host of the radio program Bookworm, says: "The Map of Love brings to us the things that the novels are meant to bring not just politics but love, not just love but romance, not just romance but counter-romance; this is the real thing; this is the bright book of life" (2003, April 9). It gives voices for diverse tongues and minds to create a faithful story and leave the reader a chance to judge the whole story of women. Based on the novel, the British colonizer is divided into two parties; the first is the aristocratic and the other party chooses to indulge and live an unforgettable story in the land of the Orient. Despite the social, sexist, cultural and racial powers of the British colonization era, the heroine re-conceptualizes masculine oppression by rejecting the white oppressive stereotypes.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler introduces her revolutionary theory of performativity which conceptualizes that "gender is performative". Butler deconstructs the cultural and biological norms; she questions the notion of "being a woman [as it] is more difficult than it perhaps originally appeared, for we refer not only to women as a social category but also as a felt of self, a culturally conditioned or constructed subjective identity" (p. 324). Butler defines gender as a social role performed and enacted by the individuals and validated and accepted by society. She also defies fixities and universalities related to the cultural and social role of gender. She sees gender as provisional, shifting, contingent and performed. Butler also fights the sociocultural norms which are opposed to the subject's gender and identity as she says "The body is figured as a surface and the scene of cultural inscription;" the body "is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history" (p. 177). Butler indicates that "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (1993, p. 308). The opposing power regimes of restricting gender create a subverting process by subjects.

Butler claims that "acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are performative in the sense that the essence of identity that they otherwise purport to express becomes a fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (1990, p. 336). She also adapts the theory of drag that "fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks identity" (p. 337).

This paper tackles cross-cultural marriage in a feminist theoretical frame. The paper attempts to show how the writer represents the Transvestite White Woman as a wife and her way to remap a successful cross-cultural marriage despite the cultural and political challenges she faces.

II. THE TRANSVESTITE WHITE WOMAN

Gender is the basic issue of feminist movement. Bell Hooks in her book *Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center* (1984) defines Feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (qtd. In *Feminism is for Everybody*, 2000, viii). The previous quotation implies that all sexist actions and thinking are rejected either by men or by women. It is not a movement against men but a practical way of liberty from patriarchy as the latter is seen as institutionalized sexism. Hook also identifies the term black gaze to determine that black people are also racist because "black people watch white people with a critical "ethnographic gaze, is itself an expression of racism" (qtd In Brown, 1999, p. 24).

White women were being criticized for being racist and for not living the experience of ethnic women. Whiteness studies want to shed light on the "universalism" in feminism to contribute to the issue of "understandings of race by suggesting that it should be a question of all women, and no less for white women than for any others" (Brown, 1999, p. 5).

Butler in her book, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, indicates her revolutionary theory of re-conceptualization and identity formation. She indicates that "identifications shift does not necessarily mean that one identification is repudiated for another; that shifting may well be one sign of hope for the possibility of avowing and expansive set of connections...[it] involves a substitution of oneself for another that may well be a colonization of the other's position as one's own" (p. 118). Accordingly, she challenges the social roles and their performances by creating alternative enacted acts and performances, an alternative to the way norms lead to mutually reversing visualization of gender relations and the genders' social practices. The notion of gender performativity appears in *The Map of Love* along with the first meeting between the white protagonist and the future ethnic husband. Gender for Anna, the white protagonist, is shown as an obstacle in her journey to discover Egypt not the one inside the British colonization's firm walls. To meet the real Egypt with its tradition and culture, she asks one of her servants, Sabir, to help her to achieve her dream who explains to her that it is very dangerous to have this experience not only as a woman, but also as a British. Anna might adopt Butler's performativity by deconstructing norms and obstacles. So, she chooses to disguise herself as a man to subvert her femininity to achieve her dream. The journey starts but it turns to be a terror journey. Anna (the man) is kidnapped by Sharif Basha who is a decisive opponent of the British Mandate. Anna thinks of all the scenarios except the one that happens, she says: "[F]or myself, the thought that holds most terror for me now is to become known in London as 'that Lady Anna Winterbourne who was abducted by the Arabs'" (Souief, 1999, p. 105).

She expresses her own racial and gender fears; she will be oppressed by this notion as an English white woman who is being taken by an Arab.

The kidnappers determine his/ her safety as "my person, possessions and horses were safe and would be returned to me as soon as their demands were met by the Egyptian government" (Souief, 1999, p. 106). Anna feels insecure and hesitates whether to show her "true identity" or her "feminine identity" (Souief, 1999, p. 106). She is aware that her femininity is not worth in this situation than being a male.

The protagonist of *The Map of Love*, Anna Winterbourne, literally and figuratively chooses to hide her femininity which controls her wishes and dreams to wear a masculine mask in her life in Egypt. She emancipates her cultural socio-political norms by having a cross-cultural man and her marriage succeeds by being a political masculine partner for her husband Sharif Basha. While Anna dreams of giving up gender and political norms, she has many questions about her colonial situation as a British and the death of her former British husband, Edward. She wants answers for the paranoia she has because she is considered by her race a part of colonization. She hates the British colonization as it was the cause of her previous misery and fragmentation. She refuses the British claim of colonization to civilize and free indigenous because of this claim she was being in a prison of sadness and a failed marriage. She is called a widow twice because of her own country. Anna prays "for the souls of all the men who were joined in that terrible event" (Souief, 1999, p. 34) in Sudan and all parts of the British "empire".

Whereas all the British people who visit the Egyptian colony stay at their fancy luxurious rooms and palaces, Anna describes that "there is something at the heart of it [Egypt] all which alludes me- something- an imitation which I felt in the paintings, the conversations in England, and which, now that I am here, seems far, far from my grasp" (Souief, 1999, p. 102). She has the feeling of displacement as she wants to dive into the normality and simplicity of the place away from the British hypocrisy and falseness. She wants to form a self-definition of Egypt away from what she learned and politically taught. Anna's process of transformation assumes to deconstruct her cultural feminine identity; it is a journey of discovering herself, a journey of persistence and courage to reconstruct her identity. Even her marriage is a part of the process of freeing and deconstructing the stereotypical image of herself as a woman.

Anna shows her admiration of Egyptian culture and identity from the minute she takes her feminine mask off and wears the masculine identity. She finds her path to go to the extreme and to have a true version of herself far away from the aristocratic British hypocrisy to indulge in real Egypt by being a man. She changes- disguising as a man- her gender to fit into colonial and cultural norms. By deconstructing her sex, she makes her gender socially accepted which gives her the right to be a new identity and be able to create her perspectives away from her British cultural colonizer. She puts aside biological, cultural and social significances that eliminate her womanhood.

While Anna shifts her gender, she makes her new identity provisional, accepted and validated in Egyptian society. Even though Anna is afraid of being called "that Lady Anna Winterbourne who was abducted by the Arabs" (Souief, 1999, p. 105), she is determined to hide the whole story of the abduction to protect her fame. Anna figuratively shares masculinity with her husband Sharif Basha. Their marriage is rejected by different levels. She is not just a wife; she is a political close partner to her husband.

III. REMAPPING THE INSTITUTION OF MARRIAGE THROUGH THE WHITE WOMAN

Egypt was under the British colonization from 1882 till 1956 after the Suez Crisis. This colonial period in Egypt was reflected in British fiction and theatre (Alhawamdeh, 2022). The British forces withdrew from the Egyptian lands after the Anglo-Egyptian agreement of 1954. The British claim of this colonization "is to civilise Africa in the interests of Europe and that to gain that end all means are good" (Souief, 1990, p. 32). Anna does not believe this claim as she lives the misery of her former husband Edward after coming back from Sudan. Edward suffers from psychological mental disorder because of what he witnesses by the British terrorism in Soudan. Anna is a white woman who belongs to the colonizer side but she gets a critical mind to see the truth of this war, she explains the hostility of the British army, "how Kitchener let the British and Egyptian soldiers loose upon the town for three days of rape and pillage" (Souief, 1999, p. 34). Anna feels worried about Edward as he will never handle the idea of taking part in these horrible deeds. The death of Edward leads to Anna's depression in a way she expresses: "If I could believe that he died for a noble cause. If I could believe that he died contented" (Souief, 1999, p. 41). She blames herself as she believes she couldn't save him from his psychological dilemma. Soueif explains Anna's feeling, by Isabel's words, as "[t]hat's the trap... we're trained, conditioned to blame ourselves. This guy was inadequate, and somehow she, the woman, ends up the responsibility..." (Souief, 1999, p. 42). As women are raised under blame discourse by men for any dysfunction in their families, Anna unconsciously keeps blaming herself for not being the loved wife who "would have found the key- when he was so ill-so desperate-" (Souief, 1999, p. 42).

Ahdaf Soueif draws on the history of Egypt under British colonization through Anna Winterbourne's diary entries and letters. The modes of confessional appear in these letters. Feminist writers indicate the honesty and clearness of confessional letters as a way to be close to the mind of the writer. Anna, the white woman, and Amal, the ethnic woman, both establish a new term of sisterhood by indulging in confessional concepts. Amal implies the full understanding of Anna's mind and behaviour through these letters, she says "I got to know Anna as though she were my best friend- or better; for I heard the worst and the best of her thoughts and I had her life whole in front of me... she became so present to me that I could swear she sits quietly by as I try to write down her story"(p. 43). Bell Hooks points to sisterhood

theme between women of all colors in her book *Feminism is for Everybody* as to "work with great diligence to confront racism and the conflicts it engenders with the conviction that sustained committed struggle will lead towards a liberatory feminist political agenda" (2000, p. 125). For hook Sisterhood "became yet another shield against reality, another support system" (1986, p. 129). Amal and Anna empower each other by convincing the reader of the strong connection they retain. Amal confesses how Anna's letters help her in her future decisions and Anna wants her letters to be memorized and read. This power, which Amal sustains through these letters, confirms hooks' theory of sisterhood that "[m]ale supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men" (1986, p. 127). Amal feels lonely in her life after her divorce; nevertheless, Anna's journal becomes her only consolation.

Anna's memories of the East are harsh and tough because of her former husband's death and the death of her Arab husband Sharif. Anna's mother died when she was only nine. She has trouble contacting her father, so she marries Edward seeking happiness and a stable life. However, this marriage doesn't last because of what Edward faced as being a part of the British forces. Colonization and war in the East brought death and sickness to soldiers and their families. Anna blames herself for Edward's death. She thinks that their marriage depresses him and lets him choose death," a well-loved man would not die with horrors eating silently, secretly at his mind. If she had loved him better, perhaps he would not have needed to go to Sudan. If she had understood him better, perhaps she could have nursed him back to death" (Souief, 1999, p. 41). Anna proves by her second cross-cultural marriage a remapping ideology from feminist perspectives.

Anna Winterbourne is not a common wife; she becomes a wife, a partner, and a male political friend to her husband Sharif. He argues with her on so many issues like politics, colonialism and also love. She completes him in a way that she couldn't forget him after his death. It is a marriage that stands against many contradictions and ambivalence. The way this marriage keeps going to enhanced levels shows how its extreme incompleteness could lead to its perfection.

The protagonist of this story is a white British woman who is very politician and reasonable. She fights her norms which are forced because of her gender. She chooses to think and practice to collect answers. She wants to find the real political truth of the colonized away from her country's claim. Anna refuses to track the colonizer's notion toward Egypt and its people. She chooses an approach which makes her see the true images of this country away from the British bias and prejudice as quoted "I am hoping to learn a little more of native life here, although I must say I have no idea how to put that hope into actual form" (Souief, 1999, p. 71). While she is in her room at Shephard's Hotel which depicts a mirror reflection of Britain, she has the feeling that "still I am not in Egypt" (Souief, 1999, p. 102).

Anna achieves a successful connection with nature as well as with her relationship with Egypt. She describes nature as "a vastness which I have never before experienced – the land, the sea and the sky, all stretching unbroken and united" (Souief, 1999, pp. 190-191). Anna's experience is due to her approach of clearness and authenticity. She explores the Egyptian desert where "no amount of reading of guidebooks or travelers' accounts, not even the stretch of desert I saw at Ghizeh, could have prepared me for this" (Souief, 1999, p. 190). She interlocks the landscapes "for peace of mind and peace of heart" (Souief, 1999, p. 197) which she never feels in Britain or in the walls of the British mandate palaces.

As the name of the novel holding the map, the couple succeeds in bringing out a new political map by love. They create a bridge between the West and the East by overcoming all circumstances and considerations surrounding them. They achieve a peaceful marriage full of compassion and understanding. Anna and Sharif Basha establish a new discourse that huge cunning political discourses could not establish. In her journey to Egypt, Anna succeeds in finding her peace and harmony. She explains how her meetings with Egyptian women "brought a certain awe into my heart and I realised it was like being in church" (Souief, 1999, p. 378). Even after the assassination of her ethnic husband by her own country, she actualizes her identity as a mother, as a person and as a wife who chooses her style of remapping a cross-cultural marriage in a feminist framework despite contradictions and rejection.

IV. CONCLUSION

Arab women writers struggle to find their places in the literary milieu. They also struggle against their cultural social patriarchal circumstances to create a story to rebel against all the boundaries of their societies. They create a new process away from the assimilation of their counterparts and their cultural roots. Women writers in general fight the way men writers show the world. They create new perspectives in contrast to men writers' definition of the world. Ahdaf chooses to go too far to the story of a white woman to tell that not only ethnic women suffer from oppression but also white women.

By being the transvestite, the white woman, in this novel, succeeds in her mission to create a new different way of living not only by being a wife but also by presenting the collapse of the central colonizer castle. Anna remaps a successful ambivalent marriage. The beauty of this marriage lies in its extremeness and differentiation. Ahdaf shows Anna as a reasonable wife who decides her journey which is full of love and determination as women can be both a partner and a wife.

By being by the side of the colonized, Anna has established a complex code only women could crack it. Soueif, Anna, Amal present a feminist story that challenges other men's stories of colonization, patriarchy and assimilation. Also, the reader participates in this story by reflecting on the same stories of racism, multiculturalism, cross-cultural marriages and other ways of being on the other side of the binary opposition.

The manly woman is a woman with multiple faces; she refuses to be defined by her society by choosing her definition to be diverse, multiple, unique and the same. Anna does not only refuse to be a colonizer but also she refuses to be under men hegemony. From the beginning of her story, she rejects to see Egypt through the eye of colonial Britain as she also is overwhelmed by the real truth of everything. She gets what she asks for. She finds true love, a happy marriage, a sincere family and the peace that she always wants to have. Breaking all the restrictions whether cultural, political or gender, she finally sees her true self which ends up being a mystery and a puzzle that needs a lot of effort and experience to be solved. She gathers her own story and paves the way for other women to accept being away from the herd. Finally, the protagonist, Anna succeeds in remapping the whole history by reuniting the three generations in her family by abandoning the cultural boundaries of her gender and creating new aspects of her identity.

REFERENCES

- [1] Alhawamdeh, H. A. (2022). "The cultural transformation of the trope of the renegade in late seventeenth century- and early nineteenth century English drama: John Dryden's *Don Sebastian* and Frederick Reynold's *The Renegade*." *Critical Survey*, and vol.34, no.3, pp. 18-38. <https://doi.org/10.3167/cs.2022.340302>
- [2] Awad, Y. (2018). "Space, Transformation and Identity in E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*." *Transnational Literature*, Vol. 10, no. 2, May 2018.
- [3] Brown, Heloise. Gilkes, Madi & Ann Kaloshki- Naylor. (Eds.) (1990). *White? Women: Critical Perspectives on Race and Gender*. Raw Nerve Books.
- [4] Butler, Judith. (1998). "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Abelove, Barale & Halperin. (Eds). Routledge, 20(307-320).
- [5] Butler, Judith. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, New York.
- [6] Butler, Judith. (1990). Gender Trouble, *Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse*. *Feminism Postmodernism*, 324-339.
- [7] Davis, Emily, S. (2007). "Romance as political aesthetic in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*." *Genders* 45.
- [8] Hall, Stuart. (1990). Culture Identity and Diaspora. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora: Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. Johnathan Rutherford. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- [9] Hooks, Bell. (1986). Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women. *Feminist Review*, 23, 125–138. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1394725>.
- [10] Hooks, Bell. 1952-2021. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: passionate politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- [11] Soueif, Ahdaf. (1999). *The Map of Love*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Safa'a Maqableh is a PhD candidate at the University of Jordan, Faculty of English Language and Literature, Amman, Jordan. Her researches are on Feminist studies and Fiction.