

Establishing the Mezzaterra on Ritual and Myth: Ahdaf Soueif's Appropriation of the Sacred in "The Map of Love" by Christine van Deventer

Abstract

The Map of Love, by Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif, is set in a space that is a cultural meeting ground. Ahdaf Soueif is described by many to be a "hybrid" writer as her work seeks to occupy a ground common to Arab and Western cultures alike. Soueif coined her own name for this concept. She calls it Mezzaterra, which translated means "middle ground". This paper is about how Soueif anchors the idea of Mezzaterra in the sacred realm at a point in the past that stretches beyond the origin of Christianity and Islam, by referencing the Egyptian Creation Myth of Isis, Osiris and Horus. In this way she establishes it as a reference for the legitimate acceptance and interrelatedness of the abovementioned religions and cultures. By using Mircea Eliade's Myth of the Eternal Return, I study how Soueif uses the repetition of the ritual in *The Map of Love* to confer a reality upon events. The reference to The Sacred and The Profane allows me to study how the sacred is shown to interact with the real in *The Map of Love* and how the real is placed on the same level as the sacred and thus made sacred, especially through the employment of a hierophany in the text. Thus the Mezzaterra is established as a sacred ideology that has its roots in Egypt's Creation Myth - the overarching and informing Creation Myth.

"I do very much believe in commonalities, in the 'common ground'", Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif states in an interview conducted with her by Jamal Mahjoub (58). In that same interview Soueif's preoccupation with Egyptian mythology comes to the fore in that she shares with Mahjoub the main preoccupation of her upcoming novel – "the figure of Ma'at in Ancient Egyptian mythology" (58). The discussion of Ma'at in this interview raises a main concern for Soueif – "let go of your past and you'll be lost" (58). This is the translation of an Arabic proverb which summarises one of the key principles of Ma'at: "live in the present, looking and working towards the future, but always fully cognisant of the past" (58). For her, as an Egyptian, pharaonic Egypt and the mythology of the Ancient Egyptians is an

intrinsic part of her past – part of what shaped the land she lives on, the culture that surrounds and shapes her, and the person she has become. It is therefore no coincidence that Ancient Egyptian mythology plays a very integral role in *The Map of Love* and is used as a metaphoric device by which Soueif displays commonality between the West and the Middle East. Just the thought of Egypt conjures up the idea of the pyramids and pharaohs in one's mind – more so than its modern historical or present realities do. Soueif taps into this past in the contextual portrayal of Egypt found in *The Map of Love*, which stretches far back into ancient times. By way of myth, she subtly introduces this past to her reader and uses it to break down ideological and religious barriers that separate. In this paper studying the myth inherent in *The Map of Love* is the focus, or, in the words of Vickery, I intend to “isolate latent elements, which, like those of dreams, possess the force that vitalizes the manifest pattern” (ix).

Amin Malak quotes Edward Said in his essay *Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity: The Fiction of Abdaf Soueif*: “No one today is purely *one* thing” (140). Within the context of hybridity which Malak investigates in the writing of Soueif throughout this article, this statement inverts the idea that hybridity is something extra-ordinary. It endows each person with an aspect of the Other in his/her being. Through *The Map of Love* Soueif brings this statement of Said to life by employing the Egyptian Creation Myth as an archetype for her characters to re-enact in order to “destabilize entrenched exclusionist ethos” (Malak 140) as they interact cross-culturally and give birth to new generations who embody the hybrid. The Egyptian Creation Myth follows the actions of four Egyptian gods as they manifest a united pharaonic Egypt of the past. The image of Isis together with the mythical tale including Osiris and Horus, comes to the fore in a central image in the novel – that of the tapestry woven by Anna, Isabel's great grandmother. The tapestry that Anna wove consists of three panels which get lost and found over the course of the novel. It is the overarching image that anchors the role of the myth in the family relations in *The Map of Love*. The tapestry, with its Pharaonic iconography and Islamic text forms part of a “motif of hybrid metaphors” (Malak 157) presented in the novel. Some of the others are the monastery of St Catherine in Sinai which harbours a mosque inside its walls – both holy places provid-

ing protection to each other during times of conflict; the 1919 flag of national unity on which is displayed a crescent and a cross to symbolise unity across religious borders; the fact that Egypt follows three different calendars at the same time: the Gregorian, Islamic and Coptic calendars. All these hybrid metaphors in some way link to the imagery on the tapestry.

For the purpose of this study, the work of historian of religion and philosopher Mircea Eliade is highly relevant, and I am focussing specifically on his *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1954) and *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959) with regards to coming to terms with the role myth plays in culture. This understanding of myth and its re-enactment in real life also provides an insightful commentary on the significance of the use of myth in *The Map of Love*. Has it not been the way of humankind to make myths part of our existence throughout the ages “to create a meaningful place . . . in [the] world” (Vickery ix)? I suggest that the result of Soueif’s employment of myth is twofold: firstly, it entrenches her work deeply in its cultural roots and secondly, it allows Soueif to make a spiritual claim about the centrality and importance of Mezzaterra.

Eliade states that “the way in which a reality came into existence is revealed by its myth” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 76) since myths provide humanity with “divine models” of “how the cosmos came into existence” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 77). This is the kind of myth that we encounter in *The Map of Love* – one which is revelatory of the cosmogony in the Egyptian context. The myth in *The Map of Love* is furthermore tied to religious aspects of Christianity and Islam that will become apparent. What we see in *The Map of Love* is the strong symbolic reference to the Egyptian Creation myth as well as re-enactments of that myth as Soueif portrays “the mythical event” as becoming “present once again” (*The Sacred and the Profane* 77). My first endeavour is to provide a definition of myth and then to study the relevance of portraying its re-enactment. For this purpose I refer to Eliade’s “most embracing” definition of what a myth is in *Myth and Reality*:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the “beginnings”. In other words myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos,

or only a fragment of reality... Myth, then, is always an account of a “creation”; it relates how something was produced, began to be. Myth tells only of that which really happened, which manifested itself completely. The actors in myths are Supernatural Beings. They are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the “beginnings”. Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the “supernaturalness”) of their works. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred (or the “supernatural”) into the World. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World and makes it what it is today. Furthermore, it is as a result of the intervention of Supernatural Beings that man [sic] himself is what he is today, a mortal, sexed, and cultural being. (5-6)

The above definition touches on a vital characteristic found in myths, especially the one found in *The Map of Love*, and that is the recounting of a “breakthrough of the sacred” into the natural world. This definition is what Eliade himself stated is what he found “most embracing” of the idea of myth, yet he specifically points out that myths are always “accounts of a ‘creation’”. Of course, there are mythical tales that do not fit this description, but for the purpose of this study, since the myth that Soueif employs is a Creation Myth, it is applicable. It provides a lens through which to study the myth portrayed by Soueif in *The Map of Love*. What is relevant is the fact that the reader of the novel is transported back to “the ‘beginnings’” thus providing the time when Mezzaterra was established. The Egyptian Creation Myth, as will presently become apparent, reveals how a United Egypt came into being through the actions of supernatural beings who are the protagonists and antagonists of this myth: Isis, Osiris, Seth and Horus. What is more is that the “creative activity” of the divine beings is re-enacted in *The Map of Love* by the protagonists of the novel, who through the re-enactment of the myth also bring into being a new reality. Through displaying the breakthrough of the sacred into the contemporary world within the novel in the establishment of a united Egypt and through establishing the Mezzaterra by means of the re-enactment of the characters in the novel, the formation of the Mezzaterra is placed on the same sacred plateau as that of Creation and is turned into a sanctified and

religious activity. Before continuing it is important to know the significance of the re-enactment.

In *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade states:

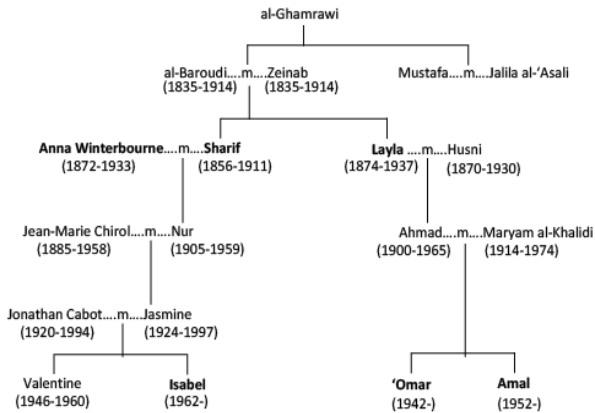
To reintegrate the sacred time of origin is equivalent to becoming contemporary with the gods, hence to living in their presence – even if their presence is mysterious in the sense that it is not always visible. The intention that can be read in the experience of sacred space and sacred time reveals a desire to reintegrate a primordial situation – that in which the gods and the mythical ancestors were present, that is, were engaged in creating the world, or in organizing it, or in revealing the foundations of civilization to man. This primordial situation is not historical, it is not calculable chronologically; what is involved is a mythical anteriority, the time of origin, what took place “in the beginning,” *in principio*. (91-92)

“[B]ecoming contemporary with the gods” and “integrate a primordial situation” – these concepts are of concern in this study, for *The Map of Love* displays a situation where the characters are portrayed as “contemporary with the gods” and hence bringing to the fore the concept of “creation”, of a new beginning and of a “primordial situation”. In the midst of the historical context that Soueif portrays, through the re-enactment of the myth the reader is transported back to a primordial time, a time of creation. The creation and primordial time is the time when things were as they should be, the original intent of the world was present and the potential of its realization was tangible. It is at this time that we encounter the concept of unification in the myth. The “hierophany” at the centre of the novel, where Isabel encounters Jesus, as well as the strong parallel that is drawn between Isabel and Isis, together with the symbolism of the names, shows that Soueif portrays the characters as interacting with the gods. Thus, through them she is able to bring into being the sacred concept of unification, which, as I have explained in the previous chapter, lies at the heart of Soueif’s philosophical and political project.

In *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade illustrates how “archaic cultures” re-enacted the mythical event on an annual basis in order to “recover original sanctity” “with each new year” (75). In *The Map of Love* the reader is presented with the re-enactment of the Egyptian

Creation Myth twice at the turn of a century – first at the beginning of the Twentieth Century by Anna and Sharif and secondly at the beginning of the Twenty First Century by Amal, Isabel and Omar, and with each re-enactment is established a new dimension of Mezzaterra. Eliade points out that the repetition of myths had a meaning for archaic men and women, since, in the imitation of the archetype, “the exemplary event”, a reality is conferred upon events (*The Myth of the Eternal Return* 90). Thus not only through the re-enactment of the myth, but also through its repetition twice at the turn of two centuries, does Soueif anchor the idea of Mezzaterra as that which is willed from the beginning and which must be brought to consciousness. As Eliade points out this imitation “of the gods” has a two-fold outcome, a person “remains in the sacred or reality” and “the world is sanctified” (99), which for the purpose of this study means that Mezzaterra is the will of the sacred and it alone is the true reality (for the purpose of the novel) and it establishes sanctification where it is brought into being so that from there it can multiply.

The interwoven myth provides the ideological context within which the historical representation can be understood. As part and parcel of the historical representation, the creation myth is the historical point of reference in *The Map of Love* and acts as a living and guiding inspiration to the characters in the novel as they repeat actions from the myth yet not on purpose. The historical representation, as mentioned above, is brought into being by Soueif through the family: The family is a type of the creation myth as they symbolise the birth of a new “nation” – the “mezzaterra nation”; and, through the family members and their interests Soueif is able to portray the historical context. Soueif centres her narrative around one family, the family of al-Ghamrawi. At the very start of the book is a family tree diagram that plots out the entire family for the reader. Below is a recreated version:



The relations of the main characters (marked in bold) to each other become apparent when studying the above diagram. While Amal and Isabel are not direct cousins, they are related.

In an essay in *Women: A Cultural Review* titled “History as genealogy: A.S. Byatt, Tracy Chevalier and Ahdaf Soueif”, Mariadele Boccardi investigates the way in which genealogy is used to establish continuity as opposed to narrative continuity in *The Map of Love* and two other novels. She finds that “the central theme of the plot” is “not the family history but the individual’s encounter with that history, and therefore with the narratives that convey it” (Boccardi 201). It is relevant to this study that she points out how “from the sequence of generations the historical consciousness is born and time is understood as a linear manifestation of genealogy”, since this establishes the primary role that the family plays in the novel as a means of providing a historical representation (Boccardi 202). Boccardi further points to the fact that even though “a genealogical continuity” is recreated, *The Map of Love* “undermine[s] the very concept of family line that is [its] model, by subverting the certainty that it should be ‘patrilinear and primogenitive’” (202). It is this finding that I want to explore further by bringing to the fore the most astounding way in which Soueif establishes the women as taking possession of the continuation of the family line and its survival, not only for the family that they represent, but also in the

broader context of the nation of Egypt. Boccardi very aptly points out at the end of her essay that “genetic succession is the prerogative of the female members of the family line” (203), and finally she hints at “the potential of this female strategy”, which, for this study, is a starting point:

When Isabel and her new-found cousin Amal discuss the etymology of Arabic words derived from ‘mother’ and ‘father’ and conclude that the former ‘goes into politics, religion, economics’ (Soueif 1999:165), which is to say all the categories of history, while the latter has no etymological descent (Boccardi 203).

The predominant role of the female in ensuring the survival and continuation of the family is also echoed in the myth. Through the image of the tapestry and the allusion that it appropriates with the Egyptian Creation Myth in which a female god plays the role of securing the genetic succession of the “middle people/nation”, Soueif manages to suggest that just as Isis is mother to a unified Egypt, Egypt is mother to the true “middle people/nation”, religion is no grounds for difference, and the continuation of the idea – the seed – of the beloved is possible through the woman. For through being impregnated by it the woman can allow it to take form and in and through her contemplation of it can give birth to something that is a living representation thereof.

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