

Soueif's *Aisha*: A Portrait of Memory, Time, and Liberation

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Abstract

This paper explores *The Returning*, which is a short story written by Ahdaf Soueif. *The Returning* is selected from the author's first collection of short stories entitled *Aisha* which was written in 1983. It is Soueif's first fictional work. This paper focuses on the way the author depicts her female protagonist named, Aisha, as a nostalgic character. Aisha revisits her past and bumps into lost memories with her husband. Soueif also portrays Aisha's transformation into a liberated and liberating female character. Aisha transcends time and the clutches of her past to claim a fresh start. This paper attempts to reveal how the author focuses on her protagonist's memory and journey throughout her past, returning to the present. It also focuses on the author's utilization of time-shift technique to depict her protagonist's set-forth liberation and that of her story from oblivion and the chains of a lost past. This paper reveals an alternative vision of female characters detached from clichéd female portraits. It also unwinds creative images of time as flexible and co-existing entities; past, present, and future.

Keywords: Female protagonist, liberation, memory, Soueif's *Aisha*, time-shift

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Introduction

This paper focuses on probing Aisha's character. Aisha is the female protagonist in Ahdaf Soueif's short story *The Returning*. *The Returning* is selected from her first collection of eight short stories entitled *Aisha* (1983). The first impression readers capture exploring *The Returning* is that Soueif seems to confirm the authenticity of a stereotype, representing her protagonist as a sentimental and delirious female character and prisoner of a nostalgic past and memories, particularly of her husband. Soueif also depicts Aisha as an emancipated woman trying to liberate herself from patriarchal authority. Aisha attempts to transcend her clichéd portrait that is labeled inferior, and weak and therefore, releases her story from the dizziness of a lost past.

Ahdaf Soueif redefines and deconstructs time through her utilization of memory as a means through which female voices are represented as the narrative tool that grants female writers a literary standard "to vie with the male in the process of textual creation" (Malti Douglas, 1995, pp. 5-6). Ahdaf Soueif allowed her protagonist's character to intertwine with that of diverse female characters. According to Ballantyne, such female characters transcend time to reach a unique self (1975, p.194). They "make gestures associated to freedom" (Ballantyne, 1975, p.194). Aisha shares this peculiar liberating mission with Scheherazade. Scheherazade's power as a female character culminates when she saved herself and the entire kingdom through the power of her narrative. She thus delays and then stops the genocide of king Sheheryar, who killed virgins at dawn. She also prevents the kingly genealogy from extinction and death, allowing a return to life (Ouyang, 2003, p.41). Scheherazade's character underwent significant evolution, oscillating from divine beauty to a "wily seductress, from prisoner to liberator" (Gauch, 2007, p. xi). Both female characters, Scheherazade and Aisha, were assigned the mission of releasing their stories from the clutches of oblivion.

The central queries this paper attempts to answer are the following: How does Soueif switch from revealing a stereotyped portrait of her female character to a picture an emancipated and freed female character able to transcend the past and embrace the present and future? How does Soueif unveil a mosaic of time shifts to allow her female protagonist to grant her main female character liberation and transformation?

This paper starts with a distinction between memory and nostalgia. An overview of the transformations operated by fiction writers regarding the use of time in narratives is presented later. Finally, *The Retuning* is analyzed, focusing on Soueif's perception of memory and her use of time shift to suggest possible answers to the set-forth queries.

Literature Review

Memory vs. Nostalgia

To allow her protagonist the role of liberated character and the demystification of her portrait as a weak entity, Soueif granted huge importance to memory and the use of time -shift, intertwining past, present and future, which prevented the tale from getting immersed in the dungeon of nostalgia, dwelling in the past. Aisha is therefore allowed a leap into the present and future. This transformation freed her from sheer delirium and backwardness. The difference in meaning between nostalgia and memory is significant. Nostalgia is associated with

forgetting and is repressive however, memory helps characters look back to move forward, and conjure up: “disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future” (Greene, 1991, p. 298). According to Rabinowitz: “Understanding the past (instead of being enslaved by it) changes the present and the ever-evolving present changes the significance of the past” (1987, p.179). Soueif applies the pattern of what I term ‘circular return’. Linear use of time is essential when reading fictional texts however; a back-and-forth movement from past to present enhances the comprehension of such texts. Mitchell pointed out: “By reading the end into the beginning, we learn to read time backward. In this way, the plot does not merely establish human action in time. It also establishes it in memory, and memory in turn repeats-recollects-the course of events” (1981, pp.165-179-186). Morrison insisted on the certainty of considering a non-fixed pattern of telling stories. She contends: “No author tells the stories. They are just told---meanderingly- as though they are going in several directions at the same time...I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books” (Mc Kay, 1983, p.420).

Likewise, *The Returning* informs us about the importance of memory to forge past, present, and future as, what I labeled, ‘co-existing time entities’ rather than clashing items. Journeys throughout time reveal so many hidden truths to us about the world and ourselves. When we transcend the linearity of time, we allow ourselves to see clearer and to know better, permitting our past to inform our present and future. We are granted an opportunity to renew. Stories include remembering and promoting change as a liberating move from an old story to a new one (Greene, 1991). According to Lodge (1992):

The simplest way to tell a story...is to begin at the beginning, and go on until you reach the end...But story tellers perceived the interesting effects that could be obtained by deviating from chronological order... [...] through time-shift, narrative avoids presenting life as just one damn thing after another, and allows us to make connections of causality and irony between widely separate events (pp.74-75).

Lodge perceived telling stories through deviating from chronological order of events as a way to make connections between events, and therefore viewing time entities (past, present, and future) as complementary and related dimensions.

Time: Different Identities

Unlike modern and earlier versions of the novel, the postmodern novel focuses on non-linear time and temporal displacement in stories, which question the real and the scientific commandments that rule the modern world. It also problematizes social and cultural structures that determine the perception of time dictated by a western vision of reality. The most crucial aspect of postmodern novels is their attempts to reject chronological time and to put to the front a kind of circular, spiraling time that is a version of “mind time”(Currie, 2007, p.92). So-called cosmological time and inner time perpetually influence and modify one another (Currie, 2007).

Accepting a reverse motion of the arrow of time, namely going backward instead of its usual tendency to advance, has been tough to perceive. Davis (1995) claimed that the possibility of

reading: "the arrow of time" backwardly strikes readers as unusual being used to the idea of reading time forwardly (p. 222).

Besides calling it linear and non-linear time, Anglo-American philosophical approaches to time distinguish between tensed and untensed views of time. The First view considers time in its linear passage, i.e. past, present, and future following clock time. The Second view perceives time as: "a block in which the relations between events are understood as a sequence of times and dates in which events relate to each other in terms of before and after" (Currie, 2007, p.17). It views time as one entity whereby events of different time dimensions co-exist (Currie, 2007). According to Lucas (1989), the existence of tensed time is experienced, yet one cannot deny some kind of what he labeled "temporal tourism" (p.11). He confirmed that although one is located physically in the present that does not prevent one from experiencing other temporal dimensions i.e., past and future, through their thoughts. A person can distance herself from the physical bounding gates of the present (Lucas, 1989).

Viewing time as co-existing temporal items (past, present, and future) not as linearity, is the result of experiencing it as internal time. This Genette pointed to when considering the chronological order in which writers should have told their stories and how these narratives were recounted throughout the consciousness of its characters. "One of the striking abilities of fictional narratives, as Genette (1980) has analyzed, is their freedom to roam in time, using anachronies" (Genette as cited in Currie, p.21). Brooks claimed that:

If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it. Perhaps we would do best to speak of the anticipation of retrospection as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic. (as cited in Currie, p.30)

The idea of time as succession becomes obsolete, making space for the concept of time as a co-existence of three temporal dimensions (past, present, and future).

Soueif's *Aisha* is one among myriad protagonists who traveled throughout time. Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* narration concerns events of a single day that usually follows a linear line, and yet because some of the events are memories, the last call for a constant flashback (Currie, 2007). Currie contended that it is: "a kind of 'cut up' technique whereby the narrative jumps constantly in time, so that the principal hermeneutic activity of the reader is the reconstruction of a chronological sequence of events" (2007, p 37). Joyce's *Ulysses* also represents the story of a day in Dublin. Events unfold in a circular structure extending the space of a physical day into a novel that is read for hours. Currie posited that: "Both *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Ulysses* are concerned at a thematic and technical level with the opposition between internal and external time, and with the enormous quantity of mind activity that fills the smallest units of time" (2007, p. 129).

Like Soueif, Faqir opted for fractured narratives rather than linear ones. She explained this phenomenon in her interview with Chambers (2011):

More tragic and more beautiful than the whole, and perhaps it will capture a larger chunk of the truth if it's told from different perspectives [...] The source of this may be The Arabian Nights, because it contains a changing narrative: you have one story, within a story, within a story, within a story. You don't get a resolution quickly, and perhaps I took something from that. (p.65)

Previous studies could offer different visions of using memory and time in literary texts, transcending nostalgia and allowing for the implementation of 'time tourism'. However, they seem to overlook the coexistence that exists between different time entities that makes them complementary units. *The Returning* is a short narrative that blends the set forth concepts and keywords representing time as a co-existence of past, present, and future and depicting the main character Aisha as a timeless liberator of her story.

The Returning: A journey into Time-Shift and Memory

Soueif represents Aisha in *The Returning* as sentimental female character enshrined in her reminiscences. She thinks of her controversial relationship with her husband, Saif. Soueif's utilization of the stream of consciousness technique in *The Returning* allows time economy. She blends the past in a series of memories that the main character recollects, merging past, present and future to become a single story. The author highlights the role of memory in transcending sheer nostalgia and the past to allow her protagonist a better vision of the present and future, as explained in the Memory vs. Nostalgia section.

One meets Aisha in the opening narrative with her "little red car". "I need those books", she insists on her way to her long deserted flat, returning to Egypt. She has come back home from England after a six-years absence. "She did not recognise this square". Recognition seems impossible right from the start. "She remembered a green garden with spreading trees and flower beds and paths of red sand. She saw instead a construction site" (Soueif, 1983, pp.11-12). The main character remembers and imagines comparing old and new, familiar and unfamiliar, and an imagined past with an inescapably ubiquitous present as it appeared in reality. The intrusion of constructions sites into nature displays what used to be in an old-time and what is there for Aisha; remembrance of time past. Nostalgia, discussed earlier in this paper, takes the lead from the very beginning.

Now Aisha is to enter her apartment, turning "a worn-out key", and inhaling a "forgotten" and "familiar smell" (pp. 12-11). She thinks about how she looks. She faces a mirror: "Her expression, too, was different. The wide-eyed, open, expectant look was gone. Instead, there was — what? Repose? Something that people took for serenity. But she knew. She knew it was frail as an egg-shell" (Soueif, 1983, p. 17). The old familiar expression is no longer there. Aisha has struggled to resurrect it back. Yet, she meets a stranger in her mirror. It was a stranger, no one but herself. She has tried to feel alive by putting her fingers on the mirror. "The mirror was a wall between her and the warm flesh behind it It was cold". Aisha seems not to be able to grant any reality for her reflection in the mirror. It is as cold as ice, beyond any reach. She feels like a ghost, as unreal as a dead face reminisced anew. Is this ghostly setting to stand as a "metaphor for her relationship with (Saif) him?" her husband (Soueif, 1983, p. 18). Now:

She could see him, sense his contours and his warmth but whenever she made a move to touch him there would be a smooth, consistent surface. It was transparent, but it was unbreakable. At times she had felt he put it there on purpose and she had been furiously resentful. At others it had seemed that he was trapped behind it and was looking to her to set him free. (Soueif, 1983, p. 18)

Aisha's reflection in the mirror depicted an alien face to her. It feels 'unreal', ghost-like and unidentifiable. She has tried a recollection, an imagining of her husband's face; maybe to cast more life into her own. The relation of self/Other in this case representing the Saif/Aisha binary in its oscillation between sameness and difference has often been kindled to the metaphor of the mirror. Consequently, they, i.e., self and Other are mirror images of each other, each different yet somehow the same and, subsequently, tied by their reflections. The "labyrinth of looking-glasses" is the picture that describes this relationship (Kearney, 1998, p.17). Aisha's time travel revisiting the past and her memories with her husband meet Lucas's expression of "time tourism" discussed on (p.5).

However, the boundary between the expected, old familiar warmth and life proves unbreakable. It hints at Aisha's cold relation with her husband, a ghost-like figure in a mirror. He seems out of reach, making the distance between him and Aisha feel eternal. Yet, he is not more accessible than she was. He seems trapped in this confined 'glass space', hoping she can set him free. Aisha made him appear even more trapped than he seemed. Saif seems to grab the rags of Aisha's memory. He seized her past and a world she used to know but knows no more. A world she can 'live' and 'be in' through reminiscences. It is a world she has longed to remember.

She reconsiders her relation with her husband, how cold he was, and careless of her "crying till she could not breathe". He prefers smoking, reading, and listening to music instead; indifferent to her. "She slept alone, unknowing, in large double beds that mocked her." The tapestry in her flat portrays "the Arab Knight and poet Antar on horseback and his beloved cousin Abla in a litter on a camel's back". Aisha remembers telling her husband that Antar "thought a lot of himself like you" (Soueif, 1983, p.19). She refers to her husband as an Arab or Frinji knight. "He would have gone out and slain dragons and ghouls". He has learned to do things without her, like travelling and making adventurous trips to the desert. He has known to be alone without her. Aisha's memories of herself could not compete with those of Saif. She feels she has not got a history. Besides, "it had seemed to her that her past was devouring her present." (Soueif, 1983, p.22). She seems to have tried to belong to his world in vain. This could entail he is the self and she is the Other; the female inferior stranger. Her attempts at rapprochement seem to widen the gap between her world and her husband's. He wanted to be alone without her. He seems alone, as she does. Only memories of him are available now. Memories of his childhood with her and memories of her estranged life intertwine. Aisha seems to have missed the telling of her narrative, unlike Scheherazade. She strives to find her way out of oblivion and sheer delirium to be able to transcend time and offer her narrative a life of its own.

Another object Aisha recovers from her past she finds in the cupboard: "Her veil and small pearl embroidered Juliet's cap nestled in tissue paper. They were covered with black moths". Aisha wants to get rid of it. She carries the white card box where the veil is, "she put it in the sink, searched for the matches and set fire to it". Is it a desire to finally, break up with her past and memories? Is it the gateway for her to freedom? Aisha feels dizzy, crying again. "...this too was familiar". Her answer was always "I don't know", when people enquired about her "Recurring illnesses," which people said, were "hysterical" (Soueif, 1983, p. 22). She just sleeps, finally tired of her sobs.

When Aisha awakens, she realized that "she did not have an instant doubt about where she was. What she did not know was when she was". She seems to be out of time. She asks: "what happened?", and "where is he?" (Saif) "What did I dream?", she seems to compare what has happened to her to a mere dream. Her recollections in her apartment; has it been all a dream? Is it a dream of a past that now has been converted by her to a mere imaginary world she has resurrected to try a merge with her own self, familiarity, and the reality of when she was. She returns again to the mirror, she has not seen a "round-faced girl with long, straight black hair". Instead she has seen "a woman with the curly hair and the pearl necklace". "She looked at the mirror with recognition, relief, and sorrow." Now, she sees clearly what she is with recognition. She is retired and sad. She seems to compromise with what is there. She decides to leave the room. She scanned the literature shelves and picked out five books about seventeenth-century poetry, in the living room. She leaves the flat, "switched off the light and pulled the door too. Then she put her key in the lock and turned it finally, twice" (Soueif, 1983, pp. 23-24). She drives her red car again and goes away. Do her blossoming recognition and her awakening of what she called a dream prompt her to feel what she strived to make real but in vain? Did Aisha decide to break up with her recollected past woven into memories of her distant husband to the newly found Aisha and to part with it in search of a new world?

As mentioned in (P2) of this paper, Aisha shares with *The Arabian Night's* Scheherazade a peculiar liberating mission, perpetual attempts at revealing their stories, and constant endeavors to renewal. She also shares the same task with Soueif's other female protagonists. These characters are in constant search for their voices and the control of their narratives (Darraj, 2003). Soueif focuses on the condition of the Egyptian women in particular and of women in general in her fictional texts. She rejected the stereotyped picture of Arab women in particular forged as "sexed social beings" "not self-defined autonomous beings" (Trabelsi, 2003, p.10). Through her writings, Soueif aims at adopting values such as female emancipation, the right to education which were deemed exclusively western, but they are there to "transcend geographical boundaries" (Trabelsi, 2003, p.10). Asya is Soueif's protagonist in her first novel *In the Eye of the Sun*. Asya breaks up with all the ties imposed on her though she has to face a list of ordeals. She endures her American lover's orientalist representation of her. Again Gerald Stone wants to shape Asya's narrative. He wanted to enslave her to match the exotic images he encompasses of an Eastern princess (Soueif, 1993). Anna, Amal, and Isabel are Soueif's main characters in *The Map of Love*, who share narratives to release them and to allow them to define their own selves. *The Map of Love* displays "historical, (and) transcultural

worlds as mirrors for our modern world of migration and displacement” (Luo, 2003, p.81). In *Aisha* and *The Map of Love*, Soueif allows her female characters to rise above stereotypes’ blockades to deliver themselves from oblivion and decay. Soueif’s female characters are revealed from different periods. Anna, a British lady, and Layla, an Egyptian activist, emerge from the past. Amal an Egyptian writer, and Isabel an American journalist, are revealed from the present. Soueif gives the date April 1997 as a date in the present to mark the beginning of Amal’s narration. It reflects the month when the act of decoding Anna’s diaries takes place in “the spring of 1997” (Soueif, 2000, p.10). Spring is a season of regeneration and rebirth, during which Soueif intends to give Anna another life through the gathering of the various pieces of her diaries and then reinterpreting them through the eyes of Amal in spring. Anna’s revelations are interrupted by Amal’s comments in the present, about how familiar and so alive Anna is and also the hundred years that separated her from the present. She thought: “What difference do a hundred—or a continent—make?” (Soueif, 2000, pp.12-14). The co-existence of time entities (past and present) in *The Map of Love* is also discussed in Bishara’s paper. She claimed:

Second, it is a second story that writes itself by itself through the extension of the Past into the Present, the return of the characters of the Present to the characters of the Past, and the rotation of the cycle of the century on these or those scenes and facts, which suggest similarity of today with yesterday. Third, it is the opposite story that Ahdāf Soueif adopts in her novel here when she rereads the Past in the light of the present and vice versa when she puts the stereotypes of the past in front of the stereotypes of the Present and vice versa (2022, p.17)

She also discussed the ubiquitous presence of women’s liberation in *The Map of Love* (Bishara, 2022). Aisha and other female protagonists all meet in the space of fictional texts to liberate their stories from a dusty past.

Conclusion:

This paper attempted to reveal how the author focused on her protagonist’s memory that travels throughout her past and returns to the present and how she utilized the technique of time-shift to depict her protagonist’s set-forth liberation and that of her story from oblivion and from the chains of a lost past. This paper tried to reveal an alternative vision of female characters detached from hitherto clichéd female portraits. It also attempted to unwind creative visions of time as flexible and coexisting entities; past, present, and future. One met Aisha, an emancipated, educated Egyptian woman, in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Returning*. Coming back home, she struggled to come into grips with her present and the real world. She confronts her unfamiliar and unrecognized reflection in the mirror. Her relationship with her husband seemed alien to her. She converted her present into a past immersed in memories and imagination to recuperate the old familiar Aisha. She was depicted by Soueif as a maudlin female character submitting to her reminiscences, imprisoned in her obsessions of a nostalgic past, rejecting any belonging to the present, and therefore, turning a blind eye to the world outside her entrapped self. She strived to carve a picture of her husband, no other than the one dwelling in her imagination; a selfish man doing things without her and failing to understand her as a lonely woman.

She overlooked the estrangement that the mirror succeeded in displaying. It was no longer the past. It was not the old setting. It was the present that she had to call herself to so as to liberate her story and her past life from the chains of iron nostalgia to set them free as complementary to, and informing the present. The author's use of memory and time-shift allowed this time-machine journey to take place, displaying a mosaic of temporal change. Aisha decided to leave her past locking the door of her flat twice with her poetry books in her car driving speedily. This journey could be the passage through which the author confirmed then demystified the myth and the stereotype of a cocooned woman who is denied freedom and knowledge. Aisha knows and reencounters herself while she was hitherto lost in the past, transforming it into a present. Aisha could be viewed as a female character whose self-renewal could grant her a novel start, conjured up as a liberated and liberating woman.

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