

Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*: Writing a Self-The Female Voice

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Abstract: In the novel *The Map of Love*, Ahdaf Soueif has portrayed a living picture of a society where women are conquering the time and space boundary. The bonding among women of different generations and land are exposed throughout the novel. This novel concerns about the comprehensibility of women among each other. Paperno (2004) says, "scholars (...) can be judged based on their ability to deal with diaries, which calls for attention to the form (or genre), context, and individual subject simultaneously (573)". These women, from this perspective, are truly scholar as they have well dealt with the diaries and have got the interpretation of their ancestor's life along with their own. It is difficult for a person to be aware of all the movements taking place within her; and it is of course inaccessible to external observers. A person pays attention to only some aspects of this stream. And a person can only provide some aspects of this stream to others. This paper gives us the impression of such linguistic and emotional reading; and the capability of interpretations of other women and self. This paper focuses on the power of understanding and comprehensibility of women and expression of women. It also discusses the reason, why it has been done through the use of diary and letters conquering the emotion, generations and time.

Keywords: Diary, letters, expression, comprehensibility, relationship, feeling, thought, self and other.

Though not often taught in English literature courses, in Bangladesh, Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* is an especially valuable text for exploring female gender issues. Living away from her beloved husband along in London she has spent a long time; from that time of her life until her death, Anna wrote constantly. However, most of her writing is not only about the life she is living or experiencing but also about what is occurring outside there in the war. She has also written about the impact of these wars in her life. We have seen how she has lost her first husband, Edward in the war of Sudan. Though he came back live from there, he was not healthy. He imprisoned himself and it was not very long that he lived after he was back from Sudan. Anna also lost her second husband, Sharif, in a bomb blast in Egypt. In *The Map of Love*, the reader witnesses the unfolding of female self as Anna navigate from the known life of her youth and comfort of companionship towards a much more complex female persona of self-questioning and self-censorship. Freud has designed of a psychoanalytical setting which is meant to facilitate the externalization of the stream of thought. In this process, the person lies down and talks to an unseen analyst sitting behind her. This is meant to lower her level of self-consciousness which helps her to express as closely

as possible about her flow of consciousness. The rule of free association (to say whatever comes to one's mind) was meant to facilitate this. However, it also had another function. Freud (1953) was trying to see traces, or cues, suggesting the presence of the stream of unconsciousness that could not be externalized. Freud assumed that for the reasons of self-preservation in a social world, people could not become aware of some parts of their flow of thinking. If these could not be consciously expressed through language, they could however find other forms of externalization. For example, in neurotic symptom, slips of the tongue or dreams. He identified various signs in people's action and expression which is the basis of hypothesis about these deeper levels of the stream of 'unconsciousness'. From that perspective, it appears that diary and letter writing is only one of the many possible modes of externalizing of self—that is, of renovation of images, impressions, feelings, memories, into words and sentences which Anna has done wonderfully. Readers find Anna and her intense feelings in her personal documents (letters and diaries). These documents help us to understand her psychology and reasons of her actions and silence. Stanley (2004) talks about Plummer's observations about the apparent characteristics of letters, in her *The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences*, which can perhaps help us to explain why

“... many insights can be gained from the study of letters, yet... social scientists are likely to remain suspicious of their value on a number of scores... every letter speaks not just of the writer's world, but also of the writer's perceptions of the recipient”. (202)

According to Stanley (2004) Letters are *dialogical* and it is not like one person writing or speaking about their life, but a 'communication' or 'exchange' between one person and another or others. It is also perspectival because the 'point' is not fixed or directly referential, but it changes according to the recipient and the time. However, history and literature has a long interest in letters and diaries. This has drawn researchers to work on people's psychology. The historical value of reading diaries and letters involves understanding the importance of how individual writers engaged, experimented with, or changed the conventional forms alive in their time. Perhaps more than any other kind of historical text the personal writing reveals how people both embraced and resisted the time and place in which they lived. Stowe (2000) says that their personal motives for employing either form – the emotional and intellectual energy infusing the form with life each time it is written with a new subjectivity – suggest much about how people in the past made their cultures, but made them from the materials at hand. Soueif has written her novel, *The Map of Love*, with a great number of diaries and letters along with personal documents which indicates that it is indeed a historical novel, or probably, a novel, that is going to reveal the history; the history of time and people. These credentials have showed the reader that there is a complex and unknowable relationship between these

documents and the lives of these women and probably readers as well. Now, a question may arise about the owner of these credentials that what was all these for her. It was probably, for her, a way of letting go of the pain that she was suffering of at that time. Anna, the writer, who is portrayed by Amal while revealing these documents, gives readers a silent voice that is spread over the pages of letters and diaries in the 'trunk'. But it is very living for the reader if they can read these old stuffs as deeply as Amal did. Amal was so successful in comprehending that Anna became 'real' to her: "She has become as real to me as Dorothea Brooke... she is living her life here, on the pages in front of me (26)". When Anna begins writing, a hundred years back from the time Amal reads these documents; it was probably for Anna a way of releasing her agony. So, she started to write to her friends shortly after her hard days had started in the relationship of her with her first husband, Edward. She started to think often about her childhood days with her mother. In her letters, she has mentioned numerous about *Sir Charles* who was a friend of her father's. Even when she started to suffer in the relationship with her first husband, Anna used to share with *Sir Charles*, who used to console her in those days. It is perhaps because she did not have anybody else with whom she could share and expect to understand her feelings. She was well aware that she has lost her husband and now, there is no other companion in her life, to understand her deepest thoughts and feelings. Her father's friend, *Sir Charles*, later, who became like friend for her, becomes her confidant. It was him and sometimes in the diary where she used to express herself fully: "He is not himself. ... Edward, my husband, is not himself. ... Now he is back I hardly know him (27)". Not long after Anne begins writing, the beloved husband, Edward, passed away. Then, Anna's miserable world becomes even lonelier. Cut off from husband and family, she is desperate to describe her terrors, desire, gladness, and conflicts, all of which remain intense in her life. So, she shares to *Sir Charles* which she encloses in her diary: "I have told Sir Charles that I believe that in his heart Edward was just and honourable to the end... (35)".

Amazingly, Anna's physical isolation from her husband does not change the dynamics of her psychological development which is evident in her writing. She has so well described her feelings and thoughts on the paper that she could touch the heart of her later generations who lived after hundred years of hers. She writes very few words after the loss of her husband but enough to state her mind-set completely: "If only he had died contented ... if only he had died at peace ... (38)". Or even when she writes: "I sat in the garden for an hour today... if I had been able to make him speak to me (39)". It is not that *Sir Charles* has only understood her feelings; rather her power of writing and her influence of thought did play over the minds and lives of her next generations. Her emotional needs and reactions continue to change during the time of her widowhood

from her first husband and these changes reflect the gender issues which become most pressing for "ordinary" ladies. (38-46) Stowe (2000) mentions about John Mack Faragher in *Making Sense of Letters and Diaries*, where it has been shown how American women moving West in the nineteenth century wrote conventional letters home, filled with good wishes and narrative descriptions of travel, but also infused them with longing and loss beyond what we might expect. In *Making Sense of Letters and Diaries*, Judy Litoff and David Smith similarly have been mentioned. It has been talked about how they have shown the range of feeling and depth of commitment in the letters of World War II families, and Elizabeth Hampsten has sounded in the depths of midwestern farm women's personal writing, rich with the desire to tell, yet paradoxically inscribed "read this only to yourself" that is mentioned in Stowe's (2000) *Making Sense of Letters and Diaries*. Though the time setting of this novel, *The Map of Love* is not world war, but Anna has migrated from west and she has experienced these desire to live, get love and be loved, longing to share. That is what Anna has expressed throughout her pieces of writing. Anna comments on the problem precisely, constantly frustrated by how she failed to satisfy her husband. She writes on one occasion: "I have failed him. I am constantly and repeatedly failing him. If I could but find the key to the locked door of his mind, I could sweep out all the terrors that lurk there. And he would be well again (31)." Her later generations find out her emotion captured on the pages and start to compare themselves with their lady ancestor, Anna. They try to find the similarities among their life cycle and the sameness of passion about their relationship. These women who has revealed the story of this self presenter, Anna Winterbourne, had the same conflict in their relationship with their beloved between being themselves and being admired by their partners. This conflict of 'being' lies at the heart of these female characters' struggle to find or abandon a voice that will be acceptable to others and yet reflect her true being. Many women fail in this negotiation.

It is not that Anna Winterbourne was a feeble hearted women rather she was as stronger as any women could of her time. She has not hidden her feelings rather she has let them spread out on pages and shared her thoughts and sentiment with her friends. Neither did she fear of judgment by others nor did she keep silent rather she expressed herself fully. After Anna's first husband Edward's death, writing was Anne's work and therapy as she endures countless hours in silence and dread. Going inside her and pouring that self onto paper gives her the strength to grow under horrific conditions. Teachers may want to use this occasion to point out to both males and females in class that diary or journal writing—not to be considered a gendered activity!—can help them find their authentic voices and resolve inner strife intensely felt during the turmoil of their life. It will also help them to hold and preserve their

feelings and thought of happiness of their life.

Steven says that diarists' record may be out of pleasure about small events of their life like- meeting someone new, the coming of a storm, a death in the family – they inevitably wrote about their relationships with others. And writing to or about others, they wrote themselves anew each time. Although they may not have thought about it this way as they wrote, they nonetheless were making for themselves a personal presence in the wider world of the written word typical of their time and place. One of the most valuable and fascinating aspects of the Diary of Anna Winterbourne is the fact that Anna began her writing with the hope of sharing her own thoughts and feelings. She was unknowingly somehow reveling the future life of women of the family. Teachers could refer to The Diary and letters of Anne Winterbourne to have a close study which may interest students how women's words and emotion work and speaks to reveal the past and future. A comparison of these documents with self may dramatically let to reveal female self. Anna was very much comfortable in her writings which are evident in those pieces where she has let her emotions and confidential feelings flow. She did not suppress her authentic self for the sake of being pretentious rather it was to some extent important for her to let her feeling come out of her chest.

Anna's descriptions of a complicated relationship with her first husband must be considered as another important gender issue. Anna often becomes frustrated by her husband's insensitivity to her feelings. But she was dissatisfied with herself and she started accusing herself that she has failed to make her husband happy and live. Moreover, Anna never complained about the negligence she has got from her husband rather she was in pain for Edward, her husband's absence near her. After the death of her first husband, Anna grieve, which is evident in her letters and other writings about the difficulty she had with him and after he passed away in the relationship. But untimely she overcomes it and she turns to another relationship, her life with Sharif-al-Gharwami.

Students will easily appreciate how remarkable and wonderful it is that Anna managed to live out her first love life while struggling. With great courage and energy, Anna explores the limits of sky by traveling Egypt and fell in love again with Sharif and get emotional which gives her to live another love life. Though it was also short for Anna to live with Sharif, she got the 'love of her life' there, her daughter, Noor. All her memories she has recorded in the conversations with her family and friends in her letters and diary. She goes even further by describing her relationship in great detail. It is worthy for Anna, to talk about the small incidents and feelings of her as a subject of exploration and writing. Teachers can have students discuss the reasons Anna was so forthcoming at a time when it was "unladylike" to even think about being such forward-thinking. Her writings also make it strongly felt throughout the diary and letters in passages about the roles she played as a woman and her own goals.

Edward, her first husband, the object of Anna's longings, remains not only a "character" in Anna's highly personal account of their time together rather he became precious memory and encouragement which has probably encouraged her to step out of the home and live another life. Teachers can ask their students to imagine their own version of the relationship. Anna's life and the cycle that goes round the family even after hundred years are appealing for the readers and researchers as well. Anna has let her heart open for her next generations and also for the readers to feel and find the similarities and differences to understand what they could write in their diaries and what could be their probable version of their diaries and writings in that situation. Each individuals age and gender along with life experiences seem to affect his or her perspective, but still we see that Anna's next women generation's life was alike her to some extent.

Finally, throughout the diary Anna refers to her life but it has let the opportunity to see Amal, Isabel and Jasmin the life of theirs in another ancestor's life. Anna's documents provides its readers with a emotional portrait of a vibrant, complicated female voice whose brilliant potential was in her views of life and writing. Thankfully, the Diary remains vibrate for students and readers of our own era with Anna's interested, honest reflections about the uncertainties, thrills, and risks of womanhood.

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