

Widows and Women: Soueif's Presentation of Women and Widows in *The Map of Love*

- Mir Mohammad Tonmoy

Abstract: In her novel *The Map of Love*, Ahdaf Soueif has created women and widow characters with a better understanding that a writer could ever do. Generally widows are thought to be a kind of stereotype who always mourn the loss of their husband. They are also expected not to have any other feelings and desires. But in Soueif's writing there is empathy and sympathy for these women. For her widows are similar alike other women. According to her novel, they have equal independence and right to live their life as much as other women have. That is why all prominent characters of this novel, *The Map of Love*, are women. These women characters are created with as much diversity as possible. These women characters are considerate and concerned about each other. They have a kind of bonding with the writer as well. However, Soueif has tried to establish the women's and widow's place in the society through the novel.

Keywords: women, inheritance, sympathy, society, bonding

Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*, is one of her prominent piece of writings where we see insightful representation of women. This gives us an opportunity to perceive women in the society with a wider range of prospect. Soueif has focused on the condition of women from multicultural zone. She has also put up the position of women in the society and their expectations and dissatisfaction. She has also talked about the social desire and personal desire and their ultimate achievement. In this novel, she particularly focuses on women in widowhood. Two prominent characters of this novel Anna Winterbourne and Amal go through widowhood. Widows are viewed as suspect in all culture because they do not conform to patriarchal idea of the standard women. According to this ideology they are the women who have lost their husband and also lost all rights to live their lives. They are not supposed to have any feelings or desires anymore. They are just expected to be invisible to society and yet submissive to the patriarchal laws and regulations. As Kehler comments:

But like their real-life counterparts, literary widows regardless of age are inherently embedded within a specific and individual set of political, social, and economic circumstances. Ideological preceptors, whether in the name of morality or decorum, were prone to ignore the particular circumstances that each widow faced. Rather, they lay down rules and made value judgments as if widows were a monolithic abstraction.(2)

To show how similar the patriarchal ideology is in all countries and culture Ahdaf Soueif has created most of her writing on the contact zone.

Her *The Map of Love* is one of them and it is undoubtedly one of her best creation where representation of women is very accurate. Here women are presented in a contact zone and they are well formed characters to embody transnational situation. Moreover, she has brought about a culturally social restoration in her writing through women. She has showed the similar kind of destiny and life cycle of women crossing the boundary. Soueif has presented women's love, bonding, and extra-marital relation in her piece of literature. The time setting is even though a very conservative one along with the representation of the male dominated society still the focus is on the feelings of women, life of women and living of these women. She brought into picture a very different kind of image of women which was mysterious for the existing social structure of that time. She deals with the emotional and sexual twist among women within the conservative society. She also depicts the frustration of women within these patriarchal structures.

Soueif believes that if women are given a chance to speak up out of their heart then they would be able to express themselves through their words. The women who have no life of their own or probably a very conservative one even find their own way of expression. The patriarchal society says that their function is to keep the family together, adoring their child and doing everything possible to give comfort to their husband. In the novel the traditional mind of women becomes apparent when Anna starts thinking that she is the failure as she could not make her first husband comfortable. : "I have failed him. I am constantly and repeated failed him. If I could but find the key to the locked door of his mind, ... and he would be well again." (31) Usually we read stories about women who is accused of not taking care of their husband or even killing them: "I am accused of being a witch who killed her husband." (Terezinha, 1997) But here, Anna was accusing herself for the suffering of her husband: "If he had died contented... If I had been able to make him speak to me" (39) .So ingrained is the patriarchal ideology in some women that they find faults with themselves when their husband die or suffer. Anna did not have an identity of her own. She was busy in thinking of her husband and her domestic life. It is as if she is born to serve others. She did not even think of her own desire and comfort much. Alyson Alvarez commented in *A Widow's Will: Examining the Challenges of Widowhood in Early Modern England and America*:

Early modern society had only a few roles carved out for women. A girl typically moved from being a daughter to a wife and mother. While these three roles were different from one another and came with different responsibilities, they were all subject to men's authority in some way. The subjugation of daughters, wives, and mothers allowed for them to function within the society. When a woman could no longer fit into of these roles, she was met with numerous conflicts. The death of a woman's husband dramatically altered her place in society because a widow challenged the dominant ideals by living with without a father or husband's authority. (5)

Even though Alvarez's comments are about early modern England and America, they are applicable to widows of any age and country: "Widows, of any station and status were rarely able to escape the difficulties of widowhood. Although a few women were able to create a comfortable environment for themselves, the majority of widows were faced with new problems." (79)

But Soueif has shown us in this novel that widows are like just any other human being. They have lost their life partners but that does not mean that life has stopped for them. They still have desire and feeling and they have a right to live life as they will. They can also fall in love again and see the life through new colourful glasses and enjoy the present without betraying the past. And this what a patriarchal society cannot tolerate. Soueif is the women writer who portrays women as individuals in her work within the framework of realistic society. Her main focus is the issues like love and feelings of these women. Her women characters assert her deep understanding of human mind and her remarkable power of description. Her novel *The Map of Love* portrays women like Anna, Amal, Isabel and Jasmin. She has shown the strength of these characters and the power they have in their life cycle. Among these prominent characters of this novel, we see the similarities in their life. Even we see triangle love story among mother-Jasmin and daughter-Isabel and Omar. The social and personal life of these women is disposed at different levels. Soueif herself has experience of living in multicultural situation and as she is a woman she has made these characters well. So, the characters and the descriptions of the writing are realistic and convincing. One of the important point is that Soueif has situated her women in the past and in the present social milieu and tried to parallel them. The reason behind this, it can be assumed that she has a kind of fear in her mind that these women, so inflamed with passion and desires, that they could not be bound by traditional and conservative conventional society. It is really admirable the way she has shown the courage to reveal the attraction between men and women even outside the conjugal life which was not acceptable in orthodox society though in west. Soueif has derived this courage, strength and open mind from her living style and experience of Eastern living.

Here I would like to elaborate one point by giving an example of Anna, who is a widow after the death of her first husband Edward. She is young and beautiful and not inferior to anybody and she questions her own state and fate. She had her friend and family to console her in her distress. She has nothing to lose because she lost her mother and now she has lost her husband. Now, she wanted to live again and see the love again. That is why she could fall in love again with Sharif. Anna was a woman who was devoted to put together the bonds in the relationship. So, she does not deserve the punishment or the treatment meted out to her. Soueif reveals the secret passions and desires of wives and widows and men drawn into clandestine relationship with others outside their marital life. As an example Jasmin had a pain of losing her young son in war and went for a relationship though she was married. The very striking point I have

found about her is that although she represents the conflicts between personal desire and cultural practices and emotional and sexual needs of her characters, she has made all these clandestine. This is also evident by the way how the writer gives a clean twist to the relationship when Isabel, the daughter of Jasmingrew up. She fell in love with the man her mother was once in love with. Isabel finds a justification of having relationship when she learns from her mother that Isabel is not Omar's daughter. At the end she also loss her beloved as it has happened in the case of her mother, grand aunt, grandmother. This is in her family that women are left alone and it is only another woman who could understand another. This is probably because of their similarkind of life experiences. Although a taste for sin in one's eyes could be detected and seeking of love is prominent at any cost is in all her novels and it is central theme in the novel *The Map of Love*.

Amal on the other hand has been separated from her husband and child. She has been united with the other family member of her family but there is an incomplete feeling in her. There is example of her idealization of life by how Amal, who is loving towards her child and family and courageous that she takes step out from the life she does not want, is made to live a happy life within the loss of family members. It is a very different image of women that Soueif has portrayed because at that time it was very common for women that they will be submissive to their husband. But we see that Amal has divorced her husband and she is also separated from her son. Isabel, another women character is also separated from her husband and till a certain period of time she was separated from her beloved. We see the sense of satisfaction and freedom in these women. This proves the powerful message for women that women gradually came outside of their domestic life and became aware of their own life and living. Soueif has depicted four parallel women characters in this novel to show that the emotions and expectation of women whether they are widow, single or married are same. They want to be loved by someone, they have a desire to express themselves and they have opinion about different issue. But most of them have one very common aspect that is all of them are very subtly dominated by patriarchal ideology. Because of patriarchal society, they have suffered whether directly or indirectly. And this domination and suffering is more explicit in case of widowed women. For example when Anna wants to travel alone and marry again there is an objection from the English representative in Egypt. In case of Anna, widowhood gives her freedom, a freedom to travel and explore, and fall in love again. Had Edward, her first husband was alive, It would have been impossible for her to do those. She herself would have never thought of doing so even though she always wanted to visit Egypt. So her first husband's death is a kind of blessings in disguise for her. The time setting Soueif has set for this novel travels about hundred years. The first generation who lived hundred years ago, Anna, is now living in the heart and brain of the next generation women, Amal and Isabel. Their thought and living style is similar. Even their life cycle is somewhat so alike that these women are stunned when they found out

about it. Soueif has made a fine parallelism among the stories of these women's life. It is probably because of her beliefs. She has to some extent spoken freely and openly on the issues of widow remarriage and relationship beside marriage through this novel. She is one of the writers dealing with the emotional needs and conflicts of women of both eastern and western society. In her this novel, *The Map of Love* Soueif has described the issues of transnationalism but in a very different way by making an western woman fall in love with an eastern man. Here she has represented a very successful figure of women. Here, the voice of the narrator's voice is a woman, the writer is a woman, and the main characters are also woman. Through this Soueif has shown the importance of women in the society. Here, Soueif has represented a new kind of women apart from the role of woman as a mother, wife or sister. She has shown a sisterhood and other womanly feelings but they have their own will and identity.

Soueif has depicted in this novel the inner conflict of women. These women are modern but traditional under social practices. But they have slowly discovered their own individuality and identity. Isabel, who is divorced, has fallen in love with a man who once was her mother Jasmin's beloved and they had intimate relationship as well. However, later Isabel becomes mother of Omar's child. And they keep its name Sharif. Sharif was Isabel's great grandmother Anna's second husband. So, the other way round Isabel is giving birth to the root of her family and ofcourse her identity. It is again Isabel who found the trunk and brought it to Egypt to discover the mystery. In the novel, *The Map of Love*, we find struggle for family and love. In this process the individuality of women and the identity of women suffered most. They have to some extent been the prey of situation and has suffered. They have been denied of their self-fulfillment by nature. For example, Anna and Isabel wanted to be with their love which they could not be. Both of their beloved partners died in bomb blast. She has also discussed about Anna's self centered first husband who failed to understand her wife's effort.

In my conclusion I would like to say is that in a sense Soueif has exposes the false moral conventions of society about relationship. She has developed empathy for the victims she has portrayed in his novels because these victims are suffering from broken relationship. She did show compassion towards them and at the same time, she treated them with love, and kindness.

References :

- Alvarez, A. D.(2013). "A Widow's Will: Examining the Challenges of Widowhood in Early Modern England and America" Dissertations, Theses, & Student Research, Department of History. Paper 57. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/historydiss/57>. web
- Kehler, D. F.(2006) " Shakespeare's Widows of a Certain Age: Celibacy and Economics" *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, 1, 17-30. web.
- Soueif, A. (2000) *The Map of Love*. Anchor Books: New York, .Print.
- Terezinha, (1997) Zambezia Province, Mozambique,. Cited in "Widowhood: invisible women, secluded or excluded". In *Women 2000*. December 2001. Web

