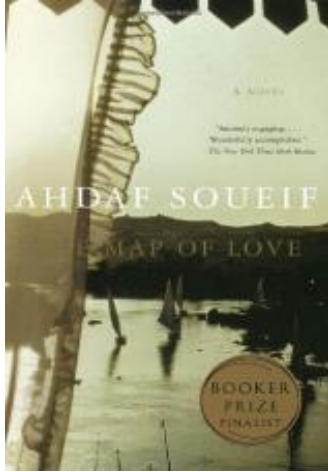


The Map of Love

by Ahdaf Soueif



About the Book

With her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, Ahdaf Soueif garnered comparisons to Tolstoy, Flaubert, and George Eliot. In her latest novel, which was shortlisted for Britain's prestigious Booker Prize, she combines the romantic skill of the nineteenth-century novelists with a very modern sense of culture and politics--both sexual and international.

At either end of the twentieth century, two women fall in love with men outside their familiar worlds. In 1901, Anna Winterbourne, recently widowed, leaves England for Egypt, an outpost of the Empire roiling with nationalist sentiment. Far from the comfort of the British colony, she finds herself enraptured by the real Egypt and in love with Sharif Pasha al-Baroudi. Nearly a hundred years later, Isabel Parkman, a divorced American journalist and descendant of Anna and Sharif has fallen in love with Omar al-Ghamrawi, a gifted and difficult Egyptian-American conductor with his own passionate politics. In an attempt to understand her conflicting emotions and to discover the truth behind her heritage, Isabel, too, travels to Egypt, and enlists Omar's sister's help in unravelling the story of Anna and Sharif's love.

Joining the romance and intricate storytelling of A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, Ahdaf Soueif has once again created a mesmerizing tale of genuine eloquence and lasting importance.

Discussion Guide

1. Anna and Sharif meet under very dramatic circumstances. Why does Soueif use a highly charged, potentially dangerous kidnapping to bring the two together? Could have they found each other and fallen in love in the course of their everyday lives in Egypt?
2. Is the portrait of Anna's and Sharif's courtship and marriage realistic? Are Anna's sacrifices in the name of love overly noble or romantic? Does her easy adjustment to life in an Arab household ring true?

3. What impact does his marriage to an Englishwoman have on Sharif's position and the way he is perceived by the Egyptians and the British? Why is the couple accepted by Egyptian society and ostracized by the British? What implications does this convey about the fundamental attitudes and character of the two cultures?

4. Anna and Sharif speak to each other in French. Is this only a matter of convenience? To what extent does language define identity? Does speaking a language that is native to neither help or hinder communication between Sharif and Anna?

5. In what ways do Anna's letters to Sir Charles differ from the entries she makes in her journals? How do her descriptions of the Khedive's Ball [p. 92], her trip to the Great Pyramid [p. 95], and other anecdotes shed light on the political situation in Egypt and on British imperialism in general? Are Lord Cromer, James Barrington, Mrs. Butcher, and other members of the British community fully realized characters, or do they merely serve as symbols for various political beliefs?

6. Why does Anna embrace the cause of Egyptian nationalism with such fervor? In addition to her desire to see justice done, what other emotions motivate her?

7. "How can it strike so suddenly? Without warning, without preparation? Should it not grow on you, taking its time, so that when you think 'I love,' you know—Nor at least imagine you know—what it is you love?" [p. 48], Isabel muses after she meets Omar for the first time. The words could also describe Anna's feelings for Sharif, and Sharif's for Anna. Discuss how the separate but intertwining stories in **The Map of Love** shed light on eternal realities of love, as well as on the particular qualities of love between people of different, and often conflicting, cultures.

8. Isabel learns that she and Omar share a common ancestry not from him but from Amal [p. 184]. Why doesn't Omar share this information with Isabel before she leaves for Egypt? Are Omar's reservations about their relationship based solely on their age difference? What other factors in Omar's personal life underlie his reluctance to become involved with a young American woman? Sharif marries Anna despite cultural and political sanctions against their union. Why is it easier for Sharif to commit to marriage to Anna than it is for Omar to commit to Isabel?

9. When Isabel meets Amal's friends, Amal writes, "That is the first thing you notice, I think, when you look at these three women: Awra and Deena, with faint circles under their eyes, a slight droop in their shoulders, a certain dullness of skin, look worn. While Isabel, shining with health and a kind of innocent optimism, looks brand new" [p. 222]. What is the significance of this passage in terms of the themes of the novel? Does Amal see Isabel's "innocent optimism" as a positive or negative quality? Is Isabel less innocent at the end of the novel?

10. Amal's former professor says to the young Egyptian activists, "Do you realise, when you speak of a political programme, that your programme now is the same that Mahmoud Sami al-Baroudi's government tried to establish more than a hundred years ago?" [p. 227] Why have the Egyptians been unable to achieve their goals? Are they, as Mustafa argues, "a nation of cowards—we live by slogans" [p. 224]? To what extent have their ambitions been thwarted by the long period of English occupation and Western antagonism and disdain toward Arabic culture and civilization?

11. **The Map of Love** is firmly grounded in historical fact and current realities, yet two of the most striking incidents are the afternoon Isabel spends at the house of her ancestors, now a padlocked shrine in the heart of Cairo [p. 292], and the inexplicable reappearance of the third panel of Anna's tapestry [p. 495]. Why do you think Soueif includes this

"magical" element? Why is the rediscovered panel the one depicting the child of Osiris and Isis?

12. Early in the book, Amal says, "[T]his is not my story. . . . It is the story of two women: Isabel Parkman . . . and Anna Winterbourne" [p. 11]. Is Amal more than a conduit of Anna's and Isabel's stories?

13. For more than a century, Amal's ancestors were leaders in Egypt's nationalist movements and revolutions; her parents lost their home in West Jerusalem when the state of Israel was established in 1948, and after the 1967 war, her mother is devastated by the realization that she will never be able to return to her homeland [p. 118]. Does Amal family's history affect the way she presents Anna's and Isabel's stories? Do the political beliefs Amal holds undermine the persuasiveness or power of novel for the reader?

14. In reviewing one of her previous books, Edward Said called Soueif "one of the most extraordinary chroniclers of sexual politics now writing." Does Amal's position as a member of respected family and her education abroad allow her freedoms that are denied to other women? What incidents in the book, either historical or contemporary, contradict Western stereotypes about the roles of women in Islamic society? Are Layla and Zeinab Hanim portrayed merely as tradition-bound, subservient women? What evidence is there that they are able to effect change not only within their own families but within society in general? Both Isabel and Amal live independent lives, free of the demands of husband and family. Which woman embodies your own idea of feminism?

15. What parallels are there between the decisions Anna and Isabel face? In what ways do the characters represent the "norm" of their respective cultures? To what extent do they defy cultural rules and expectations? How does Anna, for example, compare to the women of her period, both real and fictional, you have read about in other books?

16. How does religion shape the actions of Sharif and his family in both negative and ways. Are Amal and Omar affected in any way by the religious tradition in which they were brought up?

17. Does the passage of time change Isabel's understanding of love? Does her love for Omar deepen as she learns more about his background? In what ways does the course of their romance mirror Anna and Sharif's marriage? Which couple has to overcome greater obstacles? Beyond the impediments imposed by society, how do the personalities of each character effect their relationships?

18. The Map of Love contains a great deal of information about the history of the Middle East, as well as about the current situation there. How successful is the author at integrating fact and fiction? Did the discussions of politics help you understand the characters and their motivations or did you find them intrusive?

19. Did the novel change your perceptions of the conflicts in the Middle East? Did the depictions of the aspirations of Egyptians and other Arabs differ from preconceptions you may have had? Did it change your view of Israel? Your attitude about the role of the United States in Arab-Israeli relations? Soueif draws parallels between U. S. involvement in the area today and British imperialism. Is this a valid analogy?

20. Do you think Soueif expresses the views of the majority of Egyptians today? What have you read or heard about that supports your opinion?

Author Bio

Novelist Ahdaf Soueif was born in Cairo and educated in Egypt and England, where she studied for a Ph.D. at the University of Lancaster.

Critical Praise

"Sweeping and evocative--. An unconventional love story. "

The Map of Love

by Ahdaf Soueif

Publication Date: September 12, 2000

Paperback: 544 pages

Publisher: Anchor

ISBN-10: 0385720114

ISBN-13: 9780385720113