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## Dispatches from West Asia

### **Ahdaf Soueif, political-cultural commentator and novelist, discussed her writing career with author-journalist Salil Tripathi**

Ahdaf Soueif's journey has been one beyond maps. Born in Cairo, educated and married in England and spending time in both places, she finds the rewards of inhabiting the 'Mezzaterra' enormous. "At its best, it endows each thing, at the same moment, with the shine of the new, the patina of the old... the landscape, the food of one culture constantly reflected off the other," she wrote in the preface to her *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*.

The book marks Soueif's journey from novelist to political writer, according to Tripathi, contributing editor of *Mint* and *Caravan*, and author of *The Colonel Who Would Not Repent: The Bangladesh War And Its Unquiet Legacy*, who steered the discussion. On what brought her to writing, Soueif said, "One day, having finished my Ph.D. and waiting for my viva in England, I found myself with no commitment. I asked myself if you want to be a writer, why aren't you writing now?"

Which is how Soueif came to be an arresting cross-cultural voice — placing life in Egypt and England under the spotlight. "I dream in Arabic but I am unable to write in it," she said of the 1999 Booker-nominated *The Map of Love*, a passionate love story of Lady Anna Winterbourne, an Englishwoman and Sharif Pasha Al-Baroudi, an Egyptian nationalist. The book was translated into Arabic by her mother, a well-known academic, whose translation of *King Lear* is considered a seminal work. "I surprised myself when I wrote in English. English was my literary language; Arabic, my lived-in language. I could write Arabic but couldn't access it for my fiction. It was like trying to play two octaves in an entire keyboard." Which is also why she doesn't identify Arab with Muslim. "In the central Arab world, especially in Egypt, Syria and Tunisia, you can feel the Christian Coptic, Jewish and Islamic cultures. Equating the Arab world with Islam is a Western construct."

Tripathi then drew her into her halcyon days of growing up in the Egypt of the 1960s. "I caught the tail-end of a time of openness and cultural exchanges in Egypt," she said. Then, what led to the dehumanisation, asked Tripathi. "The fact that Egypt was not a democracy... a fact that hit us hard with the defeat in the Arab-Israeli War (1967)."

On shifting her gaze towards Gaza, and reporting for *The Guardian* from there, she said, "There are Palestinian strands in my novels *The Map of Love* and *In The Eye of the Sun*. I wasn't sure about reporting though. But when I returned from Ramallah, I had so much to say. I realised I

had a platform, a rare thing to present a story from the Palestinian point of view. When that space opened up, I felt the responsibility. Writing a novel on it would have been presumptuous.”

Having spent nights with the thousands protesting at Tahrir Square and with her own nephew among the many jailed, Soueif said, “The duty of an artist is to engage with a broader canvas.”

And for much of the world that doesn’t get to hear a first-person account of life in West Asia, Ahdaf Soueif’s romantic, concise and committed-to-the-truth stories hold a mirror to it.