

The Scattering of the Self and the Sense of Alienation: Ahdaf Soueif's *Sandpiper*

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Abstract

This paper deals with the questions of dislocation, disintegration, the sense of alienation, and the scattering of the self through the following short stories: "Sandpiper," and "Melody." My aim is to shed light on the dilemma of a "displaced subject," and to demonstrate the possibility of cross-cultural understanding. Moreover, the aim of this study is to illustrate the artistic literary technique of Soueif, particularly the use of figurative language which is a very effective approach in portraying her story. However, the influence of psychological theories on Soueif's fiction is obvious as she tackles the problems of loneliness, loss and melancholy in *Sandpiper*. The author has experienced dislocation as she has spent part of her childhood in London. *Sandpiper* (1996) is a collection of short stories, and it leads us to ask many questions. Why did Soueif call her short fictional collection *Sandpiper*? Does sand reflect the fragmentation of a human being? To what extent does the title of the collection illustrate the content of the fiction? Does Soueif succeed in demonstrating the feelings of the displaced subject?

Keywords: Sand, Fragmentation, Displaced Subject, Integration, Loneliness.

1. Style: Language and Metaphor

The etymology of the collection's title is used as a linguistic technique to draw our attention into the significance of the fictional work. The title of the collection is given to this short story, "Sandpiper," because it reflects the content of the fiction. In other words, all the characters of this fictional collection are fragmented selves, and most of them are "displaced subjects." "Sandpiper" consists of two words: "sand" represents the "displaced subject," and fragmented self, while the piper's tune is inspired by the musical movements of the waves. The pipe is an oriental instrument that is associated with sadness and loneliness.

In "Sandpiper," a piper plays the story of Lucy's mother, an English woman, who cannot integrate into the Egyptian culture, but does not want to leave her husband for the sake of her daughter. Both the protagonist and her husband are not mentioned by name in the narrative. Her sense of fragmentation reflects the collection's title. The narrative is presented in the first person by the protagonist, Lucy's mother. Soueif employs a flashback technique through the protagonist's memories about her marriage and relates them with the present reality. The

portrayal of the beach sets the opening scene of the narrative: "White sands drift across the path. From my window I used to see patterns in their drift [...] I did not want one grain of sand, blown by a breeze I could not feel, to change its course because of me." (23)

The protagonist, Lucy's mother, likes going to the sea to find solace and reveal her secrets and problems in front of the sea. That is to say, the sea arouses her unconscious and makes her wander in the spell of inward contemplation. "Sand" symbolizes the displacement and fracture of a human being. In other words, her circumstances have taken her to Egypt in the same way that the sands have been cast across the lane. "One grain of sand" symbolizes her husband who has changed his style of life because of her. "A breeze" symbolizes the lovely occasion that has united the heroine with her husband, but she is unable to feel it because she cannot assimilate into his culture. It is seen that the sand is so fragile that as the breeze comes, it sweeps away the particles of sand. That is to say, a human being is like the sand in the wind; she/he could be carried anywhere in an unpredictable manner. Furthermore, Lucy's mother goes on to say: "What point would there be in trying to decipher a pattern that I had caused? It was not easy." (23) She thinks that it is a difficult thing to decipher and analyze the issues of this particular model of marriage.

A visual movement of the waves is portrayed in the following passage. Lucy's mother likes having a good time near the seacoast: "I used to sit where the water rolled in, rolled in, its frilled white edge nibbling at the sand, withdrawing to leave great damp half moons of a darker, more brownish-beige." (24)

Soueif creates a fascinating portrait by saying that the water whirls, and its edge is embroidered with trim, biting at the sand then retreating, leaving moist half moons of brownish-beige. Water is associated with the feminine and it indicates the protagonist's sensibility. Moreover, the water reels and bites the sand like a child. The waves of the sea decrease the amount of the sand by biting and taking them away to the sea. "The brown colour" symbolizes earthiness while "the beige" indicates the conservative line. Both colours indicate the reality of the protagonist's marriage. The heroine goes on to say: "I would sit inside one of these curves, at the very midpoint, fitting my body to its contour, and wait. The sea unceasingly shifts and stirs and sends out fingers, paws, tongues to probe the shore." (24) She describes the motions of the waves where the voice of the sea never ceases; it moves, agitates and clamours, sending out fingers, paws, voices to examine the coast. The sea symbolizes a great power over human beings where it can be destructive, seductive, deceitful, and peaceful. The dichotomy of power between human beings and animals is apparent in the portrayal of the sea's waves. The sea is represented as a supernatural being that has fingers and tongues of a human being and claws of animals. The waves represent unpredictable and changeable circumstances and feelings. It is seen that the protagonist is overcome by strong feelings concerning her personal life.

Lucy's mother goes on to depict the mobility of the waves and makes us enjoy the harmony of water: "Each wave coming in is different. It separates itself from the vast, moving blue, rises and surges forward with a low growl, lightening as it approaches to a pale green, then turns over to display the white frill that slides like a thousand snakes down upon itself, breaks and skitters up the sandbank." (24)

"Blue" is associated with the sea's wave which ascends and heaves forward with a low grumble brightening as it comes near to the faint green. Thus, "the brighter the blue becomes, the more it loses its sound, until it turns into silent stillness and becomes white. Represented in musical terms, light blue resembles the flute." (Gage 1999: 192) It is evident that the movements of the wave look like the tones of the flute. The wave symbolizes hope due to its illumination when it comes near to the shore. Her love towards her husband begins to fade, but her daughter gives a kind of stability to her life. She has got simultaneous feelings of serenity and melancholy as represented by the light blue and the flute. In this regard, it is seen

that the blue sea gives her a sense of relaxation since colour has an effect on the human organism. The psychologist, Galton, states: “there is no doubt that blue has a calming effect.” (Gage 1999: 265) Thus, “green” symbolizes growth which indicates that the protagonist is hopeful of a good future and a solution to her personal problems. The author depicts the motions of the ebb and wave in a wonderful way where the edge of the wave is ornate with trims. When the wave approaches the sandbank, the drops of water slip like a thousand snakes which demonstrate the fascinating power of the ripple as well as unpredictable evil. Actually Soueif has given us a direct live scene from the beach of Alexandria.

Thus, the protagonist continues by saying: “I used to sit very still. Sometimes the wave would barely touch my feet, sometimes it would swirl around me then pull back, sifting yet another layer of sand from under me, leaving me wet to the waist.” (24) We see a harmonious motion between Lucy’s mother and the ripple where the wave touches her feet and separates the stratum of sand from under her feet and drenches her to the waist. Soueif is very distinguished in conveying the truthful image of waves by explaining the small details and the feelings of the protagonist to the extent that she makes us live with her character on the seacoast.

Moreover, we see that the narrative adheres to one character and one subject. The opening of the story is mirrored in its ending. The author concludes the story by saying: “That narrow stretch of sand knows nothing in the world better than it does the white waves that whip it, caress it, collapse onto it, vanish into it. [...] where the water turns a deeper blue.” (36) Both the sand and the wave have a limited knowledge because they do not know about the sands of the desert which are far away from them. Their knowledge of each other is also restricted. There is a melodious connection between the sand and the wave where the latter embraces the former lovingly. The sand waits for the white foam and absorbs it. In addition to that, the beach also does not know about the depths of the sea. (36). That is to say, the protagonist only knows her husband superficially. “A deeper blue” symbolizes the unconscious of Lucy’s mother, and makes her think of an endless thing. John Gage states: “The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man towards the infinite, awakening in him a desire for the pure and, finally, for the supernatural. [...] unfolds in its lowest depth the element of tranquillity.” (Gage 1999: 192)

The protagonist decides to remain with her daughter sincerely despite her inability to live in Egypt. Soueif explores the mysteries of the human soul and reveals the unconsciousness of the main character which shows the innovative technique of her work.

1.1 Loneliness

Soueif, as an expatriate, demonstrates the psychological and physical conditions of a “displaced subject.” The protagonist, Lucy’s mother, feels lonely due to her inability to integrate into the oriental culture. Silvia Caporale claims: “A subject dislocated from her emotional roots, the inner quest becomes a way of coming to terms with a set of norms that belongs to a reality defined by ‘different’ standards from those of the subject’s original one. (Caporale Bizzini & Richter Malabotta 2006: 12)

Lucy’s mother is unable to integrate completely into the new oriental environment nor identify with the needs of her Egyptian husband despite her love for him. Being unable to cross the border of differences between the two cultures affects her love and relationship with her husband, and she has expressed this by saying: “I never see my lover now.” (33) Going more deeply into the problem of Lucy’s mother, she feels dislocated from her emotional roots because she lives in a foreign land and struggles with the foreign language, Arabic. (33) Moreover, the protagonist feels disappointed because her “foreignness, which had been so charming, began to irritate him.” (33) We see that there is a great distance in their emotional relationship. The protagonist feels uncomfortable in Egypt and she perceives that she needs

“to be protected from the sun, the mosquitoes, the salads, the drinking water.” (33) Evidently, this shows her psychological suffering because she is unable to integrate into the Egyptian environment.

The protagonist goes on to express her vulnerability where she feels solitary because she and her husband do not sleep in one room. She describes her bedroom and says that the Egyptian people use one long pillow with two smaller ones on top of it. According to the Arab culture, the long pillow symbolizes the union between a husband and a wife. It is said that God blesses the person who unites the couple on one pillow. Lucy’s mother does not like to sleep with her husband on the same pillow and she says: “These four pillows are my innovation.” (32) It is evident that affection and tenderness have left their life.

Lucy’s mother, as a “displaced subject,” frequently reflects on the past in order to assuage her displaced soul. Reflection serves as a healing purpose because an “autobiographical memory is necessary as a strategy of resistance as it works both as a way of retrieving memories and reconstructing wounded parts of one’s self.” (Caporale Bizzini & Richter Malabotta 2006: 13) The protagonist remembers how she met her husband twelve years ago at a bus-stop in a Georgian square. She married him eight years ago, and she gave birth to his child, Lucy, six years ago. (24-25) She recalls her happy times with her husband in a Cairo restaurant which overlooks the Nile, where he kissed her hands and said: “I’m crazy about you. [...] Eternity was in our lips, our eyes, our brows.” (29) “Eternity was in our lips.” This phrase reminds us of *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the two lovers were in a boat on the Nile and Antony said to Cleopatra that their love was in their lips. The protagonist’s recollection of pleasant days helps her to heal her wounds. Unfortunately, their love does not live long, because her dilemma is that she does not try to be open towards the Arab culture.

Lucy’s mother goes on to say that they come to the beach house in Alexandria each summer, but the second summer “was the sixth summer of our love and the last of our happiness.” (25) She feels that their love is pulling away from them and her husband has changed where he “was back home, and he needed someone he could be at home with, at home. [...] His heart was broken in two, mine was simply broken.” (33) This quote demonstrates the disillusion of the protagonist’s married life. The author repeats the word “home” twice in order to emphasize the desire of Lucy’s father to return to Egypt, while Lucy’s mother does not like to live in Egypt. Her feelings of loss are illustrated in reflection of the past, as she says: “I should have gone.[...] I should have turned, picked up my child and gone.” (27) The protagonist recognizes that it is too late to take her daughter because Lucy, who is six years old, belongs to her father’s culture. She wished that she had taken her away when she was eight months old. (31)

In addition to that, Lucy’s mother believes that there is no solution to her dilemma and she says: “From where I stand now, all I can see is dry, solid white. The white glare, the white wall, and the white path, narrowing in the distance.” (27) “Dry” indicates that the relationship between her and her husband has become uninteresting since love has pulled away from their life. “The white glare” symbolizes hope which narrows because the distance between her and her husband has increased. “The white wall” indicates a successful house that unites the couple, as well as denoting protection. White symbolizes faith, purity and a successful beginning. “White path” indicates the faithful path of their marriage. Unfortunately, there is no hope of a harmonious life since hope reduces due to the broken relationship between the couple. Finally, the protagonist does not like to leave her husband due to her love for her daughter as Lucy is her trap. This indicates that a mother’s love towards her children is eternal.

2. Multicultural Community

In the second story, “Melody,” the people live in a compound and they are from different countries, demonstrating a very beautiful coexistence. The protagonist, Ingie, is Turkish, and her friend, Wayne’s mother, is English. Elaine is Scottish, and the flower-man is Lebanese. There are also Egyptians, Filipinos and Germans who live in the compound. It is shown that multiculturalism becomes a major theme in Soueif’s fiction thus, “post-independence writers again relied on hybridity- that is, the blending of different cultural influences.” (Boehmer 1995: 203) Cultural hybridism indicates the richness of our world.

2.1 Style: Language and Metaphor

The story, “Melody,” is presented in the first person by a participating character, Wayne’s mother. The author does not produce the story in a chronological sequence. Instead, she uses a flashback technique that allows the reader to know about the past events through current ones such as the first marriage of Ingie’s husband as well as the first marriage of the narrator’s husband. The protagonist, Ingie, has two children, Murat and Melody, the latter dies in a car accident while crossing the street.

The opening passage of the story describes how the “scent of jasmine fills the air.” (3) The colour of jasmine represents purity, pleasure and safety, and this is ironic since the story ends tragically. It is seen that the narrator refers to her own thoughts, perceptions and judgements which indicate a subjective point of view. For instance, “I guess,” “I mean” and “I could never understand.”

The night of Melody’s funeral, the air in the compound “was not just full of the scent of jasmine, but literally heavy with it.” (10) The scent of jasmine serves as a metaphorical function in the fiction. The scent of jasmine symbolizes the soul of Melody that does not die and lingers in the compound. The white colour of jasmine is associated with innocence and angels’ clothes. The innocent child, Melody, lived only fifty months. She is like an angel and her soul smells like the scent of jasmine, because she is pure and has not committed any sin. Melody was buried in Turkey, and the story concludes describing: “the air seemed fresher and the scent of jasmine was even more strong.” (19) This symbolizes that Melody’s soul exists in the compound near the house of her family. Melody’s name indicates happiness and optimism; and the end of the story is ironic since Melody has brought a tragic tune to her family. The difference between the short fiction and the novel is that “the ending must necessarily be unexpected or ironic, whereas this is not vital in the longer form.” (Wallhead 2007: 14) That is to say, the end of the story fulfils the criterion of the short fiction genre.

2.1.1 The Experience of Loss

Ingie is deeply affected by the death of her daughter, and her tragic situation is shown in the following sentences: “she had aged overnight. [...] She looked slight and frail in her long black skirt and her black T- shirt. [...] black circles around her eyes. [...] I still hear her cry ‘Mama!’ [...] She hit her breast.” (11-13) Ingie mourns the death of her daughter and her black clothes indicate her sadness and misery. This is the moment of crisis in her life because her dream of avoiding the prophecy of the fortune-tellers and having only two children turns into a nightmare. She is overwhelmed by melancholy, depression and shock because her heart has been broken by the tragic loss of Melody. In this regard, Freud states: “Profound mourning, the reaction to the loss of someone who is loved, contains the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world - [...] the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing him) [...] It is easy to see that this inhibition and circumscription of the ego is the expression of an exclusive devotion to mourning which leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests.” (Freud 1957: 244).

Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia that one experiences in sadness. In mourning “it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.” (Freud 1957: 246) Ingie has lost her concern regarding the outside world because it has become worthless and void. Freud points out that this case is not considered pathological, because when mourning finishes in time, Ingie’s ego becomes liberated. There is an exception that some people may have melancholia instead of mourning but Ingie’s situation does not change into a pathological condition, because she does not suffer from the disturbance of self-regard in her grief. In other words, Ingie does not feel that her ego becomes empty and poor, but the outside world seems to her doomed, miserable and blank.

Ingie was so fond of her daughter to the extent that she did not send her to school, and she was teaching Melody how to read and write at home. (4-5) Suddenly, fate has changed her life, and her beloved daughter will not be with her anymore. Ingie as a vulnerable self, she reenergizes the voice of mourning by recalling Melody’s cry the night of the accident, as well as her movements in the house. That is to say: “The experience of loss [...] through the death of loved ones [...] we experience grief, we sustain damage that breaks the autarchic illusion. It tears us from ourselves to reveal something about who we are [...], something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us.” (Caporale Bizzini & Richter Malabotta 2006: 20)

This misfortune is very painful and it reveals Ingie’s fragility where her daughter is considered part of her heart. Actually, nothing can express her agony and suffering adequately.

In conclusion, *Sandpiper* reflects the fragmentation and fragility of a human being. Thus, Ingie’s frailty is shown in the fiction and what has happened to her might happen to anybody. Soueif succeeds in demonstrating the feelings of a “displaced subject” where the protagonist, Lucy’s mother, psychologically cannot assimilate to Egyptian culture, because she is unable to cross the inner barriers of cultural differences. She can neither integrate completely into Eastern society, nor can she return to England without her daughter. Her dilemma is that she does not try to be open towards the new environment due to her internal disaccord that prevents her from securing herself in her identity, and this sense of not belonging to this new country, creates an identity crisis. On the other hand, in “Melody,” the characters succeed in crossing the borders of different cultures and languages where they strengthen their multicultural beings. That is to say, multicultural society does not always mean a negative approach to Otherness, but it is rather positive and productive in a sense that we exchange experiences, learn new languages, and achieve the brotherhood of human beings, which is the highest level of civilization. In other words, the more culture we have the richer we are. However, both Ingie and Lucy’s mother have experienced the sense of fragmentation and their stories have been played with sad tunes. To conclude, a human being is like the sand in the wind, she/he might be moved anywhere in an unexpected way.

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