

## **In Conversation with Ahdaf Soueif**

**Writer, Cultural Producer and Political Activist Ahdaf Soueif is one of the two laureates of the 2019 ECF Princess Margriet Award for Culture, together with [City of Women](#). While representing distinct cultural approaches, both laureates offer a hopeful vision of democracy by redefining our understanding of culture and its capacity to improve a common European social reality.**

*"Generations of southern Mezzaterrans had, I guess, believed what Western culture said of itself, that its values were universalist, democratic and humane. They believed that once you peeled off military and political dominance, the world so liberated would be one where everyone could engage freely in the exchange of ideas, art forms, technologies. This was the world that my generation believed we had inherited. A fertile land, an area of overlap, where one culture shaded into the other, where echoes and reflections added depth and perspective, where differences were interesting rather than threatening, because they were foregrounded against a backdrop of affinities. The rewards of inhabiting the Mezzaterra are enormous. At its best, it endows each thing at the same moment with the shine of the new and the patina of the old, the language, the people, the landscape, the food of one culture constantly reflected off the other. This is not a process of comparison, not a 'which is better than which' project but rather at once a distillation and an enrichment of each thing, each idea. It means that within each culture, your stance cannot help but be both critical and empathetic."*

—Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*, 2004

Ahdaf Soueif has courageously merged literature and activism, building a body of fiction and committed journalism that responds to the legacies of European intervention in conflicts outside of the continent's immediate territorial boundaries. Soueif's consistent opposition to both authoritarianism and colonialism has marked her as a cultural figure of international importance inspiring new generations of critical voices throughout Europe and its neighbouring regions. Throughout her career, Soueif has been a tireless mediator between the supposed opposition of East and West, working to find common ground for a more democratic future. Prior to welcoming our laureates in Amsterdam on 2 October, the European Cultural Foundation met Ahdaf Soueif at her home in Cairo in May 2019 to discuss her work.

**Writing and literature have been a part of your life since your earliest memory: exploring, imagining and learning in your mother's library, then expressing yourself through writing. You care about stories.**

Stories have always mattered hugely to me. I think I retain information much better when it comes in the form of a story. I learned to read very early because my mother was doing a PhD, we were in England, so it was just my mother, my father, and me and for her to be able to use as much of her time as possible, it was really useful for her if I could learn to read. I mean, I remember actually the day that I understood what letters on the page meant and from then on, reading was essential part of life. I've talked about my mother's library and how important it was to me, but there was also the influence of my nanny when we came back to Egypt and I had a younger sister and brother and we all had a nanny, and on Wednesday nights, my parents went out and my sister and brother would be asleep and she would tell me stories.

And her stories were very vivid, very alive, very different from what I was reading. And also I think I learned, I mean, this is all with hindsight, but the fact that she would tell a story... she had one eye that was ruined and I would ask her what happened to that eye and she always told me a different story. And I kind of learned that it didn't matter, that these were the stories she told and each one was interesting and each one was potentially true.

So yes. And I think with fiction, for me, the crucial and the most exciting thing it did was that it was able to transport you from the confines of your own character and your own life and surroundings into something much bigger and much more varied. And that was miraculous and that was the essence of my love for it. I don't have like heaps of juvenilia as I understand that other writers have. I started writing after I finished my PhD and it was, again, I remember a specific day when I said to myself, "Well, you've finished the PhD, it's five o'clock, you have nothing on this evening and you think in your head that you want to be a writer, so you need to sit down and write." And that's when I started working out and experimenting with my first story and being surprised at the fact that it was happening in English, that I could hear the dialogue in Arabic, but the narrative was just coming in English and I couldn't do it any other way.

I do think though that in terms of practise, I was making up stories all the time, so daydreaming was, again, a central part of life and simply narrativizing things and telling stories. I think I did my practise mentally and orally and only started actually putting words on the page when I was good and ready at a later point, and those were the



short stories, the first lot of short stories that came out as Aisha and were later collected with Sandpiper into the collection, *I think of you*.

**In your [work](#) the personal is political, and your writing is political whether it's fiction or nonfiction. One of the spaces you create is for the collective to exist and express itself: it is in this movement from the personal to the collective that the political makes sense, because it becomes action through the energy and imagination of the many. Your work is exemplary in that sense. Could you share examples - from [PalFest](#) to your [participation in the Egyptian revolution](#) - that would illustrate this urge and passion?**

Well, I think that if we look at sort of how, what we could call my career or life as a writer developed, you have the short stories and then you have the first novel that everybody does, which is, *In the Eye of*

*the Sun* and which is very much a novel of sentimental education. It's the classic first book. And politics of course starts to show there because it was part of my growing up and part of what shaped my world. And then of course I start to review books and therefore I start to engage with what's being written, what's being written about in English, about my part of the world. I mean, again, I happened to be living in England. I mean, this is really the thing, that because of that early education with my mother, I was bilingual and I went into English literature and I ended up living in England and marrying an English writer and poet. And so this position of, in a way belonging to both, but also seeing how each culture regarded the other one and how it related to it and how it dealt with it and how it represented it to itself became a really critical part of my life, and that began to show when I started to review books.

And so I think it's at that point that the political, in that sense, becomes personal for me. And I guess we can see that in the choice of subject for the next novel, *The Map of Love*, which actually deals with the possibility or otherwise of cross cultural relationships and cross cultural understanding and what it is that language means and what it is that language does and how power plays out in relationships. *Map of Love* was nominated for the Booker and I suddenly had a much bigger platform. So when the Second Palestinian Intifada broke out in 2000, the Guardian asked me to go and write from there, do a



reportage, and I went. And I think that that really worked a change in me. I mean, being brought up on the Palestinian question as an Egyptian in the '60s and '70s and so on, but to actually go there and see the situation on the ground for myself and meet people and see how different it was from how even I who thought I knew it imagined it, was life changing.

I think that in relation to literature, two things happened to me. One was that when I wrote my reportage piece for the Guardian and I was writing at full stretch and I felt what writing was for, more

than when I had been writing my own fiction as it were, that this was something, this was something out there in the world that mattered, that affected the lives of millions of people, and that my writing could be an instrument for, I don't know, change, I mean, mitigating whatever. And yes. So that was one thing, suddenly sort of discovering a reason for writing at full stretch. And the other was that people there clearly cared so deeply about literature and about being of, if you like, the cultural life of the world so that despite the fact or maybe because of the fact that their lives were so ridiculously difficult, they were very desirous of a space in which they didn't talk about their lives, but talked about something completely other and completely different. And I felt the responsibility of writing.

I spent that week wishing that there was more of me there, that there were other people there who could see what I was seeing, who could live through the experience in their own ways and make it their own and perhaps do something with it, and I also felt that the Palestinians who went through checkpoints in order to come and hear me read deserved to see much more than me. And that was the idea out of which a few years later Pal Fest was born, the idea of taking writers, artists, not on a fact

finding tour, but on a literary festival so that it was like you do readings, you do workshops, you do seminars, just come and do them in Palestine. That's all. And to trust to the experience, to make its way through to them, and at the same time, to help the Palestinians get a few more international voices and presences in their midst. And so that's how it happened out of, I suppose, belief in literature and the belief in the empathetic power of literature because it was totally demonstrated to me by the Palestinians themselves.

**With more than a decade working on PalFest, you could share numerous examples about the impact the festival had on people's lives both in Palestine but also outside of Palestine through the stories that have been told and shared. Is there one in particular you would like to highlight, that remains very strong in your own imagination and that makes you specifically happy and proud about the work you all did as a team?**

Well, 10 years of PalFest have left many, many such moments really like when the Israelis raided our opening night at the Palestine National Theatre and the first thing I saw was one Israeli soldier in full gear, and I thought, "Oh, he wanted to come and attend and he didn't have time to change." And then it



turned out of course that they were there to close us down. But I think if I was to choose one incident, it would be when a fellow writer, a British youngish Jewish writer was next to me in Jerusalem by the Western Wall and he suddenly stopped and he said, "This is like science fiction. It's as if everything I ever thought I knew has been turned upside down and it's like science fiction." And that was very moving and it was also exactly what it was about. That there were preconceptions that were stopping people from actually realising what was happening, but being there on the ground just told you and he expressed it and he actually went back and he wrote about it, he wrote about it a lot and he restarted a novel that he had been working on to accommodate this new experience, this new reality that he now had.

**In a 2017 interview at Hay Festival you mention how in the West, discourses need to use the idioms of the west in order to be understood, which is something that we saw happening for instance during the Apartheid because white South African writers knew the vocabulary and idioms to create discourses and a narrative that helped build solidarity outside of South Africa. This took longer for Palestine, you said in that interview, mentioning one major intellectual voice who had the tools and the language of the West to do so: and that is the late Edward Said. Could you tell us how are these discourses today? Did we find a way to capture the imagination of the people who still don't really understand the situation in Palestine, including a lot of Western Europeans who, due to their own history and collective memory, look at the context through a binary lens. To what extent do you think PalFest has helped creating a more nuanced discourse and going back to Edward Said and his legacy: Do you think we managed to create a pan-European discourse that includes the voices of people in the region the same way that we have also tried to create discourses about what's happening in Ukraine including Ukrainian voices or what's happening in all the different regions of Europe and its borders. Because for the European Cultural Foundation clearly Europe is not only the European Union and our narratives must include all the different voices and perspectives that we need to put together, share and be able to gather a better understanding of the different political contexts across all geographies. What are we missing to continue the work (building this wider European discourse)?**

Well, I certainly hope that we do manage to create the discourse and the imagination that allows for a more inclusive way of looking at history and the possibilities for the future for Europe and for the rest of the world, because I don't see how the future can work out for the coming generations without that. And it is interesting to look at the difference between how quickly the Anti-Apartheid Movement for South Africa was able to gain ground in the West and how much more difficult it has been for Palestine. And part of that, a large part of that of course has been to do with history and with the Holocaust and with European centuries, old Anti-Semitism, and the collective guilt for that and the need to make reparations even though they are at the expense of another people. So that's well understood and South Africa of course didn't suffer from any of that.

But the issue of language also is interesting because the opponents of Apartheid, the white opponents of Apartheid, if you like, who are already part of the discourse of the West, they knew how that discourse worked. They knew what language to use, which registers to use, which idioms to employ, and that was very largely not the case for Palestinians until Edward Said came about, and I think he was the first person really to be so firmly of the West and of Palestine that he was able to pitch his arguments perfectly and was able to attract and mobilise so many people to the extent that there was an opinion in the American government in 2001 and later when they started the war on terror, that Edward Said's effect on scholarship in the United States was to make a lot of Arabists unable to contribute to the war on terror, in other words, they could not be hoodwinked or tricked into believing the dominant discourse that was anti-Arab, anti-Muslim and so on.

I think this situation has certainly changed because of course the diaspora Palestinians who've been in the West for so long now and who've been part of the West, they now have that annual general meeting and have that discourse. And I think also of course the net and social media has contributed to breaking the stranglehold of the media on the information that people get. We have different problems with that now, but certainly for the last decade plus, it has played a really large part in making it possible for people in the West working in English, say, to really understand what's happening and to empathise with it, and we see the results of that of course in the proliferation of movements like Not in Our Name and Jews for Justice and Rabbis for Justice and so on, where people have understood and have taken the cause of Palestine to their hearts and actually made it their cause.

**Israeli writers are welcome to the festival as viewers but are not offered a space on stage. Could you tell us about this conscious choice of the festival?**

For the first few years of PalFest, the central question that we would be asked by the European media was, why did you not invite Israeli authors? I think that the people in the west then who regarded themselves as liberal and humanists were always trapped in the idea of bridge building and of like equality and equal time and shared cultural endeavours and so on. PalFest was not about that. PalFest was actually trying to break out of a paradigm that the Palestinians found insulting, which was that they were always regarded alongside the Israelis, so you could not have a Palestinian event, a Palestinian discussion without it being to do with Israel. And they really wanted to be seen for themselves, on their own. They didn't want this twinning, this obligatory twitting all the time. So we said this is a festival for Palestinians. If Israelis would like to come and attend in the audience, then that's fine, but we are not going to be yet another organisation that forces Israelis down the throats of Palestinians.

If Israeli authors want to visit Palestine and talk to the people and have cultural activities with them as Israeli authors, then we're happy to connect them to Palestinian writers, Palestinian cultural managers



who can organise this for them, but it is not the job of PalFest because we've seen so often events where like the idea is to get an Israeli and a Palestinian, or a Jewish person and the Muslim person together on the same stage and then you think your job is done and then one can go back to their life of privilege and the other can go back to their life of oppression and nothing changes, but everybody feels good about this shared experience. Well, that is fake and it doesn't lead to any results and it wasn't what we were about. We were setting up a festival to bring international authors to the Palestinians to give them a literary festival that they would like and that they would enjoy, and to give the internationals an opportunity to live the Palestinian experience and then to go away and let it work in their imaginations and do whatever they wanted with it, but we were not a peace building or bridge building exercise at all.

**Translation is always thought of as a bridge between political and cultural contexts, a space where many voices and listeners/readers can come together and**

**share stories on an equal level. Translation becomes political in many cases. Could you tell us more about your relationship with translation - not only as a translator of literary works but also as a multilingual writer and thinker constantly juggling narratives between different contexts?**

Translation is of course really important and it's a really good thing that recently we see a lot more Arabic literature going into European languages and there are lots of factors going into that, some of the awards that happened in the Arab world, which carry with them, the idea of translating the books and so on. This is great. Again, for me, when I first came into contact with Arabic work in translation, it was very much an eye opener and it was actually quite distressing because, a, there was always the choice of what it was that would be translated and of course it was always the more exotic, the more strange, the more that made the reader feel that they were like in the Arabian nights or something. But also it was the language. I mean, there were words that I think didn't get used in English except in translations from the Arabic and there was also sort of sentence structures that were very complex, that were very long, and that actually made you think that Arabic was a very kind of like a flowery, elongated kind of language and yes. And that was pretty unfair.

I remember actually doing an exercise once for one of my son's school exercises where we took a passage that was translated by Richard Burton from the *Thousand and One Nights* and we did a standard translation, which really just translated it as it was, and it was so different, the atmosphere and effected created, and so on. So yes. And I think that actually *The Map of Love* touches on that because that was something I was very much in the middle of thinking about. The small work that I've done in translation has been very much an attempt to write that because yes, in the end, if what you're trying to do is you're trying to create an empathetic emotion, trying to get the reader to actually think that these are people pretty much like him, but with sort of some differences, then having a specific and very orientalist language doesn't help.

Well, quite honestly, I'm not really sure how much an understanding of Arab literature or an empathy with it would be helpful today. I think that the issues now are so large. There are issues of big politics, geopolitics and of economics. And I also think that anybody who really wants to understand what's happening can, because, again, of the information that's available on social media, because so many Arabs, Muslims, et cetera, are perfectly able to express themselves in English and in French and in German and in Dutch and do so. So I now think that people who don't understand or who don't understand to the degree that they actually put themselves behind the geopolitical pressures that are happening, the wars, the threats, and so on that are happening now, do so because that's what they want, because this is their world view and not because the information is not available to them or not accessible to them. I think we're in a different place.

**We do see many issues arise across geographies, in Europe and beyond, imperilling democracies and creating polarization within discourses and societies. We try to respond to these issues through culture.**

Yes. I think that we can agree that the world is in trouble now and that to simplify things, there are two strong currents. One is towards more division and towards more misunderstanding and more conflict, and the other is of course towards more togetherness and finding solutions that work for everybody. I think that we who belong to the second, to the people who are looking for a common ground and for a way to move forward more equitably for everyone, I think that we perhaps make a mistake when we think that the other group need convincing. I don't believe it's a matter of convincing. I believe that the state of conflict and the state of war and the state of misunderstanding is the state that they desire for the world and that is where their interest lies and that is what they work for. And so I think that instead of spending time and effort in working out how to persuade and how to convince, I think that our work and efforts should perhaps now be towards imagining what this future might look like. And it isn't easy because it's easier to paint and to imagine dystopias than it is to imagine utopias, utopias, the people have imagined to have tended to be somewhat boring and somewhat regimented and still trapped within the parameters that people know, whereas of course in dystopias you can just let your imagination run wild.

But I think that the failures that we are living with now necessitate a new act of imagining and I think that the future somehow rather like, I mean, with fiction, you're trying to or not you're trying, but what good fiction does is it arrives at universal feelings, values, truths that every reader can understand, can feel part of, but it does that by being very specific and very individual. And possibly the kind of future that we need to try to imagine now carry something of this and that it needs to be at one in the same time imagined at a very local level, but also at a global level. And I think that that really is the challenge now that people have to rise to and I think there is definitely, definitely... well, there's definitely a need, but there's a push and the desire and we see.

I mean the big thing is what's happening to the planet, is what's happening to the environment of the degradation of the environment and the fact that we can feel the danger to the planet and it's heart-breaking and heartening to see how young people across the world and particularly across Europe, because they have the freedom and the ability to do so, are taking this issue to their hearts and are really sort of trying to push for change that will lessen at least the dangerous to the planet. And I think that we need to think in those terms. We need to think about the planet, we need to think globally, and we need to think how we can reimagine a future together in a planet that can sustain us and sustain us in a way that offers a level of dignity and decent life for everyone. And I think that for Europe in particular, this vision has to embrace what you could call a wider Europe or the wider region and it's a

region where... I mean, Europe is very small and it is part of a much larger region with which it has always had trade and cultural exchange and movement and travel and I think that that needs to be embraced and there is a desire to embrace that and that's why we see the interests that work against it becoming more and more vicious and more and more loud.

I think that the Israel-Palestine question is very much a part of that and is very much at the heart of that, and that if that could be solved because at the moment what it's doing is it is, well, obviously it is polarising people, it's preventing any true understanding and any true cooperation, but it's also providing an example of a level of oppression and dispossession and actually denying people rights, which in the 20th century it became accepted that there is such a thing as universal human rights and universal right to self-determination and the idea of how democracy works. Now, the situation, Israel-Palestine makes a nonsense of all of that and therefore I think it is very much working against the idea of a future where we can all work together and try and solve the pressing and potentially fatal problems that threaten our entire planet.

One of the lessons that I learned from Edward Said was that you always have to convey hope and preferably end on a note of hope. So you should be able to see and describe what's wrong very clearly, but you should always have some opening of a way forward. And I remember my father once said, he was psychologist and he said something like, if you're trapped in a cube, don't think of it as a closed cube, think of it as six potential exits. So for all the troubles that we have now, I think that one could see them as challenges and opportunities, so look at, for example, that whole issue of refugees coming into Europe. And let's not even talk about why it was that they chose to leave their homes and make their way to Europe or the history behind that or anything. But the fact is that hundreds of thousands of young, motivated, smart people from the region are trying to enter Europe. And at one point, Chancellor Merkel made a very brave and optimistic gesture towards them and it practically cost her her seat, but that seemed a moment of genuine hope.

And I think that in looking at the challenges that Europe faces today, each one of them can actually carry, a potential for a way forward. I make new great claims for literature, but I think that if our job is imagination and if in literature you're always creating another world for your reader to inhabit and you're creating it in sympathy with your characters, then maybe it is more of a responsibility on people whose imaginations work that way to try and imagine a different and better world.

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page 2: At the opening of PalFest 2017, photo by Rob Stothard

page 3: Ritu Menon and Ahdaf Soueif in Hebron during PalFest 2010, photo by Raouf Hajj Yehia

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