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**The Coming of Age of Aisha in Ahdaf Soueif's *I Think of You***

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master in Language and Culture**

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Isaac Newton.

# Dedication

For a loving family.

For special friends.

For the future me; be kind.

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### **Abstract**

Every individual undergoes different changes while stepping out and moving towards another stage during the process of maturation from childhood to adulthood, mainly as the case of Aisha, the main protagonist of the three short stories included in Ahdaf Soueif's collection of short stories *I Think of You* (2007). In the field of character study, there lies the main concern of the Bildungsroman tradition that traces the years of formation of a protagonist from youth to maturation. Therefore, this study aims at analyzing the years of development of Aisha's character and identity by stating the elements that make up a Bildungsroman according to both Buckley and Al-Mousa's studies. The themes include: childhood, conflict of generations, provinciality and the larger society, a cross-cultural conflict and a spiritual crisis reaching at the end a reconciliation of two cultures and self actualization. Furthermore, in the light of a postcolonial view and a psychoanalytic understanding, this study makes use of both literary theories in order to approach the cross-cultural context and the character development of Aisha.

## Introduction

In the midst of the increasing modern globalization and the growing number of nations on the move, literature in its total sum of different studies, essays, memoirs, fictional stories ... etc., assumes the role of the middle man in cross cultural communication. It transmits realities of nations through a channel of creative, intelligent, captivating, delighting collection of writings. Arab-Anglophone literature is the middle man in the cross cultural communication between the East and the West.

The Arab-Anglophone literature can be defined as the body of literature produced in English by authors of Arab origins. Since its beginning in the 1920's, it has addressed many themes that project the situation of immigrants, refugees, exiled and even those chose the exile *i.e.* expatriates. This relatively new literary genre as explained by Muaddi Darraj S. "bypasses the need for translation and ... speaks directly to English-speaking audiences about the world on the other side of the divide." as western readers seek to understand the "Arab mind" and world after the 9/11 events..." ("Writing Relocation" 123).

One of the many themes addressed by the Arab-Anglophone literature is the theme of coming of age. The narration of coming of age is but a modern form of the Bildungsroman, it stands in the heart of the body of this literature as it describes how these "hybrid"<sup>i</sup> (Bhabha), identities are living, thinking, adapting, developing and integrating in the hosting nations/countries. In this regard Darraj notes that Arab writers are exploring themes of rich material proffered by their hybrid identities as persons who live and work at a point midway between East and West ("Writing Relocation" 123), a point that E. Said describes as "contrapuntal"<sup>ii</sup> (1994) In the sense that they have to deal with the two faces of their single coin.

Arab writers are similarly motivated by the experience of not belonging to one place, and they have been recently churning out novels, poems, short fiction, and non-fiction at a dizzying pace that constitutes an Arab literary debut in the West (Darraj “Writing Relocation” 124). Indeed, in her collection of short stories *I Think of You* (2007), Egyptian born, English upbringing Ahdaf Soueif, writes about the different lives of women in-between-cultures, women as herself, who were born to live in a foreign environment, estranged and dislocated. The author writes about how their Identities are formed, shaped, changed and sculptured in different yet relatively similar transcultural<sup>iii</sup> contexts.

In the field of literature what would be a better approach to studying a character’s development in a work of fiction or other than the Bildungsroman tradition. When literally translated the term *bildungsroman* means “novel of formation” or “novel of education”, it basically traces the years of formation of a main protagonist from youth to adulthood. According to Gottfried and Miles “the Bildungsroman represents a progression of connected events that lead up to a definite denouement” (122), as it concentrates on “actions, thoughts, and reflections equally and attempts to portray a total personality: physical, emotional, intellectual, and moral” (122).

In a profiling of the elements that construct a Bildungsroman in English literature, Jerome Hamilton Buckley suggests that it is a novel that portrays all but two or three of a set list of characteristics, among them “childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy” (qtd. in Boes 231). However, in a modern, postmodern and transcultural context, and after being adapted into European and Arabic literature the novel of formation can be said to have evolved when compared to the old original German texts. An example to the development of this genre is that it now includes female protagonists as a “double other”<sup>iv</sup>

when before it concentrated only and mainly on male protagonists. In addition to that, Nedal El-Mousa provides three more themes to those of Buckley that fit more the context of transculturality of the Arab-Anglophone Literature: the first theme is the cross cultural conflict of the East and the West; the second is the occurrence of a spiritual crisis in the protagonist's journey; and the third is to learn to reconcile the two opposing cultures (qtd. in Al-Mutairi 360).

The particularity of this study is that it contends that, amongst Ahdaf Soueif's collection of short stories *I Think Of You* three of which can be read as a bildungsroman in an attempt to understand the process through which the main protagonist Aisha, will come of age and come to define herself in a cross-cultural acculturation between the East and the West, favorably, referred to as transcultural. Starting with the first story titled "Knowing" that narrates Aisha's childhood at the age of five (05) years in Egypt until she travels to England with her family as they are academics. Going to the second story titled "1964" that is concerned with Aisha at the age of fourteen, a teenager that suffers of dislocation and estrangement when she starts to go to school in search for company and acceptance of the society. Arriving at the third story titled "Returning" that portrays Aisha the adult as she goes to her ex-husband's apartment to retrieve books she needs in a course that she teaches. Since the *bildungsroman's* main concern is to trace the moral, physical and psychological development of a protagonist from youth to adulthood, it is found that the body of literature of the selected case study provides the first starting point that should allow this research to take its natural course.

Following an MLA 8<sup>th</sup> Edition format, this paper study is divided into three chapters. The first chapter titled "The Narration of the Bildungsroman Tradition" provides an overview of the Bildungsroman, its definition, origins and the development of its meaning and scope. In



addition to that, an overview of the Arab-Anglophone literature will help contextualizing the case study and its author Ahdaf Soueif.

The second chapter titled “Aisha the Child and the Teenager, the Making of an Identity” explores some of the themes of the Bildungsroman that serve the development of the protagonist throughout her childhood and teenagerhood going through stages of self education, cross-cultural conflict and alienation to come to the last part towards her maturity and adulthood.

The third chapter titled “Reconciling the Two Opposing Cultures and Beyond, Aisha: A Call for Life” thus presents the last constructing theme of the Bildungsroman that leads up to the definite denouement of the protagonist’s journey; a reconciliation to a border position and a self actualization that further establishes her identity.

All that, broadly, in the light of a theoretical framework that ranges from a psychoanalytic reading of the protagonist’s psyche whenever it is approachable and a postcolonial reading that is suggested by the trajectory of the East and the West that the character undergoes. The main focus is to define the themes of the *Bildungsroman* arriving at the result where the protagonist reaches her self-actualization and recognition.

## Chapter One: The Narration of The Bildungsroman Tradition

The relationship between the individual and the society has always been a major theme in literature. Society has a great role to play in the individual's growth and development, yet there are times when one just does not want to follow the mainstream of the society. Indeed out of the need to break out of its conventional molds which are made to be the "norms", some individuals find themselves in the middle of a struggle to single out their *Self* out of a large crowd of those identical beings molded by the society. Eventually those individuals, after entering and exiting the furnace of life, they will finally get to the last stage known as *self-actualization*<sup>v</sup> (Abraham Maslow) where they realize their full potentials and arrive at a satisfying state of being. In the field of literature, some writings took as a main theme the years of development of a main protagonist and were represented in novels that later on came to be known as *bildungsroman*. Therefore, this chapter will briefly explore the definition of the Bildungroman tradition, its background and examples, introduce the Arab-Anglophone literature, and the author of the case study at hand; *I Think of You*, Ahdaf Soueif.

### 1.1. The Bildungsroman: An Overview

The term *Bildungsroman* is a German compound word of *Bildung* meaning "education or formation" and *roman* meaning simply a "novel". In a definition by C. Hugh Holman in *A Handbook to Literature* (1992) a *Bildungsroman* is "A NOVEL which recounts the youth and young manhood of a sensitive PROTAGONIST who is attempting to learn the nature of the world, discover its meaning and patterns, and acquire a philosophy of life and 'the art of living'" (51). Another definition of the word is given by M.H. Abrams in his book *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1999) the term *bildungsroman* is then defined as "signifying 'novel of formation' or 'novel of education.'" The subject of these novels is the development of the protagonist's mind and character, in the passage from childhood through varied

experiences—and often through a spiritual crisis— into maturity, which usually involves recognition of one's identity and role in the world” (193).

The *bildungsroman*, in that sense, is a novel of formation that recounts the various stations a main character undergoes in his path towards self recognition, where some of those steps or stations are not always so pleasant or easy to pass by. This literary genre has a wide readership as many individuals seem to relate to the course of events or hardships and eventual possible triumphs. Bakhtin states that the classical Bildungsroman presents us with “the image of a man in the process of becoming” (qtd. in Selin Ever 2013 vi).

In a paper on the origins of the *Bildungsroman* Aditiya Shirag explains thoroughly the historical background of the genre; the term *Bildungsroman* was first used by the German critic Johann Karl Simon Morgenstern who “clearly stated that the genre was to portray the hero’s *Bildung* (formation) in all its steps and final goal as well as to foster the *Bildung* of the readers” (44). Therefore the function of such novels is not merely to depict the stages of development and education or formation of individuals, but it educates the readers as well as they relate to the stories and familiarize with the hardship the protagonist goes through until arriving to the last stop of the journey and that is the *self-actualization*. Shirag adds that “A Bildungsroman gives the individual a voice, as novels within the genre focus on the development of the individual and his or her moral growth from youth to adulthood” (41).

There are some older examples that apply to the genre *bildungsromane* (plural), such as the *Telemachy* from Homer’s *Odyssey* (which concerns Odysseus’s son Telemachus), written in the 8th century BC (Literary Devices). Yet the *bildungsroman* as a literary genre was not popular until about the 18<sup>th</sup> century along with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-96), the term itself was only popular when it was “introduced to the critical vocabulary by the German philosopher and sociologist Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 –1941), who first

employed it in a biography of Friedrich Schleiermacher and then popularized it with the success of his 1906 study *Poetry and Experience*” (Boes 231).

This genre was born to the German literary family and was later adopted, fostered and spread worldwide especially in the English literature and literary studies. According to the Oxford English Dictionary the credit goes to the Encyclopaedia Britannica of 1910 as it was the first to introduce the term Bildungsroman to the English field of studies, hence, it later on came as a handy designation for a novel that deals with the formative years of one person (Boes 231). It was not until the early 90’s that the *bildungsroman* had entered the English literary space as a term. However, works of the Genre did exist a while back. Boes provides us with the main elements that would qualify a work to be called a *bildungsroman* based on a Buckley’s criteria. Some English novels that bear similarities with their German counterparts such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) are generally considered to be prominent examples of the *bildungsroman*, yet scholars have brought to attention that when adopted by European literature. According to an article “The Bildungsroman in the Nineteenth Century”

[T]he form took on some unique characteristics. The English *Bildungsroman* tended to have a more confessional quality, it often involved the protagonist's move from the country to the city, it was more concerned with the theme of religious doubt, and it ended less optimistically than the German variety, often portraying society as a somewhat destructive force (eNotes).

In the same article, it is stated that the destructiveness of society also exists in the French *bilungsromane*; for example, “in Gustave Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* (1869) and Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830)—the protagonists’ youthful desires are not idealistic and naive; they are realistic, reasonable desires that society will not fulfill” (eNotes). Because the differences or the changes in the English and the French Bildungsroman deviate

from the classical form of the German Bildungsroman, critics tend to exclude them from its scope. Similarly, late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American writings such as *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1868) are placed within the scope of the genre, others exclude American novels because they are found to be more concerned with particularly American themes. (eNotes)

The Bildungsroman was also adopted by the Arabic Culture; in “The Arabic Bildungsroman: A Generic Appraisal” Nedal Al-Mousa (1993) analyzed six Arabic Novels in an attempt to extract the specifications of the Arabic Bildungsroman in the Arabic Literature. As a result, Al-Mousa proposed three additional themes that may be added to Buckley’s, and that would be more compatible with the conditions and the situations of the Arabic Culture and through which, distinguishing the Arabic Bildungsroman from that of the European. The first theme is a cross cultural conflict of the East and the West, the second is the occurrence of a spiritual crisis in the protagonist’s journey, and the third is to learn to reconcile two opposing cultures. (Al-Mutairi 360)

And the Bildungsroman continues to evolve, as literary critics begin to explore the female Bildungsroman that traces the emotional growth and social maturity of a young woman. “Criticism frequently focuses on the difficulties of achieving maturation and inner development while constrained by the limitations inherent in being female in a patriarchal society ... [w]hile its themes and techniques continue to interest modern readers” the themes and the techniques of this genre continue to interest modern readers because of its “pervasive influence and the enduring relevance” Creating even a wider readership as ever. (eNotes)

The *bildungsroman* narration, from its early use, definition, form and content in the 18<sup>th</sup> century have changed and is still changing. Again during the 1980’s and the 90’s, the traditional definition of the genre witnessed an expansion after the rise of the post-colonial,

minority and feminist studies, “the genre was broadened to include Coming-of-Age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models” (Boes 231). The word *bildungsroman* now holds a new meaning, not as different, yet there is a remarkable difference between Coming-of-Age narratives and the 18<sup>th</sup> century *bildungsroman* definition. In “Modernist Studies and the *Bildungsroman*” Boes (2006) summarizes that using the term *Bildungsroman* as an umbrella term “erases the national particularity of the genre.” He notes that the German critics have coined the term “Entwicklungsroman” which literally means “novel of development” explaining that “Franco Moretti, in his recent “Conjectures on World Literature,” cautions against the tendency to build generic definitions from a local, and usually national, corpus (73–81). In a globalized world, he advises, literary scholars would instead do well to look for broader patterns and treat local variations as nothing more than just that.” (242).

In this order the term *Entwicklungsroman* might be a fine alternative to describe the study in hand since it is synonymized with modernity as it is mentioned by Boes that in the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Franko Moretti as well as Jed Esty in recent years and other literary critics the “novel of development” is “an exciting locus of modernity, and with it also of modernism, the era in which developmental process reach their global breaking point.” However the term *Bildungsroman* continues to vex German traditionalists as its generic and overstretched use still encompasses very large types of literature (241-242). This widespread success of the *bildungsroman* as a model will continue to be modernized even further as this study will attempt to vex the critics even more; using the model of the *bildung* to shadow it on a short story should the work of Ahdaf Soueif *I Think of You* (2007) prove to fit in the *bildung*'s model.

## 1.2. The Arab-Anglophone literature

Arab-Anglophone literature is the body of literature written in English by Writers of Arab origins be it Arab British/American immigrants or sons and daughters of early Arab British/American immigrants. Dalal Sarnou writes about Anglophony in most Middle Eastern countries and links its origins to the British colonization just as in South Africa and South Asia, Noting that after Bhabha, this has favored the emergence of hybrid identities, hybrid writings and hybrid cultures. She further notes that works of Arab writers and more specifically those of women seem to be overlooked when speaking of Anglophone literature;

[A]lthough scores of books have looked at Anglophone literature around the globe, they tend to make scant reference to the contribution of Arab writers, and specially women. Knowing that names such as Chinua Achebe, Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie and Anita Desai among others now are forming what can be identified as ‘parallel canon’, a similar recognition must be dedicated to significant Anglophone Arab writers –most of which are women as Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Diana Abu Djaber and others (51).

Similarly, in *Arab Voices In Diaspora* (2002) Layla Al-Malah highlights an irony in the fact that the Arab Anglophone Literature has gained an unprecedented increasing interest only after the tragic events of 9/11, “it did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11 and asked itself who those ‘Arabs’ really were.”(01), the thing that calls for more production of this literature to make the Other *know* and see the truth through the writings of Arab, giving the defendants speak for themselves (14).

This relatively new literature was not always as popular as it is today, but things change over time and some of the most important things take time to bloom as they are meant to. There was a time when women could not even write nor publish under their real names; as

“women” they had to use aliases in order to have some of their works published and criticized “without prejudice in male-dominated circles” (Armitage, Culture Trip), an example to which can be the Brontë sisters: Charlotte, Emily and Anne. In the present time, publishing is no longer an issue, but are their works being equally criticized or there still exists some overlooked prejudices as opposed to objectivity?

Again, in another study, Sarnou speaks of how the body of literature produced by Arab-Women which is regarded as a minority literature is a growing field that bridges the communication between the two ends of the world; the East and the West:

Anglophone Arab literature, mainly the one produced by women, is a promising field of literary, cultural and discursive research, not only because it is a minority literature but also because it represents an important bridge of communication between the West and the Arab/Muslim world in an era during which tension is growing between the two sides. Due to their cultural blending and linguistic tapestry, these writings offer Western readers an authentic portrayal of the Arab world, and Arab Muslim woman, away from a false representation transmitted to them through manipulated media channels (“Articulation of Major Discourse” 77).

In Geoffrey Nash’s Book *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers In English* (2007) there is a wide focus on contemporary Arab-Anglophone writers and the qualitative difference of writings in Arabic, Arabic literature translated into English, as well as works written in English by Authors of Arab origin. His main focus revolves around the latter category using Edward Said’s term the “Anglo-Arab encounter”. Furthermore, Nash examines writers from different Arab nationalities and had dedicated a full chapter to speak of Arab Women writings; “Arab Women’s Autobiography and Memoir in



English” some of the prominent names are Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela and others (24).

In this growing body of writing, despite their artistically different styles, women writers share many different aspects in their works; the most important and relevant one is the background of being Arabs, Muslims, and most importantly *Women*. The latter gives a third dimension to their writings as being a double other, considering that their works are noted to be semi or modified autobiography (Nash 25). Additionally, the other major aspect of the works of these Arab-Anglophone writers is the “transculturality” of their situation, a term used by Arianna Dagnino to describe writers of multicultural backgrounds who have embraced their position in the world as who they are, “hybrid” identities, and transcend the issues of expatriate/migrant writers, issues of alienation and displacement and “unhomeliness” (Dagnino 1-3).

### **1.3. The Themes of Bildungsroman and the Short Story**

In *I Think of You* (2007) Ahdaf Soueif has lined three short stories in a progressive chronological timeline that narrates the story of its main protagonist Aisha from her childhood in the first short story titled “Knowing”, to her teenagerhood in the second story titled “1964” and at last, her adulthood in the third story titled “Returning”. In its nature, the short story contains few characters, not too many details or events and a single climax, fragmentation and a wide focus on and a closer look to the main character; Aisha in this case. It is found convenient to attempt to read these three short stories as a *bildungsroman*. After a search for similar case studies of attempting to apply the *bildungsroman* tradition to a short story instead of Novel, studies of the sort have not been found, in this order we will, respectfully, follow the criterion provided by Buckley and Al-Mousa.

It has been clearly stated by Jerome Hamilton Buckley that the Bildungsroman's plotline must include "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (qtd. in Boes 231). Though Buckley admitted that writers do not strictly follow this pattern while writing a Bildungsroman, he argued that no Bildungsroman "ignores more than two or three of its principal elements" (18). Additionally, in a study of the thematic construction of the Arabic-Bildungsroman, Al-Mousa provided three themes that distinguish the Arabic adaptation of the genre from that of the European: a cross cultural conflict, the appearance of spiritual crisis in the protagonist's journey and eventually learning to reconcile two opposing cultures (qtd. in Al-Mutairi 360). As the core of this case study, *I Think of You*, is a work of an Arab-Anglophone writer, it bears traces of both cultures in its lines, it is only appropriate to use both Buckley's elements and Al-Mousa's themes in order to achieve the purpose of the study.

In this order, to have a Bildungsroman is to have the stated above themes and elements. But the specificity of this literary genre has not covered Short Stories; since the term is literally translated from German to "Novel of Formation" or "Novel of Education". However, in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* Abrams (1999) defines the novel as "an extended narrative... distinguished from the *short story* and ... the *novelette*; its magnitude permits a greater variety of characters and a greater complication of plot (or plots)" (190). He also defines the short story as a brief work of prose that organizes the action, thought, and dialogue of its characters "into the artful pattern of the plot" and most importantly that the terms for analyzing the component elements, the types, and the various narrative techniques of the *novel* are applicable to the short story as well" (286). Therefore, it is safe to say that the similarities between the two forms of narratives, the short story and the novel, are quite

overlapping after all they both serve as narratives to develop an artful plot that goes around its characters.

In the light of the similarities between these two forms of writing, and because of the nature of the case study, we will examine it in the frame of the “novel of formation”. Indeed the combination of the three short stories could be counted as a Bildungsroman, as the selected stories narrate the happenings of the main character’s most important stages of development from childhood to adulthood. We will attempt to read the events that are the proof of a Bildungsroman and observe how this character is developing and learning and eventually becoming an adult. The fact that the short story tries to create a mood rather than a plot will help understand the atmosphere where the character had grown.

#### **1.4. About the Author Ahdaf Soueif**

Geoffrey Nash considers her as “a path- finder in the wave of Arab writers in English of the last two decades of the twentieth century” (24). The novelist Ahdaf Soueif (1950-) was born in Cairo and educated in both Egypt and England, where she studied for a Ph.D. at the University of Lancaster. She is an award winning author of two collections of short stories, *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1996), and two novels. *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), and *The Map of Love* (1999) The latter was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction (British Council).

In addition to being a world celebrated and acknowledged Arab-Anglophone Novelist, Soueif is also an essayist and a political activist, she is a regular contributor to literary magazines and newspapers and appears on radio and television in England, The United States and the Arab world. (Nash 2007) In 2004 her book of essays, *Mezzaterra*, was published. Her most recent work is *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012), a personal account of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Ahdaf Soueif lives in London and Cairo and is the founder of the Palestine Festival of Literature” (British Council). She is not only an entertaining novelist, but

an activist as well. Soueif is considered to be a voice of the East in the land of the West, a bridge between cultures, politics and nations.

S.M. Darraj claims that “Ahdaf Soueif ... quietly infiltrated the British literary scene and became a finalist for the prestigious Booker Prize in literature—the first Arab and Muslim woman to be so recognized. Since the tragedies of September 11, 2001 the work of these writers has received even more attention, as Western readers seek to understand the “Arab mind” and world.” (2002, 123). Darraj also notes how the Anglophone Arab Literature bypasses the need for translation and speaks directly to English-speaking audiences about “the world on the other side of the divide” (123), demystifying, through her characters, the lives of Arab-Anglophone who occupy a “border position” (Abdul Jan M. 97) of all shapes and sizes in stories of fiction that delight and enlight.

## Chapter Two: Aisha the Child and the Teenager: The Making of an Identity

This chapter will attempt to extract the events and details that, according to Buckley and Al-Mousa, would qualify a work to be a novel of formation. Starting with the first element being the *Childhood* that appears in the first story “Knowing” where Aisha, the main protagonist, is a child of five years of age focusing on her childhood and the relevant events that are directly related to the character’s development. Moving to the second element, that is *Provinciality and the larger society*; expressed in the East-West Trajectory where the family travels from Egypt to England. The Next element mentioned by Buckley would be *Self Education* that is highlighted throughout the three selected short stories in the protagonist’s passion for books. The other characteristic is *the conflict of generations* which is revealed through the Aisha’s rebellious and eventually independent character. And finally, the last element chosen from amongst many others is *Alienation*, where the protagonist finds herself in a “border position”<sup>vi</sup> (qtd. in D’Alessandro) that is portrayed in the second short story “1964” where Aisha is a teenager of about fifteen years of age, focusing on her actions and reactions, way of thinking and behaving in her environment.

### 2.1. The Theme of Childhood

Childhood is the place to start and the first criterion set by Buckley. It represents the beginning, the first stop in the journey towards maturation, be it psychological or physical. In this story the main character Aisha is a five year old Egyptian daughter of two Egyptian intellectuals who live in Egypt with larger families of grandparents, uncles and aunts, of the both paternal and maternal offspring in various houses, whom she calls the grownups “the grownups are wonderful” (Soueif 7). One of the houses she particularly loves and calls “the spoiling house” where most of the time no one says no to her. Sunlight is shining on her childhood but things get a little cold when they travel to England as her parents leave for their postdoctoral studies, Aisha finds refuge in books and her wild fertile imagination.

In the opening of the story, Soueif puts it clear to the reader that the narration comes from an older perspective; that is Aisha as an adult is narrating the memories of her childhood “I remember a time of happy, dappled sunlight” (Soueif 7). The narrative oscillates from a childlike perspective towards an adult retrospective reminiscence or commentary (Bindasová 8); “Looking back, I see a pool of sunlight, and in it, a child. She is dressed in a blue-and-white-spotted frock with a white lace bodice. She holds on to her mother’s skirt” (Soueif 7) talking of herself as if she is not that same person, as if someone else had taken her place or perhaps she is all grown up now and no longer relates to that long time ago little happy child. Aisha is narrating her own story but with some distance using a “she”. This may indicate a self distinction from the person she was before and the person she is now, but as the narration goes along the shift to the “I” comes abruptly and unexpectedly. She is nostalgic and longing to that past when her father would come to her room to comfort her after she has seen a “horrible creature” and explains that it is only the shadow of the chandelier. “[S]he is safe” she says, and here comes the shift “Yes. The world is safe and pleasant and the worst grief I know is to be beaten at Snakes and Ladders by Uncle Murad” (Soueif 7). It was only after feeling some peace and comfort that Aisha, as a narrator, had let herself indulge into character and speak with an “I”. The protagonist here is reconnecting with herself and getting into a nostalgic state, to her old self, expressing her love of the family and her home in Cairo, Egypt.

The narration goes on to introduce Aisha’s surrounding and the way she lives within her family. Starting with her home where she lives with her parents: “The garden is always sunny. I play with my blue tricycle or eat my meals sitting in a wide eyed rocking duck. This is my home. I know the address by heart” (Soueif 7-8). And moving to her grandparents’ house where she goes often “the spoiling house”. Aisha writes very warmly about her Grandmother whom she calls respectfully “Mama hajja”: “I call her: Mama who has gone on the pilgrimage to Makkah. It is a title of respect. But it is also a truthful description. For

Mama Hajja has been to Holy Makkah” (Soueif 8), and the way she gets naughty with her while the grandmother is praying ““You little monkey. You would have made me break my prayers?” I snuggle contentedly against her breast in the sunlight, sucking my thumb”(Soueif 8). And of course her grandfather’s furniture shop “Now it is a sunny winter’s day and I am playing at my grandfather’s shop” (Soueif 8) where she spends her time creating “caves under desks and labyrinthine castles in piled-up sofas” until her grandfather “Morsi” calls at her for lunch time where “the boy from the neighboring restaurant comes into the shop carrying a large, round brass tray shining in the sunlight” (Soueif 8). One notices that the description of the small details seemingly holds a deep meaning to Aisha as they are full of energy, laughter, comfort and *sun*.

The sun in this context holds a symbolic meaning and significance that bypasses the simple meaning of the source of light. It symbolizes the warmth of love and happiness that exists in the small simple things such as the tender hug of the granny, or the playtime at the grandfather’s shop, and holistically, the love of the family in Cairo. One might ask why precisely in Egypt? The answer is: because as the narration develops further, the logical counterpart of the sun and its warmth in Cairo will be the darkness and the cold of England. In “The Symbolism of the Sun and Light in the *Republic* of Plato. II” (1944) James A. Notopoulos notes that “The sun reaches its greatest development as a symbol ... In the thought of Plato the sun assumes a symbolic function which embraces the traditional conceptions of the sun, yet transcends them through Plato’s new use of the symbol” (223), the latter meaning a metaphysical notion “explain [ing] the invisible through its appropriate visible” (224). As Plato emphasizes that Light equals Truth and the Sun is the Symbol of Good. Appropriating Plato’s thought to the story of Aisha; it is convenient to say the sun symbolizes the warmth and love of the family in Egypt.

The narrative goes further as the narrator continues to describe the sugar dolls and the fire crackers at the Prophet's birthday, the gatherings of the family around fire on evenings of Ramadan, the evening of cake-making for the "Small Eid" "My grandmother and the women of the family sit around on the floor in a circle, chatting." (Soueif 11) the point of convergence of these events and many others is not just the tradition or religion it is the family. As a child, Aisha grew surrounded by a relatively large and loving family friends, grandparents, aunts and uncles; people she is familiar with, their costumes, traditions and language; "they ... surround me with admiration and love" (Soueif 12).

The Theme of Childhood is apparent in bold letters in the first chapter of Aisha's life narrated in "Knowing" as it scrutinizes the most important events of that lifetime. And the theme that follows is interwoven within her childhood, creating not one, but two themes at the same time: Mobility, traveling from Egypt to England and Self-Education as the protagonist will, shortly after moving, learn how to read and eventually, envelop herself in a new world. This sum of new experiences that the protagonist will undergo holds, without doubt, very interesting events that can be life changing.

## **2.2. The Theme of Self Education**

A new event is introduced to the protagonist's life, learning how to read is Aisha's major step in self education as with it she will come to know more about the world. The charm of books had a consistent existence in Aisha's life and development. Before she could read Aisha would pick out some of the books from her parents' library and venture in a world of her own, creating tales with the pictures she has in the books. During this "transcultural" (Epstein) movement, not only from one country to another but from one culture to another, Aisha found a certain refuge in books as she learns the new language and with it how to read, she becomes a voracious reader.



The need for this refuge is a reaction to the new situation that the character is currently undergoing; Aisha was very attached to the family members and used to be constantly surrounded with love and attention and now she finds herself alone with her books and stories, her imagination, fictitious characters and nightmares. Being the voracious reader she is “I want to do nothing but read” (Soueif 13), the protagonist decides, knowingly, to buy a different type of books titled *Vampires* “Something tells me my parents won’t approve” (Soueif 14) she decides to snuggle it and wait for her parents’ usual night out in order to read it “this time, not only don’t I mind: I positively *want* them to go” (Soueif 14). Later that night she sees a nightmare and is forced to call after her parents to comeback and stay with her, she is now miserable because she will not be left alone again.

The “child” has a mind for strategic thinking, she has a plan, and she abides by the rules. Usually children are enthusiastic and cannot wait, yet, Aisha somehow shows signs of pre-maturation, and she patiently waits for her parents to leave before she ventures into her new delight. In addition to that, she is adapting to the new situation, especially when it is all in her favor; she now wants to be left alone. As a general commentary one can say that books have a distinct importance in Aisha’s pre-maturation and character development. As a means of surmounting difficulties the protagonist uses books in order to adapt to new situations and the surrounding environment.

Experiencing dreams can be interpreted on the level of psychology leading, possibly, to understanding why did Aisha experience the previously mentioned nightmare. According to Carl Jung’s psychological interpretation of dreams, the latter is a human reaction coming from the most honest place, the unconscious, expressing the deepest wishes and desires, he notes that

The dream represents that tendency of the unconscious that aims at a *change of the conscious attitude*. In this case, the counter position raised by the unconscious is

stronger than the conscious position: the dream represents a gradient from the unconscious to consciousness. These are very significant dreams. Someone with a certain attitude can be completely changed by them (C. Jung).

When Aisha experienced a nightmare where she saw the vampire she had read about, her natural reaction was calling after her parents knowing that her parents cannot stop the vampire from appearing “I know now my parents are neither omnipotent nor omniscient. They cannot stop the vampire from appearing, but at least they can be there when he arrives. I insist that they stay in and I win” (Soueif 15). The protagonist’s real desire is to have her parents around her just as they used to be, however, at the same time she is miserable because she realizes that she is not to be left alone after that incident. This paradoxical behavior and desire can be interpreted as the development of her character; on the one hand, her ego prefers the new role initiated to her she likes being a semi-grown-up that stays alone and reads her books and any book she likes. On the other hand, the child in her still needs the close presence of her parents to fight away the creatures of the dark loneliness.

Jumping to Aisha the teenager in “1964”, her passion for books is still unchanged, she still finds refuge, a consolation and an understanding inside the pages of her books and the worlds of her characters that she cannot find in the people surrounding, meaning the English people

I loved Maggie Tulliver, Anna Karenina, Emma Bovary, and understood them as I understood none of the people around me. In my own mind I was a heroine and in the middle of the night would act out scenes of high drama to the concern of my younger sister, who had, however, learned to play Charmian admirably for an eight-year-old (Soueif 16).

The rhythm of her new life in England did not allow her much space to meet new people and have constant company and amusement, so books were the source of everything,

and most especially her source of romance. When “temporary rescue” as she puts it, comes from some friends of her parents, whom suggested that their son could take her out to the theatre, she finally experiences her first ever kiss “I had felt nothing at all, but I became more and more a heroine and borrowed from the library Mills & Boon romances that I read by flashlight under the covers in the dead of night” (Soueif 18). Aisha always returns to her books to learn even more and maybe next time she will play her “heroine” part better.

### **2.3. The Themes of Provinciality, the Cross Cultural Conflict, and Alienation**

In J. H. Buckley’s early definition and profiling of the Bildungsroman tradition, he included provinciality as a theme as in the early European British novels where the protagonist would move from the country side to the larger city seeking education and growth. However, according to Al-Mousa in the Arabic Bildungsroman, the protagonist is introduced to a conflict that stems from a cross cultural issue. To the specification of this case study, the protagonist travels from her homeland Egypt to England with her family throughout which, the themes mentioned above seem to appear very interwoven.

D’Alessandro in “The Stratheden and the negotiation of the East-West trajectory: identity and migration in Ahdaf Soueif’s *Aisha*” writes that “Trinh Minh-ha recalls how travelling can become the only way to dwell in a postcolonial age” (Fortunati *et al* 12).”(325). Although the decision of traveling was not particularly Aisha’s, yet she is forced to deal with what this trajectory brings. “I go on a long journey across the sea alone with my father. We land in a cold dark wet windy place with a lot of people and a lot of trains.” (Soueif 12), the parents traveled to England; for a child that saw sunlight everywhere, she might not prefer the “cold ... dark ... wet windy place” (12). At this point Aisha is introduced to a completely, not only new, but very different surrounding than what she is used to

Now I remember a new home. It is much smaller than the ones we’ve left behind and not so pretty. But there is a fire in the living room wall. Everything here is much

colder, much darker than I'm used to. There is no one; no one except my parents. And I don't see very much of them, for I am sent to school (Soueif 13).

The protagonist Aisha is introduced to many changes. First change that occurred was from living in a house full of loving people to a "new home" a "not so pretty" home. Second, from houses and rooms full of sun to a much darker and much colder place; Third, from being surrounded most of the time by a large family of aunts and uncles to having almost no one since she doesn't see much of her parents, and finally the school and the language. The last two elements could have represented a challenge and cause issues, yet the child was fortunate to learn the language so easily and like the new friends she makes at school and story time with her teacher; "I miss my aunts and uncles and grandparents. But now I like my new friends." (Soueif 13) "I miss the sun. But I like the evenings when I sit at my mother's feet in front of the fire. She reads and writes and I look at pictures. There are no sugar dolls, no Ramadan lantern, no Eid, and no sheep. But instead there is Father Christmas and a stockingful of presents" (13).

Although she finds herself in an alien place she seeks a way to content herself with the new surrounding replacing one thing for another, the family for the new friends, the sun for the fiery evening with her mother, the eventful times of Ramadan and the Eid and others for "Father Christmas" and a stocking full of presents. Aisha adapts quickly and easily to the new situation, or is it too quickly? As a child of roughly five to six years of age, she still is not mature enough to question the change, approve or disapprove of it; she can only adapt, perhaps eventually adopt it as well. On the one hand, adapting to new situations could be a trait of a character and personality but, it is still too soon to judge such thing because Aisha has not yet reached any level of self-awareness. Yet if this adaptation means anything, it should be a character building experience that will eventually affect her coming of age shortly after. On the other hand, to adopt would have more to it than meets the eye; it means

accepting voluntarily all the change that had happened from family to surrounding people to religion.

This grand change that happened to the protagonist's life as a child still does not show any major outcome which can be described as a negative effect resulting from her trajectory. However, in the second selected short story "1964" where Aisha is a teenager of fourteen (14) years of age who has developed a certain awareness and judgment, liking and disliking; Aisha has a different perspective and way of viewing things as her first experiences with the other cannot be described as fully positive.

One thing that did not change, however, is that she still does not like the cold, dark, damp weather of England "I stood in the snow, freezing and waiting for the bus. I was lonely. ... I had washed and dressed in the cold dark while my young sister and brother slept on." (Soueif 16). Now that the protagonist is older and more aware of her surrounding, she starts to see the difference between her figure and that of the others (the English) as she complains "Fourteen, with thick black hair that unfailingly delighted old English ladies on buses ("What lovely curly hair. Is it natural?") and which I hated. It was the weather; hours of brushing and wrapping and pinning could do nothing against five minutes of English damp" (Soueif 16).

In the passage above Aisha appears to be fully aware of the physical difference between her Self and Others; and this is only the first step towards total alienation. The protagonist's first encounter with the Other as a different entity began on board of the *Stratheden*; the ship that had brought them from Egypt after being in Sydney and Bombay Aisha describes the scene "We got on at Port Said. The *Stratheden* had come through the Suez Canal from Bombay and before that from Sydney. It was full of disappointed returning would-be Australian settlers and hopeful Indian would-be immigrants" (Soueif 16). The ship here is a symbolic indicator of the major trajectory undertaken by human beings in traveling

not from one place to another but from one life to another. In “The Strathden and the Negotiation of the East-West Trajectory” D’Alessandro argues that

The ship appears in literature not simply as a means of transport but as a metaphor for a living body on which a variety of migrants from various backgrounds meet and are forced to share their lives for a limited period of time. It transports not only their bodies but also their culturally determined preconceptions, their beliefs and values. The ship becomes a microcosm of the global, postcolonial reality, which reflects hierarchical structures that are culturally specific, determined by class, ethnicity and race (326-27).

Aisha had encountered an Indian boy named “Christopher”, to her account in a spirit of adventure she gave him her London address, something her mother would not appreciate. The mother has a sense of superiority being an Egyptian, Academic, Intellect, coming to England on “a sabbatical to do *postdoctoral* research.” (Soueif 16). Already the incident on the ship prepares Aisha for a personal change and a cultural critique portrayed through her mother’s prejudice. She observes “I wasn’t *postdoctoral*, but it still wasn’t quite the thing to play with the Indian teenagers,” (Soueif 16). The attitude that the parents portray on the ship does not change as they reach their home in England; when they receive a letter addressed to Aisha from Christopher they are disappointed and saddened that she had struck a friendship with the Indian boy (D’Alessandro 329). Aisha complains in silence “Why was it wrong to give him my address? Why shouldn’t I know him?” (Soueif 16) by that questioning her parents’ attitude and behavior when they opened a letter addressed to her “It was addressed to me and had been opened. It never occurred to me to question that.” (16). This attitude gives hints about her parent’s paradoxical behavior between being liberal intellectuals and at the same time traditional in their thinking that Aisha should not meet with “Christopher”. This is also a sign of a conflict of generations that Buckley had included in the thematic construction

of the Bildungroman, but because it appears scarcely in the story, it is left out to concentrate on other more apparent features.

The suitable alternative of the Indian boy, however, is the vicar's children. Aisha's mother had agreed on her behalf to let her go out with the children of the priest on the grounds that Aisha is always "moping" around and complaining that she does not have friends (17). Yet, this experience proved to be another disappointment, but this time, a disappointment to Aisha herself. To her excitement and search for adventure, Aisha thought they might go to see a "film" or even go to a youth club like the one they have at home "the Gezira Club" she had imagined would be more exciting and liberated but instead, they went to church (17).

The protagonist's first encounter started with a boy called "*Christopher*" encompassing the word "Christ" and the second with the vicar's children and the church. The latter shows that religion is another facet of the Other's culture where Aisha finds herself being pulled towards. This push and pull of culture and religion causes a conflictual encounter for "her"; Aisha who is a Muslim being invited to a Church, in this sense Wisam Kh. Abdul-Jabbar argues, in the light of Jacques Derrida's "The question of the Foreigner", that the hosting nation's "hospitality" constrains the foreigner and devours his identity, he states that

Mireille Rosello explores the emergence of a postcolonial understanding of hospitality, which necessitates 'dissolution' as 'he host strips the guest of his or her identity' (2001: 31). In this sense, hospitality becomes synonymous with an 'extreme' gesture of xenophilia: the devouring embrace that takes the other in until there is nothing left of "them" but us' (Bammer 1995: 47) In this connection, Ahdaf Soueif's literary work addresses the site of conflict where the other encounters another culture (151).

Although to Aisha's account, this event would make her feel less different "I told myself it was nice that they thought nothing of taking me, a Muslim, to their church. It

was proof that I belonged— a little; that I wasn't as different as I feared I was.” (Soueif 17). All Aisha wanted was to belong, to be a part of something more, a part of the society in which she lives; she no longer wants to be alienated. However, that does not go too well for her, the apparent difference between Aisha and her peers was too bright to go unnoticed

Everybody was large and pale with straight light brown hair and tweeds. I felt excessively small and dark and was agonizingly conscious of my alien appearance, and particularly my alien hair, as I waited to be sought out and guided into the love of Jesus Christ. Mercifully, it did not happen. Even so, I had been—however unknowingly—betrayed, and I knew I would never go out with the vicar's children again (Soueif 17-18).

Being alone and bored all the time, Aisha contents herself with her trips to the launderette passively anticipating for something to happen, keeping her eyes open as she passes by “the teddy boys and the rockers preening on the street corners” (Soueif 18). Her heart yearned for them even though she was positively conscious that her parents would never approve of their company, to herself she said “I realized that with my prim manner and prissy voice they wouldn't want me for a friend anyway. I was a misfit: I had the manners of a fledgling westernized bourgeois intellectual and the soul (though no one suspected it yet but me) of a rocker” (18).

The protagonist is torn between her desire for liberation and rebellion and the expectations of her parents “Trapped between liberal (Western) facade and conservative (Eastern) attitudes, Aisha feels more and more alienated” (D' Alessandro 330). On the one hand, she does not venture to speak to the rockers because she knows that her parents would not approve of them. However, on the other hand, she fears rejection of the society portrayed through the rocker boys, she feel a misfit, unwanted and misplaced.



The cross cultural conflict that Aisha undergoes develops as she goes to school, although ironically, she is excited that she will get to know more people of her age and increase her opportunities at meeting an adventure mislead by the books she reads. Unfortunately she is again disappointed she writes “No one had warned me it was a girls’ school. I had always been in a mixed school at home and found boys easier to get along with than girls. Suddenly school didn’t seem like such a good idea; a vast, cold place with thousands of large girls in navy blue skirts” (Soueif 19).

Aisha was different from the other girls in her class, not only in her appearance, but in her attitude as well. She was conscience of her “Westernized bourgeois intellectual” self, as opposed to her classmates that come from a working class background. Being a Muslim in a Christian school “I wanted nothing more than to merge, to blend in silently and belong to the crowd and I wasn’t about to declare myself a Mohammedan or even a Muslim” (Soueif 19). In addition to that, she spoke proper English “like a teacher” as the other girls spoke cockney “I knew they were speaking Cockney and I was speaking proper English. But surely I was the one who was right.”(19). Aisha’s strong desire to blend, merge, fade into the society silently made her so passive toward even her religion; she could declare herself a Muslim, but Instead, she indirectly denied her identity in a strive of belonging and not being the Other.

Aisha hated school “school was a disaster” (Soueif 20), she failed at math because she could not understand the terminology but in contrast, she aced at English class which made her happy. Little did Aisha know that her happiness will not last and it could eventually backfire on her, she could have been as proud of herself as her parents, but they did not know the whole truth. Being the Egyptian that knows English better than the English themselves is not exactly the best way for Aisha to make good friendships with the English girls, especially as they get called out by the teacher if they do not know things like “Birds of feather flocked together” (20). So at break time, she would wander in the cold playground yearning for her

sunny schools in Cairo. In order to escape this sad reality, she develops a new habit of escaping to the library and envelops herself yet again in the pages of her books, the only familiar place she knows, the only people that will not reject her

There, hidden in a corner, holding on to a hot radiator uninterrupted by cold blasts of air or reality, I communed with Catherine Earnshaw or pursued prophetic visions of myself emerging, age thirty, a seductress complete with slinky black dress and long cigarette holder, a score of tall, square jawed men at my feet (soueif 21).

But how is it possible that she can commune with the British characters but not with the British people? In books, characters are silent and cannot exactly talk back to Aisha, she is capable of relating to them but it is a one way channel where the characters will not relate to her. In reality, it is pretty much the same; she is willing and more likely desperate to commune with the Other, but the Other is not willing or enthusiastic about communing back. In this regard, the hosting culture is not particularly hospitable, but that may not be as negative as it may seem. After being alienated for too long, it is time for Aisha to change her point of view and take a new position as to where she stands from the world.

The protagonist, Aisha, finds herself trapped in a “contrapuntal” point where she is at the meeting point of two opposing cultures or representation of cultures forced to choose to belong to one or the other. On the one hand, Aisha yearns for the East, Cairo, the place she loves the most, as appears in the first story “Knowing”, and the good old places full of sun and love which she cannot go back to. On the other hand, she lives in the West, England, where she does not seem to be happy either in her school or at home. So far, the required criteria or the plotline of the Bildungsroman provided by Buckley is found within the first two short stories “Knowing” and “1964”, which leaves the themes provided by Nedal Al-Mousa that will be discussed in the following chapter.

### **Chapter Three: Reconciling two Opposing Cultures and Beyond, Aisha: a Call for Life**

This chapter aims at reading the last of the three selected short stories “Returning” in addition to “1964” as the former portrays the final station of Aisha’s journey; her adulthood, and with that the final element of the Bildungsroman narration according to Buckley within a special context; a Transcultural context. In addition to the themes that profile the Arabic Bildungsroman given by Al-Mutairi. These themes include the *Self-actualization* and a working philosophy through reconciliation between herself and her transculturality. All of which leads to the point where she is an independent identity transcendent beyond all affiliations.

#### **3.1. Reconciling two Opposing Cultures**

In a socio-cultural scenario stirred by the increasing interconnectedness and modern globalization where political borders are blurred by the acculturation of the increasing number of societies on the move, a new generation of culturally mobile writers was born. These writers are called “transcultural writers” in the words of Arianna Dagnino, they have, by choice or life circumstances, “[E]xperience cultural dislocation, live transnational experiences, cultivate bilingual/pluri lingual proficiency, physically immerse themselves in multiple cultures/geographies/territories, expose themselves to diversity and nurture plural, flexible identities” (01-02).

Endowed by this flexibility, these “transcultural writers” find themselves less and less trapped in the immigrant/exile syndrome. Indeed, Ahdaf Soueif who is an Egyptian born English upbringing fits the criteria of transculturalism more and more as notes Hechmi Trabelsi in his “Transcultural Writing: Ahdaf Soueif’s *Aisha* as a Case Study” that Soueif has no personal history of opposition or rejection of English. She is aware of her “border position” as being in the meeting point of the two cultures, in an in-betweeness, “embracing both at the same time” (2003). Soueif seems to place her characters in this position that comes

to be called “border writing” in many of her works such as her first collection of short stories *Aisha* (1983) as well as her two novels *The Map of Love* (1992) and *In The Eye of The Sun* (1999), a selection of works that give the impression of semi-autobiographical writing or at least bears huge resemblance to the author’s life and “transcultural” and “border position”.

Feeling trapped in that “contrapuntal” point where she is neither in the place she loves nor likes the place she is in, Aisha is forced to take the matters into her own hands and change things around her. Carine Mardorossian points out that because of Aisha’s displacement “the migrant’s identity undergoes radical shifts that alter her self-perception and often result in her ambivalence towards her old and new existence” (qtd. in D’Alessandro 331). This leads to a very important aspect that serves the process through which Aisha will reach the reconciliation of the two cultures.

### **3.2. Transculturalism and the Border Position**

In the short story “1964”, the protagonist Aisha manifests a very important development of character that has originally resulted from her alienation and displacement; she moves from a desperate want of connection and recognition of the Other, be it her family or the society in which she lives, to a complete isolation, an exile, yet by choice or at least a sense of tolerance of situation without the need to adhere to it. Aisha decides to not go to school, and this decision has an extended effect, it foreshadows her reconciliation of the two cultures in which she grew. After repetitive scenes of passive acceptance of her parents’ constraining rules and their sad disapproval of her choices an example to which is “Christopher” the Indian boy she met on the ship, the fact that she gave him their London address, etc. Aisha makes some life changing decisions. A rebellion erupts.

Aisha’s rebellion starts with baby steps; she would go to the café on the corner of their house and play her favorite songs of the Beatles, the Animals, the Stones and others on the jukebox, although her parents would highly disapprove of the sort, yet there “[She] was happy

and brilliantly alive” (Soueif 22). It was her little secret and she let no one know of it, and it nurtured her sense of rebellion; she had “the soul ... of a rocker” (Soueif 18).

On the school dance of Valentine’s Day, she discovered that there was no secret world from which she was barred; she was the only girl to have brought a boy with her. All that the English girls that made her feel a misfit and different and missing out on life, she now knows that “there was just –nothing” (Soueif 23). As she comes to this conclusion, her little rebellious spirit grows to make a very strong character changing and building decision “I’m not going to school anymore” (23) in a flat voice and simple words she lets her parents know that she will take charge of her life from now onwards. Few words they are, but, they will make all the difference. The parents disapprove, obviously, of her sudden decision and her mother goes back and forth between Aisha and her father, protesting and carrying threats in an attempt to put down her daughter’s decision, she repeats “Daddy is terribly displeased with you,” then, “Daddy won’t speak to you for weeks” (23). Yet her efforts go in vain as she hold on to her attitude “Withdraw all your love, I thought. I won’t go back. They went against their principles: “You won’t get any more pocket money.” It was still no good (Soueif 23). The determination with which Aisha faced her parents left them with no option but to accept her decision with bitterness.

Her rebellion is finally crowned with success. Aisha quits school and stays at home all day long listening to rock music, reading her parent’s “forbidden” inventory of books; erotic literature such as the “*Kama Sutra*, *The Perfumed Garden* of Sheikh Nefzawi, *Fanny Hill*” (Soueif 23). Through this little triumphant act of rebellion Aisha is establishing for herself a personal space where she can be at ease being the lead heroin of her story, communing with the only person worth communing with, her Self. As points out D’Alessandro, the choice of Aisha’s literature is a mixture of both the East and The West classics portraying a transitional

acceptance of her transculturality and admitting herself to the border position through which she will finalize the last of the stages of her development. (332)

The story of Aisha advances pretty quickly and jumps in the third short story “Returning” to her adulthood, where she comes back from England, after being gone for a period of 6 years, to her ex-husband’s apartment for the purpose of retrieving certain books she needs “I’m teaching a course and I need those books” (Soueif 24). Arriving at the house location, Aisha did not recognize the scene; it was different from what she remembers “She remembered a green garden with spreading trees and flower-beds and paths of red sand. She saw instead a construction site” (24), to her eyes, it was more of a destruction site. A construction of a Mosque and an Islamic Institute had taken over the green spaces where frogs and crickets had lived; it is the representation of the new Islamic era in Egypt (Trabelsi 2003). The latter was also represented through the scene where she was going into the apartment building and could see with the corner of her eyes heads “covered in the white Islamic headdress that was spreading so rapidly” (Soueif 25).

When Aisha had dreamt of her return to home, Aisha had imagined a full scene of herself arriving at home and the doorman “Abdu” would welcome her and “Saif”, her ex-husband, with warmth. She would ask him about his wife “Amna” to whom she would have brought presents (25). Alas the reality was quite different from the fantasy; the surrounding of the house was unrecognizable, “Abdu” was taken to the army and now there is a new doorman, “Amna” has gone to live with the folks in the village, and most remarkably, she was divorced. There was no “Saif” with her.

This image that she had found as she came home was not compatible to the one in her imagination, when fantasy meets reality, it creates a shock. Aisha thought she would come home to a warm welcoming place full of the people she loves, going back to the Cairo that echoes with her nostalgic memories. The reality of things proved to be rather disappointing.

The nostalgic memories of Aisha go back to when she was younger surrounded by unconditional family love.

### 3.3. Self-Actualization, Aisha: a Call for Life

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment” Ralph Waldo Emerson.

It is no surprise that Aisha have come a long way through many difficulties of cross cultural conflict, estrangement, a feeling of “unhomeliness” as in the words of Adorno “not to be at home in one’s home” (qtd. in E. Said “Exile” 147), she had always taught herself to accept, adapt, and overcome. In an interpretation of the protagonist’s name, Trabelsi says that “Aisha” represents “a call for life, a new life” it has a root of “*aich*” in Arabic, it means “to live”. (2003) The name also has a meaning of continuity, in a present continuous, she is *living* and shall continue to live.

In the opening lines of “Returning”, Aisha is portrayed as an adult, she comes speeding in a “little red car” (Soueif 24). The car is a symbol used by authors as a “vehicle” of mobility, independence and freedom of decision. Aisha is portrayed in an advanced view of her life controlling where it should go and how it should be. In opposition to the earlier times when she was a teenager Aisha had come on a ship, the *Strathededn*; she had no control over the ship, its destination or the people in it as they come from many places in the world symbolizing the multi-culturality of the world in a global modernization.

The color red of the car on the other hand, generally used in Gothic literature, symbolizes energy, strength and passion. Historically speaking, the color red in ancient Egypt represented life, fire and victory and was used as well to convey anger, hostility and chaos (mummies2pyramids). Adding that to the symbolism of the car, this implies that Aisha, despite everyone and everything, with a little bit of disorder and chaos, loneliness, or even distress she still exists, well alive and as powerful as ever.

After parking the car in what used to be a street full of trees and green spaces and is now shadeless spot, she goes up the stairs and into her ex-husband Saif's apartment where she also lived when they were married. Ironically, even though Aisha barely recognizes the surrounding of the apartment, her hands seem to remember the key hole and her nose remembers the smell of the apartment. She goes about the apartment reminiscing about the pieces of furniture that she and her husband picked together, and each of those had a story and a meaning that holds dearly an importance to the protagonist's ex-marital life. One of the objects Aisha mentions is a mirror; she was looking at the cold reflection of a person she used to be. She puts her hand on the mirror contouring the face she sees but, all she could get is a cold consistent surface. Aisha cannot get in touch with her old self because she is now, a new person who has moved on from the memories of her past, after all one cannot dwell on the past. She goes on to describe the very last moment as drove away giving the reader a sense of victory coming out of the words:

Out in the sun, she got into her little red car. She put the five books and her handbag on the passenger seat and drove down the west side of the square. She maneuvered carefully around the potholes till she came out of the bumpy road and to the roundabout once again. There she picked up speed (Soueif 31).

The "little red car" does not appear only once, but twice in the short story "Returning". It was previously mentioned that combining the meaning of the color red and the symbolism of the car, it emphasizes state of fearsome freedom of choice and control over her life that Aisha has reached now after going through many difficulties the last of those is a fail marriage. The significance of the story returning can be interpreted not only as in returning to the apartment or to Egypt but also, a returning to her *Self*; the strength and passion projected through the color red and the feeling of being unstoppable when getting behind the wheels of the car, in other word her life. The books by her side represent the working philosophy that



Buckley states in his profiling of the Bildungsroman. Aisha is a teacher of literature as the books suggest “five books on seventeenth-century poetry” (Soueif 31), literature that had always been present in her life representing both her passion to knowledge and arts, and that it is forever the most loyal companion to her journey.

It was not mentioned to what culture those books of literature belong, English or Arabic, neither the destination of Aisha; it was not clear from where she was coming or to where she is going. The reader might, implicitly, understand that she may have come from England on a mission and she might go back but nothing is clear or can be proved. This is yet another emphasis on Aisha’s border position and self fulfillment, as she does not need to pick one place or another, one country or another, one culture or another because she can simply be a mixture of both. Soueif here stresses an important point that Aisha does not have to belong to a particular side, because she is simply herself, she belongs to humanity and that is enough. Her identity is unique to her situation and to that of many others as herself.

The open ending and the image of Aisha maneuvering the potholes carefully and then speeding up the road in her little red car, suggest the independent identity she now possesses. She controls where she goes and how she identifies herself not how others might identify her. When the protagonist Aisha reaches this state of conclusion and empowerment through the acceptance of her Self and the world around her, she has reached a self-actualization and recognition, and by that the last of the elements of the Bildungsroman.

## Conclusion

Guy G. Kay said “We are all shaped by where we grow up, though that shaping takes different forms” (Thacker 2013). Indeed, in the process of coming of age, formation and development, the individual is “*the sum total of [his] experiences*. Those *experiences* – be they positive or negative – make [him] the person [he is], at any given point in [*his*] life” (J. B. Neblett ).

To grow up and be mature is called coming of age in literature, expressed through a genre of German literature called *bildungsroman* tradition, literally translated to novel of formation. But the tradition is no longer traditional; as it has been modernized and will continue to be modernized in respect to the tradition’s main guidelines; tracing a protagonist’s development from youth to maturity. J. H. Buckley (1974) specified certain criteria/plotline that helps profiling a work as a *bildungsroman*, but that is only concerning the European model of the genre, in that order N. Al-Mousa (1993) stated three more different themes that are crucial to the Arabic *bildungsroman*. Based on logical thinking, to study an Arab-Anglophone work of literature such as the collection of short stories *I Think of You* (2007) by Ahdaf Soueif, it is best to combine the themes and elements stated by both Buckley and Al-Mousa in order to define the coming of age and the formation/education of the main protagonist of three selected short stories, Aisha. These elements and themes start with the childhood of the protagonist and her self-education, the provinciality as in moving from town to city, a cross cultural conflict and alienation to reaching a reconciliation of two opposing cultures, and finally, a self recognition and actualization in a sense of self fulfillment. After studying all the mentioned elements and themes and scrutinizing the plotline of the three stories combined throughout the second and the third chapters, the three short stories appear to be inclusive of all the necessary elements that would apply to any other traditional and modern Bildungsroman contains, all that, respectfully, according to Buckley’s and Al-

Mousa's studies and with the assisting analysis of many others. The study was viewed from a postcolonial contextualization and a psychoanalytic understanding, all of which, helped in arriving at this conclusion.

The theme of "childhood" was projected throughout the first story "Knowing", as the narrator "Aisha as an older self" was recounting her life in Cairo when she was about five years old. She described everything she loved with warmth and joy portrayed through the love of the surrounding large family and a symbolism of the sun that bears the meaning of her nostalgic true and honest love of Cairo and the family. The second theme come after the family had moved to England for postdoctoral studies, Aisha suddenly found herself in a foreign place surrounded by no one; she learned to seek adventure and good time in books and imaginary tales of her own, "educating herself", entertaining herself, adapting to the new surrounding in her special way.

The aspects of the Bildung appeared to be interwoven in the second story "1964". "Provinciality" did not come in the form of moving from a small town to a big city, but rather from one culture to another, creating a "cross-cultural" conflict at the same time. Because the parents of the protagonist are academics, they traveled to continue their studies and work in England, the thing that caused the Egyptian teen to be trapped in-between two lives, two cultural aspects her home is in London but her heart stayed in Egypt. Aisha had to endure the estrangement and "alienation" that resulted from the displacement of her existence, but eventually, she showed resilience and a strong character through which she was able to surmount all the difficulties that surrounded her.

In the transcultural context where she grew, Aisha "reconciled the two cultures" by establishing herself in a "border position", understanding that she is an Egyptian that happens to live in England and that this fact does not make her any less of an English, she learned that

she did not have to belong to either or, but she could be both. The latter is, in itself, a type of “self recognition and actualization” projecting the last of the aspects of the Bildungsroman.

It appeared very strongly in the third short story “Returning”, where Aisha came back as a free independent woman, a teacher who had learned her life lessons and was then ready to teach others, that she had reached a self fulfillment and recognition maintained an awareness of who she was and where she comes from and the limitless possibilities of what she can be. All the stated above appeared in bold letters through interpreting the red car as a symbolic evidence of her freedom.

In respect to the judgment and interpretation of the readers, the study remains open to critique and refinement in light of constant actualization of thought and information.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The term was widely disputed in postcolonial theory, it commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms of identity within the contact zone produced by colonization

<sup>ii</sup> A term coined by Edward Said referring to a method of analysis implemented in colonial and postcolonial studies, considering the two points of views of both the colonizer and the colonized.

<sup>iii</sup> The term is generally defined as “seeing oneself in the other” and “encompassing more than one culture” For further information see Ellen Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein, “In Place of a Conclusion: Transcultural Dialogue”, *Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication* ed. Ellen Berry and Mikhail N. Epstein (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999) 312.

<sup>iv</sup> It refers to dealing with women as inferiors in a male dominant past and present and as strangers and foreigners in a cross-cultural context.

<sup>v</sup> The American psychologist popularized Kurt Goldstein’s conception of self-actualization and defined it as the fulfillment of one’s greatest potential.

<sup>vi</sup> Abdul Jan Muhamed points out, there are certain writers that occupy a so-called ‘border position’ (97), located between two cultures, the same concept is referred to by Edward Said as “Contrapuntal” where Two cultures (more specifically) are juxtaposed. See D’Alessandro “The Strathden and the negotiation and the East-West Trajectory” (2007).

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## المخلص

يخضع كل فرد لتغييرات كثيرة خلال عملية النضج من الطفولة إلى البلوغ ، تماما مثل ما حدث مع 'عائشة' البطلة الرئيسية للقصص القصيرة الثلاثة المتضمنة في مجموعة القصص *أنا أفكر فيك* (2007) للكاتبة أهداف سويف. في مجال دراسة الشخصيات، يكمن الشاغل الرئيسي لتقليد (رواية التشكيل) أو (الرواية التربوية)، الذي يتتبع سنوات نمو و تطور البطل من الطفولة إلى البلوغ. و عليه، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل سنوات تطور شخصية وهوية "عائشة" من خلال تحديد العناصر التي تشكل الرواية التربوية حسب دراسات كل من "باكلي" و "الموسى"، و التي تتمثل في الطفولة، الصراع بين الأجيال، المجتمع الأصغر والمجتمع الأكبر، الصراع بين الثقافات المختلفة. حيث يؤدي هذا الأخير إلى أزمة روحية، و تتوصل في نهاية المطاف إلى مصالحة بين الثقافتين وبذلك اكتشاف الذات. و تتم هذه الدراسة في ضوء نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار للتعبير عن سياق الثقافات المتعددة لعائشة، ومفهوم التحليل النفسي لنتبع تطور شخصية هويتها.

## Résumé

L'être humain, tout au long de sa vie, dès la naissance jusqu'à l'âge de maturité, il est à l'abri de subir un ensemble de changements physiques et psychologique. Mettant en exergue le cas d'Aisha la protagoniste principale des trois histoires sélectionné parmi le recueil d'histoires d'Ahdaf Soueif *Je Pense à Toi* (2007). Dans le domaine d'étude de personnages, on met l'accent sur la préoccupation de la tradition du Roman de Formation qui retrace les années qu'un protagoniste a vécu et qui ont forgé sa personnalité de l'enfance jusqu'à l'âge adulte. Cette étude a pour but d'analyser les années de développement de l'identité d'Aisha en indiquant les éléments qui composent un Roman de Formation selon Buckley et Al-Mousa, y compris l'enfance, le conflit des générations, la province et la société. Il s'agit d'un conflit interculturel et spirituel qui aboutit à la fin à une réconciliation de deux cultures et une reconnaissance de soi. En outre, cette étude met en relief la vision postcoloniale pour aborder le contexte interculturel d'Aisha tout en prenant en considération une analyse psychanalytique pour mener au bon port l'étude du développement identitaire de cette protagoniste.