

## **EDITORIAL**

### **A Story of Scholarly Encounters in Language and Literature**

This issue of *Cairo Studies in English* (CSE) appears as the Department of English Language and Literature celebrates its centenary, marking the establishment of Fouad I University (Cairo University) in 1925 and the Faculty of Arts. The Egyptian University was launched on the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 1908, and the opening ceremony was attended by Khedive Abbas and Prince Fouad, the first President of the University. In 1925, it came under government supervision and the direct authority of the Minister of Education.

As we reflect on the history of our department, we pay here specific attention to the scholarship documented in the Department's publications. We have therefore chosen to devote this special issue to sharing and reflecting on a selection of articles published along the years in the Department's two main publications: *Cairo Studies in English* (incepted in 1955) and the *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Comparative Literature* covering a wide range of topics (since 1991).

The emergence of *Cairo Studies in English* marks an important moment in the history of the nationalization of Egyptian universities. Until 1951, only British teachers taught the English curriculum, and Egyptian teachers taught Arabic subjects. By 1949, the department was joined by Egyptian PhD holders in English Literature, but they were prevented from teaching in the department and were sent elsewhere to teach (Al-Ayouty, Interview; and Moussa, Interview). When Taha Hussein, Dean of the Faculty of Arts, became Minister of Education, he found out that there were Egyptian PhD holders prevented from teaching in the department, "he decided in 1951 to terminate the foreigners' contracts and replace them with Egyptian faculty members (Al-Ayouty, Interview).

The first volume was published, as *The Annual Bulletin of English Studies* in 1955, soon after the 23 July 1952 Revolution against the monarchy and the British occupation, and yet before the evacuation of the British colonial forces from Egypt in 1956. Although it was described as an "annual bulletin", a second volume did not appear in 1956. This was probably due to an extended period of anti-colonial political turmoil, taking the form of the nationalization of academic institutions; in this case, the Department of English, compared by Amin Al-Ayouty to the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956.

The Department revived its publication by issuing *Cairo Studies in English* in 1959 (edited by Magdi Wahba). In his Editorial Note, Magdi Wahba explained the changes in the following:

After an absence of four years, the *Annual Bulletin of English Studies* feels that its name has been singularly inappropriate. The new name which the old *Bulletin* has adopted is *Cairo Studies in English* in the hope that this will serve the dual purpose of situating the publication geographically and avoiding all reference to a periodicity that it may find itself unable to sustain. (n.p.)

The Department Library (the Magdi Wahba Library) holds copies of the 1955 and 1959 volumes, followed by the 1981 volume entitled *Centenary Essays on George Eliot* and subtitled “Supplement to *Cairo Studies in English*”, collected by Magdi Wahba. The archives of the Egyptian Academy of Scientific Research maintain that *Cairo Studies in English* was catalogued in 1970 upon receiving an ISSN (issued in France, before there was an ISSN issuing body in Egypt), and has been catalogued since the 1960s with the Library of Congress.

After another extended “absence”, *Cairo Studies in English* was issued again in 1990, with the publication of *Cairo Studies in English – a Special Issue in Honour of Magdi Wahba*. In her Foreword, Hoda Gindi, the editor of the volume, briefly recounted the history of *Cairo Studies in English* and asserted the plan to revive it, stating the following:

It is more than fitting, it is right, that the first issue of the resurrected *Cairo Studies in English* should be a volume in honour of Magdi Wahba, the founder of the journal and its longtime editor. It was Magdi Wahba’s vision and inspiration that brought about the publication of the first, and for some time, the only journal devoted to English academic studies in Egypt, the *Annual Bulletin of English Studies*, the precursor of *Cairo Studies in English* ... Other periodicals there had been, but those were only concerned with creative writing and were edited by British nationals, but the *Annual Bulletin of English Studies* was original in its conception because it provided a forum for scholarly articles and was, moreover, edited by an Egyptian. (n.p.)

Still, *Cairo Studies in English* continued being published irregularly throughout the years, taking the form of an occasional volume, a festschrift or a book. In 2016, the Department Council adopted a *Cairo Studies in English* publication plan, which has led to the regular publication of the

journal, out of a commitment to ensure its continuity and visibility. With the publication of the 2017 volume on “Language, Literature and the Arts,” *Cairo Studies in English* went online, with the added descriptive subtitle: *Journal of Research in Literature, Linguistics and Translation Studies*, hosted by the official national online publisher, the Egyptian Knowledge Bank. (A whole list of the online-published volumes is available in the appendix at the end of this issue.)

This memorial issue is entitled “Scholarly Encounters in Language and Literature” and is divided into four sections<sup>1</sup>. First, we begin with “CSE in History” where we include three articles marking three milestones in the history of the journal as an intended periodical, a series of special issues, and an occasional festschrift. Second, we provide a selection of keynote addresses delivered at various editions of the Department’s international symposium on comparative literature, since its first round in 1989 until 2015. Third, we include a section with symposium contributions in Arabic delivered as keynote speeches and panel interventions. Fourth, though not directly related to CSE or the Symposium, we are including two personal narratives about the history of the Department recorded with two prominent figures from the first generation of Egyptian faculty members of our Department: Professor Fatma Moussa and Professor Amin Al-Ayouty. After we completed our selection of articles for publication, we asked colleagues to write a short foreword to each entry in order to highlight the key issues as well as reflect on the relevance of the topic dealt with, then and now.

Our selection of articles and speeches and interviews was guided by our aim to shed light on how English Studies developed and was potentially transformed after the departure of the British founders in 1951. Both the issues of *CSE* and the proceedings of the conferences held at the department constitute a valuable record of the process of decolonization of the department and the discipline. Our understanding of decolonization does not mean a total rejection or break from western thought, but a critical engagement with its assumptions and epistemes from a position grounded in our histories and intellectual legacies<sup>2</sup>. The question about the colonial burden of English Studies and its various manifestations is a question that continues to be debated and addressed. It is the topic of our upcoming symposium in November 2025 entitled “A Century of English Studies in the Global South:

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<sup>1</sup> In recognition of the historical dimension of the articles included in this memorial issue, we have maintained most of the stylistic and citation methods used in the original articles. These aspects in themselves reflect changes that take place along the years.

<sup>2</sup> A study of the journey of English Studies in Departments of English in Egypt is a much larger project.

Impact on Scholarship and Society.” It was the subject of a keynote address by Terry Eagleton, “The End of English?” delivered at our first International Symposium on Comparative Literature in 1989.

In fact, reflections and critical engagements with the meaning and implications of being an academic specialized in English studies is a recurrent theme and concern. Radwa Ashour reflects on the link or relation between a department of English in Cairo and the social and political realities of Egypt in a poetic intervention entitled “What is the English for ‘Karawan’?” (karawan is Arabic for curlew). She found the boundary between the classroom and the outside world comparable to the position of being in-between cultures, and similar to the identitarian dilemma between a fundamentalist approach to tradition and a westernized modernity. Abdel Wahab Elmessiri traces his intellectual journey that takes him from Damanhur, a small city in Egypt, to a PhD student in Rutgers University in the US. His journey and positionality as an Arab intellectual lead him to reject the “new critical” approach to literature that advocated for the autonomy of the work of art which he found too limiting and not appreciative of the immersive power of art in the world. He was also very critical of structuralism in favor of a “value-oriented humanistic literature”. Both Amin Al-Ayouty and Fatma Moussa who belong to the first generation of Egyptian academics, recount the history of the department while reflecting on their positionality as mediators between two cultures.

A glimpse of the topics and themes tackled in this issue is indicative of the interests and contributions of our department. Magdi Wahba’s revival of the memory of a forgotten feminist writer, Mary Hays, as early as 1951, is nothing short of a prediction of one of the most important research directions in the department, i.e. research in feminist theory and feminist approaches. Hoda Gindi’s insightful analysis of Henry James’s assessment of George Eliot’s work was prompted, as she tells us in the foreword, by James’s ability as a critic to “put aside his own views on the ‘Art of Fiction’ and recognize Eliot’s great achievements.” American literature was later integrated in the curricula. In an article entitled “Egypt in the Eyes of the Other,” Amina Rachid examines the work of three writers who wrote about their experiences in Egypt: Lawrence Durrell, Michele Butor, and Giuseppe Ungaretti. Her critical approach to the politics of representation illuminates the differences between the three writers in their relation and perception of the ‘other’.

Arabic language and literature figure prominently in the department, always from a comparative perspective. Latifa Al-Zayyat, Professor of English Literature and renowned writer, contemplates her intellectual and political coming of age in the first half of the twentieth century leading to the publication of her first novel in 1960. This was a period that saw the rise of a

liberal cultural elite who mastered western languages and adopted western literary genres, always adding local dimension. She acknowledges the formative influence of modern Arab writers on her journey as a writer, despite disagreeing with some of their choices and ideological leanings. Arabic language is the focus of Shukri Ayyad's keynote about the role of literature in the modernization of language. Mohamed Enani's keynote about Arabic as an international language engages critically with Arab grammarians and language specialists using insights from modern linguistics. Nehad Selaiha, prominent theatre critic, highlights the importance and impact of the movement of independent theatre in Egypt championed by young groups that operate outside the patronage of state cultural institutions. Egyptian theatre, particularly diasporic Egyptian theatre, was also the focus of Marvin Carlson's keynote in 2009.

The function and meaning of literature in a world beset with wars and conflict is a recurrent theme. Edwar El Kharrat, prominent Egyptian writer, attempts to respond to a question about the value or feasibility of literature in difficult times. He argues that a balance between hope and despair is a mark of an aesthetically valuable work of art. Bill Ashcroft, speaking in 2012 in the aftermath of a wave of revolutions that swept the Arab world, emphasizes the importance of the creative spirit to combat despair and imagine better futures. Palestine as a universal living symbol of resistance to colonial aggression surfaces in many interventions. Patrick Williams rightly notes that at a theoretical level, "Palestine remains the great unexplained absence from postcolonial theory." He proceeds to speculate on the role of the intellectual or resistance poet or artist by focusing on three Palestinian icons of resistance: Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish and Naji Al-Ali. Dennis Brutus, South African national who was jailed during the apartheid era, makes a strong case for the responsibility of intellectuals and activists to speak truth to power, and to counter hegemonic institutions and political systems.

The issue testifies to the stellar lineup of speakers and participants in our comparative literature symposia and CSE. Edward Said, Catherine Belsey, Kenneth Pike, Bill Ashcroft, Radwa Ashour, to name only a few, shared valuable insights from their scholarship and their experiences as engaged academics cognizant of global challenges and conscious of their responsibility as intellectuals towards their students and their societies.

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***Acknowledgements:** Most of the articles included in this issue (1955-2015) were selected from old print editions, and therefore required retyping, conversion from hardcopies to softcopies, and a great deal of proofreading. We wish to thank our colleagues Dr. Heba Selim Aziz, Ms. Marianne Nabil, and Ms. Aya El-Shafei for their*

*help at different stages of our work on this issue. We wish, of course, to acknowledge the efforts of the editorial assistants, Dr. Fatima Elzahraa Ramy and Ms. Sarah Galal for their revisions of the first drafts; to the managing editors of this issue, Dr. Ahmed Elshamy and Dr. Amira Fawzi for their work on the final manuscript; and to Dr. Muhammad Kamal for the online publishing stage. Finally, we extend our thanks to all our colleagues, who took part in writing the forewords to the articles and reviewing them; and last but not least, we wish to express our appreciation to Professor Heba El-Abbadi for her kind help at various stages of work on this issue.*

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*Cairo Studies in English* – 2025(1). <https://cse.journals.ekb.eg/>