

My Life in the Department

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I joined the Department of English, Fouad I University (Cairo University) in 1947, having been introduced to English literature during my secondary school education and inspired by my elder brother Yassine Al-Ayouty. At the time, Egypt was under British “occupation”, and so all our professors were British. Bryn Davis was the Head of Department, and among our professors there was Robert Liddell who wrote a book on the art of the Novel. We also had Mr. Lings, who he taught us English Life and Thought, which is the equivalent of today’s Culture and Civilization. Having converted to Islam, his lectures were interesting because of his comparative approach. There were four main subjects taught at the Department at the time: Novel, Poetry, Drama, English Life and Thought, in addition to Latin, French and Arabic. Latin was very useful because it brought to our attention the roots of various words in English, such as for example: date and data from the Latin word datum. Our only Egyptian professors were those teaching us the course on Arabic, which included two components: translation taught by Dr. Saheir El-Qalamawi and literature taught by Dr. Hamza each throughout one whole academic year. Saheir El-Qalamawi, being fluent in both English and Arabic, was a great teacher of translation; while I remember that Dr. Hamza helped me develop the skill of writing critical essays in Arabic.

There were around 50 students in my class, with a total of around 200 in the Department. The whole ground floor of the building, with all its rooms, belonged to the Department of English. So the large groups were classrooms, while the smaller rooms (where we now have administration offices) were professors’ offices. The Head of Department’s office was the first room to the left next to the stairs leading to the History Department, while our room, the junior assistants’ room was the small one further up the corridor opposite the current Head of Department’s office. The furthest section at the other end of the corridor hosted the famous Faculty of Arts Cafeteria. We had classes in the mornings, and there was an electric bell that used to go off at the hour (the beginning of class) and ten minutes to the hour (end of class). We used to get

* This essay was developed from an interview/conversation between academic, critic, novelist, and translator, Amin Al-Ayouty, and professor Hoda Gindi (held in 2015). The interview (conducted in a mixture of English and Arabic) was attended by Hala Kamal and recorded by Dalia Ebeid. The essay was written by Hala Kamal, edited by Hoda Gindi and approved by Amin Al-Ayouty; it was then printed in the booklet marking the 90th Anniversary of the Department of English Language and Literature (celebrated in December 2015).

our reading list before the summer break, so as to spend the summer reading for the following year. All courses were extended throughout the year, with one year's work subject, and once the academic year started we were expected to submit one research paper per month for every course. So, you would see students moving between their department buildings and the old Central Library opposite our Department, in addition to the British Council Library and the American Cultural Center Library. We took our studies very seriously, and I remember that when I joined the Department I even developed my own dictionary, or rather a glossary of new words and terms.

At the end of my last year, I witnessed an important turning point in the history of our Department. By then Yassine Al-Ayouty, Rashad Rushdi and Louis Awad were the first Egyptian PhD holders who received their degrees in England and came back to teach at the Department. Yassine Al-Ayouty was the first Egyptian PhD holder at our Department (June 1950), followed by Rashad Rushdi (December 1950). They were then followed by Louis Awad and Magdi Wahba. But the British prevented Egyptians from teaching at the Department, and sent them to teach English elsewhere. Taha Hussein, being the Dean of the Faculty of Arts realized that there were Egyptian PhD holders prevented from teaching in their department, so when he became Minister of Education, he decided in 1951 to terminate the foreigners' contracts and replace them with Egyptian faculty members. There were also rumours that some professors were in the British secret service, and that they were planted in Egypt as university teachers, particularly during World War II, but not that I knew of any during my undergraduate years. Anyway, the British were soon forced to leave, and Rashad Rushdi became the first Egyptian Head of the Department of English in September/October 1951. At more or less the same time, Angele Botros Samaan, Fatma Moussa, Fayez Iskandar, Aziz Soliman and Fakhry Kostandi, who were back with a Diploma in Education from the University of Exeter. Rashad Rushdi appointed them at the Department and they all shared the load of teaching. Their role in running the Department at that time is to my mind equivalent to that of the Suez Canal guides who ran the Canal after Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956!

The termination of the British professors' contracts was done in a rather brutal way – they went to their offices one day to find the termination of their contract decisions on their desks, ordering them to leave the country at once! I remember when I was once in London collecting material for my thesis, I ran into one of them, Holloway. His reaction to my friendly greeting was "What are you doing in the enemy country?" When I explained that I was working on my thesis topic, he responded saying that it had already been done! I was devastated, and did a lot of research trying to find the source, but it then turned out that my topic had not been done before, and that he just said so to spite me!

One of the things the Egyptians did upon taking over the Department was to establish the MA degree. I graduated in 1951, so I was among the first to enroll in the Department of English MA Programme. There were one or two courses to take, then we had to choose a topic for the MA thesis. Rashad Rushdi and Fatma Mousa had done their PhDs on Travel Literature, Magdi Wahba was specialized in Middle English, but I was fascinated by D.H. Lawrence, so I worked on Lawrence.

I was not at the Department during Nasser's Purge, when he dismissed his political opponents from public post, particularly the communists and Muslim Brothers (known then as the Muslim Brethren); but we all heard about the removal of Louis Awad who was dismissed from university for being a communist. There were those such as Mahmoud Amin El-Alem, at the Department of Philosophy, who was reduced to a clerk in the library archives, and someone else was transferred as an employee to the Bata shoe shops!

Following my graduation in 1951, I was not appointed at the Department, so I studied for my MA and spent some time teaching in secondary schools in Egypt then in Libya. I spent 5 years doing my MA, until I received the degree in 1957. I received my certificate, however, from Gamal Abdel-Nasser, during the first Celebration of Academic Achievement held at Cairo University in 1958 (I even have a photograph of Nasser handing me my certificate). I was only appointed at the Department after receiving my MA degree, and I taught for a year (1959-1960), before leaving to the University of Leeds, in England, to do my PhD. I was not the only junior assistant at the time, there were others appointed around the same time such as Shawky El-Sokkary (a lecturer), Karam (language instructor), and Amin Rofael who was a very nice person. During this year I remember teaching at the Departments of Journalism, Arabic and Psychology. We did not teach language the way things are today, but we used to teach English literature. For instance, when I taught at the Department of Journalism, I did *A Doll's House*; Sakina Fouad was one of my students then. I also taught Nasr Abou-Zeid at a point, and he later on offered me a signed copy of his controversial book.

The Department offered a very high standard of education, and our graduates were trained to work as teachers, translators and even creative writers. I did some translation, but I also wrote several novels – five novels all in all. I started writing my first novel, *Al-samt wal-sada* (Silence and Echo) in the 1960s while I was doing my PhD in England. I finished it after the 1967 war, and it was partly about the war, and mainly about the fear that prevailed during Nasser's time. Then I wrote *Layali al-shams* (Sun Nights) which was published in the 1970s, but the one I really liked and consider a novel proper is *Laylat al-tair al-ghareeb* (The Stranger Bird's Night), and *Nagmat al-fagr la tudfi* (The Dawn Star Gives No Warmth) – both published in the 1980s. I think that a critic once wrote that it had echoes of Lawrence; I was very fond

of Lawrence, so I might have been influenced by his style, but it was not conscious imitation. My last novel, however, was published in 2000, and was entitled *Khamriyya*.

I think our study of English, Latin, French and Arabic literatures at the Department of English offered us the necessary intellectual foundations for careers in education, translation, literary criticism and creative writing.