Where Angels Fear To Tread

Fatma Moussa[*]

Foreword by Hoda Elsadda[**]

Fatma Moussa (1927-2007) belongs to the first generation of Egyptians appointed in the department of English at Cairo University. She obtained her PhD in English Language and Literature in 1957 from Westfield College, University of London. She was a renowned critic of Arabic and English literature. She was also a translator and translated a number of Shakespeare's plays into Arabic as well as several of Naguib Mahfouz's novels into English.

Moussa joined the department as a student in 1944-1948 and despite achieving academic excellence, she was not appointed upon graduation on the pretext that she was a woman. She never accepted this excuse as she was eventually offered a position in 1951 and "nobody seemed to object to my being a woman" then. In 1951, with the spread of a revolutionary wave against British colonialism, all contracts of the English staff were terminated, and the department was Egyptianized, and both men and women were appointed to teach in the department.

In her keynote address she reflects on her experience in the department of English at Cairo University against the backdrop of social and political transformations in Egypt: "our lives, our careers, and I suppose our salvation, are constantly determined by political action." She recalls the struggle for independence in the thirties and forties, training camps of resistance fighters, the fidaiyeen, the violence of colonial authorities, and the similarities between colonial oppression in Egypt before independence, and in Palestine, which has continued into the 21st century.

In an oral history interview conducted in 2003[***]*, her life narrative about her family, her formative years at school and at university and later as a member of staff in the department of English, is also a narrative about life in Egypt in the twentieth century. At school she met and was taught by strong Egyptian women, trailblazers in their own fields, who inspired her and impacted her future. She remembers the public libraries where she spent her childhood reading Arabic and English literature. She recalls the names of her British teachers at university: P.H Newby, Robert Liddell, Brian Davis. She recalls Magdi Wahba (1925-1991) who founded and funded Cairo*

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[*] Keynote speech delivered at the Fifth International Symposium on Comparative Literature (1998); published in the Symposium Proceedings: *Translation*, eds. Mohamed Enani and Mohamed Abdel Aatty, Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University (1999), pp. 1-6.

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[***] An interview with Fatma Moussa was conducted by Hoda Elsadda in 2003 as part of the oral history archive housed at the Women and Memory Forum (www.wmf.org.eg). The interview is in Arabic and is published in this issue of *CSE*.

Bulletin, which became Cairo Studies in English. She recalls the academic/political tussles of Rashad Rushdy, the first Egyptian to join the department of English after obtaining a doctorate from Leeds University, with leftist/revolutionary academics in the department of Arabic. She speaks proudly about her colleagues in the department, Rashad Rushdy (1912-1983), Louis Awad (1915-1990), Angele Botros Samaan (1923-2011), (Mohamed Enani (1939-2023), Samir Sarhan (1942-2006) and Abdel Aziz Hammouda (1937-2006), who made significant contributions to the cultural scene in Egypt. Her reflections on various historical junctures in the history of the department of English provides invaluable insights into the development of English studies in the global south.

She married Mustafa Soueif who founded the department of psychology at Cairo University. She had three children: Ahdaf, Laila and Alaa. When asked what she was most proud of, her first response was: my three children. She was also proud that she was always independent and did not follow fashionable trends. She added: "my real achievement is that I was able to be both a mother and a housewife in parallel to my study and interest in world literature and my contribution to world thought. If you look at my kitchen you will find a large table with piles of papers… I was always skeptical of people who thought that domestic happiness and motherhood constitute obstacles to [women's] achievements."

Where Angels Fear To Tread
Fatma Moussa (1999)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first share with you that warm sense of gratification I had, when I arrived at the entrance to the Department and saw that banner hanging over the lintel announcing an International Conference on Translation in the Department of English. Fifty years ago last June, I graduated from this Department with a first class honours degree. I was the only honours student in the class of 48 but there was no place for me in the Department.

A young newcomer, a novice really who had just joined the staff of the Department that year had taken it for granted that I would be given a job as a TA or demonstrator, but the Head of the Department, a Welsh man of whom I was really fond, had put the green voice right. No, he said, the Egyptian University would not approve the appointment of a woman. The Hons. Class of 48 had two men besides two women, but I suppose if challenged, the Professor could have said, "… they are Copts and I already have two Copts among the junior staff, I don't want to be accused of favouring Christians". There had been a number of Muslim men in the Hons. Classes of 46 & 45, but they had all gone on to the careers sign posted for the graduates of this Department, a two year diploma of education, then teaching English in secondary schools which is what most of the graduates did. A few got good

jobs with foreign companies or were employed in the Egyptian Broadcasting service.

Of course Mr. Smith, the new comer who obviously did not know what he was stepping on, did not pursue the question that far. He just relayed the conversation to my Egyptian tutor, Louis Awad , who in turn relayed it to me. When I retorted that there was Suheir al-Qalamawi, she was teaching us translation! His reply was, "But she is in the Arabic Department. Taha Hussein is her Professor; she has his backing! Do you have access to Taha Hussein?" I did not and you had to have backing (wasta) for every kind of job. There was no given right to a first class honours graduate to anything. The fact was that there was no place for us Egyptians in this Department, except for a few classes and under really humiliating conditions!

And there was no place for Arabic literature. Students could join the Department who had studied in foreign schools and got foreign secondary school certificates. They were just required to pass an "equivalence" examination in Arabic, before they were allowed to graduate, which was not taken very seriously; everyone seemed to pass it in the end. We did four years of Latin, two or three years of French but only one year of Arabic in the first year when we did general Humanities courses. We later did translation for a year; I remember the classes of translation into Arabic well for Suheir al-Qalamawi was our tutor, but I do not remember doing any translation into English, but I remember that Qalamawi did not much like our class. Some students had very poor Arabic and the passages chosen for translation must have been pretty difficult; I remember being set to translate some lines from Wordsworth which I must have done correctly, but horribly! Those were the late Forties before the rise of "theories of translation" and things were bound to change. They did change but not in the course of normal gradation. We came in on the crest of a revolution, not the July Revolution of 1952, but the real revolution with which the land was boiling since the end of World War II, convulsions of which were rocking the status quo and reverberating here in our midst, in the University. It is curious to note how our lives, our careers, and I suppose our salvation, are constantly determined by political action. The Egyptian cause of Independence which had been temporarily put to rest during the Second World War was again alive and kindling in 1945 with constant clashing between Egyptian demonstrators and British forces stationed in Cairo, Alexandria and other cities as well as a huge base in the Canal zone. Few people now remember the continuous revolutionary action going on in the country 1946-1952, with our university at the centre of it all. After the "incident" on Abbas Bridge in February 1946 (more generally described as "massacre"), the Prime Minister, the notorious Ismail Sidqy announced on radio that the University would be closed until further notice, because "a criminal mob had infiltrated the ranks of green students! I remember the

university was more often closed then open during my last two years as an undergraduate.

Successive ministries failed to get any concessions from the British apart from withdrawing their forces from the cities and concentrating them in the Suez Canal zone. A general election was called and the *Wafd* Party came in on a thumping majority in 1949. When Nahhas Pasha failed to get the British to negotiate new terms for the 1936 Treaty, at the basis of Anglo Egyptian relations at the time, members of Parliament called for its abrogation. Nahhas Pasha responded in October 1951, declaring the Treaty nil and void, from his read in Parliament. It was a reign for the people's war on the forces of occupation. Men working in the Allied camps on the borders of the Suez Canal quit their jobs and converged on Cairo seeking jobs or volunteering for resistance action. Military training camps were sprouting all round the cities, in the desert in distant fields and young *fidaiyeen* were converging on with members of the armed forces in civilian directing them. Every day there was news of British "authorities" against civilians, house searches, stopping of vehicles, the razing to the ground of a village in revenge for giving refuge or cover to the *fidaiyeen*. When you hear of Israeli actions among Palestinians, it all comes back to mind.

Every new incident rocked the demonstrating students with anger, calling for open armed resistance. The university authorities, fearing for the lives of the British teachers, asked all faculty of British nationality to stay home for a while until things got quieter, which they did not. At that time, *I* lived during working hours in the little office adjoining this amphitheatre. It had a little library of rare editions and a table and was supposed to be working on my MA thesis. I was on a scholarship: LE 10 a month, only 2 pounds less than my salary as a primary school teacher, from which I had made my escape a few months before. Dr. Rashad Rushdy had arrived in the Department with a Ph.D. in English from the University of Leeds, probably the first in the Arab World. He had studied in Leeds at his own expense, for his family was well off. The Dean persuaded Mr. Bryn-Davies, the Chairman of the Department to appoint Rushdy on the staff which the man could not refuse but he assigned him to teach only non-specialists. Rushdy's English was excellent; his accent was faultless, miles removed from the malevolently satiric image Robert Liddell gave him in *The Rivers of Babylon* (1959). He wrote short stories and translated Ibsen and Gogol for radio and the theatre. He was obviously ambitious and did not lack daring - or scheming as many would say. Louis Awad introduced me to him, and he offered to look at my work. He was surprised at the wide scope of the subject I had chosen as advised by Louis Awad and approved by my supervisor, a subject I have not finished to this day! He gave me the first useful advice on the MA I had received, but this was soon interrupted by the political situation coming to a head in the university.

When the storm broke over the heads of the English staff in October 1951, Rushdy came to me and asked if I would like to teach in the Department. Of course I would! He knew Insaf al-Masry, the Hons. Graduate of class 1949; she was working in the English broadcasting service. She quit and joined us. There was Amin Rufail, a very polite but constantly depressed member of the Department. Rushdy later called in other Egyptians teaching English in various colleges, but at this early juncture he started with this small bunch of "chosen few", of whom he was absolutely sure. He went to the Dean with a skeleton timetable covering all courses with reduced hours, and combining non-specialist classes that were set in the same books. The English had been obliviously optimistic; we had to teach Shakespeare and Jane Austen to students of the History Department, but we did it and the occasional use of Arabic came in very useful.

Those were heady days and we worked with "revolutionary fervor" as one might say. I must have taught three or four different Shakespeare plays that year and I often had to remind the students that neither Shakespeare nor Jane Austen were our enemies (though Edward Said may have something different to say on the subject). Our enemies were the forces in Ismailia and Port Said and the politicians in London. When some student drew a swastika in chalk on the door of Room 19, I nearly blew my top.

We had been teaching for some weeks when the contracts of all British staff in the University were terminated in the last week of December 1951.I was really sorry to see my old professor go. Years later Magdi Wahba told me that Bryn-Davis mentioned my name in an article he wrote as one of the brightest graduates of the Department, who, unfortunately could not be taken on as a member of staff because she was a woman! Actually, nobody seemed to object to my being a woman when I was appointed in January 1952 and Insaf al-Masry soon followed as well as many others: Magdi, Saad Gamal, Angele, Safia Rabi', Fakhri, etc.

Someone could have looked at the Department and said, "I see the future and it works!" It was the Department of English with a new face; two practical courses of study were soon introduced: translation and criticism in all four years. Later we started a graduate Diploma in Translation. Our department was the model for new departments in the newly created universities. Older graduates of the Department had long been working in translation: M. Habib, Z. Khurshid, Uthman Nuwaya and many others who carried the burden of the growing programs of translation financed by the state, but their work was independent of the Department.

The new face of our department active participation in the creative as well as the critical work going around: seminars, discussion groups and literary contests were part of extracurricular activities in the university. The English Department was for the first time actively involved in the critical scene with

many causalities naturally in the clashes between Rushdy and his "disciples" and advocates of socialist realism adopted mainly by younger members of the Arabic Department and the press at large. Someone should put it all on record, the poets, the dramatists, the short story writers and senior journalists who graduated from this Department as well as the musicians and dancers, actors and directors. The anger of mediocre critics at those upstart crows of the English Department who seemed to "borrow the feathers" of well-established disciplines and shake the work of their letters to the foundation. A well-documented study of criticism of the plays of Rushdy, Enany, Sarhan and Hamouda would provide interesting material on the history of ideas. The work of the dramatists themselves should be studied as a school; I do not know if anyone has attempted such a study, but they have been given a name, the Ph.D. dramatists!

Finally, about translation, which is the theme of this conference, I am afraid that it is here that angels would really fear to tread, where fools are gladly rushing around! Not being an angel, and having been around for quite some time and with all the theories of translation floating and the various workshops we have run at the university and at different institutions, I must admit that I am deeply shocked at the deterioration of the standard of translation in the media and in books submitted for publication in the National Project for Translation, particularly when the culprit is a graduate of the English Department or, which is worse, a member of the staff in one of 16 universities we pride ourselves on, and the younger they are the worse.