GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Afro-Asian Third-Worldism into Global South: The Case of Lotus Journal

By Hala Halim | November 22, 2017

If the received critical wisdom dates the birth of postcolonial theory to 1978 with the publication in New York of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, it is high time that a "pre-postcolonial" be recuperated and critically assessed.[1] I would argue that 1955, when Indonesia hosted the Asian-African Conference (or the Bandung Conference), launches the postcolonial *avant la lettre*. Preceded as it was by several anticolonial assemblies, Bandung was a watershed: it brought face-to-face, and on non-Western grounds, the leaders of newly independent countries, including Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser and India's Jawaharlal Nehru, to promote self-determination, anti-imperialism, world peace, and resistance to racism. The line of descent from Bandung — involving a series of interrelated, mostly overlapping movements, associations, conferences and cultural projects — was decidedly Third-Worldist and anti-Eurocentric (for an account in a political key see Prashad 2007).

One signal trajectory in that lineage, particularly for this antecedent postcolonialism, was the Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Organization (AAPSO), which came to be based in Cairo where it held its first conference in 1957-58. This event led to the conference of Afro-Asian Writers in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in 1958, which passed the resolution to establish a Permanent Bureau of Afro-Asian Writers. The latter was first based in Colombo and then relocated to Cairo in the 1960s (Sa'd al-Din 2004). A principal contribution of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (AAWA) was the issuing, starting in 1968, of a trilingual quarterly journal — until the late 1970s, the Arabic edition was printed in Cairo, the English and French in the German Democratic Republic — later to acquire the name *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings* (see figs. 1, 2, and 3). Available to writers' unions and through subscription to libraries, *Lotus* was also sold in some bookstores in African and Asian countries, according to Nehad Salem, a translator who formerly worked for AAPSO and contributed to the journal (Salem 2017). In the aftermath of the Arab boycott of Egypt following President Anwar Sadat's Peace Treaty with Israel and the assassination of Youssef El-Sebai, secretary-general of AAWA and editor-in-chief of the journal, *Lotus* moved to Beirut. It would eventually relocate to Tunisia, sometime after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In the early 1990s, it was discontinued in part because of the dissolution of the USSR, which had provided much of the funding in the Tunis phase. The Lotus Prize was awarded to such writers as Chinua Achebe, Mahmoud Darwish, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Alex La Guma, Ghassan Kanafani, Agostinho Neto, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Kateb Yacine, several being involved in AAWA or whose work had appeared in the journal (for the Cold War context of the award, see Halim 2012, 569-571).

Fig. 1 Cover of *Afro-Asian Writings*, Arabic edition, vol. 1, issue 1, March 1968

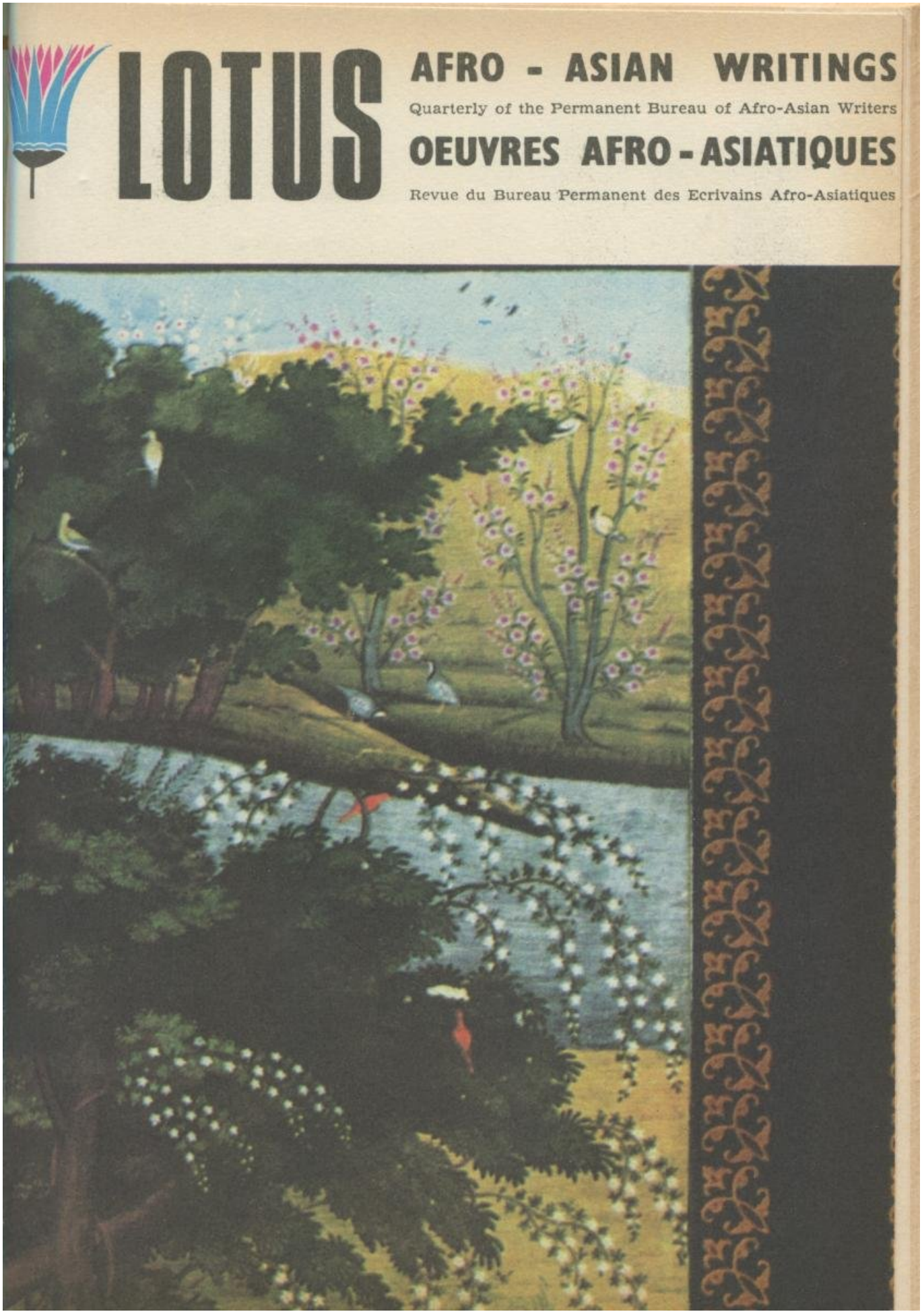

Fig. 2 Cover of *Lotus*, French edition, vol. 2, issue 6, October 1970

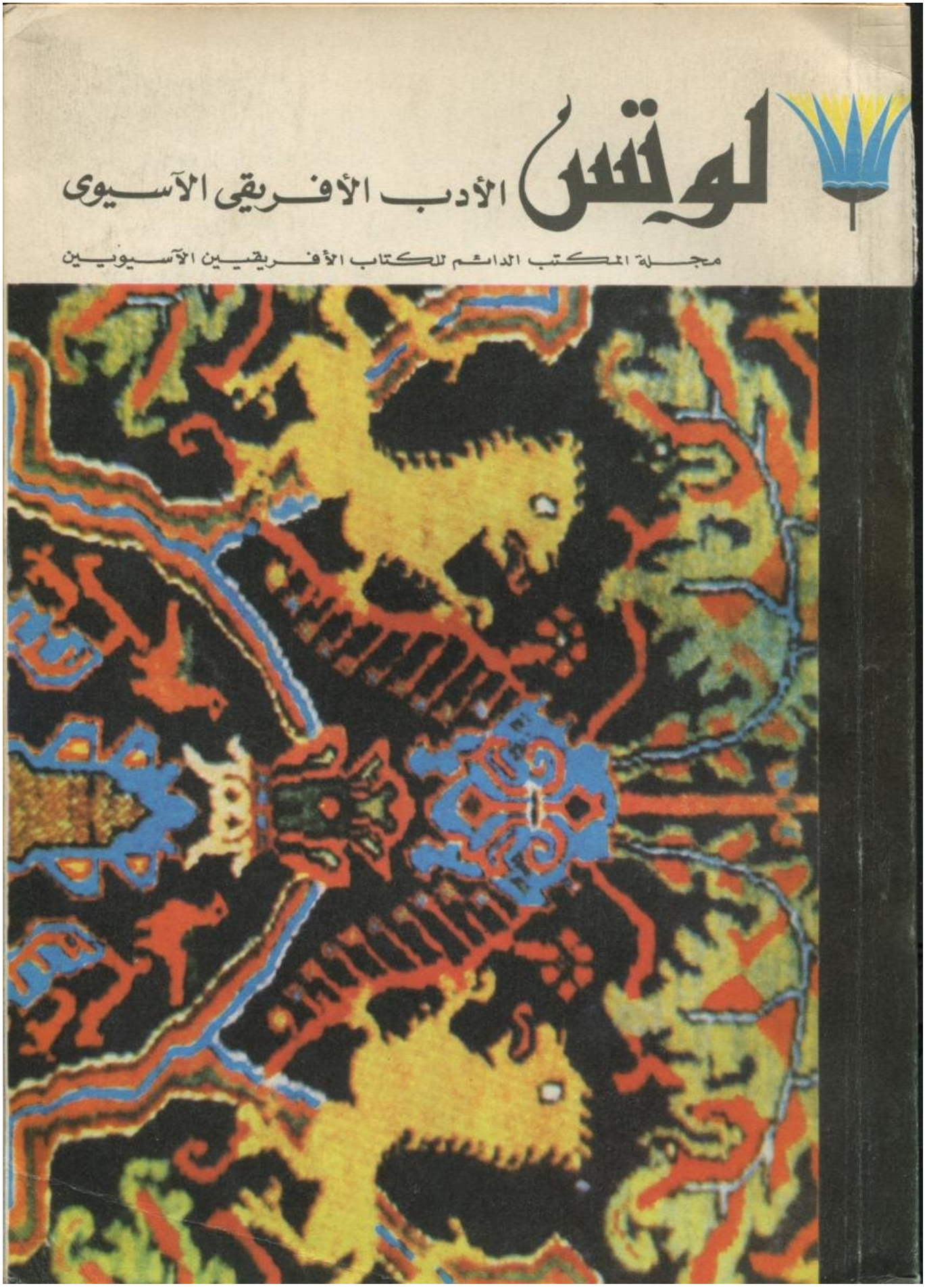

Fig. 3 Cover of *Lotus*, Arabic edition, vol. 3, issue 9, July 1971

As I argue at greater length elsewhere, *Lotus* instantiated the potential, albeit not fully fulfilled, of what today we would call Global South comparatism (Halim 2012). It represented this potential not only by dint of its contributors, but by virtue of the journal's bypassing the Metropole as a forum for literary interchange between postcolonial, Third World intellectuals.

Translation, as practice and as theoretical inquiry, was central to this endeavor. Of the journal's three languages, only Arabic, with a large African and Asian readership, is a language indigenous to the Third World; in some cases, however, a text may have been originally written in a fourth language, e.g.: Japanese, and then translated into English or French and from that into the two other languages. Already a demanding translational production, issuing *Lotus* in another Third World language was not to be. Beyond standard postcolonial debates on language politics, *Lotus* hosted interventions on the question of direct translations between African and Asian languages that would dispense with relay via European languages (Saber 1970 and Singh 1974; Halim 2012, 570-75). Various articles in the "Studies" section, in my view, perform *regards croisés*, or intersecting gazes; i.e.: a text by an intellectual from a given African or Asian country addressing another country's culture(s), sometimes with comparatist references (Iyengar 1972; Halim 2012, 577-78).

It should be conceded that *Lotus* pushed against a strictly Afro-Asian geographical ambit, printing texts from other parts of the Third World or by members of groups in the North with affinities to its project, such as African Americans. However, such inclusions were not systematic. Despite the journal's avowed Third-Worldism and attunement to internationalism, the representation *per se* on *Lotus*' pages did not attain to a full-fledged Global South scope or tricontinentalism, whether specifically with reference to the context of the Tricontinental, or First Solidarity Conference of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America held in Havana in 1966 in which AAPSO participated — construed by Robert J. C. Young as "the founding moment of postcolonial history" — or broadly speaking (Young 2001, 5; Lee 2010; Halim 2012, 581-82). This limitation was in part a function of an Egyptian-Soviet alliance, with the larger Cold War context adversely affecting and eventually derailing the Afro-Asian project. Another shortcoming was that the journal did not make room for autocritique or address the internal failings of the Afro-Asian nation-states.

One fruitful avenue for future research in the pages of *Lotus* that I would propose is the thematics of solidarity evinced in the literary texts published by the journal, which was inscribed in the moment of liberation movements and "commitment"; indeed it served as a forum for a signal intervention on "resistance literature" by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's work on the subject (Halim 2012, 572). For historically-oriented research, *Lotus* is also a valuable resource of AAWA "grey literature," and by extension discourses at play within Third-Worldism, not least because selections of the association's conference proceedings, otherwise not readily available, were printed in the journal.

For years after its bureau moved back to Cairo, AAWA mooted the idea of relaunching the journal: in 2006 it held an international meeting in preparation for reviving both *Lotus* and the association, the latter to be reconceptualized as an association for the Global South that would include Latin America (Labib 2011; Halim 2012, 566). Lack of funding, as well as issues with offices, caused delays. It was not until winter 2016 that AAWA revived *Lotus*, a second issue having been published in 2017 (see figs. 4, 5, 6, and 7).

Fig. 4 Relaunched *Lotus*, Arabic cover, issue no. 1, 2016

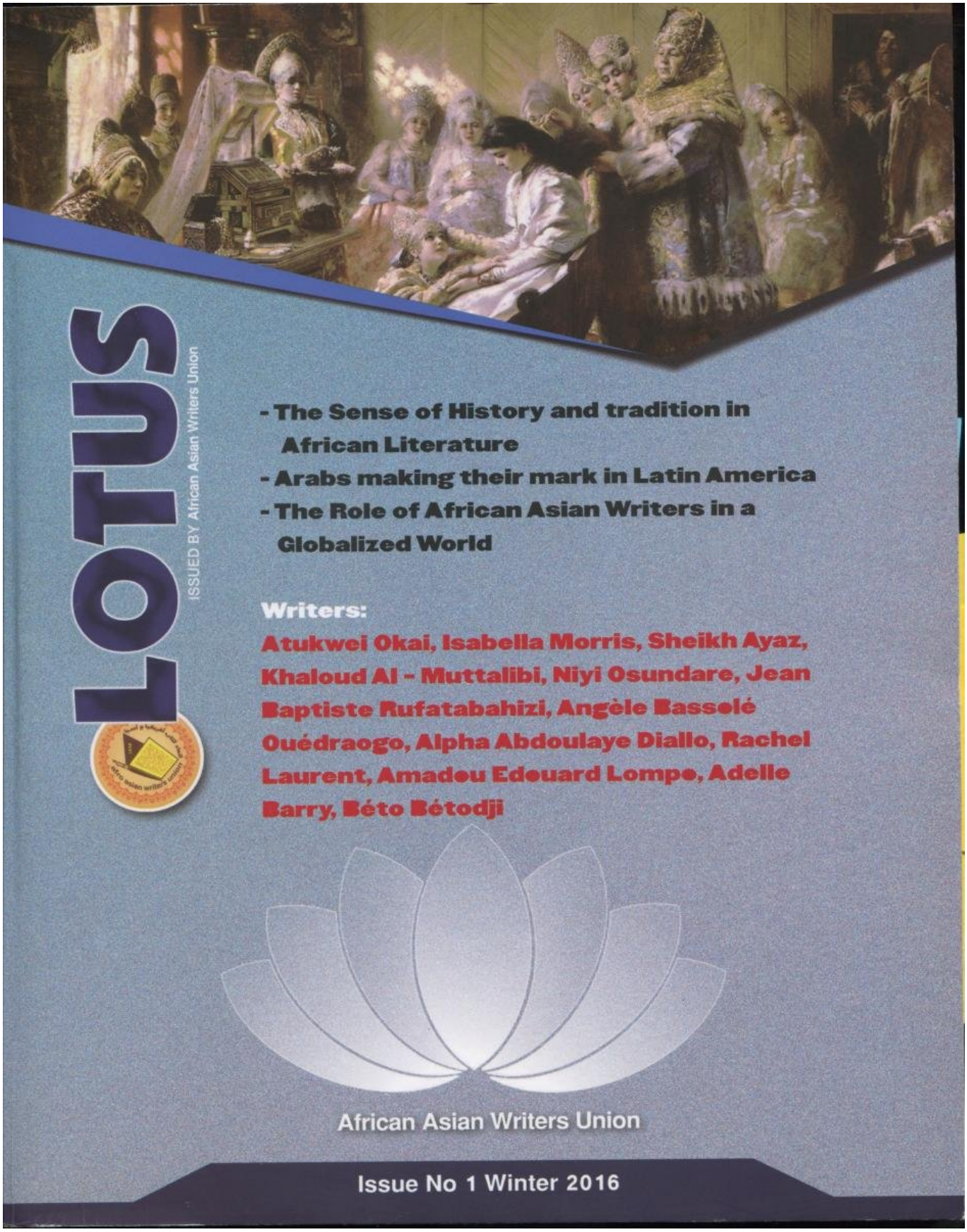

Fig. 5 Relaunched *Lotus*, English cover, issue no. 1, 2016

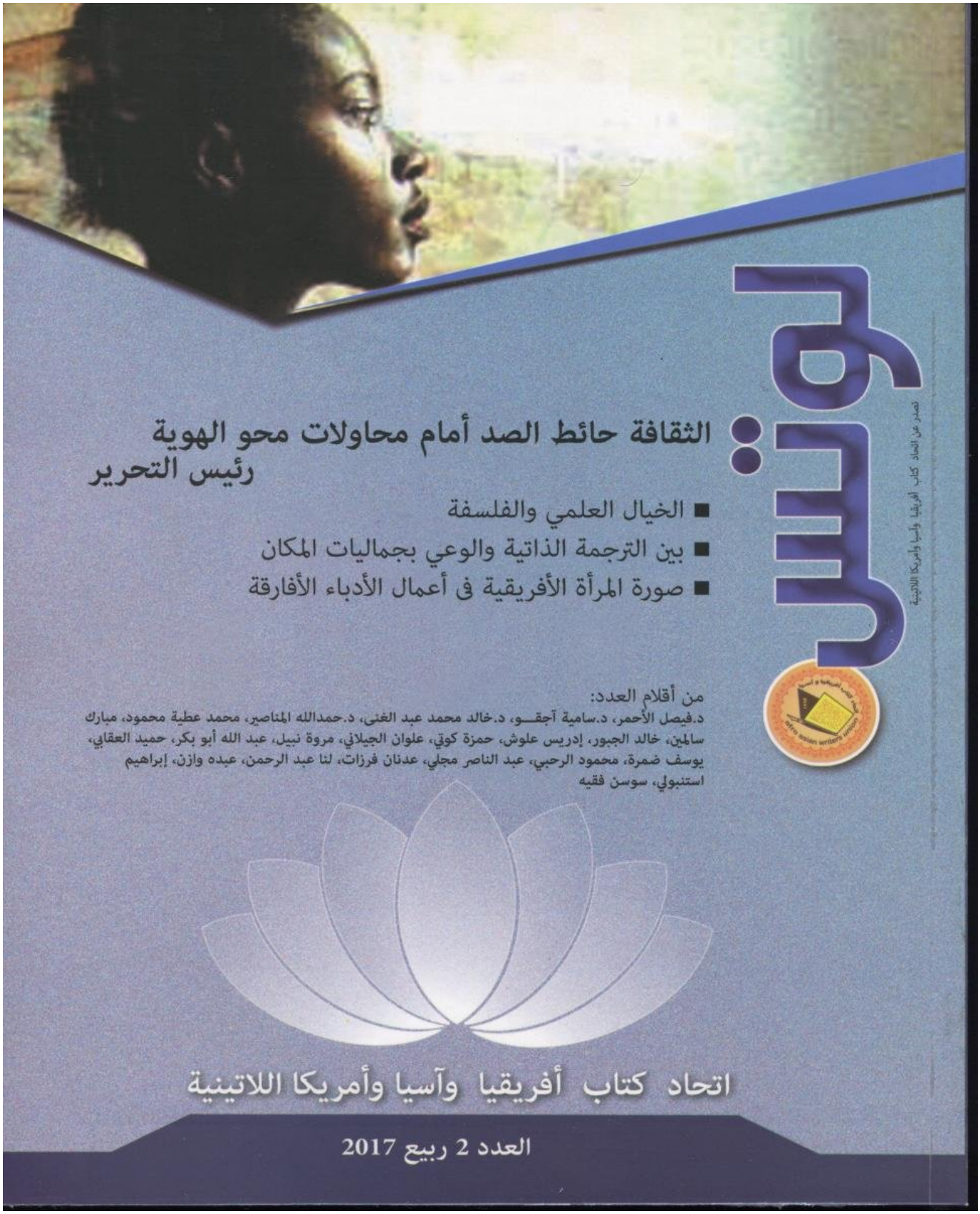

Fig. 6 Relaunched *Lotus*, Arabic cover, issue no. 2, 2017

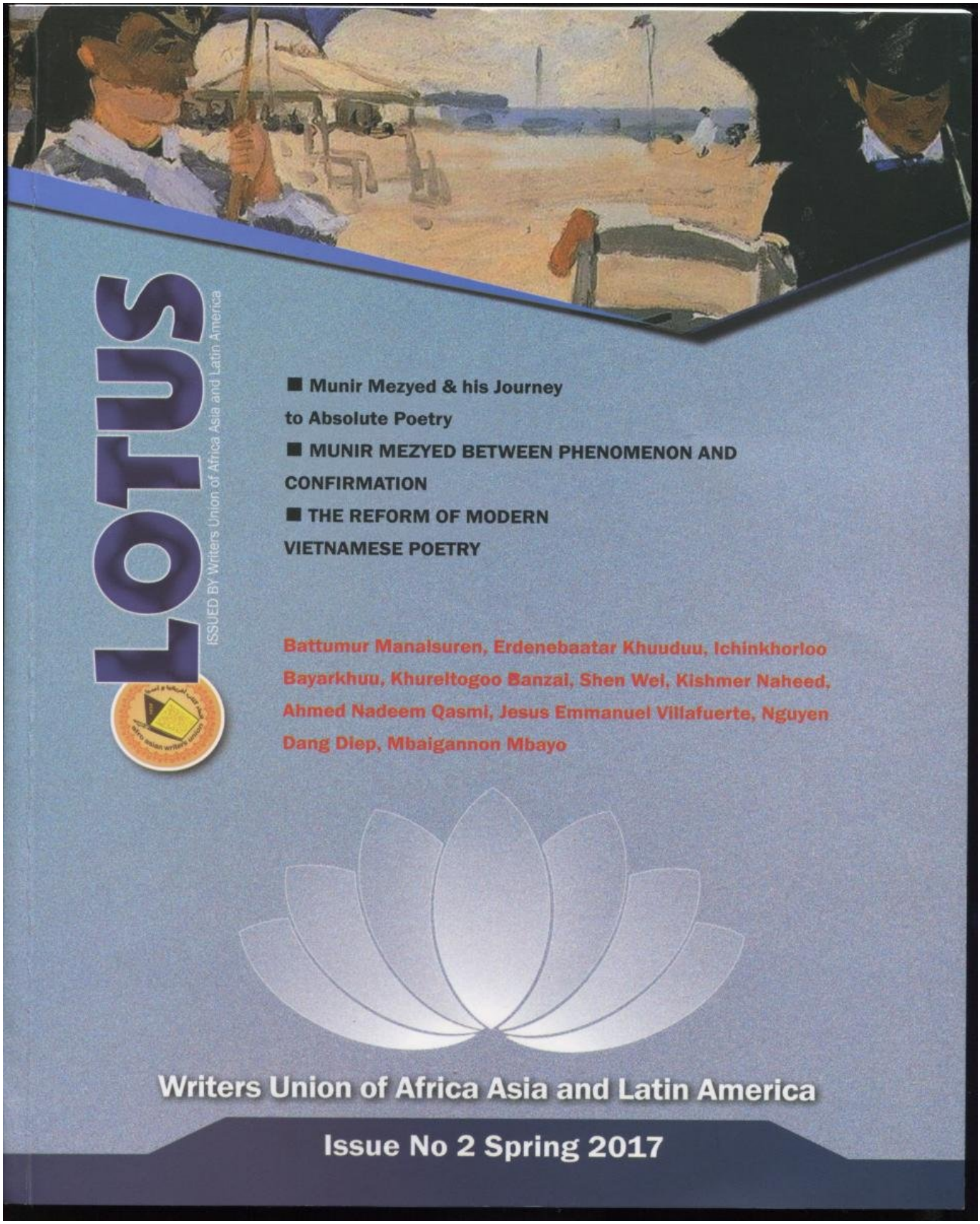

Fig. 5 Relaunched *Lotus*, English cover, issue no. 2, 2017

In design, format and content, the relaunched *Lotus* does not forcefully affiliate itself to its predecessor. Granted, one article cites canonical postcolonial writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe in relation to history and tradition in African literature (O'Okwemba 2016); another, titled "The Role of the African-Asian Writers in a Globalized World," harks back to such Third-Worldist icons as Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and

Che Guevara (Hamadto 2016); an academic essay critiques the persistent tendency to compare Arabic with European literatures and makes a case for comparative work between Arabic and sub-Saharan literatures, specifically with attention to epics and sagas (Abu al-Layl 2016); and a section titled “The *Lotus* archive” in the second issue carries an Arabic piece reprinted from a 1989 issue of *Lotus*. As with the old journal, the second issue has a dossier devoted to the literary culture of a particular country, in this case Chad. One marked difference from the old version of the journal in its Cairo-based period, however, is that texts in the three languages — Arabic, English and French — are all published between the covers of the same issue, with no translations of texts in a given language into the other two.

The reissued *Lotus* emerges, of course, in a rather different world; and the editorials vacillate somewhat in stating the journal’s mission. The editorial to the first issue positions cultural interaction as an antidote to “religious terrorism,” an “international problem that faces modern human civilization,” positing that the journal “constitutes a bridge” which facilitates “encounter and understanding” leading to “integration under the broad umbrella of tolerance, fraternity and peace,” the old lexicon of “solidarity” notably bracketed (Salmawy 2016).[2]

By contrast, the second editorial addresses the single most important — and salutary — change in the relaunched *Lotus*, announced on the cover itself: AAWA now renamed the Writers’ Union of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (WUAALA). The editorial appeals to the similar economic and political preoccupations of the three continents and what it identifies as the support by and large offered by their states to peoples’ rights to “freedom and independence,” as well their resistance to the exploitation of resources by “world powers.” Such common preoccupations “were translated into both temporary and permanent alliances that played important roles at certain stages” — presumably an allusion to the Tricontinental, among others — “but what is more important is that [the three continents] drew their cultures from similar sources.” Hence, WUAALA, in its attunement to the interrelations “of the nations of the South,” is including “unions of Latin American writers” in order to construct a “buffer,” a strong “cultural line of defense” against “any infiltrating attempts that aim to erase the identities of our countries” (Salmawy 2017a).[3] It was at the behest of writers from Latin America — who foregrounded common colonial histories and “Third World preoccupations” — that the continent came to be included, the 42 union members of the revamped WUAALA now including two Latin American ones, from Cuba and Colombia (Salmawy 2017b).[4]

Despite this gesture of inclusiveness, the revamped *Lotus*, in contrast to its predecessor, thus far appears to lack any specific ideological orientation or conceptual coherence. “We are not promoting a definite ideology,” posits Mohamed Salmawy, writer, secretary-general of WUAALA and editor-in-chief of the revamped journal. *Lotus* “is a platform where we are giving voice to Third World writers to express being the conscience of their nations” — an echo of *littérature engagée* — “and invariably it is different from what is being propagated officially in… globalization.” Most texts published are solicited through a call to member unions, and assessed “only from the literary point of view.” Distribution takes place at WUAALA conferences and the issues are posted on *Lotus*‘ Facebook pag**e**. Unlike the old AAWA, which “in the heyday of independence, solidarity and non-alignment” received “a lot of financial aid,” the union no longer “gets as much generosity…. now we have to fight our

battle alone. It's a different situation, but perhaps it gives us more independence because we are not influenced." The funding, currently from the subscriptions of member unions, allows for only one annual issue of the journal. Among WUAALA's plans are reestablishing the Lotus prize, to be awarded once every three years on account of limited funds, and including in the journal translations into Arabic of selected texts published in the English section and vice versa (Salmawy 2017b).

Only time will tell how inclusively tricontinental the new *Lotus* will be. However, as a historical bridge from the post-Bandung era, the journal provides a case study for reflecting on the vicissitudes of the relationship between the Third World and the Global South.

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[1] Portions of this article are drawn from Halim 2012. I wish to acknowledge the help I received from Randa Barakat, Managing Editor of *Lotus*, in the course of my research on the relaunched journal.

[2] Translation mine from the Arabic. The editorial to the 2016 issue is published only in the Arabic section.

[3] Translation mine from the Arabic. The editorial to the 2017 issue is also available in the French section, albeit not in the English one.

[4] The inclusion of Latin America is not reflected in the contents of the 2017 issue of *Lotus,* perhaps because it took place while the journal was in production. However, the English section of the 2016 issue includes at least three relevant texts: a poem from Cuba titled “It’s not Our Fault” (Pérez 2016); a poem from Colombia titled “My Love and my Vertigo” (Guzmán 2016); and an article titled “Arabs Making their Mark in Latin America: Generations of Immigrants in Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico” (Salloum 2016).

About the Authors

Hala Halim is an associate professor of Comparative Literature and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. She is the author of *Alexandrian Cosmopolitanism: An Archive* (Fordham University Press, 2013), which received an Honorable Mention from the American Comparative Literature Association for the Harry Levin Prize for Best First Book in Comparative Literature. Her translation of a novel by Mohamed El-Bisatie, *Clamor of the Lake*, won an Egyptian State Incentive Award. Halim's recent publications include the essay "Scope for Comparatism: Internationalist and Surrealist Resonances in Idwar al-Kharrat’s Resistant Literary Modernity,” in *Arabic Humanities, Islamic Thought: Essays in Honor of Everett K. Rowson*, edited by Joseph E. Lowry and Shawkat M. Toorawa (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

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