



On Tuesday January 14, 2025 at 2pm at CEDEJ **Yasmin Shafei** will be presenting her research :**Reading Resistance and Agency through 19th Century Citizen Petitions**

The study of mental illnesses and asylums have emerged as fundamental areas of historical inquiry. Research on disability studies and the histories of mental health are growing fields encouraging a rethinking of the cultural, social, economic, and political histories of the Middle East. The history of mental asylums reflects the multiple ways in which colonial governments and modern nation-states defined their national projects and relationships with their subjects. Studying colonial asylums, psychiatry, and constructions of mental illnesses is central to understanding Egypt's history, shedding light on significant historical processes such as colonization, state building, modernization, medicalization, and professionalization.

Using mental health as the lens through which to examine the colonial state and its engagement with various actors, this research investigates the impact of the British occupation on the development of Egypt's state asylums of 'Abbāsiyya and Khānka as well as on the professionalization of psychiatry and the experiences of the asylums' patients and their families. Through the analysis of a wide range of primary and secondary sources written in Arabic, French, and English, including citizen petitions, referral memoranda, and Ministry of Interior and Lunacy Division reports, the research examines the multi-faceted history of mental health and psychiatry. The goal is to provide a holistic approach to the study of the history of mental health and psychiatry in Egypt, investigating its asylums, doctors, attendants, patients, and their families.

This seminar examines nineteenth-century citizen petitions from the National Archives in Egypt to tell the history of mental illnesses from the perspective of patient's families. Viewed as counter-narratives to the institutional histories in asylum reports and government correspondences, these petitions reveal the experiences of the families of patients confined at the 'Abbāsiyya Asylum. The research investigates how Egyptians accustomed to home care and traditional treatments responded to the state's referral of mentally ill family members to the asylum. The study centers the experiences of patient's families within the historical enquiry on colonial asylums and demonstrate the multi-faceted nature of the psychiatric encounter and the negotiation and resistance strategies deployed by the actors in this encounter. Citizen petitions provide valuable insights into the ways families deployed their own agency in interpreting and negotiating the legal systems enforced by the state. They also uncover the language used to refer to the mentally ill as well as the range of emotions associated with the institutionalization of relatives with mental illnesses in late nineteenth-century Egypt. Uncovering the voices of family members, however fragmented, is

but one of the ways in which historians can ensure that the family remains an integral part of disability studies.

Yasmin Shafei is a Postdoctoral fellow at The Center for Economic, Legal, and Social Studies and Documentation (CEDEJ) in Cairo. She holds a Ph.D. in Middle Eastern history from the American University of Beirut. She received her MA and BA in International Relations from the American University in Cairo. Her research focuses on intersections of colonial studies and the histories of medicine and mental health. Specifically, her dissertation explored primary documents at the National Archives in Egypt and the United Kingdom to investigate the impact of British colonial rule on the development of psychiatry and Egypt's state asylums during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Through the analysis of a wide range of primary sources, her dissertation also examined the lived experiences of both patients and their families, further interrogating the impacts of class and gender. Prior to embarking on her Ph.D. journey, she spent 15 years working with Oxfam and several United Nations agencies on regional issues related to refugees, gender, education, and health.