

The Relationship between Naguib Mahfouz and the Islamists: The Real, the Exaggerated and the Fabricated

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Abstract

The attitude of the so-called Islamists towards the Egyptian Noble Laureate is often represented as one of tension and resentment. However, the current study argues, this monolithic representation of the attitude the Islamists presumably have always had towards Mahfouz is oversimplified and misleading because it conceals an extremely complex and multifaceted reality. More precisely, the researchers show that although the Islamists have had their disagreements with the writer, and although they repeatedly objected to some of his works on religious grounds, they have also played an important role in discovering the talented writer and introducing him to the public; creating and renewing (whether intentionally or unintentionally) curiosity and interest in his works; and providing approbation of (that sometimes amounts to religious legitimization to) some of his most controversial works. Quite often the over-dramatization, and at times fabrication, of the conflict between the Islamists and Mahfouz is carried out in order to serve political and ideological ends.

Keywords: Islamists attitude towards Naguib Mahfouz, conflict, monolithic representation

1. Introduction

Less than a month after the attempt was made on the life of Naguib Mahfouz, he was asked about the reason he was targeted. The answer he offered reflects a profound understanding of the event and its ramifications: “I simply got caught in the middle, in the battle between the system and the Islamists” (Weaver, 1995, p. 3). Such a statement aptly summarizes the way the Nobel Laureate was politically implicated in a series of battles between the “Islamists” and the anti-“Islamists” (be it the governing system, the secularists, the liberals or the intelligentsia). Nor did these battles come to an end with the death of the writer. Rather, they renewed with new political events and upheavals. In almost all of these battles, the “Islamists” were, and continue to be, projected as uniformly hostile to Mahfouz and his work, and repeatedly this attitude towards the writer has been used as evidence that illustrates the “Islamists” narrow-mindedness, their hostility to freedom of expression, disrespect to the other and, therefore, the threat they pose to the society at large.

However, such a monolithic representation of the attitude the so-called “Islamists” presumably have always had towards Mahfouz is oversimplified and misleading because it conceals an extremely complex and multifaceted reality. More precisely, we shall attempt to show that although the “Islamists” have had their disagreements with the writer, and although they repeatedly objected to some of his works and political stances, these objections and conflicts were usually not as dramatic or violent as they are portrayed in the visual and written media. In many cases, the fabrication or over-dramatization of these disagreements is carried out in order to serve political and ideological ends.

One recent example that clearly illustrates the politicization of Mahfouz occurred recently when the “Islamists” achieved a great success in the first free and fair elections to parliament in Egypt in January 2012—they secured over 70% of the seats with 47% for the Muslim brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party and 25% for the Salafist Al-Nour Party—(Kirkpatrick, 2012) has taken many by surprise. Apparently, Egyptian and Western policy makers did not anticipate such success since as Tadros, (2012) explains, “[t]he nearly unanimous consensus among both the Egyptian political class and the Washington experts was that the ‘Islamists’ were only

a scarecrow used by Mubarak to frighten the West.” In an interview that took place in 2011, President Obama slighted the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood maintaining that it is “one faction in Egypt. They don’t have majority support.” Ironically, even the former President of Egypt, Mubarak, himself was disillusioned about the power of the “Islamists.” He brushed aside the power of what he labelled as the “Islamic fanatics” insisting that they are “nothing to worry about,” and implying “that a severe crackdown on the Brotherhood was imminent” (Weaver, 1995, p. 13). There seemed to be one thing that Mubarak was sure of: “these groups will never take over this country” (Weaver, 1995, p. 14).

However, the “Islamists” did indeed take over, and soon after their unexpected success, these declarations of assurance were replaced by strong feelings of concern and apprehension and “caused anxiety among progressive Arabs and a great deal of confusion in the West” (Ghitis, 2012). Among these concerns is the fear that the “Islamists” would seek to implement the Sharia law; infringe on the rights of women and minorities; and restrict the right to freedom of creativity and speech. Fear intensified when the society of the Muslim Brotherhood announced in March 2012 that they will field a presidential contender though they had repeatedly vowed to the contrary, and when a few “Islamists,” especially from Al Nour Salafist party, made a number of controversial statements over issues pertaining to women’s dress code, the banking system in Egypt, democracy, the Pharaonic civilization, and the works of Mahfouz. Such statements generated heated debates especially among the so-called artists and elites, and resulted in the creation of “The Egyptian Creativity Front.” The Front, a coalition of musicians, artists, actors, actresses and writers, purported to face what the members considered to be a “growing pressure to limit freedom of expression and creativity in Egypt following the landslide victory political Islamic groups scored in parliamentary elections” (Dawoud, 2012). A number of statements issued by the Front stressed the need for the revolution to continue not only until people were able to freely choose their rulers, but more importantly until the Egyptian will is liberated “by removing all kinds of restrictions on freedom of thought, opinion and creativity” (Dawoud, 2012).

In the midst of such debates, Mahfouz was propelled from the periphery (Note 1) into the centre, though not of the literary but the political scene. In this context, Mahfouz was used as a twofold symbol: a master of Egyptian artistic creativity (after all he is the only Arab writer to date to win the Nobel Prize for literature) and a victim of the “Islamists” oppressive power (his struggle with the “Islamists” presumably culminated in the attempt that was made on his life as a result of works that were considered blasphemous). The new attention to the writer materialized in the many electoral posters of presidential candidates that surrounded the writer’s monument as if each is claiming bond with him as well as in the plethora of discussions about, interviews with, and articles and statements by presidential candidates, prominent policy makers, artists and writers. In almost all of these, the “Islamists” were projected as uniformly hostile to the writer and his work.

2. The Problematic Use of the Term “Islamists”

So far we have been placing the word “Islamists” between inverted commas in order to register our reservation over the use of this controversial term. Despite the fact that a number of politicians, scholars and journalists (especially Westerners and those who are described as secularists and liberals in the Muslim world) argue that the term is a “useful and accurate one, for it indicates that this phenomenon is an ‘ism’ comparable to other ideologies of the twentieth century” (Pipes, 2000), many others, particularly those classified as Muslim (or “Islamist”) thinkers and scholars, reject such labels altogether. Supporters of the former view contend that “Islamism” refers to “political Islam” and describes “a radical ideological movement” that “seeks to use Islam as a vehicle to power” (De Atkine, 2006). Salman Rushdie defines the “Islamists” as the people “who are engaged upon such political projects,” and argues that it is important to distinguish this group, in which he includes “the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the bloodsoaked combatants of the FIS and GIA in Algeria, the Shia revolutionaries of Iran, and the Taliban,” from what he considers to be “the more general, and politically neutral ‘Muslim’.” Simply put, for this group, “Islamism and terrorism are synonymous” (Martin & Abbas, 2010).

The second party (Note 2), on the other hand, rejects such classification not only because of “its gratuitous implication of terrorism” (Martin & Abbas, 2010), but more importantly because Islam is perceived as a whole that cannot be divided into political Islam, economic Islam, civilian Islam, moderate Islam, traditional Islam, modern Islam or any other form of Islam. For this group, there is no distinction between Muslims and “Islamists” since “[e]ach Muslim is simultaneously an Islamist who is ‘a member of the Islamic cause’” (Bulaç, 2012). In fact, members of this group blame such classifications on the colonizing West which is not only “attacking us [i.e. the Muslim world] militarily and plundering resources, but it also wants us to ‘imprison out religion to the private space, marginalize, and relativize it’” (Bulaç, 2012).

Another point worth mentioning here is related to the problematic idea of fixed classifications, labelling and

naming. A quick survey of the histories, philosophies, and practices of the various and diverse groups mentioned in Rushdie's aforementioned list which he conflates under the label "Islamists" could easily reveal the inaccuracy of his claim. Finally, even within the same group, there are at times major differences and sharp divisions. Take the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example, which is said to be "difficult to understand or predict" (Petrou, 2011, p. 2), partially because "they are not a monolith," but rather "a diverse group with various movements within it" (Petrou, 2011, p. 2). The above are some of the problems associated with the term "Islamists" (hence without inverted commas), which we still feel obliged to use simply because of its prevalence and because it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for a more appropriate term.

3. Qutb Draws Attention to Mahfouz

After this necessary digression, we can now return to the topic of the relationship between Mahfouz and the Islamists. Mahfouz's writing career started in 1928 when he wrote for different newspapers. In 1938, he published his first collection of short stories, *Whispers of Madness*, followed a year later by his first novel, *Mockery of the Fates* translated into English under the name *Khufu's Wisdom*. *Rhadopis of Nubia* was published in 1943 and *The Struggle of Thebes* in 1944. Despite this relatively early publishing debut, the Arabic critical establishment remained almost oblivious to Mahfouz and "completely ignored him" (El-Naqqash, 1995, p. 186). El-Naqqash (1995) attributes this lack of interest to the fact that the novel as a genre was fairly recent in the Arab world and was, therefore, far less appreciated than poetry. In 1944, however, matters began to change as Sayyid Qutb (known as "the most influential ideologue of the Islamic movement in the contemporary Arab world") (Algar, 2000), piled highly enthusiastic praise on the writer and his work.

Born in 1906, Qutb was only 5 years older than Mahfouz, but was already a renowned critic in the forties with works that "served to elevate him to the proximity of leading figures on the Egyptian literary scene, such as Abbas Mahmoud al-Aqqad ... and Taha Hussein" (Algar, 2000). In his first piece of criticism on Mahfouz, Qutb discussed *The Struggle of Thebes*, and his enthusiasm for the novelist and his work were apparent in almost every line of this article which begins as follows:

As I try to restrain myself from showering praise on this novel, I am seized by an overwhelming sense of enthusiasm and joy, something I feel obliged to confess to the reader in the hope that such a confession will allow me to assess the novel as soberly and objectively as befits any critic (El-Qa'id, 2001).

Qutb then contrasts this vibrant work, which he describes as an epic in prose, with "the dead history" and "dead books" taught to school children in Egypt. He concludes with the following powerful statement:

Had I have the authority, I would have made this novel available to every young boy and young girl, and I would have printed it and made it available to every household free of charge. Furthermore, I would have set up an honouring party to celebrate the writer—whom I have no acquaintance with. (El-Naqqash, 1995, p. 279)

Fourteen months later, Qutb was to write another laudatory review of Mahfouz's *Khan El Khalily*. He praised the novel's quintessential Egyptian spirit and, at this early stage in the novelist's career, predicted his potential to gain global fame. Similarly, in his discussion of *The New Cairo*, Qutb denounced the lack of critical attention paid to the novel and to the works of Mahfouz in general. He described Mahfouz's collection as a true starting point in creating an authentic Arabic novel; a humane work of art with a local and national taste.

Mahfouz never forgot nor denied Qutb's role in drawing the attention of the public and the critical establishment to his writing talents. He repeatedly acknowledged this fact with a great sense of gratitude. Despite Qutb's enthusiasm, the literary establishment continued to ignore Mahfouz for many years to come. By 1952, Mahfouz would have published eight novels and a collection of short stories. However, he received attention only from two critics: Qutb and the less prominent critic, Madawy, (El-Naqqash, 1995, p. 189).

Some argue that all this support and enthusiasm occurred during what Siddiq variably labels as the "secular" (107) and "atheist" (109) phase in Qutb's life, when he was "frank about his atheism" (Siddiq, 2007, p. 107). According to supporters of this view, Qutb's attitude towards literature in general was to change "to its diametrical opposite in 1951, the year of Sayyid Qutb's proclaimed rebirth" (Siddiq, 2007, p. 108), which turned him into a philosopher of violence (Note 3). However, the following indisputable facts in Qutb's life point out to the inaccuracy of these claims:

First, Qutb was raised by devout parents "according to the Islamic values and religious principles" (El-Khaldy, 1994, p. 55). He committed the Holy Quran to memory by the age of ten and was a devout Muslim who regularly attended prayers at the mosque, where he would listen to scholars from Al-Azhar and participate in discussions. Second, during the period in question (1937-50), Qutb wrote three very important books: two of

these are related to Koranic studies and the third, *Social Justice in Islam*, is regarded as one of “a handful of important works [which] can be singled out as containing the quintessence of his thought” (Algar, 2000, p. 11). Third, as early as 1946, Qutb “began to dissociate himself completely from Al Aqqad and his school” (Rahman, 2012, p. 4) due to Qutb’s increasing “interest in spiritual themes” (Rahman, 2012, p. 5). In response to embracing an Islamic school of thought, Al Aqqad, who disapproved, disliked and even fought against practical Islam, criticized Qutub’s new interest and accused him of “choosing the path of heedlessness and over-simplicity” (El-Khaldy, 1994, pp. 154-5). Fourth, in 1947, Qutb became editor-in-chief of *The New Thought*, a “social, reformatory and revolutionary” journal which sought “to present the model of an Islamic society free of corruption, tyranny, and foreign domination” (Algar, 2000, p. 2).

Reflecting on the presumed dramatic change in Qutb’s character following his trip to America, Berman states:

In some of the accounts of Qutb’s life, this trip to America is pictured as a ghastly trauma ... which sent him reeling back to Egypt in a mood of hatred and fear.

I am sceptical of that interpretation, though. His book from the 1940’s, “Social Justice and Islam,” shows that, even before his voyage to America, he was pretty well set in his Islamic fundamentalism. (Note 4)

Accordingly, Qutb, “the first prominent literary critic to recognize the nascent talent of Naguib Mahfouz in the mid-1940s” (Siddiq, 2007, p. 107), is also “the Muslim thinker and activist who, more than anyone else,” according to Siddiq “‘theorized’ and legitimated the Islamic backlash that almost claimed Mahfouz’ life half a century later.”

4. The Controversy over *Awlad Haritna*

The second major incident that brought the writer and the Islamists face to face took place in 1959, following the serializing of some chapters from Mahfouz’s most controversial novel *Awlad Haritna* (translated *Children of Gebelawi*, 1981; *Children of Our Alley*, 1996) on the pages of *Al-Ahram*. There are two main and very different narratives as to the way the Islamists reacted to this novel when it was first serialized: one by the author himself and the other by some who seem intent on portraying this incident as a ferocious battle between Mahfouz and the Islamists. The narrative Mahfouz offers in more than one occasion goes as follows: an unnamed literary figure raised some objections against the novel maintaining that “it parodies the stories of the prophets” (El-Namnam, 2012, p. 135). Other people followed suit, and objections increased and multiplied until they reached Al-Azhar, the office of the attorney general and eventually President Nasser. Apparently, most of the objections and allegations were raised by literary figures and not by religious scholars. The President asked two scholars from Al-Azhar to examine the work and deliver a report confirming or refuting these allegations. In the report (it is unclear whether it was oral or written, but no copy of the report is to be found) both scholars confirmed the objections against the novel and recommended that serialization be halted. The President then asked El-Kholy, who was Head of Press and Book Publication at the time, to arrange for a meeting between Mahfouz and a number of scholars from Al-Azhar to discuss the novel and arrive at a solution or an agreement. The appointment was set; Mahfouz showed up but neither of the Al-Azhar scholars presumably because they had felt their role ended with the report that was delivered to the President. “The matter concluded with a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ dictating that the novel would be printed outside Egypt but not inside it ... It did not reach the jurisdiction nor was there a battle on the pages of the newspapers ... what is even more important is that there was no verdict to confiscate the novel which was published years later ... in Beirut with the permission of Mahfouz” (El-Namnam, 2007, p. 135).

According to the Noble Laureate himself, there were no hostile confrontations between him and the Islamists over the novel in 1959, no accusations of heresy or apostasy nor was the novel banned in Egypt. Instead, Mahfouz emphasizes the fact that his decision to not publish the novel in Egypt wasn’t based “upon any censor’s orders, but out of the desire not to alienate Al-Azhar. Irrespective of censorship, I made an agreement and will honour it” (Salamawy).

Now, let us read the following excerpt from an article exemplary of the way this incident is described in many scholarly journals and respected newspapers:

When the novel was serialized ..., it generated a mixed reaction of deep admiration and intense hostility. In the introduction to his translation of the work, Philip Stewart describes eloquently its reception in Egypt: “It is not often that preachers lead their flocks into the streets to shout for the banning of a novel hailed by many as a masterpiece...” Mahfouz faced the outcry of religious zealots, who unleashed their tempestuous fury at the “godlessness” of the work and its deviation from the Koranic story. In their outrage, some of them demanded that Mahfouz be brought to trial, asserting that his “profane portrait” of Muhammad verged

on heresy. As a result of fiery sermons by the clergy of al-Azhar mosque against the novel, no Egyptian publisher dared to print it in book form. (El-Gabalawy, 1989, p. 91)

The difference between this account and that offered by the writer himself is vast. In fact, over-dramatization of this incident was so extreme that news about the jailing of Mahfouz because of the novel reached people in Morocco; students went on strike and rallied in the streets asking for his release. Commenting on this piece of news, Mahfouz asserts: "It is a fallacy. I was never jailed in my life" (El-Naqqash, 1998, p. 140).

5. The Noble Prize and the Renewed Controversy over *Awlad Haritna*

Mahfouz continued to cherish the promise he had taken upon himself not to allow the novel to be published in Egypt without the permission of Al-Azhar, and the debate almost died out only to be resurrected thirty years later when Mahfouz received the Noble Prize for Literature. The Swedish Academy had not only cited *Children of Gebelawy* as one of the milestones in Mahfouz's oeuvre, but more importantly it offered a reading of the novel that confirmed the way it was initially read by the Islamists: "The theme of the unusual novel *Children of Gebelawy*," states the Academy's press release, "is man's everlasting search for spiritual values. Adam and Eve, Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and others, as well as the modern scientist, appear thinly disguised. It is the scientist who ultimately is responsible for the primeval father Gebelawy's (God's) death." (Note that the Islamists were repeatedly accused of not understanding the novel despite the fact that their reading was consistent with the one offered by the Swedish Academy).

The special attention paid to the novel caused the controversy to start anew, and two opposite reactions emerged: on the one hand, there were those who thought it was shameful for such an important work to be published in many countries and many tongues outside Egypt but not in the writer's home country; a campaign was launched to obtain permission from *Al-Azhar* for publication; and the Egyptian evening paper *Al-Masa'* began to serialize the novel. "The moment was indisputably a permissive one," states Mehrez (2012, p. 19), "but Mahfouz, sensitive to the political climate of the late eighties, declined, asking that *Al-Masa'* stop publication."

Parallel to this move, albeit in the opposite direction, objections against the publication of the novel were renewed and the Swedish Academy was accused of being insensitive towards the religious sentiments of the Muslim world. The issue intensified further as it almost coincided with the international debate around Salman Rushdie. Hence, the discussion around the novel was revived. The reaction of the Islamists was again over-dramatized and a couple of prominent sheikhs were repeatedly cited as illustrative examples of how the Islamists handled the issue: Sheikh Abdul Hamid Kishik and Sheikh Omar Abdul-Rahman.

Gaber Asfour, for example, argues that Kishk's book *Our Word in Responding to Awlad Haritna* is "representative of the religious discourse against the novel," and that it was natural for this literary work to be subjected to Kishk's attack "since he considered it defiant to the teachings of Islam and an apostasy that can only be corrected through repentance or, in case of insistence, killing." In reality, however, a careful reading of Kishk's book proves that it is only a "response" as the title indicates: Kishk offers a religious reading of the novel, cites some paragraphs and comments on them by explaining the reasons they are erroneous from an Islamic perspective. It could be argued that literature should not be read or responded to in such a manner, but what is more important in this context is that nowhere in the book does Kishk accuse Mahfouz of apostasy or heresy.

6. The Attempt on Mahfouz's Life

Similar exaggerated reports on the Islamists' reactions circulated, multiplied and gained momentum in 1994 when an attempt was made on the life of the Noble Laureate. Many blamed Kishk and Abdul Rahman. Both were quoted of accusing Mahfouz of heresy (El-Namnam, 2012, p. 169) and calling for his death. Surprisingly, even the widely quoted claim that the latter had issued a *fatwa* (a religious ruling) against the writer was inaccurate, at best. In an interview with Weaver, Abdul Rahman was asked about the presumed *fatwa* in which he declared Mahfouz an apostate. His reply was unequivocal: "No, no, no," he said. "This whole matter is so misunderstood. What I said—and this was when *The Satanic Verses* was making headlines—was, if we had punished Naguib Mahfouz for what he wrote in *Children of Gebelawi* [sic], then Salman Rushdie never would have dared to write that book. This was a reply, to a question asked by a journalist. It was a reply, an opinion. It was not a *fatwa*" (Weaver, 1995, p. 11). In the televised show *Al Asl wal Asr* in 2012 on Abu Dhabi Television, El Awwa (Note 5) emphasized the fact that "no *fatwa* to kill Mahfouz has ever been issued by any person, authorized or not."

The procedures that followed the assassination attempt were bizarre and left many in shock: "Within an hour of the attack on Mahfouz, the government announced...that an arrest would be made that night; the following

morning, seven young men were arrested, and an eighth was killed by police gunfire” (Weaver, 1995, p. 2). Soon after, sixteen young, working class alleged Islamists were captured and tried by “the military tribunal conducting the kangaroo court,” (Aboul-Ela, 2004, p. 347) the like of which is described by Amnesty International as “grossly unfair” (qtd. in Weaver, 1995, p. 2). All of these young men were convicted: “Two defendants, one charged with doing the stabbing and another with planning the details of the attack, were sentenced to death and executed, and almost all the other defendants were found guilty of conspiracy” (Aboul-Ela, 2004, p. 347). Many doubted the government’s story about the identity of the attackers, but “it is unlikely, given the secrecy of the court proceedings,” maintains Weaver, “that the many puzzles surrounding the stabbing will ever be solved” (2). What makes the story even more bizarre is the fact that the former President Mubarak denied any religious motivation behind the attack. According to Mubarak, “the man who tried to assassinate Naguib Mahfouz knows nothing about the Koran; he knows nothing about praying. He was simply paid to do what he did. It’s all a matter of money” (Weaver, 1995, p. 13).

Notwithstanding these doubts around the alleged *fatwa* and the real motivation of the attackers, many continued to insist that the “young Islamist” who stabbed Mahfouz in the neck “was acting on the *fatwa* ... pronounced by Omar Abdel-Rahman six years earlier” (Mehrez, 2001), and a number of anti-Islamists sought to exploit the event for political and ideological ends as “a wide variety of writers with secular leanings... hoped to use the event to embarrass the Islamist opposition” (Aboul-Ela, 2004, p. 346). The fact that shortly after the attack many prominent Islamist scholars and leaders denounced the assassination attempt and some others visited Mahfouz in hospital (tellingly, among the latter were Sheikh Al Ghazaly who in 1959 reported to President Nasser his objections against the novel) received very little attention.

7. *Awlad Haritna* Eventually Published in Egypt with Blessings from Islamist Scholars

Over the years, a great number of intellectuals tried to convince Mahfouz to allow *Awlad Haritna* to be published in Egypt, but the writer insisted that this would never happen without the concession of Al-Azhar. However, he refused to ask Al-Azhar for permission because he believed that the religious institution should have no authority over literary production. This dilemma was eventually resolved when Mahfouz suggested that an introduction to the novel by a prominent Islamic figure would suffice for him to allow the novel to be published in Egypt. Eventually, the distinguished Islamic scholar Kamal Abul-Magd was selected for this purpose (Salamawy, 2006).

Mahfouz died in August 2006. A few months later, the novel was finally published in book form in Egypt ending a controversy that lasted almost half a century. It has an introduction by Abul-Magd and a statement on the book cover by Al-Awwa. A number of objections were raised by both the Islamists and the liberals in Egypt albeit for different reasons: some Islamists saw the introduction and the back cover statement by two prominent Islamist scholars as a religious legitimization for an anti-Islamic novel, while many liberal intellectuals, such as El-Ghtani, indicated that they are against the introduction because it “is a very dangerous precedent” for “a novelist of the stature of Naguib Mahfouz [to] only have his work published when it is sanctioned with an introduction by a religiously-commended Islamic scholar like Abul-Magd” (Nkrumah, 2006). Once more, as Nkrumah points out, “the controversy surrounding the publication of Naguib Mahfouz’s *Awlad Haritna* ... has been hijacked for political ends.”

8. Recent Over-Dramatization of Personal Views for Political Ends

Most recently, the issue of the Islamists’ attitude towards the writer was discussed amidst heated debates in Egypt over the presumed threat the Islamists, who have newly gained power, pose to the freedom of expression. The debate was triggered when during a televised interview in December 2011 El-Shahat, a prominent Salafist figure, was asked about his opinion of the works of Mahfouz. In response, El-Shahat accused Mahfouz’s works of promoting “prostitution and drugs,” and encouraging “promiscuity and atheism” (Rashwan, 2011). In a number of interviews that followed, El-Shahat tried to explain that what he said about Mahfouz and other issues were not “statements” but “answers” to “explosive questions” he did not wish to discuss as he thought them to be of less importance to Egypt and the Egyptians. Apparently, he was well aware that these explosive questions were set up to portray him and his party as a group of extremists who busied themselves with controversial and less important issues, but he failed to evade them because, in his words “one is left with no choice,” but to be honest about what he believes (El Shahat, 2011).

The supreme committee at El-Shahat’s Nour Party expressed rage at his responses and prohibited him from making press statements in the name of the Party. Moreover, the Party’s official spokesperson repudiated El-Shahat’s statements and stressed the fact that they express personal views (Dabash, 2011). However, Asfour (2011) chose to counterattack these personal views by accusing all Islamists of being “enemies to creativity,” and by reminding the public of old tensions: “they hired one of their followers to kill Naguib Mahfouz and Faraj

Foudah.” The disproportionate attention given to El Shahat’s responses and opinions not only by the Egyptian but the international media (Note 6) is yet another example of how some intemperate personal views of an individual labelled as an Islamist could fan the flames of the presumably continuous battle between the Islamists and Mahfouz.

As a result of these renewed arguments, Mahfouz was plunged into the political debate and many candidates, both parliamentary and presidential sought identification and alliance with the writer as a signifier of open mindedness and appreciation for arts and freedom of speech. An image of the statue of Mahfouz surrounded by electoral posters appeared on the pages of many newspapers, and the headline of one of these reads “Electoral Posters of Candidates Besiege the Statue of Naguib Mahfouz in Giza Following a Salafist Statement Accusing Him of Encouraging Debauchery in Society” (El-Qassas, 2011). Ultimately, the degree of tolerance and appreciation for Mahfouz’s works became one of the decisive criteria used to classify candidates (and political/religious parties) into liberals and Islamists and in categorizing the latter into ultraconservative, conservative and moderate Islamists.

9. Conclusion

The above discussion sheds some light on the complex and multifaceted relationship between Mahfouz and the Islamists. It explores A number of the problems associated with the use of the term “Islamists” and illustrates the crucial role those classified as such have played in discovering the talented writer and introducing him to the public; creating and renewing, whether intentionally or unintentionally, curiosity and interest in his works; and providing approbation of (that sometimes amounts to religious legitimization to) some of his most controversial works. In addition, the paper shows that the Islamists did have their share of disagreement with Mahfouz especially over *Children of Gebelawi*, and they did object to a number of his themes and works. However, the discussions and (re)presentations of disagreements and conflicts are usually tainted with a good deal of over-dramatization, presumption and fabrication preventing a truly objective understanding of the complex and multifarious relationship between the two and usually serving political ends.

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Notes

Note 1. In August 2012, a number of prominent cultural and literary figures in Egypt expressed dismay over what they considered to be negligence of Mahfouz's sixth memorial. The renowned writer, Gamal El-Ghitani, criticized "the exiling [of Mahfouz] in his homeland," and "his absence from life" in Egypt, inferring that "this means that great writers...would be forgotten." Similarly, Youssef El-Qa'id maintained that "an event or activity should have been organized to commemorate the writer and the absence of such is a major mistake on behalf of Mahfouz." See Bilal Ramadan. (2012, August 30). Gamal Al-Ghitani: As if Naguib Mahfouz is Exiled. *Youn 7*. Retrieved from <http://www.youn7.com/News.asp?NewsID=770426>

Note 2. Among those who object the use of the terms Islamism, Islamists and political Islam are the prominent scholars Mohamed Amara from Egypt, Rashid Al Ghanoushy from Tunisia, Ali S. El Byanouny from Syria and Sajid El Abdaly from Kuwait.

Note 3. In fact Siddiq contradicts his own claims about Qutb's presumed atheism during this period as he states "by 1948 [Qutb] was already a well-known public figure and a *highly visible Islamic activist*" (218, italics added).

Note 4. For more information about the inaccuracy of claims around Qutb's reported atheism refer to Salah El Khaldy (162).

Note 5. El Awwa is the former Secretary General of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, head of the Egyptian Association for Culture and Dialogue, and a presidential candidate in the 2012 Egyptian elections.

Note 6. See for example an article in Al-Nahar Newspaper entitled "The Battle Between El-Shahat and Mahfouz Reaches the International Media" <http://www.alnaharegypt.com/?t=55143>

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