The Misinterpretation of Naguib Mahfouz’s *Children of Gebalawi*

**Abdulrahman Ahmed M. No'amah**
PhD. Scholar, English Dept.,
School of Languages, Literature & Cultural Studies
Faculty of Arts, STRMU-Nanded
Dr. D. N. More
Assistant Professor & Research Guide
Post-Graduate Department of English & Research Centre
People's College, SRTMU-Nanded
India

**Abstract**

*Children of Gebalawi* has always been a curse for its writer for more than fifty years. Mahfouz first published the Original Arabic text *Awlad Haratna* in a serialised form in the daily newspaper Al-Ahram in 1959. The publication of this novel was met with very harsh opposition from many extremist religious figures. That led ‘Al-Azhar Al-Sharif’ to ban publication of this novel in the form of a book. This ban has lasted till 2006 when Al-Shoroq Publishing House published the first Egyptian version of the novel. During this period the novel was published in Beirut, Lebanon in 1967 and translated into English by two different translators: Philip Stewart in 1981 and Peter Theroux 1996.

*Children of Gebalawi* is a realistic as well as a deep philosophical novel. The religious interpretation of the novel is the main reason behind its ban as well as all the problems caused for the novelist because of it. This article is an attempt to explore and further investigate this novel in an attempt to find an answer to what prevented this novel from publication in Egypt for more than fifty years. Moreover, why did the authorities allow its publication in 2006?

**Key Words:** Children of Gebalawi – extremist – interpretation – ban
1. Introduction

Naguib Mahfouz (11 December 1911 – 30 August 2006) is an Arab Egyptian novelist. He is the only Arab literary figure to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. He has written 34 novels, more than 350 short stories, several movie scripts and five plays. His masterpiece is The Cairo Trilogy that consists of three novels; Palace Walk (1956), Palace of Desire (1957) and Sugar Street (1957). His most controversial novel that has almost killed him is Children of Gebalawi (1959).

Children of Gebalawi has always been a curse for its writer for more than fifty years. Mahfouz first published the Original Arabic text Awlad Haratna in a serialized form in Al-Ahram newspaper in 1959. The publication of this novel was met with very harsh opposition from several extremist religious figures. That led ‘Al-Azhar Al-Sharif’¹ to ban the publication of this novel in the form of a book. This ban has lasted till 2006 when Al-Shorooq Publishing House published the first Egyptian version of the novel. During this period the novel was published in Beirut, Lebanon in 1967 and translated into English by two different translators: Philip Stewart in 1981 and Peter Theroux in 1996.

Children of Gebalawi is a controversial piece of literature. Readers and critics have interpreted it in two different ways according to their own ideological and philosophical backgrounds. On the one hand, it is a realistic story that portrays the life of a 19th century Egyptian family living in a remote village. It portrays the human lust and struggle of the strongest to dominate over and control the life of others. On the other hand, Children of Gebalawi is an allegory that narrates the story of man from the beginning of the creation. The characters and their stories are similar to the stories of some prophets mentioned in The Bible and The Qur’an as well. The allegorical nature of the novel has caused a lot of controversy among intellectuals as well as ordinary readers. Some critics received it nicely and believed that it is a good way to convey the social message that the novelist has presented in this novel. But some others attacked it fiercely and accused the novelist of disdaining divine religions and insulting God’s prophets.

The main problem of Children of Gebalawi is the orthodox religious interpretation of the novel. As a result of this religious interpretation the novel is banned, the novelist is threatened and was about to lose his life in a murder attempt in 1994. What ended this debate – and the novel has finally got published in Egypt – is another more moderate religious

¹ Al-Azhar Al-Sharif is the highest religious authority in Egypt. It is founded in the year 970.
interpretation that cleared out of the previous misinterpretation. The later interpretation makes it clear that this novel is not insulting any religion or disdaining any of the prophets of God.

2. The Realistic Aspect of Children of Gebalawi

The story is set in a 19th century Egyptian remote village. It gives us the story of Gebalawi, the wealthy man who decides to retire and appoints his youngest son Adham to run the family business. This decision causes an opposition from the eldest son ‘Idris’ who refuses his father’s decision and as a result he is thrown out of the house and deprived of all the wealth. The subsequent chapters narrate the life stories of three of Gebalawi’s grandchildren namely Gabal, Rifa’a and Qasim.

Adham, now the person in charge to run all the family’s business, is tempted by his wife to sneak into his father’s bedroom to see the will of his father. When Gebalawi comes to know, he expelled them from the mansion to live in an alley near him. Gebalawi affords his son some of the income of the family to help him to start a new life.

Adham moves to an alley near his father’s mansion where he starts a new life. The novel tells the story of three of Adham’s children namely Gabal, Refa’a and lastly Qasim. Each of these grandsons of Gebalawi devotes their life trying to spread social justice and fight the gangsters who control the life of people in the valley. Gabal, for instance, believes in radical solutions. He believes that these gangsters and corrupt people must be killed, stoned and drowned in order to spread justice. After the death of Gabal, Refa’a continues the fight for social justice. Rifa’a believes in tolerance and peaceful solutions. He is betrayed by some of his followers. He is killed and his body is thrown into the desert. After Rifa’a’s death, Qasim becomes the new leader of the alley. He is a mixture of Gabal’s strength and Rifa’a’s tolerance. The time of Qasim is described by the novelist as the best and more prosperous period in the life of Gebalawi’s children and the people of the alley.

After the death of Qasim there appeared a strange man who comes to live in the alley in Rifa’s Sons’ quarters. This person is a magician called Arafah who uses his magic powers to invent a destructive weapon to defeat the gangsters. Unfortunately Arafah uses his magical powers to serves those who pay more. As a result, injustice continues to dominate the life of people in the alley. (Mahfouz)

That is to say, on the realistic level, Children of Gebalawi is like all Naguib Mahfouz’s other novels that call for social justice. In fact, his master piece The Cairo Trilogy
as well as all his other novels focuses on unveiling the society’s untold stories of the everlasting struggle between good and evil. Its main concern is highlighting the sufferings of the marginalised groups and presenting the socio-political scenario of Egypt in the post-colonial era. It shed light on the social problems and atrocities committed by the powerful men on ordinary poor people. Fawzi An-Najjar writes in an article entitled “Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: the Case of Naguib Mahfouz”.

Naguib Mahfouz’s writings and public statements have been a subject of controversy among Egyptian and Arab writers, political analysts and religious scholars. Since most of his works address political, social, cultural and moral aspects of Egyptian life, it is natural that he would have critics and even enemies. (Anajjar 141)

3. The Allegorical Aspect of Children of Gebalawi

Children of Gebalawi is taken by many critics and readers as an allegory that tells us the story of man on earth and the everlasting conflict between good and evil. Mahfouz tries to explain the relationship between modern science and religion using allegory to convey his message. He symbolizes the co-existence of the three main religions in the Middle East; Islam, Christianity and Judaism using fictional allegorical characters to serve the purpose. The religious interpretation of Children of Gebalawi takes Gebalawi as a personification of God; Adham as Adam; Idrees as Iblis (The Satan); Gabal as the prophet Moses; Rifa’a as the prophet Jesus; Qasim as the prophet Mohammed; Arafah as the symbol of modern science and technology; Gebalawi’s palace to symbolize Heaven and the alley as a symbol of earth.

From the very beginning of the novel, the similarity between the events of the novel as well as the characters and some of the stories in The Qur’an and The Bible is very clear. The story of Gebalawi and his two sons Idris – Iblis in Arabic – and Adham is similar to that of God and Satan and Adam. Idris is driven out from his father’s house because of disobeying his orders. As for Adham it was the temptation of his wife that led him to break the rules of his father. He, too, was expelled out of his father’s house. This story is identical to that of Adam and the Satan. This is why extremist religious figures have accused Mahfouz of personifying God as Gebalawi – something according to them is blasphemy. The allegory of the Devil’s temptation of Adam and Eve can be clearly read in the following lines from the novel:
Driven by overwhelming desire for revenge, he entices his brother, Adham, to betray his father's trust, which leads to his expulsion from the House, together with his wife, Omayrna. Outside the gate, Idris, drunk and dancing with malicious glee, reveals his true nature as "the incarnation of evil. (Mahfouz 31)

Similarly, most of the opponents of Naguib Mahfouz’s *Children of Gebalawi* accuse him with offending religion and insulting the prophets of God due to the similarity between his characters and the prophets Moses, Jesus and Mohammed peace be upon them. Gabal, for instance, is taken by the religious interpreters to represent the prophet Moses. Gabal's solution to the problem of the gangsters is throw stones and water on them from the windows of the houses and drown them or bury them alive which is a technique very similar to that narrated for the end of the Pharaoh of Egypt when he and his men were drown in the Red sea as the story says in *The Qur'an*.

We revealed to Moses: “Strike the sea with your staff” so it split and each part was like a huge mountain (26.63). We brought near the others (Pharaoh and his army) (26.64). We saved Moses and all those who were with him (26.65). Then we drowned the others (26.66).²

Refa’a is taken as a personification of Jesus the Christ whose innocent nature and peaceful attitude towards people caused his crucifixion according to the Biblical story. The following extract from *Children of Gebalawi* shows the similarity with both the two stories. Talking about Rifa’a after his being killed by the gangsters, Naguib Mahfouz writes: “…his body had remained in the desert until Gebelawi himself had carried it away and that it lay hidden under the soil of his luxuriant garden”. (Mahfouz 196)

A very famous religious scholar in Egypt named Abdulhamid Kishk wrote a book in response to *Children of Gebalawi* in which he interpreted it according to his own understanding. In his paper entitled “Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Naguib Mahfouz”, Fauzi M. Anajjar writes about Kishk’s book and interpretation of the novel saying:

In his book, *Kalimatuna fi al-Radd ʿala A wliid Hiiratina* (Our Word Responding to *Children of Gebalawi*), which is written to refute and incriminate the novel’s author, Shaykh Abdulhamid Kishk focuses

² The English translation of Qur’an. The Chapter of ash-Shu’ara’ (the Poets) (26.10-66)
not only on the lowering of the dignity of God and the Prophets, but also on Mahfouz's distortion of the Qur'an for his own purposes. The story begins with depiction of Gebalawi (God), owner and master of the quarter and all surrounding areas, who lives in his great house (the universe) for a long time without being seen by anyone. ‘Is it not sad’, says one of his offspring, ‘that we have such a grandfather who does not see us and we cannot see him? Is it not strange that he is locked up in this great house? For Muslims in general, God cannot be seen or known through the senses. (Anajjar 146)

It is because of such an attitude, religious scholars like Kishk that Naguib Mahfouz has always been a target for extremist Islamists who formed a public front to oppose all of his writings, social ideas and political view. The peak of this opposition was when young man stabbed Naguib Mahfouz in the neck while he was leaving his house in Cairo to attend a public gathering. Luckily, the murder attempt failed and Mahfouz survived. When the police asked the young man about his reasons to attempt murdering a writer, his only answer was that Mahfouz was an atheist. In his book Arabic Culture and the Novel: Genre, identity, and agency in Egyptian fiction, Muhammed Siddiq writes:

Thus, while Imam Khomeini was issuing his religious decree (fatwa) against Rushdie’s life in Iran, Shaykh ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman was elaborating the case of direct causality in Egypt. “Had Naguib Mahfouz been killed when he wrote Children of Gebalawi, Salman Rushdie would not have dared write The Satanic Verses,” he is reported to have said. In both instances, as in many others, the novels were read allegorically, in flagrant disregard for their other constitutive literary and aesthetic attributes. As “disguised” theological heresies, the literary texts were readily indicted for infringing a fundamental tenet of Islam. Accordingly, the outraged “Islamic” response appeared duly uniform and universal. (M. Siddiq xi)
4. Conclusion

*Children of Gebalawi* continued to be banned in Egypt because of the misinterpretation of some extreme religious scholars till 2006 when Al-Shorooq Publishing House in Cairo published the first Egyptian version of the novel with an introduction written by a well-known Islamic scholar named Dr. Ahmed Kamal Abo Al-magd. In his introduction to the novel, Abo Al-magd gives his own interpretation of the novel and its allegorical nature. He mentions that Gebalawi can be interpreted as a symbol of religion that puts the rules for people to follow but not as a symbol of God. He also mentions that he has met Naguib Mahfouz immediately after the failed murder attempt. In that meeting Mahfouz assured him that he has never attempted to insult or disdain God or any of his prophets. (Sallam)

Dr. Abo Al-Magd agrees with the religious interpretation of the novel that takes Arafah as the symbol of science and modern technology. He further adds that when Arafah surrenders his power and knowledge to the bad people and refuses to follow neither the steps of the children of Gebalawi nor the will of Gebalawi himself, his knowledge has turned to be of no use to the needy people in the alley. For Abo Al-Magd this novel only symbolizes the bond between science and religion. That is when religion is abandoned for the sake of science; science turns to be a weapon in the hands of evil people. (Sallam)

When a novelist writes a novel, he mingles reality with imagination. A novel is a piece of art that can be interpreted in so many different ways. Every critic’s interpretation is not taken for granted as the one and only meaning of the story. What happened to Naguib Mahfouz’s *Children of Gebalawi* can be taken as an example. The novel is banned for more than half a century and caused a lot of controversy because of some religious scholars’ misinterpretation. The same novel is published in 2006 because of another moderate religious interpretation.

---

4 Dr. Ahmed Kamal AboAl-Magd is a politician, an Islamic scholar and Professor of Public Law at the School of Law, Cairo University.
Works Cited


