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Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shāker: The Life and Thought of a Non-Stereotypical Anti-Modernist

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Abstract

Maḥmūd Shāker was an anti-modernist thinker who developed a non-stereotypical stance from Modernity, Colonialism, Orientalism, and contemporary Arab modernists. He developed his literary method that he attributed retrospectively to Islamic pre-modern tradition. Maḥmūd Shāker is a literary critic who could have had some tangencies with many of the prominent intellectual trends in the early and mid-twentieth century, such as Salafism, Arabism, Islamism, and Nationalism. However, if a negative definition is sought to describe him, he can be classified under none of these groups. Magdy Wahba may be correct in what he went for; that Maḥmūd Shāker represents the voice of anti-colonial anger in the conscience of the Islamic orthodoxy. However, I believe that Shāker also represents the Islamic societies' unrest quest to connect with self after the identity crisis caused by the colonization processes.

Keywords: Maḥmūd Shāker, Anti-Colonialism, Anti-Modernity, Islamic literature, Arabic literature

1. Introduction

I started reading the works of, and about, Maḥmūd Shāker (d.1997) with a question: how to classify this man within the 20th century's intellectual and Ideological map? To which discourse does he belong? As the reading progressed, I realized the problem of the question itself. The challenges that the study of Maḥmūd Shāker suggests against such forms of stereotypical classifications became more apparent. Hence, the following article will review his life and works, focusing on his anti-modernist standpoints: how it was developed and reflected in his *oeuvre*. After that, an analytical attempt will be made by assessing the possible classifications that Shaker was usually associated with. This is to see how they will or will not fit his specific frame of thought.

1.1 The Beginnings

Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shāker was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1909 and died in 1997, which means that he lived through the rapidly changing twentieth century from beginning to the end. He was born to a deeply rooted family in the Islamic educational pre-modern tradition. His father, Sheikh Muḥammad Shāker (d. 1939), was a prominent *Azharī* scholar who held the deputy chair of al-Azhar Mosque. His maternal grandfather was Sheikh Hārūn ibn ʿAbdel-Rāziq (d.1918), a distinguished *Mālikī* jurist. His elder brother was sheik Aḥmad Shāker (d.1958), a prominent *ḥadīth* scholar who edited many essential classics, such as *al-Risāla* for al-Shāfiʿi (D.820) and parts of the *Musnad* of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855). The child Maḥmūd experienced the escalating political climate that preceded the outbreak of the first world war. He closely witnessed the tense revolutionary atmosphere of 1919 Egypt, especially since his house was an elbow room for many of the political interactions in which his father was engaged.[1] As he described, he was grown up in a house where the classical Arabic *fuṣḥā* was usual in daily communications.[2] All these childhood memories will significantly impact his later intellectual development. Although the familial, religious scholarship legacy, Maḥmūd Shāker joined the secular education system designed and supervised in Egypt then by the British colonial authorities. He graduated from secondary school in 1925 and was being prepared by his father to be a physician. However, his interest in literature led him to obtain an uncommon exception in 1926 to join the faculty of arts with the help of Ṭāha Ḥussein (d.1973), a friend of his father. He abandoned the college after two years because he conflicted with the man who helped

[1] (al-Sherīf 173)
[2] Ibid., p.171.

him enter the university. Shāker then refused to pursue his undergraduate career further and dedicated himself to a self-learning path.

Out of the frustration that followed his battle with the university, he left Egypt with no intentions of returning. He left for Saudi Arabia, where he was welcomed by some Saudi scholars and was invited to establish a primary school in Jeddah, where he became its first headmaster. In less than a year, he returned to Cairo and spent most of his time reading classical Arabic sources. He focused primarily on studying Arabic poetry and expanded his readings to include all the Arabic and Islamic pre-modern literature in almost all disciplines. [3] He spent some time in political action, as he became one of the Young Men's Muslim Association founders. [4] During this stage, two teachers seem to have been the most influential on him: Muṣṭafā Ṣādeq al-Rāfiʿī (d.1937), the prominent Egyptian poet and writer, and Sheikh Sayyed al-Marṣafī (d.1931), the linguist and Azharī scholar. Under the latter, he studied the first Arabic poetry classics.[5] He became connected to the leading publishers of that time, such as Amīn al-Khāngī (d.1938) and Muḥib al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (d.1969). The latter was in 1937, editing and publishing the book of *Adab al-Kātib* for ibn Qutaiba (d.889), invited him to edit parts of the book, and praised his talent in the book interface. That was the first time his name was shown in a scientific publication.[6]

1.2 The Definitive Moment

To a great extent, the career of Maḥmūd Shāker was defined by the moment when he went through the conflict with his university teacher, Ṭāha Ḥussein. Ṭāha Ḥussein was lecturing about his theory that doubts the historicity of the pre-Islamic *Jāhilī* poetry. Ḥussein published his theory in the same year in his controversial book '*fī al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī.*'[7] Shāker was already exposed to the orientalist academic literature due to his mastery of the English language, gained during his primary British-directed education. He believed that Ṭāha Ḥussein's arguments were based on the prominent orientalist David Margoliouth's (d.1940) conclusions in one of his articles. He had a copy of Margoliouth's paper from Aḥmad Taymūr Pāsha (d.1930), whom he met at Muḥib al-Dīn al-Khaṭībʾs office.[8] However, Ṭāha Ḥussein promoted his theory with no reference to Margoliouth. Shāker confronted his teacher with his doubts and argued against him, defending the authenticity of the pre-Islamic poetry, but the reaction seemed hostile. Shāker then stopped attending his classes and went through times of despair. He was then subjected to extremely high pressure from the surrounding circles in the university and in his father's house, which usually received many of the prominent figures of the political and cultural milieus that held great respect for Ṭāha Ḥussein, the 'Dean of the Arabic literature.' They were trying to convince Shāker to retreat from his aggressive position from Ḥussein. He told them that to return to the university, Ṭāha Ḥussein should admit his plagiarism of Margoliouth's argument. Expectedly, no one approved of this condition, and everybody gave up on him. He described the whole incident as an 'earthquake' that had shaken his life.[9] Shāker then came to a very emotional act when he desperately committed a suicidal attempt by cutting off his hand wrist. This incident led his bereaved teacher, Muṣṭafā Ṣādeq al-Rāfiʿī, to write a series of articles about suicide that were later published in one of his books. Shāker, by the third article, started to respond, and probably these articles helped him get out of this bottom. [10]

1.3 A Closer Look at the Personality

The journalist ʿĀida al-Sherīf (d.1997), who later became one of his students, described her astonishment of the 19-year-old student, who could fearlessly criticize and mock big names such as Ṭāha Ḥussein and later, ʿAbdul-ʿazīz Fahmī (d.1951) in the course of debating them. She says, in a book that was published after the death of both her and Shāker, that she already had a family full of religious scholars who were either affiliated with al-Azhar or Dār al-ʿUlūm. They were all criticizing Ṭāha Ḥussein as well. But by then, she ascribed their criticism to their religious conservative non-literary background.[11] Her remark is essential to understand the environment where such a prominent case occurred and the typical reactions. Understanding the moment that will shape Shāker's entire life and career afterward is also essential. Shāker is characterized by his acute critical personality, which submits to no authority. He can criticize his contemporary teacher Ṭāha Ḥussein as strongly as he can criticize the classical great theologian al-Jāḥiẓ.[12] He can attack his adversary Louīs ʿAwaḍ (d. 1990) in a

[3] (Wahba 190)
[4] Ibid.
[5] (al-Sherīf 176)
[6] (al-Ṭanāḥī 520)
[7] (Ḥussein)
[8] (El-Shamsy 200-201)
[9] (al-Jerjānī 17)
[10] (al-Sherīf 45)
[11] Ibid., p.17.
[12] (Shāker, Qadeyyat al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī fī Kitāb ibn Sallām 11-21)

series of pyrotechnic articles,[13] as hard as he can criticize his close friend Yaḥia Ḥaqqī (d.1992).[14] However, his criticism in many cases may be seen as crossing the lines, exceeding the scientific argumentation to subjective defamation. Wadīʿ Felasṭīn, the Egyptian historian and journalist, said that Shāker's aggressiveness against Louīs ʿAwaḍ, the Christian writer, caused this debate to take the form of a religious conflict, not a literary discussion. This incident led him to prison for 18 months between 1965 and 1967.[15] His fierce critical nature is the most common feature among all the testimonies about him, both from his enemies and friends. It created an aura of dread around the man that was almost described by everyone he came in contact with.

However, this sensitive nature is only an outer layer of a compassionate and emotional personality. Abū Hammām used the best metaphor, the Egyptian poet ʿabd al-Laṭīf ʿabd al-Ḥalīm (d.2014), who was one of his students. He likened Shāker to a coconut fruit: excellent and hard from the outside, surprisingly soft and fragile from the inside.[16] Shāker's emotional nature is persistently evident between his writings, speeches, and interviews. His suicidal attempt is additional evidence of such a nature. Reading or listening to him shows clearly how he was committed to sincerity and how such emotions were conveyed through an outstanding linguistic capability and mastery of the Arabic language. This aspect is essential to understand how he responded to what had happened with Ṭāha Ḥussein and what followed.

Another aspect of his personality is essential to understand his thought and later developments: his firm dignity and self-respect. In an interview with the national radio of Kuwait, he was asked by the interviewer about his students, and he replied by stating that he does not believe he has any students. The interviewer commented by saying that this may be a humbleness of him. He directly objected in a decisive tone that surprised his interviewer, saying that he is not humble to anyone, 'I am in a state of self-bride that you cannot imagine, but I am telling you the truth as it should be.'[17] These three pillars of his personality: critical nature, sensitivity, and self-bride, are the most vital personal keys to understanding better his thought and intellectual standpoints regarding Modernity, modernists, and Arabic literature.

1.5 The Reaction: The Literary Method

In the wake of the conflict, Shāker started to gradually develop an understanding of Egypt's literary and cultural milieu at that time. The main problem he raised in front of Ṭāha Ḥussein was his discontent with the reckless, impatient reading of the literature. From his perspective, such kind of reading leads to hasty irresponsible conclusions, similar to what 'the Dean' concluded. From now on, the term 'cultural scene' will be persistently followed by the adjective 'corrupt' almost every time it is mentioned under his pen. The whole milieu, in his opinion, is 'diseased' with the reckless, impatient reading established by the teachers and then transmitted to the students and followers.[18] For Shāker, the Arabic and Islamic literature is not being carefully read by his contemporaries. Hence, he said that he dissociated himself from all the current methodologies, groups, and schools to develop his method, which he refers to as 'the method of tasting' *manhaj al-tadhawwuq*. He applied his method to poetic texts and generalized it to any form that sought to convey meaning.[19]

Nevertheless, he rarely explained or elaborated the method and its specific techniques. He believed that the extraction of any method is not the author's responsibility as much as it should be on the reader's shoulders. An author's role is to apply his way through his works to give an example, which he did already, then the reader should be able to learn and extract the method's basics. One of Maḥmūd Shāker's students, Mundhir abū-Sheʿr, collected the scattered interpretations of his teacher out of his edited and authored works, creating a dictionary for Shāker's terminology.[20] The dictionary adds no analytical value and only useful shortcuts and definitions. Under the title *'tadhawwuq al-kalām'*, he explains that it is the careful inquiry about what is inside the minds and hearts of the texts' writers, whether it is poetry, prose texts, historical reports, or even scientific treatises. Such careful inquiry can lead to unveiling the minute details and inferences that are hidden under the text. Such reading requires patience and persistence in the pursuit of the semantics of the text. It involves the exclusion of first impressions and, more importantly, the presets that deviate from or redirect the reception of the text.[21]

We can see that the definition, which did not go far from what Shāker himself expressed, focuses on 'careful

[13] (Shāker, Abaṭīl wa Asmār)
[14] (Shāker, Namaṭ Mukhīf Namaṭ Ṣaʿb)
[15] (abū-Ṣāliḥ 55)
[16] A recorded interview by 'Abdel-Hamid al-'Umari, retrieved from t.ly/HO8Z
[17] (al-ʿAlī 103)
[18] (al-Jerjānī 25)
[19] (Shāker, Risāla fī al-Ṭarīq ilā thaqāfatinā 6)
[20] (abū-Shiʿr)
[21] Ibid., p.122.

reading,' which has some prerequisites to succeed. The first condition, according to Shāker, is the mastery of language. Outstanding mastery of the language for Shāker is essential for successful reading. His student and the famous editor Maḥmūd al-Ṭanāḥī (d. 1999) comments on Shāker's linguistic capabilities by saying that Shāker was reading the Arabic literature in its variety 'as a single book. He reads *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* as he reads *al-Aghānī*; reads Sībawaihʾs *Kitāb* as he reads the *Mawāqif* of ʿAḍud al-Dīn al-ʾījī…he had the whole package.'[22] This statement indicates his outstanding experience with classical Arabic sources besides his linguistic capabilities.

For instance, Shāker was refuting a claim of al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 868) regarding pre-Islamic poetry in one of his inquiries. Al-Jāḥiẓ believed pre-Islamic poetry is relatively recent and cannot be older than 200 years before Islam. Shāker's opponents cited such a claim to undermine the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry. While analyzing al-Jāḥiẓ's claim, Shāker criticized the simplistic mathematical approach that was used by al-Jāḥiẓ and was able to invite not only books of poetry but relatively different sources of *ḥadīth*, history, literary eloquence *balāgha* and biographical dictionaries in a meticulous scrutinizing process that ended up concluding al-Jāḥiẓ's unmentioned sources and proving him inaccurate.[23]

Language is not the only basis for Shāker's method. The most central part of Shāker's method is what he refers to as the 'pre-method' *mā qabl al-manhaj*.[24] It means the epistemological framework that any method performs within. This epistemological background, in his belief, directs the reader's approach to the material, both in the collection and interpretation phases. Such epistemological experience of the reader is deeply rooted in the collective culture of his specific society and essentially expressed in its tongue/language. Hence, his super emphasis on the importance of language. Orientalists, based on that, can only reach a deep understanding of Islamic literature if they are raised in the culture that surrounds it, even if they have mastered Arabic as a language. The same is true for him the other way around. In his first reaction to Margoliouth's article, he said to Aḥmad Taymūr Pāsha, who gave it to him and asked for his opinion: 'I think this is extreme silliness concocted by a nonnative speaker, shameless as always...I do not doubt that I know English better than this foreigner will ever know Arabic several times over...I could trace the development of English poetry from Chaucer to today objectively better than any account he could produce of Arabic poetry. Yet I do not have the impertinence and brazenness to think that I could publish a single letter on the development of English poetry.'[25] Language for Shāker is the key to the culture and its deeper epistemology diffused through its literature. Furthermore, by his expanded reading of the variant fields of Islamic and Arabic literature, he believes that he has reached the solid essence of the Arabic-Islamic culture.[26] Cultural multiplicity within a society is then, according to him, a scourge on that society, as it leads to disputes of methods and differentiation of understandings, and the society will remain in an endless circle of disagreements.[27] It is unavoidable to notice some puritanical traits in his notion of culture, especially cultural multiplicity.

For Shāker, that imperative link between language, culture, and literature is inevitable in the reading process. He completely disagrees with the *desertion* claims that Ṭāha Ḥussein based himself upon in his book. Ṭāha Ḥussein, following René Descartes (d.1650), claimed that the 'modern scientific methods' requires the reader to disentangle oneself from any previous beliefs, including religion and nationality and any prior knowledge of the topic.[28] This claim is impossible, in Shāker's opinion. It is ultimately hypothetical that a person can neutralize all his prior knowledge regarding the investigated matter. However, even if possible, one can never dissociate himself from the impact of language and culture, which he calls the 'pre-method.' They will keep directing the reading process as they are not mere intellectual knowledge but rather entangle feelings, desires, and beliefs that may lead the reading process astray.[29] This problematic bias can only be rectified within the culture itself, not aside from it. Here comes the role of religion.

Religion or any core beliefs that play its role, for Shāker, is the pinnacle of the culture. *Religion* is the source that provides the person with the ethical foundation for the whole self. As much as the person's religion is more profound, more comprehensive, and in a superior moral status, it becomes more capable of guiding him through the 'pre-method' and the 'method,' protecting him from the deviations of the reading and interpretation.[30]

[22] (al-Ṭanāḥī 480)
[23] (Shāker, Qadeyyat al-Shiʿr al-Jāhilī fī Kitāb ibn Sallām 11-21)
[24] (Shāker, Risāla fī al-Ṭarīq ilā thaqāfatinā 22)
[25] (El-Shamsy 201)
[26] Ibid., p.25.
[27] (Shāker, Jamharat Maqālāt al-Ustādh Maḥmūd Moḥammed Shāker 143)
[28] (Ḥussein 74-75)
[29] (Shāker, Risāla fī al-Ṭarīq ilā thaqāfatinā 30)
[30] Ibid., p.31.

Something called a 'universal culture is impossible for Shāker, as nothing can be called a 'universal religion.'[31]

Based on the previous notions, the 'reckless underestimation' of any of the Arabic language literary forms is considered by him a gross underestimation of the culture, religion, and society that it belongs. Moreover, if such underestimation comes from an indigenous member of that society, it is disrespectful to oneself. The introduction he wrote for the book of *Asrār al-balāgha* of al-Jerjānī (d. 1078) could be read as a manifesto that defends the superiority of the Arabic language over the other tongues and refutes the 'reckless underestimation' *istihāna* of his contemporary modernists, influenced by the colonial orientalists, for the Arabic literature.[32] The solid original essence – or the pre-method in his terminology- of the Arabic-Islamic pre-modern literature was supposed to survive and master the intellectual scene of his times if it were not for the colonial interventions.[33]

2. Colonialism

As language, culture, and religion are inseparable components in Shāker's outlook,[34] he perceives the colonial interventions as a confrontation between two religions, two cultures expressed in a war between two languages. Hence, again, his extreme emphasis on defending Arabic literature. It escalated into a religious and doctrinal matter, not a literary dispute. In his most famous work, *Risāla fī al-ṭarīq ʾlā thaqāfatinā*, Shāker traces back the history of conflict between Islamic societies and Europe starting the crusade campaigns that began in 1096/489 and lasted for almost two hundred years. It was, according to him, an attack on Islam itself motivated by evangelist missionary enterprises.[35] With the ceasing of the crusades, the second wave of Christian action took place in the form of intellectual interest in the Islamic sciences. This is how he refers to the early records of Orientalism. For Shāker, Orientalism is the other face of the euro-Christian plan to undermine the Islamic culture and regain Christian superiority. According to Shāker, the orientalists' interest in learning the Arabic language was the main gate they sneaked from to burglary the 'treasures' of Islamic literature.[36] Based on that, Shāker believes that there are three phenomena in the confrontation between Euro-Christianity and Islam, which are three manifestations of the same essence. These are 'evangelism' *tabshīr*, 'Orientalism,' and 'Colonialism.' 'They are, one hand, for they are brothers of the same father and mother. They share the religion, the objectives, and tools.'[37]

For that, Shāker believes that the later developments in the orientalist's studies of Islamic literature in the modern era were the land leveling for the contemporary colonization of the Islamic territories. It is the most recent episode in a long story of the Islamic-Christian confrontations.[38] In the same vein, He reads the revolutionary events in Egypt in 1919 as an episode of confrontation between the Arabic and European civilizations that included their literature and languages. The colonials manipulated it to form a political conflict between the Egyptian parties.[39]

3. The Arab Modernists and Orientalism: Against the 'First Crack.'

As Shāker proceeds with his analysis, he concludes that the main objective of Orientalism is to promote a specific image of the Islamic communities for the European reader. Masqueraded with the 'scientific inquiry,' such orientalist enterprises aim to convince the European audience that the Islamic populations are uncivilized barbarians who built their achievements on non-Arabic earlier civilizations' contributions, such as the Persians and Greeks. For him, such cultural and religious defamation undermines the authenticity of the Arabic literature to protect the Christian European people from falling under the influence of Islam.[40]

Magdī Wahba, who was one of Shāker's students, compared Shāker's *Risāla* to Eduard Said's (d. 2003) 'Orientalism,' which was published a few months later that the second edition of Shāker's major work on al-Mutanabbī (d. 965), which included the *Risāla* as an introduction. He says that If Said's work 'was a statement in secular terms of the case against Orientalism, based on quasi-Marxist assumptions, this long introductory essay (i.e., the *Risāla*) puts the case of conservative and orthodox Islam against the whole process of confrontation and curiosity which characterizes the history of European Orientalism and its American offshoots.'[41]

[31] Ibid., p.75.
[32] (al-Jerjānī 17-30)
[33] (Shāker, Risāla fī al-Ṭarīq ilā thaqāfatinā 25)
[34] Ibid., p.73.
[35] Ibid., p.35-36.
[36] Ibid., p.48.
[37] Ibid., p.49.
[38] Ibid., p.56.
[39] (al-Sherīf 34)
[40] (Shāker, Risāla fī al-Ṭarīq ilā thaqāfatinā 59-60)
[41] (Wahba 191)

Orientalists, for Shāker, are not to be blamed for what they are doing. Their act is justified because they are loyal to their people and religion. The real blame should fall on those Muslims and Arabs who followed them blindly and promoted their ideas in the Islamic lands.[42] In his introduction to *Asrār al-Balāgha*, Shāker followed the Arab modernists' claims and critical attitude towards the pre-modern literature from Ṭāha Ḥussein back to Rachīd Reḍā (d. 1935) and earlier to Muḥammad ʿAbdū (d. 1905). He believed this lineage that started with ʿAbdū echoed the orientalists' approach. he describes it as 'the first crack in the heritage of the Arabic-Islamic nation.'[43] It may be of relevance here to remember that Shāker's father, sheik Muḥammad Shāker, had earlier conflicted with Muḥammad ʿAbdū regarding the 'reform' and development of al-Azhar mosque and its educational curriculums.[44]

The modernists' call, according to Shāker, propagated the reckless underestimating attitude towards the Islamic literature among the younger generations, who may have dared to declare many irresponsible claims, among which is the belief that 'whoever seeks the classical Arabic eloquence is similar to a patient who seeks the village barber for treatment, leaving aside the qualified practitioner physician.'[45] We can see in the background of this metaphor, which modernists or their students supposedly use according to Shāker, the main themes of Arabic modernism. Using the 'village,' as opposed to the metropolitan city, referring to a form of 'under-civilized' community echoes the theme of 'civilization' held heavily by the modernists. Furthermore, using the 'barber,' whom villagers in Egypt eventually used to visit for essential medical advice, as opposed to the physician about ungrounded and non-scientific treatment, echoes the notions of science, enlightenment, and, again, civilization.[46] The physician in the metaphor refers to the modernists and assumingly modern/western-based knowledge in front of the outdated village barber who represents the Islamic pre-modern tradition. Recalling Ṭāha Ḥussein's reliance on Descartes' 'scientific method' in this context is beneficial.

4. Judging Modernity

As opposed to those who take modernism as a reference to evaluate the Islamic pre-modern tradition, Shāker goes the other way around. He considers Modernity's morality according to the Islamic foundations he can extract from the pre-modern literature. In his introduction to the book of *Faḍl al-ʿAṭāʾ ʿalā al-ʿusr* for al-Ḥasan ibn Sahl al-ʿAskarī (d. 1005), Shāker criticizes individualistic morality in Modernity as compared to the altruistic approach of Islam according to his understanding. He gives the reader many examples of the attitude of Islamic figures to highlight the Islamic altruistic morality, which he believes was the reason behind the flourishment of the early Islamic societies.[47] Shāker condemns those who praise modern European ethics for their individualism and consider 'generosity' and altruistic ethics in the Arabic culture as a less rational form of economics.[48]

Shāker further extends the line to argue that such individualistic ethics is the reason behind the economic and political crises that Modernity is facing. He is flabbergasted by the fact that economists and politicians are puzzled in their attempt to establish peace these days, in which the international climate is heating up, getting ready for the second world war. He believes that the reason for wars and conflicts lies in the very heart of the individualistic and selfish morals of Modernity itself.[49] Shāker finally offers altruism and bountifulness, which he believes to be instinctive as much as they are Islamic, as a cure for humanity's catastrophes.[50]

4.1 The Tangencies: Where Exactly Was Maḥmūd Shāker Standing?

Prefacing his book, in pre-Islamic poetry, Ṭāha Ḥussein classifies the cultural scene of his time into two major groups: protagonists of the ancient *anṣār al-qadīm* and protagonists of the new/novel/modern *anṣār al-Jadīd*.[51] While the latter group, *anṣār al-Jadīd*, could be understood as a vast blanket that incorporates all 'progressive' modernists, the first group, *anṣār al-qadīm*, is less clear or precisely defined. As Ahmad Khan notices, the grand narratives of modernism fail to distinguish the suitable ideological varieties in the cultural scene.[52] Anti-modernism was characteristic of many schools of thought during the early twentieth century, and they were all different in many other aspects. Hence, in an attempt to understand Maḥmūd Shāker's position, I will discuss his connections to many intellectual schools of his time that similarly opposed Modernity and modernism and to

[42] (Shāker, Risāla fī al-Ṭarīq ilā thaqāfatinā 62)
[43] (al-Jerjānī 21)
[44] (al-Sherīf 23)
[45] (al-Jerjānī 28)
[46] (Massad 88)
[47] (al-ʿAskarī 9)
[48] Ibid., p.7-8.
[49] Ibid., p.11.
[50] Ibid., p.12.
[51] (Ḥussein 64-73)
[52] (Khan 228)

whom he was frequently attributed.

4.2 Salafīsm

Was Maḥmūd Shāker a *salafī*? This is an important question, especially since Shāker was frequently framed as such by modernists and *salafī*s. The editor and translator Nasīm megallī dedicated a book about the conflict between Maḥmūd Shāker and Louīs ʿAwaḍ, in which he framed the conflict as a confrontation between the fundamentalist religious side, represented by Shāker, and the secular nationalist stream, represented by ʿAwaḍ. Megallī said that Shāker understands culture and history from a very narrow perspective, exclusively, the religious perspective. Megallī describes Shāker's position as being an attack on the 'rational concepts *and* the modern western culture in literature and thought' in favor of the '*Salafī* and fundamentalist *ʾuṣūlī* stream. It is remarkable how Megallī is ligating rationality from one side and the western culture on the other in that compulsory manner. Praising the west is unmistakable in the tone of his phrase, especially if read in Arabic. The '*salafī* fundamentalist *ʾuṣūlī*' stream, according to Megallī, feeds the notion of the clash of civilizations in the west. Megallī even says that the book of Samuel P. Huntington (whom he did not write his name correctly) that held the same title, the Clash of civilizations, is nothing but an outcome of such fundamentalist Islamism '*that we have.*'[53]

As well, the journalist and art historian Samīr Gharīb wrote a soon after Shāker's death a critical article refuting Shāker's standpoint regarding the pharaonic arts. Shāker had earlier expressed his discontent with the statue of Nahḍat Maṣr that Maḥmūd Mukhtār (d. 1934) sculptured in the early twenties in response to the 1919 revolution. Shāker criticized the figure based on its pharaonic nature, although he praised the sculptor's skillfulness.[54] Shāker also, according to Gharīb, attacked the pharaonic civilization by describing it as a 'Defunct paganism' based on a group of 'Myths and fables.' Samīr Gharīb concludes a radical religious judgment from Shāker's position that implies a religious prohibition *taḥrīm* of the non-Islamic arts and possibly of art in general. He links Shāker's work to the radical Islamists' discourse against arts that emerged later, accusing Shāker of being their early ancestor and reference.[55] What Samīr Gharīb did not understand in Shāker's position is that his criticism of the pharaonic art was not for being religiously prohibited *ḥarām* but for being 'culturally irrelevant' to the Muslim communities from his perspective. Nowhere in Shāker's article did he mention a jurisprudential judgment regarding that statue or any other artistic work. His analysis was subjected to the necessary consistency between art from one side and society's culture from the other.[56]

It is not only modernists who claim Shāker as a Salafī, but the *salafī*s themselves. Upon his death, the Islamic literature magazine dedicated a whole volume to honor the man, who died 'under the flag of the Qurʾān, defending the pillars of this nation *ʾUmma* and its authenticity, its Qurʾān, classical Arabic, its heritage, and its Islamic identity.'[57] The magazine was founded and supervised by Sheikh abū-l-Ḥasan al-Nadawī (d. 1999), an Indian Islamic scholar with *Salafī* reformist affiliations. The attempt of the magazine to frame Shāker under its discourse is noticeable in the edition's preface. His interview with the national radio of Kuwait provides another piece of evidence. Shāker was talking about himself and the development of his thought. He said to the interviewer: 'I am not a proselytizer *dāʿeya* as you can see, as I have no party,' the interviewer interrupted him confidently: 'except for the party of God *ḥizb Allāh,* of course.' Shāker reserved with obvious displeasure: 'I have no party. This (i.e., what the interviewer said) is a *Ṣūfī*-like manner for employing words, which I do not like. I say I have no party, meaning I do not party in *the* modern way.'[58] The interviewer's interference exemplifies the persistent framing of Shāker which he was helplessly resisting.

After a lecture that he gave to the students of the school of arts at Alexandria university, a female student stood up and asked him to clarify the foundations of his standpoint from Ṭāha Ḥussein and commented: 'we notice that you approach the literature from a *salafī* perspective.' Shāker responded by saying that using the term *Salafī* itself is an output of Modernity. He does not believe in such dualities (i.e., *Salafī* vs. modernist), and he believes that the nation of the Arabic tongue is one united stream since the founding father Ismāʿīl up until himself.[59] It is evident that he could not escape the classification dualities in public awareness. However, the least we can be sure about is that Shāker used to reject Salafīsm and all forms of ideological Islamism of his time.

[53] (Megallī 10-11)
[54] (Shāker, Jamharat Maqālāt al-Ustādh Maḥmūd Moḥammed Shāker 86-89)
[55] (Gharīb 82-83)
[56] (Shāker, Jamharat Maqālāt al-Ustādh Maḥmūd Moḥammed Shāker 86-89)
[57] (abū-Ṣāliḥ 1)
[58] (al-'Aly 102) though the text is documented here but listening to the recorded interview is clearer about his tone and reply.
[59] A recorded audio that could be found on the link: t.ly/fSDe

4.3 Islamism

He indeed confessed early enthusiasm for Wahabism in his youth. That was why he traveled to Saudi Arabia after quitting the university because of his conflict with Ṭāha Ḥussein. However, this trip lasted for less than a year. In an interview, he later described this enthusiasm as an 'immature act of juvenility.'[60] His early excitement for Wahabism was quickly left behind as It was only his first reaction after the crisis. He later developed a very critical standpoint from all the Islamists. In his introduction to *Asrār al-Balāgha* for al-Jerjānī, Shāker condemns the origination of 'what is so-called the Islamist groups *Jamāʿāt Islāmeyya.*' 'The speaker of them can talk about the *Qurʾān* and *Ḥadīth* with words that he memorized from his teachers, unknowing its meaning, and not only reply to; but *arrogantly* refute the traditions of al-Bukhārī and Muslim (d. 875) for being single narrator traditions *aḥādīth āḥād.*'[61] He describes the members of these groups as 'children…who could speak whatever they desire on Qurʾān, *Ḥadīth*, and jurisprudence, and refute what was said by Mālik (d. 795), abū-Ḥanīfa (d. 767), and al-Shāfiʾī by saying: they are men and we are men *naḥnu rijāl wa hum rijāl* (i.e., we are on equal authorities).'[62] He criticizes Islamists on the same basis as modernists: their reckless underestimation and disregard for the Islamic Arabic pre-modern literature.

In his introduction to *Tahdhīb al-Āthār* for al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Shāker criticizes the excessive 'boldness of many traditionists in our time who may expose themselves to judging prophetic traditions as being authentic or weak.' He believes that, in our time, very little knowledge is available to make such judgments with certainty. Although he did not explicitly declare, such practices that he criticizes are common within *salafī* and Islamists' scholarship circles. It is another form of recklessness that he is standing against.[63] To contrary of what is frequently claimed, Maḥmūd Shāker cannot be classified as a *Salafī* or Islamist, and this will lead us to move forward in our attempt to understand his representation by looking at another aspect of his thought.

4.4 Nationalism

In the interview mentioned above, the interviewer wondered about the strong reputation that Shāker has in many the Arabic countries as opposed to his relatively unpopular status in Egypt and asked Shāker for an explanation. Shāker said that the reason is that 'I have actualized in myself a crucial thing; that is I feel that I am only an Arab; not Egyptian, nor Iraqi, nor Levantine, but rather I am all of those; I am from all of those; I am a part of them.'[64] In the same vein, we need to remember his response to the female student in the Alexandria lecture when he expressed his strong belief in the unity and continuity of the nation of the Arabic tongue since Ismāʿīl up to his time. Observing these two example responses, having Shāker's strong anti-colonialist position in mind, can we draw a picture of an Arabic nationalist thinker?

ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Dūrī (d. 2010), the prominent nationalist Iraqi historian, states that the early forms of Arabic Nationalism in the 19th century were mainly of non-political cultural characteristics that included Islamic and Arabic tributaries in its attempt to rediscover/revive the Arabic civilizational identity. However, the later developments of the movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries shifted to a more reserved standpoint regarding the matter of Islam and a higher political occupation. This observation is not contradictory to the fact that Islam as a cultural and historical foundation kept present in the nationalist sphere of thought, especially in Egypt, more than it was in Iraq or Syria because of the prevalence of anti-ottoman tendencies in these countries. Generally speaking, cultural reliance on Islam and Arabism were juxtaposed for a long time before, as he expressed, 'paths differentiated.'[65]

Shāker's ideation could be linked to such a sphere of thought in that broad sense. If a coercive interpretation is to be accepted, Shāker's idea shares some factors with the early phases of Arabic Nationalism. However, Shāker's outlook differs from the typical form of Arabic Nationalism prevalent in the early and mid-twentieth century in many aspects. As explained earlier, Shāker reserves a very central position for religion in his theory of culture. It is not 'parallel' nor secondary to language or ethnicity, as could be concluded from the available frame of Nationalism. Religion in Shāker's thought is almost congruent with language, culture, and social identity. Also, Shāker does not share any part of the nationalists' reformative standpoint from the pre-modern heritage.[66] Al-Dūrī explicitly states that 'it is an absurdity we speak of obtaining the best of the heritage *turāth* and the best

[60] (al-'Aly 102)
[61] (al-Jerjānī 29)
[62] Ibid.
[63] (al-Ṭabarī 15)
[64] (al-'Aly 102)
[65] (al-Dūrī 66-67)
[66] Ibid., p.67.

of the modern civilization concurrently; this is a romantic unrealism.'[67] These are not the kind of ideas that Shāker would have agreed to. Such heritage is the *sanctum sanctorum* from Shāker's perspective. However, it could be safe to some extent to conclude that Shāker's position could be found in the tangency between Arabic cultural Nationalism and the conservative cultural conscience of Islam.

5. Islamic Pre-Modern Intellectual Tradition

Magdī Wahba considers Maḥmūd Shāker's fame throughout the Arab world 'as a leader of Islamic orthodoxy.'[68] It could be accepted, in a sense, that Shāker was expressing the voice of anti-colonial anger in mainstream Islamic awareness, just as Wahba declared in his discussion. However, Wahba's statement cannot be agreed upon if it implied that Shāker represented the Islamic pre-modern intellectual tradition. Although Shāker was raised in a deeply rooted family in such a scholastic tradition, we cannot extend this representation to him only by familial affiliation. Shāker was not typically an Islamic scholar, though he firmly attached himself to Arabic and Islamic literature. He was not, for instance, a follower of any specific legal, theological, or a *Ṣūfī* pre-modern school. His literary method, which we discussed earlier, is not based on any earlier tradition. Despite that he tried to connect his method to the approaches of some classical authors, such as al-Jerjānī, he explicitly declared that this connection was a retrospective matching that he made by re-interpreting al-Jerjānī's writings in a manner that, I would say, is a bit coercive. His method was not the continuity of any earlier intellectual tradition that he followed or drew upon. Shāker was not approaching pre-modern Islamic literature as a pillar for religious authority or as a reference for Islamic reform. Instead, he was coming it as a foundation for cultural identity that entangles the society's national and religious conscience. In my opinion, Shāker was a litterateur and a literary critic in the first place, who approached the Islamic pre-modern tradition typically as *literature*, not as an educational specialized technical material. I mean that he was technically neither a jurist, theologian, nor a traditionist.

Ahmed Khan describes the scholars' community in the early twentieth century as a 'community in which men of *adab* (letters) were indistinguishable from men of *mutūn* (classical religious texts).'[69] His description should be considered for the dynamic emergence, yet still incomplete, of the differentiated community of the 'men of **Adab'** during that period. Rephrasing Khan's statement may describe the early twentieth century as an age when 'the men of *Adab* were not *yet* fully differentiated from the men working with the *mutūn*.' On such tangencies, Maḥmūd Shāker could be found.

It is clear from the previous discussion that Maḥmūd Shāker's thought was difficult to be contained in a well-defined category. It is not a surprise that Shāker used to feel isolated in the cultural scene in Egypt. Although his house witnessed a weekly assembly of intellectuals of different directions, he expressed his extreme disappointment with the cultural elite in Egypt to his Kuwaiti interviewer, who wondered why Shāker does not enjoy in Egypt the same reputation he enjoys in the Arabic countries. Shāker said in a clear tone of disappointment that 'the Egyptians (i.e., the Egyptian intellects) consider themselves the greatest ever, and one of them does not acknowledge the credit of his brother or teacher.' He excepted only one Egyptian figure who is the novelist Yaḥia Ḥaqqī. [70]His aggressive polemics, side to side with the literary-religious intersections, forced him to be observed in the conservative dogmatic seat. Such rivalries that he gained ended up placing his position more attracted to the *salafī* reformist stance, which he never claimed and persistently negated.

6. Conclusion

Maḥmūd Shāker was an anti-modernist thinker who developed a non-stereotypical stance from Modernity, Colonialism, Orientalism, and contemporary Arab modernists. He developed his literary method that he attributed retrospectively to Islamic pre-modern tradition. Maḥmūd Shāker is a literary critic who could have had some tangencies with many of the famous intellectual trends in the early and mid-twentieth century, such as Salafism, Arabism, Islamism, and Nationalism. However, if a negative definition is sought to describe him, he can be classified under none of these groups. Magdy Wahba may be correct in what he went for; that Maḥmūd Shāker represents the voice of anti-colonial anger in the conscience of the Islamic orthodoxy. However, I believe that Shāker also represents the Islamic societies' unrest quest to connect with self after the identity crisis caused by the colonization processes.

[67] Ibid., p.68.
[68] (Wahba 190)
[69] (Khan 255)
[70] (al-ʿAlī 103)

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