

## The Roots of Sayyid Qutb's Qur'anic Studies, 1939 – 1947

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**Abstract:** The paper is an inquiry into the roots of Sayyid Qutb's Qur'anic studies, 1939 - 1947, which were to pave the way for his commitment to Islam and his emergence as a leading ideologue of the contemporary Islamic movement in Egypt, the Arab and Muslim worlds. Qutb's Qur'anic commentary *Fi Zilal ai-Qur'an* (In the Shades of the Qur'an) which appeared first in early the 1950's and his other controversial Islamic writings have become an integral part of current Islamic resurgence. And like other Muslim revolutionary writers, Qutb's Islamic writings are grounded in and justified by quotations from the Qur'an. This is clearly seen in his major Islamic writings such as *al-'Adalah al-ijtima'iyah fi al- Islam* (Social Justice in Islam) (1949). The paper tries to discuss Qutub's literary career and concerned works to focus on them and to disseminate among the world leaders.

**Key words:** *Qura'nic Studies, Sayyid Qutb's literary works.*

## INTRODUCTION

This is an inquiry into the roots of Sayyid Qutb's Qur'anic studies, 1939 - 1947, which were to pave the way for his commitment to Islam and his emergence as a leading ideologue of the contemporary Islamic movement in Egypt, the Arab and Muslim worlds. Qutb's Qur'anic commentary *Fi Zilal ai-Qur'an* (In the Shades of the Qur'an) which appeared first in early the 1950's and his other controversial Islamic writings have become an integral part of current Islamic resurgence. And like other Muslim revolutionary writers, Qutb's Islamic writings are grounded in and justified by quotations from the Qur'an. This is clearly seen in his major Islamic writings such as *al-'Adalah al-ijtima'iyah fi al- Islam* (Social Justice in Islam) (1949)

In the following pages these topics will be discussed: Qutb's literary career, 1939 - 1947; Qutb's Qur'an of childhood; The beginning of his literary analysis of the Qur'an; Study of Qutb's works, *al-Taswir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an* (Artistic Portrayal in the Qur'an) (1945) and *Mashahid al-Qiyamah fi al-Qur'an* (Scenes of Resurrection in the Qur'an) (1947); reasons behind Qutb's renewed interest in the Qur'an, and early signs of changes in Qutb's orientation.

## QUTB'S LITERARY CAREER, 1939-1947

Qutb's vigorous interest in literary criticism was evident in the dozens of articles which appeared in Cairo's leading literary reviews *al-Risalah* and *al-Thaqafah* at this period. These articles were collected later in his work *Kutub wa-shakhsyat* (Books and Personalities) which was published in 1946.<sup>1</sup>

One critic, Muhammad al-Nuwayhi, who was highly critical of Qutb's attempts to establish a theoretical basis for literary criticism, praises highly his talent for literary analysis and appreciation. He describes Qutb as a "man with pure artistic taste" who was thus instinctively able to convey to his readers the artistic enjoyment he derived from his analysis of a literary text.<sup>ii</sup>

Qutb's career in literary criticism was highlighted by his work **al- Naqd al-adabi: usuluhi wa manahijuhu** (literary Criticism: Its Sources and Methods) which appeared in 1947. Al-Nuwayhi was extremely critical of this work,<sup>iii</sup> but the critic Muhammad Yusef Najm describes it as reflecting a fine taste (dhawq murhaf), a deep original understanding (fahm 'amiq asil), and a comprehensive Arabic education (wa-thaqafah 'Arabiyah shamilah)<sup>iv</sup>.

Qutb describes his critical method as comprehensive (manhaj takamuli), that is, encompassing and utilizing all literary methods, including artistic, historical, and psychological analysis, when passing a comprehensive judgment on a literary work<sup>v</sup>. Qutb. The literary critic, is described by Najm as a self-made critic of al-'Aqqad's school who unlike most Arab literary critics paved his own way in the field without the knowledge of a foreign language or first-hand exposure to Western literary criticism. His exposure came through the Arabic translations of Western-educated writers such as Zaki Najib Mahmud, Muhammad 'Awad Muhammad, Muhammad Mandur, Mahmud al-Ghul, and Nazmi Khalil.<sup>vi</sup> It is worth mentioning that Qutb's exposure to Western literature also came through the translations of his mentor al-'Aqqad and his younger brother Muhammad.<sup>vii</sup>

As a literary critic Qutb figured prominently in the emergence of the novelist Najib Mahfuz from obscurity. According to Mahfuz, the first two critics to review his works in **al-Risalah**, Sayyid Qutb and Anwar al- Ma'adawi, deserve the credit for bringing him into the limelight.<sup>viii</sup> Qutb's prophetic voice and enthusiastic analysis of Mahfuz's work can be seen in his review of **Khan al-Khalili** (1945), a novel about Egyptian society during World War II. Qutb said that the novel portrayed in depth and in a true, precise, simple manner a living picture (surah hayyah) of the air-raids, fears, mentality, and surrounding conditions of the war years. According to Qutb, this novel ought to be singled out in the annals of modern Egyptian literature because it marked a decisive step (khatwat hasimah) toward a national literature with both a pure Egyptian spirit and an international aura. Qutb concluded his review as follows: "I hope that these words will not excite the vanities of the young author whom I hope will be Egypt's writer of the long novel".<sup>ix</sup>

In addition to his critical work, Qutb wrote short novels which included **al-Madinah al-mashurah** (The Bewitched City) in 1946, fashioned after **A Thousand and One Nights**, and **Ashwak** (Thorns) in 1947. It is generally believed that **Ashwak**, which is dedicated to two lovers whose affair comes to a painful end, reflects Qutb's own love affair in the early 1940's, a topic which will be discussed further. In addition, Qutb co-authored several well-known educational manuals in the 1940's, including **al-Qasas al-dini**, **al-Jadid fi al-Iughah al-' Arabiyah**, **Rawdat al- Tifl** and **al-Jadid fi al-mahfuzat**.<sup>x</sup>

## **QUR'AN OF CHILDHOOD**

Qutb's childhood memorization of the Qur'an did not give him a deep insight into the meaning and significance of the Book. However, certain verses did leave a deep impression on his imagination in the form of imagery or personal associations. For example, the imagery of a man praying at the edge of a cliff and on the verge of falling down from it was invoked whenever he read Qur'an 22:11 (**And among mankind is he who worshippeth Allah upon a narrow marge so that if good befalleth him he is content therewith, but if a trial befalleth him he falleth away**

utterly. He loseth both the world and the hereafter).<sup>xi</sup> Another strong impression was the image of a man breathing heavily with mouth wide-open and tongue hanging out, which came to him whenever he read Qur'an 7:175-176 (**recite unto them the tale of him to whom We gave Our revelations, but he sloughed them off, so Satan overtook him and he became of those who lead astray. Therefore his likeness is as the likeness of a dog; if thou attackest him he panteth with his tongue out, and if thou leavest him he panteth with his tongue out**).<sup>xii</sup>

Qutb says that the pleasant, simplified and exciting Qur'an of childhood (Qur'an al-tufulah al- 'adhib, al-muyassar, al-mushawwiq) was transformed, into the difficult, complicated and broken Qur'an of youth (Qur'an al-shabab al- 'asir, al-mumazzaq) as a result of reading Qur'anic commentaries while attending institutions of learning in Cairo.<sup>xiii</sup> Furthermore, Qutb's secular-oriented life in Cairo in the 1920's and the 1930's led to a diminishing of his Islamic beliefs and to extreme doubt about his faith.<sup>xiv</sup> Even so, Qutb admits that "intermittently he felt a secret desire to take comfort in the Qur'an." "These moments," Qutb says, "invigorated him like no other experience did and made him feel that he was indeed standing on firm grounds which had not been desecrated by mud."<sup>xv</sup>

## LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE QUR'AN: THE BEGINNING

By the late 1930's Qutb appears to have rediscovered his "beautiful and beloved Qur'an" (Qur'ani al-jamil al-habib), including its vivid and moving imagery. It occurred to him, as a result, to write about the imagery of the Qur'an from a purely artistic point of view.<sup>xvi</sup> At this stage Qutb was a firm believer in the separation of religion and literature. He held that if the Qur'an were temporarily stripped of its religious sanctity and set aside as a book of legislation and political order, one would find in it a literary work of art, beauty, peculiar charm and abundant imagination, all of which were integral to its 'artistic inimitability' (al-i'jaz al-fanni).<sup>xvii</sup>

Qutb justifies his literary analysis of the Qur'an on the grounds that the nation, in his view, had reached a stage of development which permitted intellectual and psychological luxury. This was different from the stage of necessities in the infancy of the nation, when Muslims necessarily studied the Qur'an as a source of legislation for their daily lives.<sup>xviii</sup>

In his first attempt at Qur'anic literary analysis Qutb focused on such artistic aspects as imagery, tales, dialogues, and expressions. He points out first the charm, narration and imagination to be found in Qur'anic imagery. He marvels, for example, at the simile of the unbeliever and the thirsty man who is deceived by a mirage in the desert; or the simile of the unbeliever and the man who is deceived by darkness at sea, as seen in Qur'an 24:39- 40 (**As for those who disbelieve, their deeds are as a mirage in a desert. The thirsty one supposeth it to be water till he cometh into it and findeth it naught, and findeth, in the place thereof, Allah, Who payeth him his due, and Allah is swift at reckoning. Or as a darkness on a vast, abysmal sea. There covereth him a wave, above which is a wave, above which is cloud. Layer upon Layer of darkness. When he holdeth out his hand he scarce can see it. And he for whom Allah hath not appointed light, for him there is no light.**)<sup>xix</sup>

Likewise, Qutb marvels at the Qur'anic art of storytelling, with its artistic, psychological and philosophical dimensions. He cites the tale of Maryam (Virgin Mary) in Qur'an 19:16-34 which includes all these dimensions, and goes on to describe the dramatic developments of the story. He points to Maryam's dilemma upon being told by the Spirit of Allah that she is pregnant (**she said: How can I have a son when no mortal hath touched me, neither have I been unchaste?**). Her labor pain, deep anxiety, and fear of the adverse reaction of those around her led her to despair and to desire death (**Oh, would that I had died ere this and had become a thing**

**of naught, forgotten!)**. Her fears were in fact confirmed when she received a hostile reception upon returning home with her child (**Oh sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a wicked man nor was thy mother a harlot**). Only divine intervention saved her from the wrath of her people, when the child in the cradle suddenly began to speak (**Lo! I am the slave of Allah. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet. And hath made me blessed wheresoever I may be, and hath enjoined upon me prayer and alms giving so long as I remain alive**).<sup>xx</sup>

Qutb writes in the most glowing terms about artistic dialogue in the Qur'an, saying that it transcends imagination. In illustration he cites several Qur'anic dialogues, including that between the dwellers of Heaven and Hell in Qur'an 7:44, (**And the dwellers of the Garden cry unto the dwellers of the Fire: We have found that which our Lord promised us (to be) the Truth. Have ye (too) found that which your Lord promised the Truth? They say: Yea, verily. And a crier in between them crieth: The curse of Allah is on evil-doers**).<sup>xxi</sup>

Qutb then goes on to examine the artistic expressions of the Qur'an, describing them as brief though paramount in precision and beauty. He cites Qur'an 82; 18 (**And the morning when it breathes) (wa-al-Subh idha tanaffas)** as an example of a Qur'anic expression which invokes imageries of vitality and activity in a living creation.<sup>xxii</sup>

Qutb concludes his article with an attempt to place the artistic imagery of the Qur'an in one of the literary traditions of classicism, symbolism, realism, and romanticism. He suggests that Qur'anic imagery is akin to romanticism, terming it the 'light kind of romanticism' which is devoid of constraints and artificiality and which reflects Arab mentality and specifically forms of Arabic expression. For the Qur'an was addressed to the Arabs first and in Qutb's view, represents the highest stage of inimitability in Arab eloquence.<sup>xxiii</sup>

In the five years following the publication of his preliminary articles on the artistic aspects of the Qur'an, Qutb maintained fluctuating literary interest in the subject but did not publish any new study. The more he read the Qur'an and realized its artistic inimitability, the more the idea of writing an expanded study appealed to him.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Qutb also began to feel at this time that Qur'anic portrayal (taswir) is not separable from the rest of the Qur'an, but rather forms the basis of expression (qa'idat al-ta'bir) for all the Qur'anic purposes, save for the sections dealing with legislation.<sup>xxv</sup> It was upon Qutb's discovery of this underlying unity that he decided to resume his writing on Qur'anic imagery. In 1944 he published articles in Cairo's monthly review **al-Risalah** in which he called for the adoption of the Qur'anic artistic method of portrayal in modern literature so as to raise it to loftier horizons. Qutb also expressed astonishment at both ancient and modern Arabic literatures for their failure to utilize the artistic method of the "First Book of the Arabs".<sup>xxvi</sup>

This and similar articles were highlighted by the appearance of Qutb's two major works on the literary aspects of the Qur'an, **al-taswir al-fanni fi al-Qur'an** (Artistic Portrayal in the Qur'an) and **Mashahid al-qiyamah fi al-Qur'an** (Scenes of Resurrection in the Qur'an) in Cairo in 1945 and 1947 respectively. According to Qutb, his basic goal in these works was to restore the Qur'an to one's hearts in a way similar to how the Arabs first received it and were charmed by it; to present it in such a way as to rid it of the baggage of linguistic, syntactical, juristic, historical and mythical commentaries, and to bring out its artistic aspects and literary peculiarities, and in the process awaken the feelings to its beauty.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Furthermore, Qutb says that he attempted to present Qur'anic scenes as portrayed by the clear outward expression (zahir al-lafz al-wadih). He thus sought to avoid complicating them with

unnecessary interpretation and discussions. Qutb adds that, in his own belief, the Arabs first received the artistic beauty of the Qur'an in such a manner as to deepen their feelings and shake their souls, and that the later Qur'anic commentators and interpreters complicated this response.<sup>xxviii</sup>

It should be noted that Qutb's interest in the Qur'an at this stage was by his own admission, purely artistic (*hadafi huna hadafun fanniyun khalisun*). In other words, he professed to be influenced only by his sense of being an independent artistic critic (*bi-hasat al-naqid al-fanni al-mustaqil*). If the excellence of art and the sanctity of religion happened to coincide, he added, it would be purely unintentional and would not influence his beliefs (*fa-idha iltaqat fi al-nihaya bara'at al-fann bi-qadasat al-din, fa-tilka natijah lamm aqsid ilayha wa-lamm ata'aththaru biha*).<sup>xxix</sup> Qutb's preoccupation with the purely artistic features of the Qur'an at this stage, according to 'Azm, was criticized by the leader of the Muslim Brothers, Hasan al-Banna (1906 - 1949), for intentionally ignoring the religious aspects of the Book.<sup>xxx</sup>

### AL-TASWIR AL-FANNI FI AL-QUR'AN

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine in detail the content of **al-Taswir al-fanni fi al-Qur'an** (1945). Therefore, only the highlights and pertinent material will be discussed. This work is considered to be the foundation of Qutb's Qur'anic studies and to have had a great influence on his Qur'anic commentary, **Fi Zilal al-Qur'an**, which appeared in the 1950's and 1960's.<sup>xxxi</sup>

Upon completing the writing of *al-Taswir*, Qutb says he experienced the rebirth of the Qur'an within himself. He had already experienced the Qur'an as being beautiful within himself, but the beauty had been composed of fragmented parts. Now, by contrast, the Qur'an appeared to him to be one united sentence based on a "special rule", with a wondrous coordination he had never dreamed possible.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Qutb maintains throughout **al-Taswir** that the Qur'an has a unified artistic method of expression (*tariqah muwahhadah fi al-ta'bir*) used for all purposes, including demonstration and argumentation. Qutb introduces this main thesis by examining what he considers to be the charm of the Qur'an and its source. In doing so, he cites the story of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab whose decision to become Muslim was greatly influenced by the charm of the Qur'an.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Qutb sees the sources of this charm in the beautiful, effective, expressive and picturesque Qur'anic expressions found in the early Meccan Chapters which, he says, bewitched the pagans into accepting Islam.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Qutb also devotes some attention to the historical development of Qur'anic study and interpretation. In his view, Qur'anic study in the form of exegesis was initiated by some companions of the Prophet and was expanded greatly by the end of the second century of the Hijrah. However, instead of studying the artistic beauty and its harmony with the religious beauty, later commentators engulfed themselves deeply in the juristic, dialectical, grammatical, syntactical, historical and other aspects of the Qur'an.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Those commentators who studied the inimitability of the Qur'an, Qutb says, did have the opportunity to examine its artistic method, but instead they occupied themselves in studies dealing with "utterance and meaning" (*al-lafz wa-al-ma'na*), and their relationship to rhetoric. Only two scholars, 'Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani and, to a lesser extent, al-Zamakhshari, went beyond the confines of "utterance and meaning" to show awareness of Qur'anic artistic imagery.<sup>xxxvi</sup> However, none dealt as Qutb himself did with the general characteristics which bring out the artistic merits of the Qur'an.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Qutb then moves on to concentrate his discussion on Qur'anic artistic portrayal pointing out that portrayal is the favorite device of the Qur'anic style. In his view this portrayal is full of color, motion, and rhythm. Often description, dialogue, words, and expressions help to magnify imagery and make it lively and human.<sup>xxxviii</sup> As an example, of mental meanings (ma'ani dhihniyah) reproduced in sensual image, Qutb cites Qur'an 7:40, in which the impossibility of non-believers entering Heaven is vividly likened to the impossibility of a camel entering a needle's eye (**Lo! they who deny Our revelations and scorn them, for them the gates of Heaven will not be opened nor will they enter the Garden until the camel goeth through the needle's eye. Thus do We require the guilty**).<sup>xxxix</sup>

Qutb then elaborates on the methods which form the basis of Qur'anic portrayal, namely, 'sensual dramatization' (al-takhyil al-hissi) and 'magnification' (tajsim). By the technique of 'sensual dramatization' the Qur'an imparts to solid objects and natural phenomena a life akin to that of humans.<sup>xl</sup> A case in point is Qur'an 81:18 (**And the morning when it breathes**).<sup>xli</sup> Here a human quality, that is, breathing, is ascribed to the morning. 'Magnification' (al-tajsim), in Qutb's scheme, gives meanings and states, dealing with ma'nawiyat (mores) magnified images and forms. The Qur'an applies this technique when it likens sins to loads (ahmal) that are carried on one's back, and when it describes the suffering of sinners as being thick (ghaliz) and the days of sinners as being heavy (thaqil).<sup>xlii</sup>

Qutb points out that anthropomorphic Qur'anic expressions such as "**The Hand of Allah is above their hands.**" **His Throne on the water**", and "**He sat on the throne**" -- expressions which have aroused heated dialectical theological debates on the past -- are examples of dramatization and magnification used for the simple purpose of clarifying abstract meanings.<sup>xliii</sup>

Qutb also discusses the artistic symmetry (al-tanasuq al-fanni) of the Qur'anic portrayal, noting an underlying musical rhythm which performs a basic harmonizing task in Qur'anic rhetoric. This internal harmony stands out in shorter Qur'anic (Surahs) and diminishes in longer ones. A typical instance is Qur'an 53: 1-5:

*By the star when it setteth,  
(wa-al-najm idha hawa)  
Your comrade erreth not, nor is deceived;  
(ma dalla sahibukum wa-ma ghawa)  
Nor doth he speak of (his own) desire,  
(was-ma yantiqu an al-hawa)  
It is naught save an inspiration that is inspired,  
(in huwa illa wahyun yuha)  
Which One of mighty powers hath taught him,  
(‘allamahu shadidu al-quwa)<sup>xliv</sup>*

and Qur'an 79: 1-59

*By those who drag forth to destruction,  
(wa-al-nazi'ati gharqan)  
By the meteors rushing,  
(wa-al-nashitati nashtan)  
By the lone stars floating,  
(wa-al-sabihati sabhan)  
By the angels hastening,  
(fa-al-sabiqati sabqan)*

*And those who govern the event,  
(fa-al-mudabbirati amran)<sup>xlv</sup>*

The difficulty of separating the artistic and religious aspects of the Qur'an is evident when Qutb examines the Qur'anic tale. Despite his declared intent to deal only with the literary aspects of the Qur'an, it is clear that Qutb gradually began to emphasize the religious rather than the artistic aspect. This was especially true when, in writing about the purposes of dramatic narrative in the Qur'an, he devoted much space to a discussion of purely religious purposes. His outline of the major purposes includes the following: The confirmation of the truth of the Revelation of Allah's Message, the reaffirmation that true religion from Noah to Muhammad was from Allah, the reiteration that Unitarianism (al-Tawhid) is the basis of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the assertions that the means utilized by the Prophets and their experiences with their people were the same in the different monotheistic religions and that the religions of Muhammad and Ibrahim were the same. Other purposes include the declarations that Allah supports and blesses his prophets and his sincere friends, that Satan is the enemy of the children of Adam, and that Divine and human wisdom are far apart.

Qutb also points out the subordination of the narrative to the religious message. This subordination is apparent in the repetition of parts of tales in different chapters of the Qur'an. The tale of the Prophet Moses, for example, appears in no less than twelve chapters.<sup>xlvi</sup> This subordination is also manifested in the variety with which the tales in the Qur'an are treated. Sometimes a tale is presented from the beginning of the story, as in the tales of the births of Jesus, Mary, and Moses. Sometimes a tale is taken up at a later stage of the story, as in the tales of Joseph, Ibrahim, David and Solomon. Some tales are detailed like those of Joseph, Ibrahim and Solomon, while others are given only briefly, like those of Hud, Salih, Lut, Shu'ayab, Zakariya and Ayyub. Finally, the tale's subordination can be seen in the frequent incorporation of religious directives as prologues or epilogues to them.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Sayyid Qutb's first major work on the Literary analyses of the Qur'an was received with mixed reaction. The young Egyptian novelist Najib Mahfouz thought very highly of this work as a reader's guide to the literary beauty of the Qur'an. (**al-Risalah**, Cairo, 23 April 1945).

On the other hand, as seen earlier, Qutb's work was sharply criticized by the leader of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, Hasan al-Banna for intentionally ignoring the religious aspects of the Qur'an. In addition, an **al-Ahram's** literary critic, Bint ash-Shati' did not consider Qutb's work as a break through in the literary study of the Qur'an. She asserted that others in the Egyptian University of Cairo paved the way for Sayyid Qutb (that is Amin al-Khouly, her teacher at the University and later her husband). Even though the name of al-Khouly was not injected in the debate that ensued, it was clear to Qutb that al-Khouly was behind Bint al-Shati's assertions.

Qutb's hostility toward al-Khouly surfaced with the appearance of the controversial doctoral dissertation of Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah titled **al-Fann-qisasi fi al-Qur'ann al-Karim** (1947) in which the author questioned the integrity and rejected the historical framework of the Qur'anic tale. Amin al-Khouly supported whole heartedly his student Khalafallah's controversial work as seen in his preface to the different editions of the book.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Sayyid Qutb directed his hostility to Khalafallah's mentor and chair of his dissertation, al-Khouly, mounting a bitter personal attack against the latter in a Cairo's leading publication, **al-Wadi**.<sup>xlix</sup>

## MASHAHID AL QIYAMAH FI AL-QUR'AN

In this second major literary-oriented Qur'anic work, **Mashahid al- Qiyamah fi al-Qur'an**, which appeared in 1947, Qutb applies the views articulated in **al-Taswir** to the Qur'anic chapter and verses dealing with the scenes of Resurrection (al-qiyamah).<sup>1</sup> In a long introduction to this work Qutb surveys the development of the idea of the "other world" (al- 'Alam al-Akhar) in human consciousness, beginning with the ancient Egyptians and continuing with the Persians, Greeks, Romans, Hindus, Jews, and Christians.<sup>ii</sup>

In Qutb's view, the Qur'anic portrayal of the "other world" is unprecedented because of its deep impact on the mind, the comprehensiveness of its imagery and the purity of its conception.<sup>iii</sup> He says that the idea of the "other world" in the Qur'an is as simple and clear as the Islamic system of belief itself. It deals with death, resurrection, happiness and suffering. Those who believe and do good deeds are bound for heaven and happiness, while those who do not are bound for hell and suffering.

Qutb finds in each resurrection scene a symmetry between the parts of the scene, the expressions used, and the underlying rhythm and music.<sup>liii</sup> In the rest of the book, Qutb presents the Qur'anic verses which deal with the resurrection scenes and analyzes them according to the principles enunciated in **al-Taswir**. Thus the scene of Resurrection in Qur'an 81: 1-14 is given as follows:

*When the sun is overthrown, And when the stars fall,  
And when the hills are moved,  
And when the camels big with young are abandoned,  
And when the wild beasts are herded together,  
And when the seas rise,  
And when souls are reunited,  
And when the girl-child that was buried alive is asked,  
For what sin she was slain.  
And when the pears are laid open,  
And when the sky is torn away,  
And when hell is lighted,  
And when the garden is brought nigh,  
(Then) every soul will know what it had made ready.<sup>liv</sup>*

Qutb describes this scene as portraying a total overthrow of everything familiar and a comprehensive revolution of all existing entities. Participating in this overthrow and revolution are the heavenly bodies, the beasts, domesticated birds, human souls, and so on. The opening scene is a calamitous movement which turns everything upside down, excites the calm and frightens the secure. The music and rhythm which underlay the scene are breathlessly rapid, reflecting the calamity.<sup>lv</sup>

## REASONS FOR QUTB'S INTEREST IN THE QUR'AN

### *Renewed Interest in Islamics Among the Literati*

Qutb's renewed interest in the Qur'an in 1939 and thereafter should be seen within the larger context of the renewed interest of liberal literati in Islamics in the 1930's and 1940's. This is the period which saw the proliferation of Islamic works, especially Islamic history and biography, on the Egyptian literary scene. In these works can be seen a search for ideals and values drawn from Arabic Islamic history and tradition, which was inspired by resentment against Western



hegemony in Egypt and the Arab world and a gradual loss of faith in the popular appeal of liberal nationalist parliamentary ideals.<sup>lvi</sup>

For example, the one-time bastion of secular liberal ideas and Pharaohism, the weekly **al-Siyasah** of Muhammad Husayn Haykal, changed its orientation during this period, adopting an Islamic tone and topics. Haykal himself wrote a biography of the Prophet (1935) and argued that "the Egyptian cultural soil was inhospitable to any but Muslim-inspired ideals and values".<sup>lvii</sup> Qutb's mentor, al-'Aqqad, in 1942, likewise, wrote a biography of the Prophet, which was followed by similar works on the Caliph Umar (1942), the Caliph Abu Bakr (1943), the Prophet's wife 'A'ishah (1943), the Caliph 'Ali (1944) and 'Ali's son al-Husayn (1944), among others. In fact, all the senior literati including Haykal, Taha Husayn, al-'Aqqad, Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ahmad Amin, concentrated their efforts on Islamic biographies and history.<sup>lviii</sup> Qutb, however, chose an independent path by concentrating on the literary analysis of the Qur'an.

Thus the literary atmosphere in Cairo was conducive for Islamic-oriented writings. The more prominent literati took the lead and the younger generation, including Qutb, followed.

### ***Personal Reasons: the death of Qutb's Mother***

Qutb's study of the Qur'an was not merely "intellectual and psychological luxury", as he termed the literary analysis he pursued in his first Qur'anic study, but was apparently a psychological and spiritual necessity. As mentioned earlier, Qutb admitted that during his secular life in Cairo in the 1930's and 1940's he felt persistent secret desire to take comfort in the Qur'an because it gave him the feeling of standing on firm ground. The Qur'an was a comforting refuge from the pain of the environment in which he lived. Qutb's unhappiness in Cairo was reflected in his poetry of the heart in the 1930's and it continued to manifest itself in his prose and verse of the 1940's when he described himself as that fugitive young man, a lover of the impossible, who seeks what he cannot find and is bored with all what he attains.<sup>lix</sup>

The death of Qutb's mother Fatimah, in October 1940, was a major blow which partially explains Qutb's increased interest in the Qur'an at that period. Fatimah's influence on Qutb was enormous in instilling in him a deep sense of mission which was to remain with him until his execution in 1966. Upon her death he writes: "Mother who will narrate to me the tales of my childhood in which you portray me as if I were of a unique texture (nasij farid) which made me think that I was great and required to live up to this greatness?"<sup>lx</sup> He says further: "Mother... to whom do I ascend the step of life and who will celebrate when I am ascending ... Maybe many will rejoice ... but your celebration is unique because it is the rejoicing of the skilful cultivator who realizes the fruits of his cultivation and efforts."<sup>lxi</sup>

Fatimah's death was also devastating because Sayyid was not married and she had been a major source of emotional support. Since the death of his father (ca. 1933), she had also shared with him the responsibility of raising his brother Muhammad and his sisters Hamidah and Aminah. He writes again: "Only today have I felt the heavy burden ... because as long as you lived I was strengthened by you. But now that you are gone I am alone and weak".<sup>lxii</sup> The impact of her death can be seen in **al-Atyaf al-Arba'ab** (The Four Phantoms), which was written by her children in 1945. In their joint dedication, Hamidah, Aminah, Muhammad and Sayyid write: "After we had

lost our father and migrated from our home to Cairo we have lived like strangers. However, your death had left us alienated. We have become lost plants without roots and perplexed phantoms without a dwelling.<sup>lxiii</sup> Qutb describes himself and his brother and sisters as strangers without a mother.<sup>lxiv</sup>

### ***Personal Reasons: Shattered Love Affair***

Another event which partially explains Qutb's increasing interest in the Qur'an was the unsuccessful love affair (around 1942 or 1943) which is depicted in his prose and verse. Following his mother's death it appears that Qutb sought to fill the void in his life through marriage, and consequently he fell in love and was engaged. However, problems developed which led to the breaking of the engagement. Deeply shattered, Qutb was never again seriously involved with a woman. It is generally believed that Qutb's novel **Ashwak** (Thorns), which appeared in Cairo in 1947, reflects this disastrous affair.<sup>lxv</sup> Qutb dedicates his work "to the one who plunged into the thorns with me, bled as I bled, became miserable as I became miserable, and went her own way as I went mine: both wounded after the battle ..."<sup>lxvi</sup>

The impact of this affair is evident in Qutb's prose and verse in the early 1940's. His unhappiness is evident in his poem entitled "**Hilm al- Hayah**" (The Dream of Life), in which he laments the lost dream which idealized his love and gave meaning to his life.<sup>lxvii</sup>

In another poem, entitled "**Nida' al-Kharif**" (the Call of Autumn), Qutb calls on his love to return to their love nest, because the days of their lives are running out without hope or reunion. The renewing of their love, Qutb says, will invigorate their lives.<sup>lxviii</sup> Later he refers to his love as a "forbidden fruit" (al-fakihah al-muharramah) which leaves him suspended between heaven and earth. For he hates and loves life for her sake and runs aimlessly, only to return to seek life from her. He describes his idealized love as a myth, a child, a snake, a gazelle, a saint, a nun. He concludes by saying: "Oh Fate (Qadar); Why did you put her in my way and make her a forbidden fruit? I hear, Oh, Fate, your severe and mocking judgment."<sup>lxix</sup>

A year later (1944) Qutb was still pondering his unhappiness and his shattered love. He says that he does not grieve the girl he loved, but the youngster within himself who was full of excitement and idealized love but who is no longer there.<sup>lxx</sup>

### ***Personal Reasons: Qutb's Health***

Another development which partially explains Qutb's renewed interest in the Qur'an at this time was his poor state of health. Although it cannot be proven that Qutb has suffered from poor health since early youth, there is evidence of ill health in his writings from September 1940.<sup>lxxi</sup> In November 1945 Qutb reports that he was ill for four months.<sup>lxxii</sup> In July 1946 Qutb remarks sarcastically that he has consumed half of the medicine in Hulwan's pharmacy.<sup>lxxiii</sup> He was also reported hospitalized during his stay in the United State (1948 - 1950).<sup>lxxiv</sup> In January 1952 he was reported to have serious eyes problems. In the same month he was reported generally ill.<sup>lxxv</sup>

It has been suggested that Qutb's health deteriorated in the aftermath of his parents' deaths. The attendant anxiety, responsibility for his brother and two sisters, and the frustrations of his career could well have contributed to the development of the stomach, lung and heart ailments which were to become more noticeable and serious in the 1950's and 1960's after having been exacerbated by his imprisonment between 1954 and 1964. It is certainly not unlikely that a man afflicted with sickness and other personal problems; without the comfort of a mother or wife, would turn to his religion for refuge. In the case of Qutb, it was the Qur'an that increasingly became his refuge.

## EARLY SIGNS OF CHANGES IN QUTB'S ORIENTATION

Despite the fact that Qutb was stressing the purely artistic or literary goal of his Qur'anic studies, one should not underestimate the long-lasting spiritual effect of his deep submergence in the Qur'an, especially at a time when he was experiencing personal crisis and his society was passing through unprecedented turmoil resulting from the social, political, and economic dislocations of the World War II period, 1939-1945. In a conversation with the Indian Muslim scholar Abulhasan 'Ali Nadawi in 1951, Qutb acknowledged that his literary analysis of the Qur'an gradually led him to take a deeper interest in its religious message, which eventually influenced him and guided him to faith.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

One can, therefore, observe in this period some changes in Qutb's attitude toward poetry and the infinite. By late 1943 he had begun to have doubts about poetry of the psychological states, that is, subjective poetry of the heart, which he had been composing and championing since the beginning of his literary career. Qutb still believed in it, seeing it as a specimen of the highest ideal of modern poetry, but now he saw it as being limited in its horizons (mahdud al-ufuq) and was not in itself able to fulfill his need for the infinite.<sup>lxxvii</sup>

Qutb's continual but fruitless search for the infinite (al-ghayr mahdud, al-taliq) finally comes to a triumphant conclusion:

*Indeed there is a sole consolation. There is the God (al-Ilah) who has no beginning and no end and who is free from all restraints. Oh Mighty God.: I love you because you are the only infinite (ghayr al-mahdud) in this existence. I love you because you are the only hope for the human heart when it becomes confined within limits.*<sup>lxxviii</sup>

## EMERGENCE OF QUTB THE MORALIST

This development should be seen in the light of the ravaging impact of World War II upon Egyptian society. Safran points out the following:

*The millions (sic) of foreign troops that passed through the major cities of Egypt helped bring about a complete erosion of public morality. The mass of well-paid, easy-spending, pleasure-seeking soldiers, themselves torn from their social roots and controls, spread a mood of "eat and drink for tomorrow we die", which ...*

*was extremely provoking to Egyptians. The sight of well-fed alien troops in the midst of widespread want and deprivation aroused the envy of the people, and their indulgence in the pursuit of sex and drink hurt the moral sensibilities of most Egyptians... Moreover, the generally arrogant behavior of the troops stirred their nationalist and xenophobic feelings.*<sup>lxxxix</sup>

These developments helped foster an atmosphere which was seen by many, including Qutb, as contributing to the decay of public morality and institutions. The deep impact of these developments upon Qutb can be seen clearly in his later Islamic writings. For example, in his **Ma'rakat al-Islam wa-al-ra'smaliyah** (The Battle of Islam and Capitalism), Qutb reminds his readers of the treatment accorded the Egyptians by the Allied soldiers during World War II. He accuses the soldiers of crushing Egyptians with their cars like dogs and of trampling Egyptian dignity and honor. Qutb also recalls the soldiers' looks of disdain at the Egyptian police and army officers.<sup>lxxx</sup>

The emergence of Qutb the stem moralist should not be seen merely as a development of the 1940's. Rather, moralism had been ingrained in him by his upbringing and environment. Qutb had been brought up in a rural environment which he refers to as "conservative and clean". As an adult, he maintains that he led a serious life which allowed no time for play. He also believed that poetry and art had preserved his imagination from pollution.<sup>lxxxii</sup> Qutb was always proud of his rural origin, holding the opinion that rural people were more authentic, with more fortitude and a purer conscience than the urban people of Cairo.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

According to Qutb, the essence of ethics is not represented by the acts of those who avoid evil for fear of the suffering of the day of reckoning, or by the acts of those who avoid crime for fear of the penal code.<sup>lxxxiii</sup> Rather its essence is represented by those who possess true manhood and its virtues, which include fortitude, courage in helping others, compassion, confidence with dignity, affection and responsibility. It is also represented by sound womanhood and its virtues, which include shyness, mercy, and sacrifice. It is represented, further, by virtues common to man and woman alike, namely, sensitivity of conscience, exaltedness of self, purity of feelings, and clean speech. Any attempt to destroy these virtues is, according to Qutb, an evil act which should be resisted because it entails the destruction of character and society.<sup>lxxxiv</sup> With these ethical standards as his guide Qutb began in 1940 to articulate publicly his criticism of what appeared to him to be moral decay in Egyptian society.

Qutb, the outspoken moralist, can be seen emerging publicly in 1940 in the many articles he wrote attacking the prevailing public morality of Egypt, including the part played by the entertainment sector of society in demoralizing the will of the people. He criticized the younger generation and their way of life, and also attacked what he considered to be the disgraceful behavior of the "aristocrats" who bathed on Alexandria's beaches, accusing them of being alien to the Egyptians and their culture.<sup>lxxxv</sup>

Finally, Qutb calls the moral decay of society a (mihnah) tribulation, an integral part of the tribulation of humanity that resulted from the adoption of the materialistic civilization of Europe. He says:

*How I hate and despise this European civilization and eulogize humanity which is being tricked by its luster, noise, and sensual enjoyment in which the soul suffocates and the conscience dies down (yakhfut), while instincts and senses become intoxicated, quarrelsome and excited.*<sup>lxxxvi</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Qutb's vigorous interest in literary criticism in the 1930's and 1940's branched into the literary analysis of artistic imagery and portrayal in the Qur'an. In February and March 1939 Qutb's articles on this subject appeared in Cairo's leading cultural and scientific monthly review, al-Muqtataf, where he pointed out, inter alia, the inimitability (i'jaz) of the Qur'anic literary style and called for a comprehensive study of the Qur'an as a literary text. Qutb's interest in the Qur'an in 1939, albeit for literary purposes only, can be seen as the first major sign of the change that was to take place in his intellectual orientation and the beginning of his trek in search of an Islamic ideology. According to Qutb himself, the Qur'an, more than any other single factor, was instrumental in leading him out of the turbulence he experienced in his fruitless search for the infinite into a strong belief in the Islamic way of life.

Qutb's emergence as a serious student of the Qur'an was accompanied by his emergence as a moralist and as an anti-Western, anti-establishment intellectual. These mutually reinforcing developments were, like the Qur'anic teachings, crucially significant in the makeup of Qutb's ideology in the late 1940's, 1950's and 1960's.

By the mid-1940's, Qutb, the long-time supporter of the Wafd party in 1920's and 1930's, had become disillusioned with the prevailing political system. He accused Egyptian political parties, including the Wafd, of indifference to the social ills of Egyptian society and asserted that social justice in Egypt was non-existent. He called for the reform of the programs of the existing political parties or the creation of new parties with a constructive mentality. He also directed his attacks against the privileged in society and against the accommodation of the British by Egyptian politicians, reminding his readers of Egypt's heroes of the near past, including Mustafa Kamil and Sa'd Zaghlul, who stood up for Egypt and its independence.

Qutb's interest in the Qur'an was not merely an "intellectual and psychological luxury" as he termed the literary analysis of the sacred Book, but was apparently a psychological and spiritual necessity. The Qur'an was a comforting refuge from the pain of the environment in which he lived. His unhappiness in Cairo was very much evident in his poetry and prose works in the 1930's and 1940's. Furthermore, the death of Qutb's mother, his shattered love affair and his poor health in the 1940's together with his alienation from the status quo, prompted him to turn increasingly toward his religion for his personal needs and for answers to his nation's ills.

World War II and the economic, political and social dislocations it caused further alienated one-time adherents of liberal nationalist ideals like Qutb. The war's impact on Qutb cannot be over

emphasized. Its adverse effects are very much reflected in Qutb's writing, as it was this period, 1939-1945, that many drastic changes began to take place in Qutb's outlook including his emergency as a moralist.

In conclusion, one needs mention that there had been a trend among some Islamist writers to refute all Qutb's intellectual output, especially the secular oriented literary works that appeared prior to Qutb's joining the Islamic call. It was alleged by these writers that Qutb himself had disavowed his secular-oriented works. However, this latter claim was not substantiated or documented.

A case in point is Muhammad Tawfiq Barkat's work on Sayyid Qutb (Beirut, Dar al-Da'wah, n.d.) in which the author questions all those who take interest in Qutb's alleged un-Islamic works. However, this militant stand by some authors led other Islamists to sharply criticize them. Salah "Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi a devout biographer of Sayyid Qutb in his work **al-Taswir al-fanni 'ind Sayyid Qutb** (Amman, Jordan, Dar al- Furqan, 1983) accused the likes of the above mentioned authors of unfairly discarding 45 years of Qutb's life.

The general trend among Sayyid Qutb's biographers, however, is to take all stages of Qutb's life on equal footing as to crystalize a holistic picture of Sayyid Qutb's life and thought.

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