

MODERN TAFSIR – SAYYID QUTB AS A TRAILBLAZER

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1. Introduction: The Man

1.01 Birth and Parentage

Sayyid bin Qutb bin Ibrahim, an Islamic thinker, author, public administrator and Qur'anic exegete, was born in a village called Moshe in the Asyut district of Egypt on 9 October, 1906 (Ramadan 1324)¹. He was born to the family of notables respected for their deep religious inclination and learning. Thus, he grew up as a devout Muslim; he memorized the Qur'an before his tenth birthday. His father was a politician who belonged to the nationalist party of Mustafa Kamal known as 'Hisbul-Ummah. His uncle Ahmad Hussayn, with whom he stayed when he later moved to Cairo in 1920 for further studies, was a member of Wafd – the major nationalist movement or force in Egypt in the 1920s and 30s. Apart from the political inclination of the family, Egyptian society was overwhelmed with strong sentiments against British occupation or colonization since 1882 and the unabated domination of Egypt's social, political, cultural, educational and economic life².

1:02 Educational Career

Young Sayyid started schooling in the year 1912 and accomplished his primary education in his village (Moshe) in 1918. Owing to the revolution against British rule in 1919, he could not continue his education for two years. Having graduated from the local state school, he proceeded to Cairo to complete his education. In 1922, he joined the Abdul Azeez Teacher Training College and graduated in 1925 with the qualification for the Tajhiziyyah Darul-Ululm (a preparatory section of the modern Teacher Training College). The study was designed to last for four years while only those of exemplary and brilliant performance were given admission (indeed first class material).

Thus, in 1929, he gained admission into Darul Ulum, the city's Modern Teacher Training College that Imam Hassan al-Bana had attended ten years earlier. As the college offered modern subjects, Sayyid became acquainted with Western literature, which he for sometime had greatly admired. He graduated in 1933 with a Bachelor of Arts in Arabic literature. He later proceeded to the United States of America for further studies. Much shall be said on this later.

1.03 His Intellectual Orientation

Many reasons had been advanced for Sayyid's intellectual efficacy. It was said that the activities and ideas of Mahmud Abbas al-Aqad, a journalist, essayist and novelist who was renowned for writing a series of books about prophets, exerted a great influence on Sayyid Qutb⁴. It has to be stated that Mahmud was a loyal member of the Wafd Party so long as Zaad Zaghloul was the leader. He disengaged himself from the party when Nahas Pasha became the party's helmsman. His writings, especially about the prophets, most particularly Prophet Muhammed (SAW) and his companions, were informed as a result of his discontent with the party's programmes and the mass corruption of the Egyptian society. This he did with a view to sanitize the society and bring about an Islamic resurgence or a moral regeneration. And this had a great impression on Sayyid.

Thus, when Taha Husayn, the first graduate of Egypt's first modern University, the first indigenous Dean of its Faculty of Arts and of course the first African to be nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, tended towards Western modernism, thereby portraying Egypt as part of the West and prescribing several measures which were considered anti-ethical to Islam, Sayyid quickly digested the work and in no time wrote a rejoinder to it. The rejoinder was widely accepted

and re-published in the journal of the Muslim Brotherhood⁵.

Thus, partly as a result of his family background and partly because of the influence of the writings and ideas of Mahmud, he developed a great interest in and for intellectual pursuits. He became a journalist, a renowned poet and short story writer. He became very productive and impeccable in the literary and social debate of his time, and this, by and large, culminated in his publishing a lot of works on poetry and literary criticism with the intent of exhibiting Islam as the true way of life. His first work on Islam, 'At-Taswir al-fanniy fil-Qur'an' was published in 1945, a study of the linguistic excellence of the Qur'an. This signifies the dawn of his Islamic awakening. He thoroughly and sincerely studied the Qur'an and exclaimed that he had found solutions to burning issues troubling his mind.

Contrary to his political career which had started earlier as a result of his relation or contact with the Wafd Party and which was borne out of his uncle and al-Aqad's influence, he later emancipated himself from political affiliations in the mid-forties after becoming disenchanted. He then associated himself with Islamic struggle. Though his first work was published with the assistance of Al-Aqad, he dissociated himself from him and his school of thought because of his active involvement in Islamic struggle. Just immediately after the Second

World War, the theme and focus of his work changed to Islam and the Egyptian society with the popular aim of bringing about a resurgence. A graphic picture of this transfiguration was painted thus by John Esposito:

During the fifties, Qutb emerged as a major voice of the Muslim Brotherhood and its most influential ideologue...⁶

He wrote a lot of biographical novels as well as general works on poetry. He published his "Social Justice in Islam" in 1948. He established in the book that Islam, as against Christianity, Communism as well as every other ideology and or way of life, has its own social system that makes it distinct from others. He opined that while Christianity sees man from the spiritual standpoint, Communism from material needs, Islam strikes a balance between the two conflicting and parallel perspectives to suit the nature of man who was created from spirit and matter.⁷

Being a courageous and vociferous critic he usually criticized the views of Taha Husayn and other modernists who he considered as recalcitrant to the nascent Islamic resurgence. His thought provoking and unpendatic articles against the British and its cohorts gave him friends and foes alike. He was respected, honoured and admired by Egyptians and was greatly venerated by the nationalist Islamic tendency. He,

on the other hand, as a result of his frantic and frontal attack on the monarch, even with his determination to die for the purpose of bringing Allah's earth under Allah's hegemony, was arrested by King Farouk in the late forties. He escaped owing to his past affiliation to the Wafd Party⁸. It was equally claimed by Muhammed Heikal that Qutb was equally influenced by the writings of Abul-Ala Mawdudi⁹.

1.04 His Experience in the United States

Sayyid, the great man of letters and intellectual efficacy was sent by the Ministry of Education to study for his Master's degree in the United States¹⁰. This was done purposely to silence and check his angry voice and the power of his pen. However, to their utter dismay, it only raised his tempo and improved his zeal. Rather than suppressing him, with his high sense of justice, literary and linguistic prowess and spiritual inclination, he was attracted to the 'Ikhwanul-Muslimun' in Egypt¹¹. Perhaps what was intended was to exile him for sometime and the fact that perchance if he was made to study in America he might become westernized. He left for the United States on 3 December, 1948, boarding a ship only to rediscover Islam and become its ardent advocate. It was on record that for

the first two years of his stay there he wandered about from one state to another and from one University or institute to another¹². Sayyid was indeed a man of vision and mission.

Equipped with sound knowledge, sound moral background, spiritual uprightness and several other virtues, the social degeneration, fraud, dissoluteness and wanton conviviality prevalent in American society could not exercise any influence on him. He was vehemently taken aback about the American cultural drift and this greatly strengthened his love for Islam and rekindled his religious observance. He was convinced of the promiscuity of Western civilization as unravelled in its sexual permissiveness and depravity, the free mixing of the sexes and the free use of alcohol. Racial prejudice, which the Americans conceived for the Arabs and anything Arabic, was indeed another factor for his Islamic re-awakening.

To drive home the point viva voce, he was highly disgusted with the jubilation in many quarters of America over the assassination of Hassan al-Bana in 1949. Upon enquiring about the reason for the jubilation, he was proudly informed that the greatest enemy of the West had been killed. He thenceforth resolved strongly to join the 'Ikhwan' and partake actively in its activities. This he did formally in 1953¹³.

1:05 His Services to Egypt

Sayyid Qutb was not only a pride to the institution that produced him, but he was equally a source of inspiration to the general public, his nation and the Islamic world. One of his lecturers, Dr. Muhammad Mahdi Allam, had this to say about this vibrant scholar. 'Sayyid Qutb is a pride to 'Darul-Ulum'. He made this remark as the chairman of an occasion where Sayyid Qutb delivered a lecture. The lecture was published and the same remark reflected in the foreword written by Dr. Allam¹⁴.

Immediately he graduated from Darul-Ulum in 1933, Qutb became an official in the Ministry of Education. He worked there for about twenty years. He taught in about four schools between the period of 1933 and 1940. His first appointment took effect from 2nd December, 1933, at Dawidiyyah school, at six pounds as his monthly salary. There and then, he settled with his brothers and sisters in a town called Helwan, on the outskirts of the Great Cairo¹⁵. On 1st April, 1940 he got a new appointment as the Arab Editor to oversee the cultural unit for public instruction, and the general administration of the cultural department in 1945.

On his arrival from United States on 20th August, 1950, he returned to the Ministry of Education and resumed duty then as the Assistant Inspector in the office of the Ministry of

Education and on 17th May, 1952 he was returned in the same post to the office of the Minister of Scientific Research and Projects.¹⁷ Owing to his burning desire to Islamise the polity of Egypt, there ensued differences between him and his superiors in the Ministry over his refusal to accommodate his Islamic reformative suggestions¹⁸. Premise upon this, he forwarded his resignation letter to the Minister of Education on 18th October, 1952. He was actually due for retirement on 2nd December, 1953, as he joined the Ministry on 2nd December, 1933, meaning that he had served for a period of 18 years and eleven months.

However, Ismail al-Qabani, the honourable Minister of Education, rejected the resignation owing to Qutb's laudable contributions to the state via the Ministry. Granted or not granted, Sayyid had resolved to leave. The letter was eventually presented before the Assembly of Ministers under the chairmanship of Jamal Abdul-Nasir. The Assembly resolved that Sayyid should complete the remaining statutory period which would enable him get his retirement benefits, as well as other entitlements. Another sub-committee of Ministers was finally inaugurated to look into the matter and make necessary recommendations to the government after Sayyid insisted on resignation. At its deliberations over the issue, the Assembly acknowledged the receipt of the resignation letter

with effect from the date it was issued. However, they resolved that resignation should not be granted him until 13th January, 1954 whence he would already be due for retirement.¹⁹

1:06 His Contact with and Position in Ikhwan

Sayyid had long been aware of the Muslim Brotherhood and its activities, especially of its founder and Amir, Imam Hassan al-Bana, before he crossed the frontiers of Egypt to the United States. However, he seemed not convinced of the veracity and efficacy of their struggle. During his brief stay in the United States, he observed that the tool to change the Egyptian society was the movement. This was further established during his stay in the United States, as he was enraged and disgusted with the jubilation in many quarters of the American society over the assassination of the Imam in 1949. It has to be recalled that the latter was the founder and leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in 1928.²⁰ When he asked about the jubilation, they replied that Hassan al-Bana, the greatest foe and adversary of the West, had been assassinated. He then resolved to join the Muslim Brotherhood and partake actively in its activities. In 1953, after his arrival from the United States, he joined the organization as a bona fide full-fledged member²¹.

Before he formally became a member, Sayyid had dedicated his "Social Justice in Islam" to a band of men

who would work as a team to rescue Egyptian society from the abyss or brink of the precipice it was in and restore its honour and past glory among the committee of nations. This was the vision and mission that he had been pursuing vigorously all along. As a result of his commitment, hard work, intelligence, literary power and style, linguistic prowess, erudition and bold but logical and radical presentations, he rose very rapidly in the organizational hierarchy of the movement.²² He was in 1952 elected a member of the Consultative Council (Al-Maktab-ul-Irshad) and was made the head of the Da'wah Department. He was appointed the Editor of the Al-Ikhwani-Muslimun journal. He thereby became the mouthpiece of Ikhwan, 'a trailblazer as well as an ideologue with the set up'.

1:07 Sayyid behind Bars

The activities and programmes of the Muslim Brotherhood were later considered by the government of the day culpable, treasonable felony, thereby resulting into the government clumping down on and incarcerating its members. However, the suppression of Ikhwan and the humiliation of its members by the Jamal Abdul-Nasir-led government notwithstanding, it only re-affirmed and strengthened Sayyid in the ideological struggle. In 1954, he was arrested and imprisoned with other notable members of the Ikhwan. He was later released for

want of health. Shortly thereafter, he was re-arrested and jailed for the second time on 26th October, 1954 for an alleged plot to overthrow the Abdul Nasir-led government. A tribunal headed by Jamal Sahm with Anwar Sadat and Hassayn Shaffi as members was commissioned to look into the case and recommend the necessary punishment to the government. The tribunal sentenced him to 15 years imprisonment. He was released in 1964 for health reasons with the intercession of the Iraqi president, Abdus-salam Arif.²³

For the third and last time in the series, Jamal Abdul Nasir announced from Moscow the unveiling of an alleged conspiracy and plot by the Ikhwan, with Sayyid as the pivot and ring leader, to assassinate him and overthrow his government. He was for this reason put behind the bars on 9th August, 1965.²⁴

The unabated onslaught, perpetual and untold torture of Sayyid and other members of Ikhwan in Nasir's prison to subdue their spirit and reduce their tempo only raised their zeal higher, affirmed their sincerity and established a guaranteed success and the immeasurable rewards that awaited them. To them, the harder the struggle the sweeter the victory. These were indeed the incentives that geared them up and increased their enthusiasm and commitment to Islam as the only way to success. It was during this period of torture, tumult and

incarceration, which spanned over a period of ten years and three months, that he wrote most of his works.²⁵ In fact, his magnum opus, "In the Shade of the Qur'an" – an extensive commentary or exegesis on the whole Qur'an and his 'Milestone' (that he described as "what is to be done", by the radical Islamic movement, as well as being an ideological tract) were written during his second stay in the prison.

Eventually, a death sentence was pronounced on Sayyid. On the fifth day of the pronouncement, the chief warder conducted him round the prison yard. In the process, he was taken to his sisters, Hamidah Qutb and Zaynab Al-Ghazali²⁶. He had a discussion with them and concluded by saying, "*Let us not bother, let us get ourselves used to patience*". On the eve of his execution, the prison officials persuaded Hamidal Qutb to prevail over her brother so that he might confess the truth of the matter. She was made to understand that she was the last person who could save the life of her brother by way of intercession and by way of confession. The death sentence of her brother as well as the endorsement was shown to her so as to frighten and instill fear in her. The officer exclaimed:

The loss of Sayyid was not just to the Ikhwan alone but to Egypt and beyond too, and that other members of Ikhwan have confessed the fact of the matter. So you should prevail over your brother to be co-operative for the safety of his life. They only wanted him to

say that the Ikhwan was in contact with a certain party and country in relation to the attempts on Nasir's life. *I know and everyone knows that you are the best people in the country and the only people in Egypt working for aqidah...*

So Hamidah approached her brother and told him what had happened. Sayyid then queried her thus,

Is it you asking me this or them? By Allah, had this been true, I would have said it and no power on earth would stop me from saying it. But it did not happen and I would never tell a lie.

While alone with Hamidah later, he again asked,

Would you have liked me to say what they wanted? They possess neither good nor harm for themselves. Life decrees are in the hands of Allah. The despots can neither prolong nor shorten my life. All is in the hand of Allah, and Allah is behind us, encompassing everything.²⁷

When the news of his execution by hanging was broken a few days thereafter, there was hue and cry, indeed pandemonium everywhere. The whole Arab and the Muslim worlds were not spared. There were comments and lamentations. Zaynab Al-Ghazali, who was equally a loyal member of Ikhwan and also an inmate of the prison undergoing torture and humiliation, had this to say about the act:

Such a great loss! Sayyid Qutb, the Mufasssir of the Qur'an and Islamic Daiyyah, a sage in his understanding, eloquence, clarity and force of argument. A man who held fast to his religion, trusting in Allah's victory.²⁸

That was how they ended his life. He remained undaunted in a mission he had chosen for himself, that is, living in the shade of the Qur'an and inviting others to do the same.

Some of the sterling qualities of Sayyid Qutb were his intellectual efficacy, literary vigour, linguistic prowess, clarity and force of argument. He unveiled and exhibited his intellectual expertise and literary splendour in more than twenty-five works. His magnum opus is an extensive commentary on the Qur'an. It is in six volumes, written in Arabic. Presently, it has been translated into several local, national and international languages.

He considered the period of his incarceration as a moment of living under the shade of the Qur'an. This was described graphically in the following words by the author's brother – Muhammad Qutb:

The fruit of the most productive years of its author's intellectual life and at the same time a vivid expression of the sacred battle which he fought and which culminated in his martyrdom in 1966. Though, written and partly re-written over a period of more than fifteen years, most of which he spent in prison.²⁵

Stating those works is outside the scope of this treatise³⁰.

This position of his is reflected in his foreword to Abdul Hassan Ali Nadiwi's "Islam and the World", where he writes,

The most important need of the day is to help the Muslim acquire confidence in himself and his past so that he is able to face the future with hope, courage and high resolve.³¹

When he was presented the manuscript of 'Milestone', Imam Hassan al-Hadadybi, the then Supreme Guide of Ikhwan, passed the following comment:

With Allah's benediction, this book has confirmed all my trust in Sayyid, may Allah spare him. Sayyid, Allah willing, is the awaited hope for Da'awah.³²

1:08 His Idea of Jahiliyyah and the Method of Islamic Resurgence

Sayyid's understanding of Jahilliyyah is an outright refusal to adopt and follow the laws of Allah. Thus, it does not matter if there exist in a society believers who pray, fast and perform Hajj and some other religious rites; as long as they adopt and follow laws, norms and values other than those of Allah,

they are assumed by him to be living in Jahiliyyah.³² He described the Jahiliyyah of yore as one based on general ignorance, simplicity and primitiveness while the modern one is based on learning, complexity and frivolity³⁴. His idea of 'ignorance' was misconstrued and misinterpreted such that Sheikh Sibki of Al-Azhar accused him of being Kharjite and blasphemous³⁵.

Therefore, to rescue the situation and emancipate believers from the prevailing jahiliyyah, he warned that no attempt should be made to blemish (juxtapose) the Islamic system or way of life with the prevailing jahiliyyah, as that would be suicidal. He therefore recommended that there should arise a band of believers, a jama'ah, that is to be the vanguard of Islamic work and governance. He recommended further that it should have its constitution, programme, agenda and manifestoes drawn from the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet and those of his companions.³⁶

2.0 His Modern Approach to Tafsir

The Qur'an is considered the greatest miracle of Prophet Muhammed (SAW)³⁷. One of the unique features of this holy book is its ability to remain relevant to every time and clime, conditions and positions man may find himself in. This is further facilitated by the principle of Ijma and

Qiyas³⁸, which give individual scholars the right to exert themselves so as to come out with solutions to a prevailing problem. In fact, Sayyid was one of the great Islamic scholars and thinkers of the twentieth century who qualified to be called a Mujahid³⁹, if not a Mujadid⁴⁰.

One of such areas in which his impact is greatly felt is the area of the interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an, otherwise known as 'tafsir', on which he authored a work entitled, *Fi Silal Qur'an (In the shade of the Qur'an)*, perhaps the first modern 'tafsir' to be published. It has numerous features that make it distinct from the traditional approach to Qur'anic exegesis. Sayyid's approach to Qur'anic exegesis is a very unique one and is equally very superb, especially when one considers the circumstances that brought it into vogue, as well as its suitability to the present needs of the Muslim world. As a corollary to this, in his foreword to *Islam and the World* he writes, "The most important need of the day is to help the Muslim acquire confidence in himself and in his past so that he is able to face the future with hope, courage and high resolve."⁴¹

References abound, whether written by himself or by those of his friends and foes alike, which establish that quote as being the force that spurred Sayyid into writing "In the shade of the Qur'an". We shall be content with those written by Muhammad Qutb, the author's brother, in the

introduction to *Juz 'Amnah* (the 30th part) or volume of the English version of "In the Shade of the Qur'an"⁴² I have chosen those contained in the introduction just because it is within the part seriously reviewed and equally because of its lucidity and suitability to the issues under study. Before taking a critical look at the elements that made Sayyid's approach to 'tafsir' unique, let me quickly state here that the following features were mentioned by Muhammad Qutb in the introduction to the 30th part as what makes the 'tafsir' 'a tafsir with distinction'⁴³:

- (i) The largest part of the work was written while the author was in jail.
- (ii) He lived in the shade of the Qur'an and invited others to do the same via the medium of 'tafsir'.
- (iii) It is not just ordinary tafsir or commentary but a campaign of struggle. If we have to use the term tafsir we should add "commentary with a definite/defined aim".⁴⁴
- (iv) It was written to suit the needs of the contemporary Muslim society.
- (v) It was written to help Muslims live and practice Islam in the same way as the early Islamic generations.
- (vi) The author used modern scientific findings to explain or establish the veracity of the Qur'anic message with a view to appeal to human senses, especially those who are carried away by those scientific discoveries and technological advancement to the extent of denying the existence of God.
- (vii) He used the commentary to advocate for the adoption of the comprehensive pristine Islamic way of life.

- (viii) He exhibited via the ‘tafsir’ the Islamic method of educating the individual and the community.
- (ix) The author suffered incarceration for his ideas and beliefs and for the same he died.
- (x) He encouraged Muslims to be the vanguards of Islam by way of inviting them to the way of Allah (SWT).

The above is a graphic picture of the ‘tafsir’ painted by the author’s brother. The above shall therefore form our thesis and indeed the very basis and focus of this study. However, much emphasis shall be laid on the scientific, intellectual and philosophical approaches used by Sayyid in his ‘tafsir’, *In the shade of the Qur’an*, with special reference to the 30th part.

2.01 His Scientific Approach

As mentioned earlier, the conclusion arrived at by modern scientists are used by the author to corroborate and explain certain signs of Allah mentioned in the Glorious Qur’an, so as to impress it on his readers the all encompassing nature of the book and to invite them at the same time to the way of the Omniscient God who taught man that which he knew not.

He quoted some scientists for this purpose, for example, while commenting on ‘after that He spread out the Earth. He brought water from it and brought forth its pasture, and mountain he set firmly” in Surah⁴⁵, 79:

Life may appear on a certain planet if certain conditions are met; the planet must be of suitable size, at a medium distance from the sun, and it has to be a composition, which mixes the element in right proportion to permit the emergence of life. The suitable size is necessary because the atmosphere of the planet is conditioned by his gravity. The medium distance is a necessary condition because the planets which are near to the sun are so hot that nothing can solidify on them and those that are far from the sun are so cold that nothing on them can have any measure of elasticity. The right composition of elements is necessary because position in right proportion is a must for the growth of vegetation, which is, in turn, essential for the sustenance of life. The earth has an ideal location to satisfy all these conditions which help the emergence of life in the only form which we know.”⁴⁶

While giving the exegesis of Suratul Abasah in respect of the following verse, ‘Have you not seen how We pour down the rain in torrents’, he writes,

Perhaps the theory closest to the truth concerning the formation of oceans whose water evaporates and fall down as rain, claims that they were formed somewhere above the earth and then were poured down in torrent. A contemporary scientist says on this subject: If it is true that temperature of the earth at the time of its separation from the sun was about 12,000 degrees, or that of the surface of the sun, then all elements were formed and, therefore, no chemical combination of

importance could exist.

Gradually as the earth, or the earth forming fragments cooled, combination would take place and a nucleus of the world as we know it is formed. Oxygen and hydrogen could not combine until temperature was reduced to 4,000 degree Fahrenheit. At this point these elements would rush together and form water. What you know as the atmosphere must have been enormous at the time. All the oceans were in the sky and those elements not combined were in the air as gasses. Water, having formed in the outer atmosphere, fell towards the earth but could not reach it, as temperature near the earth was higher than it was thousands of miles out. Of course, the time came when the deluge would reach the earth only to fly up again as steam with old ocean in the air, flood that would result as cooling progresses are beyond calculation.⁴⁹

He equally quoted the following, while rendering 'tafsir' on "Oh man! What has lured you away from your Gracious Lord, who created you and gave you an upright shape", (Chapter 82 of the Glorious Qur'an):

The human body is composed of a number of specialized systems: the skeleton, the muscular system, the lymphatic system, the nervous system, the digestive system, the skin, the urinal system and the tasting, smelling, hearing and seeing. Every one of these systems is miraculous and far more wonderful than any scientific achievement, which makes man

possessed with wonder. Yet man tends to overlook the wonder of his constitution.

He equally quoted the following:

Man's hand is one of the remarkable wonders of nature. It is extremely difficult, indeed impossible, to invent a device which can match the human hand for simplicity, efficiency, ability and instant adaptability. When you read a book you take it in your hand, then you hold it in the position most suitable for your reading. The same hand will automatically correct the position of your book whenever a correction of position is necessary. When you turn a page you place your finger underneath the paper and apply amount of pressure needed for turning the page. When the page is turned no more pressure is applied. You also use your hand to hold a pen and to write. With your hand you use all the tools you need such as spoon, a knife or a pen. You use it to open or close windows and to carry anything you wish to carry ... man's hand has 27 pieces of bones in addition to 19 groups of muscles".⁴⁹

"A part of the human ear is a series of some four thousand minute but complex arches graduated with exquisite regularity in size and shape. These may be said to resemble a musical instrument, and they seem adjusted to catch, and transmit in some manner to the brain, every cadence of sound or noise, from the thunderclap to whisper of the pines and exquisite blending of the tones and harmonies of every instrument in the orchestra. If in forming

these or the cells were impelled to evolve strict efficiency only that man might survive, then why did they not extend the range and develop a super acuteness? Perhaps the power behind these cells' activities anticipated man's coming needs of intellectual enjoyment, or did they by accident build better than they knew"⁵⁰

Finally, on his scientific approach we shall quoted the following:

"In human beings the taste function is carried out by the tongue, through groups of the taste's cells which are located in the taste buds of the mucosal surface of the tongue. These buds are of different shapes: some are filamentary, some mushroom shaped and others are lenticular. They are supplied by fine branches of glosso-pharangeal nerves as well as the nerve which carries the taste sense. When we eat these fine branches of the taste nerve are stimulated and conveyed the impulses of the taste sensation to the brain. This system is located at the front of the tongue, so that we may reject what we sense to be harmful. It is this system which helps us sense whether what we eat is bitter or sweet, hot or cold, sour or salty etc. The tongue contains nine thousand of these fine taste buds, each of which is linked with the brain by more than one nerve. Hence we may wonder: How many nerves have we? What are their sizes? How do they function individually and do they combine to give the brain their various types of sensations? The nervous system, which

effectively controls the body, is composed of fine neurons which cover every part of the body. The neurons are linked to larger nerves which are, in turn, linked to the central nervous system. Whenever any part of the body feels any sensation, even the slightest change of temperature, the nervous system conveys this sensation to the peripheral nerves which in turn, convey it to the brain so that it may order the necessary action. The signal are carried through the nerves at the speed of 100 metres per second".⁵¹

These are but a few quotations among many others relating to science quoted by the author. This is not without a reason; the reason just as we have rightly pointed out earlier can be deduced from the 'Introduction' to the book.

The author also speaks at length on the numerous signs in the universe, which indicate the Divine existence, making occasional but cautious use of some of the conclusions arrived at by modern science. This he does as the Qur'an often dwells on those signs, since they are sure to stimulate the human heart to conscious recognition of the unity of the creator and His infinite majesty and greatness and consequently worship and submit to him alone. The author as a Daiyyah, who invited all and sundry, indeed all men of all walks of life, thus needs to appeal to a specific section or group of people in a

way they can best understand. For the book is a 'campaign of struggle' because, it is, indeed, much more than a 'commentary' on the Qur'an.

Another reason that might have accounted for the scientific inclination of the author is that scientific discoveries and/or inventions via technology have stunned man to his nerves that he gave up God and assigned all His attributes to nature. As a credence to the above, Muhammad Qutb had this to say in the 'Introduction' about the distinct nature of the content of the 'tafsir':

Our present age has its own features which perhaps, have never existed in any period of history. They are the ones which give this "commentary" its own colour and determines its point of emphasis.⁵⁴

2:02 His Attitude to Allegorical Matters

Sayyid Qutb was an intellectual per excellence. He exhibited his intellectual prowess in all his works of which "In the Shade of the Qur'an" is not an exception. However, he was extremely cautious in introducing his personal ideas and opinions into his commentary. This, to a greater extent, can be deduced from his attitude of standing aloof to sectarian tendencies or rabid fellowship of any school of thought. His position on

allegorical verses is clear as he said the following on them:

There is a safe rule for approaching the Qur'anic text which may be appropriately stated here, viz. we cannot approach what the Qur'an states with prejudiced minds and preconceived ideas, whether generally or in relation to the subject matter or the statement under study; the **OPPOSITE IS THE RIGHT WAY. WE MUST APPROACH THE QUR'ANIC STATEMENTS IN ORDER TO DERIVE OUR CONCEPTS AND FORMULATE OUR IDEAS FROM THEM.**⁵⁴

Therefore, in pursuance of the above dictum he says the following while commenting on a verse:

How this would happen remains to us a matter of conjecture⁵⁵. What is meant exactly by such readings, and how the sky would look after it has been rent are difficult to say. All that we are left with is a feeling of violent change which overwhelms the universe, as we see it, and a realization that its perfect system will no longer be in operation.⁵⁶

Whereas other Mufasirum⁵⁷ before him engaged in polemic and all sorts of arguments and at time unnecessary controversy over such matters, his attitude all

through has been that Allah only uses the wordings in the way we can understand and that we should not compare such scenes or scenarios to our worldly experiences. He however, in his exegesis, delves greatly into science, psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, etc. to bring home his points viva voce. And so just as we have been made to understand, 'In the shade of the Qur'an' is not just a commentary, but a 'campaign of struggle'. For example he defines Jahiliyyah as 'ignorant', i.e. unIslamic: "Islam divides all societies, beliefs, and practices into two groups: Islamic and ignorant (*Jahili*). Whatever is in conflict with Islam can only be derived from ignorance for knowledge of the supreme Creator, His message, the methods He commands mankind to follow and social codes He want them to set up will lead mankind into one direction, namely the Islamic direction. So when people adopt unIslamic beliefs, values and practices their action can only stem from their lack of such knowledge, or from deliberate disregard to such knowledge. Hence, Islam describes such an attitude as one of the ignorance (*jahiliyyah*), and whatever social (order) set up it produces as ignorant"⁵⁸

It was this position of his that led Sheikh Sibki ^Aaccuse him of blasphemy. However, if we consider the foregoing and the following, no doubt we shall see vividly that Sayyid maintained a golden mean course. He was never an

extremist, nor did he abandon his pinion in totality. Meanwhile, the fact that the Qur'an addresses those who can reflect absolved Mufasirun who used, to some extent, the intellectual approach (*ray*), as long as they fall within the limits given and as long as they are devoid of any prejudice and pre-conceived notions, to cut it short, sectarian tendencies or extraneous matters.

2:03 His Philosophical Approach

“Sayyid Qutb ... a sage in his understanding, eloquence, clarity and force of argument.”⁵⁹ This is the vivid picture of Sayyid Qutb painted by Zaynab Al-Ghazali when she was informed of his execution. With his linguistic prowess, erudition and sense of direction, Sayyid used synthetic analysis and logic to drive home his ideas *viva voce*. He appealed to the wisdom of his readers via this medium. Several examples of this abound, but we shall be content with just a few.

Those who persecute the believers, men and women and persist with their evil ways, careless, unrepentant, and do not repent shall suffer the chastisement of Hell, the chastisement of burning.

His philosophical comment on the above verses goes thus:

Burning is specified although it is also implied by the chastisement of hell. It earns its specific mention in order to serve as a counterpart to the burning in the pit. Although the same word signifying the action is used, the two types of burning are dissimilar in intensity and duration. The burning here is by fire lit by human beings while the burning in the hereafter is by fire lit by the Creator. The burning here is over in a few minutes while in the hereafter it goes on for ages unknown except to Allah. The burning here is accomplished with Allah's pleasure with the believers, and with the triumph of that noble human concept referred to earlier, while in the hereafter the burning is attended by Allah's anger and man's abject degradation.⁶⁰

Further comment follows:

"Stern indeed is your lord's vengeance" this is a most suitable comment which contrasts Allah's punishment with the petty and for fling vengeance exerted by the tyrants, and though taken by them and by people generally to be very powerful. The really powerful strike is that leveled by Almighty to whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, not that leveled by some insignificant people who imposed their

rule over a limited piece of land for a limited period of time. The statement also emphasizes the relationship between the addressee, namely, the messenger (SAW)⁶¹ and the speaker, that is Allah, the Almighty. He says to him, "Stern indeed is your Lord's vengeance". He is your Lord, in whose godhead you believe, and on whose assistance you rely. This relationship is very significant in a situation where believers suffer the chastisement inflicted by the tyrants.⁶²

From the foregoing quotations, one realizes how the author had succeeded in using analytical and synthetic propositions. This is not sheer polemic, as the author employed logic to establish his points. There are yet many other places where he employed such philosophical methods for the purpose of passing across his message to his audience or readers. Much of this can be found on pages 119, 124, 125, 126, and 270 just to mention a few.⁶³

Apart from those approaches mentioned above, there are such other approaches like the psychological, the sociological and the historical used by the author in the book. However, so long as these are not the peculiar features of his commentary, though they could be distinct from others, owing to shortage of time and space special attention shall not be given to them.

With this spectrum of approaches, his aim was to present Islam as a comprehensive way of life that covers every gamut of human life in all its ramifications. He used all the approaches that cover all human endeavours and walks of life as he invites all and sundry, regardless of their profession, to join the crusade, for "here is no deity beside Allah (SWT)". The commentary represents a blueprint of the sum total of the struggle of the 'Ikhwan-ul-Muslimun' for Sayyid was indeed its major "ideologue and of course trailblazer".

3:0 Conclusion

A comparative study of Sayyid's work with those of other Mufasirun has revealed a marked difference, which is too glaring to overlook. Perhaps part of the reasons for that is that the author lived in a just concluded century and unlike his predecessors was able to know the plight of the modern Muslim and thus address them. One such other reason that can be advanced for the difference was the challenge posed by the non-Muslim of which the author was aware and thus rose up to face and also warn his fellow Muslims to be wary of the threat to their way of life. "The non-Muslim, on the other hand, confront humanity with a host of philosophical, social, political and economic doctrines which banish religion from practical life and at best restrict it to a tiny corner of man's

conscience, so that it may become purely a relationship between the individual and his lord that has no bearing whatsoever on society and its active life, or at worst, fight it tooth and nail and bar its very existence. As a result, human life is full of many sorts of political, social and economic injustices, which know no limits. It witnesses various types of intellectual and moral perversion unknown in history. The advocates of such perversion and deviation try nevertheless to dress their erring ways in a scientific garment and they hold to them as if they were the truth itself or the ideal sought after. This they do despite all that they suffer in consequence of nervous and psychological diseases – worry and restlessness, madness and suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction and crime.⁶⁴

Unlike many other Mufasirun, Sayyid did not give prominent attention to *Sababun Nuzul* of verses and/or passages of the Qur'an. Although this is seen as a negative side of the work as the knowledge of *Sababun Nuzul* facilitates the proper understanding, implications and application of the Qur'anic message, however, one should not lose sight of the fact that the author has a focus and indeed an agenda, which he held on to very tenaciously. Sayyid devoted quite a good portion of the work to an introduction to each of the chapters and of course each part or section of the Qur'an. Such introductions are so scintillating that they keep the reader in suspense

and propel him or her to read further. In the Shade of the Qur'an stands out owing to the conscious and deliberate attempts made by the author to address contemporary issues from the perspective of Islam. He was therefore able to come out with what should be the attitude of Muslims to issues like family planning, alcoholism, drug addiction, etc. under the purview of Islam.

One other factor that makes the work a unique attempt was his attitude of standing aloof to sectarian tendencies and rabid followership of any school of thought. One can perhaps conclude that this was borne out of the fact that he was a 'Daiyyah' who understood the plight of Muslims and was ready to proffer solutions to their problems. Equally, unlike the works of some other mufasirun who devoted their efforts to certain themes, Sayyid's work is all-encompassing. There are such works having as their theme linguistic exposition; such works tend to be overburdened with rhetoric and semantics. Yet others have as their theme juristic matters, thus making their main focus Islamic jurisprudence just to mention a few. However to Sayyid, since the Qur'an is a comprehensive code of life, a 'tafsir' of the book should therefore address every facet of human life in all its ramifications.

The author used consciously scientific findings to explain the verses of the Qur'an. He quoted copiously

from both Muslim and other scholars to justify the position of the Qur'an on several issues and to justify it as a revelation from God. No man as at the time of the revelation and beyond possesses such knowledge as contained in the passage of the Qur'an. One such other thing considered by scholars as the weak point of the work is his attitude to the use of hadith. He, unlike others, seldom used it and wherever he did at all, the chain of transmitters is dropped outright. Perhaps the reason that could be advanced for this is that the work was written while the author was in prison. Of course, he was not the only scholar with this kind of tendency. Imam Ghazali is equally observed to have dropped the chain of transmitters in his work, *Ihya ulumu-Din (The Revival of the Religious Sciences)*.

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