

From Religious Realism to Social Criticism: Sayyid Qutb's Approach in *Fi Zilal al Qur'an*

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Abstract

This paper deals with Qutb's approaches which are in some ways differ from other Mufassirun's way of the Quranic interpretation, thus making his Zilal so relevant to the modern and contemporary society as it attempts to give consistent answers to the social and political problems facing Muslims. In Qutb's view, the establishment of a society in which Islamic teachings could be properly applied, was inevitable. Some distinctive characteristics that made Zilal so special are also discussed.

Keywords: Muslim society, Qur'an, Modern Tafsir

1. Introduction

This paper deals with Sayyid Qutb's approaches in *Zilal* and how they resulted in conflicting opinions between the author and other *Mufassirun* on certain issues mentioned in the Qur'an. Qutb's interpretation of the Qur'an began with the conviction that the Qur'an was the true guidance for all human beings and thus the only valid source to direct their affairs. This belief emerged only after his progress through several stages of his career coupled with the strong influence of the current environment surrounding the Egyptian society of his time. For this reason, his *Zilal* is very relevant to the modern world for it attempts to give consistent answers to the social and political problems facing Muslims today. In Qutb's view, the establishment of a society in which Islamic teachings could be properly applied, was inevitable (Qutb, *Zilal*, 1:209, 304, 328, 597; 2:657, 673, 767, 795, 874; 3:1388, 1735; 4:207; and 6:3334, 3342, 3344, 3345). Qutb's understanding of and his approach to the Qur'an as manifested in *Zilal* discussions provoked criticism from Muslim and non-Muslim writers. Some even argued about the originality of Qutb's ideas: did they develop as a result of Qutb's long study of the Qur'an and his deep understanding of Islam? Were these ideas shaped by Qutb's prison experiences? It is also, therefore, the purpose of this study to examine the judgement of some Muslim and non-Muslim writers concerning *Zilal*.

2. Material and Method

Data for this article is based on the recent qualitative research conducted using content analysis approach. According to Stemler (2001), content analysis is a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding. In this paper, all the data were gathered from extensive reading on Qutb's development of thought that matured against his time and his critical commentary on the Quran manifested in his *Zilal's* discussion. Several concepts and themes related to his thoughts are evaluated and analyzed for the purpose of getting meaning for the study.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. From Religious Realism to Social Criticism

Sayyid Qutb Ibrahim Husayn Shadhili was born in a village called Musha in the Asyut District of Egypt in October 1906. Qutb attended the state elementary school (*madrassa*) instead of the traditional Islamic school (*kuttab*) at the age of six. His early years at the *madrassa* witnessed his excellence in reading and writing. At a very early age, he mastered important aspects of traditional Arab Muslim culture, such as the knowledge of Arabic, syntax and morphology, which enabled him to be in the ranks of the literati (*udaba'*) in the 1930s and 1940. In 1925, Qutb entered Kulliyat al-Mu^callimun, a preparatory and secondary school. Three years later, he joined a two-year course, al-Fusul al-Tamhidiyya li'l-kulliyat al-Dar al-^cUlum, (the Preparatory High School of Dar al-^cUlum) before being admitted into Dar al-^cUlum's Teachers College. Qutb successfully completed his studies in 1933 and obtained a BA degree in Arabic Literature and the Diploma Certificate of Education (Hammudah, 1990). Upon graduation, he became a teacher and inspector for the Ministry of Education, to which he devoted himself for nearly eighteen years until he resigned on 18 October 1952.

Qutb's interest in Islam develops as he began to feel the necessity of fulfilling spiritual and religious elements in human life in addition to achieving scientific breakthroughs. The publication of his work *al-^cAdalah* in 1949 clearly exemplified the first phase of his new intellectual quest that was his interest in social issues and the need to return to Islam as their solution (Abu Rabi', 1984). It is important to note that besides the Qur'an, there was another factor that led to Qutb's change of direction from literary works to the study of Islam as a way of life. The social and political situation in Egypt during the 1940s, especially after World War II, had also contributed towards his religious realism. These years witnessed his disillusionment with the prevailing political system of the country. The climax of his career during this stage was his divorce from any political mainstream party and his pursuit of an independent literary path. Many of his articles had demanded social and political reforms in the country. In 1945, for example, he wrote an article in *al-Risalah* magazine, in which he criticized the leaders of the existing political parties, whom he considered more inclined to demagoguery than to democracy in their programmes. Qutb also called them to focus more on social programmes, to correct the unequal distribution of wealth and promote social justice to benefit all Egyptians.

Qutb's articles written in 1945 in many ways revolved around social, economic and political reform, and did not advocate "Islamic" solutions. Only in October 1947, after his long study of the Qur'an coupled with a consciousness of the national crisis, did he establish, with some friends, a weekly journal, *al-Fikr al-Jadid* (New Thought). The journal offered Islamic agenda for the social problems facing the country. In addition, it attempted to bring people's attention to Islam instead of following capitalist and communist groups, who were active in spreading their reformative programmes for the Egyptians. The journal, however, did not describe in details the Islamic method of achieving justice in human social and economic welfare, such as the obligation to pay *zakat* etc. Rather, it focused more on a just distribution of wealth in Egypt, relations between landowners and workers, and between employers and employees in regard to wages and working hours (Musallam, 1993). This lack of any comprehensive Islamic solution was perhaps due to the short period of its appearance: it was published for only six months (October 1947 to May 1948) before being closed down owing to the martial law being declared prior to the Palestine war.

The reform programmes advocated by the journal opened the minds of the Egyptians to the need to stand up to the privileged elite in their society and demand social justice the distribution of wealth, individual ownership and so on. As Heyworth-Dunne (1950) writes:

"The journal promised to be one of the most interesting experiments of modern times, as it offered some real contributions by suggesting methods which could be employed for the solution of some of the acute social problems facing the Egyptian today. The editors also made it their duty to show up the real situation amongst the poor, both in the towns and in the country. He (Qutb) and his agents collected a number of detailed reports on the living conditions of their compatriots and published these with photographs (Heyworth-Dunne, 1950: 97).

Qutb's reform programmes did not end with the demise of *al-Fikr al-Jadid* in 1948. On the contrary, he continued his activities by calling the people to return to Islam for a solution to their current social and political problems. The appearance of his later books; *al-^cAdalah al-Ijtima^ciyah fi'l-Islam* (1949), *Ma^crakat al-Islam wa'l-Ra^csmaliyyah* (1951) and *al-Salam al-^calami wa'l-Islam* (1951) are a clear indication of this new phase in Qutb's intellectual career. These books exposed to the Egyptians the real enemies who had contributed to its social, economic and cultural deterioration. They included the imperialists such as the British and the French governments, whom Qutb regarded as playing a crucial role in Egyptian politics. British interference in this sphere could be seen, for instance, in the appointment of Mustafa Nahhas as the Prime Minister in 1942 (Khalidi, 1994). The British Ambassador, with British tanks and troops surrounding the palace, forced King Farouq to form a new government under Mustafa Nahhas.

This led to frustration among political leaders of the country, who realized that such an appointment and formation of the government were based on British interests. As Vatikiotis writes:

“Nahhas had come to power only because Britain had threatened the monarch with the use of armed force. Britain on her part had simply considered that at that critical moment of her wartime position a Wafdist government in Egypt was the most consonant with, and convenient to, her interest. There was no indication that the British government considered the Wafd the best hope of a government as such for Egypt. (Vatikiotis, 1969: 350-351)

Thus, Qutb's development of thought go through three important stages. The first stage began with his literary work, in which he became a well-known literary critic between 1926 and 1948. Later on, from 1948 to the early 1950s, he moved from literature to social criticism of the basic contradictions in Egyptian society, which he aspired to resolve. He found that Islam was the only solution to his country's socio-political problems and struggled, together with the Ikhwan, against the existing order until his imprisonment in 1954. The third stage began in prison and ended with his execution in 1966. He finally emerged as an Islamic ideologue whose main concern was to see human society under an Islamic government. To this end he produced a more radical and open criticism of those in authority. In his view, the lives of Muslims were no longer Islamic. Terms like *jahiliyyah*, *jihad* and the establishment of the Islamic society (*al-mujtama' al-Islami*) and state (*dawlah*) occupied most of his discussions. Qutb's emphasis on those ideas perhaps reflects his personal ordeal of imprisonment and death sentence.

3.2. Qutb's Approach in *Zilal*

As noted earlier, Qutb's interest in the Qur'an began only in 1939, when he started writing some articles on the artistic beauty of the Qur'an. This interest was followed by the publication of *Taswir* in 1945 and *Mashahid al-Qiyamah* in 1947. While writing these two books, whose main theme was Qur'anic imagery, Qutb hoped that one day he could produce a complete Qur'anic exegesis on the artistic beauty of the Qur'an by following the direction of the theory that he had formed in *Taswir*, and *Mashahid al-Qiyamah* (Khalidi, 1986: 15) Qutb wrote in *Taswir* for instance, on the important principle of Qur'anic commentary:

Taswir is a pre-eminent tool in the Qur'anic method. It designates with sensual dramatization the image of intellectual meaning (*al-ma'na al-dhihni*), psychological condition, perceptible events, visible scene, human exemplar (*al-namudhaj al-insani*) and human character. These transform into an image similar to individual life, a renewed action (*al-haraka al-mutajaddidah*). Therefore the intellectual meaning transforms into an action or movement, the psychological condition becomes visible or perceptible, the human exemplar becomes a lively person and human nature becomes embodied or visible (Qutb, 1994: 36).

The above extract clearly indicates the method that Qutb intended to use for Qur'anic commentary. He believed that such an experience could deeply affect the human heart, as he himself has been affected while interpreting certain verses of the Qur'an. The literary beauty of the Qur'an, he argued, had decidedly persuaded Arab leaders to convert to Islam (Qutb, 1994: 22). *Taswir* had, therefore, added a new dimension to Qutb's study of the Qur'an, and its method was then employed in his coming thesis on Qur'anic studies. Qutb's plan was fulfilled when the first edition of *Zilal* appeared in 1952. Here the author clearly stated that the purpose of his work was to express his appreciation of the artistic beauty of the Qur'an, similar to the method used in *Taswir*. Since it was in 1951 when Qutb's articles on Qur'anic commentary began to appear in *al-Muslimun*, it seems that *Zilal* was began during his reorientation from literary critic to radical social activist representing the impoverished Egyptians.

It was also during this year that Qutb joined the Ikhwan. Thus one question arises here: did the appearance of the *Zilal* itself represent Qutb's new orientation, to justice and equal rights or his new discovery when studying the Qur'an from the artistic aspect? This question has created a difference of opinion among some scholars. Some consider Qutb no longer studied the Qur'an from the artistic viewpoint. Rather, Qutb's commentary saw Islam as the solution to Egypt's problems. However others considered that the focus on the artistic beauty of the Qur'an was Qutb's main purpose in writing the *Zilal*, independent of his ideological method (*al-manhaj al-fikri*) in interpreting its meanings. In describing the historical background to the writing of *Zilal*, Khalidi notes that the first edition of *Zilal* published in 1952 initially represented Qutb's ideas and his experiences at that time. In other words *Zilal* was based on Qutb's personal appreciation of the literary beauty of the Qur'an, following a direction similar to that of *Taswir* and *Mashahid al-Qiyamah*. Khalidi further argues that Qutb did not ignore the ideological approach (*al-manhaj al-fikri*) in writing the first edition since such an approach had already occupied his mind following the publication of *al-Adalah* in 1949. It was only in the revised edition of *Zilal* completed between 1953 and 1954 that Qutb added a dynamic approach (Khalidi, 1986:18).

Therefore it could be said that both artistic and ideological approaches (*al-manhaj al-jamali wa'l-fikri*) were important to Qutb in the first edition of *Zilal*. This was apparently due to the socio-political conditions in the country at that time, according to Qutb's statement in the introduction:

Some people may regard it [the *Zilal*] as a kind of interpretation or a survey of the general Islamic principles as put forward by the Qur'an, or perhaps even as a study of the divine code of life and society shown in the Qur'an. But, none of these considerations has been my intended purpose. All I have tried to do is to write down the notions that occurred to me (*khawatiri*) while living in such shades [i.e. *Zilal al-Qur'an*]. (Qutb, 1995: 2)

Qutb's approach in his *Zilal* differs from other *tafsir* in that, while interpreting the meaning of the Qur'an, he transported himself and his readers into an imaginary world similar to that of the early Muslims, who strove to follow the Revelation and apply its principles to their daily lives. In his view, only by living in such an environment could people truly understand the Qur'an and its message and be motivated to follow its guidance. Qutb said:

There is only one model and method of returning to God, which is to replace one's entire lifestyle with that system as is found in the Qur'an....and it was the Qur'an that established a new concept of existence, life, values and institutions. (Qutb, 1995: 15-16)

In his book, *Khasa'is al-Tasawwur al-Islami wa Muqawwamatuh*, published in 1962, Qutb also stressed an effective means to understand and apply the message of the Qur'an:

To understand the implications of the Qur'an and the feelings inspired by it is not a question of knowing the words and phrases, what we usually call *tafsir*. It is to provide the self with an asset of the feelings, the realizations and the experiences which accompanied its revelation and accompanied the Muslim community as it received it in the heat of action. (Qutb, 1982: 7)

Thus *Zilal*, influenced by this viewpoint, can be described as a dynamic (*Haraki*) *tafsir*. One often finds words like *ihla'at* (inspiration) and *zilal* (shade), which indicate the author's attempt to go beyond addressing the literal and general meaning and convey to his readers the reality of the occasion with all its excitement and appeal. Perhaps this is the significance of Qutb's choice of title, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*: that is, to convey feeling as well as meaning. These characteristics made Qutb's commentary thoroughly modern in its approach, in the sense that he attempted to show the Qur'an's relevance for all times and circumstances of human life. This differed from the traditional *tafsir*, which, incorporated *ahadith* and philological studies where necessary to clarify interpretations of Qur'anic verses. In describing his method of Qur'anic commentary, Qutb said:

The Qur'anic approach (*al-manhaj al-Qur'ani*) never presents the ideology in the form of a theory to be studied, for this is the knowledge that establishes nothing in the conscience or in life. It is "cold" knowledge that neither controls caprices (*ahwa'*) nor frees one from the yoke of desires...Also it does not present studies in jurisprudence, the political and economic system, the natural and social sciences, or in any other form of knowledge. Rather it presents this religion as an ideology...moving (its believers) towards the realization of its practical contents from the moment it settles in the hearts and minds. (Qutb, 1995: 1399)

The above was in agreement with 'Abduh's view that the Qur'an was not primarily the source of Islamic law or dogmatics, nor an occasion for philologists to display their ingenuity, but the book from which Muslims ought to derive their ideas about this world and the world to come. (Jansen, 1974: 24). We have therefore found that the modern *tafsir*, as exemplified by Qutb and 'Abduh, attempts to demonstrate that the Qur'an is not a dead text comprehensible only to the learned, but a dynamic, living text, compatible with modernity and offering a lifestyle for Muslims to follow today while remaining true to their religious roots. In so doing, Qutb sometimes went beyond the approach of other modern *mufasssirun* and invited his readers into a kind of virtual reality similar to the environment in which the Qur'an was revealed. An example is his commentary on "*Sura al-Fath*" (48). Qutb states in the introduction to the *Sura*:

Before we begin explaining the contents of the *Sura* and its significance, it would be better to look [first] into the nature of the event in which the *Sura* was revealed so that we can feel [ourselves] living in the environment in which all [the early generation of] Muslims lived and learnt lessons from this revelation of the Qur'an. (Qutb, 1995: 3306)

Another important aspect of Qutb's approach in *Zilal* was his great emphasis on interpreting the Qur'an using the Qur'an (*tafsir al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an*). This means that the Qur'an is sufficient to guide humankind and can be correctly understood solely through its own expression. Qutb reiterated his stand as follows:

The practice in this *Zilal* is based on the principle that we shall not add anything to the issues concerning hidden things about which Allah is giving us just a speck [of information]. We shall therefore stop at [the information supplied] by the Qur'anic text and not go beyond that. It [the information so supplied] is, in itself, sufficient to establish the basics which Allah decided to reveal (Qutb, 1995: 3634).

The above statement does not mean that Qutb rejected the role of the Prophet's *ahadith* (traditions). Indeed, he often referred to the *hadith* not just to clarify the meaning of the Qur'an, but also because the *hadith* itself is one of the sources best fitted to an interpretation of the Qur'an. (Kafrawi, 1998: 9) The only source that Qutb excluded in the *Zilal* was biblical materials (*Isra'iliyyat*) for his Qur'anic commentary. He explained:

I personally do not see any immediate necessity, in dealing with these fundamental subjects, to refer to any source other than the Qur'an, except the sayings of the Prophet since they constitute reports about the Qur'an. Any other opinion is insufficient, even if it is true, until the researcher (*al-bahith*) can convince [us] that he found it in this extraordinary book (Qur'an). (Qutb, 1995: 1423)

As mentioned before, Qutb's approach to *Zilal* shifted from artistic and ideological approaches (*al-manhaj al-jamali wa'l-fikri*) to a dynamic approach (*al-manhaj al-haraki*) during late 1953 and 1954. These periods, as we noted earlier, witnessed Qutb's active participation in the Ikhwan against the unjust government, resulting in his 15-year prison sentence beginning in 1954. The prison experience, in which he was tortured and isolated from the outside world, gave Qutb a new opportunity to study the Qur'an more closely and discover the pure source of Islam from its contents. In addition, this new life enabled him to find in the Qur'an and draw from it new guidelines for the modern world and the struggle to establish a just Muslim society. As Sivan (1985: 25-30) writes:

Qutb's [Qur'anic] ideas matured during his nine years in prison. The prison experience was to be, in effect, crucial in the making of most of the other New Radicals as well.

According to Khalidi, Qutb's prison's experience enabled him to see the real condition of the Muslims around him. Besides the corrupt government ruling the Egyptians at the time, there were other factors contributing to his fate and that of the Ikhwan. These included the weakness in the faith of the Muslims and the loss of the spirit of the Qur'an in their hearts. This was apparent from their unfounded support of the unjust government, despite knowing about its oppression of Islamic groups and their fellow Muslims in particular (Khalidi, 1986: 28-29). They did not truly understand the declaration of faith, "*La ilaha illa 'Allah*" which asked them to act in accordance with the requirements of the faith. In other words, they had moved far away from the Islamic principles stipulated in the Qur'an, because they no longer lived in the spiritual atmosphere similar to that of the early generations of Muslim generation, in which the Qur'an was revealed (Khalidi, 1986: 29) All these were, perhaps, the issues occupying Qutb's mind at that critical time which led him to concentrate on the role of the Qur'anic movement (*al-Qur'an al-Haraki*) in solving the problems facing the Muslim *Ummah* and the Egyptians in particular. In Qutb's view, the study of the Qur'an as a dynamic text had been successful, especially during the early years of Islam. At that time, the Qur'an had produced a generation of Muslims that not only studied the Qur'an as the source of religious guidance but also practised its teachings in their daily lives.

As described earlier, Qutb managed to apply his new approach only in the last three volumes of the first edition of *Zilal*. However, in his revised edition of the full *Zilal*, it included all these approaches: artistic, ideological and dynamic. Nevertheless, the artistic and ideological approaches became much less important, for he believed that emphasis on the aspects of Qur'anic movement was more successful in attracting his readers so that they would feel the Qur'an was really addressing them. As Tripp writes, Qutb's new dimension of thought led him believe that "the Qur'an had given mankind the means whereby it could re-invent itself in the mould intended by the Prophet and, through him, by God." (Tripp, 1994: 161). Convinced by this new approach in Qur'anic commentary, Qutb also called on his readers and scholars in *tafsir* to follow in the same direction so that they could understand the true meaning of the Qur'an. As he said:

This Qur'an will be appreciated only by those who are ready to enter into this war [against *jahiliyyah*], and to struggle together in a situation similar to that in which it was revealed...and those who try to apply the Qur'anic meanings and its message while they are just sitting down, studying [its message] from the rhetorical and artistic points of view, will find themselves removed from its nature because they are in a frozen state, from taking part in the real battle and movement. (Qutb, 1995: 1866)

Furthermore, Qutb expressed in the introduction of the revised edition his happiness and satisfaction at having reached an absolute and final certainty:

I emerged from this period of life – in the shade of the Qur'an – having arrived at an absolute and final certainty (*yaqin jazim*): that there can be no good for this earth, no repose nor satisfaction for humanity, no edification, no blessing, no purity, and no harmony with the laws of the cosmos and the quintessence of life, except through a return to God. (Qutb, 1995: 15)

For Qutb “a return to God” had only one form and one way, that is, a return in every aspect of life to the way of Allah (*manhaj Allah*), which He had prescribed for humanity in the Qur'an: “This way is the sovereign power of this Book in all of human life and the only source of appeal in the arbitration of the affairs of humanity.” (Qutb, 1995: 15). This new dimension to Qutb's thought brought him to the conclusion that the real struggle in his society was that between Islam on the one side and *jahiliyyah* on the other side. This struggle was between those who wanted Islam to govern human life and those who rejected the *shari'ah* of Allah, irrespective of their being Muslim or non-Muslim. Prison life also caused him clearly and painfully to see the Nasserite regime as *jahili* and the Muslims who supported the regime as living in *jahiliyyah*, since the laws, morals and behaviour of society were based on *jahili* concepts propounded by the regime. The concept of *jahiliyyah* became the main point of divergence between the thought of Qutb and that of al-Mawdudi. Al-Mawdudi considered only the political community – the ruling elite – is *jahili*. (Mousalli, 1992: 20)

4. Conclusion

As a whole, *Zilal* has attracted the attention of Muslim and some non-Muslim scholars from all over the world. Although it lacks discussions of jurisprudence, compared with other traditional *tafsir*, *Zilal*, with its author's distinctive approach to Qur'anic commentary, has the ability to awaken human consciousness and thus enjoys widely acceptance among various intellectual groups. That is why one will find that the book remains a ready reference for teachers, preachers, writers and sincere seekers of the truth all over the Muslim world. The content of *Zilal* that revolve around Qutb's treatment of the social and political problems facing Egyptian society and the Muslim on the basis of the Quran attracted both Muslim and Western scholars's attentions to consider his view and his influence upon the new Muslim generation in particular on the socio religious concern and commitment towards their religion and nation (*ummah*) as a whole.

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