

Modernism in Islamic Thought and Sayyid Qutb: An Analysis

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Abstract— Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) was an influential Egyptian writer, educator, and Islamic theorist, recognized for his significant contributions to modern Islamic thought and political ideology. A key figure in the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb became known for his critique of contemporary Muslim societies and his call for an Islamic resurgence. His most famous work, Ma'alim fi al-Tariq (Milestones), published in 1964, outlined his vision for an Islamic state and society, emphasizing the need for a return to Quranic principles and the rejection of Western influence. This book became central to the ideology of "Qutbism," advocating for an Islamic society through struggle (jihad) and the establishment of a unique Muslim identity. Born on October 9, 1906, in Egypt, Qutb was an active writer and revolutionary. His critiques of the Egyptian government under President Gamal Abdel Nasser led to his imprisonment and eventual execution in 1966 for allegedly plotting Nasser's assassination. Despite his controversial views, Qutb's writings, including Fi Zilal al-Qur'an (In the Shade of the Quran), continue to influence various Islamic movements, inspiring both revivalist and militant ideologies. His legacy remains divisive, with some viewing him as a visionary Islamic thinker, while others see him as a radical who incited extremism.

Index Terms- Modernism in Islam, Sayyid Qutub, Islamic revivalism, Islamic reform, Arabic Language.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the village of Musha, Upper Egypt, Sayyid Qutb born in 1906 and initially gained recognition as a literary critic and poet before emerging as a prominent leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. His shift from a secular intellectual to a committed Islamist was shaped by his time in the United States and later imprisonment in Egypt. In his key works, such as *Social Justice in Islam* and *Milestones*, Qutb outlined his vision for an Islamic society, offering a sharp critique of what he saw as the moral and spiritual decline in both Western

and Muslim societies. Sayyid graduated from the Dar Al-Uloom preparatory school in 1929 AD and joined the Dar Al-Uloom College at the end of the same year. Theology, philosophy, Hebrew, the Syriac language and its comparison with the Arabic language, history and political economy.

Sayyid was not satisfied with the curriculum at Dar Al-Uloom College despite the variety of subjects and their focus on religious sciences literature and language. His eye was on the College of Arts affiliated to Cairo University and he expected it to be better and better in its curriculum than the College of Dar Al-Uloom. One of the reasons for his dissatisfaction with the curriculum in Dar al-Uloom was that it was short in teaching foreign languages. Rather he made thought-provoking notes in which he suggested changing the curriculum in a memorandum to the college administration and he was a student in the college itself. Sayyid was known among the students for his critical opinions, and he used to present his opinion on the topics of literature, criticism, and poetry, with frankness, courage, and unity.¹

Sayyid was managing the literary and critical discussions in the college and the literary debates and battles were sharp, violent, and harsh. Sayyid disagrees with his teachers on some literary and monetary issues with politeness, respect and appreciation. When Sayyid Qutub studied at the college, he had many friends, and among these friends: AsmaaSaad Al-Lebanon, Muhammad Ibrahim Jabir, Bayed Al-Amrousi, and Abdul Aziz Ateeq are noteworthy. The atmosphere in the village prior to 1919 AD was changed and the house of Sayyid's family was the center of many meetings held by the village's faces with his father and their conversations were whispered between them Sayyid was watching

what was going on in the house with a keen eye, “and it seemed that there was a certain feeling brewing he remembers now that and he realizes that when he was a child he was expecting something in his sense, with these men, The secret meetings that take place in his house the doors are closed and the voices are whispering these meetings were throwing in his mind this mysterious thing that he does not know Mysterious, he does not know what it is nor how it will happen but something will happen and peace. He was the principal of the school gathered the students and gave them a fiery patriotic speech and he told them: The school will be closed for an indefinite period because he and his classmates are going to work in the revolution and this is the duty of every person. Sometimes it fell on his hand and he set out on the enthusiasm and immediacy of the revolution.

He wrote speeches and included verses of poetry – he thought they were well-balanced while they were worn out – and he delivered them in synagogues and mosques where the sacred revolution was blown into the crowd. So they began to listen to every call for the revolution and if he was a young child like him, he hardly exceeded.

Sayyid Qutub graduated from the Faculty of Dar al-Uloom in the summer of 1933 AD. He worked immediately after graduating in the Ministry’s schools as a teacher. He was appointed as a teacher at the Dawoodiyyah Preparatory School... in Cairo on December 2, 1933 AD. After more than six years in the teaching profession, Sayyid moved to the Ministry of Education on 31/1940 AD. He was transferred to the Department of Translation and Statistics on 17/4/1940. Then he was transferred as an inspector of primary education on 7/1/1944. This transfer was due to the anger of the Minister of Education on him, due to his cultural, literary and political activity. Then he was returned to the General Culture Department in April – 1945 and he was its president is Ahmed Amin. Sayyid remained in his work until the end of 1948 AD, when the planners in the ministry arranged for him a scientific mission to America, where he traveled to America on 3/11/1948 AD. His travel was on a scientific mission from the Ministry of Education, to specialize in education and the fundamentals of curricula. Sayyid stayed in America for about two years then he returned from it on 23/8/1950 AD. He

was appointed as an assistant observer in the office of the Minister of Education. He was transferred to the southern educational district of Cairo in 10/1951 22/AD He was returned to the Ministry on 17/5/1952 AD to work as an assistant observer in technical research and projects. Finally, he submitted his resignation from the Ministry 18/10/1952 AD.

Minister Ismail Al-Qabbani tried by various means to persuade Sayyid to abandon his resignation and return to work, and he delayed the resignation for more than a year, despite Sayyid’s reversal of it. And in 13/1/1954 AD, the Council of Ministers in the revolutionary government approved Sayyid Qutub’s resignation from the ministry from the date Sayyid submitted it to it, which is 18/10/1952 AD. It is not from the date of the Council’s approval of it, and the decision of the Council of Ministers is harmful to Sayyid, and it was taken after the relations of the revolutionary governments with the Muslim Brotherhood had worsened. It was Sayyid’s service in the ministry from 2/12/1933 AD to 18/10/1952 AD. Their total was: eighteen years, ten months and sixteen days.²

Sayyid Qutub and the Educational Journey to America after the mid-forties, Sayyid turned towards Islam and preached to it. He also had an interest in the political, social and national issues that Egypt and its people lived through, and his literary style employed him to address these issues, meaning that he moved literature from the stage of ‘literature for literature’...to the stage of literature for the service of life and belief.

The disease after the second war, Egypt was living with Issues and problems, and suffering impassess and crises, at all levels and levels. Sayyid observed what the people were suffering from, looked at the basis and source of the calamity, and found it in the English colonialism that perched on the country, and then in its tools and aides in the country, such as the palace, the government, parties, feudal lords, major merchants, the owners of false claims, and the enemies of morals and virtues, and Sayyid was linked to the Prime Minister. In that time “Mahmoud Fahmy al-Nuqrashi is an old connection, so al-Nuqrashi worked on arranging a mission for him to America. His dispatch to America was with the aim of getting rid of him, protecting his articles, and his reform activity turned

on this goal the desires of the three parties: the palace, the government, and his superiors in the Ministry of Education. So he arranged his travel to her. The reason for going to America to obtain a master's degree, and others thought that he was sent for a doctorate, he was working in the technical inspection in the Ministry of Education, they arranged for him what is consistent with this work – so they asked him to see the curricula and systems of education in America, as an expert in curricula, and a specialist in programs. When Sayyid arrived in America, he spent months studying the English language – and when he mastered the English language, he began making field tours to universities, institutes, and schools, with the aim of acquainting himself with their curricula and educational systems, and getting acquainted with the programs and methods of teaching in them. His tour included several states, where he visited different cities, such as New York, Greeley, and San Francisco. Sayyid traveled several states of America. He visited several universities and institutes there, and learned about the curricula and teaching methods in them. And his time allowed him to make tours and visits to the facilities of the cities in which he resided, and to look at their features and landscapes in their mountains and valleys.³

He was making field tours, examining samples and models of American society, and through them Social life there, and he used to mingle with members of society, study their lives and discuss them, and he used to send his articles to some newspapers and magazines in Egypt. He used to send personal letters to his brothers, relatives, and acquaintances. He resided in the city of “New York” and learned from them the general nature of American life, and that is why he called it a strange and honest term, which is “the huge workshop.” In New York, it was published for him by Al-Kitab magazine in Egypt. Among the cities we knew for a while was the city of Washington, DC, and he sent two Islamic critical letters to Tawfiq al-Hakim, which were published in the letter. One of these cities is the city of Greeley, Colorado, and we know that he stayed there for a little while, and there he finished his studies of the English language. Everything, until he got to the church and he sent from this city a lofty treatise of faith, which he called “Lights of Man.” Far away and it was published by him in the magazine “The Book in Egypt.” He had a participation in Al-Medina magazines, where he wrote an article in the

“magazine” in which it is published, entitled “The World is Born Disobedient” based his idea on an ancient Egyptian legend, its summary.

He resided in California for a long time. He first resided in the capital of the state, San Francisco, “and it seems that its atmosphere did not agree with his health, so he fell ill, and entered its hospital, and there he witnessed manifestations of joy and jubilation among the hospital staff, not the martyrdom of” Hassan Al-Banna Al-Murshid. General of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. He left San Francisco” and settled in a beautiful rural village, nestled in an agricultural valley nearby in the village of Palo Alto. Then he resided in the city of “San Diego” and sent two letters from it to ‘Abbas Khadr’, which the latter published in his corner “Literature and Art in a Week in the “Al-Risalah” magazine. Some Egyptian magazines. It was avoided by private messages. . It is what the previous writers called “the Brotherhood messages that he sends to his acquaintances, relatives and brothers.”

When Sayyid Qutub returned from America to Cairo on 8/19/20 AD, he appointed him as an “assistant observer in the office of the Minister of Education at the time – Ismail Al-Qabbani in the Ministry of Education. Then he was transferred to the “South Cairo” area on 22/10/1951 AD. He was reinstated to his first job as an “assistant observer” for technical research and projects, on 17/5/1952. After the continuous succession between him and the senior men of the ministry because of their standing in his direction and their rejection of his reformist views of an Islamic character, he submitted his resignation to the Minister of Education Ismail Al-Qabbani on the date 17/10/1952 AD. Since he joined the job on December 2, 1933 AD, he deserves to be referred to retirement, after a full twenty years of service. Honorable Minister of Education Ismail Al-Qabbani submitted his resignation, and he tried several

- Born and brought up and Education:

Qutb's early education was steeped in traditional Islamic studies, but he also pursued modern education, earning a degree from Dar al-Ulum in Cairo. His initial career as an educator and literary critic involved extensive engagement with contemporary literary circles, where he advocated for literary realism and

was a proponent of Egyptian and Arab cultural revival. **Traditional Islamic Education:** Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906 in Musha, Egypt. He memorized the Qur'an by age ten, reflecting a traditional Islamic upbringing that influenced his later works.

Local Schooling: He attended primary school in his village, receiving a combination of religious and secular education.

Formal Education-Dar al-Ulum, Cairo: Qutb moved to Cairo in 1929 to study at Dar al-Ulum, where he graduated in 1933 with a degree in education. This institution blended traditional Islamic studies with modern subjects, and Qutb became an accomplished literary critic during this time.⁴

Professional Career and Further Intellectual Development- Teaching and Educational Inspector: After graduating, Qutb worked as a teacher and educational inspector, traveling across Egypt and observing social and economic conditions, which later influenced his social critiques.

Literary Criticism: He gained prominence as a literary critic, publishing extensively on Arabic literature and establishing himself in Egypt's literary circles.

Study Abroad- United States (1948-1950): Qutb was sent to the U.S. by the Egyptian Ministry of Education to study the American educational system. He attended several institutions, including Wilson Teachers' College, Colorado State College of Education, and Stanford University.

Disillusionment with Western Culture: Qutb's experiences in the U.S. led to his disillusionment with Western society, which he viewed as morally decadent and materialistic. This experience significantly shifted his views towards a more radical stance against Western modernity and secularism.

Intellectual Transformation and Return to Egypt, Shift to Islamism: After returning to Egypt in 1950, Qutb's writings began to reflect a commitment to Islamic principles. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood and became a leading intellectual in the organization.

Prison and Radicalization: Qutb was arrested in 1954 and imprisoned under harsh conditions. During this time, he wrote influential works such as "In the Shade of the Qur'an" and "Milestones," which reflected his radicalization and critique of secular governance. Sayyid Qutb's education encompassed traditional Islamic studies and modern secular education. His experiences in the United States profoundly influenced his ideological shift towards radical Islamism. His educational background and professional experiences provided the foundation for his influential and controversial contributions to modern Islamic thought.⁵

Transformation and Ideological Development: Qutb's turning point came during his two-year stay in the United States (1948-1950), where he was deeply disillusioned by what he saw as the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of Western civilization. His observations during this period profoundly shaped his later works, which emphasized the need for a return to Islamic principles.

Significant Works:

Social Justice in Islam (1949): In "Social Justice in Islam," Qutb argued that true social justice could only be achieved through the implementation of Islamic principles. He critiqued both capitalism and socialism for their failures and proposed Islam as a holistic system capable of addressing human needs.

In the Shade of the Qur'an (1951-1965): This multi-volume exegesis of the Qur'an represents Qutb's most extensive work. It reflects his deepening Islamic convictions and his vision for a society governed by Sharia (Islamic law). The work is notable for its literary quality and its emphasis on the practical application of Qur'anic principles.⁶

Milestones (1964): "Milestones" is perhaps Qutb's most controversial work. Written during his imprisonment, it calls for a revolutionary vanguard to establish an Islamic state and criticizes existing Muslim societies for their deviation from true Islamic values. Qutb's concept of Jahiliyya (pre-Islamic ignorance) is central to this work, positing that modern societies are in a state of ignorance akin to pre-Islamic times.

Qutb's Influence and Legacy:

Qutb's execution in 1966 by the Nasser regime turned him into a martyr for many Islamists. His ideas have inspired a wide range of movements, from moderate reformists to radical groups advocating for violent jihad. Qutb's emphasis on the sovereignty of God (Hakimiyya) and the necessity of a vanguard to implement Sharia has been particularly influential in the ideological development of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Sayyid Qutb's legacy is multifaceted, encompassing significant influence on modern Islamic thought, political movements, and the broader discourse on Islam and modernity. His works, especially "Milestones" and his Qur'anic commentary "In the Shade of the Qur'an," have left a lasting impact on both supporters and critics.

Intellectual Influence- Revival of Islamic Thought:

Qutb is credited with revitalizing Islamic thought in the mid-20th century. His emphasis on returning to pure Islamic principles and his reinterpretation of concepts like Jahiliyya and Hakimiyya have become central themes in contemporary Islamic discourse.

Qur'anic Exegesis: His extensive commentary on the Qur'an, "In the Shade of the Qur'an," remains a key reference for many Muslims seeking to understand the text from a modern yet conservative perspective. It emphasizes the applicability of the Qur'an to all aspects of life, including politics and society.

Political Impact-Islamist Movements: Qutb's ideas have profoundly influenced various Islamist movements worldwide. The Muslim Brotherhood, which he was a part of, adopted many of his principles. His call for an Islamic state governed by Sharia law inspired groups seeking to implement Islamic governance.⁷

Radicalization and Jihad: More controversially, Qutb's writings, particularly "Milestones," have been interpreted by some as justifying violent jihad. Radical groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS have drawn on his works to legitimize their actions. While Qutb himself did not explicitly call for terrorism, his rhetoric about the need for a vanguard to lead an Islamic revolution has been co-opted by militant extremists.

Critique of Western Modernity- Anti-Western Sentiment: Qutb's critique of Western materialism, moral decadence, and cultural imperialism resonated with many Muslims who felt marginalized by colonialism and global Western dominance. His works provide a framework for resisting Western influence and advocating for cultural and religious authenticity. **Cultural and Moral Critique:** His observations on the moral and cultural failings of the West continue to influence debates within the Muslim world about modernity, secularism, and Westernization.

Martyrdom and Symbolism- Execution and Martyrdom: Qutb's execution in 1966 by the Egyptian government turned him into a martyr for many Islamists. His death is often viewed as a symbol of resistance against oppressive regimes and the struggle for Islamic principles.

Inspirational Figure: For many, Qutb remains an inspirational figure who stood against tyranny and sought to reestablish Islam's role in public life. His life and works are frequently cited by those advocating for political and social change based on Islamic values.⁸

Academic and Scholarly Discourse- Subject of Study: Academically, Qutb's works have been extensively studied and analyzed. Scholars explore his impact on Islamic thought, his theological arguments, and his socio-political critiques. His writings are central to understanding the development of modern political Islam.

Criticism and Debate: Qutb's legacy is not without controversy. Critics argue that his ideas promote intolerance and extremism. Debates continue about the interpretation of his works and their implications for contemporary Muslim societies. Sayyid Qutb's legacy is enduring and complex. He is seen as a pioneer of modern Islamic thought, whose ideas have inspired both peaceful Islamist activism and radical militancy. His critique of Western modernity and advocacy for a return to authentic Islamic governance continue to influence a wide range of Islamic movements and intellectual debates. Understanding Qutb's legacy is crucial for grasping the dynamics of contemporary Islamic politics and thought.⁹

CONCLUSION

Sayyid Qutb remains a pivotal figure in modern Islamic thought. His works continue to be studied, debated, and utilized by diverse groups seeking to navigate the challenges of contemporary Muslim societies. While his ideas have sparked considerable controversy, Qutb's call for a return to Islamic principles as a solution to societal ills resonates with many Muslims around the world. The Islamic thinker Sayyid Qutb was one of the most prominent Islamic scholars in the world, and his personality combined many talents that are rarely found in one man. Sayyid Qutb was the most famous writer of the twentieth century. He wrote more than sixty books on social and Arabic studies. In addition to his breadth of knowledge, he was a caller for Islam, humanity, and security, so he founded a movement for the message of humanity. His writings express his breadth of knowledge and his determination to create a just and ideal society that enjoys freedom. It is the effect of using easy, simple language in both his writings and speeches. It reviewed the stages that Sayyid Qutb went through to reach the prestigious position he enjoyed in the Arabic language, literature, and Islamic culture. He began his academic career as a researcher in the world of literature, poetry, and criticism. Then he became a researcher in structural, aesthetic, and artistic studies of the Holy Qur'an. Then he became a researcher in general Islamic thought. He became a researcher in practical change thought.

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