Book Reviews


Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), an educationist by profession, is considered one of the main ideologues of the Islamic socio-political concepts and philosophy of the twentieth century. He was a prolific writer and a trenchant critic. His intellectual life spanned a period of more than 40 years (1921–1964) but most of his writings, with the exception of his remarkable book *Social Justice in Islam*, which made a visible impact on the Arab world in particular and Muslim world in general, appeared after his return from USA in 1950, and during the period of his imprisonment (1954–1966). One of the books that Qutb wrote during his internments *Ma’ālim fi ’l ʿarq* (Milestones) was highly impactful and is considered to be a major reason prompting the verdict of the Military Court for his execution.

Not much academic work has been done on Sayyid Quṭb’s contribution to Islamic thought. Sayed Khatab, who is a researcher in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University, Australia, should be commended for having taken up the responsibility of introducing Sayyid Quṭb and his theory of *Jahiliyyah*, through this book, to the English-speaking world.

According to Khatab, “Islam and *jahiliyyah* are the real binary opposites and the real struggle in the future will be between them, and not between the East and the West.” (p. 1) The future is, therefore, likely to witness a clash between Islam and *Jahiliyyah* and not between incompatible civilizations, as propounded by certain Western academics. Khatab argues that Quṭb’s perception of ‘Sovereignty of Allah’ or Islam and *Jahiliyyah* “together form the hard core of the ideological and political tactics of many of the Islamic political organizations worldwide.” (p. 1) It is for this reason that he has paired this book with another book *The Power of Sovereignty: The Political and Ideological Philosophy of Sayyid Qutb*.
Khatab has divided the writings of Sayyid Qutb in four specific periods to understand the concept of jahiliyyah and its evolution over time, apart from an introductory chapter on ‘What the early Muslims meant by jahiliyyah?’ According to him, “the explicit term jahiliyyah did not exist in Arabian literature before Islam but was given by Islam…. The term jahiliyyah was itself used by the Qur’an in the Madinah period after the migration (hijrah) of Muhammad and his followers to Madinah and during the founding of the Islamic state… In short, the Qur’anic concept of jahiliyyah is exclusively used as antithetical to the concept of Sovereignty, the highest governmental and legal authority, Submission to this Sovereignty is simply Islam.” (p. 43)

During the first stage of his writings (1925–1939), Qutb felt “that human life should be in harmony with the universe.” He “did not use the explicit term jahiliyyah but distinguished between al-iman (belief) and al-kufran (unbelief).” (p. 78)

During the turbulent period 1939–48, when the events of Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936–1937 impacted significantly on Egyptian intellectuals and Turkey announced its new secular constitution in 1937, “Qutb had arrived at a point where he clearly saw any adoption of Western laws as a secular threat to the Islamic identity and culture of Egypt.” (p. 83) Qutb’s visit to USA during 1948–1950 provided him with an opportunity to have a direct acquaintance with the Western culture, to compare it with the Muslim society and arrive at certain conclusions about their relationship, which he propounded during the last phase of his writings during 1950–1966.

Qutb used the term jahiliyyah for the first time in his introduction to Abu’l Hasan ‘Ali al-Nadawi’s works published in mid 1950s. The concept was further elaborated in later writings. The major discussion of the jahiliyyah concept appeared in the works that were written during his imprisonment. In his book Ma’alim, Qutb “pointed out the bankruptcy of the ideas of both Western and Eastern blocs... In his view, the fundamentals of the ideas and social systems of the two Western blocs were in conflict with human nature. Because of these fundamentals, the world was now living in jahiliyyah... This jahiliyyah is based on transgression. It transgresses the authority of Allah on the Earth. It transgresses the rights of hakimiyyah (Sovereignty), the most specific characteristic of ulubiyyah (divinity).” (p. 168)

Qutb emphasizes “that, under any social system other than that of Islam, the people are worshipping themselves in various forms. The Islamic social system is the only worldwide system that liberates people from worshipping anything other than Allah.” (p. 168–69) He defines jahiliyyah as the condition of any place or society where Allah is not held to be the sovereign being or His law being the sole authority in human life and society.
Khatab, in his introduction to the book acknowledges that Quṭb’s writings and “in particular his theory of jahiliyyah have been viewed as one of his literary weapons and a threat to the nationalistic regimes in the Arab and Muslim worlds from Cairo to Tashkent and are now viewed as a threat to the West as well.” (p. 1) but he intentionally refrains from a critical examination of his thoughts. This is perhaps a significant limitation.

The book is worth reading to know and understand a prominent ideologue of Islamic socio-political and the evolution of his thought process. The book highlights the need for an objective critique of Quṭb’s ideas, its conformity or otherwise with the basic philosophy of Islam, its applicability to the modern world and its implications.

Ather Zaidi


Islam and Sufism, are they conciliatory or contradictory towards each other? This question needs tomes and bulky volumes to be answered by the scholars, and in the present case too we aren’t concerned with this question. Islam in Kashmir became dominant religion through the peaceful preaching by the Muslim Šūfīs, who not only brought religion but helped to usher a new innovative revolution in social, economic, political, cultural and literary spheres too. Not much has been written to specify the areas which were affected by the new religious creed and mass conversion to Islam.

Professor Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi in keeping verve with his prodigious writing as a prolific writer has penned down yet another unique, innovative and well researched tome depicting these lesser known aspects of Sufism, and its impact on various fields of life, literature and living of common man. The book is divided into a number of chapters each lucidly written and well researched depicting a certain aspect of Sufi-Islam impact and its various dimensions. The influence of Islam also resulted in the rise of a unique Shivaism philosophy which was an amalgamation of Islamic, Hindustic and Buddhistic impacts. The Sufism in Kashmir also developed a unique