

## The Influence of Al-<sup>ᶜ</sup>Aqqad and the *Diwan* School of Poetry on Sayyid Qutb's Writings

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### Abstract

*One of the most well known scholars in Muslim society of the twentieth century was Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966). Throughout the formative phases of Qutb's life, many figures were responsible for shaping his cultural and intellectual orientation. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the influence of ᶜAbbas Mahmud al-ᶜAqqad into the life of Sayyid Qutb and his writings in particular. The study used content analysis approach to collect relevant data. Results show that ᶜAbbas Mahmud al-ᶜAqqad was one of the most important figures who responsible for shaping Sayyid Qutb's literary outlook and socio-political orientation which resulted in profound changes in his intellectual ability as manifested in his writings.*

**Keywords:** Muslim society; Islamic ideologue; Islam

### 1. Introduction

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 (*madrasa*) instead of the traditional Islamic school (*kuttab*) at the age of six. Qutb's years at the *madrasa* 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, he entered Kulliyat al-Mu'allimun, 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 politics began in his early days in Cairo, when he gradually became a partisan of the Wafd, the party particularly associated with independence, parliamentary government and the Nationalist cause. On 3 November 1948, Qutb left Egypt for the United States to study modern systems of education and training. His departure, however, was seen as a result of his severe criticism of the existing political authority which made the latter angry with Qutb. In the words of Musallam (1983):

the palace had become very impatient with Qutb and had ordered the Prime Minister, Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi, to arrest him. But al-Nuqrashi, an associate of Qutb in the Wafd and Sa'dist parties, manage to salvage the situation by ordering Qutb's superior at the Ministry of Education to send him abroad on an educational mission.

Qutb's stay in the United States was one of the most fruitful periods in his life, for he started to appreciate Islamic values and way of life and to reject the Western way of thinking and its civilization. His article in *al-Risalah*, entitled *Amrika allati Ra'aytu* (The America that I Saw), provided a clear picture of his experiences and personal observations during his stay in that country (Hammudah, 1990). Qutb admitted in *Amrika* the advancement and achievement of the Western people, and the Americans in particular, in science and modern technology, which had brought them great material success.

The Americans, Qutb proclaimed, “are a nation achieving advancement and development in terms of science and production” (Khalidi, 1986). However, turning to questions of moral and spiritual well-being, Qutb withheld his appreciation of the West, considering that the American success was not able to bring a peaceful life based on brotherhood and equality. In his view, the Americans were born in an environment of science and technology, which then became the main focus of their lives, and so religious principles were abandoned. At this point one can see Qutb’s interest in Islam develop as he began to feel the necessity of fulfilling spiritual and religious elements in human life in addition to achieving scientific breakthroughs. Qutb returned to Egypt in 1950 after two years in the United States. His return to Egypt perhaps signified his symbolic return to Islam as a comprehensive way of life. The publication of his work *al-‘Adalah* 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). Upon his return, Qutb was approached by Ikhwan members, who asked him to co-operate in writing some articles for the organization’s journals such as *al-Da‘wah* (The Call) and *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun* (The Muslim Brothers).

According to Kepel, Qutb ultimately devoted himself to the Ikhwan late in 1951, when he was 45. It is also important to note that on Qutb’s return there was a close association between the Ikhwan and the Free Officers in their intention of overthrowing the monarchy and the liberal nationalist regime. Despite different ideological principles (Socialism versus Islam), the growing crisis in Egyptian politics and the economy had led them to agree to co-operate in the struggle for unity and justice for the Egyptian people. The revolution of July 1952 saw Qutb’s emergence as one of its important figures. He played a vital role in influencing the people of the country and gaining their support. In 1954, two years after the revolution, the relationship between the Ikhwan and the new regime under Jamal ‘Abd al-Naser leadership seemed to deteriorate as the Ikhwan gradually became disillusioned with the regime’s emphasis on Egyptian nationalism rather than Islam as the governing system of the country. This could be seen with the arrest of a thousand Ikhwan members, including Qutb. The main reason given was the Ikhwan’s conspiracy to overthrow the Nasserite government as well as their attempt to assassinate Nasser himself. As Kepel (1984) writes, “Whether it was a police provocation or a deliberate act, the attack gave the president the perfect excuse for finishing off the Muslim Brethren.” On 13 July 1955, after a farcical trial, Qutb was sentenced to fifteen years in prison, during which he completed his major work, *Fi Zilal al-Qur’an* (In the Shade of the Qur’an) as well as several other works (Kepel, 1984).

In 1964, Qutb was released after the intercession of President ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif of Iraq, who was on a state visit to Egypt. Qutb was, however, rearrested a few months later accused of plotting against the regime. In fact, his release in 1964 was followed by the publication of his controversial work, *Ma‘alim fi’l-Tariq*, which was used by the regime as the main item of evidence in his 1966 trial for conspiracy to overthrow the regime. On 29 August 1966, Qutb was executed along with two other members of the Ikhwan, ‘Abd al-Fattah Isma‘el and Muhammad Yusuf Hawwash. Their execution sent the Ikhwan underground for several years (Abu Rabi, 1984). There are numerous well-known figures of the twentieth century who influenced the development of Sayyid Qutb’s thought. Names like Hassan al Banna (d.1949), Abbas Mahmud al Aqqad (d. 1964) and Abu A’la al Mawdudi (d. 1979) were so influential in the Muslim World for their contributions to Islam and Islamic resurgence in particular. This paper will, however, be limited into ‘Abbas Mahmud al-‘Aqqad, one of the intellectual figures, who regarded as having a strong influence on Qutb’s thought on literary views, socio-political issues and Islam whom Qutb clearly mentioned in many of his writings. Qutb’s development of thought went 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 Muslim Brotherhood Movement (*Ikhwan al Muslimun*), 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* (ignorance), *jihad* (holy war) 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.

## **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. This method also imply that any technique employed for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages. For the purpose of the content analysis, several materials such as newspaper, books, films, videos and the like can be used in gathering required information. In the context of this paper, all the data were gathered from extensive reading on al Aqqad's life and his socio-political involvement in Egypt as well as his writings. Several concepts and themes related to his thoughts are evaluated and analysed for the purpose of getting meaning for the study. More importantly, the study attempt to show how such concepts and themes derived from al Aqqad had influenced his disciple, Sayyid Qutb and exposed him to literature and political views which were paramount in Sayyid Qutb's views on literature and political questions of his his country, Egypt.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1: Al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad and the *Diwan* school of poetry

<sup>c</sup>Abbas Mahmud al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad (1899–1964) was one of the most important figures in the first half of the twentieth century. His importance stemmed from the fact that he was a famous Egyptian thinker, literary critic, modernist and outspoken journalist who participated in the political struggle from the 1920s to the early 1940s for independence from British rule. During those years, he joined the Wafd party under the leadership of Sa<sup>c</sup>d Zaghlul and devoted his talents to the cause of the party. His support of the party ended with the death of Sa<sup>c</sup>d Zaghlul, for he was disillusioned with the new party leader, Nahhas Pasha, whom he considered more inclined to demagoguery than to democracy (Kepel, 1984).

Al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's early years in Aswan, where he was born, saw his exposure to Western language and culture. This was due to the many British communities living there and working on the construction of the Aswan Dam. Therefore it enabled him to keep in touch with them and gain access to English books and magazines. It also gave al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad the opportunity to learn English language and culture, which led him finally to be influenced by English writers like Hazlitt, Coleridge, Macaulay, Arnold and Darwin (Taubah, 1977). Al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad distinguished himself from other Egyptian thinkers in that he firmly believed that reason and intellect alone guided men's actions. His tendencies were more towards secular ideas such as individualism and liberalism, which, from his viewpoint, could bring to men intellectual and cultural liberty. Many of his writings clearly exemplified his thought, for he focused much on the significance of an individual and his social and political role. As an Egyptian thinker striving for a better life for the Egyptian nation, al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad saw European society as the ideal. This perhaps was the result of his long devotion to Western writing and literature during his early years at Aswan. In al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's view, the democratic system applied by Europe and the Western countries ought to be applied to Egyptian society because it would give individuals their freedom of right in the governmental system of the country and later bring the country towards material and intellectual development. Al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad wrote in *al-Risala* in 1943 of his support of the democratic system: "I [personally] support democracy because it protects the individual freedom and improves human life." (Taubah, 1977).

In his literary career, al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad seems to have been a man of vision. He believed that the real function of the poet was to serve as the intermediary between life and its people. Therefore in his view poetry and other literary works were not a form of entertainment but a faithful interpretation of life (Semah, 1974). Here he clearly opposed neo-classical poetry and its protagonists such as Ahmad Shawqi (1869–1932) and several others who were considered static in their poetry. According to al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, the poetry of Ahmad Shawqi and his associates did not have characteristics that could bring much benefit to the public and make sense to its mind. Their poetry focused more on describing and comparing things, such as likening the shape or colour of one object to another, without giving attention to the current issues and the poets' personal expression of them. "A true poet", al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad added, "is not necessary to show what objects look like but to express his peculiar mode of perception and his attitude to life." (Semah, 1974).

#### 3.2: Influence on the Intellectual Development

Al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's influence on Qutb's intellectual development began in the early 1920s when the latter moved to Cairo to live with his uncle, Husayn. There, Qutb was introduced to al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, who was already famous in both poetry and criticism. According to Khalidi, there are several reasons for the increase in Qutb's association with al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad. Firstly, Qutb was living with his uncle, Husayn, who was already close friends with al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, for both were Wafdists and journalists. Secondly, Uncle Husayn's residence itself was close to al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's residence. This closeness of course enabled Qutb to visit al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad frequently and learned many things from him including the meaning of life. Thirdly, al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's personality and his talent in literary works and criticism attracted Qutb so much that he then began to admire al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad and read his works (Khalidi, 1994).

Qutb's association with al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad also enabled him to read Western books on various subjects such as literature (including poetry), history, philosophy, psychology and education, since many of them were available in al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's personal library. In addition, Qutb was a loyal reader of al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's writings, judging by his enthusiasm in reading all the articles and books written by his mentor. Thus, al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's secular ideas such as liberalism, individualism and modernism as reflected in his writings gradually influenced Qutb's as he began to realize how reason and intellect could guide human action. Qutb did admit to this development when he stated that al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad helped him to focus on the thought rather than the utterance (*al-<sup>c</sup>inaya bi'l-fikr akthar mina'l-lafu*) (Musallam, 1983). Perhaps it was during this stage that Qutb appeared to be greatly influenced by the Western way of thinking and became acquainted with its civilization. This can be seen from Qutb's later writings in which he mentioned Western writers like T.W. Arnold (1864–1930), Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and the English poet Thomas Hardy (1840–1928). In Qutb's novel *Ashwak*, for instance, Qutb used ideas like existentialism, scepticism and liberalism, which indicated his Westernized tendencies. Noting on this new orientation, Haddad writes, Qutb's association with al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad had exposed him to Western sources and made him "extremely interested in English literature and read avidly anything he could lay his hands on in translation" (Yvonne Y. Haddad, 1983).

### 3.3: Meaning of Political Struggle

Al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's influence on Qutb's thought had also enabled the latter to realize the meaning of political struggle in the country in a true sense. Although the fact that Qutb's concern for social and political problems had developed during his years in Musha, as described in *Tifl min al-Qarya*, it was al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, who shaped and prepared Qutb to analyse critically the social and political situation in his country. Musallam noted this development, saying that when Qutb left Musha around 1921, "he was a highly literate and politically conscientious young man with a mission in life, which had been engraved in his consciousness from the age of ten" (Musallam, 1983). As a student of al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's school, Qutb became highly impressed by the personality and political thought of its leader. This included al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's outlook on the Western parliamentary system and his preference for democracy to any other ideologies like Marxism and communism. To al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, democracy as applied in the West gave an individual a full right in the government. Qutb also became impressed with al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's political role as such in the 1919–1922 revolution and his literary contribution to the nationalist struggle of that time, in which he aimed at implanting an awareness of nationalism in the minds of the Egyptians.

Thus Qutb's years with al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad opened his eyes and made him realize that, as a literary critic, he too had a role to play in finding solutions to the problems of the Egyptian social and political milieu. Following both his uncle and mentor, Qutb joined the Wafd Party and became an active member. Qutb devoted himself to working for the party for almost twenty years, including writing poetry and essays for the party's newspaper, *al-Balagh* (Musallam, 1983). Qutb's discussion on socio political issues in his later writings such as *al-Adalah*, *al-Islam wa Salam al-Alam* and *Ma'rakat al-Islam wa al-Ra'samaliyyah* clearly motivated by his mentor, al Aqqad's thought. In those books, Qutb criticized the corrupt royal government, feudalism and capitalism and how they could bring calamity, social instability and injustice for the country. In *Ma'rakat al-Islam wa-I-Ra'smaliyya* (The Struggle between Islam and Capitalism) and *al-Salam al-<sup>c</sup>Alami wa'l-Islam* (World Peace and Islam), Qutb clearly affirmed the capacity of Islam as an appropriate and desirable ideology for the world of the mid-twentieth century

From the period spent at Dar al-<sup>c</sup>Ulum to the middle of the 1940s, Qutb also joined al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad in literary battles against the latter's literary rivals such as al-Rafi<sup>c</sup>i and several others among the neo-classicists. Qutb's critical writings against al-Rafi<sup>c</sup>i appeared mainly in *al-Risalah*, where his method of criticism clearly relied on the thought of al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad. Describing al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's influence on his thought in literary work, Qutb mentioned to al-Nadwi, who visited him in 1951, that:

There is no doubt that I am a disciple of al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad both in literature and in literary style. It is to him that I owe my ability to think clearly; he stopped me from imitating al-Manfaluti and al-Rafi<sup>c</sup>i... Al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad is a man of pure intellect; he will only examine a problem through reason and intellect, so I proceeded to quench my thirst at other springs nearer the spirit. I then took the trouble to study the poetry of Orientals such as Tagore. I used to believe moreover that someone like al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, with his great wisdom and personality, would not submit to such necessities and confusions as the government and the authorities, but he reconciled himself to them (Sylvia Haim, 1982).

### 4. Conclusion

Although Qutb began to dissociate himself completely from al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad and his school in 1946, but the latter's influence on him prior to 1946 was paramount particularly on the meaning of life and socio-political struggle for justice.

Qutb's distance from his mentor was also due to his gradual interest in spiritual themes in poetry and other literary works. This, of course, differed from his mentor, al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, who was still firmly convinced that reason and intellect alone could guide men's action by ignoring spiritual values. Need to be mentioned, Qutb's latest interest might have been the result of his six years' work on a literary study of the Qur'an, beginning in 1939 and ending with the publication of his book, *al-Taswir al-Fanni fi'l-Qur'an*, in 1945. This is because his separation from al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad began in 1946 and signified that his literary analysis of artistic imagery and portrayal in the Qur'an had provided him with a new direction in literary work: the search for spiritual values. Qutb did admit that "the Qur'an, more than any other single factor, was instrumental in leading him out of the turbulence he experienced in his fruitless search for the infinite into a strong belief in the Islamic way of life." Thus, the formative phases of Qutb's life saw the development of his intellectual career and emergence as one of the important Muslim figures of the twentieth century.

Throughout those years Qutb's background, including his upbringing, education and the socio-political conditions of Egyptian society, were responsible for shaping his cultural and intellectual orientation. The intellectual environment during his years in Cairo was also exceptional, for Qutb appears to have been gradually influenced by names like al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad, who contributed to shaping Qutb's critical basis of thought and his outlook on the social and political situation of his country. More importantly, Qutb's joining the political party and realising the importance of a political struggle for the country was the result of his impress with al-<sup>c</sup>Aqqad's political role as such in the 1919–1922 revolution and the latter's contribution to the nationalist struggle of that time

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