Clarifications on the Works of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

Qaisar Mohammad
Lecturer, Department of Higher Education,
Govt. of Jammu & Kashmir, India.

Abstract: Said Nursi from Bitlis (1876-1960), who sacrificed his whole life for the cause of Islam and fought against the corruption of society caused by enemies like atheism, materialism, colonialism, etc. through his writings collectively known as Risale-i Nur is the founder of a significant Muslim movement, whose teachings form the basis of one of the largest and rather influential religious orders in contemporary Turkey. The renewer (mujaddid) of the previous century had been Mevlana Khalid; the renewer of this century was not Said Nursi but his Treatise of Light (Risale-i Nur). He himself wrote: “I now realize that the name Bediuzzaman, which was given to me many years ago although I was not worthy of it, was not mine anyway. It was rather a name of the Risale-i Nur. It was ascribed to the Risale-i Nur’s apparent translator temporarily and as a trust.” His treatises, whose number has exceeded one hundred and thirty, pertain to themes such as the afterlife and faith, and they purposely avoid politics and worldly matters. It also resembles Sufism in terms of the themes that it covers, but it is not exclusively Sufi either. Imam Bediuzzaman covers the themes in Risale-i Nur in such a unique way; it is as if nobody has ever mentioned them before, analysing them with strong proofs and by this means resolving them.

Keywords: Risale-i Nur, Ottoman Empire, Said Nursi, Nurja, Turkey

I. Historical Background:

Said Nursi spent much of his subsequent life (after the Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925) in prison or in various places of enforced residence in Turkey. Although he had no clear connection with the Revolt, Said Nursi was accused of inciting rebellion among the Kurds resulting in his exile from Van to Burdur in Western Anatolia1 which gave him the opportunity to separate himself entirely from active politics.2 There he wrote his first work, Nurun ilk Kapilari (The First Doors of Light). Later, he moved to Barla and began to write his main work, Risale-i Nur (Treatise of Light).

Firstly, Nursi wrote small treatises that took the form of a book namely Saiyqal al-Islam (Reasonings) in Arabic and it comprises of the many concise issues like Muhakemat (Reasoned arguments, which details questions and answers given during his visits to tribal leaders in Eastern Anatolia and was written as an attempt to convince them of the importance of democracy and freedom and that these ideas were compatible with Islam), Sunuhat (Manifestations) and Munazarat (Debates, which depict the socio-political situation of Ottoman Turkey before the World War I), Divan-i Harbi Orfi (The Shining Proof), Khutuvat-i Sitte (Six Steps, written against British occupation aiming to inform people of its dangers not only in regard to Ottoman provinces, but also towards the unity of Islam) and Khalba-i Shamiya (His sermon of 1911 in the Damascus Mosque has also been published as The Damascus Sermon delivered in Arabic, some part of which is placed in his biography Seerat-i Zauti in Arabic or Tarihce Hayat in Turkish compiled by his students during his lifetime).3 Said Nursi produced most of the treaties on which his movement is based between 1925 and 1944.4 Secondly, the New Said (1925-1950) resorted to serious writing5 and wrote his voluminous magnum opus Kulliyati Risale-i Nur which comprises of the following books entitled; Sozler in Turkish (The Words in English and al-kalimat in Arabic), Mektubat in Turkish (The Letters in English and al-Maktubat in Arabic), Lem alar in Turkish (The Flashes in English and al-lum’aat in Arabic), Shuaier in Turkish (The Rays in English and al-Sha’ar’at in Arabic), Isharaat al ‘Ifaz in Arabic (Signs of the Miraculousness in English and Isharaat al ‘Ifaz in Turkish, was written during World War I and his most philosophically complex text),6 Asa-yi Musa in

3 Tuluuat, Zerre, Zerre, Qesil ‘Ifaz and ‘Tuluiqat are the other small leaflets written in Arabic by Nursi.
5 He did not write himself (quickly) rather made his students especially Shamla Hafiz to write for him in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. However, he himself wrote some first few parts of The Words.
Turkish (Staff of Moses in English and al-asayi Musa in Arabic). He wrote in Ottoman Turkish script except for al masnavi al-arabi an-nuriyya and Isharaat al 'Ijaz (1913-1914) which he originally wrote in Arabic. Emirdag Lahikasi (Emirdag Appendix), Barla Lahikasi (Barla Appendix) and Kastamonu Lahikasi (Kastamonu Appendix) which were originally written in Ottoman Turkish, some parts of Lahikasi collection has been translated into Arabic as al-Milahiqh that deals with the questions and answers about the services ‘Hizmet’ of Nurjus for others. Furthermore, the letters included in these Lahikalar (Appendices) are often written in question and answer format and deal with various topics from theological conversations to jurisprudential matters, mostly on topics regarding ways to strengthen faith. In 1936 he was exiled to Kastamonu, a city located in central northern Anatolia, where he spent about seven and a half years. He continued to exchange letters with his students. These letters were collected and later published as Kastamonu Lahikasi. Between his arrival in Kastamonu in March 1936 and about 1940, Nursi wrote from the Third to the Ninth Rays inclusive. Of these, the Seventh Ray, The Supreme Sign, was written in Ramadan of 1938 or 1939. It was followed immediately by the Eighth Ray, and the summary of the Arabic Twenty-ninth Flash, Hzâb al-Akbar al-Nuri. During these years the Risale-i Nur became firmly rooted in Turkish society.

II. Popularising Risale

Although his writings were banned by the Kemalist regime, Said Nursi maintained his reputation as a religious leader. He began to attract a group of followers who copied his writings by hand and distributed them all over Anatolia. The copies of his writings, which were illegally written in Arabic script, were distributed secretly all over the country. The sections of the Risale-i Nur were copied and read in Arabic script until Said Nursi eventually permitted their printing in Latin script in 1956. This underground circulation of Said’s writings also led to a sense of solidarity and attachment among his followers (Nurjus). Hence, the Nurjus emerged from the beginning as a text-based movement, i.e. a movement centered on Said Nursi’s writings. He also demanded the free circulation of his Risale-i Nur, which according to him contributed to the fight against communism and Freemasonry. Through the mid-1920s, Said’s writings seem to have been printed without particular difficulty. By the mid-1930s, some villages around Isparta, near Said’s first place of exile in western Anatolia, had become centers for manuscript reproduction, so much that his treatises became a factor in propagating rural literacy in the old script, among women as well as men, obviously, which also resulted in the formation of a sense of religiosity among the masses. Ultimately the number of handwritten copies of the various parts of the treatises allegedly amounted to six hundred thousand. If that was remotely true, it would infer that one of the largest manuscript-copying projects in history occurred in the twentieth century. Later on, his writings began to be mechanically reproduced in Isparta and Inebolu in 1946, using the first imported copiers in Turkey. Furthermore, Risale-i Nur was finally set free of all alleged charges in 1956 that resulted to its proliferation and translations in different languages. Nursi called this as “the Risale-i Nur’s festival” after put on trial for 434 times.

III. Translation Works of Said Nursi’s Risale

While he himself had translated The Damascus Sermon (Khutba-i Shaamiya) from Arabic into Turkish in 1951, his younger brother Abdul Majid (d.1967), who was the then mufti of Urgup ne-riyya (Hizb al-Akbar al-Nuri). Through these years the Risale-i Nur became firmly rooted in Turkish society.

16 Sarwat Sawlat, Millat-i Islamiya Ki Muktatasar Turâk Vol.3 (Markazi Maktaba Islami: New Delhi, 2010), 255.
poetry, it is still very beautifully written. On many occasions, Nursi compared his Masnavi to that of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi (d.1273) and believed that as Rumi’s Masnavi Sharif served many people throughout history, so his Masnavi would also serve people in their faith in the future.

Hamid Algar was the first academic to introduce Nursi and his magnum opus, the Risale-i Nur, to the English speaking world. In 1979, he translated one of Nursi’s treatises, The Supreme Sign which deals with the existence of God. It was published by the Risale-i Nur Institute of America, founded by followers of Nursi in the United States. In 1980, Algar also translated Nursi’s The Resurrection and the Hereafter which was published by the same publishing house. Algar’s translation was followed by Sukran Vahide’s. Beginning in the 1990s, Vahide translated most of Nursi’s works into English. This gave Western intellectuals an opportunity of a close reading of Nursi’s texts. Parallel to the translations, the Istanbul Foundation for Science and Culture founded in 1979, organized symposiums and workshops not only in Turkey but also abroad to disseminate Nursi’s ideas. Furthermore, the crucial point in Nursi Studies was Serif Mardin’s publication Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in 1989. This was the first scholarly analysis marking the beginning of Nursi Studies in the academic world.

The Arabic translator Ihsan Qasim as-Salih has also been able to compile all the contents of the Risale-i Nur collection in the form of a book namely al-Faharis in Arabic. The English translation of this large corpus has also been undertaken by a British woman, Shukran Vahide (Wife of one of the students of Said Nursi, Mehmet Firinci). Hitherto, the English translator Shukran Vahide has been able to translate six books of Risale-i Nur collection. She was so impressed by the work, Risale-i Nur, when exposed to it as a student in England, that she moved to Turkey in 1985 and thereafter devoted herself to its translation in order to make the writings of Said Nursi known to the broadest audience.

IV. Conclusions

Nursi struggled to come up with a new interpretation and methodology of Islam which resulted in the writing of his magnum opus Risale-i Nur. Today, Nursi still is considered one of the most influential figures in modern Turkey, despite being dead for nearly fifty five years. The readers of his writings come from various segments of society, from lay people to college students to members of parliament. There are many aspects of Nursi and his writings that attract millions of people. After the Quran and Hadith, Nursi’s writings are the most read books in Turkey.

His methodology kept him and his students away from political involvement. Nursi believed that one should focus on faith, rather than politics since faith is essential for the afterlife.

21 Andrew Rippin, The Islamic World (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2008), 401