



# An In-Depth Analytical Study Of The Works Of Sayyid Qutb: Ideology, Influence, And Legacy

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**Citation:** Dr. Raysul Hoque et al (2024), An In-Depth Analytical Study Of The Works Of Sayyid Qutb: Ideology, Influence, And Legacy, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(7), 1202 -1206

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i7.7914

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Sayyid Qutb, born in 1906 and executed in 1966, was a prominent Egyptian writer, educator, and Islamic theorist. He played a significant role in shaping modern Islamic thought and was a key figure in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood during the 1950s and 60s. Qutb's writings, particularly his most famous book "Ma'âlim fi al-Tarîq" (Milestones), published in 1964, became central to the ideology of Qutbism. In "Milestones", he critiqued contemporary societies, arguing that despite their technological progress, they lived in a state of "Jâhiliyyah" (ignorance), disconnected from true Islamic principles. Qutb advocated for a resurgence of Islam through jihad to restore a purer form of the faith. His works have greatly influenced modern Islamic movements. After being convicted of plotting to assassinate Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Qutb was executed in 1966. His writings, including "Fî Zilâl al-Qur'ân" (In the Shade of the Qur'ân), continue to impact debates on Islamic governance and the role of religion in political life.

**Keywords:** *Islamic Thought, Sayyid Qutb, Islamic revivalist, Islamic reformist, Arabic Scholar etc.*

## Introduction

Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906 in the village of Musha in Upper Egypt. He initially gained recognition as a literary critic and poet before becoming a prominent figure in the Muslim Brotherhood. His shift from a secular intellectual to a committed Islamist was deeply influenced by his time spent in the United States and his subsequent imprisonment in Egypt. Qutb's most influential works, such as "Social Justice in Islam" and "Milestones", reflect his vision for an Islamic society and his critique of the moral and spiritual decline he observed in both Western and Muslim societies.

In 1929, Qutb graduated from the Dâr al-'Ulûm preparatory school and later that same year, he enrolled in Dâr al-'Ulûm College. There, he studied a range of subjects including theology, philosophy, Hebrew, Syriac (and its comparison with Arabic), history, and political economy. Despite the broad curriculum, Qutb found the program at Dâr al-'Ulûm unsatisfactory, particularly due to its limited focus on foreign languages. He had initially hoped that the College of Arts at Cairo University would offer a better and more comprehensive curriculum compared to Dâr al-'Ulûm.

Qutb's dissatisfaction with the curriculum at Dâr al-'Ulûm led him to voice his concerns openly. He even submitted a memorandum to the college administration, suggesting improvements to the curriculum while he was still a student. Known among his peers for his critical thinking, Qutb frequently expressed his opinions on topics related to literature, criticism, and poetry with remarkable frankness, courage, and independence.<sup>1</sup>

Sayyid Qutb played an active role in managing literary and critical discussions during his time at college. The literary debates he participated in were often intense, sharp, and challenging. Despite his strong opinions, Qutb always disagreed with his teachers on various literary and critical matters with politeness, respect, and

<sup>1</sup>. **Bergesen, A.** (Ed.). (2008). *The Sayyid Qutb Reader: Selected Writings on Politics, Religion, and Society*. Routledge.

appreciation. During his studies, he had many friends, including notable individuals such as Asmaa Saad Al-Lebanon, Muhammad Ibrahim Jabir, Bayed Al-Amrousi, and Abdul Aziz Ateeq.

The atmosphere in Qutb's village before 1919 was charged with change. His family's home became a hub for meetings between village leaders and his father. As a child, Qutb observed these secretive gatherings with curiosity, sensing something significant was unfolding, even though he could not fully grasp what it was. He recalled how these closed-door meetings, with whispered voices, left a deep impression on him. He felt that something was about to happen, even if he couldn't articulate it at the time.

During the revolution, his school principal gave a passionate patriotic speech, informing the students that the school would be closed indefinitely because he and others were going to participate in the revolution—an obligation for every person. Qutb, filled with enthusiasm, also got involved. He wrote speeches, including what he thought were well-crafted verses of poetry, and delivered them in synagogues and mosques, inspiring the crowd with revolutionary fervour, despite being a young child at the time.

Qutb graduated from the Faculty of Dâr al-'Ulûm in the summer of 1933. He immediately began working as a teacher in the Ministry of Education's schools and was appointed to Dâwûdiyyah Preparatory School in Cairo on December 2, 1933. After more than six years in teaching, he moved to the Ministry of Education on January 31, 1940. On April 17, 1940, he was transferred to the Department of Translation and Statistics. Later, on January 7, 1944, he was appointed as an inspector of primary education, a position he was moved to due to the Minister of Education's displeasure with his cultural, literary, and political activities. In April 1945, he returned to the General Culture Department, headed by Ahmed Amin.

Sayyid Qutb continued his work in the Ministry of Education until the end of 1948 when the ministry arranged for him to undertake a scientific mission to the United States. He traveled to America on November 3, 1948, as part of a study mission to specialize in education and curriculum development. Qutb stayed in the U.S. for about two years, returning to Egypt on August 23, 1950. Upon his return, he was appointed as an assistant inspector in the office of the Minister of Education. In October 1951, he was transferred to the southern educational district of Cairo. On May 17, 1952, he returned to the Ministry, this time as an assistant inspector in technical research and projects. However, he ultimately submitted his resignation from the Ministry on October 18, 1952.

Minister Ismail Al-Qabbani made several attempts to convince Qutb to withdraw his resignation, delaying the process for over a year despite Qutb's insistence on leaving. Finally, on January 13, 1954, the Council of Ministers in the revolutionary government approved Qutb's resignation, retroactive to the original date of October 18, 1952. This decision came at a time when relations between the revolutionary government and the Muslim Brotherhood had deteriorated, and the timing of the resignation's approval was unfavourable to Qutb. His total service in the Ministry, from December 2, 1933, to October 18, 1952, amounted to eighteen years, ten months, and sixteen days.<sup>2</sup>

Sayyid Qutb's Educational Journey to America marked a pivotal moment in his intellectual and ideological development. By the mid-1940s, Qutb had turned toward Islam and began advocating for it while engaging with the political, social, and national issues that Egypt faced. His literary style evolved to address these challenges, shifting from "literature for literature's sake" to "literature in the service of life and belief."

During this period, Egypt was grappling with numerous problems, suffering from crises on many fronts. Qutb observed the people's struggles and traced the root of these difficulties to British colonialism, which dominated the country. He also identified the palace, the government, political parties, feudal lords, wealthy merchants, false claimants, and enemies of morality as enablers of this colonial oppression. Qutb had an established connection with the then Prime Minister, Mahmoud Fahmy al-Nuqrashi, who eventually arranged for Qutb to be sent to America. This move, orchestrated by the palace, the government, and his superiors in the Ministry of Education, was intended to remove him from the local scene and limit his influence through his articles and reformist activities.

The official purpose of Qutb's trip to America was to study education systems and curricula, with some believing he was there to pursue a master's degree and others assuming it was for a doctorate. At the time, he worked in the technical inspection department of the Ministry of Education, and his assignment was aligned with this role—to examine American curricula and educational systems as an expert in the field.

Upon arriving in America, Qutb spent several months mastering the English language. Once proficient, he began visiting universities, institutes, and schools across several states, including New York, Greeley, and San Francisco, to familiarize himself with their educational methods and programs. His tour included various institutions, where he studied their curricula and teaching techniques. During his stay, he also took the opportunity to explore the cities he visited, observing their landscapes, mountains, and valleys, immersing himself in the cultural and natural features of the United States.<sup>3</sup>

During his time in America, Sayyid Qutb undertook field tours to observe various aspects of American society. He interacted with people, studying their lives and engaging them in discussions. Throughout his stay, Qutb wrote and sent articles to Egyptian newspapers and magazines. He also corresponded with his

2. Qutb, S. (2000). *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (Fi Zilal al-Qur'an). Islamic Foundation. (Original work published 1951-1965).

3. Kepel, G. (2002). *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*. Harvard University Press.

family, friends, and acquaintances through personal letters. Residing in New York, Qutb coined a unique and insightful term to describe American life, calling it "the huge workshop." His writings from New York were published in "Al-Kitâb" magazine in Egypt. He also spent time in Washington, D.C., where he sent two Islamic critique letters to Tawfiq al-Hakim, both of which were published.

One of the cities where Qutb briefly stayed was Greeley, Colorado, where he completed his studies in the English language. From Greeley, he sent a letter titled "Lights of Man," a spiritual essay published in "Al-Kitâb". He also contributed to other magazines, writing an article titled "The World is Born Disobedient," in which he built his idea around an ancient Egyptian legend.

Qutb later resided in California for an extended period, initially in San Francisco. However, the city's environment did not suit his health, and he fell ill, eventually being hospitalized. While in the hospital, he witnessed celebrations among the staff upon learning of the death of Hassan al-Banna, the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. After leaving San Francisco, Qutb settled in the rural village of Palo Alto, located in a picturesque agricultural valley. He later moved to San Diego, from where he sent two letters to Abbas Khadr, which were published in Khadr's column "Literature and Art in a Week" in "Al-Risâlah" magazine. Qutb continued to contribute articles to Egyptian magazines, as well as sending private letters known as "Brotherhood letters" to his acquaintances, relatives, and friends.

Upon his return to Cairo on August 23, 1950, Qutb was appointed as an assistant inspector in the office of the Minister of Education, Ismail Al-Qabbani. On October 22, 1951, he was transferred to the South Cairo educational district. Later, on May 17, 1952, he returned to his previous position as an assistant inspector for technical research and projects. However, due to ongoing disagreements with senior officials in the ministry over his reformist views, which were rooted in Islamic principles, Qutb submitted his resignation to Minister Ismail Al-Qabbani on October 17, 1952. Having joined the Ministry of Education on December 2, 1933, Qutb had completed nearly twenty years of service by the time of his resignation. Minister Al-Qabbani attempted several times to convince him to reconsider his decision.

### **Early Life and Education of Sayyid Qutb:**

Sayyid Qutb's early education was rooted in traditional Islamic studies, but he also embraced modern education, ultimately earning a degree from Dâr al-'Ulûm in Cairo. His initial career as an educator and literary critic saw him actively participating in contemporary literary circles, where he advocated for literary realism and championed the revival of Egyptian and Arab culture.

Qutb was born in 1906 in Musha, Egypt, and by the age of ten, he had memorized the Qur'an, reflecting the traditional Islamic upbringing that would later influence his writings. He received his primary education in his village, where he experienced a blend of religious and secular instruction.

In 1929, Qutb moved to Cairo to study at Dâr al-'Ulûm, graduating in 1933 with a degree in education. This institution combined traditional Islamic studies with modern subjects, and during his time there, Qutb established himself as an accomplished literary critic.<sup>4</sup>

### **Professional Career and Further Intellectual Development:**

**Teaching and Educational Inspector:** After graduating, Sayyid Qutb began his career as a teacher and educational inspector. In this role, he traveled throughout Egypt, observing the social and economic conditions that would later inform his social critiques.

**"Literary Criticism":** Qutb gained recognition as a literary critic, publishing extensively on Arabic literature and establishing himself within Egypt's literary circles.

**"Study Abroad - United States (1948-1950):** In 1948, Qutb was sent to the United States 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 a profound disillusionment with Western society, which he perceived as morally decadent and materialistic. This discontent significantly shifted his views toward a more radical stance against Western modernity and secularism.

**Intellectual Transformation and Return to Egypt:** Upon returning to Egypt in 1950, Qutb's writings began to reflect a deeper commitment to Islamic principles. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood and quickly became a leading intellectual within the organization.

**Prison and Radicalization:** In 1954, Qutb was arrested and imprisoned under harsh conditions. During his incarceration, he produced influential works such as "In the Shade of the Qur'ân" and "Milestones", which embodied his radicalization and critique of secular governance.

Overall, Sayyid Qutb's education encompassed both traditional Islamic studies and modern secular education. His experiences in the United States had a profound impact on his ideological shift toward radical Islamism. His educational background and professional experiences laid the groundwork for his influential and controversial contributions to modern Islamic thought.<sup>5</sup>

4. Algar, H. (2000). Wahhabism: A Critical Essay. Islamic Publications International.

1. El-Affendi, A. (1991). Who Needs an Islamic State? Grey Seal Books.

Transformation and Ideological Development: Sayyid Qutb's turning point occurred during his two-year stay in the United States (1948-1950), where he became deeply disillusioned by what he perceived as the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of Western civilization. His observations during this period significantly influenced his later works, which emphasized the necessity of returning to Islamic principles.

### **Major Works of Sayyid Qutb:**

**Social Justice in Islam (1949):** In "Social Justice in Islam", Qutb argued that genuine social justice could only be realized through the implementation of Islamic principles. He critiqued both capitalism and socialism for their shortcomings and proposed Islam as a comprehensive system capable of meeting human needs.

**"In the Shade of the Qur'ân" (1951-1965):** This multi-volume exegesis of the Qur'an is 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.<sup>6</sup>

### **Milestones (1964):**

"Milestones" is arguably Sayyid Qutb's most controversial work. Written during his imprisonment, it advocates for a revolutionary vanguard to establish an Islamic state and criticizes existing Muslim societies for deviating from true Islamic values. Central to this work is Qutb's concept of Jâhiliyya (pre-Islamic ignorance), which posits that modern societies exist in a state of ignorance like pre-Islamic times.

### **Influence and Legacy of Sayyid Qutb:**

Qutb's execution in 1966 by the Nasser regime transformed 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 significantly influenced the ideological development of groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Sayyid Qutb's legacy is multifaceted, encompassing a considerable impact 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'ân", have left a lasting impression 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 Jâhiliyya and Hâkimiyya have become central themes in contemporary Islamic discourse.

**"Qur'ânic Exegesis":** His extensive commentary on the Qur'ân, "In the Shade of the Qur'ân", remains a key reference for many Muslims seeking to understand the text from a modern yet conservative perspective. It underscores 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 adopted many of his principles, of which he was a part. His call for an Islamic state governed by Sharia law inspired groups seeking to implement Islamic governance.<sup>7</sup>

### **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 necessity of 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.

6. Shepard, W. E. (1996). Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam. Brill.

7. Sedgwick, M. (2004). Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century. Oxford University Press.

### Martyrdom and Symbolism

Execution and Martyrdom: Qutb's execution in 1966 by the Egyptian government transformed 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.<sup>8</sup>

### 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 regarding 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.

### 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.

As one of the most prominent Islamic scholars of his time, Sayyid Qutb possessed a unique combination of talents that are rarely found in a single individual. He is widely recognized as one of the most famous writers of the twentieth century, having authored more than sixty books on social and Arabic studies. In addition to his vast knowledge, he was a proponent of Islam, humanity, and security, founding a movement centred on the message of humanity.

His writings reflect both his extensive knowledge and his determination to create a just and ideal society characterized by freedom. Qutb's use of clear and simple language in his writings and speeches has made his ideas accessible to a broader audience. His academic journey illustrates the various stages he traversed to attain the esteemed position he held in Arabic language, literature, and Islamic culture. He began his career as a researcher in literature, poetry, and criticism before evolving into a scholar focused on the structural, aesthetic, and artistic studies of the Holy Qur'ân. Eventually, he expanded his research to encompass general Islamic thought and the concept of practical change.

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