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An Analytical Study of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Intellectual Development and Composition of *Risale-i Nūr* (a Thematic Qur'ānic Exegesis)

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Abstract

The current study analyses Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's life and contributions. It presents a short description of his early life, education and dissatisfaction with the then prevailing education systems. This is followed by an analysis of his intellectual development due to rapidly changing circumstances. The paper also presents an insight into Nursi's representative work '*Risale-i-Nur*' through an analysis of its structure and methodology. This is significant because his intellectual development, due to changes in his circumstances, played an instrumental role in determining the style, method and objectives of *Risale*. Hence, the study of his intellectual development is imperative to understand the objectives of *Risale*. The findings of the paper revealed that Nursi's approach to reform the Muslim society was not stagnant. In the 'Old Said' phase, he attempted to neutralize the decline in Muslim community through sociopolitical reforms. The 'New Said' phase was marked by his efforts to strengthen belief, encounter anti-religious ideologies and detachment from politics. In the 'Third Said' phase, he again took interest in sociopolitical matters but it was limited to the theoretical realm with no practical involvement. The study also found that the structure of *Risale*, its treatment of subjects and its methodology are its distinguishing features. It consists of the elements well-suited to the needs of the time to save Islamic belief against the onslaught of atheistic ideologies. The current research was conducted using the qualitative approach. It is beneficial for academia in understanding the intellectual development of this great 20th century Turkish Muslim scholar.

Keywords: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, educational formation, intellectual development, spiritual rebirth, *Risale-i-Nūr*, structure, methodology

Introduction

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi¹ (henceforth referred to as Nursi), a distinguished Muslim revivalist of the 20th century, was born circa 1876 in a small village Nurs, situated in Bitlis, a province of eastern Turkey (Anatolia). The official name of the region where he was born was Kurdistan in Ottoman time because the Kurds constituted the majority of the populace. Nursi also was of Kurdish lineage. Nursi lived through three epoch-making phases of Turkish history i.e. final decades of once magnificent Ottoman Empire till its collapse after

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¹The title Bediuzzaman was given to him due to his extra ordinary capacity of learning and capability of acquiring of knowledge, whereas Nursi is due to the relevance of his birth place Nurs.

World War-I (WW-I); establishment of Turkish Republic by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1923-1950); and finally the Democratic Rule (1950-1960). His life is also divided into three distinctive phases to represent his intellectual development and reformation strategies: Old Said, New Said and Third Said.² As Old Said he observed abysmal political situation of Ottoman Empire and was a proponent of saving Muslims from decline through political and educational means. In the meantime, he went through a spiritual crisis which resulted in his realization of inadequacy of the human philosophy. By taking up the *Qur'ān* as his sole guide, he decided to serve humanity with the method of the *Qur'ān* rather than through political means. Thus, the second phase of Nursi's life, named New Said, began in the years following WW-I which coincided with the regime of the New Republic of Turkey whose objective was to westernize Turkey. In this period Nursi experienced the pain of exile and imprisonment spanning twenty five years. The focus of Nursi's efforts in this phase remained on writing treatises of *Risale-i Nūr* (henceforth referred to as *Risale*) in order to save his people from the effects of sceptical movements. Except for writing and disseminating *Risale*, he kept himself away from all sorts of other social and political affairs. However, after 1950 with the victory of Democrats in elections, the situation eased out for him to some extent and he emerged as the Third Said. This is the period when he began to take interest once again in socio-political matters of the country; but this time in a different way. He only offered his support and advice to the Government but did not take practical part in politics as he had done in the Old Said phase.

Thus, Nursi's whole life seems to be a linear continuation of events, in which he went through a number of stages in his intellectual life. In other words he went through a continuous development and transformation of ideas and thoughts. Colin Turner named it "his developmental journeyed from the Old Said to the New Said and on to the Third Said."³ This does not mean that he changed his views on account of different circumstances and continuous course of events around him. Instead, it was his intense contemplation and imbibing sets of varied values and ideas that he emerged with more effective and appropriate strategies each time to combat the conditions and circumstances.

The first part of the paper aims to analyse his educational formation and the development in his approaches to the reformation of society in the three distinctive phases of his life. The study will first explore the reasons of his dissatisfaction with the existing education together with a discussion on his early writings. Secondly, his involvement in socio-political matters till 1922 and his subsequent disillusionment with this approach will be covered. Thirdly, his spiritual transformation will be critically analysed. The second part of the study will focus on his magnum opus, *Risale-i Nūr*, brief introduction to its volumes,

²Nursi himself divided his life into two phases of Old Said and New Said, later on the experts of Nursi Studies added the phase of Third Said, due to the change of circumstances again, and the minor change in Nursi's strategy.

³Colin Turner, *The Qur'ān Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light* (Germany: Gerlach Press, 2013), 515.

structure and methodology used in it. The study will be conducted through qualitative research approach.

2. Educational Formation of Nursi's Personality

Nursi commenced his studies at the age of nine with the understanding of the *Qur'ān*. A sense of dissatisfaction with the education system of his time began to appear in his mind at a very early age which did not allow him to study with interest. He could not stay for long at any *madrasah* (religious school) in the first five years. However, in the meantime, he took lessons from his elder brother Abdullah who was a learned scholar and teacher. It was only the *madrasah* of Shaikh Muhammad Jalali, (Shaikh was a well-known scholar of that time), where Nursi took his studies with serious efforts. He completed the whole course in only three months, at the age of just fourteen or fifteen, which usually took an average student fifteen to twenty years to complete. It not only demonstrates Nursi's extraordinary power of memory and remarkable intelligence but also shows his discontentment with the curriculum comprising heavy commentaries, annotations and further expositions of original books. Nursi initiated from *Molla Jami*, a commentary on Arabic syntax, and completed all the works in turn by ignoring all the commentaries and concentrating on only a certain number of sections in each work. He learned around hundred works here including *Jam al-Jawami* by Ibn Subki on the principles of *fiqh*, Ibn Hajar on the same, and *Sharh al-Mawaqif* by Jurjani on *ilm al kalam*.⁴ At the end of three months he obtained diploma from his teacher and got the right to wear scholar's gown, which wko,'? as a regional practice, though he declined.⁵

Afterwards, Nursi decided to visit famous local Muslim scholars to broaden his knowledge. He travelled around eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. While roaming, he interacted with *shaiyks* (scholars) of different *madrasah* (religious schools), forming a surprising impact on them with his extra ordinary knowledge. He was given the title of Bediuzzaman first time during these years by Molla Fatehullah Efendi, a renowned scholar of Siirt. He proved himself successful in debates and wisely answered the complicated questions. He also started to introduce himself as a teacher now onwards. Furthermore, he learnt Arabic lexicon *Qamūs al Muhit* till the fourteenth letter *Sin*.⁶

⁴Sukran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 11; Sukran Vahide, "Toward an Intellectual Biography of Said Nursi," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 4.

⁵For details see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 6-10; Sukran Vahide, "The Life and Times of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi," *The Muslim World* 89 (1999): 208-09; Vahide, "Toward an Intellectual Biography," 3-4.

⁶For further details see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 11-17; Sukran Vahide, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and the Risale-i Nur," in *Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ian Markham and Ibrahim Ozdemir (England: Ashgate, 2005), 5; Sukran Vahide, *The Author of the Risale-i Nūr: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 2010), 26-33;

A worth noting event of his life during these years regarding formation of his educational ideas is his stay in a place Mardin in 1892 where he was introduced to Jamal uddin Afghani's "powerful ideas for arousing Muslims and revitalizing Islamic civilization, for which constitutionalism and education were crucial."⁷ Serif Mardin relates this experience of Nursi with "widening of his intellectual horizons."⁸

Another important juncture in the first phase of Nursi's life was his stay in Bitlis in 1892/3 at governor's residence, as the tutor of his children. Here he had a comprehensive study of classic Muslim sciences, almost forty in number, in just two years. These included "instrumental, such as logic, Arabic grammar and syntax, as well as the main sciences of Qur'ānic *tafsir* (exegesis), *hadith* (narrations of Prophet Muhammad SAW), *fiqh* (Jurisprudence) and *kalām* (Theology)." It was here that Nursi benefited from the last teacher of his life named Shaikh Muhammad Kufrevi a leading *Naqshbandi* (a spiritual order) scholar. A worth noting point here is that all the scholars from whom Nursi took lessons belonged to *Naqshbandi* order. Contrary to the inclination in his region, Nursi had tendency towards Qadri order. He not only had noticeable influence of Shaikh Adul Qadir Gilani's teachings on his personality but also was highly inspired by Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (regenerator of the second millennium). However, in spite of deep influence of these *sufi* leaders on his personality, he never joined any spiritual order (*tariqat*) in his life. Rather, he expressed in his writings that Sufism was not suitable for this age.⁹

Nursi had realized the need for revivification of education system while roaming different areas of eastern provinces of the Empire. His visit and stay in Van from 1895 onward proved to be the final stone in shaping his ideology and future strategy for the revitalization of education system. Nursi stayed in Van for almost twelve years - first with the governor Hassan Pasha and afterwards with his successor Tahir Pasha in his residence. Tahir Pasha himself was a "patron of learning, followed developments in science, and owned an extensive library." His residence was the "favourite centre for government officials, teachers of the new secular schools, and other intellectuals" for debates and discussions on current issues. This new environment soon led Nursi to the realization of the terrible effects of "westernizing and secularizing reforms of the Tanzimat¹⁰" on the

Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc, *Makers of Islamic Civilization: Said Nursi* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2009), 8-9; Serif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 65-74.

⁷Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 23.

⁸Serif Mardin, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1873-1960): The Shaping of a Vocation," in *Religious Organization* ed. J. Davis (London: Academic Press, 1982), 69.

⁹Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 5, 26; Vahide, "The Life and Times," 212-13.

¹⁰(Turkish: "Reorganization"), series of reforms promulgated in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876 under the reigns of the sultans Abdulmecid I and Abdulaziz. These reforms, heavily influenced by European ideas, were intended to effectuate a fundamental change of the empire from the old system based on theocratic principles to that of a modern state." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. "Tanzimat," accessed August 15, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Tanzimat>.

ideas of Ottoman elite class, particularly educated from secular schools (*maktab*). Besides, Nursi also realized incapability of traditional Muslim Theology (*Ilm ul kalām*) to counter the criticism on Islam.

After realizing these facts, and taking advantage of governor's library and the newspapers and journals supplied to his office, Nursi began to study all the modern (social and physical) sciences of that time including history, geography, mathematics, geology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, and philosophy. He studied and mastered approximately ninety works here without the help of any teacher or instructor.¹¹ This whole situation led him to the decision of working on the establishment of a university in eastern provinces of empire named Medresetu'z-Zehra on the model of *Jaam-e al Azhar*. Nursi's purpose of founding this university was on the one hand to combine traditional religious sciences with modern physical sciences, and on the other, to make an embodiment of three different educational streams i.e. *Maktab*, *Madrasah* and *tekke* (sufi lodges)¹² the representatives of modern secular schools, religious education institutes and spiritual educational centres respectively. Moreover Nursi founded his own *madrasah* named Horhor in Van "where he put into practice his ideas for educational reform, based on the combined teaching of the traditional religious and modern sciences."¹³

Another important incident, which brought a revolution in Nursi's ideas and proved decisive for his strategy of revival of society in later years, was the statement of a British statesman Gladstone: "So long as the Muslims have the Qur'ān, we shall be unable to dominate them. We must either take it from them, or make them lose their love of it."¹⁴ In Nursi's words this was the turning point of his life, when he decided to dedicate his whole life to the service of the *Qur'ān* to prove its truths by taking the help of all sciences and knowledge which he had acquired.

3. Nursi's Socio-political Activism and Early Writings

The years from 1907 to 1922 of Nursi's life were the peak of his social and political activism. He arrived in Istanbul in 1907 to get financial support from the Government for educational reforms but he encountered a relatively new situation. The Ottoman Empire was passing through the final years of its dynasty and Istanbul being capital was "home to

¹¹Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 28.

¹²For details on necessity to establish this university in Nursi's vision and its purpose see authoress' dissertation Shumaila Majeed, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Approach to Reconstruction of Muslim Society; An Analytical Study" (PhD diss., University of the Punjab, 2018), accessed August 19, 2020, http://pr.hec.gov.pk/jspui/bitstream/123456789/10502/1/Shumaila%20Majeed_Ismic%20Std_2018_UoPunjab_PRR.pdf.

¹³Sukran Vahide, "A Chronology of Said Nursi's Life," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi (SUNY Press, 2003), xvii; Vahide, "The Life and Times," 213.

¹⁴Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 31.

numerous political intrigues.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the movement for the restoration of Constitutionalism was in full swing. It was the time when the long reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II was nearing its end.¹⁶ A movement of freedom from despotism was generated by certain thinkers and groups such as Young Ottomans’ Namik Kamal, and CUP (Committee of Union and Progress) of Young Turks etc. Nursi supported this Constitutional movement because in his view Ottoman Empire could be saved only through freedom and constitutional government¹⁷ provided both would remain under the subjugation of Islamic law. Thus, in this whole period Nursi seems to be highly inclined towards adoption of political means in order to avoid further decadence, to save the Ottoman Empire and foster Muslim unity. He focused his attention on two areas: constitutionalism and education. He wrote books and numerous articles in newspapers, addressed public gatherings, had long discussions with tribesmen in the south east of Turkey, and joined multiple religious societies. He made concerted efforts to make political authorities realize the importance of the revivification of education system and also presented a petition for this to Ottoman Sultan, though he could not get favourable response at first.¹⁸

When the Ottoman constitution was reinstated as a result of Young Turk Revolution of July 1908 under the leadership of CUP, Nursi favoured this revolt and delivered his famous speech ‘Address to Freedom.’ But soon after he discontinued the support of CUP realizing their anti-religious tendencies and joined *Ittihad-i Muhammedi* (Muhammadan union for Muslim Unity). The aim of later organization was “regeneration of the Ottoman state on the basis of Islam and the promotion of Islamic unity.”¹⁹

In April 1909, Albanian soldiers, stationed in Istanbul, started a rebellion against westernized inclinations of CUP. Some civilians and members of other units also joined this uprising whose slogan was ‘We want *shari’ah*’. Consequently, a troop of army from Salonica was called by CUP to suppress this mutiny. They disposed of Abdulhamid II and replaced him with Sultan Mehmed Resad, and CUP was now seated in power more firmly than ever.²⁰ Many people were arrested, imprisoned and assassinated. Nursi was also arrested because of his support to *Ittihad-i Muhammedi*, and writing articles in their newspaper.”²¹ He got acquittal after a strong defence speech. He did not stay there anymore²² and turned his attention towards ordinary subjects of the Empire.

¹⁵Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 14.

¹⁶Hamid Algar, “Said Nursi and the Risala i Nur an Aspect of Islam in Contemporary Turkey,” in *Islamic Perspectives: Studies in Honour of Mawlana Sayyid Abul Ala Mawdudi*, ed. Khurshid Ahmad and Zafar Ishaq Ansari (U.K: The Islamic Foundation, 1979), 315.

¹⁷Vahide, “Toward an Intellectual Biography,” 5.

¹⁸Vahide, “The Life and Times,” 217.

¹⁹Algar, “Nursi and Risale-i-Nür,” 315.

²⁰Algar, “Nursi and Risale-I Nür,” 315-16; for further details consult Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 71-81.

²¹Vahide, “The Life and Times,” 218.

²²Ibid; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 80-81.

In 1910, Nursi travelled to remote areas of Eastern provinces to persuade tribesmen about the benefits of constitutionalism and its necessity for the Ottoman Empire. Besides, he informed them about the urgent need of educational reforms. Later on, he converted his discussions with them into a book form titled *Munazarāt* (Debates). He wrote another work for scholars, titled *Muhakemāt* (Reasonings). He visited Damascus in 1911 where he delivered his famous 'Damascus Sermon.' In this sermon he identified the major reasons of Muslim's decline and their solutions in the form of "remedies from the pharmacy of the *Qur'ān*."

A distinguishing feature of Nursi's personality was that he not only exerted himself theoretically to save the Ottoman Empire from the decline but also practically participated in WW-I as a last effort to save this centre of Muslim's union. He joined the army as a regimental commander in Eastern provinces. He fought at the forefront of war with his students, and was finally captured by Russians.²³ After two years of captivity he returned to Istanbul in 1918 and received a warm welcome and a war medal in recognition of his extraordinary services in war.

Following the Ottoman's defeat at the end of WW-I in 1918, the Empire was partitioned and occupied by Allied Forces of France, Britain, and Greece etc. Resultantly, a national movement was mobilized among the Ottomans to liberate their country. This culminated into National War of Independence (1919-1923) under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Nursi supported this struggle and declared it a *jihād*. He combated the forces of occupation with his pen and wrote *Hutuvat i Sitte* (The Six Steps).²⁴ When he was asked to help in the establishment of autonomous Kurdistan, he refused by saying that it was more important to revive the Ottoman state than establishing Kurdistan,²⁵ despite the fact that he himself was a Kurd. During these years, passing through certain spiritual crisis, Nursi spent almost one and half years in solitude in contemplation which ultimately ended with his transition from the Old Said to the New Said.

The victory of National Muslim forces in the war of Independence was a ray of sunshine for Nursi. He believed The New Republic would bring about a renaissance in Islamic civilization. Having receiving many invitations, he left for Ankara, the base of Grand National Assembly (A new parliament founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1920). Assembly gave him a warm official welcome on November 9, 1922. But he was extremely disappointed to see the government's politics of Secularization. The deputies and officers were under the terrible impact of westernization and atheistic ideas of materialist philosophy and had a lax attitude towards Islam.²⁶ He warned them about that, had a detailed meeting with Mustafa Kemal,

²³Vahide, "The Life and Times," 220; Vahide, "A Chronology," xviii-xix; Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 17. For details of courageous actions of Nursi during war see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 111-29.

²⁴Ibid; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 150.

²⁵Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 20.

²⁶Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 169; Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 21.

and as a last effort wrote two books *Zeyl-ul-Zeyl* (The Appendix of the Appendix) and *Hubab* (Goals) to disprove atheism; but all this could not bring fruitful results.²⁷

Although Nursi had already concluded almost two years back that he should take the methodology of the *Qur'ān* for reconstruction of his society, this transformation of the Old Said to the New Said became more evident after his visit to Ankara. According to Abu-Rabi:

This is, perhaps, the most momentous event in Nursi's life after his conversion to the 'New Said' several years before. He began to realize more acutely than ever before that Turkey was indeed at the crossroads, and that the political leadership of the Turkish nation represented by Atatürk and by his ideological cohorts was more determined than ever to get rid of the Shari'ah as the source of governing, and to pave the way for Turkey to follow a strict secular and Westernized path that would disavow its past identity. This discovery was appalling, to say the least, and confirmed Said's long-held suspicion that the intention of the new leadership was to kill the Islamic spirit of the Turkish nation.²⁸

It is only befitting to discuss some of Nursi's Old Said works, as they are called.²⁹ The subjects regarding social and political matters of Muslim society were prominent in these writings. For instance, *Nutuk* (Speeches) published in 1910 is based upon the public speeches he delivered between 1908-10 mostly to support new constitutional regime of the CUP from an Islamist view point. Likewise, *Iki mekteb-i Musibetin Sehadetnamesi Veya Divan-i Harb-i Orfi ve Said-i Kurdi* (Testimonial of the Two Schools of Misfortune or the Military Court and Said-i Kurdi) published in 1911 "is the compilation of his defence speeches in the Military Court set up just after the 31 March Incident and also several articles he had published in different newspapers to advocate the Islamist view and the constitutional regime."³⁰ *Hutbe i Samiye* (Damascus Sermon) 1911 deals with social and political factors of the Muslim World's Decline and its solutions. *Munazarat* (Debates) published in 1913 also reflects Nursi's thoughts on socio-political matters of that time. *Muhakemat* (Reasoning) was published in 1911 on the principles of the *Qur'ānic* exegesis.

Nursi produced his incomplete *tafsīr* (Interpretation of the *Qur'ān*) during war in 1916 with the title *Isharat ul Ijāz* (Signs of Miraculous-ness) which was published in 1918. It is the only work of Nursi in which he explains the *Qur'ānic* verses in the style of traditional *Qur'ānic* exegesis. *Hutuvat-i Sitte* (The Six Steps) was written to support National Army forces in the war of independence.³¹

²⁷Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 171.

²⁸Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi, "How to Read Said Nursi's Risale i Nūr," in *Islam at the Crossroads: On the Life and Thought of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, ed. Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 64.

²⁹Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 153.

³⁰Ali Mermer, "Aspects of Religious Identity: The Nurcu Movement in Turkey Today," (PhD diss., University of Durham, 1985), 121, accessed August 19, 2020, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1614/>.

³¹Ibid; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 151.

From 1920 to 1923 Nursi focused on the reasons of the Ottoman's decline in his writings. The works i.e., *Sunihat* (Inspirations 1920), *Hakikat Cekirdekleri* (The Seeds of Reality 1920, *Nokta* (Point, 1921), *Rumuz* (The Symbol, 1922) and *Isharāt* (The Signs) (1923) all were mainly on the subject of decline³² *Zeyl-ul-Zeyl* (The Appendix of the Appendix) and *Hubab* (Goals) were written in Arabic to disprove atheism during his stay in Ankara in 1922-23. *Tuluat* (The Rises written in 1923), is also on Islamic perspective of socio-political matters.³³ Another Old Said work *Suaat* (Rays) written in 1923, discussed Holy Prophet's (SAW) miracles in order to prove the finality of the Prophet-hood.³⁴ Among these works *Hutbe i Samiye* (Damascus Sermon), *Muhakemaat* (Reasonings), and *Isharat ul Ijaz* have been adjusted later by Nursi as part or volume in the collection of *Risale*.

4. Spiritual Rebirth of Nursi and Composition of *Risale-i Nūr*

Nursi faced severe spiritual and physical disturbance after his return from the captivity of WW-I. Previously he was of the view "that European science and philosophy could be used to reinforce and strengthen Islam;"³⁵ but he underwent severe mental distress after facing miseries of confinement, stretches of war, death of his students, along with Ottoman defeat and foreign occupation. He had realized that the philosophy he had been advocating brought no hope.³⁶ He withdrew into isolation and spent almost one and half years of his life (1920-1921) on this inner struggle, which resulted in the emergence of the New Said with "crystallization of his ideas."³⁷

One day, while reading in solitude the book *Futuh ul ghayb* by Shaikh Abdul Qadir Gilani, these lines left him in amazement: "You are in the Darü'l-Hikmet,³⁸ so search for a doctor to cure your heart." Nursi took this as "Oh, you unfortunate! As a member of the Darü'l-Hikmeti'l-Islamiye, you are as though a doctor curing the spiritual sicknesses of the people of Islam, whereas you are sicker than anyone. You first of all find a doctor for yourself, and then try to cure others!" Nursi comments: "I took him [Gilani] as my doctor and read the book as though it were addressing me."³⁹ Similarly, another coincidence happened while reading *Maktubāt* of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi, when he came across two

³²Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 19.

³³Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 106, 69; Mermer, "Aspects of Religious Identity," 123-24.

³⁴Mermer, "Aspects of Religious Identity," 123-24.

³⁵Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 164; Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Letters*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler, 2006), 516.

³⁶Vahide, "The Life and Times," 221; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 164.

³⁷Vahide, "The Life and Times," 221; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 165; Vahide, "Toward an Intellectual Biography," 11.

³⁸Daru'l-Hikmeti'l-Islamiye (Academy of Higher Islamic studies) A learned institution which was founded after World War I to seek scholarly solutions to the problems facing Islam and to uphold religion and its morality among the people, Nursi was also appointed as a member of this organization after his return from captivity of war see Vahide, "A Chronology," xix; Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 19.

³⁹Nursi, *The Letters*, 418-19.

letters written to a person Mirza Bediuzzaman by Sirhindi. Nursi was also known as Bediuzzaman and his father's name was also Mirza. It was like those letters were written for him containing the advice "Take only one *qiblah!*" that is, take one person as your master and follow him; do not concern yourself with anyone else.⁴⁰ After remaining in a state of confusion⁴¹ for some period, he finally understood that he should take only the *Qur'ān* as his sole guide.⁴²

Nevertheless few years back when he came to know about Gladstone's words, he had decided to dedicate his whole life for the service of the *Qur'ān*. However due to certain circumstances and course of events, he had been distracted from his aim.⁴³ Now the situation guided him to strengthen his earlier decision. Therefore, his ambition to explain the truths of the *Qur'ān* was reinforced in order to save the belief of his people through *Risale*. Together with this, his meeting with deputies and members of National Assembly in Ankara (as previously discussed) also supported his view that the method of Old Said which was to make politics a means for the revival of Islam, would not be beneficial anymore. He understood that the "new leaders were to be combated not in the realm of politics, but with the immaterial sword of the *Qur'ān*'s miraculous-ness."⁴⁴ Thus, having unquestionable fidelity to the *Qur'ān* he left for Van, where he retired from public life altogether.

Nursi settled in Van in 1923 spending his time by teaching in a mosque. Here, he emerged with a different approach because now he was concentrating more on "saving and strengthening religious belief," instead of social or political matters.⁴⁵ He wrote an important work here "*Mesnevi-i Nuriye*, to set the conceptual framework of his lifelong work, *Risale-i Nur*."⁴⁶ In the meantime, the political structure of the country was also in changing process. The caliphate of the Ottoman Empire was abolished by Grand National Assembly in 1924 and Turkey was declared as a new Republic. Ankara became the capital of the New Turkish Republic, which actively promoted secularization and started to eradicate Islam from the state and Turkish life.⁴⁷ In 1925 a rebellion broke out against the westernized trends of the new Government. As a result, the government institutionalized

⁴⁰Ibid., 419.

⁴¹This confusion led him to search for that only *qibla*, and through a process from philosophy to Sufism to finally Quran he reached the reality, that he should take only the *Qur'ān* as his sole guide, for details see second chapter of authoress' PhD dissertation Majeed, "Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Approach to Reconstruction."

⁴²Nursi, *The Letters*, 419.

⁴³Vahide, "The Life and Times," 221.

⁴⁴Ibid., 223.

⁴⁵Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 177.

⁴⁶M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (New York: Oxford university press, 2003), 154.

⁴⁷Sukran Vahide, "About the *Risale-i-Nūr* the Words and their Author," in *The Words*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler, 2010), 805.

very strict policies to suppress the revolt and further similar events.⁴⁸ This included the closure of religious institutes, banning religious literature and arresting men of religion.⁴⁹ Nursi was also arrested and deported to a remote place. This marked the beginning of trials in his life in the form of exile and imprisonments which covered 25 years of his life from 1926 to 1950.⁵⁰ This is the period in which he composed his monumental work *Risale-i Nūr*, a thematic *tafsīr* of the *Qur'ān*.

In 1926, Nursi commenced *Risale* by writing small treatises on different tenets of belief to cater for the religious needs of the people who were now deprived of all means of religious education.⁵¹ These expositions were so applauded by the people that despite severe threats of arrests and imprisonment, they continued reading and writing the copies. In the following years the *Risale* “silently spread and took root, combating in the most constructive way the attempt to uproot Islam, and the unbelief and materialist philosophy.”⁵²

The increase in Nursi's followers also resulted in the increased pressure of authorities on Nursi and his students. He was exiled to three different places. First he was deported to Barla,⁵³ where he spent eight and half years from 1926 to 1934. The house he stayed in is considered first “*Nūr Madrasah*, (*Risale-i Nūr* school)” because here Nursi composed the major part of *Risale*.⁵⁴ The second place where he was deported was Kastamonu.⁵⁵ There he spent seven and half years from 1936 to 1943. The third time he was confined in Emirdag from 1944 to 1948.⁵⁶ Nursi was purposely deported to the remote areas so that lesser people could interact with him. He was kept under strict surveillance the whole time. Despite the difficulties in visiting him, he attracted loyal students who assisted him with the writing of the *Risale* and its distribution.⁵⁷ He was also imprisoned three times in this period. Nursi continued writing treatises of *Risale* even during the hardest conditions of imprisonment. Sometimes he was not allowed to get paper and pen and he used chalk, paper bags or scrap papers, even matchboxes.⁵⁸

In spite of all these hard conditions, the writing and dissemination of *Risale* continued. Nursi used to dictate a particular piece to his close disciple, who brought the written pieces

⁴⁸See Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity*, 155.

⁴⁹Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 190-91; Vahide, “A Chronology,” xx.

⁵⁰Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 185.

⁵¹Vahide, “A Chronology,” xx.

⁵²Vahide, “Words and their Author,” 805.

⁵³A remote and tiny village of only 15 to 20 houses in the mountains of Province Isparta see Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 186.

⁵⁴Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 26; Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 189, 96.

⁵⁵In the Ilgaz Mountains to the south of the Black Sea. See Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 227.

⁵⁶A small provincial town see *ibid.*, 271.

⁵⁷Vahide, “A Chronology,” xxi. For further details Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 189.

⁵⁸Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 30, 32.

to nearby village, from where further copies were written by hand because printing was banned. Copies were written secretly with great efforts in the houses of *Risale* students and then distributed. Nursi did not have any reference or book while writing. He wrote down only with his memory. In this way the treatises of *Risale* passed from village to village, town to town and ultimately spread throughout Turkey.⁵⁹ Men, women, young old even children all showed a great enthusiasm in writing and making copies of these treatises. The estimated number of hand-written manuscripts is 600,000,⁶⁰ considered by some an exaggerated figure. However “it is an indication that Nursi’s message was spreading around the country.”⁶¹ Besides saving and revitalizing religious beliefs of the Turkish people, treatises of *Risale* contributed to some other important matters as well. Firstly, it played an important role in preserving the *Qur’ānic* script in Turkey, when Arabic script was replaced with Latin script in 1928 by Mustafa Kemal,⁶² Nursi continued writing in the Ottoman script and thus kept his nation fellows in touch with the script of the *Qur’ān*; secondly, writing and duplicating of treatises by hand played a significant role in increasing the literacy rate; thirdly, *Risale* became the source of guidance and reformation of many dangerous prisoners during Nursi’s imprisonment. That is why Nursi termed prison “*Medrese-i Yusufiye*, the School of Joseph, recalling the Prophet Joseph (AS), the patron of prisoners, and that prison was essentially a place of training and education.”⁶³

The third Said period, 1950 to 1960, was easier from previous 25 years. Democratic Party won the election in 1950 and its policies towards religion were not hostile. Lifting of many restrictions ensured that “Nursi and his followers had greater freedom in pursuing activities connected with the *Risale* and the growth of the Nur movement.”⁶⁴ However, *Risale* was only cleared by Court in 1956 and “Nur students in Ankara and Istanbul started to have it printed in the Latin alphabet. Nursi called this the *Risale-i Nur* festival” After this with Nur study centres (*dersane*) opened all over the country.⁶⁵ Nursi began to pay attention to social life in Turkey and the wider Muslim world. In the general elections of 1957, Nursi supported Democrats who were anti-communism, secularism and atheism. However, this time he was not practically involved in politics and advised his students to do the same. He also advised the Turkish government to develop good relations with other Muslim countries and praised the Democrat Government’s decision to sign the Baghdad Pact between Turkey and Iraq, later joined by Pakistan, Iran, and Britain in 1955.⁶⁶ He and his students sent copies of *Risale* to different countries including Germany, Pakistan, Syria, Korea, Finland, America, Japan, India, Indonesia, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and some

⁵⁹Ibid., 26.

⁶⁰Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 204.

⁶¹Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 26.

⁶²Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 191.

⁶³Vahide, “The Life and Times,” 232.

⁶⁴Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 36.

⁶⁵Vahide, “A Chronology,” xxiii.

⁶⁶Turner and Horkuc, *Said Nursi*, 36, 42.

African countries. He even approached the Christians to create harmony among the Muslims and the Christians to fight against secularism and atheism. He sent a copy of *Risale* to the Pope of Vatican in 1951. In the late 1959 and early 1960, he made visits to 'dersanes' (Nur study centres), which his students had established on his advice, and reached Urfa in south-eastern Turkey. Here he suffered from illness and died on 23 March 1960, 25 Ramadan 1379.⁶⁷

5. *Risale-i Nur*: Structure and Methodology

Nursi's monumental work *Risale-i Nūr*, which is an interpretation of the main *Qur'ānic* truths, was written between 1925 and 1949. It is different from traditional *Qur'ānic* commentaries "which expound all its verses giving the immediate reasons for their revelation and the apparent meanings of the words and sentences." *Risale* is instead a thematic interpretation *ma'navi tasfīr* "which expounds the meaning of the *Qur'ānic* truths."⁶⁸ Nursi explains that "the *Qur'ān* addresses all men in every age in accordance with the degree of their understanding and development." The *Risale* explains the *Qur'ān* keeping in view the particular needs of this age⁶⁹ in which belief was victimized by materialism to an unprecedented degree. Therefore, Nursi drew from the *Qur'ān* such principles which not only strengthened faith of an individual through 'belief through investigation' (*iman i tahqiqi*) but also logically refuted the materialist philosophy.

5.1. Structure

Said Nursi's monumental work comprises 14 books in Turkish language with the following titles:

1. *Sözler* (The Words) 2. *Mektubat* (The Letters) 3. *Lem'alar* (The Flashes) 4. *Şualar* (Rays) 5. *Mesnevi-i Nuriye* (The *Mathnawi* of Light) 6. *İşaratü'l İ'caz* (The Signs of Miraculousness) 7. *Asa-yi Musa* (The Staff of Moses) 8. *Sikke-i Tasdik-i Gaybi* (The Affirmative Seal of the Unknown) 9. *Muhakemat* (Reasonings) 10. *İman-Küfür Muvazeneleri* (The Balancing of Faith and Unbelief) 11. *Tarihçe-i Hayat* (Biography) 12. *Emirdağ Lahikası* (The Letters of Emirdağ) 13. *Barla Lahikası* (The Letters of Barla) 14. *Kastamonu Lahikası* (The Letters of Kastamonu).

First four volumes are considered the main books of *Risale* which are further divided into chapters or treatises. Each chapter is titled with a number (i.e., in first volume The Words, first chapter is titled as First Word, second chapter as Second Word and so on) and followed by the sequence. However, a few chapters are also given additional titles in relevance of their themes. The literary structure of all books of *Risale* is very unique. For instance first book *Sozler* (The words) contains thirty three words or chapters in it. Then second book *Mektubaat* (The Letters) also consists of thirty three letters or chapters, each

⁶⁷Ibid., 41-44; Vahide, "The Life and Times," 243-44.

⁶⁸Sukran Vahide, "A Brief Look at Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Life, the *Risale-i-Nūr*, and the Flashes Collection," in *The Flashes*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler, 2010), 482.

⁶⁹Ibid.

chapter of this book is also titled with a number as First Letter, Second Letter and so on. Interestingly enough in this book, the chapter Twenty-Seventh Letter does not contain any details rather it refers to other three volumes of *Risale*. It is mentioned under the title of Twenty-Seventh Letter that “these have been published separately as Emirdag Lahikası, Barla Lahikası and Kastamonu Lahikası,”⁷⁰ which are the last three books of *Risale* that comprise the correspondence of Nursi with his students during his stay in Emirdağ, Barla and Kastamonu, the places where he was exiled respectively. Similarly, Thirtieth Letter also refers to a separate book published with the title *İşaratü'l İ'caz* (The signs of Miraculousness). This is one of Nursi’s Old Said works which he added later as a small volume of *Risale*. The same is the case with the chapter of Thirty-First Letter, which refers to another entire book *Lem’alar* (Flashes).⁷¹ Thus, the whole work *Risale* is structured in a unique and inter-related manner. Nursi mentioned that this structure was divinely indicated in his heart.⁷²

The *Risale* was originally written in Ottoman Turkish language in Arabic letters and later in Nursi’s lifetime as per his instructions was also converted into Latin alphabet. Since then the writing and publishing are continued in both scripts till the date. In 1980’s it began to be translated into English and other major languages. As discussed above the first four books are considered the major works comprising the crux of Nursi’s thoughts and teachings. The first volume of *Risale* is ‘The Words,’ which is considered the foundation of the whole collection. It deals with the subjects of basic Muslim’s belief and its tenets with rational proofs for the modern man. ‘The Letters’ is the second main volume of *Risale*. This is based upon the letters which Nursi wrote to his students as replies to their different religious questions related to the subjects discussed in first volume from 1930 to 1934.⁷³ So this book is considered a supplement to the first Volume.⁷⁴ The Third book written in the series of *Risale* is ‘The Flashes.’ This collection proves the main truths of belief and gives strong replies to the atheistic criticism on the truths of belief and the *Qur’ānic* verses. The fourth main volume of *Risale* is titled ‘The Rays.’ It is basically a collection of the treatises written by Nursi during three terms of his imprisonment. It also includes the letters he wrote to his students and defence speeches he presented during his trial in courts. This volume embraces very significant mysteries of belief and affirmation of Divine Unity.

⁷⁰Nursi, *The Letters*, 13.

⁷¹Ibid., 17; for further details on structure of rest of *Risale* volumes see Majeed, “Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Approach to Reconstruction.”

⁷²See for instance Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Emirdag Letters*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler, 2016), 47, 56, 57, 62.

⁷³Mermer, “Aspects of Religious Identity,” 131.

⁷⁴Serdar Poyraz, “Science Versus Religion: The Influence of European Materialism on Turkish Thought, 1860-1960,” (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 2010), 187, accessed August 15, 2020, https://etd.ohiolink.edu/pg_10?::NO:10:P10_ETD_SUBID:72805#abstract-files.

5.2. Methodology

The *Risale-i-Nur* methodology was a product of Nursi's long contemplations and his years of experience in education and teaching. The methodology consists of various elements. The first important element is the use of allegorical comparisons (*temsil*). Nursi explained the rationale for the use of this method was to achieve two purposes: to make the comprehension easy for the readers and to establish how logical and coherent the truths of Islam are.⁷⁵ The allegorical comparisons were usually used as an introduction in the first section of a treatise to grab the attention of the reader and facilitate understanding. Nursi considered them a means to reach the highest truths as they brought close the most remote truths and collected the most diffuse matters.⁷⁶ His treatise on resurrection of the dead and the hereafter, *The Tenth Word*,⁷⁷ is the most commonly quoted example of allegorical comparisons. The denial of resurrection was spreading fast among the Muslims under the influence of atheistic ideologies. Nursi explained to his students how observing the blossoming of almond trees evoked in his mind the *Qur'ānic* verse dealing with the concept of resurrection: "so look to the signs of God's mercy how He gives life to the earth after its death; indeed He it is Who will give life to the dead and He is powerful over all things."⁷⁸ The second important component of *Risale* Methodology is the comparison between *Qur'ānic* wisdom (*hikmet*) and agnostic philosophy. This element was employed to refute materialist and naturalist philosophy. The Treatise on Nature, *The Twenty-Third Flash*,⁷⁹ deals explicitly with this subject. The use of logical proofs and reasoned argument is the third important constituent of the *Risale* methodology. Almost every claim in *Risale* is supported by proof mostly followed by a logical refutation of the philosophical claims on the same matter. The proofs are established on coherent arguments and made understandable through allegorical comparisons.⁸⁰

Reflective thought or belief through investigation, which is the fourth and most significant element Nursi employed in *Risale*, is the distinguishing characteristic of the New Said phase. This is such a method which Nursi himself states he learned it after the continuous efforts of "40 years of life and 30 years of study."⁸¹ Belief through investigation is to grasp the truths of belief through minutely observing the universe, and deep study with logical reasoning of its beings and "processes of the natural world" which is actually the manner of the *Qur'ān*. The leading component of this method is *mana-i harfi* (other indicative, the significative meaning of things), "which means considering or reading

⁷⁵Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler, 2006), 59.

⁷⁶ Nursi, *The Letters*, 443.

⁷⁷Nursi, *The Words*, 59-132.

⁷⁸Al-Qur'ān al-Room 30:50.

⁷⁹Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Flashes*, trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler, 2010), 232-54.

⁸⁰For details see Vahide, "The Life and Times," 227-28.

⁸¹Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Al-Mathnawi al-Nuri*, trans. Huseyin Akarsu (New Jersey: The Light, 2007), 67.

things for the meanings they express and on account of their Maker”⁸² In Nursi’s words: “All things other than God, that is the universe, should be looked at as signifying something other than themselves (*mana-yi harfi*) and on His account. It is an error to look at them as signifying only themselves (*mana-yi ismi*) and on account of causes.”⁸³ This method is “central to the *Risale-i Nur* and lies at the heart of the way to reality that Bediuzzaman opened up.”⁸⁴

6. Conclusion

The study was conducted to critically analyse different phases of Nursi’s life and his approaches to social reformation in Turkey. The paper also aimed to examine *Risale-i Nur*’s structure and subjects of its different volumes. The paper investigated Nursi’s intellectual and spiritual development from his childhood to old age. The research finds that many factors combined to shape his thought process. His early disagreement with the education system had a pivotal role to play in his intellectual development in the years to follow. His innate brilliance enabled him to acquire knowledge from diverse fields including religious and modern physical sciences. An in-depth insight into the three periods of his life is a pre-requisite to understanding his person. They indicate that Nursi’s views were not stagnant. However, it would be misplaced to conclude that the change in his strategy was a mere reaction to the external factors and not an outcome of his internal thought process. Evidently, it was a combination of the demands of the social changes and introspection. The study reveals that in the years of the Old Said phase, he chose socio-political activism as a means of the revitalization of the Muslim society. However, circumstances left him in a state of disappointment and prompted him to review his strategy. This led him to his New Said phase. His spiritual re-birth in this phase was an outcome of two factors i.e. his seclusion and contemplation; and, atheistic trends due to which he considered it more important to strengthen the threatened faith of the common people rather than engage in political struggle. Therefore, the New Said focussed on revitalization of faith. To achieve this purpose, he immersed himself in writing *Risale* which proved instrumental in reconstruction of belief of individuals with the method of the

⁸²Sukran Vahide, “Bediuzzaman Said Nursi’s Approach to Religious Renewal and Its Impact on Aspects of Contemporary Turkish Society,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi (USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 58-59.

⁸³As quoted in Vahide, “Toward an Intellectual Biography,” 11; also see Nursi, *Al-Mathnawi*, 67-68.

⁸⁴Sukran Vahide, “The Book of the Universe: Its Place and Development in Bediuzzaman’s Thought,” in *Forth International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Said Nursi A Contemporary Approach to understanding the Qur’ān The Example of the Risale-i Nūr* (Istanbul: Sozler, 1998), 466; for detailed explanation of the method Reflective thought consult Necati Aydin, *Said Nursi and Science in Islam: Character Building through Nursi’s Mana-i-Harfi* (New York: Routledge, 2019), accessed August 19, 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333574034_Said_Nursi_and_Science_in_Islam_Character_Building_Through_Nursi's_mana-i_harfi.

Qur'ān. Nursi's endeavour was applauded by a huge number of masses. On the allegations that his views were harmful to the political reforms during the Republican regime in Turkey, the government turned against him, resulting in his frequent imprisonments and exile. In a way, these years of hardships proved rewarding for Nursi because they allowed him sufficient time to write his monumental work *Risale*. Authorities took every possible measure to restrict the preaching of his ideas but they couldn't crush his or his students' resilience. In the last phase of his life termed as The Third Said, Nursi's attention reverted to socio-political matters. However, now he did not participate in such matters actively. Rather, he performed his role as the advisor of the government. The change in the political environment and easing of conditions during this phase made it possible for Nursi to get his work published and disseminated on a larger scale even outside of Turkey. As regards *Risale*, it is unique in its structure, subject treatment and methodology. It comprises fourteen books. However, the first four are considered more important. The study finds that this comprehensive work was different from the traditional interpretations of the Holy *Qur'ān*. Contrary to the traditional approach, the main aim of this work was not to explain the verses in their historical perspective but to provide logical arguments for the truthfulness of Muslim beliefs in order to prove the superiority of the *Qur'ān* and its civilization. *Risale* is unique not only in its structure and subject treatment but also in its methodology. Nursi drew on his experience in education and time spent in isolation to employ different techniques in his monumental work so as to make it both appealing and understandable for both scholars and general public. The *Risale* methodology rests on four elements: allegory, comparison between the *Qur'ānic* wisdom and materialist philosophy, logical proofs to support the truths of belief, and reflective thought on the universe.

To sum up, the study will contribute in the body of knowledge on Nursi's life and contributions significantly. It will provide the readers with deeper insights into Nursi's intellectual and spiritual development and the role he played in the revitalization of the Muslim society. The researcher believes that there is a scope to expand on this study by drawing on Nursi's methodology to revive Muslim civilization in the present day context. The study may help the future researchers who wish to work more extensively in this area which the present study couldn't do due to the limited scope of this study.

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