

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE AND WORKS OF BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI

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ABSTRACT

Said Nursi was a profound Muslim thinker and revivalist, whose teachings (Risale-i Nur) and ideology are still being followed today in modern Turkey. His life is full of enthusiasm and energy. During his lifetime, he encountered problems similar to those faced by other Muslim scholars and thinkers in other parts of the Islamic world in the 20th century. He lived a life of struggle and harassment but never acted aggressively and never allowed his students to respond with aggression. The strong opposition of the government to religion as opposed to Nursi's firm stand against any irreligiousness certainly made him a symbol of religious movement in Turkey. He 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, whose teachings form the basis of one of the largest and rather influential religious orders. This paper anticipates discussing the significance of Nursi's thoughts, teachings and his life and also explaining the importance of Nursi in the formation of ideology that helped the society of Turkey to get rid of anti-religious systems. The aim of this research paper is to explain his literary contributions that proved to be one of the most ubiquitous read materials in Turkey. Also, the paper will describe and highlight some clarity related to the writings of Nursi i.e. who wrote actually the treatises of Nursi, its propagation and popularization, who published and translated it in later times.

Keywords: Nursi; Risale-i Nur; Ottoman Empire; Nurju; Turkey

INTRODUCTION

This essay is primarily a theoretical one and the methodology adopted for this paper is historical and descriptive. Many books, thesis, research papers and articles have been written on Nursi, and in fact, I have referred to many such works. However, it seems that there is need of a summarized paper that could illuminate both his life and works—the blend which is not found in previous scholarship. For example, the Islamic current that developed into the most tenacious challenger of Kemalism is analyzed in Serif Mardin's (1989) *Religion and Social Change in*

Modern Turkey: the Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (New York: State University of New York Press) which is rich in new insights once one gets past the sociological jargon of the first chapter. He has not as such focused on the writings of Nursi and other points of interest mentioned in this paper.

Shukran Vahide's (2005) *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press) is a daunting work comprising of more than four hundred pages. It mainly covers Nursi's life and thoughts. Though

it is a classic on Nursi studies, but it does hardly deal with the works of Nursi in a focused manner. Colin Turner and Hasan Horkuc's (2009) *Said Nursi: Makers of Islamic Civilization* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press) covers the life and thoughts of Said Nursi very briefly but also gives many references for further reading. It majorly focuses on the summary of six central themes in *Risale-i Nur*. Ian S. Markham and Suendam Birinci Pirim's (2011) wrote a book entitled *An Introduction to Said Nursi* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited), it gives a description of the life of Nursi in the first chapter. In other parts of the book, Markham portrays Nursi as a theologian and an exegete.

Ihsan Qasim Saleh's (2014) writing on *Mukhtasar Sawaneh Hayat: Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New Delhi: Barla Publications) provides a description of Nursi's life in Arabic language and has been recently translated into Urdu by Hafiz Muhammad Ahmad Nadvi and Dr. Naseem Akhtar Nadvi. Only few pages have been attributed to the writings of Nursi vis-à-vis theme of *Risale-i Nur*. The most important place after Makkah and Madina had been Ottoman Turkey for its pivotal position of holding the flag of Caliphate for more than six centuries. But, there was a topsy-turvy and Caliphate was dismembered in 1924 by Mustafa Kamal Pasha Ataturk. Turkey came out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire (1299-1924) by the treaty of Lausanne. Secularism was spread like wildfire in the society of Turkey. In this juncture, Nursi played a vital role in founding a text-based movement whose adherents later came to be known as *Nurjus*.

Nursi was born in 1876 in Nurs, a village in township of Ispart sub province of Hizan, the province of Bitlis in the Eastern part of the Ottoman Empire. He was born in a family of theologians, belonged to Shafi'ite (Mardin, 1989: 60) school of Islamic law and traced his ancestry to the family of Prophet Muhammad (Mardin, 1989: 65). First, one has to remember that he was a very well-known scholar in the era of the Ottoman Empire. Secondly, he was imprisoned by the government of his time and was beleaguered throughout his

life. Bediuzzaman himself divided his life into two periods: Old Said (*Eski Said*), from 1876 to 1920; and New Said (*Yeni Said*), from 1920 to 1949. Some of his biographers study the period of 1949 until his death as a third period in his life, due to his restricted involvement in politics, at least at the level of voting (Rippin, 2008: 396). Each Said corresponded to different orientations and approaches that he employed at different times to raise Muslim consciousness. The Old period (1876 to 1920) takes him from birth to the founding of the Republic. The Old Said period was one of political involvement. New Said (1920 to 1949) entered a world where influencing modernity had destabilized and undermined old equilibrium. And, finally the Third Said (1949-1960) emerged as 'The Master'—teacher of *Risale-i Nur*.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Inconsistent Education of Nursi Begins

During the childhood of Nursi, there were no schools and no *madradas* (religious seminaries) in his village Nurs. However, his elder brother, Mulla Abdullah was the first who encouraged the young Said to start studying. Nursi set off with his brother for Mulla Mehmed Amin Effendi's *madrada* in the village of Tag, near Ispart, some two hours from Nurs on foot. However, he fought with a student called Mehmed and did not stay there long for the young Nursi held himself in great esteem, he could not endure even the smallest word spoken to him in a commanding tone, or to be dictated in any way. So he returned to his own village, where he told his father that he would not attend *madradas* any more until he was older because the other students were all elder than he was. So, Nursi's lessons were then restricted to the one day a week that when his elder brother, Abdullah, returned. About a year going through this way, then once again Nursi set off to continue his studies on full-time basis.

He first left for the village of Pirmis and remained under the instructions of Sayyid Nur Muhammad Effendi and then to the summer pastures of the Hizan Sheikh, the Naqshbandi

Sayyid Nur Muhammad. Said remained there a while longer, and then went together with his elder brother Abdullah to the village of Nursin. From there he moved on to a village called Kugak. Nursi stayed a while (how many months) in the *madrasa* at Kugak (Vahide, 2005: 10), and then set off alone for a place called Siirt and the *madrasa* of Mulla Fathullah; again showing his fierce independence and almost foolish courage, for travel was extremely dangerous due to the lawlessness of the times. Pursuing his studies for some two months under this well-known teacher, he then departed for Geyda, a village near Hizan where Sayyid Sibgatullah, the Gawth of Hizan, lies buried. He returned to Nurs to spend winters there. Filled with enthusiasm, Said left Nurs, going first to the village of Arvas in 1888 and from there to Sheikh Amin Effendi's *madrasa* in Bitlis. This time he set off for the Mir Hasan Vali *madrasa* at Mukush (Bahcheseray), whose principal Mulla Abdul Karim did not pay heed to the juniors. When he saw that the new, lower-grade students were given no importance, he ignored the first seven books, which should have been studied in sequence, and announced he would study the eighth. He remained there only a few days, then went to Vastan (Gevas) near Van. During this period, he attended briefly some ten *madrastas* in the region of his native village, but was unable to find what he was seeking. He came under the instruction of different Naqshbandi Ulama in the Kurdish region and at an early age he earned a reputation as an erudite religious scholar.

Real Education of Nursi Begins and His Early life

Nursi proved himself to be both an intellectual prodigy and a rebel against the established curriculum. His travels around the *madrastas* continued for about five years but he was unsatisfied with his experience. After a month in Gevas, he set off with a companion called Mulla Mehmed for Dogubayazit, a small town near the foot of Mount Ararat, and it was here that his real studies commenced (Vahide, 2005: 10). Nursi was settled and pleased with

the *madrasa* in Bayazit, in Erzurum. In 1891, he undertook intensive studies at the *madrasa* of Sheikh Muhammad Jalali therein Dogubayazit, where he is said to have completed in three months a course that normally took more than a decade (Hermansen, n.d.: 3). These three months were to provide him with the foundations of or key to the religious sciences on which his later thought and works would be based. At the end of three months, toward the springtime, Said Nursi obtained his diploma, an authorization diploma (*Ijazah*), earning the title of 'Mulla' from Sheikh Jalali and was then known as Mulla Said at the time when he was only fourteen or fifteen years old (Markham and Pirim, 2011: 8).

After getting the *Ijazah*, Mulla Said finally arrived in Bitlis, for two days where he attended the lectures of Sheikh Mehmed Amin Effendi. It was from this time that he started to teach the Arabic sciences and have his own students. From Bitlis, Mulla Said traveled on to Sirvan, where his elder brother, Mulla Abdullah, taught in a *madrasa*. Mulla Said remained with his brother a while longer and then made his way to Siirt again. On his arrival in Siirt, he went to the *madrasa* of the famous Mulla Fathullah Effendi, who was to experience the photographic memory Said Nursi was blessed with and the tremendous number of books Said had read and learned. It is related that on one occasion, Nursi read an entire page of a book from his memory after only a glance (Rippin, 2008: 397). Amazed with this sharp young mind, Mulla Fathullah of Siirt gave him the title 'Bediuzzaman', nonpareil or wonder of the age (Markham and Pirim, 2011: 9). Whenever the opportunity arose, and especially in the long winter evenings, Nursi would make the trek to *madrastas* in the vicinity to listen to the discussions of the *sheikhs*, students, and teachers. These occasions and the culture they reflected clearly had a formative influence on his character and future activities. In this connection, Nursi went to Bitlis again and remained at the *madrasa* of Sheikh Amin where he was tested by Sheikh Amin and due to the jealousy harbored against Nursi there, he was forced to leave and

then roamed to different places like Tilo, Jizre and Mardin (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 9).

The young Nursi's talents attracted attention, including that of several governors. Taken into their households, Nursi continued his religious studies, began to learn western subjects, acquired wider world wakefulness through reading the print media, and served the governors, one of whom relied even on him to arbitrate tribal disputes. Firstly, Governor of Mardin sent Nursi to Bitlis in 1892 under guard. Then Governor of Bitlis, Omer Pasha invited Nursi to teach his children and a stay of two years with him. There, Nursi read classical texts and natural sciences. Thereon, Nursi moved to Van where Governor of Van, Hasan Pasha, invited Nursi to reside with him. In Van, he got acquainted with modern secular sciences. Tahir Pasha succeeded Hasan Pasha and persuaded Nursi to reside with him and supported his talent until the latter's death in 1913. He was hosted in Tahir Pasha's Palace for about three years. There, Nursi memorized basic ninety Islamic books which according to Nursi helped him to reach to the sky of understanding of the Quran (Kaya, 2014: 3).

In 1898, Tahir Pasha, the then governor of Van, shared with Nursi a quote in a newspaper from the British secretary for the colonies stating, "So long as the Muslims have the Quran, we shall be unable to dominate them. We must either take it from them, or make them lose their love of it." Upon reading a newspaper account of a speech in which the British colonial secretary William Gladstone (1809-1898) denounced the Quran, Nursi went into a rage, roaring that he would prove to the world that the Quran was an 'inextinguishable sun' of inspiration (Mardin, 1989: 78).

As mentioned above, a noteworthy development during Nursi's stay in Van came from his access to Tahir Pasha's library, where he studied different sciences. He studied math, physics, astronomy, chemistry, biology and geology, and gained depth into history and philosophy. He wrote a book on math,

which was destroyed by a fire in the governor's residence prior to its publishing. He also wrote commentaries on logic (Markham and Pirim, 2011: 9). Here, Nursi founded his own *madrasa* where he put into practice his ideas for educational reform, based on the combined teaching of the traditional religious and modern sciences. The latter he taught himself at this time. He formulated his plans for a university, called the '*Madrasa uz-Zahra*' that would bring together these different educational traditions because he often expressed his frustration toward traditional religious scholars, whose discussions could not supply solutions to the major problems of the time. For Nursi, religion did not consist solely of faith matters; instead, he argued that due to its comprehensive nature, religion was connected with sociology, politics, and economics. Even though he had a traditional education, Nursi was critical of traditional Islamic learning as insufficient and irrational. Nursi's aim was to save the Ottoman State that is to say to build unity within the Empire. Nursi saw education as the most important means to accomplish this unity: "Unity cannot occur through ignorance. Unity is the fusion of ideas, and the fusion of ideas occurs through the electric rays of knowledge" (Nursi, 1977 as cited in Vahide, 2005: 37).

Due to the charismatic personality of Nursi and his liaison with the previous governor with whom he stayed, Yahya Nuzhet Pasha, advisor of Ottoman Porte, recommended Nursi for advisor post of the Ottoman Porte to Abdul Hamid's II imperial bird keeper Kuschu Mustafa Bey. Attracting the attention of Sultan Abdul Hamid's courtiers, he went to Istanbul in 1907 intention of which was to gain official support for '*Madrasa uz-Zahra*' (Urfa) in eastern Anatolia to be a sister university to the Azhar University in Cairo and to ask permission from the Sultan for this. Also, to extend Ottoman secular education, he asserted, essential to produce an educated Kurdish speaking cadre to turn the Kurdish tribesmen into good Ottoman citizens (McDowall, 2007: 93). The embodiment of this rapprochement was to be the '*Madrasa uz-Zahra*' (Vahide,

2005: 45). Nursi wished for Islam to function like a consultative council, that is to say, through the mutual consultation (*shura*) of “the three divisions of the army of Islamic education”—those of the *madrasas*, the *maktebs*, and the *tekkes*—so that “each would complete the deficiencies of the other.” Another intention he had to visit Istanbul was also to engage with a broader spectrum of scholars, intellectuals, and politicians there (Markham and Pirim, 2011: 11). Also, intention of visiting was to present a series of reform proposals to Sultan. On reaching the Sultan Abdul Hamid’s Court, he was sent to Topkapi mental asylum as a result of his pungent and bold language with the Sultan (Nursi, 1998: 493). Thus, Nursi could not attract support for his proposal of establishing a university.

Nursi’s Involvement in Politics

Since Nursi lived during the turbulent collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the new Turkish Republic, he had to respond to the dominant debates of his time. He wanted the amendments in Ottoman state policies and was in favor of the subsistence of the Ottoman Empire (Saleh, 2014: 2). Traces of the two periods of Nursi’s complex life, Ottoman and Turkish, and establishes the different political, social, and religious dynamics that influenced his thought in both periods, Nursi was awakened to the wider issues facing the Muslim world. Nursi was very critical of the apparent absolutism of Sultan Abdul Hamid II and the way Islam was reduced to a state ideology (Yavuz, 2003: 153). He struck up a friendship with Kuschu Mustafa Bey’s son Ashraf Sanjar Kushchubashi, who later became a leading figure in the secret service—special organization, *Teshkilat-i Mehsusa* (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 12).

Nursi also joined the Young Turks and became actively involved in constitutional reforms. He went to Salonika and stayed at the house of Manyasizade Rafik Bey, chairman of Committee for Union and Progress (CUP). Meanwhile, Nursi delivered a speech in Salonika on freedom organized by CUP. For example, he embraced the

Young Turk revolution of the CUP and its call for the establishment of a constitutional state. In the following months, he strove to put forward his ideas concerning this, educational reform, unity, and other matters in newspaper articles and involvement in public life. When constitutional revolution occurred in 1908, Said Nursi supported that with the intention to try to Islamize it as that propounded by Namik Kemal.

Said Nursi was also to be a founder of the Muslim association known as the ‘*Ittihad-i Muhammadi*’ (the Muslim Union). His articles were published in a famous newspaper ‘Volkan’, the mouthpiece of *Ittihad-i Muhammadi*. Between 1908 and 1910, he delivered a number of speeches and became a member of societies including ‘*Talebe-i ulum Jamiyeti*’ (Society for students of the sciences). The association (*Ittihad-i Muhammadi*) was established a week before the military rebellion in Istanbul which had acquired a notoriety in Turkish history as the incident of March 31st (1909). The rebellious group consisted of privates led by non-commissioned officers. Though, Nursi had supported the constitutional movement of July 1908 while in Istanbul, but later lost confidence in the CUP because of its anti-religious policies. It accused the latter of a policy intimidation based on terrorism and, at the same time, of attacking Islamic institutions. Because the incident was a reactionary, populist outbreak demanding a return to the *Sharia*, the association was inculpated in the rebellion. Its most popular writer, Dervish Vahdeti, was hanged. Nursi also was indicted of inciting the 31st of March incident in 1909 and put on trial by the military Court (Mardin, 1989: 85). However, Said Nursi disculpates himself of complicity in the outbreak. He states that he harangued the Eastern porters of Istanbul so that they would abandon any ideas they might have harbored of joining the rebellion (Mardin, 1989: 84). Believing Islam to be the middle way, Nursi advocated moderation and counseled abjuring limits, referring at all times to the Prophetic tradition which has it that,

“Too much or too little of anything is not good: moderation is the middle way” (Nursi, 1995: 43). This is the reason why he also expounded

the beliefs of the extremist Wahhabi school and their origins and historical development and demolished convincingly the ideas on which they are based (Vahide, 2005: 15). Said Nursi was brought to trial along with other members of the *Ittihad-i Muhammadi*, but the court found him innocent and he was acquitted after twenty four days in captivity. Meanwhile, Nursi published his first work, a collection of his speeches and articles, entitled *Nutuk* (Speech). Nursi spent one and a half years in Istanbul and settled in the Shekerji Han (Centre of Muslim intelligentsia) where he hung an attractive sign at the door of his room declaring “here, all questions are answered and all problems are solved, but no questions are asked” resulting in his fame (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 13) and gained respect even among the Ulama of Istanbul for his profound knowledge. Nursi did not stay long in Istanbul after the trial and set off for Van (Vahide, 2005: 83).

The Damascus Sermon

From Van, Nursi visited through the eastern provinces of Turkey in between 1910 and 1913 and also visited Damascus delivering a famous sermon at Umayyad mosque. Nursi travelled among the tribes of the Eastern Provinces, persuading them of the benefits of constitutionalism, and explaining how it could be made the basis of the progress and unity of the Islamic world. His exchanges with those he encountered, he subsequently put that into book form, firstly in Arabic, and then in Turkish. These were published in two works, one addressing the Ulama, entitled *Muhakemat* (Reasonings), published in 1911, and the other addressing the people at large, entitled *Munazarat* (Debates), published in 1913. In Damascus, Nursi presented a more elaborate picture of the Muslim world and condition in relation to the west. He identified six severe ailments that tarnished this condition and offered six remedies for their healing. The sicknesses are these:

“Firstly: The rising to life of despair and hopelessness in social life. Secondly: The death of truthfulness in social and political life. Thirdly: Love of enmity. Fourthly: Not knowing the lumi-

nous bonds that bind the believers to one another. Fifthly: Despotism, which spreads, becoming widespread as though it was various contagious diseases. Sixthly: Restricting endeavor to what is personally beneficial” (Nursi, 1996: 26-27).

In the form of ‘Six Words’ Nursi describes a number of those positive truths of Islam, which form the cure for the grievous sicknesses besetting the Muslim community; “Hope, courage, honesty, love and brotherhood, self-sacrifice, awareness of the luminous bonds uniting the believers, mutual consultation”(Nursi, 1996: 14). The sermon was well received and immediately published as *Khutba i-Shamiya* (The Damascus Sermon). After Damascus, he set off for Istanbul in pursuit of his dream of founding the *Madrassa uz-Zahra* (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 16). Sultan Mehmed Rashad approved his proposal and was granted 19000 gold liras but the project was impeded by eruption of the Balkan wars (Nursi, 1996: 14). This time, Nursi did not stay long in Istanbul. He returned to Van after his journey to Rumeli with Sultan Mehmed Reshad (Vahide, 2005: 101). While in Van, he continued teaching in his old *madrassa*.

World War First and After

With the support of Anver Pasha (d. 1922), the then Minister of War, Nursi’s magnum opus *Isharaat al-Ijaz* (Signs of Miraculousness) was published (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 19). On the outbreak of war, Minister of War Anver Pasha involved Nursi to muster the militia. Nursi along with his students fought against the Russian army on the Caucasian front in 1916. The Russians captured him after the fall of Bitlis and held him as a war prisoner in Siberia. After spending about twenty months there, he escaped in 1917 during Russian Revolution through St. Petersburg. He traveled through Poland, Germany, and Bulgaria spending some months in these European countries, once again improving his knowledge. Escaped to Istanbul in 1918 where he was given a medal for his bravery. Nursi’s return to Istanbul was met with a ‘hero’s welcome’ that echoed in the Empire’s capital and districts (Markham and Pirim, 2011: 13).

After arriving in the then capital, Nursi was appointed as a member of the '*Dar al-Hikmah al-Islamiyya*' (Islamic House of Wisdom), a learned council or Islamic academy seeking solutions of growing problems of the *ummah* (Vahide, 2005: 133). It was the highest religious institution in the Ottoman Empire. In this institution Nursi's specific duty was to answer the questions posed by foreigners (Rippin, 2008: 398). Starting in Siberia, however, a spiritual crisis had begun to turn him into the "New Said". He was getting older, and politics and western philosophical sciences had not given him satisfaction. He could find this contentment only by returning to religious studies. He came to believe that Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi was transmitting him a message from the beyond to unify his Qibla, essentially, to face in only one direction to pray. He must find a single master, and that could only be the Quran. Besides, Said Nursi mentions both Imam Sirhindi and Mawlana Khalid as persons who deeply influenced him. Appointed as *Sheikh al-Islam* in 1920 by Sultan Vaheduddin at the recommendation of *Sheikh al-Islam* Musa Kazim Bey, he promoted the foundation of organisations and groups like '*Yeshilay*' (Green Crescent Society) in 1920 and the '*Jamiyeti-i muderrisin*' (the Madrasa Teachers Association) in January 1920. He wrote on the causes of Ottoman decline in small couplets like *Sunuhat* (1920), *Hakikat Chekirdekleri* (1920), *Nokta* (1921), *Rumuz* (1922).

Nursi's Resistance against Foreign Encroachments

Nursi was deeply troubled by the British occupation of Istanbul, as he witnessed the reoccupation in March, 1920. He invited the people of Istanbul to unite and resist against the occupation. He also became a strong supporter of the independence movements in Anatolia known as *Kuvayi Milliye*. He published a tract entitled *Khutuvat-i Sitte* against British occupation aiming to inform people of its dangers not only in regard to Ottoman provinces, but also towards the unity of Islam. However, Nursi later on developed

his opinion on Europe. He said:

"In this time of modern civilization, the Europeans are civilized and powerful, and harmful hostility and bigotry have therefore disappeared. For in respect of religion, the civilized are to be conquered through persuasion, not through force, and through showing by conforming to its commands in actions and conduct that Islam is elevated and lovable. Force and enmity are only to combat the barbarity of savages" (Nursi, 1996: 85).

He opposed the *Sheikh al-Islam's* (Durrizade) fatwa, legislation justifying the occupation and issued a statement against it calling for resistance. *Sheikh al-Islam* held the official highest rank of opinion in the Sunni world, akin to the archbishop in the Anglican Church; Nursi's attitude posed a significant challenge (Markham and Pirim, 2011: 13).

Nursi in Ankara and his Transition to New Said

Since Nursi supported the War of Independence; it was not surprising that the newly instituted parliament in Ankara started taking an interest in Nursi. He was invited to Ankara in 1922 where he spent eight months which was going to be the emergence of an incredible transformation in his life. Ataturk himself invited Nursi to take up membership in the Grand National Assembly (Atasoy, 2005: 44). At the invitation of Ataturk, Nursi reached Ankara on the 4th of August 1922 but was deeply disappointed by their policies of secularization. He called Ataturk as the Anti-Christ for Muslims. Seeing the conditions in Ankara, Nursi realized that the Old Said's method did not work to defend the basic tenets of Islam against atheism and materialism. Seeing dangers surrounding this new formation, he issued ten articles as a warning to members of parliament in 1923, reminding them of the causes that had required the nation to enter into wars and the sacrifices that people made. And after the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1924, he fulminated against the irreligious policies of the government, which, he believed, served to turn people not into secularists but into atheists (Turner, 2007:

103). He understood that more innovative method were necessary for the New Period. Thus, he left Ankara for Van in April 1923. In Van, at this time, Nursi was not involved in politics. He gave up the Old Said's method. He devoted most of his time to contemplation. Despite having supported the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in its formative years, he leveled harsh criticisms against those members of the CUP who advocated violence as a means of realizing their political aims. He preached on essentials of belief rather than on political and social events and developments. Nursi no longer envisioned politics as the means to revive Islam and society, rather he coined a very famous statement which became a principle for his students; Nursi stated:

“I seek refuge in God from Satan and Politics” (Nursi, 2010: 312). After denying to be allied with the politics of the time, he declined the positions he was offered, such as being a member of the parliament, the chief religious official of eastern provinces (Sharq umumi vaizligi), and membership in the religious affairs department of the government. Leaving the “Old Said” behind, he retired to a cave near Van to study the Quran. Nursi turned back to Van, to his *madrasa* with an intention to teach. However, his life was about to face a dramatic shift that would change everything. The newly founded government was disappointed in Nursi's decision not to support the new regime; and the government feared Nursi's charisma and influence. Keeping him suppressed and under tight control seemed a safe and legitimate solution.

Sheikh Said Rebellion of 1925 and Life in Exile

It is important to note that at this time the Eastern province was not very stable. Some of the Kurdish chiefs and sheikhs were not satisfied with the government of CUP or with some of its members, who were known as blasphemous and secularist among the people of the region. Receiving foreign support, several revolts occurred as a result including the uprising of Sheikh Said in 1925. Nursi refused to partake in

any of these uprisings. He did not want to draw his sword against his Muslim brothers. Nursi replied as follows:

“The struggle you are embarking on will cause brother to kill brother and will be fruitless. For the Kurds and Turks are brothers. The Turkish nation has acted as the standard-bearer of Islam for centuries. It has produced millions of saints and given millions of martyrs. The sword may not be drawn against the sons of Islam's heroic defenders, and I shall not draw mine!” (Vahide, 2005: 181-182).

Still, Nursi was accused of masterminding and tried of involvement in 31st March incident of Sheikh Said. He was taken to Istanbul and questioned about the revolt. Even though the court had no proofs of his involvement, Nursi was taken to Antalya and sent to exile in Burdur, a small town in south-western Anatolia for next seven months. This was the beginning of thirty years of banishment and imprisonment in different parts of Turkey sanctioned by the new government (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 22) but Nursi was able to kick start a silent struggle—a text-based movement against the forces of irreligion.

In Burdur, Nursi stayed in the Haji Abdullah Mosque in Degirmenler district. Masses inevitably attracted to Nursi. He preached every day at afternoon and later collected his sermons into a book *Nurun İlk Kapilari* (The First Doors of Light). Because of his continued activity; his attractiveness again led to his shift to a secluded village Barla. At Barla near Isparta, he began writing his major works, known collectively as the *Risale-i Nur* (Treatise of Light), largely dating from 1925 to 1944. When he was exiled and subjected to forced settlement in Barla he was first hosted by security people later by an *imam* who was a migrant from Hungary, Muhajir Hafiz Ahmed. Nursi's exile in Barla lasted for almost eight and a half years, during which he wrote almost ninety percent of the *Risale-i Nur* (Yavuz, 2003: 22). Thereafter, he spent most of his life in forced residence at different places. Nursi's followers, *Talebe-i Nur* (the students of light) reproduced and circulated his writings, and his influence grew. Official qualms that he

trying to found a religious brotherhood, which had been forbidden, or to undermine the republic resulted in repeated trials on the same charges. Nursi defended himself against the brotherhood charge with the observation that many people that who did not belong to Sufi orders had gone to heaven but that none who lacked faith had done so (Nursi, 2010: 39). In 1934-1935, taken back to Isparta where he spent next nine months finishing *al-lum'aat* (The Flashes Collection) in Eskishehar prison and started to write *al-Shu'a'at* (The Rays). Again, he was arrested in 1935 along with his 120 students all over Turkey and sentenced to eleven month imprisonment.

Nursi was released from Eskisehir Prison in March 1936 and was sent to Kastamonu in the Ilgaz Mountains to the south of the Black Sea for next seven years. He was now fifty-nine years of age. During his first three months in Kastamonu, Nursi stayed as a guest in the police station. He referred to the prison as *Madrasa-i Yusufiya* (The school of Joseph). There he wrote *Ayat al-Kubra* (The Supreme Sign) and also completed some other parts of The Rays. On account of his writings, he was again allegedly tried and sentenced to nine months of harsh imprisonment in Denizli. Nursi said that if conditions had been bad in Eskisehir Prison, in Denizli they were worse (Vahide, 2005: 257). He was released from there in July 1944. After a two month stay in Denizli, Nursi was taken on official orders to Emirdag where he stayed for next seven years without any movement. He was again arrested and given an eleven-month jail sentence for pamphleteering. Later, he was again imprisoned in Afyon prison (which he called as Third school of Joseph) between January 1948 and October 1949 incarcerated for twenty months (Vahide, 2005: 286). Nursi stayed in Afyon for two months before moving back to his former place Emirdag after which Nursi resorts to teaching and becomes 'The Master'. Albeit, Nursi's alleged prosecution remained unabated even after the victory of Democrats invariably sued by the pro-Kemalists (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 37). In January 1952, he visited Istanbul for a trial after twenty seven years which attracted a huge gathering (Vahide, 2005: 311).

Historical Background of Writing *Risale*

As mentioned in the previous sections, 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 connections with the Revolt, Nursi was accused of inciting rebellion among the Kurds resulting in his exile from Van to Burdur in Western Anatolia (Bruinessen, 1992: 258) which gave him the opportunity to separate himself entirely from active politics (Atasoy, 2005: 47). 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 *Khutba-i Shaamiya* (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 Zaati* in Arabic or *Tarihce Hayat* in Turkish compiled by his students during his lifetime). *Tulu'at*, *Qatre*, *Zerre*, *Qizil I'jaz* and *T'aliqat* are the other small leaflets written in Arabic by Nursi.

The New Said (1925-1949) resorted to serious writing although he did not write himself (quickly) rather made his students especially Shamlu Hafiz to write for him in Arabic and Ottoman Turkish. However, he himself wrote some first few parts of

The Words. Further, he produced a 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), *Shualer* in Turkish (The Rays in English and *al-Shu'a'at* in Arabic), *Isharaat al 'Ijaz* in Arabic (Signs of the Miraculousness in English and *Isharaat al 'Ijaz* in Turkish, was written during World War I and his most philosophically complex text (Yavuz, 2003: 154), *Asa-yi Musa* in 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* (Seedbed of The Light) and *Isharaat al 'Ijaz* (1913-1914) which he originally wrote in Arabic (Abu-Rabi, 2008: 8). *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-Milahi*q 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 (Markham and Pirim, 2011: 17).

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, *Hizb al-Akbar al-Nuri*. During these years, the *Risale-i Nur* became firmly rooted in Turkish society (Vahide, 2005: 249).

Popularizing *Risale* and the Last Days of Nursi

Although his writings were banned by the Kemalist regime, 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 Nurjus. Hence, the Nurjus emerged from the beginning as a text-based movement, i.e. a movement centered on Said Nursi's writings (Yavuz, 2003: 151). He also demanded the free circulation of his *Risale-i Nur*, which according to him contributed to the fight against communism and Freemasonry (Azak, 2010: 123).

Through the mid-1920s, Nursi's writings seem to have been printed without particular difficulty (Vahide, 2005: 194). By the mid-1930s, some villages around Isparta, near Nursi'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 (Findley, 2010: 290). 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 (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 38) and translations in different languages. Nursi called this as "the *Risale-i Nur*'s festival"

(Markham and Pirim, 2011: 16) after put on trial for 434 times (Sawlat, 2010: 255). Nursi bought some printing machines which furthered the publication of *Risale-i Nur* both in Arabic-Ottoman script as well as newly introduced Latin alphabet.

In 1958 some of Nursi's close students, primarily Mustafa Sungur and Zubeyr Gunduzalp, prepared Nursi's official biography. Wanting attention to be focused on the *Risale-i Nur*, Nursi cut out most of the sections describing his personal life and exploits. There was dispute as to whether or not photographs should be included, and on Nursi's decision a number of them were added (Vahide, 2005: 323). Nursi gave importance to translations during these years, both from Turkish into Arabic—to further spread the *Risale-i Nur* in the Islamic world—and of the Arabic parts into Turkish. A follower, Dr. Tahsin Tola, then obtained permission to publish Nursi's works in Latin letters; Tola also edited a biography and Nursi's authorized biography was written and published in 1958. Nursi's third period proved brief. In late 1959 and before his death, Nursi embarked on a series of trips to Ankara, Konya and Istanbul. Said Nursi himself explained that he visited Ankara to demand that the Aya Sofya Mosque be re-opened to worship. Aya Sofya was turned into Mosque by Muhammad-The Conqueror in 1453. Later, it was changed into a museum in 1934. When he died in March 23, 1960; Ramadan 25, 1379 (Vahide, 2005: 343), Nursi was renowned as the founder of the most powerful text-faith based movement in Turkey with one and a half million of estimated followers. He was buried at Urfa, but not for long. His remains were taken away on a military plane and reburied at a secret location near Isparta (Vahide, 2005: 347).

Translation Works of Said Nursi's *Risale*

While he himself had translated *Khutba-i Shaamiya* from Arabic into Turkish in 1951, his younger brother Abdul Majid (d.1967), who was the then mufti of Urgup near Kayseri, translated

Asa-yi Musa from Turkish into Arabic at Nursi's suggestion. Nursi wanted to interest many quarters in this work (Vahide, 2005: 323). Later, in 1955, Abdul Majid translated Nursi's wartime Quranic commentary, *Ishaaraat al-Ijaz*, and his *al-masnavi al-arabi an-nuriyya* from Arabic into Turkish (Turner and Horkuc, 2009: 44). Translated *al-masnavi al-arabi an-nuriyya* into English by Huseyin Akarsu, although it is not poetry, it is still very beautifully written. On many occasions, Nursi compared his *Masnavi* to that of Mawlana 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. Prof. 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. After Algar, the translation work of this large corpus was undertaken by Shukran Vahide, a British woman (Wife of one of the students of Said Nursi, Mehmet Firinci). 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 (Algar, 2001: vol.12).

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 (Sayilgan, 2012: 9). 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. 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 (interview, 1 May 2015).

CONCLUSION

Nursi ended up with a courageous ascetic preacher who wanted to combine religion with Western Science and Technology. He led an active, brave life, enduring hardships and striving to make Islam a way of life for himself and for everybody, based on *Zuhd* (asceticism) and *Taqwa* (meticulousness for the pleasure of Allah). In his early life, he concentrated his efforts on maintaining the unity of the Ottoman Empire and supported the Young Turks in their struggle for reform and the establishment of constitutional government. The mature Nursi of the Republican era saw his mission as safeguarding the Islamic religious and cultural underpinnings of Turkish identity. He also aimed to rejuvenate this identity by addressing some of the legitimate shortcomings that critics and intellectuals had pointed to in the late Ottoman period. 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 as one of the most influential figures in modern Turkey, despite being dead for nearly six decades. 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 (Rippin, 2008: 401). 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. The renewer (*mujaddid*) of the previous century had been Mawlana 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” (Nursi, 1998 as cited in Vahide, 2005: 29).

Nursi stressed on the study of the Quran to adapt Islam to modern conditions. Such study had to be undertaken by educated Muslims, for he realized that the traditional Ulama, who claimed to possess a monopoly over the interpretation of religious texts, could not meet the challenges of a positivist age in which a new critical stance toward knowledge had developed.

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