

Searching for Solace: A Biography of Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Interpreter of the Qur'an

By M. A. Sherif. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1994.

Searching for Solace consists of two parts, two appendixes, and a section displaying documents and photos of Yusuf Ali and those with whom he had contact.

The author devotes the first part to A. Yusuf Ali's life and his service to the British. He was born in 1872 in Surat, western India, into the Bohra mercantile community, whose members trace their Muslim ancestry to the efforts of preachers sent by the Fātimid caliphs in Cairo. Ali was sent to Bombay for his education. While there, he attended the new school of the Anjuman-e-Islam and, subsequently, a missionary school named after its founder, John Wilson. He was barely eight or nine years old when he left home. Classes were taught in both Urdu and English. When he was fifteen, Ali left Wilson's school and entered its senior section, Wilson College, which was affiliated to the University of Bombay. Sherif thinks that Ali's education in the Anjuman school helped him resist the cultural onslaught of the dominant British colonizer.

Ali arrived in Britain in 1891 to study law at St. John College. He eventually became one of its best students, which predisposed him to work in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), a much prized career. His first appointment, on 23 January 1896, was assistant magistrate and collector in Saharanpur, India. After a few years in India, he returned to Britain in 1905 for a leave. While there, he married Teresa Mary Shalders. Sherif thinks that his marriage to an English woman symbolizes Ali's desire to establish a bridge between India and the West. But this marriage ended in divorce in 1912 following his wife's an extramarital affair. Their children were left in her custody. The affairs of his children are considered to be one reason that pushed Ali to resign from ICS. But his loyalty to the British empire remained strong. When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, he reaffirmed his commitment: "I am prepared and shall be pleased to volunteer to temporary service, in any capacity in which I can be useful on account of the War" (p. 32).

Ali's strong commitment to the British was based on his belief that India could learn a lot from Britain. But he also had a strong faith in Islam as a religion and civilization that could contribute much to the West. This should have been among the strong reasons that motivated him to translate the Qur'an into English. His *Interpretation of the Qur'an* has made him famous among Muslim speakers of English throughout the world. The author underlines a number of factors that helped Ali achieve this great work: "A troubled domestic life, ear-

lier academic specializations and employment as a college principle were experiences which intertwined with his vision of the meaning of the Qur'an" (p. 173). At home, he faced an unfaithful wife and the revolt of his children against him with a vengeance. In other words, his bond with the Qur'an was forged in times of anguish that created in him a pressing need for solace.

In addition, his love of Hellenic culture certainly enabled him to enrich his understanding of symbols in the Qur'an. (For Plato, the whole phenomenal world is a symbol. Reality is behind it, like the real light behind the Cave, in Plato's Theory of Ideas.) Ali sought for symbols in the Qur'an: Fish became symbols of secular knowledge, and the sun a mystic reference to intelligence. By deepening his understanding of the Qur'an's symbols and ideas, he came to an interpretation of the Qur'an as a guide for the individual's spiritual development. As a principal of the Islamia College, he promoted the idea of the refinement of Muslims. They should acquire good conduct, for Islam seeks to make every Muslim, however humble in station, a refined gentleman or lady. The true Muslim must be pure in body, mind, and heart. In addition to these factors, which brought him into close contact with the Qur'an and enabled him to have a profound understanding of its depth, Ali had also a good command of classical Arabic.

Modern psychology's research on creativity shows that we have just begun to understand some features of its dynamics. Creative people display a number of personality traits, among them the extreme devotion to their works. The latter become central to their lives, and so they devote most of their time in order to see the crystallization of their projects. In other words, creative works are born when their themes occupy the central personal depth of the mind and the personality of their authors. The monumental work of Ali could be considered a case in point; he finished his *Interpretation of the Qur'an* between the years 1934 and 1937.

But behind creative works, we need to identify the motivation that galvanizes their authors. For Ali there were at least two compelling reasons that led him to undertake his grandiose project. First, he had an unquestionable respect and admiration for Islam. In order to demonstrate that, he chose to write a unique interpretation of the Qur'an for those who read English. What better way than this for him to express his profound commitment to Islam! As pointed out earlier, he did not mean for his work to reach only those Muslims who could read English, but also for non-Muslim English readers in the West in particular and to make them aware, through the Qur'anic text and the impressive number of footnotes of the 1,754 pages of his work, of the wisdom of Islam regardless of time and place. In doing so, he must have had a keen ambition to universalize the message of Islam among the large English-speaking population of the modern world.

Second, on a personal level Ali had a disappointing family life. His English wife committed adultery, and their children were far from kind to him. That must have been a disturbing development for him. His decision, at the age of 62, to begin writing his *Interpretation of the Qur'an* could be seen as a last resort to save himself from his shabby condition and his state of despair. In the words of the author of this book, Ali was indeed searching for solace through the tremendous scholarly efforts he put into the making of this monumental work on the Qur'an.

Both his devotion to Islam and his troubled family life were very intimate personal forces at work on the core of his personality. As such, he was hardly

able to resist their compelling pushes and pulls. In response, he appears to have adopted a clever strategy: He used the first against the second. Thus, his project was a way to expand his horizon in the universe of the Qur'an and to contain partially, at least, his painful family life.

Mahmoud Dhaouadi
 Department of Sociology
 International Islamic University
 Selangor, Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

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