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***Theoretical Impact of the Western Intelligentsia on Shahab Ahmad's
Thought: An Analysis***

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Abstract

This article explicates the basic theoretical impact of the western school of thought on the oeuvre of Shahab Ahmad (1966 – 2015), who was educated in the western institutions throughout his life. Although some people have written on several aspects of Shahab's thought but his susceptibility remained undiscussed yet. Employing the analytical methodology descriptively, it becomes obvious that Shahab had a great working relation with orientalist/Islamicists. As a result, he was affected by them even in the basic Islamic creeds like the divine status of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and the process of the revelation. Harris and Fred Donor are the most consulted Islamicists in his book "Before Orthodoxy". He also benefitted in regard of 'Prophetic history' from GRD King, and his concept of 'Abrogation' is indebted to John Burton. Another orientalist Michael Cook – the supervisor of Shahab's Ph.D. dissertation – also played an influential role in his academic life. Shahab has penned some works also in collaboration with some other Islamicists, which compelled him not to offer any salutation with the beloved name of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). He delivered many theoretically infected and borrowed dogmas like the concept of a 'fallible Prophet', re-conceptualization of Islam only as a culture, his negation of the centrality of fiqh etc. Conclusively, all these displayed a strong theoretical impact of the western intelligentsia on Shahab's thought. Further, the way of Shahab's basic learning of Islamic theology is recommended to be enlightened to unveil the real western influence on him.

Keywords: Shahab Ahmad, Islam, Western Education, Orientalism, Prejudicial Supervision, Impacts, Borrowed Theories.

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Introduction

This research article aims to explore the influence of the western scholars' thought on a western grown Muslim scholar Shahab Ahmad (1966 – 2015 AD), who spent his whole educational life in non-Muslim institutions. Being raised in Singapore, his parents got commenced his early education from a church type school namely Raeburn Park School.¹ That western based educational journey passed through this School to Caterham School, Surrey – where he was the only Muslim student –, American University in Cairo and later on the Princeton and Harvard Universities as well. So, all these circumstances of his life express Shahab's deep attachment with the western intelligentsia.

Eventually, this effort intends to unveil Shahab's deep-rooted relation with his contemporary and earlier Islamicists, the effect of the supervision of another western historian on Shahab and his discourtesy – like his western academic ancestors – towards the Holy Prophet (Peace and greetings of Allah be upon him). This paper also examines Shahab's co-authoring the books and articles with orientalists and his columns for western encyclopaedias.

While studying the real theoretical impact of the Western phenomenon on the personality and works of Shahab Ahmad, this study explicates his many infected notions, such as his conceptualization of Islam, his concept of a 'fallible Prophet', his sense of *Sharī'ah* and *fiqh*, his concept of taking Islam as a culture, his critique on the poetry of Muslim poets and on the hermeneutic diversities of Muslims *etc.*

Having the mentorship and collegueship of many orientalists like Michael Allen Cook, Noah Feldman, Nenad Filipovic *etc.*, Shahab Ahmad began to think quite differently. In his corpuses, he had been found often disparaging the well-settled earlier Islamic issues while quoting the theories of a number of orientalists, as he dismantled the concept of the Divine Revelation by declaring it similar to the process of poetry, borrowed the idea of "Muhammad's understanding of himself", exaggerated the status of Christian Church while disgusting the Muslim rituals and many other instances.

So, he was strongly influenced by that specific western thought-provoking environment to a great extent. Being resided and educated through the western institutions for his whole life, having the friendship and collegueship of Islamicists,

¹ Nora Lessersohn, *Curriculum Vitae of Mohammad Shahab Ahmed*, (Personal Notes) (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2017), 2.

studying Islam through the orientalist sources and the ideas borrowing nature imprinted a great theoretical impact on the personality of Shahab Ahmad.

Research Methodology

In order to extract the real impact of the western thought on Shahab's theories, the analytical research methodology has been used here descriptively and interpretatively, as his monumental works and magnum opuses "Before Orthodoxy; The Satanic Verses in Early Islam (2017)" and "What is Islam? The Importance of being Islamic (2015)" are analysed here in this paper. Shahab Ahmad compiled a number of books and research articles, therefore, all those have been taken and analysed for unveiling his 'susceptibility' towards the orientalist thought. His dissenting dogmas and ideas – which have been presented by him in his works – are also brought and examined here keenly to find out his influenced and borrowing nature.

Literature Review

Shahab had got an immediate fame in his very short life, therefore, a plenty of writers have worked on Shahab Ahmad quite earlier but no one took the liberty to display the western influence as some authors described only his educational and lifetime achievements in their creations like "Memorial, M. Shahab Ahmed, 99" Princeton Alumni Weekly, October 05, 2016 Issue, "Tribute To Professor Shahab Ahmed 1966-2015" by Ebrahim Moosa, "The Revisionist" The Friday Times, Sep 25 – Oct 01, 2015, Vol. XXVII, No.33 by Natasha Shahid, "In Memoriam; Shahab Ahmed" *'al- 'Uşūr al- Wūstā*, 24 (2016) by Sarah Eltantawi and "Extra Ordinary Scholar Shahab Ahmed Redefined Islam" Chicago Tribune, September 21, 2015 by Noah Feldman *etc.*

Shahab's theories about the traditions, rituals and customs of Muslim societies have also been examined by a number of authors like Malice Ruthven in "More Than A Religion (What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic)", London Review of Books, Vol, 38 No.18, Khalil Andani in his "Book Review "What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic" by Shahab Ahmed", ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS, 2016. The fascinating theories of "conceptualization" and "re-conceptualization" of Islam are interpreted by the writers like Wasim Nasir in "What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic by Shahab Ahmed", Intellectual Discourse, 24: 1 (2016) and Michael E. Pregill in his "Shahab Ahmed's What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic as a Disciplinary Critique", Harvard Theological Review, Jan 24-2017

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and “I Hear Islam Singing; Shahab Ahmed's What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic”, *Harvard Theological Review*, Jan 2017, 110 (1).

In “Shahab Ahmed; Before Orthodoxy; The Satanic Verses in Early Islam”, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 49 (2018) by Peter Webb, “How Has the Islamic Orthodoxy Changed Over Time?”, *The Nation*, Jan 11-18, 2016 Issue by Elias Muhanna and “Book Review (Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam) by Shahab Ahmed”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religions* by Amir Hussain *etc*, the concept of the formation of Islamic orthodoxy has also been calculated.

The above-mentioned review of the earlier literature assessed quite easily that no one has discussed yet the real influence of the western environment on Shahab Ahmad's thought. So, this study is going to reveal the theoretical impact which Shahab had got from the western intelligentsia.

Shahab Ahmad and Orientalism

To explicate the influences of orientalism on Shahab Ahmad, one must have some knowledge about “Orientalism”. This refers to the word ‘orient’ *i.e.* the East. Orientalism means the Western scholarship about the Eastern world, specialised in languages and literature. The department of Orientalism regarding Islam worked at a higher level as for their local and international interests. The person who practices orientalism is called orientalist or Islamicist.

According to the life span of Shahab Ahmad, it is quite obvious that he had been extremely influenced by the orientalists, which may also be observed in his entire corpus. He seemed to consult – even about the **biography of the Holy Prophet** (Peace be upon him) which can be adopted well from general Muslim sources – with the works of many orientalists like Gregor Shoeler (b.1944 AD), Clarendon (1609 – 1974 AD), Robert Hoyland (b.1966 AD), Chase Robinson, and others.² From Harris Brickland (1904 – 1961 AD), Shahab benefited³ in regard of **history of the earliest exegeses** before al-Ṭabarī, which had been lost and recognised by none of the Islamic scholars. Harris's book “Old Muslim Opposition” and Fred Donor's (b.1945 AD) “Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginning of Islamic Historical Writing” are the most consulted works of

² Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 18-22.

³ *Ibid*, 28.

orientalists by Shahab. As he cited – in favour of unreliable transmitters – from Harris Brickland, “It is a notorious fact that numerous interpreters who had not achieved a fame in other branches of religious sciences *viz.* in *Ḥadīth* or *qīrā’āh* or *fiqh*, but were only known as interpreters, were held to be unreliable”.⁴ This quotation expresses the inner hostility of Shahab towards the *Ḥadīth* scientists and Islamic law. Shahab's claim of “Muhammad's [own] struggle to understand his prophet hood”⁵ displays his theoretical borrowing nature very well. Because he has got this most insanelly emphasized idea – of “**Muhammad's understanding of himself**” – right from Alfred T. Welch (1904 – 1976 AD), in which he declared that from the beginning, the Holy Prophet (PBUH) did not know how to act but gradually with the passage of time, he understood his prophetic mission.

While discussing the earlier **epistemological differences** of Islamic history, Shahab proved his idea – of making legal, praxial, and creedal norms with only the authority of *Ḥadīth* – with the help of Gordon D. Newby's (b.1939 AD) “Imitating Muhammad in Two Genres: Mimesis and problems of genre in *Sīrāh* and *Sūnnāh*”.⁶ In his narrated *Ḥadīth* methodology, Shahab had initially consulted the English version of the History of al-Ṭabarī from Frans Rosenthal⁷ (1914 – 2003 AD) instead of his original Arabic version. The translations of Alfred Guillaume (1888 – 1965 AD) “Life of Muhammad”, Montgomery Watt (1909 – 2006 AD), and MV McDonald (d.1957 AD) are the favourites of Shahab. He used GRD King's “The Prophet [(PBUH)] Muhammad and the breaking of *Jāhilīyyāh* Idols”⁸ to have some knowledge of **Prophetic history**. Shahab had consulted the works of French Islamicists too, as Henry Locust's “*Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki -d-Din Aḥmad b. Taimiya*”⁹ and a book of Horst Überlieferung. Shahab's understanding of the **abrogation** is begged to John Burton (1696 – 1771 AD), and his apprehension of Angels is owed to Winnet and Cyrus H. Gordon

⁴ Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017), 25.

⁵ *Ibid*, 284.

⁶ *Ibid*, 35.

⁷ *Ibid*, 44.

⁸ *Ibid*, 57.

⁹ Shahab Ahmad, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses." *Studia Islamica* Vol: 2, No. 87 (1998): 87.

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(1908 – 2001 AD).¹⁰ In addition to all these, for early Islamic history, Shahab Ahmad also cited a famous orientalist Uri Rubin's (b.1944 AD) "The eye of the beholder" mostly.

Thus, it may be considered primarily that a plenty of instances can be adduced in regard of Shahab's obvious inspiration by the orientalist's works. This, in fact, depicts the extensive influence of orientalist's thought on Shahab because evidently, he has cited orientalist sources extensively in his corpuses. Even in construing the real Islamic creeds, Shahab was indebted to the orientalist's works. Shahab's involvement in Western Academy is also evident through his dissertation, at Princeton, which had won the "Bayard and Cleveland Dodge Memorial Dissertation Prize", and "Malcolm H. Kerr Dissertation Award"¹¹. Eventually, it may be apprehended that because Shahab has learnt almost the entire Islamic history from the Western schools of thought, therefore he has a great theoretical impact of the western intelligentsia. In order to learn and have expertise in Eastern Islamic sciences, he went to the "Near Eastern Studies Department" instead of 'Eastern Islamic Institutions', so the difference is quite evident here.

Impressive Supervision of Michael Cook

A famous orientalist, Michael Allen Cook (b.1940 AD) – with having the deep acquaintance with Shahab – is also being mentioned here in this context. Cook is a scholar of Islamic history and a British historian as well. He is still a General Editor of "The New Cambridge history of Islam". Being a well-versed historian, Cook was appointed as a Cleveland E Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies Department Princeton University in 1986. As Shahab remembers, that in 1993-94 he was enrolled as a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton University and was introduced to Michael Cook, who was going to be his thesis supervisor, as he stated "Certainly the most important thing to happen to me at Princeton was that Michael cook agreed to be my dissertation advisor."¹²

Like the rest of Western Scholars, Michael Cook also influenced Shahab's intellect to a great extent. Shahab described his notion – taken from Western scholarship – of **accusing the fabrication of *Isnād* or a part of *Isnād*** supported by his mentor

¹⁰ Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, 70.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 327.

¹² Shahab Ahmad, "The Satanic Verses Incident in the Memory of Early Muslim Community: An Analysis of Early *Riwāyahs* and their *Isnāds*," (Phd Thesis, Princeton University, 1999), VI.

Cook's thought as, "At the other end of the spectrum there is an opposing *Bāṭinī* view: roughly that the material that concerns us is precipitated at the end of the second century of the supposed *Hījrāh* and with little ascertainable pre-history".¹³ By the words "supposed *hijra*" it is conclusively proved that a particular Western discouraging narrative had been taken by Shahab from the orientalist. His thinking about the *Zāhirī* and *Bāṭinī* positions has also been derived from Cook's thought. Cook – the person who is well known antagonist of Islam – has also been criticized by R.B Serjaent (1915 – 1993 AD) as he declared his book "Hagarism" as bitterly 'anti-Islamic' and 'anti-Arabian'.¹⁴

In fact, Shahab Ahmad was fuelled up for the controversial project of the so-called "Satanic Verses" actually by Michael Cook, because he gave him a lot of support and enthusiasm, as Shahab posits his teacher's debt upon him.¹⁵ Shahab's intense inspiration from Michael Cook is displayed from his statement, "Having undertaken a careful analysis of his [Michael Cook's] pedagogical method, I have concluded that it has been to give me enough rope with which to hang myself. . . . I cannot gauge how much I, this dissertation, and the larger project of [Satanic Verses] which it is apart, have benefited from his erudition, rigour, conscientiousness and good humour."¹⁶

Therefore, it must be kept in mind that Michael Cook inspired Shahab Ahmad a lot, because his supervision impressed his style of theoretical thinking. He influenced Shahab's thought about the historical tradition of Islam. Cook's erudition made a significant impact on him, as of the other Islamicists have done. As a result, we have known above that Shahab has been shadowed by Michael Cook's hostile thought towards Islam.

Shahab's Rudeness towards the Holy Prophet (PBUH)

Having been inspired and impressed by the Western Scholars conclusively, Shahab Ahmad developed a **discourtesy towards the Holy Prophet** (Peace be upon him). As for

¹³ Michael Cook, *Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions* (Princeton: Princeton University Papers, 2003), 21. Which is quoted at page 18 of Shahab's *Before Orthodoxy*.

¹⁴ R.B Serjaent, "Review of Qur'ānic Studies, Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation: Hagarism; The Making of the Islamic World," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (UK: ND), Vol: 1, 76–78.

¹⁵ Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, 333.

¹⁶ Shahab Ahmad, "The Satanic Verses Incident in the Memory of Early Muslim Community: An Analysis of Early *Riwāyāhs* and their *Isnāds*," VI.

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de-legitimization of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), the masterpieces of Shahab's literary life played a significant role. Shahab described his so-called notion about the struggle of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) to apprehend his Prophetic mission.¹⁷ He, of course, adduced his negative thinking as he stated that the Prophet (Peace be upon him) was not aware of what it meant to be a prophet (Peace and greetings of Allah be upon him), and understood it later with the passage of time. In fact, Shahab narrated here disparagingly the events – which were according to the circumstances – of the daily life of the Holy Prophet (PBUH). Having been impressed by his Western academic ancestors, Shahab Ahmad used very mischievous tone for the historiography of Islam. By narrating that the Holy Prophet (Allah's peace and blessings be upon him) is susceptible to the worldly circumstances, and the contingent relationship¹⁸ between the processes of Divine Revelation and composition of poetry, he explicated well his rudeness towards Islam and the Prophet of Islam.

Shahab further stated many repulsive views – of his ancestral academics – about the Holy Prophet (Allah's peace and blessings be upon him), just like as declaring the process of Revelation not dissimilar to the composition of poetry,¹⁹ and the Prophet (PBUH) as something between 'seer' and a 'poet'. One thing more should be kept in mind that Shahab had never venerated the Holy Prophet (Allah's peace and blessings be upon him), which is evident in his creations as he never offered the Greetings, *Ṣalāt* and *Salām* for the Holy Prophet. Whereas, Allah enjoined a clear direction as:

*Inn Allāhā wā malā'ikatā-hū yuṣallūnā 'alā al-nabīyy yā ayyūhā
alladhīnā āmanū ṣallū 'alay-hī wa sallimū taslīmā.*

“Undoubtedly Allah and His Angels send blessings on the Prophet, O believers! You (too) send your blessings upon him and salute him with all respect.”²⁰

After having this sort of strict order, who would dare, even from Muslim community, not to offer the salutations to the Holy Prophet (Allah's peace and blessings be upon him)? Because it is obvious in this verse that Allah Himself acts upon this command and

¹⁷ Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, 284.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 85.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ *Al-Qur'ān* 33: 56

“this Divine practice becomes the Sunnah of Allah”.²¹ However, Shahab followed the way of orientalist as he mentioned the name of the Holy Prophet (Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him) “Muhammad” at multiple locations in his works. But nothing to have any sort of *Ṣalāt* or salutation even on a single place. This shows his extreme prejudice and rudeness towards the Holy Prophet.

Co-Authoring and Publishing with Orientalists

In addition to the narrative of theoretical impact of the orientalist on Shahab’s thinking, the following debate can easily proceed. Shahab Ahmad had a long journey of authoring and publishing treatises and books with the help of the western academics which compelled him to differ even in ordinary Muslim beliefs. Here are some instances:

I. Neither Paradise nor Hellfire: Seeing Islam through the Ottoman/Seeing the Ottomans through Islam

A forthcoming creation of Shahab, who was co-authoring this book with a reputed orientalist Nenad Filipovic (b. 1970 AD). Nenad was also the Chief Archives Curator, Oriental Institute, University of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Once again Shahab Ahmad – not solely, but with the help of another orientalist – looked here to elaborate the Islamic rituals and traditions through the history of a big Muslim community *i.e.*, the Ottomans. Certainly, this type of argument would strengthen the claim of a “theoretically affected cultural historian” about Shahab. Strong expressions of interest from the western institutions – like Harvard University Press and Princeton University Press – have been explicated to publish this treatise.

II. The Sultan’s Syllabus: A Curriculum for the Ottoman Imperial Madrasas Prescribed in a Farmān(Order) of Qānūnī I Suleymān Dated 973(1565)

Another article was co-authored by Shahab Ahmad in collaboration with Nenad Filipovic, which was published in *Studia Islamica* journal Issue 98/99 in 2004. The paper studies about the educational reforms of the Ottoman Empire, which were implemented in the madrasahs in the reign of Sulṭān Sulīymān Qānūnī I. The reforms were made in the sense of centralizing their degree system. In this study, the authors draw attention to the entire educational system of that era.

The authors debated their thematic vision about, what they had set in the topic earlier, as an order of ‘*Pādishāh*’ (the king) Sulṭān Sulīymān on a single paper bearing a title of

²¹ Tahir al-Qadri, *Greeting and Salutations on the Prophet (SAW)* (Lahore: Mīnhāj-ul- Qur’ān Publications, ND), 19.

“*Medāris-i Hāqārū ye'ye lāzim olub fermān-i Pādishāhī-ile Muderris Efendiler'e virilen kitāblarun beya nidur*”²², which means a list of the books – that should be included in the syllabus of schools – for teachers by the orders of Sultān. Shahab and Filipovic discussed the subsequent features of that *fermān*(order), which was to allocate the syllabus for the madrassahs, run by the state. This study revealed the Ottoman educational history in a western style.

III. Ibn Taymīyah and His Times

In this volume, Shahab Ahmad collected again a number of articles written by some orientalist. He adduced the western scholars work in order to elaborate the exact comprehensive treatment of Ibn Taymīyah's thought. It comprises of an introduction and thirteen articles of many writers like Caterina Bori, John Hoover, Ozzervarli, Livant Holtzman, and Sait *etc* on the legacy and thought of Damascene Jurist, Polymath and theologian Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymīyah (d.728 AH). This compilation ironically examines Ibn Taymīyah's contribution to Qu'ānic exegesis, Islamic theology, political thought and law through a series of articles written also by non-Muslim scholars. This volume shows and proves Shahab's sense of describing – even a personality of Islamic history – influenced by the western intellectuals.

Columns for Western Encyclopaedias

Along with the above works done with orientalist, Shahab Ahmad had also penned a couple of columns titled “Satanic Verses” and “*Ḥadīth* (A General Introduction)” for some western encyclopedias like “Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001-2005, Vol. 4” and “Encyclopedia Iranica, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, continued by Bibliotheca Persica Press, 1982-ongoing, Vol. 9.4”. One thing more may be added that the western academy has used Shahab Ahmad very imperceptibly by getting this type of articles from him for their encyclopedias.

Notional Western Phobia in Shahab's Creations

As discussed earlier, Shahab Ahmad's notions are the exact demonstration of the western theoretical influence. By observing all of his research articles and compilations,

²² Shahab Ahmad, Nenad Filipovic, "The Sultān's Syllabus; A Curriculum for the Ottoman Imperial Medreses Prescribed in a Farmān of Qānūnī I Suleymān Dated 973(1565)," *Studia Islamica* 98 no. 99 issue (2004), 186.

it can be comprehended quite comfortably. Even in his ‘magnum opus’ “What is Islam? The Importance of being Islamic (2015)”, Shahab Ahmad strived for a period of more than a decade²³ to extract that what is Islam? But eventually, he fell a victim to the western thought of Islam. Most of his conclusions are construed from the works of orientalist. Some of Shahab’s this type of peculiar ideas and dogmas about Islam are as under.

I. Concept of a Fallible Prophet:

As to prove his idea – in his article “Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses” – about the confession of mistake by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in case of *Gharānīq* story, Shahab took the support of the following proverb quoted by Jorge Luis Borges (1899 – 1986 AD) in his book “Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings, 1964 AD, New York”. “In the memory of Marsden Jones. In Alexandria, it has been said that the only persons incapable of a sin are those who have already committed it and repented; to be free of an error, let us add, it is well to have professed it.”²⁴

Here, Shahab cleverly projected his western borrowed concept of a ‘fallible Prophet’, as he considered the Holy Prophet (Peace of Allah be upon him) firstly committed the error of uttering the satanic suggested words and then repented. Shahab Ahmad negates very swiftly the impeccability of the Holy Prophet (Peace and greetings of Allah be upon him) because of the theoretic inspiration, which he also got from the article titled as “*Iṣmā*” of Wilferd Madelung (b. 1930 AD)²⁵ and other such sort of works. Due to this western impact, he utilized the *Riwāyāhs* with deficient and incomplete chains too to prove the *Gharānīq* story factual, which I proved in my earlier article “Shahab Ahmad’s Hostile-Intellectual Approach Towards *Ḥadīth* Sciences.”²⁶

II. Defining Islam

On another occasion, Shahab elaborated “*Mūtāwatīr*” – a kind of Prophetic *Ḥadīth*, in which a large number of reporters transmit in all the times – with assistance of A.J.

²³ Michael E. Pregill, "I Hear Islam Singing; Shahab Ahmed's What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic," *Harvard Theological Review* 110 no. 1 (2017):150.

²⁴ Shahab Ahmad, "Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses," 67.

²⁵ Ibid, 71.

²⁶ Muhammad Iqbal Awan, Hafiz Khurshid Ahmad Qadri, "Shahab Ahmad's Hostile-Intellectual Approach Towards *Ḥadīth* Sciences," *Journal of Islamic and Religious Studies* 5 no. 2 (2020): 1 – 14.

Wensinck's (d. 1939 AD) works "*Mūtawātir*"²⁷ and "*Concordance*".²⁸ While extracting the thought of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) about the so-called Prophetic sins and repentances, he urged the reader to watch the literary work of other western scholars like Joseph Schacht (d. 1969 AD)²⁹, Henri Laoust (d. 1983 AD)³⁰, Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003 AD)³¹ *etc.* On another occasion in his treatise "What is Islam?", Shahab defined Islam with the help of his favourite orientalist L. Gardet, E. van Donzel, B. Lewis, and Ch. Pellat from "Islam: Definition and Theories of Meaning", *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (New Edition), Volume IV, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978.³² He stated that the question "what is Islam?" has different meanings theoretically and theologically.³³ This difference has been illuminated earlier by Ronald Lukens³⁴ a western professor of anthropology and religious studies at the University of North Florida.

III. Islam as a Blend of Contradictions

Shahab Ahmad, very strangely, apprehended the religion of Muslims as a blend of contradictions. His apparent **negation of modern Islam as less authentic than pre-modern Islam** and its presentation as 'nostalgia', his endeavour to conceptualize Islam in terms of disagreements of Muslims are all borrowed from the western works like "Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions (2003)", Leiden: E. J. Brill, of Johann P. Arnason³⁵, "What is 'Universal' and 'Local' in Islam?" (1998) and "Muslims through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society" (1993) Princeton University Press, of John R Bowen, "Government and Islam" New York: Columbia University Press written by Patricia Crone *etc.*

IV. Criticism on Poetry of Muslims

Shahab has also discussed the thoughts of some historical Muslim poetical figures like Farīd al- Dīn 'Aṭṭār (d. 1221 AD) and Ḥāfīz Shams ud Dīn Shīrāzī (d. 1390 AD),

²⁷ Shahab Ahmad, "*Ibn Taymiyyah and the Satanic Verses*", 85.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 97.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 68.

³¹ *Ibid*, 70.

³² Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 5.

³³ *Ibid*, 6.

³⁴ Ronald Lukens- Bull, "Between Text and Practice: Considerations in the Anthropological Study of Islam," *Marburg Journal of Religion* 4 no. 2 (1999): 1–21.

³⁵ Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 57.

Jalāl ud-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207 – 1273 AD), Bulleh Shāh (1680 – 1758 AD) and Asadullāh Khan Ghālib (1797 – 1869 AD) in the light of a number of western works. His idea of ‘what the relationship of poetry with Islam is?’ entirely depends on the following orientalist works “The Visionary Topography of Hafiz” and “The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd al- Dīn ‘Attār (translated by John O’Kane with Bernd Radtke)” written by Shayegan and Hellmut Ritter.³⁶ Shahab once again fueled up by J. Christoph Bürgel, who is – according to him – one of the most supplemented scholars of the literary discourses of Muslims, as he adduced the idea of declaring the poetry of *Ḥāfiz* as “counter-religion”³⁷ from him. In his article “Ambiguity: A Study in the Use of Religious Terminology in the Poetry of Hafiz”, Christoph Bürgel evidently observed the readers of *Ḥāfiz*’s verses feeling something like “counter-religion”. Now Shahab Ahmad interpreted this term as the ‘counter-culture’ or ‘deviating from the pre-established social and religious practices’. So, he molded this all debate to his favourite narrative of the contradictory norms of Muslim societies.

V. Conceptualization Of Islam

Shahab Ahmad considered Islam as a religion of meaning-making for oneself. Whatever a Muslim wants or does, he or she declares it Islamic. This notion of conceptualization and reconceptualization of Islam in a meaning making sense has also been bestowed by the orientalists. As he confessed that “Several of these conceptualizations of Islam have been conveniently collected in Andrew Rippin (editor), *Defining Islam (A Reader)*, London: Equinox, (2007)”.³⁸ “A History of Islamic Societies” (1998) Cambridge University Press and “Islam and the Historical Experience of Muslim Peoples” by Lapidus and “The Islamic Philosophers’ Conception of Islam” by Michael F. Marmura³⁹ and many others played a significant role in Shahab’s conceptualization of Islam.

VI. Hermeneutical Diversities

With the help of some other western intellectuals’ works – like “The Formation of Islamic Hermeneutics: How Sunni Legal Theorists Imagined a Revealed Law” (2011) by David R. Vishanoff, “The Hermeneutics of Doctrine, Grand Rapids: William B.

³⁶ Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 36, 41.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 45.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 9, 10.

Eerdmans” (2007) by Anthony C. Thiselton, “The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Qur’ānic Hermeneutics of the Ṣūfī Sahl al- Tustarī” (1980) by Gerhard Böwering⁴⁰ and many others – Shahab went to blow the interpretative and hermeneutic differences of Muslims. As he was inspired by Mark Woodward stating, “Difficulties arise because professed Muslims differ sharply on what Islam is, and are often inclined to refer to their theological opponents as unbelievers”.⁴¹ The article “The Problem: Unity in Diversity” (1995) of Gustave E. von Grunebaum also clutched Shahab in this context, though these differences are not in the basic creeds rather in the secondary and insignificant issues.

VII. *Sharī‘ah and Fīqh*

Similarly, Shahab strives to clear his position about *fīqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). By saying that he is not suggesting the *fīqh* discourses of a less significance rather these should be viewed alongside of non-prescriptive discourses. But contrary to this claim, he can be sighted suggesting the ‘putative centrality’ of *fīqh* is historically wrong and out of place.⁴² Shahab’s confusing dogma about *fīqh* indebted to Armando Salvatore, who thinks that the Islamic *fīqh* is a notion that has acquired momentum through later growth and has finally got a prominent place in the religious discourse.⁴³ Shahab’s sense of *sharī‘ah* and *fīqh* has also been elevated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Noah Feldman, Brinkley Messick and others. As they often cut the *fīqh* away from Islam but in fact, it is the interpretation of Islamic law which has been extracted from the Qur’ān and Sunnah of the Holy Prophet (Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him).

VIII. Taking Islam as A Culture

Throughout his treatise “What is Islam?” Shahab emerged to be a well versed ‘Cultural Historian’, as he took the ideas⁴⁴ of Jacques Warrensburg, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Carla Bellamy and Clifford Geertz, who posited “religion” precisely “as a cultural system”. The diversities and ambiguities of cultures, ritual practices, portraits and figural paintings of Islamic societies, and the discussions of history of an imaginary territory i.e.,

⁴⁰ Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 123, 227, 525.

⁴¹ Ibid, 106.

⁴² Ibid, 123.

⁴³ Salvatore, Armando, *The Implosion of Sharī‘ah within the Emergence of Public Normativity: The Impact of Personal Responsibility and the Impersonality of Law* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004)

⁴⁴ Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 121, 247, 175, 176.

Belkans to Bengal, all these depict the author's historical and cultural thinking rather than a religious interpretation. In fact, he seems quite impressed by the Wendy M. K. Shaw's consideration of 'Islam' as a culture rather than religion. So, that's why he declared Islam a human and historical phenomenon.

Thus, the diversities and contradictions of Muslim societies, cultural historiography, literature, art work, individual act of wine-drinking, and the figural paintings of a specific region, all lead the author to an amalgamated and western affected conclusion.

1. Exaggerating The Christian Rituals

To what extent the western environment had undertaken Shahab's mind can also be assessed by his endeavour to underestimate the Islamic society while comparing with Christian rituals. Shahab Ahmad appeared to elevate and inflate the status of the Christian Church, as he posited its corporate authority to determine the authoritative truth."⁴⁵ He complained Muslims for not having an institute like the Christian Church.

Historically, the two main branches of Church, Western (Catholic) and Eastern (Orthodox),⁴⁶ unveil very crucially Shahab's narrative of the authority of Christian Church. Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed and Methodist Churches are more and the main branches of that divided Christian Church, which has been declared a 'corporate authority' amazingly by Shahab Ahmad. To respond to the first section of Shahab's narrative, the above circumstances of the Christian Church are enough to know that the Church was absolutely not a corporate authority in such a divided situation. It's only Shahab's art of exaggeration.

As even a Christian scholar confessed the miserable and corrupt condition of the Christian Church after 324 AD:

Corrupt Church leaders began seeking power and the honours of the world. Teachers within the church began to adopt false religious concepts from Greek philosophy and pagan religions. False ordinances and ceremonies were also introduced. Even though the church still taught some truth, the true church of Christ and the priesthood were no longer on the earth, and as Christianity

⁴⁵ Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, 5.

⁴⁶ Philip P. Wiener, *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1973), Vol. 1, 373.

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spread to various parts of the world, new churches were formed and grew. None of the churches, however, was the true church.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, Shahab Ahmad did not consider above diverse condition of Christian Church and its preachers and he prejudicially declared only the Muslims as “a loose community of Scholars dispersed through a vast geographical space”.⁴⁸ But the above-mentioned circumstances suggest the scattered condition of the malfunctioning Christians. There is absolutely a wide variety of different doctrines and traditions, which shows the vast diversity in Christian groups. But, here, Shahab ignored all these and elevated the status of western Church.

Furthermore, as Shahab Ahmad pointed out “textually constituted legal and theological sects and schools of thought”⁴⁹ in Muslims, he must come to know that the Christian community has a number of denominations or sects too. The controversies between these various branches of Christianity, include significant differences even in their ecclesiology. The issues like nature of Jesus, eschatology succession of Jesus, and papal primacy of the Roman pope are commonly the reasons of dissenting each other. How is it possible that such a theologically and basically diverse community would take part in making of an authoritative or sole truth? Another Christian scholar denounced Shahab's theory of corporate authority of church in developing a religious belief. He considered the following four chief historical types⁵⁰ under which the authority presented itself: The authority of the church, the authority of experience, the authority of the scriptures, and the authority of the reason.

Thence, the clouds of the western environment hovered upon Shahab's intellect as he compared Christian rituals with of Muslims quite partially. After sighting above mentioned conditions of Christian Church, one can easily assess that the following statement of Shahab Ahmad – which had been spoken for Muslims – could only be

⁴⁷ Shanna Butler, "What Happened to Christ's Church, Liahona, (USA: Salt Lake City, Feb. 2005), Vol 29, No.2, 14.

⁴⁸ Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, 5.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Clarine A. Bedwith, "The Types of Authority in Christian Belief," *The Harvard Theological Review* 4 no. 2 (Apr, 1911): 244.

spoken for Christians. “In such a context, how does a single position come to be universally established as authoritatively true?”⁵¹

He posits the authority of church councils to interpret the Christian beliefs, but unfortunately and unjustly do not accept the authority of *Ḥadīth* Scholars, whose endeavour to seek the truth is not hidden from anyone, as they have emerged as the sources of authoritative truth in Islamic history. Moreover, although he accepted the authority of corrupt Christian priests, but didn’t consider the epistemological authority of a *fatwa* issued even by a state *Mūftī*.⁵²

Actually, the ‘absence of a church in Islam’ resonated in his mind continuously, that it did not allow him to deem the role of Mosque and *Madrassah* in Islamic polity. If Shahab had abandoned the blind following of his western mentors, he could see very clearly that from the governmental and international issues to a common individual problem, all had been solved in these institutions in the light of Qur’ān and *Sunnah*.

Conclusion

Hence, this treatise has clearly evidenced the impacts of Western Academy on Shahab Ahmad’s (1966 – 2015 AD) thought. Because he spent his entire educational life in the Western Christian intelligentsia, he appeared as an extreme exaggerator of the western biased theories about Islam. As he tried to reawaken again the allegations on the Holy Prophet (PBUH), of being a “seer” and “poet” and declaring the mechanism of Revelation “not dissimilar to the process of composition of poetry” and “the Divine Revelation is susceptible to Satanic intervention”, all these display his own susceptibility to the west-oriented thought. Shahab Ahmad was also fuelled up for the controversial project of the so-called “Satanic Verses” actually by his mentor Michael Cook, a renowned anti-Islamic and anti-Arabian personality.

Shahab showed his discourtesy and rudeness in his entire corpus like his ‘academic ancestors’, as he never venerated the Prophet of Islam as a true Muslim. He didn’t offer any salutations with the beloved name of the Holy Prophet (Allah’s peace and blessings be upon him). It also revealed his blind following of orientalists. Shahab’s co-authoring and publishing in collaboration with orientalists like Nenad Filipovic, Caterina Bori, John Hoover, Ozzervarli, Livant Holtzman, Sait and many others depicted

⁵¹ Shahab Ahmad, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam*, 5.

⁵² Shahab Ahmad, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, 192, 193.

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his theoretical inspiration quite well. To prove the ideas of “a fallible Prophet”, defining the basics of Islam, taking the diversities of Muslim communities as Islamic diversities and considering Islam as a ‘culture’ instead of a ‘religion’, all these were borrowed by his favourite westerners. He pointed out Muslim poetry and criticized *fiqh* in their very way. So, it would be significant to note, that theoretically and notionally, Shahab was highly influenced by the western scholars.

Precisely, it is now concluded that the collegueship and mentorship of many orientalist like Noah Feldman, Nenad Filipovic and Michael Allen Cook *etc.* urged Shahab to think quite differently. Thus, he got an extra ordinary bent towards the western thought of Islam. Without studying the diverse and divided historical Christian denominations, he accused only the Muslims for not making the authoritative truth unanimously and his western affected mind does not forbid him ever from de-grading the Islamic customs against the Christianity. These aspects proved a great western theoretical impact on the thought of Shahab Ahmad.

Thus, it would be conclusively true that Shahab Ahmad has erected an edifice of his ideas on the bases of western soil and got it strong with the bricks of orientalist thought. These bricks had been prepared in the factory of the western academia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some more points are being recommended here to be inquired and elaborated further in order to reach the exact position about Shahab Ahmad's literary approach. As under:

1. A critical analysis of Shahab Ahmad's comparison of Christianity and Islam should be carried on.
2. A thorough study of Shahab Ahmad's indulgence in the Western Academic World is recommended because this article may be a foreword in this context.
3. Western influence on Shahab Ahmad's *Hadīth* Sense.
4. A specific critical study of the role of Shahab Ahmad's Parents, Mentors, Colleagues and Friends.
5. Critical study of Shahab Ahmad's assumptions in Islam.
6. Shahab Ahmad's basic learning of Islamic Theology: A Critical analysis of “What is Islam? The Importance of being Islamic”.

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