



***A Dissident Reformist: Shahab Ahmad and His Oeuvre***  
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**ABSTRACT**

*While discussing the modern discipline of Islamic Studies, the name of Shahab Ahmad (1966 – 2015 AD) – an ex-professor of Islamic studies in Harvard University, USA – revolves in the minds. The quality life-span and the contributions of this iconic dissident scholar is going to be discussed here in this paper. Being a son of a broad minded medical professional couple, he was raised in the shadow of the western educational system, right from his early life. The isolated learning of a Muslim student in non-Muslim institutions parted his thinking from general Muslims. Dissenting in basic Islamic beliefs became his ultimate fashion, as he, confusingly, took the rituals, cultures and customs of a specific area's Muslims as a subject matter of Islam. Having a very short life, he authored a couple of unpublished books, which can be attached well with his cosmopolitan ideas. Undoubtedly, he was an acknowledged asset of global academia due to his relentlessness and devotion to his work but his dissident, ambitious and reformist soul made him very anxious to erase even the whole Islamic history and to start it from 'year zero'. Shahab has contributed literarily with devotion, as he penned a number of books and articles in the field of Islamic history.*

***Keywords:*** *Shahab Ahmad, Satanic Verses, Before Orthodoxy, Qissat al-Gharānīq, Hermeneutics, Conceptualization of Islam.*

**Introduction**

This article intends to put a very bright light on all the aspects of the life of an insightful scholar, Shahab Ahmad (1966 – 2015 AD), right from his initial beginning as a new born and his schooling to the university life and his demise as well. This study also illuminates the details of his peak learning years in Princeton and Harvard Universities and his memories as a fellow of teaching faculty. As an author, Shahab's contributions to the world of Islamic history and thought are also discussed here. He had a charming and dissenting personality, reforming nature,

peculiar in many notions – as the narrative of discontinuity between the ancient Islamic hermeneutics and the existing Islamic hermeneutics has become whose identity – all these personal qualities are displayed in this paper. Hence, this research produced a comprehensive introduction to the life, personality, dissenting and reforming thought and works of Shahab Ahmad.

### **Literature Review**

Because of Shahab's immediate fame, many writers have penned on Shahab Ahmad earlier as some described his notions about the rituals, traditions and customs of Islamic societies like Khalil, Andani in his "Book Review "What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic" by Shahab Ahmed", ISLAM AND CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS, 2016, and Malice Ruthven in "More Than A Religion (What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic)", London Review of Books, Vol, 38 No.18. Shahab Ahmad's "conceptualization" and "re-conceptualization" of Islam are also criticized by the writers like 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 and "I Hear Islam Singing; Shahab Ahmed's What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic", Harvard Theological Review, Jan 2017, 110 (1) and Wasim Nasir in "What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic by Shahab Ahmed", Intellectual Discourse, 24: 1 (2016).

Some authors covered some of his life's aspects also in their creations like "Tribute To Professor Shahab Ahmed 1966-2015" by Ebrahim Moosa, "Memorial, M. Shahab Ahmed, 99" Princeton Alumni Weekly, October 05, 2016 Issue, "The Revisionist" The Friday Times, Sep 25 – Oct 01, 2015, Vol. XXVII, No.33 by Natasha Shahid, "Extra Ordinary Scholar Shahab Ahmed Redefined Islam" Chicago Tribune, September 21, 2015 by Noah Feldman and "In Memoriam; Shahab Ahmed" *'al-'Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā*, 24 (2016) by Sarah Eltantawi *etc.* But this article is, on the whole, covering his life-span and works, which would be his comprehensive introduction.

### **Research Methodology**

In this paper, the analytical research methodology has been used to unveil the whole scenario of Shahab Ahmad's enthusiastic life. His oeuvre has also been analysed to assess the contribution of Shahab in the field of Islamic Studies.

### **Initial Life**

Shahab Ahmad was born on 11<sup>th</sup> December, 1966<sup>1</sup> in Singapore. His parents Muhammad Mumtazuddin Ahmad and Syeda Razia Hassan were originally from Hyderabad and Lucknow.<sup>2</sup> They were both medical professionals and had a very broad-minded approach. Their son was hoped to live under the shadow of that approach. As his mother wanted him not to be an ordinary doctor, engineer,

lawyer or a chartered accountant, but she held the view, “he is made for something different”.<sup>3</sup> Shahab Ahmad had an only elder sister Dr. Shahla Ahmad (b. 1964 AD), who is a gynecologist in London.

For earlier education, in 1972<sup>4</sup>, Shahab Ahmad was admitted to a church affiliated British primary school in Singapore named as Raeburn Park School. In 1977, spending a period of 3 to 4 years, he went to Anglo-Chinese School, Singapore<sup>5</sup>. After a couple of years, his parents, who raised him in Singapore, sent him to a boarding school namely Caterham School, Surrey in UK for his secondary education. Where Shahab had been learning for a period of 4 to 5 years during 1979 – 84<sup>6</sup> to pursue his GCE ‘A’ and ‘O’ levels. It is very interesting to note that he was the only Muslim boy in that school. Dr. Noah Feldman (b.1970 AD) states that Shahab had faced utter ostracism and the experience of being only Muslim boy in that school was very brutal for him<sup>7</sup>.

At just 18, Shahab returned again to Malaysia to be a graduate in law. Meanwhile, he began to express his views in written shape and made his debut of writing career. He wrote an article titled, “Muslim World’s Failure to Accept Technology” presented by him in a conference<sup>8</sup>. In that paper, Shahab does not confine himself solely to the spiritual matters of Islam, rather he highlighted its rational, scientific and social aspects as well. He did his L.L.B from *Kulliyah* of Laws, International Islamic University, Petaling Jaya, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia<sup>9</sup> and remained there during 1986 – 87<sup>10</sup>. He is also reported to have worked as a journalist in Pakistan and Afghanistan for a short period of time, where he played football with a tall person, probably the former Taliban leader *Osama bin Laden* (1957 – 2011 AD).<sup>11</sup>

After these all, Shahab Ahmad went to the American University in Cairo, Egypt, where he obtained his graduation degree in the field of ‘Middle East History’ from the Department of Arabic Studies<sup>12</sup>. In Cairo, he met an anthropologist Kamran Asdar Ali (b.1961 AD)<sup>13</sup>, who became his mentor, and later also attended Shahab’s funeral at Cambridge.<sup>14</sup> Being a graduate student of ‘Middle East History’ and ‘Political Science’ disciplines, Shahab Ahmad’s interest in ‘Arabic Language’ and the ‘History of Islam’ grew very up. Therefore, he decided to take MA Program, with major ‘Islamic History’ during 1992 – 93<sup>15</sup> in AUC.

### **Shahab As A Princeton Alumni**

After that, Shahab joined another American institute, Princeton University. He went directly under the supervision of an eminent historian Michael Cook (b.1940 AD)<sup>16</sup>, who always had a great impression on his personality, as he states in the Acknowledgements of his book “Before Orthodoxy” that, “To my teacher, Michael Cook, I owe a debt well beyond that which commonly burdens a student”<sup>17</sup> Shahab had precisely a research-oriented mind, as he devoted almost

all of his time only to research matters, instead of any other activity. Therefore Michael Cook seems thanking Shahab for being a cause of some strict rules for students.<sup>18</sup>

### **Doctoral Dissertation Of Shahab**

During the 1<sup>st</sup> year at Princeton, Shahab Ahmad became very interested in *Qissat al-Gharānīq*, which was named as “Satanic Verses” later. It was an episode from early Islamic history, in which the Holy Prophet ﷺ is reported to have recited some so-called Satan’s suggested verses during the revelation of the Holy Qur’ān. After having the topic just as a ‘term paper’<sup>19</sup> in result of the furore of Salman Rushdie’s blasphemous novel “The Satanic Verses”<sup>20</sup>, it fascinated Shahab so much that he imagined it later as his doctoral dissertation’s topic.<sup>21</sup>

The dissertation

“The Satanic Verses Incident in The Memory of Early Muslim Community: An Analysis of The Early *Riwāyahs* and Their *Isnāds*” Comprises On 283 Pages, Starts with An Abstract and Introduction to The Satanic Verses Story (*Qissat Al-Gharānīq*).

Shahab made his effort to explain the procedure of extensive debate relating to this incident. As he states his main objective that this dissertation is an attempt to study the place of the satanic verse’s incident in the historical memory of the early Muslim community and to collect and analyze all extant early related *Riwāyahs*. The author introduced the process of the *Hadith* sciences and the systematic progress in the formation of Islamic orthodoxy. He collected 37 reports from early narrators like *Muhammad b. Ka’b al-Qurazī*, *Urwah b. al-Zubayr*, *al-Zuhrī*, *Abu al-‘Āliyah al-Baṣrī*, *al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Mazāḥim al-Balkhī*, and the reports attributed to *‘Abd Allāh Ibn ‘Abbās* and from *Sa’īd b. Jubayr* and from many others. He collected some matter also from the exegetical works of *al-Ṭabarī*, *al-Suyyūṭī* and *Ibn abi-Ḥātim* etc.

He appraises the collected data one by one, as he firstly discusses the individual status of the narrators and their chain of transmitters. The elaboration of the text of *Riwāyah* is done in his own style of ‘Narrative motif’, ‘Narrative unit’ and ‘Hermeneutical Engagement’ etc. The coherence between *Riwāyah bi al-Ma’nā* (transmission of a tradition by meaning) and *Riwāyah bi al-Lafz* (transmission of a tradition by words), and the *Isnād* (chains of transmitting persons) terminology is also conversed here. After a long analysis of these *Riwāyahs*, Shahab Ahmad put a conclusion of almost 30 pages in his dissertation. He concluded that the Holy Prophet ﷺ – God forbids – was seduced by Satan and uttered some satanic words mixing with the Devine Revelation, due to various factors. Thus, he came at a decision that the early Muslims perceived the Holy Prophet ﷺ as a common fallible human being, who was corrected by God Himself later. A detailed

bibliography is also attached at the end of his dissertation. This dissertation was acknowledged as a high-profile research work in the western circles as it was awarded a couple of prizes.<sup>22</sup>

A unique gradual approach of Shahab – towards his goal – is also manifested here, as after ‘term paper’ and ‘doctoral dissertation’, he took this topic as a larger project, of which first part is a ‘monograph’<sup>23</sup> (Before Orthodoxy) and introduction is a huge book (What is Islam?)<sup>24</sup> with 600 pages and one thousand plus footnotes.

### **Commencement of Teaching**

After getting such a higher qualification and specialization in the field of Islamic Studies, he joined firstly, the AUC as an assistant professor of Classical Arabic literature<sup>25</sup> in the Department of Arab and Islamic Civilizations from 1998–2000.<sup>26</sup> Later, the department also paid him a great tribute by dedicating a memorial room. Most of Shahab Ahmad’s teaching career revolves around the Ivy League universities like Princeton and Harvard. In 2000, Dr. Shahab went to Harvard as a junior fellow of “Harvard Society of Fellows”.<sup>27</sup>

Following all these appointments, Shahab Ahmad returned to the Princeton University in 2004 as a visiting lecturer and postdoctoral research associate<sup>28</sup>. For a couple of years, he prepared himself with an immense research work of Islamic History, as he organized a conference on Ibn Taymiyyah in April 2005. Later, Shahab edited that conference’s paper with the title of “Ibn Taymiyyah and His Times” published by Oxford University Press, Karachi in 2010.

### **Shahab At Harvard**

Harvard University had to welcome Shahab again as an assistant professor of Islamic Studies in 2005<sup>29</sup> but this faculty position interrupted his dream of research to some extent, as he had been quite busy in the teaching conferences and seminars. However, he built a good worth in fulfilling these tasks. In Harvard, he also rendered his services to the University’s committee on the Study of Religions. He supervised a plenty of researches and dissertations with a stunning intellectual strength. A doctoral student of Shahab states in an obituary paper “He would be sure to look into whatever lapse in knowledge had emerged, and he would bring it up the next time you saw him”.<sup>30</sup>

### **Shahab In Pakistan**

Shahab Ahmad has also visited Pakistan in 2007-08 being on a leave from Harvard. He was quite glad and displayed a great zeal that some of his research work could be completed in his native land. He penned his country as “*vatan*” with a special love. As he expressed his feelings, “I am grateful to Zafar Ishaq Ansari<sup>31</sup> (1932 – 2016 AD) for inviting me to spend the academic year 2007 – 08 as a Higher Education Commission of Pakistan’s visiting scholar at the Islamic

Research Institute of the International Islamic University, Islamabad, and for his affectionate *mehmān-nawāzī* [hospitality] during my stay”<sup>32</sup>. Shahab also recounted his memories of Dr. Muhammad Hameedullah Library in the Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad and praised the warm *Pathān* hospitality of Sher Nowroz Khan, the chief librarian. So obviously, he had a great memoir of Pakistan, and in result of this, he planned again to teach in Pakistan, but his fate did not allow him to proceed.

### **Last Academic Appointment of Shahab**

Except this vacation of a year, Shahab rendered his services entirely to the faculty of Harvard University throughout the period from 2005 to the end of his life in 2015. As he joined the Harvard University in 2005 as an assistant professor of Islamic Studies, promoted later, to the rank of associate professor in 2010. And was holding a joint appointment of the Committee on the Study of Religions, and the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations.<sup>33</sup> In 2014, Shahab Ahmad was appointed as a lecturer on law and a research fellow in Islamic Legal Studies at Harvard Law School. It was precisely an honor for him to be a part of the prestigious law faculty of Harvard University. Most recent to his death in 2015, he was an associate with the Agha Khan Program for Islamic Art and Architecture.<sup>34</sup>

### **Demise**

Dr. Shahab Ahmad fell a victim to his death as quickly as he rose to prominence in his short life. Shahab had got afflicted fatally in the end of May 2015 and afterward, was diagnosed immediately with a rare form of Leukemia.<sup>35</sup> But hope for the good worked such as, on August 1<sup>st</sup> 2015, even being sick of that noxious disease, Shahab married his fiancée Nora Lessorsohn (b.1986 AD), a Ph.D. candidate in History and Middle Eastern Studies.<sup>36</sup>

On behalf of his sister Dr. Shahla – a volunteer donor – a bone marrow transplant was planned for Shahab, but his deteriorating condition made it quite impossible. So, the final moments, of a scholar’s life, came and all the efforts proved insufficient. Dr. Muhammad Shahab Ahmad passed away in Boston, on Thursday September 17, 2015<sup>37</sup> at a very young age of just 48 years. He is succeeded by his wife Nora Lessorsohn, Sister Dr. Shahla Ahmad, and his parents Dr. Muhammad Mumtazuddin Ahmad and Syeda Razia Hasan.

The funeral procession of Shahab Ahmad was held on Saturday morning at Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. A crowd of his friends – including some prominent figures like Kamran Asdar Ali (b.1961), Shehnaz Rouse<sup>38</sup> – who travelled a long distance to be there. Many of his students, former students and colleagues from Universities and family members were present there

and bereaved because the fact of his death was difficult to accept at such a young age.

Suheil Laher – a lecturer in Arabic in Harvard and a former student of Shahab – led his funeral prayer.<sup>39</sup> Due to the participation of men and women – from Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Jews etc – in the final rites of his funeral and burial, a debate of contradiction rose too. An eyewitness and a research assistant of Shahab displayed this matter as, “I imagine that Shahab would have delighted in the knowledge that contradiction and debate accompanied him to the grave”.<sup>40</sup> Shahab’s death is considered a big loss to the modern Islamic scholarship. As a number of scholars like Michael Cook (b.1940 AD), Martha Minow Morgan (b.1954 AD) and Noah Feldman (b.1970 AD) paid a great tribute to him.

### **Personal Assessment**

No doubt, the fascinating personality of Shahab Ahmad ruled over the hearts of his acquaintances. An intellectual, whose vast erudition covers several academic fields and his effort to be a beneficiary of every genre of Islamic tradition, is also quite impressive. He lived a remarkable and well-travelled life which took him from Kuala Lumpur to Massachusetts, USA. Dr. Shahab Ahmad was an acknowledged asset of the global academia, as he served in a couple of prominent Ivy League Universities like Harvard and Princeton. Shahab’s broad and extraordinary vision led him to take a chance of reformation in the field of Islamic Studies. Shahab possessed a number of other dimensions in his personality, which are going to be discussed as under.

### **Islam And Shahab Ahmad**

Although, Shahab Ahmad is considered as one of the best Islamists of the modern world, but his way of thinking – about Islam and its origins – was not orthodox. He believed and defined Islam often in contrast with almost all sects of Muslims. Shahab’s dissent sense of knowledge about Islam was informed through a study of times, traditions and territories. It encompasses a history of 1000 years, an area of almost the two third of the Islamic world – from the Balkans of eastern Europe to Middle East and Asian Bengal – and their culture, rituals and literature. In it, the diversities and contradictions of Muslim communities were highlighted by him to a great extent. His effort, to seek the real and adequate concept of Islam, has been amazingly reduced only to the diversity of Muslim beliefs.<sup>41</sup>

Another dimension of Shahab’s dissenting comprehension of Islam came through his concept of the formation of orthodoxy in the entire Islamic history. He believed that, in the early two centuries of Islam, the concept of then Muslim communities about their Prophet ﷺ was entirely different from today’s Muslims. He exemplified that the earlier Muslims had faith in the story of the cranes (*Qissat al-Gharānīq*), an episode, according to which the Holy Prophet ﷺ briefly

deceived by Satan in reciting the so-called satanic verses. And with the passage of time, the orthodoxy began to be formed and the belief of Muslims is converted into the contrast. So from this, Shahab acquired the idea of an ‘orthodoxy’ and ‘non-orthodoxy’.

Thus, Shahab wanted to elaborate the spirit of Islam as an historical phenomenon of Muslims including its capaciousness, complexity and often outright contradiction. His meaning-making dogma can be concluded in such a way that the people of Islam used the vocabulary and premises of Islam to make meaning only for themselves. In addition to this, Shahab believed that the people – of different regions, different nations and different casts – deemed Islam quite contrarily and extracted the meaning of their own choice.

Therefore, it should be kept in mind substantially, that, by conceptualizing Islam as a human and historical phenomenon<sup>42</sup>, Shahab Ahmad comprehended the rituals, cultures, stories, literatures, customs and traditions of Muslim societies as the basics of Islam, instead the Revelation and *Shari'ah*, which can be sighted easily throughout his corpus. He seems here striving to re-conceptualize Islam. A friend of him, Noah Feldman analyzed his study of philosophy, mysticism, poetry and cultures as, “Ahmed began to think that Islam must be much more than the rules in the law books”.<sup>43</sup> Thus he concluded in his own style and tried to prove Islam ‘a compendium of contradictions’ but he might not get the point that these diversities mean just to the branches, and not to the stem, of Islam.

### **Shahab’s Peculiarity**

Shahab had an unusual and different kind of thinking. His peculiarity may be sighted on several occasions, which separated him totally from all of his contemporary scholarship even of any sect. Peculiar approach and commitment profits him in his works and made him a distinct and skilled researcher. Just like Nora Lessersohn remembers that, he was so unusual to his commitment that most of their conversations and discussions of the under process work, and written material like draft pages accompanied them to many cafes and restaurants throughout the city.

Due to his extraordinary and predictive memory, Shahab had also become an ever-youngest member of National Public Library of Singapore at a very little age of just 4 years<sup>44</sup>. Having a superb and refined accent, Shahab was a brilliant polyglot, as he worked in over a dozen languages<sup>45</sup> like Arabic, English, French, Persian, German, Urdu, Pashto, Punjābī, Saraikī and others.<sup>46</sup>

Shahab’s unusualness and uniqueness is also manifested as he once expressed his inner wish to his research assistant, that he aimed to erect a scholarly edifice so formidable that no one would be able to challenge it<sup>47</sup>. Having this ability, he provided at several times, page-long citations, and argumentative footnotes and

explanations. All these aspects are witnessing his vast erudition and unusual thinking approach.

### **Cosmopolitanism And Shahab Ahmad**

By going through the erudite corpus of Shahab Ahmad, it becomes quite lucid that he was an absolute practitioner of cosmopolitanism. In this context, he struggled to a high level. Being a sole Muslim child in an English Boarding school, and residing in a number of different kinds of societies, nations and races, he had been in a struggle with cosmopolitanism and pan-culturalism.<sup>48</sup> His cosmopolitan life influenced his personality to a great extent. Having been a part of different religious and social societies, his thinking style had been changed and formed into the shape of an inter-faith belief. With unique observing angle, he delivered several contrastive ideologies. Shahab had been impacted quite extremely – especially in the religious sense – by his universal and world-wide thinking as he tried to elucidate the meaning of Islam by the culture and rituals of Muslim communities. Dr. Noah said that his understanding of religion was stretched by his cosmopolitan life. On another occasion, Dr. Noah Feldman again took a step ahead and declared the ideas of Shahab as cosmopolitan ideas, and states in his Bloomberg opinion, “Ahmed’s cosmopolitan ideas grew out of a stunningly cosmopolitan life”.<sup>49</sup> His ‘cosmopolitan life’ means a well-traveled life encompassing Malaysia, Singapore, UK, Afghanistan, Egypt, USA, Turkey, Pakistan and many more parts of the world.

Dr. Shahla Ahmad, his sister, enlightened this aspect of his life quite elaborately,<sup>50</sup> as in the childhood, they resided in Singapore, which was a huge peaceful society of mixed ethnicities. A number of languages were spoken there, and a respect for everyone irrespective of one’s religion and culture was also present there. They celebrated everything like *Divali*, *Eid*, Christmas, New Year, etc.

In this sense, Shahab also referred to the contribution of his parents by uttering the words of extreme thanks to them and simply dedicating his masterpiece ‘What is Islam?’ to his parents. As he penned, “For my parents, who raised me in the Islam of their cosmopolitanism and in the cosmopolitanism of their Islam”.<sup>51</sup> Shahab enumerated their qualities at several other points, as in his dissertation, “It is hard to know how, to thank one’s parents. Mine, by virtue of some remarkable personal qualities, have given me life of unusual cultural richness”<sup>52</sup>, and on another occasion, he is found explaining his earlier used term ‘the cosmopolitan Islam of his parents’ in his book as, “The traditions, they have sought to impart to me of justice, learning, honor, charity and the ready embrace of humanity in all its hues that is their Islam”.<sup>53</sup> Thus, the analysis of above quotes depicted quite

obviously that, the cosmopolitanism played a significant role in Shahab Ahmad's life and thought.

### **Shahab: A Determined Researcher**

By digging the facts of several phenomenon, Shahab Ahmad presented himself as a determined and relentless researcher and committed scholar. To quench his thirst of finding and researching, he made numerous visits to many libraries, located at almost half of the globe. He was quite stern to achieve his objectives. Therefore, he impressively used to investigate from various academic fields<sup>54</sup> of Muslim tradition, culture, literature, rituals and even the poetry, illegal wine-drinking trend in Muslims, philosophy and art works. He doesn't leave any field – related to Muslim community – undiscussed. Despite of having the vast material to publish a couple of books, Shahab never let himself to be hasty in this matter. His untiring and continuous research trend is heavily evident through the 'posthumous publishing' of all of his books. An acquaintance of him, Ebrahim Moosa, encouraged him once in about 2013 to publish a book<sup>55</sup> but Shahab didn't take it seriously and was not convinced, even after researching for a long period of 18 to 20 years.

Shahab's approach led him to a stage, where he became an opponent to any weak argumentation. A research assistant recalls his relentlessness as, "No figure in Ahmed's archive was too obscure to escape his attention. We hunted for Transoxianian jurists, North African mystics, Andalusian grammarians, Iraqi logicians. Every scrap of opinion about the controversy (Satanic verses) buried in the great wall of orange files for somehow significant to Ahmed".<sup>56</sup> So, the above discussion exhibits the devotion, relentlessness and commitment of Shahab Ahmad as a scholar.

### **An Ambitious and Dissident Reformer**

Throughout the life of Shahab Ahmad, his ambitiousness – of being a reformer – remained with him. As, at the age of just 18 years, he wrote an article "Muslim World's Failure to Accept Technology", which indicates his immense interest in the reformation of Muslim community. It highlights his early age reforming nature too.

Shahab's efforts, to conclude Satanic verses incident as a formation of Islamic orthodoxy and constructing a non-challengeable scholarly edifice<sup>57</sup> can be defined too as his sense of ambitious reformation. Further, he also used the manners of a reformer by re-conceptualizing Islam dissentingly. He often seems quite impressed by a liberal Muslim legalist reformer "Khaled Abou al-Fadl (b.1963 AD)"<sup>58</sup> in his masterpiece 'What is Islam?' At various times, his mentioning of several reformative movements, points out his affection to this.

Particularly, when he conversed and asked, one of his students Sarah Eltantawi for her objective to get a Ph.D, her reply was in favour of ‘a positive change’. Shahab told her that, for him, it was an inspiration by a reformer Fazlur Rehman (1919 – 1988) and added to this that “Most doctoral students start out as reformers”.<sup>59</sup> She shared further regarding his ambitions to reform Islamic history as “We shared a sense of wanting to redeem the past and change the future of the Islamic world. We had hundreds of conversations about how and why to do this. In one, particularly memorable exchange, we discussed the possibility of simply erasing all of Islamic history and starting, as he put it, at ‘year zero’”.<sup>60</sup> Certainly, this kind of reforming nature cannot be exemplified.

In this very context, Shahab Ahmad seems highly impressed by, the medieval Muslim thinker and reformer Taqī al-Dīn Ibn Taymīyyah (d.728AH) and, a traditional reformist and defender of Ibn Taymīyyah’s thought, scholar of Baghdad Khayr al-Dīn Nu‘mān al-Ālūsī (d.1317AH).<sup>61</sup> Shahab expressed even his grief for not obeying ever the real spirit of Ibn Taymīyyah’s reformative ideologies by the so-called Taymīyyan scholars of 14 – 15<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Publications**

Having a brilliant individual thinking, Shahab had delivered much more to the field of academia. Although, Shahab had a short period of life, but he spent the whole period in striving to observe and produce literature. No doubt, he was a man of letters, who had swiftly made a higher intellectual reputation in the global academic circles. His extreme desire of erecting a non-challengeable scholarly edifice<sup>62</sup> might be the reason that he had never been satisfied to publish even a single book in his life. He, obviously, worked hard and had the material of more than one book, but not succeeded in publishing that, except a co-authored compilation “Ibn Taymīyyah and His Times”. Shahab was very committed to illustrate his argument, as he collected a huge range of citations in his oeuvre. Shahab had authored and compiled books, articles, book reviews and encyclopedic entries. The number of published books of Shahab Ahmad is very small. It included only three published books and one in a pipe line.

#### **i. “Ibn Taymīyyah and His Times”**

The volume under observation, is a joint venture of Shahab and a Princeton alumnus, Yossef Rapoport (b.1968), a lecturer in the Department of History at Queen Mary University of London. It was published by the Oxford University Press, Karachi in 2010. The book in fact, is a good composite of many authors’ essays. It examines Ibn Taymīyyah’s contribution to the Qur’ānic exegesis, Islamic theology, political thought and law through a series of articles written by different scholars. It is quite interesting to note that this book is declared as first comprehensive treatment of Ibn Taymīyyah’s thought. It comprises of an

introduction and thirteen articles of different writers, on the legacy and thought of Damascene Jurist, Polymath and theologian Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymmiyyah (d. 728AH). This volume shows and proved Ibn Taymmiyyah the most rigorous, complex and vast erudite figure in Islamic history.

Six thematic sections of the book identify its real destination. As the first section has the biographical account of Ibn Taymmiyyah and a number of themes of his life and his indifferent approach as “Ibn Taymmiyyah was actually a charismatic leader of a small ‘radical’ circle of legally diverse scholars”<sup>63</sup> which was rejected to a great extent. The second section is “Theology”, which has three papers of different writers like John Hoover, Mehmet Sait and Ozzervarli. It conversed the theological positions of Ibn Taymmiyyah. As Hoover is of the view that Ibn Taymmiyyah’s theological approach was not anti-rational<sup>64</sup>. Ibn Taymmiyyah’s another theological approach of ‘Qu’ānic rationalism’ is highlighted in Mehmet’s article, in which he disagreed with the *Ash‘arīs*.

Ibn Taymmiyyah’s unique hermeneutical approach to the Qur’ānic exegesis is presented in third section. Walid Saleh claimed in his study of Ibn Taymmiyyah’s *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-Tafsīr* that he used again the *Salaf*-centric approach to revive the *Sunnah* in exegesis. In another paper, Livant Holtzman, a female writer, elucidates Ibn Taymmiyyah’s and Ibn Qayyim’s hermeneutical thinking. In the law section, one of the authors, Yossef Rapoport himself included his own article on Ibn Taymmiyyah’s legal thought. The author is to elaborate Ibn Taymmiyyah’s reinterpretation of *Ijtihād*, *Taqīd* and *Ijmā‘*. In the next section, the compilers explicated Ibn Taymmiyyah’s intra-religious thinking against the *Shī‘ī* and Christians by including the analysis of Tariq al-Jamil of *Minhāj al-Sunnah*. At last, three papers are included for Ibn Taymmiyyah’s intellectual influence and his legacy on subsequent academics.

Thus, although it did not explicate the opinion of the compilers, but this study is proved to be a beautiful demonstration of Taymmiyyan theologies, intellectual thought, and his influence and legacy for upcoming generations.

## **ii. “What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic”**

The book with more than 600 pages, illustrates Shahab’s long anticipated research of a period of more than a decade<sup>65</sup>. In fact, it is the first book of Shahab, which had been published posthumously in September 2015 immediately after his death. By some critics, this book is regarded as a ‘magnum opus’ and a monumental work. “What is Islam?” of Shahab comprises three parts and five chapters. Shahab Ahmad adduces some of his experiences of life at the outset of this book. Just like a revealing exchange between a European philosopher and a Muslim (wine-drinker) scholar, at a dinner party, who was indulging in a glass of wine and defending his act as “we are Muslim wine-drinkers”.<sup>66</sup> Second one is the

questioning of some of his non-Muslim friends about the relation of the art works of Iran, Turkey, Central and South Asia with Islam. His third experience was about an Arab female friend, who had been engaged and going to be married with a South Asian, only on the basis of their Islam.

The first chapter of the book begins with a debate about Islam as a matter of fact in human history. Instead of defining Islamic creeds, Shahab describes the diversities of societies, ideas and practices of different Muslim dominating societies. The author put six questions to inquire the relevance of different phenomenon with Islam. Firstly, refers to the contradicting philosophical conclusions of *Ibn Sīnā*, that why the philosophy has been taught in *Madrassahs*. What is Islamic in this Philosophy? Similarly, about *Sufis*, about the Islamic feature of the *Divān* of Hāfīz (d.1390 AH), the most widely read, memorized and quoted poetry in Muslim history, mentioning of wine-drinking and erotic love.<sup>67</sup> About the art works or figural paintings of Muslims, Shahab inquires: is there any Islamic art exists? At last he draws the attention to the foundation of his book's edifice that is wine-drinking, which had been a big practice in Islamic civilization, even being prohibited in Muslim legal discourses.

It also represents Ahmad's positive appraisal of Talal Asad's (b.1932 AD) views of Islam as a process rather than as an object and the influence of his 'discursive tradition' is clearly evident throughout this book.<sup>68</sup> Shahab Ahmad, tried to re-conceptualize Islam as an act of meaning making for one's own self or as a process of hermeneutical engagement. He took Islam also as a 'modern Muslim meaning' and explained it as Islamic finance, Islamic banking and Islamic economics<sup>69</sup> and he diagnosed it as "Modern Muslims have largely lost the routine hermeneutic habit of making meaning in terms of Islam from Pre-Text and Con-Text of the Revelation."<sup>70</sup> Thus, he indicated that the modern Islamic hermeneutic is quite dependent only on Text of the Revelation.

While analyzing, it seems that Shahab Ahmad emphasized to approach and observe the statements and actions of Muslims with wide open eyes, and by recounting the Muslim wine-drinkers, Arab-Turkey-Iran's art work's relation to Islam, and the engagement of two different cultured persons in the very outset of this book, he proved it to be done. In all this sort of deep study, he emerged to be a 'cultural historian', as he declared earlier that Islam is a human and historical phenomenon. 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. Balkans to Bengal, all these depict the author's historical and cultural thinking, rather than a religious interpretation. This book seems as a description of a number of aspects of Muslim culture.

Another factor of the said book is the elaboration and description of wine-drinking in Muslim cultural history. Theocratic prohibition of wine and its simultaneous and wide spread usage – even in literature like poetry – fascinated Shahab to relate it to Islamism, although, the wine-drinking is nothing but only a literary tradition in Islamic history. The presentation of instances from Muslim visual and material culture raised him in the line of dissenting scholars, because the scholars in the disciplines of religion and history have long neglected the serious study of visual culture as an essential component of any endeavor to conceive Islam.<sup>71</sup>

Further to this, the title of the book ironically questions what Shahab Ahmad is not going to answer exactly, but throughout this thesis, his endeavor is quite apparent in this context without declaring it. Some other confusions also exist in the course of this book, such as the author's struggle to clear the mind of the reader promptly, by saying that "I am not saying about the incommensurability of Islam rather than about its sufficiency for conceptualization", "not saying that Islam is whatever Muslim say or do is, rather we should see whatever he did being a Muslim".

Similarly, the author strives to clear his position about *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). By saying that he is not suggesting the *fiqh* 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 *fiqh* is historically wrong and out of place<sup>72</sup>. Some other points of ambiguities in his treatise are so that, his apparent negation of modern Islam as less authentic than pre-modern Islam and its presentation as 'nostalgia', his endeavor to conceptualize Islam in terms of disagreements of Muslims and its coherence. All of these lead to the extreme confusion of author's mind. Such as, at an occasion, he himself admitted the rightful objection of Balkans to Bengal complex being an exceptional case and that does not apply to the whole Islamic world<sup>73</sup>.

So therefore, the book seems to be a rich compendium of historical reports and confusions about interpreting what the author want to do. The diversities and contradictions of Muslim societies, cultural historiography, literature, art work, individual act of wine-drinking, and even the figural paintings of a specific region, all lead the author to an amalgamated conclusion. Thus the book has not quite succeeded to garner the attentions of most of the scholars and the masses as well.

### **iii. "Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam"**

The book, under analysis, is a long anticipated creation of Shahab Ahmad and a monograph on an infamous story of Islamic history, called Satanic verses (*Qissat*

*al-Gharānīq*). This book represents the first volume of a project of threefold sections but tragically, this project was cut short – with the demise of the author in September 2015 – to this only volume, which was also published posthumously in 2017.

The theme of the book revolves around the historicity of Satanic verses incident in which, it is said that the Holy Prophet ﷺ was misguided by Satanic suggestion and recited Satan’s suggested words with the Divine Revelation. It is often related to *Sura al-Najm* (The Star); 53. Analysis of the history of Muslim attitudes towards Satanic verses incident’s historicity<sup>74</sup> in the first two hundred years of Islam, is the main objective of this study. The debate on the formation of truth and orthodoxy becomes Shahab’s commencement of argument. Being very popular in early Muslim community, why the Satanic verses incident became infamous in the modern-day Muslims? And why it took an entire opposite position now? It was all because of the formation of an orthodoxy – which he claimed as a ‘truth-claim’ – to establish itself in society as the sole and exclusive truth<sup>75</sup>. How this orthodoxy or an authoritative truth formed? According to him, it formed as, in first two hundred years, the acceptance of this story was at near-universal position. In the next 300 years, the acceptance and rejection of this story stood on an equal level. He adds that in the next period of 700 years from 1100 to 1800AD, the rejection of the incident got a near-universal position<sup>76</sup>. The author is well acquainted with the principles of rejection of this incident – i.e. the historiographical principle (*Hadīth* Methodology) and the theological principle (*Iṣmat al-Anbiyā*) or ‘the protection of Prophets’ – but had not been convinced by them. So, to him, the near-universal position of rejection of this story is the result of formation of an orthodoxy.

To prove this incident as a standard element in the memory of early Muslim community, he wanted to adduce *riwāyahs* (traditions of the Holy Prophet ﷺ). Ahmad put 50 reports – unfortunately, with deficient, incomplete and un-intact chains of transmission (*Isnāds*) – from different sources, as he cited from Muhammad b. Ka‘b al-Qurazī transmitted from the Ray Recension of the *Sīrah* Ibn Ishāq from Abū Ma‘shar and from al-Wāqidī, ‘Urwah b. al-Zubayr, al-Zuhri, Muqātil b, Suleymān, Qatādah etc. In spite of a number of shortcomings in chains, Shahab analyzed these in accordance with his argument.

At the final stage, Shahab – instead of explaining, why modern Muslim community rejected the incident outrightly? – he justifies that the early Muslims accepted this incident as truth. But what about the earlier deniers of this story as Ibn Khuzaymah (d.311AH)? An orientalist also mentioned, “Whether or not some (such as the proto *aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth*) denied the story from the earliest periods, remains an open question”<sup>77</sup>. Shahab doesn’t seem here quite impartial, as he

accused the *Muḥaddithūn* (traditionalists) of eliminating the text and undermining the *Isnāds*<sup>78</sup> which deems precisely his unseen hostility towards them and their project.

In fact, Shahab's dissenting conclusions seems to be imprinted by the western school of thought about Islam. As, while comparing the Christian-Muslim rituals and customs, Shahab mourned at Muslims for not having a single position at any matter. Perhaps, he doesn't know that any single position or a sole truth has never been determined also in Christian history due to a number of denominations in them.

iv. **“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 Nenad Filipovic. Once again Shahab Ahmad – not solely, but with the help of another orientalist – is looking 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 “cultural historian” about Shahab. The expected length of this book is almost 175,000 words<sup>79</sup>. Four chapters of six are completed. To publish this treatise, strong expressions of interest from Harvard University Press and Princeton University Press have been explicated.

**Conclusion**

So, the charming and dissenting personality, Shahab Ahmad had a plenty of qualities as ambitious argumentation, reforming nature, peculiar in many notions. But while completing almost his entire educational journey through the non-Muslim institutions, he proves to be an influenced and dissentient modern Muslim intellectual, who lived a cosmopolitan life, which compelled him to define Islam in contrast with almost all sects of Muslims. In his very short life, he achieved a number of literary milestones in a couple of the top Ivy League universities like Harvard and Princeton. But his dissenting understandings of things stood him apart from most of the Islamic scholarship. He researched very devotedly in the field of early Islamic history as he wrote his PhD dissertation and later some books and articles as well. With his unique observing angle, he delivered several contrastive ideologies, as he longed to replace the entire creedal system, simply by erasing Islamic history and starting it at “year zero”.<sup>80</sup> Which is witnessing also his ambitious reforming and dissenting nature. As to what, he was declared more ambitious than Ibn Khaldūn (1332 – 1406 AD).<sup>81</sup> While re-conceptualizing Islam – in his compilations – his vast comprehension of cultures, rituals, literatures, stories, customs and traditions of Muslim communities seems making him a dissentient western trained Muslim scholar and a cultural historian as well.

## **Recommendations**

While comprehending the amazing personality of Shahab Ahmad, the following aspects have been left undiscussed still in this study, which would be the appropriate research topics in the future.

- \* A critical study of Shahab Ahmad’s published articles.
- \* Shahab’s research workshops and lectures should also be analyzed.
- \* Impact of the western thought on Shahab Ahmad’s conclusions.
- \* A vast analytical study of the dissertations supervised by Shahab Ahmad.



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