

## **Reader-response criticism with special reference to the Story of Maryam in the Holy Qur'an**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores one of the examples of the devout women, Maryam, and the mother of Jesus. It investigates the theory of Reader-response in relation to Sayyid Qutb's response to the story of Maryam as it is mentioned in the Qur'an. For examining Qutb's interpretation of the story of Maryam, it is clear that he encompasses the various perspectives of Reader-response theory—phenomenological, psychological, and sociological. His response is the outcome of recognition of the text as a linguistic embodiment of God's words addressed to a reader who is a necessary factor in actualizing the meaning of the Qur'anic text and who, in turn, is a member of an interpretive community that governs his interpretive strategy. Recognition of the importance of all these elements in the process of comprehension is necessary to further our understanding of how the text is read and how we interpret it.

## نظرية الاستقبال عند القارئ مع الإشارة بوجه خاص إلى قصة مريم في القرآن الكريم

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### الملخص

يتناول البحث قصة السيدة مريم أم عيسى عليه السلام من خلال تفسير المفكر الإسلامي سيد قطب في كتابه في ظلال القرآن، حيث تحاول الباحثة تطبيق نظرية الاستقبال عند القارئ على قصة مريم كما ذكرت في القرآن. ولقد أوضحت الباحثة أن تفسير سيد قطب للقصة يتضمن وجهات النظر المختلفة التي تحتويها نظرية الاستقبال، ذلك أن تفاعل سيد قطب مع النص القرآني هو نتيجة معرفته بأن النص القرآني هو تجسيد لغوى لكلام المولي عز وجل موجه إلى القارئ وهو العامل الأساسي في معرفة المعنى. هذا القارئ ينتمي بدوره إلى جماعة المفسرين التي تحكم إستراتيجيته التفسيرية. وبناءً عليه تؤكد الباحثة على أهمية التفاعل بين القارئ والنص في فهم النص وتفسيره.

In the following pages, I will explore one of the examples of the devout women mentioned in the Qur'an, Maryam, and the mother of Jesus. My point in writing this article is to investigate Sayyid Qutb's response to the story of Maryam as it is mentioned in the Qur'an. Qutb's work *In the Shade of the Qur'an* is considered a most insightful interpretation of the Holy Qur'an. He offers a thorough understanding of the story of Maryam. The paper is an attempt to reflect on the readers' mode of interaction with the words of the Qur'an.

Reader-response theory of criticism is a movement which emphasizes the reader's active participation in interpreting the text rejecting the idea that there is a single, fixed meaning inherent in the text. Reading is no longer viewed as the discovery of meaning but as the creation of it. Reader-response critics examine reading as a process, an activity through which meaning is created. It "presents a challenge to traditional measurement of comprehension"(Sebesta, "A Hierarchy to Assess Reader-response", 444). Thereby, attention has been directed to questions of how the text contributes to the reader's understanding of that text, and how the reader's responses determine the text's meaning. R. B. Gill in "The Moral Implications of Interpretive communities" summarizes the pursuit of Reader-response critics:

We no longer find an object-perceiver separation, but a process in which both parties undergo change. Meaning, in such a case, is not the impenetrable union of form and content that New Critics insisted on, but the evolving interaction of text with reader values, conventions, and understanding. (5)

Hence, Reader-response theory of criticism grows out of the acknowledgement of the authority of the reader and his relationship to the text in determining its meaning. The term "Reader-response" has come to be associated with words such as "reader", "the reading process", and "response", that is to say that what the text means depends on how it is read, and its value depends on the value of the reading experience of the reader. According to Louis Rosenblatt's influential work *Literature as Exploration*, the reading of any text "is,

of necessity, an individual and unique occurrence involving the mind and emotions of some particular reader and a particular text at a particular time under particular circumstances"(220).

The problem of where, and by whom, meaning is determined in the reading experience lies in the core of Reader-response theory. Reader-response critics bring to the centre the questions of what happens when we read, how the reader interacts with the text, how much power the reader brings to the text, and what the effect of this experience on the reader is. The answers to these questions vary, yet some similarities exist.

Indeed, the term Reader-response criticism has provided a framework for a number of different approaches that basically investigate the reading process—phenomenology, psychology, and sociology. Although each of these approaches illuminates a different fact of reader text interaction, the delineation of these classifications is not absolute, i.e. they interrelate and overlap. Terence R. Wright comments:

Reader-response, then, serves as an umbrella term for a variety of positions held together only by their concern with what goes on in the mind of the reader when he or she picks up and peruses a book. (529-30)

Mostly, Reader-response critics stress the phenomenological position. The meaning of the text results from the dynamic interaction between reader and text. Louis Rosenblatt propounds the first transactional theory of Reader-response. She formulates the concept of reading experience as a "transaction". Text and reader are no longer viewed as separate entities and become aspects of the transactive process in which each element contributes to the other. The text gains its significance "from the way in which the minds and emotions of particular readers respond to the linguistic stimuli offered by the text" (*Literature as Exploration*, 28). Wolfgang Iser also believes that the text can never be separated from the person reading it. For Iser, the text is "a frame within which the reader must construct for himself the aesthetic object" (*The Act of Reading*, 107). The text is a set of constructions for the production of meaning. In this way, the text guides the reader's personal response.

Moreover, Stanley Fish suggests that the text has an impact on the reader's assumptions and expectations, but it does not have meaning until it is experienced by the reader. It is during the development of the interaction between reader and a text that meaning is conceived. "It is the experience of an utterance—all of it and not anything that could be said about it, including anything I could say—that is its meaning" (*Is There A Text In This Class?*, 32). For Fish, the reader constructs meaning through his interpretive strategy prior to any textual meaning

On the other hand, Norman Holland's theory of reading finds its roots in psychology. Holland demonstrates that the reader constitutes meaning from the interaction of personality with text. Here, the psychological nature of the reader interacts with the text to create meaning. Through this process the reader shifts from the conscious to the unconscious. On the conscious level, the reader actively perceives the text in an attempt to formulate meaning. On the unconscious level, the reader brings his experience and association to the text. For Holland, the readers internalize texts differently because they internalize them according to their "identity theme" (*5 Readers Reading*, 128). Holland emphasizes his belief that the text is a subjective re-creation of the reader. His theory assumes an unchanging core in each human personality which filters all experiences, builds defences and informs all decisions whether conscious or unconscious. Each reader responds to the text by "assimilating it to his own psychological process, that is, to his search for successful solutions within his identity theme to the multiple demands, both inner and outer, on his ego" (Ibid, 128).

Furthermore, In *Subjective Criticism*, David Bleich draws on his psychological attitude to establish the connection between the text's interpretation and the reader's involvement with the text. To Bleich, an interpretation of a text is no more than a manifestation of the reader's personal motivations and desires. Any act of interpretation is motivated and the only way to determine the motivations behind our interpretations of a text is to look at our subjective response to it. The reader expresses a

whole life style—cognition, education, beliefs, purposes, and goals—in the process of interpreting the text. Meaning becomes "a direct outgrowth of the reader's emotional grasp of the story"( Bleich, "The Subjective Character of Critical Interpretation", 746).

Moving from a psychological position toward a sociological one, Bleich finds out that this subjective response is fundamental to the founding of any social understanding, "any 'objective' social mutuality requires the participation of one's transcendental subjectivity"( Bleich, *The Double Perspective*, 50). In other words, in whatever community of which one is a member, every reader brings forth his individual response. Priya Venkatesan concludes that " the social is not inherently distanced from an individual aesthetics"(4). A much more radical departure into the sociological approach has been clear in Stanley Fish. To Fish, the reader will interpret the text he reads according to the interpretive strategy of the interpretive community to which he belongs. It is his membership in a particular interpretive community that constitutes the meaning of the text. Fish's notion of "interpretive community" (*Is There A Text In This Class?*,180) involves a link between interpretation and society. He asserts the social dimension in his models of reading and considers the text as part of a larger system of social activity. For Fish, the texts are social because they are interpreted by readers who belong to a particular interpretive community.

The stories of the Holy Qur'an are unique in their delineation. They are not narrative in the traditional sense. They have a unique form with intensity of impact. The stories are narrated in different surahs in the Qur'an. So the reader is the one who ultimately puts the story together. The stories exist in a vastly different world of values—the values exist in the subject matter, style, characterization, plot, and the very tone of voice. Therefore, the Qur'an creates the need to place the reader in an active participation with the words of the story in order to be fully understood.

The story of Maryam in the Qur'an depends on facts that deliver their meaning without any digression. The whole story of Maryam

has been depicted in few verses and the delineation of her life is given mostly in Surah Al-Imran, and Surah Maryam. The story deals exclusively with the pilgrimage of Maryam's life from the beginning of her life until the birth of prophet Jesus. Although the story is concentrated, the pace of the story has been leisurely developed until it is fully rendered. While the reader reads her story, his eyes are always on the story's center—the character of Maryam.

Sayyid Qutb begins his interpretation of the story of Maryam by giving an account of the historic events and episodes to establish certain facts which are significant for understanding the story. He reports the encounter between the Yemeni Najran delegation and the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) which is based on the Qur'anic view that Jesus was God's "word" given to Maryam and created from His spirit. As an Islamic scholar, Sayyid Qutb starts his interpretation of the story of Maryam by pointing out the central theme of the story-- the oneness of God, which refutes and completely excludes the idea of offspring or partners, as far as God is concerned. Qutb's interpretation of the Qur'anic text is the outcome of the interaction between the text and his response to it. As a reader, "he must engage in a most demanding kind of activity. Out of his past experience he must select...,sense...,respond...,focus..., try to see it [text] as an organized whole"(Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 265). The Qur'anic text is organized in such a way as to concentrate the reader's attention and regulate what will enter into his consciousness. Qutb concludes that the story "presents the birth and life of Maryam and Jesus in such a manner that leaves no room for doubting his full humanity or that he was one of God's messengers;...."( *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 62).

According to the Qur'an, Maryam's father is Imran who descends from the family of prophet Ibrahim who in turn descends from prophet Nuh who comes from Adam. They are the chosen servants whom God has selected for the sake of conveying his message of monotheism preached from the beginning of creation. Qutb comments, "We are told that these people form a continuous chain or a lineage. However, this does not necessarily mean a family lineage, even though they have all descended from Adam and Noah. Rather the

tie which groups them together is that they have been chosen by God and that they belong to the same faith" ( *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 64). In order to prove that, Qutb goes on explaining that, in the Qur'an, God mentions two families, the House of Abraham and the House of Imran, and specifies them over all beings which indicate that they are exalted with their offspring. "Allah did choose Adam and Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of Imran above all people" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 33). Then, Qutb goes back to Surah al-Baqarah to confirm that the inheritance of prophethood is not determined by the relationship of blood, but by that of faith: "And remember that Abraham was tried by his Lord with certain commands, which he fulfilled: He said: 'I will make thee an Imam to the people. He pleaded: 'And also (Imams) from my offspring' He answered: 'But My Promise is not within the reach of evil-doers'" (Surah al-Baqarah, verse no. 124). Qutb's understanding comes as a result of the dynamic interaction between him and the text. While reading, "the work as an object tends to disappear" (Fish, *Self Consuming Artifacts*, 4), the focus will be on what is happening in his mind. In an attempt to describe the reader's mind at the time of reading, Iser introduces the idea of "the wandering viewpoint." The reader is not the external observer of the text but is situated inside the text. "Every moment of reading is a dialectic of pretension and retention, conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and continually fading) horizon already filled; the wandering viewpoint carves its passage through both at the same time and leaves them to merge together in its wake" (*The Act of Reading*, 112).

In the Qur'an, Maryam's story begins while she is still in her mother's womb. Maryam's mother, a sincere believer, dedicates the dearest thing to her, namely, the child she is bearing, to her Lord, free of all conditions and all servitude. "Behold! Wife of Imran said: 'O my Lord! I do dedicate into thee what is in my womb for Thy special service: So accept this of me: for Thou hearest and knowest all things'" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 35). The Arabic term used in this verse stimulates Sayyid Qutb to identify it. It is derived from the root meaning "freedom" or "liberation", which denotes that the mother's offering is made absolutely to God. Qutb comments, "When



submission to God alone is total, it indicates total freedom. Any other situation is a form of slavery although it may appear in the guise of freedom....When Islam preaches the Oneness of God, it preaches the only true form of human freedom" (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 65). Qutb's response to the text is a total meaning experience. He brings his own set of experiences to the text, and in turn this experience will determine his own interpretation of the text. David Bleich explains that "it is a process of construction, of synthesis performed by an active thinker rather than by a recording or a reception" (Bleich, "Intersubjective Reading", 401).

When Maryam's mother dedicates her child to God, she has expected her baby to be a boy, because only male children were devoted for service in temples. "When she was delivered, she said: 'O my Lord! Behold! I am delivered of a female child!' - and Allah knew best what she brought forth- 'And is not the male like the female. I have named her Mary, and I commend her and her offspring to Thy protection from Satan the Rejected'" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 36). She was very worried because the male is not like the female. Yet, God is fully aware of that fact. She, however, makes the offering, with some reservation, that the female cannot fulfill the task for which the baby was devoted.

Sayyid Qutb goes on explaining the mother's wholehearted supplication, seeking Allah's protection for her and for her offspring against all evil. Here, Qutb gives a detailed description of the relationship between Maryam's mother and God. The private conversation, which she held with her Lord, reveals the type of relationship which the chosen people have with their God, "it is a relationship of friendship, closeness and simple address, free of all complications. They feel they are speaking with the One who is near, loving and certain to respond" (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 66). Not only does Maryam's mother give her baby to her Lord, but she also entrusts her baby to His care and protection against Satan. "Right graciously did her Lord accept her: He made her grow in purity and beauty..." (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 37). This acceptance is given in return for the wholehearted dedication which the mother fulfills. Sayyid Qutb comments, "God's gracious acceptance of Mary also

serves as a preparation for her to receive the breathing of God's spirit and His word so that she will be able to give birth to Jesus in a way which is totally unfamiliar to human beings" (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 65). Here, Qutb's subjective response to the text is revealed. It begins in a single perception and moves toward an evaluative associative response. This subjective response involves that each reader does see things in the text that everyone else can see. Yet, each reader has a special way of perceiving the text which gives the text its own characteristics. Bleich explains:

The associative response, therefore, is the most complex but the most useful form of expressing feelings about literature. It reveals perception, affect, associations, relationships, and finally a patterned presentation of all of these in a way that demonstrates how they are organized in that particular person. (*Reading & Feelings*, 48)

Maryam grew under God's special protection. She is placed under the care of Zachariah. The Qur'an reveals how God chose prophet Zachariah for her custody. "...Every time that he [Zachariah] entered (her) chamber to see her, he found her supplied with sustenance..." (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 37). As a blessed child, God provides her with abundance of everything she needs. Her guardian, Zachariah, wondered at this abundance and asked her how she got it. Maryam acknowledges God's grace, saying no more than: "...From Allah: for Allah provides sustenance to whom He pleases, without measure" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 37). Sayyid Qutb's active involvement with the Qur'anic words relies on his own belief. The text generates images for him. These images, in turn, "will be colored by the reader's existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed" (Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 38). Qutb states that whatever is familiar to man is confined to the limitations of his own world. His thought and knowledge are limited to the natural laws to which he belongs. "Hence, it is more suitable for man not to exceed the boundaries of propriety when he thinks of God. It is far better for man to confine himself to the limitations of his own world when he speaks of what is possible and what is impossible. He must not, in any way,

try to set a framework by virtue of his experience and scanty knowledge in which to restrict God's absolute will" (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 68).

As a result of witnessing this miracle which demonstrates God's absolute will, Zachariah renews his yearning to have a child of his own in spite of his old age and his barren wife. "There did Zakariya pray to his Lord! Saying: 'O my Lord! Grant unto me from Thee a progeny that is pure: for Thou art He that heareth prayer!'" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 38). God answers his prayer-- It is an answer determined only by God's absolute will. "...Doth Allah accomplish what He willeth" (Surah Al-Imran, 40). Everything becomes possible when it is understood within the context of God's absolute will. Qutb, at that moment, becomes overwhelmed by the Qur'anic text. "It is an experience; it occurs; it does something; it makes us do something. Indeed..., what it does is what it means"(Fish, *Self Consuming Artifacts*, 393). These successive miracles that happened before the birth of prophet Jesus were something supernatural when they are compared with the norms of human beings. It serves as a prelude to the forthcoming wonders associated with the birth of Jesus. Qutb begins with a question:

What law controls such a phenomenon? It is the law of God's absolute will. There can be no other explanation of this strange event. Similarly, there is no other explanation of the birth of John when his father had been overtaken by old age and his mother was barren. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 69)

At this point, the reader's mind is placed in some sort of investigation of its own activities. Fish believes that the value of the words on pages is not in their contents but in their effect in the mind of the reader. The language of the text is not "words at all but seeds"(*Self Consuming Artifacts*, 14), which grow within the reader. As the reader reads the text, he gains awareness of what is happening to him through the reading process.

Then, the Qur'anic text refers to Maryam's purification and worship in order to refute any suspicions about her in connection with the birth of her son. She is chosen to receive the Divine spirit in the same way as Adam received it. "Behold! The angels said: O Mary!

Allah hath chosen thee and purified thee—chosen thee above the women of all nations. O Mary! Worship the Lord devoutly: prostrate thyself, and bow down (in prayer) with those who bow down” (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 42-43). At this point, Qutb describes his response, what the verse does to him as a reader. Each part of the verse evokes meaning in his mind. The meaning does not exist in the words on the page, but in the reader's response. Qutb writes:

This account shows beyond doubt the source from which this religion of Islam has come and confirms the absolute honesty and integrity of the messenger who conveyed it. He received “the truth” from his Lord about Mary and Jesus and he did not hesitate to declare that truth in that debate. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 70)

Suleiman and Grosman explain, "The act of reading is defined as essentially a sense-making activity, consisting of the complementary activities of selection and organization, anticipation, and retrospection, the formulation and modification of expectations in the course of the reading"(22-23).

After that, The Qur'an narrates the historic account of the guardianship of Maryam when her mother brought her to the temple in fulfillment of her vow to God. The question of guardianship posed a problem because the custodians had to cast their lots in order to determine who would have charge of Maryam. It was Zachariah who wins the honor of taking care of her. The Qur'an narrates:

This is part of the tidings of the things unseen, which We reveal unto thee (O Prophet!) by inspiration: Thou wast not with them when they cast lots with pens, as to which of them should be charged with the care of Mary: Nor wast thou with them when they disputed (the point). (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 44)

The Qur'anic verse does not provide many details about the casting lots. Qutb responds to the verse, filling in its details. He writes, "Some reports suggest that they cast their pens in the river Jordan. The river swept all the pens away, except that of Zachariah which remained in its place. That could equally have been the agreed formula among them, but no matter what it was, they acknowledged

his claim to be Mary's guardian"(*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 70). Qutb's mind is always in possession of knowledge. This knowledge is the outcome of the accumulation of experiences, education, and profession besides historical and cultural norms. Fish explains:

...there is never a moment when one believes nothing, when consciousness is innocent of any and all categories of thought, and whatever categories of thought are operative at a given moment will serve as an undoubted ground. (*Is There A Text In This Class?*, 319-20)

"Behold! The angels said: 'O Mary! Allah giveth thee glad tidings of a Word from Him: his name will be Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, held in honour in this world and the Hereafter and of (the company of) those nearest to Allah'" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 45). At that time, Maryam receives the news for the first time, through the angels, which tells her of the whole affair. She receives "a word" from God, namely the Christ, Jesus, Son of Maryam. Qutb pursues his argument with his wholehearted faith of God and his belief of His absolute will which is unquestionable. While reading, Qutb absorbs the text and becomes one with it. He explains the text according to his unique "identity theme" which leads him to internalize it the way he does. Holland says that "a reader responds to a literary work by using it to re-create his own characteristic psychological processes"(*5 Readers Reading*, 40). Thus, he starts to refute the argument of the narrow-minded people who try to determine the secret of the origin of life. Qutb argues:

We do not know, but God, Who has given life, knows. He tells us that life is a breathing of His spirit into something. He further tells us that giving it is achieved by a word from Him: "Be, and it is." What is this spiritual breathing? How is spirit blown into something lifeless so as to bring it into existence? This is a secret which remains incomprehensible to human reason. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 70)

It is Qutb's free-play of mind which allows him to answer the debate concerning the initiation of creation. Qutb continues his argument saying that "God tells us that the breathing of His spirit in

Adam is what gave Adam his honorable place, a distinction, even above the angels"(*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 70). For this reason, man has a special place in the general order of the universe which is not shared by any other creature. It is God who creates Adam without a male or female, and it is He who creates Jesus with a female and without a male. Although Maryam bears her son like all other women in the world, yet it is not an ordinary son because he is born by a word of God "be": "The similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam; He created him from dust, then said to him: 'Be': and he was" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 59). Qutb concludes:

The only true conclusion is that God willed to initiate life in a manner which had no parallel. His unrestricted will accomplished such an initiation of life through a breathing of His spirit, the nature of which remains unknown to us while we understand its effects. There is no reason for us to understand its nature because such an understanding does not add to our ability to discharge our mission on earth, since to initiate life is not part of our appointed task. Viewed in this manner, the whole question becomes easy to understand and raises no doubts in our minds. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 73)

As one member of the Islamic community, Qutb's interpretation proceeds not from him but from the Islamic interpretive community to which he belongs. He looks at the text with eyes informed by his community beliefs and values. Thus, it is the interpretive strategy of his community that directs him to see, and by seeing constitutes the meaning of the text. His reading experience is constrained by a conventional way of thinking that is his by virtue of his membership in a community of interpretation. Fish claims:

In this new vision both texts and readers lose the independence that would be necessary for either of them to claim the honor of being the source of interpretive authority; both are absorbed by the interpretive community which, because it is responsible for all acts interpreters can possibly

perform, is finally responsible for the texts those performances bring into the world. (*Doing What Comes Naturally*, 142).

When angels gave Maryam the happy news of a word from God, the pure inexperienced virgin becomes so perplexed, "She said: 'O my Lord! How shall I have a son when no man hath touched me?' He said: 'Even so; Allah createth what He willeth: when He hath decreed a matter, He but saith to it, 'Be,' and it is!'" (Surah Al-Imran, verse no. 47). Qutb concludes:

When the whole question is thus referred to this basic fact, all wonder disappears. Man is reassured and even wonders at himself for overlooking this simple and clear fact of God's unrestricted will. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 74)

When Qutb reads this verse, he reads with feelings, associations, memories, identifications, and interpretation from a whole lifetime of experience. Holland states: "We are organic beings, and all of our different modes feed into and back out of one another in the numberless ecological and cybernetic intricacies of our brains and bodies..., for we are finally, wholly, and forever just that—personal" ("Stanley Fish, Stanley Fish", 438).

The rest of the story of Maryam is narrated in surah Maryam. The surah begins with the story of Zachariah and his son, John, and follows with the story of Maryam and the birth of Jesus. God prepares the reader to the miracle of Prophet Jesus' birth by introducing the remarkable and wonderful story of the birth of John, the son of Zachariah. Then, God mentions the story of Maryam which is even more remarkable and wondrous, in which the virgin Maryam gives birth of Jesus without a father.

'O Zakariya! We give thee Good news of a son: His name shall be Yahya: on none by that name have we conferred distinction before'. He said: 'O my Lord how shall I have a son, when my wife is barren and I have grown quite decrepit from old age?' He said: 'So (it will be): Thy Lord saith, 'that is easy for Me: I did indeed create thee before, when thou hadst been nothing!' (Surah Maryam, verse no. 7-9)

It is God's will, then, to give this example of the creation of Jesus to remind people of His free will and unrestrained power which cannot be subject to the laws of creation and "...to appoint him as a sign unto men and a Mercy from Us" (Surah Maryam, verse no. 21). Qutb comments:

Divine wisdom has determined that life continues through procreation, involving the union of a male and a female. This applies to all species without exception.... This law of procreation continued in operation for endless periods of time. People thought it was the only method of creation, forgetting the first event that brought man into existence, because that event was special, and could not be compared with procreation. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 267)

Qutb continues his argument emphasizing the fact of Maryam's perfect purity and chastity. She had been raised in a religious family which had a complete submission to God. She is regarded as a model of piety. She, like the rest of her family, was renowned for her devotion to God as well as her religiosity, and sincerity. Once she is screened from everyone, she receives a great shock when she sees in front of her a "well-made" man. Not knowing him, she sought God's protection. "She said: 'I seek refuge from thee to (Allah) Most Gracious: (come not near) if thou dost fear Allah'" (Surah Maryam, verse no. 18). The angel introduced himself saying, "...I am only a messenger from thy Lord (to announce) to thee the gift of a pure son'" (Surah Maryam, verse no. 19). This incident of Maryam's life stopped the most competent experienced reader to visualize this young woman, a pure devout virgin, and what she has thought of when seeing a young man in her place of privacy, telling her that he wants to give her a child. Qutb writes:

We can imagine the panic and shock that must have overwhelmed Mary when that perfect man, whom she did not yet know to be an emissary from her Lord, spoke to her. For all she knew, he might have been an assailant playing a trick on her, exploiting her innocence. Yet what he tells her, in the privacy of that



place, well away from others, is that he wants to give her a child. How shocked must Mary have been? (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 269)

By God's will, Maryam became pregnant. Her pregnancy is independent of this world's customary physical relationship. Jesus was created by a miracle, by God's word "Be", and he was. His is the power that decreed that a pure son shall be born to Maryam even though no man has touched her. "He said: 'So (it will be): thy Lord saith, 'That is easy for Me: and (We wish) to appoint him as a sign unto men and a Mercy from Us': It is a matter (so) decreed'" (Surah Maryam, verse no. 21).

Thus ends the dialogue between the angel and Maryam, leaving a gap in the story. How did it happen? Nothing is mentioned by way of explanation. At this point, Qutb tries to eliminate ambiguities so as to construct a coherent sense from the text. It is the time when the reader "having resolved a sense unresolved" to decide "what is meant by what has been said" (Fish, *Is There A Text In This Class?*, 165). Here, Qutb tries to identify the word, "Our Spirit", which is mentioned in this instance and in Surah Al-Tahrim. In Surah Maryam, the Qur'an narrates that God sent to Maryam "His Spirit" who appeared to her in the shape of a man (verse no. 17), and In surah Al-Tahrim, the phrase occurs as follows: "And Mary the daughter of Imran, who guarded her chastity; and We breathed into (her body) of Our Spirit;..." (Surah Al-Tahrim, verse no. 12). Qutb explains:

Now the question arises as to whether the reference in these two surahs is to the same thing or not. From our point of view, the references would appear to be different on each occasion. In the present surah, Mary, it refers to Gabriel, the Holy Spirit, who was God's emissary to Mary. In Surah 66, The Prohibition, it refers to the spirit that God breathed into Adam when He created him to make of him a human being. He again breathed of it into Mary to bring about her conception. It is this divine breathing of the spirit that gives life with all its human characteristics. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 270)

The Quran relates this unique and remarkable event, highlighting its significance, and emphasizing the fact behind creating Prophet Jesus.

While reading, the reader sees Maryam in a remote place, away from her family and community. "So she conceived him, and she retired with him to a remote place. And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree..." (Surah Maryam, verse no. 22-23). When the signs of pregnancy became apparent, Maryam withdrew to a distant place so that no body can see her in this state. She temporarily succeeded in concealing herself from the hurtful behavior of people who could not comprehend her miraculous situation. Out of her shyness and her fanciful speculations about how her people will say of her, she wished she would have been dead and not a trace of her could be found. Qutb comments that "Now she is about to be faced with a public scandal. Besides, she was in great physical pain added to her psychological distress" (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 271). In the midst of labor and childbirth, she is driven to take shelter under a palm tree. At that moment, she began to cry, "...Ah, would that I had died before this! would that I had been a thing forgotten" (Surah Maryam, verse no. 23) These words show the extreme state of anxiety of Maryam. Maryam's thought coincides with her internal struggle. Her thoughts flow directly to us from the mind of the character herself. It is part of her consciousness. The dominance of the text, here, is apparent. It guides and controls the reader's production of meaning. It is "a frame within which the reader must construct for himself the aesthetic object" (*The Act of Reading*, 107). The text directs the reader to one particular end—Maryam's humanity. God deliberately conveys to us what is happening in Maryam's mind. Her words are a mental reaction of her sensory experience which translates her sensation into words. Maryam can feel God's protection and grace, and she feels the miracle God puts in her, yet, she is a human being. Qutb states, "We almost see her face, feel her confusion, and sense her agony as she wishes herself into oblivion" (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 271).

While she was struggling toward a date tree in the full throes of labor pains, a voice from below called her:

But (a voice) cried to her from beneath the (palm-tree): 'Grieve not! For thy Lord hath provided a rivulet beneath thee; And shake towards thyself the trunk of the palm-tree: It will let fall fresh ripe dates upon thee. So eat and drink and cool (thine) eye. And if thou dost see any man, say, 'I have vowed a fast to (Allah) Most Gracious, and this day will I enter into no talk with any human being'. (Surah Maryam, verse no. 24-26)

Maryam is now facing the greatest surprise. A baby born talks to her, reaffirms her bond with her Lord, and provides her with all her needs from drink and food. He also tells her how to deal with her predicament when she meets other people. He tells her to make a vow of silence and not to speak to anyone. Qutb states:

We imagine that her surprise lingered long, and that she took a while to take stock of her situation and stretch her hand to the trunk of the tree and shake it for her meal of dates. But when she fully realized what was happening, she was reassured that God would not abandon her. Indeed, He had given her all the proof she needed. He gave her a child who spoke from the moment of his birth to explain the miracle that had brought him into being. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 272)

When Maryam returned to her people with a baby in her arms, they exclaim, "... 'O Mary! Truly a strange thing has thou brought! O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother a woman unchaste!'" (Surah Maryam, verse no. 27-28). For them, Maryam is an example of purity, a virgin dedicated to worship in the temple. They start to reproach her for having done this wicked, dreadful thing. Qutb states that their reproach takes a different tone, which is of sarcasm and ridicule. While the written text gives us the knowledge, "the unwritten part gives us the opportunity to picture things" (Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 58). They call her "sister of Aaron", who was a prophet in charge of the Temple, passing this duty to his offspring. "How ironic that the girl associated with Aaron's perfect devotion should perpetrate such an enormity" (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 272).

In her defense, she only pointed to her son, indicating that they should ask him. "...They said: 'How can we talk to one who is a child in the cradle?'" (Surah Maryam, verse no. 29). Then, a miracle happened when the baby speaks out. The Qur'an narrates:

He said: 'I am indeed a servant of Allah: He hath given me revelation and made me a prophet: And He hath made me blessed wheresoever I be, and hath enjoined on me prayer and zakat as long as I live; (He hath made me) kind to my mother, and not overbearing or unblest; So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the day that I shall be raised up to life (again)! (Surah Maryam, verse no. 30-33)

At this point, the Quranic text exerts control over the reader's apprehension. It declares Jesus' status as a servant of God. He is not God's son, nor was he divine. The text moves the Islamic scholar, Sayyid Qutb, to state the whole truth:

This is the whole truth about Jesus. It has nothing of the claims advanced by those who assign to him a divine nature, or those who make false accusations against his mother. What God states here is the complete truth, giving details of his origin and birth. There is no room for doubt or argument. It is not for God to take for Himself a son. Most sublime is He in His glory. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*, 273)

Hence, when the account of his birth has been given, the story is drawn to a close, and the reader has been driven to the conclusion. The Qur'an does not add anything beyond this scene. It does not tell how people react to this miraculous event. This is the Qur'anic method of highlighting only the most important events, as much as the lessons the reader can draw are concerned. No further details of the story are provided. It is only followed by an emphatic statement of the truth:

Such (was) Jesus the son of Mary: (it is) a statement of truth, about which they (vainly) dispute. It is not befitting to (the majesty of) Allah that He should beget a son. Glory be to Him! When He determines a matter, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is. Verily Allah is my Lord and your Lord: Him therefore serve ye: this is a way that is straight. (Surah Maryam, verse no. 34-36)

For examining Qutb's interpretation of the story of Maryam, it is clear that phenomenological perspectives overlap with psychological perspectives, and psychological perspectives overlap with sociological perspectives. There is no clearly, defined, absolute attitude. Reader-response theory of reading encompasses all of these factors. It is the outcome of recognition of the Qur'anic text as a linguistic embodiment of God's words addressed to a reader who is a necessary factor in actualizing the Qur'anic text's meaning and who, in turn, is a member of an interpretive community that governs his interpretive strategy. Recognition of the importance of all these elements in the process of comprehension is necessary to further our understanding of how the text is read and how it is interpreted.

The meaning of the Qur'anic text is not a definable entity but a dynamic happening. The reader takes the text into him, and projects his own experience onto the text in order to grasp its meaning. Thus, the reading process is a focal point, for it sets in motion a chain of activities that depends both on the reader and the text. As the reader encounters the text, his responses bring out the meaning of that text. Iser states, "effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor of the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process" (*The Act of Reading*, ix).

Further, the theory of Reader-response claims benefits for the reader. When the reader confronts the text, he encounters sides of himself that he has not known before. As a result of this confrontation, the reader will be conscious of himself and his own acts. This new awareness leads him to make a necessary reassessment of the intrinsic quality of his personality. In constituting the meaning of the text, the reader also constitutes himself. It is a self-correcting therapy in which reading leads to the discovery of the self, and in this way it changes the reader. Thus, reading really causes "a heightening of self-awareness which develops in the reading process" (*The Act of Reading*, 157).

Maryam's profound faith enables her to see God's closeness, compassion, love, help, and mercy at all times. She is fully aware that he is All-Powerful and He is the only One in whom she seeks refuge.

After the reader gathers the whole pilgrimage of the story of Maryam, and he encounters the critical moment of her life, he should be amazed by her strength and stability. She fully recognizes that God creates everything and inserts much wisdom and goodness hidden therein. Thereby, the reader comes to a heightened awareness—a realization of the truth.

The story of Maryam is narrated in a series of highly emotional scenes, portraying images that are full of life and vigor. It is as though the reader is witnessing the events as they take place. The reader can see Maryam and feel her predicament. Every word is used not only to convey information but to convey a special kind of emotion. Each moment of sensation has its own distinctive tone, which imparts a sense of harmony with the overall meaning and atmosphere. The story of Maryam in the Qur'an has brought us to that state, in which our emotion is multiplied ten-fold, into which it has brought in us a more lasting impression.

The Qur'an, by its very nature, offers us the data which is the words of truth. It is created for a reader—a reader sufficiently attentive and responsive to what he is reading. Then, the reader is asked to make deductions from such data, and at the same time to live the experience with which he is confronted on the printed page. This explains the varied encounters between the reader and the words on the page. We all confront the same words on the printed page and gather from them a similar meaning; our intellect grasps the essential content and the data furnished in front of us. But the question recurs: do we experience the book in the same way? There lie all the differences of opinion that divide reader and reader.

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