

Deconstructing Islamic Tradition: A Panacea or a Profanity

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Abstract

Deconstruction, a keyword in postmodernism and a highly debatable term, challenges logo centrism in all its forms. The theory of Deconstruction rejects the idea of a singular meaning in a text and argues that every individual reader creates his/her own meaning. The theories of Death of author and birth of reader by Roland Barthes and the later the use of Deconstruction by Jacques Derrida made it a significant part of literary discourses. Some Muslim intellectuals such as Mohammed Arkoun, and Muhammad Shahrour have not only challenged the traditional notions of orthodoxy but have also used the post-structural and deconstructive ideological equipment to rethink the ideology of Islam. Arkoun, in his reformist agenda along with his criticism on the Western notions of reformation, contends that the task for Muslim intellectuals today is to mount a critique of traditional Islamic modes of reasoning because they confuse historically rooted traditional interpretations with the content of divine revelation. He has also given lines of action for reform. The deconstruction of the traditional exegesis or orthodoxy is just one dimension of the problem; the reconstruction of the heritage of knowledge passed on by our ancestors is more important. The article consists of the introduction and main tenets of Deconstruction theory proposed by Jacques Derrida and the application of this theory on the reading of *Qur'ānic* text and possible impact. In this regards a brief review of the theories of Muhammed Arkoun, Muhammad Shahrour has been presented.

Keywords: Post-structuralism, Orthodoxy, *Qur'ān*, Tradition, Arkoun, Reformist

Introduction:

One of the greatest dilemmas faced by Muslim thinkers is of reconciliation, or if one may say, of establishing a legitimate link between orthodoxy and the realm of rationality. One may argue that no such link exists, or that the very attempt to create a connection like this may prove futile. What is the need to legitimize the past? Why not re-examine it in the light of a modern intellectual framework? Deconstruction, though the bane of the traditionalists, provides one such framework. This article examines how some Muslim thinkers have used it to challenge the Islamic tradition as we know it.

As the keyword underpinning postmodernity, deconstruction challenges logocentrism in all its forms. It is about deconstructing the notions of truth, hegemony of reason and claims of enlightenment. Deconstruction is a difficult term to define. In fact, it challenges its own definition. At its heart, deconstruction is concerned with language. It is not simply about rejection or negation of certain ideas in philosophy. Rather, as an initial pointer, the strategy of deconstruction involves first the reversal, and then the disruption of traditional philosophical oppositions.

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Deconstruction gained currency through the writings of Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Julia Kristeva (1941) who have been its most powerful proponents. However, the writings of French post-structuralism Jacques Derrida popularized the deconstruction. He rejected the idea that a text has singular meaning or singular purpose and argues that every individual reader creates (rather constructs) his/her own meaning of the text.¹ While explaining the concept of deconstruction Derrida notes,

Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to neutralization: it must, by means of a double code or gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system. It is only on this condition that deconstruction will provide itself the means with which to *intervene* in the field of oppositions that it criticizes, which is also a field of non-discursive forces. Each concept, moreover, belongs to a systematic chain, and itself constitutes a system of predicates. There is no metaphysical concept in and for it. There is a work--- metaphysical or not---on conceptual systems. Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the non-conceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated.²

The definition of deconstruction quoted above as given by Derrida specifies that deconstruction involves analysis of texts. It seeks to expose, and then to subvert, the various binary oppositions such as presence/absence, speech/writing and so forth that dominate our ways of thinking.³ Deconstruction has been applied in a number of ways in terms of culture but it is mainly concerned with the problems of the meanings of the text, as Derrida claimed 'there is nothing outside the text.'⁴ Deconstructive method of reading does not uncover the meanings of words but it rejects the very idea that there is such a thing as true meaning.⁵ A text may possess so many different meanings that it cannot have a meaning. There is no guaranteed essential meaning.⁶

Deconstruction attacks the traditional belief that certain objective facts, such as the author's intention or the text's socio-cultural context, provide independent evidences for correct interpretation.⁷ On the other hand it claims that, there can always be as many

¹Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 125-126.

²Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, Translated by Alan Brass., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 329.

³ In Derrida's perception, in classical dualities of Western thought, one term is always privileged over the other: speech over writing, presence over absence, identity over difference, meaning over meaninglessness and life over death, etc. Derrida argues in *Of Grammatology* that in each case, first term is conceived as original, and superior, while the second is thought as secondary. In his opinion, these binary oppositions must be deconstructed.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 8-10.

⁵Jonathan Culler, "Jacques Derrida," in *Structuralism and Since: From Levi Strauss to Derrida*, ed. John Sturrock, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 165.

⁶John Anthony Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Wiley Blackwell, 1998); Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward, "What is Deconstruction and Where and When Does it Take Place? Making acts in Science, Building Cases in Law," *American Sociological Review* 59, no. 4 (Aug. 1994): 482-483, <http://www.jstor.org/>

⁷Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward, "What is Deconstruction and where and when does it Take Place? Making Facts in Science, Building Cases in Law", 482-483.

legitimate understandings of a text as there can be different perspectives or horizons for understanding. Consequently, there can never be an end to the work of interpretations, which would be marked by the eventual junction of all interpretations of the truth.⁸

Deconstruction collapses the internal conceptual hierarchies of a text and questions its covert assumptions, revealing the constructive and selective decisions that create distinctions between subject and object, signifier and referent, the word and the world, popular and serious culture, reason and rhetoric, science and art, and speech and writing which are subsequently imploded and inverted. The dominant discourse and metanarratives of modernity, i.e., reason, emancipation, autonomy, and progress, have established their regime at the expense of silenced minorities and oppressed viewpoints.⁹ For Derrida, deconstruction not only aims to transform, to displace, the dominant discourses and metanarratives of modernity, i.e., reason, emancipation, autonomy, and progress, which have established their regime at the expense of silenced minorities and oppressed viewpoints but to turn [such] concepts against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them.¹⁰ Therefore, the objective of deconstruction is to irritate, if not overthrow, this regime by pointing to its arbitrary status.

An opposition that is deconstructed is not destroyed or abandoned but re-inscribed. What deconstruction proposes is not an end to distinctions, not an indeterminacy that makes meaning, but the invention of the reader. The play of the meaning is the result of what Derrida calls “the play of the word,” in which the general text always provides further connections, correlations, and contexts.

Deconstructing the Orthodoxy and Traditional Exegesis of the *Qur’ān*:

Deconstructive reading of sacred texts such as *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah* not only encourages a closer reading of the *Qur’ān* and *Sunnah* but also challenges the traditional and established notions of orthodoxy¹¹ and classical exegesis of the *Qur’ān*.¹² Whether this philosophy of challenging the traditional exegesis is wrong or right, there are some Muslim thinkers who have started deconstructing the established notions of orthodoxy; thus not only challenging the traditional exegesis of the *Qur’ān* but also proclaiming to revisit these exegeses. The names of Muḥammad Arkoun from Algeria, Muḥammad Shahrour from Syria, Aḥmad Khalafallah and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abu Zaid from Egypt, are among those who have developed their arguments along postmodern philosophical lines to rethink Islam.

At this point, it must be kept in mind that the slogans for reformation and rethinking of orthodoxy are not new. Early Muslim modernists, Muḥammad Ábdūh, Sir Sayyid, Syed Amir Ali and others, had showed their concerns on the traditional model of atomistic interpretations of classical exegetes, moving from one verse to another verse without considering the socio-historical context.

However, Fazlur Rahman’s ((1919-1988) work in this regard is considered a milestone who not only challenged the traditional hermeneutical method of atomist

⁸Ibid.

⁹ “What is Deconstruction and where and when does it Take Place? Making Facts in Science, Building Cases in Law”, 482-483.

¹⁰ “What is Deconstruction and where and when does it Take Place?”, 482-483.

¹¹ M. A. Habib in this regard mentions the concept of infallible Imam used by Al-Ashari for Imam Aḥmad b Ḥanbal. He also wants us to challenge the authority of ashariites as orthodox creed.

¹² M. A Habib, “Deconstruction and Islam”, January 4, 2005.

exegesis of *Qur'ān* but also took up the task of devising a systematic methodology. He proposed the contextualist methodology¹³ and affirmed that the *Asbāb al-Nuzūl* (the historical circumstances surrounding a specific revelation) should be used to ensure the pronouncement in accordance with the *élan* of the *Qur'ān*.

With the advent of contentious postmodern theories of literary-historical analysis and linguistic deconstruction, Muslim scholars also engaged themselves with the *Qur'ān*. The work of postmodernists differ from the modernists, as they have not only challenged the traditional concepts of orthodoxy but have also used the postmodern and post-structural linguistic methodologies for rethinking of Islam.

Egyptian literary critic Amīn al-Khulī and Muḥammad Khalafallah (1916-1991) argued for the kerygmatic rather than the historical nature of *Qur'anic* narratives on the basis of literary analysis. Muḥammad Arkoun is of the most important thinkers in his reformist agenda and critique of traditional notions of Islam.

Muhammed Arkoun: Deconstructing the Islamic Thought:

Arkoun is a North African Francophile who has studied and taught in Paris for most of his life. His project is inspired by the French school of post-structuralist deconstructionism, which has escalated a critique of post-Enlightenment modernity.¹⁴ In this regard, Arkoun has attracted some Western scholars to experiment with postmodern methods of reading Islamic texts. His discourse is imbued with the words and terms used by post structural philosophers. For example, he uses the word *sign*, according to which realities are expressed through languages as systems of *signs*. Arkoun's assessment of modernity and Islam is not a general critique of religion based on traditional religious arguments but rather on postmodern critical theory. His critique includes radical rethinking of Islam as a cultural and religious system. This appraisal necessarily follows that a philosophical perspective should be adopted in combination with an anthropological and historical approach.¹⁵

Like most other contemporary Muslim intellectuals, Muhammed Arkoun is harshly critical of European colonialism and Orientalism.¹⁶ On the other side, as a Muslim he is self-critical of the Islamic response to modernity as well.¹⁷

¹³He identified the root cause of problem in traditional Hermeneutics which does not take into account the politico-socio context of the verse in which it was revealed (Many issues of Muslim World are due the literal understanding of the verses and quoting them out of the context such as extremism and fundamentalism). According to Fazlur Rahman, this gap in interpretation created the gulf between the Muslims and the spirit of the *Qur'ān* which he nominated as *élan* of the *Qur'ān*. To remove this gulf, a comprehensive study of the *Qur'ān* is required to ascertain principles and objectives through which *élan* of the *Qur'ān* can be re-captured.

¹⁴Ursula Günther, "Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān*, ed. SuhaTaji Farouki, (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 131; Richard C Martin, Mark R. Woodward, *Defenders of Reason In Islam: Mu 'tazilism from Medieval Scholars to Modern Symbol*, 206; Majid Fakhri, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 396-398. (third edition)

¹⁵"Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān*, 131.

¹⁶Muhammad Arkoun, "Rethinking Islam Today," *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Sciences*, 588, *Islam: Enduring Myths and Changing Realities* (Jul. 2003): 19; Muhammed Arkoun, "Islam, Europe, the West: Meaning at Stake and the Will to Power," in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, ed. John Cooper, Ronald Nettle and Mohamed

For Arkoun, believers belonging to monotheistic religions should “envisage the question of meaning, not from the angle of transcendence –, that is, of an ontology sheltered from historicity – but in the light of historical forces that transmute the most sacred values.”¹⁸ He contends that the task of Muslim intellectuals today is to mount a critique of traditional Islamic modes of reasoning because they confuse historically rooted traditional interpretations with the content of divine revelation.¹⁹

He has given a new name to the monotheistic religions as *societies of book/Book*.²⁰ Arkoun argues that “Holy Scriptures,” such as the *Qur’ān* and Bible, should not only be open to “historical, sociological, and anthropological” analyses, but should also challenge “all sacralizing and transcending interpretations produced by traditional reasoning.”²¹ Although he refers to the “demystification and demythologization of the phenomenon of the Book/book,”²² the approach is different from biblical criticism which deconstructed the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. He explains the concept of postmodern rationalism in the following words,

Modern rationality restores the psychological and cultural functions of myth and develops a global strategy of knowledge in which the rational and the imaginary interact perpetually to produce individual and historical existence. We must abandon the dualist framework of knowledge that pits reason against imagination, history against myth, true against false, good against evil, and reason against faith. We must postulate a plural, changing welcoming sort of rationality, one consistent with the psychological operations that the *Qur’ān* locates in the heart and that contemporary anthropology attempts to reintroduce under the label of the imaginary.²³

In his conceptual framework for rethinking Islam,²⁴ Arkoun has introduced the historical categories of *thinkable*, *unthinkable*, *unthought* and *imaginaire*.²⁵ In his works, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (2002), and *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert* (2006),²⁶ he has discussed these themes at length and characterized the crisis of contemporary Islamic thought in terms of the *thinkable* and the *unthinkable*, or the conflict between what is thought along orthodox or authoritative lines and what is excluded as intellectually or politically subversive.²⁷ *Unthought* and *unthinkable* cannot be understood without considering the dogmatic enclosure and the orthodox

Mahmood, (New York: I. B Tauris & Co, Ltd, 2000), 172; Muhammed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert* (London: Saqi Books, 2006), 58-59.

¹⁷ Muhammad Arkoun, “Rethinking Islam Today”, 19.

¹⁸ Muhammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, trans. Robert D. Lee, (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1994), 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁰ Muhammed Arkoun, “Rethinking Islam Today”, 30-31.

²¹ Muhammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, p.36

²² *Ibid.*, 37.

²³ *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, 36.

²⁴ Muhammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: Saqi Books, 2002), 9; “Rethinking Islam Today,” 20-22, 28-31.

²⁵ Muhammed Arkoun, “Rethinking Islam Today”, 28.

²⁶ *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert*; This book is actually revised edition of *The Unthought in the Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

²⁷ Muhammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* 9; “Rethinking Islam Today”, 20-22, 28-31.

understanding of truth. This is because orthodox discourses laid down the limits of the domain of the *thinkable*, fixing simultaneously the domain of the *unthought* and *unthinkable*.²⁸ Therefore, the notion of orthodoxy, for Arkoun is 'one of the keys to rethink the whole theology of Islam.'²⁹ Orthodoxy in his vision is no more than an official religion resulting from the collaboration of a majority of so called '*ulama*' within the state. It is a system of values which functions primarily to guarantee the protection and the security of a particular group.³⁰ Arkoun asserts that religious orthodoxy plays an important role in monopolizing the definition and interpretation with regard to sacred texts; and secondly, for establishing the interconnection of theology.³¹ He asserts that the phenomenon of orthodoxy is responsible for dogmatic enclosure³² and logocentric version of religion.³³ He defines dogmatic enclosure as a decisive break within the history of Islamic thought, putting an end to the innovative period of philosophical thought while contributing to the closing of the *Bāb al-Ijtihād* (doors of *ijtihad*).³⁴

This notion and phenomenon of orthodoxy illustrated by Arkoun is equivalent to an ideological and therefore a historical process³⁵ and goes hand in hand with reconsideration of the concept of revelation as well.³⁶ The socio-political and historical context of the formation and consolidation of this formative process provides the necessary analytical framework and categories for a critical and radical rethinking of Islam.³⁷ Such a perspective opens up new space for thought and interpretation and paves the way for an open interpretation of the *Qur'ān*, that is, a plurality of readings.³⁸

²⁸“Rethinking Islam Today”, 21; “Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 147.

²⁹“Rethinking Islam Today”, 22, 27; “Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 138.

³⁰Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 139.

³¹*Ibid.*, 139.

³²“The term dogmatic enclosure applies to the totality of the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes which allow a system of belief and unbelief to operate freely without any competing action from inside or outside. A strategy of refusal, consisting of an arsenal of discursive constraints and procedures, permits the protection and, if necessary, the mobilization of what is presumptuously called faith (q.v)...No green light has ever been given to a deconstruction of the axioms, tenets and themes that hold together and establish the adventurous cohesion of every faith. Dogmatic enclosure guarantees consistency and coherence of the corresponding tradition or orthodoxy because the group members share the same framework of perception and representation/expression. Furthermore, it explains the fact that discontinuities within Islamic thought and history have not been picked out as a theme but rather disappeared in the sphere of the *unthought* and *unthinkable*. That is exactly what needs to be deconstructed in order to establish the prerequisite for a reassessment. Moreover a deconstruction of the putative continuity explains the variety within Islamic thought to be considered as constructs and projections.” (“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 132.

³³*Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?* 9-20; “Rethinking Islam Today”, 21-22.

³⁴“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 132.

³⁵Mohammed Arkoun, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, 1st ed., s.v. “Islamic Studies: Methodologies”.

³⁶*The Unthought in the Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 46; In the view of Arkoun, revelation is placed in the realm of *unthinkable* and that's why it also requires reconsideration while keeping in mind the psychological, historical, social and anthropological perspectives.

³⁷“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 141.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 141.

At the same time, it lays the basis for religious anthropology.³⁹ Arkoun attributes his notion of revelation with the concept of *Qur'ānic* and *Islamic event/fact*. *Qur'ānic* and *Islamic fact/event* differentiates between a linguistic event (revelation of *Qur'ān*) and the consolidation of the new religion, that is between the period of revelation shaped by the *Qur'ānic* or prophetic discourse which ended with the death of Muḥammad (SAW) in 632 AD, and the fixation of revelation as a written document resulting in the determination of the reading which is supposed to have been effected from 661 AD onwards. The concept of the *Islamic fact/event* takes into account that Islam, as a system of belief, has been used for ideological and political purposes in order to legitimize and maintain power.⁴⁰ His thinking can be understood from the following lines,

The transformation of the *Qur'ānic fact/event* into the *Islamic fact/event* hides three turning points with regard to the development of the *Qur'ān*, altering the boundaries between the *thinkable*, *unthought* and *unthinkable*. “Firstly, revelation, i.e., *Qur'ānic fact/event* or rather *Qur'ānic* discourse (610-623 CE). Secondly, collection and canonization of the *mushaf* (632-936 CE), i.e. official closed corpus and beginning of the *Islamic fact/event* or rather the Islamic discourse. Thirdly, the period of orthodoxy (936-...), i.e., the formation of a new *imaginaire* within the Muslim community and the shaping of the *thinkable*, the *unthinkable*, and *unthought* as well as Islamic reason.⁴¹

To comprehend the categories of *thinkable*, *unthinkable* and *unthought*, one can say that the *thinkable* of a linguistic community covers all that one is able to think and express with regard to the historical circumstances and in connection with their intellectual possibilities.⁴² Classical exegesis played a decisive role in the formulation of the *thinkable* and the *Islamic fact/event*. Beyond the bounds of the *thinkable* is the *unthinkable* which contains all that is forbidden historically or politically to be thought or expressed.⁴³ Both historiography and *usul* widened the sphere of the *unthinkable* by selection and exclusion which resulted in a construct of history that could be controlled and channeled within the fixed bounds of orthodoxy.⁴⁴ The *unthought* is the equivalent to the total of the *unthinkable*. It embraces all of a particular time beyond the bounds of knowledge. The assumption of the historicity of a discourse that became an officially closed corpus is still part of the *unthought*. All that has been rejected and marginalized, as well as forgotten, is likewise part of the *unthought*.⁴⁵

³⁹“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 141.

⁴⁰The same concept of power and authority underlies the thought of Arkoun of which Foucault and Nietzsche were advocates.

⁴¹“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 141.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 148-149.

⁴³Arkoun has quoted three examples of how thinkable converted to unthinkable. 1. Before the systematization by Shafi‘i of the concept of *Summa* and the *usuli* use of it, many aspects of Islamic thought were still thinkable. They became unthinkable after the triumph of Shafi‘i’s theory and also the elaboration of “authentic” collections. 2. The problems related to the historical process of collecting the *Qur'ān* in an official *mushaf* became more and more thinkable under the official pressure of the caliphate because the *Qur'ān* has been used since the beginning of the Islamic State to legitimize political power and to unify *Umma*. 3. The third conversion of thinkable to unthinkable was the declaration of the *aqida* of “uncreated *Qur'ān*” as the Orthodox. (Muhammed Arkoun, “Rethinking Islam Today,”), 28-29.

⁴⁴“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 132.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 148-149; “Rethinking Islam Today”, 21.

The last and final historical category of *imaginaire* introduced by Arkoun performs the task of deconstruction. “*Imaginaire* describes the realm of reception and combination of images and imaginations with regard to reality that is accepted in a given social group sharing the same historical context.”⁴⁶ It is a concept for appropriate reading of societies and to assess societal phenomena on the level of symbolic structures which refer to the construction and perception of reality in a given society.⁴⁷ “It allows explanations of the usual operations of mythologisation, socialization, mystification, ideologisation, even transcendentalisation that social actors support according to their positions and roles within society. [...]”⁴⁸ Arkoun asserts that on the basis of this *imaginaire*, real historical events transform into paradigms and become an essential reference for human existence, and therefore are embedded in the *imaginaire* of a society or a group. To elucidate the concept of *imaginaire*, he has given the example of the society of Medina. Religious consciousness is shaped by the paradigm of the ideal society, as perceived in the historical experience of Medina, which in turn underwent interpretations on the part of orthodoxy.⁴⁹ This *imaginaire* is strong to an extent that it does not make any difference whether the imagination of the ideal society corresponds to reality at the time or not. Arkoun contends that as long as the *imaginaire* is taken for reality and not identified as imaginations about reality, there is a risk of its becoming an instrument of politics.⁵⁰ *Imaginaire* completes the concepts of the *Qur’ānic* and Islamic fact/event as well as the *unthought* and *unthinkable*.

Arkoun’s broader project of the critique of Islamic reason (which is inextricably linked to a rethinking of Islamic thought) demands deconstruction of centuries of Islamic thought which demands considerable expenditure of energy, time and familiarity with Islamic-Occidental- Christian history as well as recent developments and discourses in the field of humanities and social sciences. His project of deconstruction requires attention to the application of linguistics, semiotics and critical discourse analysis while interpreting the *Qur’ān*.⁵¹ Classical exegesis must be revisited in order to disclose its contribution to the formation and consolidation of the *imaginaire* and the *unthought* and *unthinkable*.⁵² “Furthermore, an approach similar to the principles of Tillich, Bultmann or Bart should also be adopted by Muslim theologians.”⁵³

Arkoun’s critique of Islamic reason aims to emancipate the minds of modern Muslim believers from dogmatic ideas and religious authorities who are merely human and occupy a particular place in history but claim to be divine and unquestionable. By making freedom the underlying, central theme in his works, Arkoun seeks to promote critical thinking about the past and the future, ultimately helping Muslims to enable themselves to actively contribute to the progress of human civilization and engage in meaningful exchange of knowledge with others in the world community toward the realization of liberty and equality for all.

⁴⁶“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 137-139.

⁴⁷*Islam: To Reform or to Subvert*, 27.

⁴⁸Arkoun has mentioned three types of *imaginaires*: religious, social and individual. According to him, religious *imaginaire* supersedes the other two.

⁴⁹“Rethinking Islam Today”, 33

⁵⁰“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 151.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 153.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 153.

⁵³“Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a Radical Rethinking of Islamic Thought”, 153.

Syrian Muḥammad Shahrour is also set to devise a framework to interpret the *Qur'ān*. He has moved the concept of “*the form is permanent but the content moves*” regarding the interpretation of the *Qur'ān*. He has comprehensively challenged the traditional perspectives of the *Qur'ān*. He wants his readers to understand the *Qur'ān* as “if the Prophet (SAW) has just died and informed us of the book.”⁵⁴ In his proposal of hermeneutics of the *Qur'ān*, he makes distinction between the absolute divine and the relative human applicable to the *Qur'ānic* text itself. He differentiates between the permanence of the textual form and the movement of its content.⁵⁵ The textual, linguistic form is the divine word of Allah and is divinely immutable while the content is materialized by the readers, whose context is changing from one generation to another generation, thus establishing a constantly moving content. Thus, he shows his break with the traditional interpretations of the *Qur'ān*.⁵⁶ He tried to revive the timeless message of Ibn-e-Rushd (Averroes), that revelation and reason has no contradiction.⁵⁷ Though it is true that he has not received recognition like the above mentioned two names, he still has been named as Martin Luther of Islam⁵⁸ and Immanuel Kant in Islam.⁵⁹

Revisiting Sacred Text through Gender Lens:

Muslim feminists' critique on traditional exegesis of the *Qur'ān* and demand for revisiting ‘patriarchal sources of *Sunnah*’ is also deconstructive reading. These feminists want to deconstruct the patriarchal exegesis of *Qur'ān* and make a case for revisiting these texts from a woman's perspective.⁶⁰ Fatima Mernissi, a North African Francophile, while aware of literary criticism and methods of critical discourse analysis have challenged the orthodox notions of veil and *qawwama* and democracy.⁶¹ Her writings indicate that she has been influenced by Edward Said and Foucault.⁶² In the same way, Amina Wadud has deconstructed the traditional patriarchal exegesis of the *Qur'ān*.

Deconstruction – Inviting Spiritual Void:

One is tempted to ask; is the deconstructive approach too critical, too rational, and too skeptical? If all sacred texts have to pass through the lens of deconstruction, then are we doomed to a vacuum of nothingness where spirituality is lost in the labyrinth of critical re-examination?

⁵⁴Andreas Christmann, “The Form is Permanent but the Content Moves’: the *Qur'ānic* text and its Interpretation(s) in MohamadShahrour’s al Kitabwa-al *Qur'ān*,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān*, 263.; same article first published in *Die Welt des Islams, New Series* 43, Issue 2 (2003), 143-144.

⁵⁵ “The Form is Permanent but the Content Moves”, 150.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Loay Mudhon, “The Reformist Thinker Muhammad Sharur in the Footsteps of Averroes,” trans. John Bergeron, 6.

<http://www.deenresearchcenter.com/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=2fdRQyT4Nd8%3D&tabid=58&mid=706&language=en-US>

⁵⁸The Form is Permanent but the Content Moves’: the *Qur'ānic* text and its interpretation(s) in Mohamad Shahrour’s al Kitabwa-al *Qur'ān*,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān*, 264.

⁵⁹D. F. Eikleman, “Islamic Religious Commentary and Lesson Circles: Is there a Copernican Revolution?” in *Commentaries – Kommentare*, ed.G. W. Most (Gottingen, 1991), 140.

⁶⁰Amina Wadud has interpreted the *Qur'ān* and has reread it from a woman's perspective.

⁶¹Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), xv-xvi; Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*. Trans. Mary Jo Lakeland Reading, (Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1992), 26-36.

⁶²*Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu'tazilism from Mediaeval School to Modern Symbol*, 207.

In the opinion of M. A. R Habib, deconstruction encourages one to challenge the mythical image of Islam which is beyond the reach of real time and real history. Its basic notions with reference to Islam can help to challenge the orientalist construction of Islam where Islam appears as irrational, having negative sets of characteristics as opposed to the Western Enlightenment comprising of freedom and liberalism and having organized political systems.⁶³ Deconstruction can also help Muslims to undermine the binary oppositions between the Orient and the Occident in which one is endowed with qualities of rationality and enlightenment, and the other is associated with barbarism and fundamentalism.⁶⁴

The work of postmodern Muslim intellectuals described above is based on Derridean deconstruction. Although deconstruction claims the autonomy of text, for some Muslim scholars, this autonomy is nothing except reading the text with its internal meanings and texts.⁶⁵ But on the other hand it also challenges the interpretations of foundational texts of Muslims by the learned scholars. Elemessiri describes this free play of the sign as negative which leaves texts merely 'black and blank':

Once the signs are emancipated from the transcendental signified, every sign would refer to another sign, which in turn, would refer to a third. Deconstruction vertigo would then begin. Limitless interpretation, an unrestricted semantic play that is no longer anchored in any signified, would be the result. Texts would become mere 'black on blank,' or like the words in a dictionary where every word to another with no centre to stop the play the of sign, "the dance of the pen." Everything is everything else, and everything is nothing else. Or, as Derrida put it in his inflated and unnecessarily convoluted style. "What is not deconstruction? Everything of course. What is deconstruction? Nothing, of course."⁶⁶

The claim of rethinking the interpretations of sacred Islamic texts should not be discouraged since there is no argument that Muslims need to structuralize many of their religious texts and historical events. However, the methodologies offered by the postmodernists go far beyond the target. This de-sacralizing of the text makes it impossible to recover the original text. When the sacred text, idea, personality and event is subjected to this social, critical and post-structural analysis, it becomes void of all spiritual and venerable qualities. The final result of this sort of analysis makes it just a historical document and nothing more.⁶⁷

⁶³M. A Habib, "Deconstruction and Islam", January 4, 2005, <http://www.marhabib.org/talks/deconstructionandislam.html>

⁶⁴M. A Habib, "Deconstruction and Islam", January 4, 2005.

⁶⁵Dr Syed Noumanul Haq, Interview by author, Tape Recording, Lahore. February 18, 2011.

⁶⁶"The Dance of the Pen, The Play of the Sign: A Study in the Relationship between Modernity, Immanence, and Deconstruction", 11.

⁶⁷Basit Bilal Koshul, "Recounting the Milestones: An Appraisal of Islam's encounter with Modernity," Part III, in *The Qur'ānic Horizons* (July-September, 1999), 42.