

Secular Trauma and Religious Myth: The Case of Said Nursi Bediuzzaman's *Risale-i Nur*

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Thanks to the *Risale-i Nur*, the Turks managed to maintain their religion despite the most despotic regimes of the past decades. Although its author faced unbearable persecution, imprisonment, and exile, while no effort was spared to put an end to his service to faith, he was able to complete his writings comprising the *Risale-i Nur* and raise a vast group of believers who courageously opposed the oppression and preserved the dominance of Islam in the country.

This statement can be found on most websites that introduce Said Nursi Bediuzzaman (1878-1960), the spiritual leader of perhaps the most influential Islamic movement in modern Turkey, 'Nurculuk', to an Anglophone audience. Nursi's *Risale-i Nur* functions as a foundation text for a growing Islamic

community both within Turkey and worldwide, who view it as a guide through an inner spiritual journey, apolitical Islamism or a type of Sufism. It is, however, also a product of witnessing and responding to three distinct political regimes in Turkey from that of Sultan Abdülmecit, to the Young Turks and the secular, Kemalist Turkish Republic. Most importantly, the popular image of Nursi as resisting to the aggressive secular reforms of Mustafa Kemal—as can be observed in the description above—makes it a product of cultural as well as political collective consciousness.

The claim for *Risale*'s apoliticism has largely to do with the nature of the text itself. The text's success is often tied to the de-territorializing and universalist approach to Islam and its fusion of symbols and imagery from the positive sciences of the West with the narratives of the Qur'an and local folklore. Nursi's insistence on the adherence to the text of the Qur'an with the guidance of his own *Risale*—rather than a specific political cause, a saintly figure or a sacred location—is also another quality which contributes to the claim for apoliticism. Followers often approach the *Risale* as a sort of 'Bildungsroman', that guides them through the trials and tribulations of facing rapid Westernization with an attraction to a rich and lost Islamic tradition. *Risale* is six thousand pages long, fragmented and possibly subjected to continuous editing. Although its structure and content does not lend itself to any known literary genre, *Risale*

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can be viewed as a unified text since it has a place in the collective consciousness of its followers as a singularly redeeming “book.” Therefore it is curious that it remains largely ignored by scholars of cultural and literary studies, even though Nursi’s life, influence and Qur’anic commentary often spark sociological and theological interests. More importantly, this text, which has become such a wide social phenomenon in Turkey with impacts abroad, is mostly studied by scholars who are to a great extent sympathetic to either the text itself or the Nur movement. I argue there is great potential in reading *Risale* through the terms of literary and cultural criticism as it offers a case of scriptural interpretation encountering literary modernity that foregrounds individual enlightenment, while at the same time, is a part of modern book culture coinciding with the rapid spread of print media in a modernizing Turkey. In that sense, it is not only suitable to be studied under postcolonial literary studies but also literary theory in general in that it poses questions about the use of literary devices in religious texts and their role in forming and maintaining collective identities and political communities.

One of the benefits of reading *Risale* discursively is to repudiate the general perception of it as a rejection of political life¹. Nursi’s political “silence” and the myths about his exilic pacifism that followed the establishment of the secular Turkish Republic of Kemal Ataturk, I argue, construct the radical introduction of secularism and the interruption of a religious past

by Westernizing governments in Turkey as a ‘cultural trauma’. Such trauma then is used to construct a collective identity for which the *Risale* serves as a foundational text. The text memorializes the repressed Muslim past and constructs a mythopoeic repository for a Muslim identity that can counter the rapid bureaucratization of culture by the secular Republic. *Risale*, therefore, provides a textual example of how genres of competing historical narratives and redemptive tragedies emerge, and eventually lead to spiritually transformed and politically active communities.

Cultural Trauma, Collective Identity and Prophetic Narrations

Employing the concept of trauma, both social and individual, for literary and cultural analysis in terms of their representations, dispersions and manifestations is not a new interest in literary criticism. However, it gained significance in the last two decades as a means of politicizing and mobilizing literary studies and expanding literary text to historical narratives and historiography, particularly in the context of the Holocaust². The term cultural trauma in this essay is used in the sense that social theorists Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka define it in their collaborative work *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity* (2004). This “cultural trauma theory” distinguishes itself from previous approaches to collective trauma

(what the authors call “lay trauma theories”) in that they focus on the social process of cultural trauma—based on Weberian constructivism—rather than assuming it as “naturally existing” phenomenon or a humane reaction to forced abrupt change or threat to identity. These theorists argue that cultural trauma is constructed by creating “new meaningful and casual relationships between previously unrelated events, structures, perceptions, and actions,” once a commonly perceived “source of suffering” is identified (Alexander 1). Alexander, for example, notes that through this process “societies expand the circle of the we;” that is, their response to the trauma leads to a more comprehensive political action and responsibility; thus, the perceived trauma is not only memorialized through forms of cultural representation but they also offer “progressive narratives,” meaning that they tend to prescribe a utopian future (8). Most importantly—and this is how it is different from previous theories on collective trauma—this trauma theory acknowledges that such social groups often “refuse to recognize the existence of others’ trauma” or, depending on the success of their imaginative language, are able to assimilate other forms of a suffering under a single trauma as signifier. Nursi’s *Risale-i Nur*, with its insistence on a direct relationship to the text, with its claim for a “*jihad* of the word” that guides a spiritual transformation, which however also externalizes the suffering to a vague Western agent, constitutes a perfect example for what Alexander and

his colleagues describe in their book as “trauma process” (11). *Risale*, in that sense, in its entirety captures “the imaginative process of representation” that gives the “actors a sense of experience of a trauma,” rather than the other way around, namely, when representation naturally follows a traumatic event (Alexander 9). At the same time, cultural trauma theory is different than Benedict Anderson’s theory on “imagined communities,” since the latter implies that traumas or nation building myths are constructed entirely of imaginative, i.e. unreal and nonexistent events (see Anderson). Cultural trauma theory extends its focus from national ideologies to other smaller and sometimes resisting and liberative political communities, and is not interested in the question whether a traumatic event has actually occurred. It focuses solely on the process of trauma construction. In fact, cultural trauma theorists do not correlate the reality of the event with the effects of the trauma at all. Alexander for example comments that some massive social disruptions might never be represented as a cultural crisis, and smaller events can easily be constructed as trauma. Utilizing “speech act theory,” cultural trauma theorists pay attention to the process in which trauma is created as a “new master narrative” through the unique interaction between speaker, audience and situation (Alexander 11). The “speakers,” or agents, in trauma construction are “carrier groups”—a term the authors borrow from Weber’s sociology of religion—who have both “ideal and material interest” and

are effective in “meaning making,” for example, “prestigious religious leaders” or “spiritual pariahs” (Alexander 11). In my analysis, I assume the presence of a collective authorship for the *Risale* as a “carrier group.” Rather than going into detailed search for authors, editors and translators of the collected text or accounting the biography of Said Nursi Bediuzzaman—most of the existing works on the Nur movement already do that—I take the text itself as an agent of trauma construction through its use of imagery and symbols. The figure of Nursi will only be important as a Foucauldian subject who is embedded in and influential on a network of discourses.

There are two main characteristics of the *Risale* that makes it particularly suitable for the construction of a historical trauma and in turn a collective identity. Enthusiasts of the text often claim that it is beautifully rich in imagery, and that it also draws attention to the beauty of the Qur’an itself. While this might be true, a constructivist perspective suggested by cultural trauma theory prompts us to see “beauty” as a social construction rather than an intrinsic value. Besides this emphasis on the aesthetic value, most of *Risale*’s devoted readership seems to value the continuity and consistency of Nursi’s ideas, which lends itself well to the concept of prophetic or circular narration as a cultural representation of trauma. Nursi’s official English translator and biographer Şükran Vahide comments that “despite the apparent differences in conditions in Nursi’s lifestyle [referring

to his exile during the early years of the Republic], there are numerous points of similarity and continuity in his ideas” (Vahide 94). I will demonstrate how, in *The Damascus Sermon*, imagery and metaphors are used to represent Western style secularism as a trauma and how continuity and consistency is emphasized by a circular and prophetic narration. However, I will first give a brief background on the historical conditions and construction of the audience that gave rise to a unique religious text as the *Risale*.

Situation / Audience: Tanzimat, The Rise of Nationalism, and the Genesis of *Risale-i Nur*

Fred A. Reed observes that “Turkey was—and remains—the great laboratory of Westernization, and the epic battleground of resistance to it,” and *Risale* doubtlessly constitutes a text that bore witness to such a process (Abu-Rabi’ 34). *Risale*, which was mainly responding to the Westernization process within the borders of the Ottoman Empire, however, also bears witness to the rise of phenomena such as European nationalism, anti-Imperialism, and global Islamic discourses, particularly, the ideology known as Pan-Islamism.

Şerif Mardin in his widely read study *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (1989) contextualizes Nursi’s thoughts and the subsequent Nur movement in a matrix consisting of the internal social and epistemological changes brought on by the rapid Tanzimat re-

forms and the international spread of nationalist ideologies originating from Europe. Mardin's is probably the only study that offers a Weberian, constructionist approach to the Nursi phenomenon similar to that of the cultural trauma theorists. First of all, Mardin observes that the education reforms of the Tanzimat "changed the rules of practice of social relations" (111). In other words, a central curriculum and text books, novels and encyclopedia replaced the traditional "master-apprentice" model of education, in which literacy and knowledge of Islam were disseminated largely through "rhyming dictionaries" and local folklore. Mardin calls this traditional system "personalistic," where social status was based on personal relations rather than certificates and qualifications. The chaos of the personalistic system, Mardin notes, was more tolerant of difference than the "procrustean systematization" introduced by the Tanzimat reformers, which brought on reactions particularly from the ulema (Muslim scholars) who were faced with losing their social status (122). Nursi's early involvement with Ottoman politics consisted of attempts to close the gaps between these two epistemological systems. For instance, in his early political campaigns he suggests the reformation of the existing medreses according to the modern sciences of the West instead of their complete removal and replacement by rüşdiyes (the secular secondary schools established by Tanzimat reformers). However, as Mardin observes, the Tanzimat reforms were still dependent on the

agents of the traditional system, simply because there were not enough educators trained in the Western system. This hybrid model was to be purified by the secular Turkish Republic in the following decades, and any sign of the old system was entirely removed from public life and bureaucracy. By then, Nursi had turned away from politics and entered a phase that Nursi himself and his biographers call the "New Said," roughly around 1921. Vahide when observing these transformative moments in *Risale*, notes that for Nursi it was the end of "an inner journey" through "subterranean tunnels," a metaphor he used for the "the way of [Western] philosophy;" a journey that finalizes with the reaching of the "light and truth of the Qur'an" (Vahide 10). I will offer a less irenic interpretation of these pejorative references to Western philosophy in the *Risale* by contextualizing this trope in the anti-colonialist sentiments already in the rise both within Europe and Turkey. I see the reactionary character of such symbolic forms in *Risale* as a reflection of the situation that prepared the audience for the master narrative of secularism as trauma.

The second factor contributing to the unique character of *Risale* as a foundational text, according to Mardin's observations, was the general atmosphere of the nineteenth-century, namely, the rise of nationalism that accompanied state centralization and systematization. Pan-Islamism was an extension of this nationalist thinking, and not simply an alternative to the

fragmented and ethnic nationalism as it may be perceived sometimes. I argue that Nursi's *Risale* integrates this ideology into its progressive narrative while at the same time representing the Western versions of nationalist ideologies as the "other" to his ideal of a unified Islam. Mardin notes that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, the nationalist ideologies together with the secularizing reforms had transformed Islam from "something that was lived and not questioned" to something more "Islamic" namely "a religion emerged on its own well-delineated field" (117). Hakan Yavuz, another sociologist, argues that "Islamic political consciousness [was formed] as an imagined community" posed against an "imagined other," which was Western culture and philosophy. Yavuz further observes "a profound paradox" in the works of modern Islamic thinkers such as Nursi in that "they want to be contemporary and up to date in terms of their references and theoretical tools, but they also want to overcome this sense of contemporaneity by positing 'retrieved' tradition to challenge modernity" (120).

Pan-Islamism as the contradictory model was not only an Ottoman response but an international affair supported by dissenting and anti-colonialist voices within Europe. It was mainly within early nineteenth-century European thought that "Islam [was] being constructed as an Utopia that offers everything that Western modernity failed to establish" (Mardin 99). For instance, German-Jewish scholars developed a sympathetic or at

least more neutral account of Islamic history partially in reaction to the rising German / Indo-European nativism and intellectual anti-Semitism they observed in their surroundings. Philosophically speaking, these Jewish scholars sided with Islam on the basis of "ethical monotheism" as an alternative to the Protestant ethics implicit in the idealist and speculative philosophies at the time³. A similar defense of ethical monotheism is a significant motive in Nursi's *Risale* in response to the "Western philosophy" he claims to have overcome before reaching the truth and light of Islam. The paradox of Pan-Islamism becomes apparent when we realize that it both constitutes a reaction against the fragmentation and nativism implied by Turkish nationalist ideologies and at the same time, it integrates the very principles of such an ideology by representing Islam as a utopian supnation. I therefore argue that explaining the case of *Risale-i Nur* in terms of Andersonian critique of nationalist ideologies, as Yavuz does in his study, is insufficient since it does not account for the reaction and resistance towards Western style secular nationalisms, which already during the Tanzimat reforms were emerging as a threat to Turkey's Muslim identity.

Agent: The Representations of Trauma in *Risale-i Nur*

As mentioned earlier, cultural trauma theory employs "speech act theory" to identify the situation, agents and audience in the trauma construction process. What sort of an agent did this background of educational reform and nationalist think-

ing create and how did it result in the rich allegories and metaphors in *Risale* that attracts so many modern readers today? First of all, we need to establish that the complete removal of the traditional system was perceived as a trauma to the collective consciousness of the Turks. Vahide observes that with the secular Republic, Islam “was to be systematically extirpated from all aspects of life,” which for Nursi meant persecution and exile, and the most importantly, the emergence of the phase referred to as “New Said.” It was in this phase that the meaning of jihad for Nursi transformed from a physical / political struggle to a jihad of the word, nonphysical jihad, or “positive action” [manevi cihad] (Vahide 98–100). Mardin comments that *Risale* took on the role of “Muslim collective representation [that] was denied a role in Republican Turkey” (157). Reed, who clearly sympathizes with Nursi’s cause, describes *Risale* as a work of “organic abundance, order and luxuriance” compared to the “the spiritual barrenness imposed by the secularists who ripped Turkey from a past of immense richness” (Abu-Rabi’ 42). What these scholars observe in common is that Nursi offers as an alternative an “imagined Islamic consciousness” in reviving the traditional Islamic symbols in *Risale* and combining them with the theories and “scientific facts” gathered selectively from the West (Yavuz 122).

Nursi’s *Damascus Sermon* was delivered in 1911 before the establishment of the Turkish Republic. However, Nursi’s

sermon already contains comments on the threat of Western secularism. As in the whole of the *Risale*, the leading motive is his “overcoming” of the Western materialist philosophies, to which he felt attracted to earlier. Here is a passage from the sermon that exemplifies the externalization of Western philosophy in *Risale*:

When on that journey of the imagination I looked at the animal kingdom through the eyes of materialist philosophy and of the people of misguidance and heedlessness, the innumerable needs of animals and their terrible hunger together with their weakness and impotence appeared to me as most piteous and grievous. I cried out. Then I saw through the telescope of Qur’anic wisdom and belief that the Divine Name of All-Merciful had risen in the sign of Provider like a shining sun; it gilded with that light of its mercy that hungry, wretched animal world. (20)

The most prominent images, as can be seen in this passage, are that of light and vision. And quite often, modern optical technologies are also used to express either the reinforcement of Qur’an’s truth, or, in some cases, as an obstacle to this truth. For example, in the next page, Nursi continues the extended metaphor of darkness / light: “I flung the spectacles of philosophy smashing them” (21). Since, the whole passages uses Western philosophy as something that shades “the truth,” we can con-

clude that these were made of tinted glasses and imagined to darken vision.

Another interesting observation can be made in the *Sermon* is that it is full of prophetic allusions. The use of the tinted spectacles is itself a futuristic reference, since at the time when the sermon was delivered in 1911, sunglasses probably were not such widely used objects. This can be explained by the fact that Nursi translated this sermon from Arabic into Turkish in the 1950s. A similar futuristic reference is made to the “atomic bomb,” as an apocalyptic event that will bring an end to disbelief. A more striking futuristic reference, which is like the other references blended into the original text of the *Sermon* as if it they have happened already, is a vague allusion to the “attacks” of the secular Republic. While *Risale* was not banned nor was Nursi himself persecuted at the time when the sermon was delivered, Nursi describes what actually happened to him after the Republic was established: “They have deprived many youths and others of the truths of belief. But their most violent attacks, vicious treatment, lies and propaganda have been directed at the *Risale-i Nur*, to destroy it and to scare people away from it and to give it up” (18). More striking is a “prophecy” that refers to a more specific event, again skillfully woven into the original sermon itself. Nursi prophesizes that “the true dawn broke in [1951] or it will break,” with both the past tense and the future tense employed (32). A outside editor, rather than ac-

knowledging Nursi’s obvious addition during translation, notes in a footnote that Nursi foresaw the election of the Democratic Party in 1950—which meant the end of his persecution and exile—through “a presentiment” (Nursi 27). The sermon contains further promises about an Islamic future, such as “the Ottoman state was pregnant with Europe and gave birth to a European state” and “Europe and America are pregnant with Islam” (35).

In short, the poetic imagination in *Risale* matches the prophetic dimension of the text to construct Turkey’s Islamic past as something that has been forcefully removed but can be revived by the will of the people. As cultural trauma theorists would put it, *Risale* exemplifies a progressive narrative with its creation of a mythopoeic repository that surpasses the genres of theology, scriptural interpretation or political manifesto, and borders at modernist literature. Mardin notes that “the allusive and metaphorical rhetoric had a direct impact on people’s hearts which theology, whether orthodox or mystical, could not match,” and interestingly compares Nursi’s style to magic realism (Mardin 176–78). Indeed, *The Damascus Sermon*, with its allusiveness offers to assimilate other instances of suffering from that historical period into a grand trauma narrative that poses Western philosophy and civilization as the perpetrators against “the truths of the Qur’an” (Nursi 9). Vahide comments that Nursi developed his notion of “Jihad of the mind” to counter the power of Western philosophy, by which he means Western materialist

philosophy, the type that possibly leads to disbelief and atheism (Vahide 111). Even though, in Nursi's view, his appeal for the hearts of the believers corresponded to a rejection of social and political life, "the luminous bond" that Nursi desired though his "jihad of the mind" is today a powerful political force that must be reckoned with (Nursi 11).

NOTES

¹According to his followers and biographers, Nursi's life has two distinguished phases throughout which he continued to write the Risale: the Old Said and the New Said. Hakan Yavuz, for example, comments that Nursi's "transitional journey" from Old Said to New Said coincides precisely with the official declaration of the Turkish Republic by Kemal Atatürk in April, 1923. After the radical secularism of the Kemalists strictly ruled out a faith-based politics in Turkey, Nursi "concluded that the rejuvenation of Islamic consciousness had to be carried out not on the state level but on the level of individuals" (154).

²Significant in this field are such works as, Dominick LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1996), Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, and Tali Kal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996).

³See, Emel Taştekin, "Another Look at Orientalism : Western Literature in the Face of Islam" (unpublished thesis, University of British Columbia, 2011).

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