

Read, Write and Pursue Knowledge:

Transformative Reflections from Surah *Al-Alaq*

by

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The day when the Muhammad was appointed as a Prophet is the starting point of change for him as an individual as well as for the society he was living in. That was the day when the first revelation was brought down to him by God, an event otherwise known as *nuzul al-Qur'an*. Muhammad was elevated to the status of prophethood to propagate God's Word and to uphold justice, peace and harmony among all humanity in this world.

That incident had inspired and motivated him to implement an agenda of social reconstruction and transformation that are much needed during that era. The event happened as he observed the negative reality occurring in Mecca in the form of social injustices, sufferings, inequality, slavery and exploitations by the elites.

Being an active trader and businessman who was used to trading commodities through Syam (now Syria) and other areas of Arab lands, Muhammad was profoundly aware of the structural conditions of the Arab community. Although he was born from the noble tribe of Quraish in Mecca, he refused to gain benefits and special treatments and rejected profits gained through oppressing the weaker groups in the community. Instead, Muhammad

chose to represent them and hoisted their position, although it was proven to be intricate due to the deep-rooted structures of the community at that time. His efforts to introduce reform seems almost impossible in the beginning.

Feeling dejected and disappointed, he isolated himself in the Hira' cave to gain strength and patience to pursue his sociological battle in reforming his community. It was during one of his retreats that he received the first revelation, which reads:

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ

1. Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists),

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ

2. Has created man from a clot.

اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ

3. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous,

الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ

4. Who has taught (the writing) by the pen,

عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ

5. Has taught man that which he knew not.

(Surah al-Alaq 96:1-5)

These verses are indeed very transformative in content. The first verse, which is an instruction to read, represents education and the pedagogical process. With reading, mankind will acquire knowledge and rich information that are needed for social reflection. It also helps to provide strong foundation, active mind and progressive attitude.

The third verse is about writing where God has clearly connected the meaning with the pen (*bil-kalam*). From our general understanding, writing is essential for social transformation. Through writing, the highest heritage of

human ethics were formulated into knowledge, which are then disseminated to future generations and further developed for consumption and discoursing across the world. A concrete example is the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an is documentation weighty on knowledge and consumable to mankind regardless of cultures and faith.

The fifth verse is on knowledge. Man must pursue knowledge through guidance from God. Thus, if the Qur'an – being God's Word – symbolises knowledge, Muslims must make it their agenda in society. It is timely, therefore, for mankind to absorb the spirit of *nuzul al-Qur'an* to seek social transformation and reconstruction for the development of society.

Mankind should be empowered and encouraged to excel in the area of education, literacy, social critique and public pedagogy. Without competency in these areas, any community can fall into the trap of marginalisation in the process of global development. It is a known fact that reading culture among Muslims is still low, what more in critical literacy. Failure to imbibe a reading culture will lead Muslims to isolation in the information arena and thus hinders participation in all aspects of development. Books and literatures available for public should also be free from being dominated by a single slant, especially if it is that of particular elite with vested interest – socially or economically. The freedom to disseminate knowledge hopefully will generate an increase in the moral and intellectual standards of the community.

In the area of economy, we need to increase an effort to establish a dynamic and collective economic potential of the community through empowerment process. This aspect is the key towards addressing developmental issues within a particular community because as long as poverty prevails, people

cannot achieve adequate education while still grappling with hunger and anguish.

Every sector within the community, including the elites, should adopt the agenda of empowerment to alleviate the conditions of the underprivileged class in the community. This includes the policymaking sector in the community that must play an advocacy role too. Ultimately, the existence of openness in discourse, public responsibility and equality in all aspects of life, must be uphold.
