

Muhammad Syahrur's View About of *Ummiyatu Muhammad* or Illiterate of Prophet Muhammad SAW

Ahmad Fakhruddin Fajrul Islam

Fakultas Agama Islam Universitas Hasyim Asy'ari Tebuireng Jombang
faddin.adin@gmail.com

Abstract: *We have known that many Muslims consider his beloved prophet Muhammad SAW was illiterate. It was based on many evidences, Quran evidences, prophetic hadith evidences, and history evidences. However, this claim is still far from right because it has been known that Prophet Muhammad had great intelligences. Before being a prophet or apostolate, Muhammad was known with many epithets among his people, such as al-amien. He was also wise man who could give solution when many tribes at Mecca want to fight just to appoint of who has the right to put "hajar aswad". Muhammad Syahrur, a modern Islamic scholar, denied that claim and tried to reveal the real meaning of ummi in Quran. Fortunately, Muhammad Syahrur did not writing about this topic only in his masterwork "al-Kitab wa al-Qur'an; Qira'ah Mu'ashirah". However, this topic is still an interesting topic to be discussed.*

Keywords: *ummi, illiterate, syahrur*

Abstrak: Kita telah mengetahui bahwa banyak umat Islam yang menganggap nabi kesayangannya Muhammad SAW buta huruf. Itu didasarkan pada banyak bukti, bukti Quran, bukti hadits kenabian, dan bukti sejarah. Namun klaim ini masih jauh dari benar, karena selama ini diketahui bahwa Nabi Muhammad SAW memiliki kecerdasan yang luar biasa. Sebelum menjadi nabi atau kerasulan, Muhammad dikenal dengan banyak julukan di kalangan umatnya, seperti al-amien. Ia juga orang bijak yang bisa memberikan solusi ketika banyak suku di Mekkah yang ingin berperang hanya untuk menunjuk siapa yang berhak menempatkan "hajar aswad". Muhammad Syahrur, seorang cendekiawan Islam modern, membantah klaim itu dan mencoba mengungkapkan makna ummi yang sebenarnya dalam Quran. Untungnya, Muhammad Syahrur tidak menulis tentang topik ini hanya dalam karya besarnya "al-Kitab wa al-Qur'an; Qira'ah Mu'ashirah". Namun topik ini tetap menjadi topik yang menarik untuk dibahas.

Kata kunci: ummi, buta huruf, syahrur.

Introduction

When someone gets the order to “read!” automatically we will think about what should be read? What the purpose of read, and how to read it? Maybe that was felt by Prophet Muhammad SAW when he got first revelation from god by Gabriel (جبريل). Prophet Muhammad SAW was confused about what he should read, what for, and how to read? So, the only answer which could be given by Prophet SAW is “I can’t read (ما أنا بقارئ). It was a clever answer. With his answer, it was shown that prophet Muhammad SAW has virtuous personality. That answer was also expectancy to who order for reading to give guidance.¹

Prophet Muhammad’s answer to Gabriel at the first revelation has caused many interpretations. Is that right if Muhammad SAW was *ummi*? Who has no ability to read and to write? Is “the illiterate” of Muhammad SAW truth or just myth? However many Muslims believe blindly that Prophet Muhammad was an illiterate (*ummi*). His *ummi* is one of proofs that Quran is authentic. It is not written by Muhammad, but it is pure from Allah SWT (كلام الله القدس). The discussion about the concept of *ummi* in Quran, actually, is not new in the Islamic studies domain. This concept has become one of intellectual discourse since the past, the era of *salaf* Islamic scholars. However, the discussion about *ummi* is still an interesting topic to be talked about. The difference of some Islamic scholars’ interpretation/exegesis (*tafsir*) about the concept of *ummi* has become a controversial in the *tafsir* world. So, it is not surprised if the study about word

ummi in Quran is not done by Islamic scholars only, but also being studied by Orientals (Western) scholars, who always try to ruin and overthrow Islam.²

Many interpreters who interpret word “*ummi*” with illiteracy, but several other interpreters argue that the unlearned not mean illiterate, but is defined as someone who did not get *al-kitab*, and people who are not competent to write. Historically, the Arab communities in the early days of Islam were the people who are familiar with reading and writing. So, if the word “*ummi*” is defined as illiterate, this is contrary to historical reality.

Muhammad Syahrur, a modern Islamic scholar, has different opinion about word “*ummi*” in Quran. In his famous book, “*Al-Kitab wa Al-Qur’an Qira’ah Mu’ashirah*”, Muhammad Syahrur said that Prophet Muhammad SAW (peace be upon him) was *ummi*, but he could read and write, he knew about reading and writing.³ With his methodology of thinking (assumption) he interpreted word “*ummi*” from different side. This is very interesting topic to be examined, why Muhammad Syahrur thought like that, and what the proofs of his opinion? Moreover, from this assumption, how did Muhammad Syahrur view or interpreted Quran verses?

Word *ummi* is not always mean “who can’t read and write” (illiterate). Epistemology, word *ummi* has many means. That can be seen when Allah express word *ummi* in His verses, it is not directed to Muhammad SAW only, but to the Arabic society and Jews. However Islamic scholars (majority)

¹ See Syekh al-Maqdisi. *Nabi Muhammad Buta Hurufatau Genius. (Introduction of Prof. Dr. H. Nashiruddin Umar, MA.)* Page ix – xiv.

² See Syekh al-Maqdisi. *Nabi Muhammad Buta Hurufatau Genius. The introduction of Prof. Dr. H. Nashiruddin Umar, MA. in this book. Page ix – xiv.*

³ See Muhammad Syahrur. *Al-Kitab wa Al-Qur’an; Qira’ah Mu’ashirah. Page 139.*

interpret word *ummi* with “who can’t read and write” (illiterate). So, *ummi* prophet is illiterate Prophet. Of course, that interpretation/exegesis (*tafsir*) which was considered famous is very interesting to be studied again. Is that *tafsir* supported by historical proofs? How does Quran it self explain about the word?

The bibliography observation is shown that there are two opinions which can answer questions above. First opinion, which was told by *al-Farmawy* as the famous opinion, said that *ummi* (who can’t read and write, illiterate) was covered all context which is related with Prophet SAW, Arabic society, and Jews. Second opinion, like was said by *Nasiruddin al-Ajad*, as the counter of the first opinion.⁴ However, most Islamic scholars interpret word *ummi* with who is not good in reading and writing.

Once more, each opinions and interpretations about word “*ummi*” in Quran verses must be supported by historical and rational proofs. We should not believe and give assumption that Prophet Muhammad was illiterate just because we want to show that his apostolate was true, and the revelation which had been given to him was true from Allah, not made by Muhammad him self. *Sheikh al-Maqdisi* said, if we assume that the prophet Muhammad could read and write, whether it will reduce its position in the line of the other Prophets? Will that assumption also reduce the truth and the validity of his prophetic message?⁵

About word “*ummi*”, in Quran there are 6 (six) verses which contain its word. Two of those are in singular

form; both are in Q.S. *al-‘Araf* verse 157 and 158. While four of those are in plural form; those are in Q.S. *al-Baqarah* verse 78, Q.S. Ali Imran verse 20 and 75, and Q.S. *al-Jumu’ah* verse 2.⁶ So this paper will try to reveal the truth mean of *ummi*, which is related with Prophet Muhammad SAW.

Definition of “*ummi*”

Before the discussion about Islamic scholars’ interpretations about “*ummi*” in Quran and some basic reason which proves that Prophet Muhammad was illiterate, would be better if we know first about the general definition of *ummi*. *Ummi* could mean (people) who can not write and read (لا يعرف (الكتابة ولا القراءة)).⁷ *Al-Zujaj* stated that *al-ummi* could also mean people who are still in a state like most of the people or community which was not studied the book. Because it is still like that, an *ummi* can be called still in the original condition.⁸

Abu Ishaq argued, *al-ummi* can also refer to “what is still conceived by mother” or people who are not able to write. Because he can not write, so he may be called “*ummi*”, because the writing is associated with learning problems. Therefore, people who can not write will be considered, or compared, as “a man who had been born of the womb”.⁹ Meanwhile, *Al-*

⁴ See *Fitriliza. Konsep Ummi dalam Al-Qur’an*. <http://fai.uhamka.ac.id/post.php?idpost=11>. Date 24-07-2007

⁵ See *Syekh al-Maqdisi. Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf atau Genius? Page 4*

⁶ See *Fitriliza. Konsep Ummi dalam Al-Qur’an*. <http://fai.uhamka.ac.id/post.php?idpost=11>. Date 24-07-2007. See also *Syekh al-Maqdisi. Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf atau Genius? Page 103-107*

⁷ See *al-Munjid fi al-Lughah wa al-‘Alam*. 1988. page 17. See also *Abi al-Husain Ahmad bin faris bin Zakaria. al-Miqyas fi al-Lughah*. Page 47.

⁸ See *Al-Imam Al-‘Alamah bin Mandzur. Lisan al-‘Arab*. Page 229. see also *Syekh Al-Maqdisi. Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf Atau Genius*. Page 17

⁹ See *Al-Imam Al-‘Alamah bin Mandzur. Lisan al-‘Arab*. Page 229.

Fairuz Abadi said, *al-ummi* are people who are not able to write, or people who are still in a condition of most people, who never learned to write. His condition remains as before. Ibn Ishaq also said that word "*al-ummi*" can refer to "like what he conceived his mother" or "can not write".¹⁰

In a prophetic *hadith* was said:

إنا أمة أمية لانكتب ولا نحسب

"We are a group of people who can not write and count."

In conclusion, their condition is like the initial conditions at birth by their biological mother, have not had time to learn writing and arithmetic. That's mean; they remain still in original condition. From here often stated, "The Arabs were dubbed the *ummiyyun* group because of cultural writing among them are still very rare". It's explained further that *al-ummiyah* also means negligent (*al-ghafalah*) and ignorance (*al-jahalalah*). Word *ummi* was seeming come from such meaning. Therefore, it can also mean lack of knowledge.¹¹

Basic Theories That Constitute The Judgment of The Prophet Muhammad was Illiterate/Unlettered

Prophet Muhammad was given the predicate as an unlearned/illiterate based on Quran *suroh al-A'raf* verses 157 and 158.¹²

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ يَأْمُرُهُمْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبَائِثَ وَيَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَالْأَغْلَالَ الَّتِي كَانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۗ فَاَلَّذِينَ أَمَنُوا بِهِ وَعَزَّرُوهُ وَنَصَرُوهُ وَاتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ مَعَهُ ۙ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعًا ۗ الَّذِي لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ ۚ لَا إِلٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ ۗ فَاٰمِنُوْا بِاللّٰهِ وَرَسُوْلِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْاُمِّيِّ الَّذِي يُؤْمِنُ بِاللّٰهِ وَكَلِمٰتِهِ وَاتَّبِعُوْهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُوْنَ

"Those who follow the apostle, the unlettered Prophet, whom They find mentioned In their own (scriptures),- In the law and the Gospel;- for He commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; He allows them As lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure); He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. so it is those who believe In him, honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him, - it is They who will prosper." (157) Say: "O men! I am sent unto you all, As the Messenger of Allah, to whom belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth: there is no god but He: it is He that giveth both life and death. so believe In Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believeth In Allah and His words: follow Him that (so) ye may be guided." (158)

By most scholars, word *ummi* in the verses above are interpreted by the illiterate. As stated by *Quraish Shihab* in his commentary that the illiterate of Prophet Muhammad is one proof of his

¹⁰ See Syekh Al-Maqdisi. *Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf Atau Genius. Page 18*

¹¹ See Syekh Al-Maqdisi. *Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf Atau Genius. Page 19*

¹² See Syekh Al-Maqdisi. *Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf Atau Genius. Page 33. See also <http://fai.uhamka.ac.id/post.php?idpost=11>*

apostolate. *Sayyid Quthb* in his commentary also stated that verses above are a testimony that the Israelites had been convincingly informed about the arrival of the *ummi* (illiterate) Prophet, after their prophet Moses AS and Isa AS.¹³

Another theorem which is used as reinforcement statement that the Prophet Muhammad was an *ummi* (not good at reading and writing) since before *bi'tsah*, which is Quran *suroh Al-Ankabut* verse 48:¹⁴

وَمَا كُنْتَ تَتْلُو مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ
بِيَمِينِكَ إِذًا لَأَرْتَابَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

“and Thou wast not (able) to Recite a Book before This (Book came), nor art Thou (able) to transcribe it with Thy right hand: In that case, indeed, would the talkers of vanities have doubted.”

There are two main reasons were proposed to support opinions above. First, the illiterate of Prophet was regarded as the greatest miracle and a sign of his ministry which also proves that Quran came from God without any slightest addition of the Prophet. In terms of Nasr, the illiterate prophet must be like Mary which had to be a virgin to show that God's message was conveyed through something pure. Second, because the Prophet SAW itself have said that.

Ibrahim al-Abyadi stated that there are, at least, three historical evidences that strengthen allegations that Muhammad was an *ummi* (unlettered/illiterate), not good at reading and not good at writing. First, after the revelation came down to him, he ordered someone else to write the

revelation. History was stated that many companions of the Prophet who were made by Prophet Muhammad to be his secretary, such as *Zubayr ibn Awwam*, *Zayd ibn Tsabit*, and *Muawiyah ibn Abu Sufyan*.¹⁵

The second evidence is a letter which was written by *Abbas* in Mecca to the Prophet Muhammad when the war of Uhud. The content of the letter was notification that *Quraisy* had gathered and they will be out (attack). When the bearer of this letter, a guy from *Ghafar* tribes, came to read a letter from *Abbas*, then Prophet called *Ubaiy ibn Ka'ab*, his secretary. When *Ubaiy* stopped reading the letter, the Prophet was silent, not saying anything. Even if the Prophet was not an illiterate person, why did he call *Ubaiy* to read this letter?¹⁶

The third evidence is when there was a messenger from *Bani Tsaqif* asked the Prophet to write a letter to them which contains the conditions to be met when he converted to Islam. So the Prophet SAW said, “Write to you the things that seem to you, after that give it to me”. In the article they asked, “what they were allowed to practice usury and adultery?”. Then *Ali ibn Abi Talib* did not want to write (a response letter from the Prophet) to them. Then they asked to *Khalid ibn al-Walid* and *Sa'id ibn Ash* to write it. So *Ali* said to *Sa'id*, “Did you know sir, what you were writing on it?” *Sa'id* said, “I wrote what they said”. Then they brought the letter to the Prophet Muhammad. Then Prophet Muhammad told them to read the letter, and when he stopped at the word *riba* (usury), the Prophet Muhammad ordered the man put his hand up and read a verse that says, “O

¹³ See *Sayyid Quthb. Tafsir Fi Zhilalil Qur'an; Di Bawah Naungan Al-Qur'an. Volume 5. Page 34-36.*

¹⁴ See <http://www.telagahikmah.org/kalam/110/34.htm>

¹⁵ See *Ibrahim al-Abyadi. Sejarah al-Qur'an, translated from Tarikh al-qur'an. Page 31*

¹⁶ See *Ibrahim al-Abyadi. Sejarah al-Qur'an, translated from Tarikh al-qur'an. Page 31*

ye who believe, fear Allah, and leave the rest of usury (riba)...” Likewise, when until the word *zina* (adultery), put his hand up back in the word, as the Prophet Muhammad recite verse, “*And don't approach adultery*”. So both two words were deleted and then the Prophet ordered them to write scripts for them.¹⁷

Muhammad Syahrur's view : Muhammad SAW Is “Ummi”, but He Is Not Illiterate/Unlearned

Actually this is one topic in the form of subtitles which was written by Muhammad Syahrur in his book “*Al-Kitab wa al-Quran; Qira'ah Mu'ashirah*”. Muhammad Syahrur said that word “*ummi*” in the Qur'an was found in six verses.¹⁸

First, in chapter (*suroh*) *Ali-Imran* verse 20:

فَإِنْ حَاجُّوكَ فَقُلْ أَسَلَمْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّهِ وَمَنِ
اتَّبَعَنِ ۗ وَقُلْ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ وَالْأُمِّيِّينَ
ءِاسَلَمْتُمْ ۗ فَإِنْ أُسَلِمُوا فَعَدِ اهْتَدَوْا ۗ وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا
فَأِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلْغُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ بِصِيرِ الْبَعِيدِ

“So if they dispute with You (Muhammad) say: “I have submitted myself to Allâh (in Islâm), and (so have) those who follow me.” and Say to those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christians) and to those who are illiterates (Arab pagans): “Do You (also) submit yourselves (to Allâh In Islâm)?” if they do, they are rightly guided; but if they turn away, Your duty

is Only to convey the Message; and Allâh is All-Seer of (His) slaves.”

Second, in chapter (*suroh*) *Ali-Imran* verse 75:

وَمَنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مَنْ إِنْ تَأْمَنَهُ بِقِنطَارٍ يُؤَدَّهَ إِلَيْكَ
وَمِنْهُمْ مَنْ إِنْ تَأْمَنَهُ بِدِينَارٍ لَّا يُؤَدَّهَ إِلَيْكَ إِلَّا مَا
دُمَّتْ عَلَيْهِ فَايْمًا ۗ ذُ لِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَالُوا لَيْسَ
عَلَيْنَا فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ سَبِيلٌ وَيَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ
وَ هُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ

“Among the people of the Book are some who, if entrusted with a hoard of gold, will (readily) pay it back; others, who, if entrusted with a single silver coin, will not repay it unless Thou constantly stoodest demanding, because, They say, “There is no call on us (to keep Faith) with these ignorant (Pagans).” but They Tell a lie against Allah, and (well) They know it.”

Third, in chapter (*suroh*) *Al-A'raf* verse 158:

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعًا الَّذِي
لَهُ مُلْكُ السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِي
وَيُمِيتُ ۗ فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الَّذِي
يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَكَلِمَتِهِ وَأَتَّبِعُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

Say: “O men! I am sent unto you all, As the Messenger of Allah, to whom belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth: there is no god but He: it is He that giveth both life and death. so believe In Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believeth In Allah and His words: follow Him that (so) ye may be guided.”

Fourth, in chapter (*suroh*) *Al-A'raf* verse 157:

¹⁷ See Ibrahim al-Abyadi. *Sejarah al-Qur'an*, translated from *Tarikh al-qur'an*. Page 31

¹⁸ Most study in this chapter was taken from Muhammad Syahrur's book “*Al-Kitab wa Al-Qur'an; Qira'ah Mu'ashirah*”. Page 139-143. See also Syeikh al-Maqdisi. *Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf Atau Genius?*. Page 103-120.

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ ۥ
مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ يَأْمُرُهُمْ
بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَاهُمْ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُحِلُّ لَهُمُ الطَّيِّبَاتِ
وَيُحَرِّمُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْخَبِيثَاتِ وَيَضَعُ عَنْهُمْ إِصْرَهُمْ وَالْأَغْلَالَ
الَّتِي كَانَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ فَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِهِ وَعَزَّرُوهُ
وَأَنصَرُوهُ وَاتَّبَعُوا النُّورَ الَّذِي أُنزِلَ مَعَهُ أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُفْلِحُونَ

"Those who follow the apostle, the unlettered Prophet, whom They find mentioned In their own (scriptures),- In the law and the Gospel;- for He commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; He allows them As lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure); He releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. so it is those who believe In him, honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him,- it is They who will prosper."

Fifth, in chapter (*suroh*) *al-Jumu'ah* verse 2:

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِّنْهُمْ يَتْلُو
عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِن
كَانُوا مِن قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ

"It is He who has sent amongst the unlettered an apostle from among themselves, to rehearse to them His Signs, to sanctify them, and to instruct them In Scripture and Wisdom,- although They had been, before, In Manifest error."

Sixth, in chapter (*suroh*) *al-Baqarah* verse 78:

وَ مِنْهُمْ أُمِّيُونَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا
أَمَانًا وَإِن هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ

"And there are among them illiterates, who know not the Book, but (see therein their own) desires, and they do nothing but conjecture."

In the discussion of the sixth verses above, Syahrur argue that first we must understand the meaning of the word "ummi" which is purposed in the verses above. Historically, Jews and Christians often refer to "the people who did not subscribe to their religion" as an *ummi* (unlearned/illiterate) persons or "non-Jews and non-Christians". Word *ummi* correspond with word "goyem" in Hebrew. Its meaning for today is the public or layman. These people are usually considered to be ignorant and do not know anything about laws which was written in the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity, and not too familiar with the prophetic. From this, it can be concluded that the means of word *ummi* is:

1. In addition to Jews and Christians; or
2. People who do not recognize the Jewish scriptures and Christian religions.

This is clearly visible from the editor of verse *Ali-Imran* 20 which contains the phrase "Say to those who were given the Scripture (Jews and Christians) and to those who are illiterates (Arab pagans)". People who have inherited scriptures at that time were none other than Jews and Christians. While others considered unlearned/illiterate persons (*ummi*) or *goyem/joim* (in Hebrew).

The meaning was also very obvious from verse 75 of *suroh* of *Ali-Imran*, which spoke about the Book of the Jews and Christians. Some of them, the Jewish people, when entrusted

denarius course, they will not return it. While some others, the Christian, if you entrusted wad of cash they will still return it. Why are the Jews at that time reluctant to return the deposit which is mandated to them?

It is caused they regarded *goyem* people or the general public (besides them) as their servant. They also saw themselves as respectable circles while others are laymen or the illiterate people who do not know God's will. Therefore they argued, "We do not have any obligation to the people that illiterate".

It was said in *suroh al-A'raf*, verse 157 that "they are the followers of the illiterate Prophet", phrase *ummi* was used here because he (Prophet Muhammad) is not among them (Jews), because they claim that matter of prophecy was written in the Torah (Pentateuch) and Gospel clearly, and it was not the Prophet Muhammad. After it, in verse 158 of *suroh al-A'raf* was explained that Prophet Muhammad was sent to all mankind, both Jews, Christians, or illiterate. That's because they denied the claim and the facts that Prophet Muhammad was not from among Jews or Christians, but from the third group, namely *goyem* (illiterate).

It is considered sufficient to prove that Prophet Muhammad did not understand the scriptures. Therefore, in the Quran also explained their arrogance with the phrase, "Some of them (Jews) are unlearned/illiterate people who do not see in it except their desires alone". This means that, in general, people (Jews) who do not understand the scripture or indifferent to abortion is considered as an unlearned of scripture. Therefore, the redaction of the verse was followed by concluding sentence that "*they just figured out*".

Therefore, for us, the using and the understanding of word *ummi* should always be followed by an explanation:

what kind of *ummi*? It is necessary, so we really know for sure that a person is *ummi* of what. For example, I was *ummi* of the navigation science although I was a civil engineer. It is meant I unlearned, or do not know the science of navigation except the basic course. Therefore, when I talk about the science of navigation, my knowledge is less valid and not convincing. In the Quran, such people are referred to as someone who just figured out (*wa in hum illa yadzunnuun*).

From here, it can be concluded also that the Prophet Muhammad is considered *ummi* with meaning "not from among Jews and Christians". Therefore, it makes sense if he was unlearned to the Jewish scriptures and Christian too, and his knowledge of Judaism and Christianity are also limited to what God revealed to him after the prophecy.

If the historic significance are overlooked by merely interpret it (word *ummi*) with "can not read or write", of course it was a mistake. Indeed, about the writing is the process of accumulating something to bring new meaning to the right and objective. However, whether the Prophet Muhammad really was not able to assemble the letters into a complete sentence or (minimal) write a word *ta'lif*, for example?

Which should be noted, a letter was sent by the Prophet Muhammad to *Kisra* Persian is derived from the editor which is dictated and assembled by his own right. Reading was always meant learning process by examining knowledge coupled with ability to filter the conclusions and comparing aspects of one another. Therefore, the process of screening and comparing come from the process of reading. So, did Prophet Muhammad really can not read?

Some people say, and this is an argument repeated many people, that when the revelation that ask Prophet Muhammad to read was revealed to him, the Prophet answered with the phrase “*maa Anaa bi qaari*” (I do not read or I can not read). By that story, many of people concluded that the Prophet really did not read. I (Muhammad Syahrur) have another opinion, with this parable: When Said told Zaid to go, and Zaid replied, “*maa anaa bi dzaahib*”, does this mean that Zaid was bound by something that can not go or do not have legs? Does not it also could mean that Zaid could not go or do not want to go?

So does the story of the cave Hira it also means that the Angel Gabriel handed reading material which was written so that one read by the Prophet incorrectly? Here lays our confusion, because we are accustomed to not distinguish between the desires of the Prophet to read with the ability to read it self. We thought that Gabriel come with writing on a piece of paper to be read by Prophet Muhammad. In fact, when Gabriel told the prophet to read for the second and the third time, he (the Prophet) would not read. It was only when Gabriel says “*Read in the name of your Lord*”, Prophet was amazed. He was impressed after hearing the verse, no longer deny reading.

Some other people insisted the opinion that the Prophet actually unlearned/illiterate in our understanding of the concept of erroneous read-write. I (Muhammad Syahrur) said that it is true that throughout his life the Prophet Muhammad did not know any written literature, not writing or reading a certain written material. This can be understood from following God’s word:

وَمَا كُنْتَ تَتْلُوا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ
بِيَمِينِكَ إِذًا لَأَرْتَابَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

"And Thou wast not (able) to Recite a Book before This (Book came), nor art Thou (able) to transcribe it with Thy right hand: In that case, indeed, would the talkers of vanities have doubted."

Also this verse:

بَلْ هُوَ آيَاتٌ بَيِّنَاتٌ فِي صُدُورِ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ
وَمَا يَجْحَدُ بِآيَاتِنَا إِلَّا الظَّالِمُونَ

"Nay, here (Quran) are Signs self-evident In the hearts of those endowed with knowledge: and none but the unjust reject Our signs."

So, by those verses, the illiterate of Prophet Mohammed can be explained in two aspects. First, the Prophet Muhammad never spoke in the days before his prophetic about such topics spoken in Quran. If he’d done that, no doubt the Arabs would say, “You’ve been talking about these issues before you become as a prophet?!” That’s mean, the Prophet really unlearned about topics in Quran totally. Meanwhile phrase “*min kitab*” in the editorial is mentioned in the forms that are not necessarily (*nakirah*). But obviously, which meant there was the Quran, because the wording is followed by the phrase “*(the Quran) this contains the signs evident in the hearts of people who have knowledge*”.

Analysis of Word “Ummi” and The Illiterate of Prophet Muhammad

Then which one of terms above which was suitable according to Quran itself to explain about “*ummi*”? Some interpreters choose the first sense to explain to the group of unlearned

Jewish and Arab communities as stated in *suroh* of *al-Baqarah* verse 78. Their ignorance of *al-kitab* was described because they are illiterate. However, next sequence of verse, that is *suroh* of *al-Baqarah* verse 79.

Clearly, their ignorance of *al-kitab* was not because they are illiterate, but as explained by *al-Thabari*, quoted from *Ibnu Zaid*, because they deny the apostleship of Prophet Muhammad and the holy book (Quran) which was brought by him (the prophet), and—even—did not want to learn it. Then they wrote with their own hands a book based on their version, and then they say that it all comes from God, just to gain a little advantage.

The interpretation of *ummiyyin* by the illiterate for Arabs, as stated in *suroh* of *Ali Imran*, verse 20 and 75 and *suroh* of *al-Jumu'ah* verse 2, was also not suitable if seeing the context of the Quran itself. In the first two verses, the word *ummiyyin* was associated with people of the Scripture (Jews), but distinguished from them. While in the last verse, the Prophet Muhammad was referred as an envoy that was raised “between *ummiyyin*”. All the facts above suggest that what was meant by *ummiyyin* in the verses above was non-Jewish or Arab society in the hands of idolaters that they do not have a book that is also contrary to those given the Book (*utul kitab*). This interpretation is supported by *Qatada* history cited by *al-Thabari* and *al-Qasimi* in their interpretation books.¹⁹

According to *Fakhrur Razi*, the idolaters Arabs were called unlearned/illiterate because of two things. First, because they have not got divine holy book, therefore they were called unlearned, as an example of the

people who can not read and write. Second, word *al-ummi* which are also ascribed to the word *al-umm* (mother), can also be referred to the city of Mecca which was often called the main settlement (*Umm al-Qura*). And there is no objection which mentions that such expression was the contrary with Arabic grammatical rules.²⁰

Based on the descriptions above, it is not right if attributing Arab community as illiteracy by referring to the verses above. Besides, that attribute has lack of supporting by historical evidence. Opinion that said writing tradition was rare in the Arab society in the early development of Islam because they preferred the recitation on the contrary with the opinion of famous histories author, *Ibn Sa'ad*. In his book, *Thabaqat Kubro*, he mentioned that the Arabs pagan and in the beginning of the Islamic appreciated the perfect person with the one who can write, swim, and throwing arrows.

Al-Baladzuri in *Futuh al-Buldan* said that when Islam came, there were 17 people who can read and write. However, according to the assessment of *M. Azami*, those does not include Meccan people such as *Abu Bakr*, *Abdullah bin Amr bin Ash*, *Ummi Kultsum*, *Hafsa*, *Aisha*, and others. It also should be noted here that at the beginning of Islam there were many centers of teaching and writing already, such as *Mecca*, *Tha'if*, *Medina*, *Hirrah*, and *Daumat al-Jandal*.²¹

Then what about the phrase *al-nabiy al-ummiy* in *suroh of al-A'raf* verse 157 and 158. What's the meaning of the sentence? That sentence in *nahwu* was called *na'tun man'utun* or *sifatun*

¹⁹ See *Fitriliza*.

<http://fai.uhamka.ac.id/post.php?idpost=11>.

Date 24-07-2007.

²⁰ See *Syekh al-Maqdisi. Nabi Muhammad Buta Hurufatau Genius? Page 94*.

²¹ See *Fitriliza*.

<http://fai.uhamka.ac.id/post.php?idpost=11>.

Date 24-07-2007.

wa mausufun, which means the second word indicates the nature of the first word. According to the authors, word *al-nabiy al-ummiy* in those verses more accurately if it is meant with a prophet who never read and write scripture (al-kitab; The Torah and The Gospel), and he was born and chosen from among those who did not have/get the holy book (the pagan Arabs). Therefore, in Quran the Prophet Muhammad was natured with *ummi*.

So from these statements above, word “ummi” in Quran is more appropriate in meaning “people non-Jews and non-Christians who never know or learn about their (Jews and Christian) religion even read their holy books. It can be meant that what was concluded by Muhammad Syahrur is right that the prophet Muhammad was called unlettered or illiterate just because he never learned about any religions since before his apostolate.²² Prophet Muhammad just knew about the religions of prophets before from Quran which was revealed to him only by Allah. So, this is the contrary prove of Orientals who said that Prophet Muhammad wrote Quran by himself. This is also the contrary prove of people who considered Quran is the imitation of Bible (Gospel) and Old Testament (Torah).

Conclusion

From the discussion in advance, it can be concluded that each of opinion about *ummiyatu* of Prophet Muhammad has strong arguments and evidence. However Prophet Muhammad is the most perfect human being ever created by Allah SWT since Prophet Adam till the last human at domsday. Prophet Muhammad is the most beloved human of Allah SWT. So, logically, the

Prophet Muhammad will be guarded by God from all the shortcomings and mistakes (*ma'shum*).

From the views expressed by Muhammad Syahrur about *ummiyatu* Prophet Muhammad, it can be conclude several things: First, according to Muhammad Syahrur, word “*ummi*” which is contained in the six verses of Quran should not just be taken literally, because the main purpose of using word *ummi* in those verses as metaphor meaning (al-ma'na al-majazi).

Second, Muhammad Syahrur concluded that there are two meaning of *ummi* in Quran; (1) other than Jews and Christians; or (2) People who do not know the Jewish scriptures and Christian religions. This conclusion “generally” does not contradict with the interpretation of some Islamic interpreter, both the *Salaf* and *Khalaf* scholars, especially the interpretation of *suroh* of *al-Baqarah* verse 28, *suroh* of *Ali 'Imran* verses 20 and 75. In addition, the majority of the verses editor was addressed to the Israelites who are denying the prophet hood of Muhammad just because the tendency of the nation and religion.

Third, from *Muhammad Syahrur's* statement that, “Muhammad is an unlearned but he was able to read and write”, can be concluded that the main purpose of why Prophet Muhammad was called illiterate/unlearned because since his birth until become the Apostle of God never even studied about the divine books before (Torah, Psalms, and Gospel).

Statement or views of Muhammad Syahrur above, whether was reinforced by the interpretation of Islamic interpreter scholars generally, also based on the arguments of history and rational. As far as the author, historical proposition expressed by the

²² See Chapter IV page 46-55.

intellectuals who opposed the claim about *ummiyatu* Prophet Muhammad (in the mean of not knowing to read and write) is stronger than historical proposition expressed by the people who calimed that Prophet Muhammad was unlearned/illiterate.

Meanwhile, responses which was expressed by Orientals about *ummiyatu* of Prophet Muhammad, was seen in line with the thinking of Syahrur. However their thought was based on the teachings of Judaism and Christianity. In addition, they also wanted to weaken the evidence of the miracles and the authenticity of Quran. Keep in mind, based on historical records, the Prophet Muhammad during his life just went to *Syam* (Syria) as much as 2 times, when he was little with his uncle, *Abu Thalib*, and when he was hired by *Siti Khadijah Umm al-mukminiin* to lead the trade group, and that when he was around twentieth years old. Also, based on historical records, the Prophet Muhammad from his childhood spent much of his time by; herding his uncle's goats, learn trading, and meditating to God. So, its very little chance the prophet Muhammad to read the books of the previous divine. Moreover, writing activities in the Arab society was not yet institutionalized (one of the reasons why The Arabs of Mecca at that time was called *ummiyyin*).

References

- Al-Alusi, Mahmud. 1994. *Ruh al-Ma'aani*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah.
- Al-Abyadi, Ibrahim. 1992. *Sejarah al-Qur'an*. Translation book from "Tarikh al-Qur'an". Jakarta: Rineka Cipta.
- Al-Maqdisi, Syekh. 2007. *Nabi Muhammad Buta Huruf atau Genius? A translated book from*

Khurafatu Ummiyyatu Muhammad. Jakarta: Nun Publisher.

- Al-Shabuni, Muhammad Ali. 1985. *Al-Tibyan Fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an*. Cetakan I. Beirut: Alam al-Kutub.
- Ma'luf, Louis. 1986. *Al-Munjid*. Beirut: Dar al-Masyriq.
- Quthb, Sayyid. 2000. *Tafsir Fi Zhilalil Qur'an: Di Bawah Naungan al-Qur'an Jilid 1*. Jakarta: Gema Insani.
- Shah, Aunul Abied. 2001. *Islam Garda Depan, Mosaik Pemikiran Islam Timur Tengah*. Bandung: Mizan.
- Syahrur, Muhammad. *Al-Kitab Wa Al-Qur'an; Qira'ah Mu'ashirah*. Syna al-Nasyr al-Ahaly
- Syahrur, Muhammad. 2004. *Dialektika Kosmos Dan Manusia; Dasar-Dasar Epistemologi Qurani*. Bandung: Nuansa.
- <http://fai.uhamka.ac.id/post.php?idpost=11>.
- <http://www.telagahikmah.org/kalam/110/34.htm>