

ORIENTALIST’S METHODOLOGY IN THE STUDY OF SIRAH: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Orientalism is the study of Eastern world. This term contains various meanings that this movement discusses about Eastern languages, literatures, civilizations and religions. Generally, it is a difficult task to define the basic theme, objectives and history of Orientalism, because it has its various colours in approaching the Eastern religion, art, culture and politics. Here we may not be able to produce a concrete debate on this topic, except a thematic study regarding Orientalists methodology in the study of Sirah. Historically, Orientalists have played perpetual and continuous role in distorting the image of Islam. Since the dawn of Islam they have never tried to unveil the realities and the diverse aspects of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) in particular and those of Islam in general, hence could not conceive the central message of the religion. The main reason behind this consistent approach remained the objectives they set before the execution of research in the study of Islam and Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). This is the basic drawback of Orientalists methodology in the study of Islam.

Allama Muhammad Asad (a well known scholar)¹ comments about Orientalists methodology in the study of Islam and Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). “In their investigations it almost appears as if Islam could not be treated as a mere object of scientific research, but an accused standing before his Judges. Some of the Orientalists play the part of public prosecutor bent on securing a conviction, other area like counsel for defense who, being personally convinced that his client is guilty, can only half heartedly plead for "mitigating

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circumstances". All in all, the technique of the deductions and conclusion adopted by most of the European Orientalists reminds of the proceedings of those famous courts of inquisition set up by the Catholic Church against its opponents in the Middle Ages; that is to say, they hardly even investigate historical facts independently, but start, almost in every case from a foregone conclusion dictated by prejudice."²

This is a historical fact that prejudice is a hall mark of Orientalists methodology. They always had shown hostility and biasness in the study of Islam. First of all, this hostile methodology introduced by John of Damascus, who was a Christian Scholar.

Ziauddin Sardar comments about the behaviour of John of Damascus, "He declared Islam to be a pagan cult, the Ka'aba an idol and the Prophet Muhammad irreligious and licentious man. He claimed Muhammad cobbled together his doctrine from the old and New Testament through the instruction of an Arabian monk. The writing and accusation of John of Damascus became the classical source of all Christian writing on Islam."³

Another important feature of Orientalists hostile methodology is that so many Orientalists like John Wansbrough⁴, Patricia Crone⁵, Michael Cook⁶, Andrew Rippon⁷ and Uri Rubin⁸ have adopted reductionist methodology in their research. Through the way of this reductionist methodology they have tried to create misconceptions about the realities of Islam and raised many questions on the life of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).

A well known contemporary Muslim scholar Jabal Muhammad Buaben comments that, "Referring to some contemporary material, the work of Patricia Crone and Michael Cook comes in for particular criticism, for being almost maverick and making a mockery of scholarship by rejecting almost all Muslim sources."⁹

This is a fact that a large number of Orientalists have neglected the basic rules of evaluation and research and adopted self created principles for achieving their targets. Jabal Muhammad Buaben moreover comments about the methodology of Michael Cook, that "His interpretations of the Prophets marriages, the status of women in Islam, the so called stannic verses, and the encounters with the Quraysh and others have seriously been flamed. Michael Cook exhibits great hostility and prejudice for the man Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) and the doctrine of Islam."¹⁰

Another reason of crooked aspect of Orientalists methodology in the study of Islam and Sirah, is that their research principles differ from the Muslim methodologies. The Orientalists does not care any type of moral values in the reporting of historical realities.

The most important aspect of Orientalists methodology is that they always Judge Islamic teachings on the basis of their own principles. Their studies have based on exaggeration and fragile transmissions. Allama Shibli Numani has pointed out that the drawbacks of Orientalists methodology is "The European does not care whether the reporter is a man of truth it is given to lies; he care little for his neither possible nor necessary; he merely sees whether the incidents reported by a narrators are in accord with the circumstances and trends of events."¹¹

Distrust over Islamic History, is another basic theme of Orientalists methodology. The reason behind this is that most of them belong to Christianity and Judaism or Institutions organized by Christians and Jewish communities. The example of that type of mind set is obvious in the study of Watt, where he writes, "First of all we have to consider the form in which Judao Christian influences may have affected Muhammad. The possibility of his having read the Bible or other Jewish or Christian books may be ruled out. Orthodox Islam holds that Muhammad was unable to read or write; but this assertion is suspect to the modern scholar because it is made in order to support the belief that his production of the Quran is miracles something no illiterate persons could ever have done by himself."¹²

Some Muslim scholars have discussed that conspiracy is also a part of Orientalists methodology. A large number of Orientalists have done their research work on Islam with negative motives.

Maryam Jameelah, the famous Muslim scholar, has written a book with the title of "Islam and Orientalism." In this book she has reviewed the research work of six Orientalists like Philip K. Hitti, Kenneth Cragg, S.D. Goitein, Welfred Cantwell Smith, Nadav Safran and Freeland Abott. After that review she has presented the conclusion about the Orientalists methodologies in the study of Islam. She comments, "Orientalism is not a dispassionate objective of study of Islam and its culture by the erudite faithful to the best traditions of scholarship to create profound original research but noting an organized conspiracy of incite our youth to revolt against their faith, and scorn the entire legacy of Islamic History and culture as obsolete.

The objective is to create as much mischief as possible among the immature and gullible by sowing the seeds of doubt, cynicism and skepticism."¹³

The general feature of Orientalists methodology for the interpretation of Islamic history is totally different from those principles which are mentioned in the Islamic resources.

Akram Diya al Umari has pointed out about the deficiency of Orientalists methodology in the interpretation of Islamic History. He comments, "The studies of the Orientalists are numerous and differ in their levels, quality and freedom from religious and racial prejudice. However, these studies are usually carried out by scholars who live in environments which are remote from Islam, and which have their own philosophies and cultures. It is difficult for them to understand the truth reasons for a Muslim's conduct, both individually and socially. When they seek to interpret the history of Islam, they draw analogies with European history, despite very different natures of the two histories."¹⁴

The Orientalists judgment is mostly based on materialistic approaches in the study of Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). They have not proper believe on revelation, prophet hood and Day of Judgment. This is the most glaring drawback of Orientalists approaches and methodology in the study of Sirah. Through the way of materialistic methodologies they have denied some important events of the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The materialistic interpretation of history is not justified in the field of Islamic research. The amazing thing is that some well known Orientalists like William Muir¹⁵, Montgomery Watt¹⁶, D. S. Margoliouth¹⁷, Bosworth smith¹⁸ and Washington Irving¹⁹ have adopted materialistic approaches in the study of Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). All these Orientalists have neglected some realities of Islamic history and raised many questions without any solid arguments and logic on the teaching of Islam and Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).

Some Orientalists like Clinton Bennett has adopted anthropologist methodology in the study of Sirah. Clinton Bennett has written many books like "Victorian images of Islam"²⁰ "In search of the sacred anthropology"²¹ and "In search of Muhammad."²² Clinton Bennett comments about his methodology in the study of Sirah that, "Throughout this book adopts a multi disciplinary approach to its subject matter. It draws on historiography, theology, anthropology all tools with which I have worked, as a scholar, a various stages of my

career. I began as a theologian, more into Islamic studies and, more recently into anthropology and the use of anthropology in educational research."²³

Some Orientalists have adopted descriptive methodology in the study of Islam. The basic objective for adopting the descriptive methodology is to achieve some specific targets. Due to that reasons Bosworth Smith has adopted descriptive and repeated methodology in his book "Muhammad and Mohammadanism." Basically Riv. Bosworth Smith is a devout Christian and, as such, believe in the superiority of his own religion to Islam and the supremacy of his sacred books over the sacred book of Muslim."²⁴

An important aspect of Smith work is that he has repeated the questions like other Orientalists. He was inspired the work already done by Sir William Muir, Weils, Springer and Carlyle.

Maxime Rodinson has adopted socialist methodology in the study of Sirah. Basically he was a French social scientist. He was inspired from Marxism. He has written a book on Sirah with the title of "Mohammad."²⁵ He has done his work with sociological aspects, and his evaluations are totally based on the approaches of Orientalists because he was much inspired from Tor Andrae, W. Montgomery Watt and Goldziher. Due to that dependency Rodinson failed to give an independent and fair analysis in the study of Sirah.

Kenneth Cragg is a scholar of Islamic and Christian studies. He has written so many books on different topic but his book "Muhammad and the Christian: a question of response" is an important value for those intellectuals who are interested in interfaith dialogue. He has adopted "Equational methodology" in the study of Sirah. He has also done his work on the basis of some specific purposes, as he himself describes in the preface of this book, "it is the aim of this study to offer at least one Christian's view of a resolution of the problem a resolution which no more than tentative, remain loyal to Christian criteria while outlining a positive response to Muhammad."²⁶

This is fact that equational methodology is not sufficient for evaluating the teaching of Islam. Due to that methodology Kenneth Cragg neglected some realities of Islam especially, the status of Prophet hood.

Some Orientalists have also adopted different methodologies in the study of Islam and Sirah. They adopted classificatory methodology, reservative methodology, psychological methodology,

cultural methodology, secular methodology, institutional methodology, regional methodology and contemptuous methodology. All these methodologies have very close association with scientific methodology. And this is historical fact that scientific methodology is not sufficient for the evaluation of Islamic teachings and Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). The foremost requirement for the evaluation of Islamic teachings is to believe on Oneness of God, prophet hood and Day of Judgment. But unfortunately the majority of Orientalists are unbelievers and this is the glaring deficiency of Orientalists methodology in the study of Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).

FINDING OF THE DISCUSSION

- i. This is historical fact that Orientalists has always represent, rather supported western powers to ensure imperialism in the eastern world. Basically Orientalism is an integral part of European pursuits to promote western culture through different ways.
- ii. Historically, Orientalists have played a key role in distorting the image of Islam. Unfortunately Orientalists have persistently tried to create doubts about the divine mission of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). They have presented unauthentic and groundless stories with an urge to give and then highlights misconceptions about the life and role of the holy Prophet of Islam.
- iii. In modern era the approaches of contemporary Orientalists remain the same in the study of Sirah. Most of them have repeated the questions made by their predecessors. But with the passage of time they have changed their research methodology. They are not fair and neutral in their research instead they are totally biased and prejudice and are doing research under the shadow of modernism and western epistemology.

References

1. Muhammad Asad was a well known Muslim writer. He has written so many books on different topics. Some of his famous work is "Islam at the Crossroads", "My Discovery of Islam", and "The Road to Mecca." In these books he has critically analyzed the approach of Western scholars towards Islam and Sirah. He has presented his views with logical manners.
2. Asad, Muhammad., Islam at the Crossroads. (Ashraf press Lahore, 1975), pp. 58-59.
3. Sardar, Ziauddin. Orientalism. (Viva Books private limited, 2002). P. 18.
4. John Wansbrough was a contemporary Orientalist. He is considered to be an expert of history and Quranic studies. He has written on different topics but especially on Quranic studies. In this way he has written very famous book "Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation." This book is a sign of his approach and doctrine.
5. Patricia Crone was a contemporary Orientalist. She is a student of John Wansbrough. She has written many books but her important work is "Hagarism: The making of the Islamic World (Cambridge press 1977). She has done this work in collaboration with Michael Cook.
6. Michael Cook was a professor of Eastern studies at Princeton University and the author of several books. He has written a book on the Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) with a title "Muhammad." The approach of Michael Cook towards Sirah is mostly negative and his perception is also wrong towards understanding the Quranic theories of Hijra and Jihad.
7. Andrew Rippon is an expert of History and culture. His research focuses on religious philosophies. Basically he is a disciple of John Wansbrough in his approaches towards Quranic Studies.
8. Uri Rubin is a professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Tel Aviv University Israel. He has written a book on Sirah with title of "The life of Muhammad." He has adopted hostile methodology in his research.
9. Buaben, Jabal Muhammad., Image of Prophet Muhammad in the West, (The Islamic Foundation, UK 1996). P. 305.

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10. Ibid., P. 154.
 11. Numani, Shibli Allam., *Sirat-un-Nabi* (Kazi publication Lahore) Vol. I, P. 86.
 12. Watt, Montgomery., *Mohammad Prophet and States Man*. PP. 39-40.
 13. Jameelah, Maryam., *Islam and Orientalism* (Yousaf Khan Publisher Lahore 1971), P. 105.
 14. Akram Diya, al. Umari., *Madnian Society at the time of the Prophet* (International Islamic Publishing House U.S.A), PP. 11-12.
 15. William Muir is an Orientalist who is specialized in the study of Sirah. He has written a book on the Sirah with the title of "Life of Muhammad." This book contains detailed discussion on the life of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W).
 16. William Montgomery Watt has written some books on the subject of Sirah with the title of "Muhammad at Mecca" and "Muhammad at Madina". Some Muslim scholar like Jabal Muhammad Buaben and Dr. Mohar Ali have evaluated the Watt's approaches and also refuted the question raised by Watt on Sirah.
 17. D. S. Morgoliouth was also a contemporary Orientalist. He wrote extensively on almost every subject. But his work in the form of "Muhammad and the Rise of Islam" and "Mohammedanism" has given his recognition as a famous scholar.
 18. Bosworth Smith was also contemporary Orientalist. He is among the famous Orientalists who have done their work in the study of Sirah. His work "Mohammad and Muhammadanism" comprises of four lectures delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain in February and March, 1874. Bosworth Smith was much inspired by the work done by Siry Syed Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali. This is fact that the some approaches of these two Muslim scholars are totally different from the majority of Muslim Ummah.
 19. Washington Irving was an American scholar. He has done his work on the biography of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). The title of his book is "Mahomet and His Successors." This is an introductory study on the life of Prophet.
 20. Bennett, Clinton, *Victorian Image of Islam* (University of Michigan Press).

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21. Bennett, Clinton, *In search of the sacred anthropology* (Cassell, 1996).
 22. Bennett, Clinton, *In Search of Muhammad* (Cassell London, 1992).
 23. *Ibid.*, P.I.
 24. Smith, Bosworth., *Muhammad and Mohammadanism*. PP. v-vi.
 25. Rodinson, Maxime., *Mohammad* (Penguin Press 1971).
 26. Cragg, Kenneth., *Muhammad and the Christian, a question of response*, (Longman, Londong 1984).