

## **Mediating the Trends in Writing Sirah Case Study of Dr. Mehmud Ahmed Ghazi**

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### Abstract:

Comprehending and writing Sirah in modern world is a challenging task especially for those who seek to do it in the traditional framework. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was the first to write on Sirah in order to cope with the modern stance. However, that was a reactionary effort altogether and falls in the usual apologetic realm of the colonial age. The works done in the traditional circles were equally reactionary to knock down the modern stance. However, Muslim world could not remain static on this issue and scholars came forward who tried to mediate between these approaches. In this regard Dr. Hamidullah and his celebrated disciple Dr. Mehmood Ahmed Ghazi are worthy to be discussed. This paper will discuss the contents of Sirah and the approach by which these contents presented to persuade the modern mind remaining in the traditional framework by Dr. Mehmood Ahmed Ghazi.

### **Introduction:**

Islamic sciences evolved from a single genre and that is the commentary upon the revelation which in turn comprised of the scripture of the *Quran* and the *Hadith*. *Rijal*, *Tafsir*, *Maghazi*, *Siyar*, *Fiqh* and *Kalam* were important genres among these sciences. These sciences emerged in a similar fashion in which the Greeks laid down

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The bases for natural and social sciences by developing mathematics and philosophy respectively. From these two branches of knowledge the modern world created hundreds of branches in both social and pure sciences. However, after these branches had been developed, the need for interdisciplinary approach to have a comprehensive knowledge of a particular subject was felt. Similarly, the Islamic sciences are interdependent and to comprehend any specific branch the basic principles of other branches are to be well acquired.<sup>(i)</sup> Thus the Muslims developed this interdisciplinary approach long before the Europeans. In this interdisciplinary backdrop the status and importance of the Sirah is to be determined. For this the deliberations made by the celebrated Dr. Mehmud Ahmed Ghazi in the form of his lectures on Sirah will be analyzed and further boundaries will be drawn to create a framework for our traditional assets on Sirah. In other words the present study is complementary to the paradigm proposed by Dr. Ghazi in order to develop a conceptual framework for Sirah writing in terms of interdisciplinary approach of the traditional and the modern perspectives.

### **Review of the Literature:**

The basic theme in the work of Dr. Ghazi is to establish the relevancy of studying and writing Sirah to the present day business of life. That is to say the task is to create a true perception of the Prophet's image as it stuck to the minds of the Prophet's companions, who preserved information about the person of Muhammad (ﷺ). This is not only for the Muslims but non-Muslims are equally in focus to impart the very perception. Though in one of his writings he also proposed a movement; intellectual as well as social, <sup>(ii)</sup> in his lectures, published under the title of Muhazrat-I-Sirat, he advocates the organization of the literature present on Sirah in somewhat an academic manner. A careful study of his lectures may involve the following tasks to be accomplished while writing Sirah.

1. Study of Sirah with the help of sciences (social as well as natural) like geography, sociology, medicine etc.
2. Online availability of authentic Sirah contents researched in the past and the present time by developing computer software.
3. The development of Sirah into a fully fledged discipline through already established Sirah chairs in different varsities across the globe.

Actually he conducted a general discussion about the scope and prospective of the Sirah writing and there is need to integrate the details in order to elaborate his work and suggestions in a systematic way and academic manner. The discussion which follows is an effort to make Dr. Ghazi's works an integral whole. For brevity, we cite page number directly in main text from *Muhazrat-I-Sirat* in the main text. (iii)

### **The Subject Matter of Sirah: From Distinctness to Indistinctness.**

Formerly studied under the title of '*Siyar*' and '*Maghazi*' the biography of the Prophet (ﷺ) acquired the title 'Sirah' long after the basic works on the discipline were accomplished. *Siyar* and *Maghazi* stood as distinct disciplines at the very outset. *Siyar* covered legal aspects of the Prophet's (ﷺ) life especially the dealings with other nations. It was converted soon into Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*). (iv) However, the word *siyar* remained in use afterwards as well. (v) *Maghazi*, on the other hand, was in true sense the biography of the Prophet (ﷺ) covering the minute details of his life. It was *Maghazi* which provided the subject matter for Sirah which we know today.

However, with the profusion of the subject matter the discipline lost its distinctness. As the *Siyar* and the *Maghazi* dealt only with defined material, the Sirah allows everything which was thought to be associated with the Prophet (ﷺ). For instance, the discussion about prophecy (*Nabuyyat*) comes under the fold of divinity (*Illahiyat*) but in

order to expand the subject of Sirah, writers started mentioning it under Sirah. If this practice makes any sense in exhausting (*Istasqa*)(vi) some subject then all Islamic sciences can come under the fold of Sirah as the person of the Prophet (ﷺ) occupies central position in the study of Islam. Dr Ghazi considers this practice of exhaustive compilation as a healthy act in terms of correcting details by revision and comparison, however, he also points out the drawback in this practice which renders it equally negative as it was considered positive in the first case (232). That is the inclusion of wrong details in the wake of producing bulky volumes on Prophet's life. These were the details which created misconception about the person of the Prophet (ﷺ) and orientalists prepared the stage to cast objections regarding the Prophet (ﷺ).

### **Subject Matter of Sirah: Decline of Quality Writing.**

With the downfall of the Islamic civilization epics replaced the quality writing in the Islamic sciences as a usual phenomenon. The Sirah and Islamic history were the most affected areas. This could be the sixth period regarding Sirah in addition to five periods defined and explained by Dr. Ghazi. Inclusion of miladnamas in the Sirah literature by Dr. Ghazi is taken analogous to the other material. These miladnamas are eulogy and veneration for the Prophet (ﷺ) who has already been abundantly eulogized by God. Therefore, this eulogy creates somewhat a mess about the person of the Prophet (ﷺ) and orientalists' idealization theory about the Prophet gains impetus.(vii) This and other details of this sort have blurred the actual contents of Sirah and Sirah writing lost its domains. Whether such kind of literature enjoys any status, it should not be included in the subject matter of Sirah at least.

### **Research Methodology in Writing Sirah:**

Broadly speaking, by research we can mean two things; new material in the form of discovery or declassification of the documents and new idea in the form of new interpretation or a different analysis or a useful compilation. In this scenario if we look at the literature of our classical past we can witness the fulfillment of above mentioned rules. First of all the title of any book reveals its subject matter and scope which is thought to be central in the modern research methodology. Let us have the examples of the book of Imam Bukhari. The full title is *Al Jame as Sahih al Musnad fi Hadith Rasul ullah wa Sunanihi wa Ayamihi*. In history writing we hardly find any book entitled as *Tarikh-i-Islam* or Islamic History. Take the example of Tabari; it is *Tarikh-ul-Umam wal Maluk*. In Sirah for example we have *Ad-Darar Fi Ikhtasar-i-Maghazi Was-Siyar* by Ibn Abdul Bar. Afterward like the case of subject matter this practice also saw the decline and we have books with the general term of *Sirat-un-Nabi* or with borrowed terms of the Quran as *Ar-Rahiq ul Maktum* etc. However, these works may be branded as encyclopedic style as Maulana Shibli Naumani himself showed the resolution to write "Encyclopedia of Prophetic Sciences".(viii) In recent times we have this sort of encyclopedia by Afzal-ur-Rehman entitled as "*Muhammad: Encyclopedia of Seerah*".(ix) If one notices the contents of this encyclopedia one will find the prototype of the problem that everything that can be covered under the fold of Islam or Islamic sciences is put together in the volumes of this encyclopedia. A full volume is contributed for women affairs in Islam. This is an important topic but it finds little relevancy with the subject matter of Sirah. It is an important work but suffers from the same syndrome.

In modern times the research, as we postulated it earlier, was restored by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in Sirah by writing the rejoinder to the work of Sir William Muir. Sir Syed reviewed the material and made new interpretations. It laid down the use of modern type analysis in writing the Islamic sciences. If we talk in terms of new material then Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah was the pioneer who discovered a number

of original documents. He also made extensive surveys of the historical sites to bring more details to the surface. His research got a conceptual framework by his disciple Dr. Ghazi. We may say that he reached the zenith of research in Sirah writing by suggesting blueprint for the very research. The task left to us is the construction of plan according to this blueprint.

### **Need for Writing Sirah Afresh: Dissemination through Medium of Conception.**

As mentioned earlier, the focal point of Dr. Ghazi's work is to determine the scope of Sirah writing in the modern world. The challenging thing in this regard is the often raised questions of the orientalist and blasphemous assaults of the Western media. This twofold activity also affects the modern Muslim mind. In this situation Dr. Ghazi suggested to undertake untiring effort for the Muslims to show their deep sentiments for the Prophet (ﷺ) by presenting the true picture of Sirah. For this he stressed literary efforts in the field of Sirah. However, it should not be haphazard production of the literature we have just analyzed. The question is: why writing Sirah along modern lines is necessary and why the traditional paradigm is inadequate for addressing the western objections. In this section this question will be addressed.

As every age has its conscience, the modern age is characterized by human activity in deciphering the ultimate truth or reality. Actually this concept drew the lines for the modern epistemology. Now if we want to impart the divine message to the modern world, we have to adopt this medium of conception as we use medium of language for articulation; medium of air for hearing, medium of light for seeing etc. Interestingly our traditional past is not void of this practice too. The Muslims developed their scholasticism which is called *Ilm-ul-Kalam*, when they came across with the Greek philosophy. They developed *Wahda Tush Shahud*, when they encountered Monism (*Wahda Tul*

*Wajud*) of the already existing Mysticism of the Orient and the Occident.(x) The development of these two areas was to express the Islamic spirit in the medium of philosophy and mysticism.

The reluctance of our students and scholars in adoption of the modern methodology is the complexity of theory, hypothesis etc developed by the social scientists in order to equate the social sciences with pure sciences. Along with English language this is another hurdle in the mental progress of our students. a lot of questions can be raised on this paradigm specially objectivity of pure sciences is sought in the variables of humanities. But in the wake of our inferiority complex we have to adopt this paradigm as it is. Let us take the task of writing Sirah as a platform for developing our own paradigm in research methodology by comprehending the modern paradigm and afterwards by breaking it from within it. It should be noted that our traditional paradigm has a lot to contribute for developing a new approach.

#### **Defined Subject Matter: Towards a Discipline.**

Sirah could not get the status of a discipline even in the traditional past in the syllabus of seminaries. Dr. Ghazi describes the causes in great details (592). The most apparent reason behind this negligence was our scholasticism in which energies were exhausted in addressing unnecessary details of Islamic science. However, the problem could be analyzed in another way. Due to the indistinctness of the subject of Sirah it could not get its place in the frame of scholasticism. As a discipline it could not develop technicalities over which a student can engage himself to earn some status according to the fashion of that age. So we have not terminologies in Sirah like those in *Tafsir*, *Hadith* and *Fiqh* which gave these subjects a technical status.

Setting up Sirah as a discipline requires defined domain of the subject matter as it was in the case of siyar and maghazi. A possible way out might be the focus of studies upon the wisdom of the Prophet (ﷺ) in

fulfilling the affairs of life when he was not receiving the divine guidance in any form of revelation. This demarcation is just for the sake of developing distinctness in the subject matter of Sirah and no other meaning is associated with this suggestion. For this, we may quote many examples to elaborate the case. Once the Prophet (ﷺ) was asked about the key to richness; the Prophet (ﷺ) advised to be content. This was not part of any revelation, while when asked about *Kahaf*, *Zulqarnain* and *Qiamah* he replied according to what was revealed to Him. He started Jihad when Allah allowed the Muslims to wage war but he had to carve out a war strategy himself by consulting his companions. So discussion about miracles, prophecies and metaphysical status should stay out of the boundaries of the subject matter.

Writing upon the life of the Prophet (ﷺ) mingling with other disciplines of Islamic sciences has been going on unchecked for which Sirah does not exist as a discipline in the institutions of the modern education in the Muslim world. The establishment of chairs for Sirah further renders its status as honorary subject. Furthermore, these chairs only enjoy their ceremonial position and no serious work precipitates out hitherto. Books on Sirah coming out of the press comprise of traditional descriptive style summing up of already existing details by the authors having general education. We hardly point out a doctoral dissertation on some Sirah topic published by some centre of excellence. Dr. Ghazi advised to name these chairs after some celebrated scholars of Sirah but he did not make further suggestions for these chairs. Perhaps to name these chairs as suggested would do nothing but enhance the ceremonial status of these chairs. The desirable task might be the establishment of specialized studies under these chairs in Sirah.

### **Ancillary and Auxiliary Sciences of Sirah:**

Basically Sirah is a genre of history and in knowing true history alternative source of information is of utmost importance. In constructing



the alternative approach modern historians develop the concept of auxiliary and ancillary sciences. The study of Sirah under different sciences and styles as described by Dr. Ghazi (xi) may fit well in this set of auxiliary and ancillary sciences. This will be central when we draw the boundaries of Sirah as a discipline or when we propose a curriculum for studying Sirah. The pattern will also help in determining the subject matter of Sirah.

### **Computerizing the Contents of Sirah:**

One of the resolutions adopted by Dr. Ghazi is the computerization of the Sirah contents. In this regard he specially points out the development of software one which would electronically handle the rijal of reports. This is for the common reader who could know the authenticity of any report. Though it is equally related to the contents of Sirah it will remain outside the realm of Sirah. As far as mere reports are concerned these are abundantly available online but without the boundary of a subject. Therefore first of all the boundaries of Sirah has to be determined then one can integrate the reports along with authenticity in some electronic program.

### **Sirah Writing: Historical and Civilizational Context.**

Another aspect which requires the attention of scholars is the study of the relevance of Sirah to the state and the society in the Muslim world through ages. In proper terms it is historicity of Sirah. It is a tremendous task which requires extensive study of historical literature along with mastery in Islamic sciences. We can have glimpses of the idea in Dr. Ghazi's work; however, he did not conduct a separate discussion for it. Celebrated Siraj Munir made an integrated effort in this regard but the style is too philosophical to be understood by the general reader. Secondly, though he considered history in developing his argument he did not quote much from the historical text. However, from the following excerpt we can perceive the theme of his thesis and

it can help us draw the lines of research to build the historical and civilizational perspective of Sirah. He writes:

"One of the effects which the person of the Prophet (ﷺ) cast upon the history is that being a role model his traits are not narration but practical embodiment...and this model is historicized throughout the course of the Islamic history no matter how far you marginalize that course." (xii)

### **Epistemological Aspect of Sirah Writing:**

If we are able to achieve the objectives of an impeccable Sirah discipline we still need to place all that we can achieve on the line of Islamic epistemology. Writing Sirah along the modern lines is a means to ends and not the end itself. The fulfillment of modern demands alone will lead us to nowhere but to create a mess of information. So let us demarcate between information and knowledge. For this we can ponder over the following two verses from the Holy Quran.

فَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ (سورة محمد، آية ١١)

[Trans: So know (O Muhammad) that there is no God but Allah.]

الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ. (سورة فاطر، آية ١٧)

[Trans: The erudite among His bondmen fear Allah alone.]

They cover the domain and scope of the knowledge in Islam. The first verse is the depiction of the knowledge while the second verse is the characteristic of the knowledge; the knowledge which is binding upon every Muslim in the Hadith:

طلب العلم فريضة على كل مسلم

Therefore, whether we study Sirah or any other Islamic science and even any of the branches of temporal knowledge, it would be the matter of intuition and conscience and not of mere brain and heart. It must lead us to the ultimate reality of the Creator. If it does not contain this then it might be a matter of self prestige only. While studying Sirah one should focus on this message of knowledge which the Prophet was bestowed upon and which he imparted to the human beings without demanding any reward from them.

وَمَا اسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ أَجْرٍ إِنْ أَجْرِيَ إِلَّا عَلَى رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ



**Footnotes:**

- i. In traditional Islamic education system a student used to start with Quran; then he had the education of Hadith and afterwards he specialized any of the Islamic sciences. Prominent names are equally well versed in all sciences and some of them wrote masterpieces in all branches.
- ii. Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi, *The Hijra: Its Philosophy and Message for Modern Man*, (Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1981), 75-84.
- iii. Dr. Mahmud Ahmed Ghazi, *Muhazrat-i-Sirat*, [lectures on Sirah] (Lahore: Al Faisal, 2007)
- iv. First book on Siyar was also the first book on Fiqh. It was *al Majmu' al Fiqh* by Zaid bin Ali (Imam of Zaidiya).
- v. In the traditional period scholars of Sirah often used this word though they had no intention to write on laws derived from the life of Prophet (ﷺ). For example *Ad-Darar fi Ikhtasar-i-Maghazi* was-Siyar deals with the subject matter of Sirah.
- vi. Dr. Ghazi describes it as final period of Sirah writing in the traditional past.
- vii. It describes the Prophet (ﷺ) as Real and Ideal Muhammad, see Dr. Ghazi, 298
- viii. Dr. Ghazi, 668
- ix. Afzal-ur-Rehman, *Muhammad Encyclopedia of Seerah*, (London: Muslim School Trust, 1986) 8 Vol.
- x. Imam Ghazali and Mujadid Alf Sani were pioneers in these developments respectively. The two names are epoch making movement in the Islamic history regarding the identity of Muslim community against the non-Muslim stance. For details of the development of Wahda Tush Shuhud see Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Sub-Continent (610-1947): A Brief Historical Analysis* (Karachi: Karachi University, 2003), 138-82. He made a detailed analysis of Wahda

Tush Shuhud and Wahda Tul Wajud under the title of "The Challenge of Heterodoxy" and "The Revival of Orthodoxy".

- xi. He describes ancillary and auxiliary sciences under the terms of *Ulum-i-Sirat* and *Asalib-i-Sirat* (2nd and 4th lecture) respectively. However, he mixed the details in the two and this is due to the same syndrome of indistinctness of the subject matter.
- xii. Siraj Munir, *Millat-i-Islamia: Tehzib-o-Taqdir* [Islamic community: Civilization and Development] (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1987), 44. We have summed up his repetitions in above translation by which he has made his insight confused. A careful study of the concerned passage shows that he has mingled the subject and predicate in the wake of explanation. The concept which he was prone to impart is clear from early lines of the passage while in rest of the passage he created mess about his presented concept.

