

The Expression of Religious Positivity in Karen Armstrong's Sīrah Work

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Abstract

Orientalists contributed much regarding their study of the Holy Qur'ān, Hadith and Sīrah since eighteenth century. Few of them attracted Muslim scholars due to the quality of their work about Islam, like the translation of the Holy Qur'ān, the indexes of Hadith literature and the translations of Arabic Sīrah books in English. These orientalist have left a positive impression regarding their contributions in introducing Islamic literature in West in their native languages. This research paper aims to present the expression of religious positivity in modern orientalist Karen Armstrong's Sīrah work. This selection is based on the status of this Sīrah writer in present time. Her books are best sellers written on comparative religion and a huge number of people study her books and appreciate her for expressing the positive image of Islam in West. In this study, it will be found out that in which style and angle she has presented her works regarding religious positivity especially the presentation of the personality of the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) to the non-Muslims and non-religious societies.

Keywords: expression, religion, positivity, modern, orientalist, sīrah.

Introduction:

Expression is the appearance or the look of a face. When this phrase is used for a document, it is an act or a process of representing some ideas in words¹. Word *expression* in this title shows the representation of selected orientalist Karen Armstrong in her Sīrah works regarding religious positivity. *Positivity* is the state of being positive. While *Religious Positivity* shows that a believer of a religion is representing to the society the positive face of that religion by his actions. When we say the expression of religious positivity in the Sīrah works of Karen, then it means that when Karen writes about the last holy Prophet (SAW) of Almighty Allah she shows her reader the positive face of Islam with the help of her own perception. This research paper is highlighting those points and angles of this Sīrah work of Karen by which she expresses the positivity of Islam. The paper analyzes this work in the limits of Islam or standards of Muslim Sīrah writing also. The paper chooses these

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points:

- a. The importance of *Sīrah* in present human age
- b. The role of *Sīrah* in social betterment
- c. The role of *Sīrah* in creating peace among three sematic religions

Literature Review:

Contemporary orientalist's *Sīrah* work intend to express religious positivity to eliminate violence and hate from human society. One of which is the book of Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu (1916-1992), entitled "Le Vie de Muhammad"². Gheorghiu was a Romanian professor of religion and philosophy in Heidelberg University and University of Bucharest. He wrote the *Sīrah* of the holy Prophet (SAW) in Romanian language. In his book he presented a brief sketch of the life of Allah's last Prophet (SAW) in scholarly manner. His positive work provided a chance to the European readers to understand the message of *Sīrah* for humanity. His wise narrative about *Mi'raj* shows scientific methodology used in understanding this incident³. Gheorghiu embraced Islam. A modern American *Sīrah* writer, Michael Cook wrote a book named Muhammad (Past Masters)⁴.

He introduced the holy Prophet (SAW) as a successful leader, reformer and politician. This book of Michael Cook shows the expression of partiality and dishonesty about *Sīrah* and Islam.⁵ His efforts of creating religious harmony could not be fruitful because he has consulted biased orientalist works of *Sīrah* in this book. Biased orientalist carry a long list of writers starting from William Muir⁶ and W. Montgomery Watt⁷.

They misguide their readers about *Sīrah* and the personality of the holy Prophet (SAW). They consult unauthentic translated secondary sources to narrate the life of the holy Prophet (SAW). They basically consult *Sīrah Ibn e Ishaq* and pick those narrations from this book which are rejected by group of expert Muslim scholars among them are *Malik bin Anas, Ibn e Hajr 'Asqalani and Dhabi* etc⁸. They consult *Sīrah Ibn e Ishaq's* translation of A Guillaume.

This translation of A Guillaume acquires unavoidable mistakes of translation. When orientalist consult this translation they distort historical evidences about *Sīrah*⁹ and try to fabricate human mind to misconceptions about the life of the Holy Prophet (SAW). Religious positivity is a vast subject of study today. William E Arnall, Willy Braun, Russell T. McCutcheon write their experience in this regard in their book "Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion". This group of scholars have emphasized on the study of religion in its own kind which is free from criticism and bias.¹⁰ This scholarly work is remarkable in relation to the positive study of Islam. Yetkin Yildirim in his research article entitled "Peace and Conflict Resolution in Medina Charter" highlights the importance of *Sīrah* in resolving issues of modern age humanity.¹¹

Karen Armstrong and Her *Sīrah* work:

Karen Armstrong is a religious personality, a renowned religious writer and an impressive speaker on current religious issues about

comparative study. Religion attracted her as a natural deep compassion for humanity. She left her regular study and joined church for learning her life as a future nun. During her stay in church, she tried to find out the positive and practical life style of a nun but her search remained incomplete¹². She started her study of other religions when she needed to discuss and compare religions in her TV talk show¹³. Karen Armstrong's command on English language and literature remains remarkable. This quality of her helped her in achieving the position of successful writer of best seller books on different religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism etc. Her search for a positive and practical face of religion took her to Jerusalem. She studied Judaism and the history of sematic religions in this historic city of religion. From here she started to show an expression of positivity as a common characteristic of religion. Then she tried to write on Sirah of the last Prophet (SAW) of Islam. Her books named Muhammad: A Biography of The Prophet (1991)¹⁴ and Muhammad: The Prophet of our Time (2006)¹⁵ are her *Sirah* works.

She won Muslim Public Affairs Council Media Award on book Muhammad: A Biography of The Prophet. In these books she presented personality aspects of The Holy Prophet (SAW) as a wise and successful political and religious leader. She admires The Holy Prophet (SAW) as a great reformer. Then she takes her reader to a conclusion that the personality of The Holy Prophet (SAW) is a true role model for creating peace in present society, interfaith tolerance and positive harmony in multi-ethnic communities.¹⁶

Karen Armstrong and Religious Positivity:

Unlike the conventional and traditional trend of religious positivity shown by the previous scholars like Hegel which only was limited to Christianity, Karen's concept of religious positivity desires to take all religions close to each other. Her life experiences took her to a turning point when she presented a charter of compassion on 12th November 2009. It urges believers of all religions of the world to live together with a true feeling of love for each other. Her main thesis for this project was that religion is the best tool for achieving the level of awareness for a compassionate world. Karen says that religious people are more positive towards humanity. Her concept is, infact, scientifically proven. She wrote a lot by this angle on many religions of the world. She wants to prove that no religion of the world guides its believers to hate others. No religion supports its people to violence of any kind in society. The universal concept of a positive religion is that the religion is near the human nature. Thus, Karen struggles to present all religions of the world as positive religions.

Karen's Criticism on Religious People:

Besides Karen's philosophy of compassion present in all religions, we see that she criticizes religious people for their violent actions and their brutality which they showed during wars. For example, she criticized the crusades for their brutal killing of innocent people during wars. This was, she

said, the negative evolution of the actions of Christians. So, by this criticism, she is showing another positive manner of religious people which is confession of wrong doings. She did not justify wrong doings of her own religion's believers.

Karen's Concept of Religious Harmony:

Karen Armstrong narrates the journey of religious thoughts of believers of sematic religions. She takes help from Bible and the Holy Quran for seeking information about the history of sematic religions. She assimilates compares and concludes the historic evidences of the Bible and the Quran. Then she announces that the sematic believes are harmonious to each other. The believes of monotheism, the day of judgement, Prophets (AS) and the values of humanity show strong connection between the Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is her basic thesis about religious harmony. Then she desires to think and work for a peaceful positive harmonious relationship in the believers of these religions. On the ground of her findings about sematic religions she feels that it is possible that all the religions (sematic and non-sematic) are based on positivity for human society. So she in her charter of compassion invites all religions to come forward and think and work for the betterment of humanity. Many famous personalities of the world joined her in this task and an organization came into being on the base of her charter of compassion.¹⁷

Karen's Thesis about Role of Religious Harmony for Creating Peace:

Karen in her book "Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life" explains thoroughly about her map of religious harmony which can be resulted in a peaceful universal environment for humanity. She has highlighted the main aim of religious life saving humanity and avoiding violence. In this book she relates non-sematic religious thought in detail. She quotes all religious personalities for their positive directions for humans to love and respect each other.¹⁸ She wants her readers to think seriously about creating peace in world, as the world cannot survive in present most destructive war weapons.¹⁹ So she presents her love for each and every religion of the world and is hopeful for creating peace with the help of religious positivity and a harmonious emotional and ethical action plan for the whole world.

Karen's Expression of Religious Positivity as a *Sīrah* Writer:

Karen Armstrong expressed her deep understanding of the life of holy Prophet (SAW). She presents examples from hadith and the traditions of *Sīrah* about compassion for other communities of the society. In her twelve steps for being compassionate she has quoted a hadith in which the holy Prophet (SAW) said that a person cannot be a true believer unless he likes for his brother that which he likes for himself.²⁰ She presents the personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW) as a reformer of our time who achieved peace for those people who were indulged in long wars.²¹ Karen wrote two books about *Sīrah* of the Holy Prophet (SAW) in a very crucial time when western world was kept in fear of Islam and Muslims after the incident of 9/11. She says that it

was a great challenge for her to write on *Sīrah* at that time and publishers tried to stop her for writing these books at that time. Karen has tried to write *Sīrah* for her western readers and she succeeded to keep them out of their fears about Islam and Muslims. She explained *Sīrah* as a guideline for present time on following aspects:

The importance of *Sīrah* in present human age:

Karen Armstrong in her book “Muhammad Prophet of our Time” depicts that Islam is the religion of decency and respect for each other. She says that the Prophet of Islam does not present violence of any kind. She advises her western readers to approach the biography of the Holy Prophet (SAW) in balanced way. She criticizes biased non-Muslims on their attitude of prejudice for the personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW), Islam and Muslims. She realizes that prejudice harms basic positive social behaviors like tolerance, compassion and broadmindedness.²² Karen proves the Holy Prophet (SAW) as the successful leader of our time. His strategies for resolving major problems consisted of peaceful actions for example; after *Hijrah* towards Madinah, the brotherhood among *Muhājirīn* and *Anṣār* solved many major problems of Muslims.²³ The state of *Madinah* presents great revolutionary solutions of disputes and the *ummah* is a divine unity.²⁴ While writing on *hijrah* she appears as a great admirer of the successful and positive personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW). Karen’s soft language and admiring impression made her non-Muslim readers feel and view the importance of *Sīrah* in present human age as a comprehensive human personality.²⁵

The role of *Sīrah* in social betterment

Sustainable humanity vests in the socially strong life of humanity. Karen is among those orientalist who present their scholarship about *Sīrah* as guideline for human society. She presents examples from *Sīrah* about social and cultural strengthening of humanity by making divine laws like *hijāb*,²⁶ and *qisās*²⁷ etc. She feels no hesitation in writing that all the basic work of *Sīrah* about social strength of humanity is full of kindness and compassion.²⁸ Here she invites her western readers to correct their negative impressions about the Holy Prophet (SAW). The Prophet of our time is a great kind and sensible human being.²⁹ Karen says that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) ordered His followers to accept pluralism and diversity as the will of God.³⁰ She highlights in her book the concept of *ummah* created by the Holy Prophet (SAW) was not on any worldly base like blood, cast, creed or tribe. This concept took the populace towards peaceful universal social group. The Holy Prophet (SAW) presented himself as a most tolerant man during ordering the obligations of *ṣalāh*, *zakāt*, *ḥajj* and *jihād* etc.

The role of *Sīrah* in creating peace among three sematic religions

Karen’s thesis about the peace in present age of believers of sematic religions takes her readers to a long journey of the history of the presence of God in human life on earth. She starts from the biblical concepts of God and ends on the future perceptions of people about God. In her book “A History

of God”, she has presented Islamic fundamental belief of monotheism as “Unity”.³¹ She indicates that the Holy *Qur’ān* demands from its reader a specific quality of human wisdom for understanding the attributes of God presented in the Holy *Qur’ān*. This wisdom produces as a result of true living of the life as the orders of God.³² Thus, she feels that the sematic religions have signs of unity regarding the monotheism and her thesis is that if people do not spoil their belief they can live a universal group of positive religious human beings³³. This is evident in the conclusion of her book where she writes about the religiosity of Americans. She writes that almost 91% Americans claim that they believe in God but the increasing rate of crime and social problems shows that their actions are not in line with their belief.³⁴ Here she has missed the guideline of *Sīrah* which demands the believers of *Allāh* to follow the last Prophet (SAW) to win *Allāh*’s will and Allah’s will leads us to a peaceful universal human community.

Criticism on Karen Armstrong as *Sīrah* Writer:

Karen Armstrong as a *Sīrah* writer could not save her from few mistakes while writing about the holy Prophet’s biography. She misinterprets the personality of *Hadrat Aīshah (RA)*³⁵ and few companions of the Holy Prophet (SAW)³⁶. She, as other orientalist critics, criticizes on the Prophetic Personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW). She presented the occurrence of *Mi’rāj* as the spiritual selfcreation of the Holy Prophet (SAW). She trusts on primary sources in *Sīrah* writing but she takes help from the English translations of *Sīrah Ibn e Ishāq* by Alfred Guillaume also. Besides all the weaknesses as a contemporary *Sīrah* writer, Karen is listed in a successful positive analyst of religion. She counts the Islamic and *Sīrah* approach on human society as the major need of today to be adopted. She in her statement criticized and rejected Ayaan Hirsi Ali on her point of view about Islam as a religion of violence.³⁷

Conclusion:

Karen Armstrong’s belief on religion is based on that religion is only a positive life style which is able to return peace, love and unity in society. Specially, Islam is a set of decent social and cultural values which westerners followed for designing their society. To prove her strong belief about the practical importance of *Sīrah* for today she wrote about the *Sīrah* of the last Prophet (SAW).



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