

THE WRITING OF THE BIOGRAPHY OF MUHAMMAD

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Andrew Rippin says that, " biography is a powerful mirror for the reflection of the ideals, as well as the standards, of the age in which it is written, and thus may be seen to reflect the contemporary situation of its authors in the very construction of the facts which the work intends to records".¹ Also, biography tend to idealize a person or his life and often serves a medium for expressing the ideas and ideals of the writer.

Muhammad has been a man about whom many studies have been done. Discussion on Muhammad reflects the image and inspiration of writers whether they be medieval Muslims and Christians or modern Muslims and modern scholars. Depending on the time to which different writers belong, the writing of biography of Muhammad has different trends which depend on the writer's backgrounds and interest or for different purposes using different starting points. This paper examines some scholars' inequality ideas and ideals and their illustration on Muhammad on the different times they belong.

It seems that medieval Muslim writers have discussed the biography of Muhammad in a mythical and apologetic view. Among them that he becomes extraordinarily significant; as a Holy Prophet, as the Messenger of God and as the example of the ideal practice of the teachings of Islam. Ibn Ishaq (702-767), in his *The Life of Muhammad*, says that being a messenger of God , Muhammad was a statesman and a great diplomat who established a good relationship with the Jews of Madinah and was victorious in many *maghazis* (wars) with the help of supernatural power.² Ibn Ishaq provides a richly embellished life of Muhammad which concentrates on the many miracles which God made him perform, especially those in the early part of his life.

Based his work on *Strah* of Ibn Ishaq and following its style. Ibn Hishām (828) states in his book, *Sirāh al-Rasūl*, that Muhammad's Life is the most perfect and wisdom, based on unimpeachable evidence of the Divine Writ and unquestionable records of history, furnishing a vivid and detailed account of his looks and lineament character and department, moral behaviour and

¹Andrew Rippin, *Muslims: Their Religious Belief and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 47-48. It must be bear in mind the relation of man to his environment is the relation of the historian to his theme. The historian is neither the humble slave nor the tyrannical master of his facts. The relation between the historian and his facts is one equality, of give and take. See E.H. Carr, *What is History* (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1986), p. 29.

²Ibn Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. (London: University Press, 1955).

method of prayer, his living awareness of God and anxiety for his fellow beings, the grace and elegance of this discourses, and the miraculous march of events in his momentous life.³ Moreover, in connection with the tradition of compiling Hadīth, Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Tabārī (839-923) wrote about the life of Muhammad on the basis of reports transmitted via a chain of authorities stretching back to Muhammad's time. Tabārī emphasizes more Muhammad's career, the hostility directed toward him by many Meccan leaders, his critical importance for Islam both religiously and politically and the main events of his military expeditions.⁴ In short, the writing of Muhammad's biography in the medieval Muslims sounds mythical and, sometimes, apologetic.

It would be true that it was very popular in Christian medieval to see Muhammad as an evil and wicked character in history. Some writers state that he was surrounded by idols, that he was a heretic Christian, humble, warlike, oversexed and used prophethood to build his power. Theopanes, a Byzantium author, said that Muhammad was an epileptic. Others thought that although Muhammad was influenced by Christian and Jewish religion, Muhammad falsely claimed that he was a prophet renewing and perfecting the religion of Abraham. Also, Muhammad adopted things from Judaism and Christianity in order to legitimize his greedy mentality for politic and power. Moreover, because of the Crusades and other wars against the Saracens, some Christians considered Muhammad as the incarnation of all that was evil. Also, many medieval Christian thought that since his religion was spread by the sword, that Muhammad was hostile, intolerant and belligerent. In addition, he was vilified as an imposter, identified as the anti-Christ. Dante, in his literature genre work *The Divine Comedy*, depicted Muhammad as an inhabitant of the lowest level of the hell.⁵ In short, the writing of biography of Muhammad in the Christian Middle Ages was quiet negative and unsympathetic.

³See S. Abdul Hasan Ali elaborates in detail, if not redundant, historical Muhammad which is quoted much from Ibn Hisham's work, *Muhammad Rasulullah, the Life of Prophet Muhammad* (Lucknow, India: Islamic Research and Publications, 1979). pp. 8-9.

⁴Tabārī is accounted as a pioneer of Muslim history as well as the greatest historian. See Kh. Jamil Ahmad, *Seratus Muslim Terkemuka*, Hundred Great Muslims, trans. by Pustaka Firdaus Team (Jakarta: Pustaka Firdaus, 1987), p. 414. Part of his great reputation rests upon his book of world history, *Tarikh al-Rasul wa al-Muluk* which covers the era of the Biblical prophets, details some early rulers, and then moves on the Sassanian history. The texts becomes far more detailed after this portion, being organized by the years of the life of Muhammad, the first four caliphs, the Umayyad dynasty, and the Abbasid rulers up to the year 915. See Andrew Rippin and Jan Knappet, *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 2, and al-Tabārī, *The History of al-Tabārī*, translated and annotate by W. Montgomery Watt and M.V. McDonald (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1987).

⁵See Charles Adams, "Islam", *A Reader's Guide to the Great Religion*, ed. by Charles J. Adams (New York: The Free Press, 1977), pp. 414-421 and F.E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 23, August 1991, pp. 291-315.

In quite recent times, since about 1875, Muslim interest in the biography of Muhammad has reawakened; there have been more biographies of the Prophet in the past seventy-five years than in perhaps the entire previous span of the Islamic history.⁶ It is because the discussion of Muhammad in the modern age is of relevance for it provides new ways of scenting and explanation all things about him. Also, to Muslim faith, it is still relevant for the attempts to find out the historical Muhammad produce a different picture of him from the one produce by Muslims religious-based studies on the same topic. Moreover, on the ground of the changes in trend and issues, some Muslim writers of Muhammad's biography have tried to interpret the biography in the light of traditionalism.⁷ Abdul Madjid, in *The Last Prophet and His Teaching*, says that having been a mortal, Muhammad is the best example for humankind and that his example should be kept alive for its everlasting guidance.⁸ According to him, the message of Muhammad never end; it has to play its role.⁹

Moreover, Abu al-Hasan Ali Nadwi, in his *Pathway to Madinah*, says that the chief messages of Muhammad echo the problems of modern times. He argues that modern Muslims are not the slaves of modern world.¹⁰ In his eyes, modern Muslim should be the modern Muhammad. To answer the question what the greatest achievement of Muhammad's prophethood was is that he states it was to give hope to despaired heart of man, to take him back to the path of righteousness, to cleanse his mind and heart of the contaminating impurity and to raise him to the sublime heights of spirituality.¹¹

In addition, to traditionalist interpretation, some modernists discuss Muhammad biography; they have tended to be pragmatic and rational. According to them, the study of Muhammad has to be relevant to their faith as Muslims. Islam and Muhammad, in their eyes, become ideal channels through which their ideas and views could be expressed. Being influenced by Western approaches used to study Islam, Muhammad Husayn Haykal¹² (1888-1956), in his work, *Muhammad*, refuses to introduce superstition into the life

⁶Charles J. Adams, "Islam", *A Reader's Guide* ..., p. 417.

⁷Traditionalism, sometimes, termed normative or orthodox. Traditionalism hold to the full authority of the past and that change should not and does not effect the traditions of the past. Change is to be rejected. See Andrew Rippin, *Muslims* ..., pp. 28-29.

⁸Abdul Majid, *The Last Prophet and His Teaching* (Delhi, India: Noor Publishing House, 1988), pp. 35-48.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Ali Hasan al-Nadwi, *Pathway to Madinah* (Lucknow, India: Mudran Kala Bhawan, 1982), pp. 78-80.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Haykal is most concerned with establishing the rationality of Islam and rejecting every Orientalist objection to, and criticism of, the religion itself. Islam, for him, fully in keeping with modern life and reason. See Andrew Rippin, *Muslims* ..., p. 51.

of Muhammad; rather his message is full of the rational spirit and supports individuals freedom because, he thinks, Islam is a democratic religion.¹³ Haykal speaks from a certain time period in Egypt when democracy was being promoted; his biography clearly reflects those ideals as stemming from, and therefor legitimized by, the time of Muhammad. Also, Haykal's interpretation reflects the central issues which have been emphasized in Western attacks upon Muhammad and Islam.

Moreover, Toha Husayn (1889-1973) emphasizes his writing about Muhammad on the light of cultural heritage which was to be found in classical works such as the *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq. Also, he illustrates the story of Muhammad on an imaginative way, recording events from the perspective of various characters living at the time of Muhammad and presented in a rational fashion without any emphasis on miraculous actions or the like. In the matters of the role of reason, Toha Husayn simply denies that Muhammad performed any miracles. He does not convince Muhammad the Prophet as a hero, but as God's apostle: a man with an intense spiritual experience who brought about a new relationship between God and man.¹⁴

Following the way of Toha Husayn discussed Muhammad, Ahmad Amin (1886-1954), in his *Faid al-Khatir*, argues that in the case of relationship between Palestinian with Israel there are similar premises in Muhammad's times and in the modern times. The question he provokes is that why Muhammad and his companions won and why Palestinians lost. According to Ahmad Amin, it should be analyzed case's premises because it must be there an incorrect premise in order to give the a new meaning to historical Muhammad.

Reacting to European impression of Muhammad¹⁵, Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, in his work *The Genius of Muhammad*, depicts Muhammad a great prophet, a peerless leader, a great man for all Muslims; his political life is, therefore, not as important as his spiritual one. As a result, al-Aqqad's biography downplay events as such and concentrates on the character of the hero.¹⁶ Muhammad was sent to decaying world, one which lacked belief and order, so his role was one of prophet, combining the function of preacher,

¹³Muhammad Huseyn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. by Isma'il Ragi al-Faruqi (Indianapolis: North American Publication, 1976), pp. 184-185.

¹⁴See Toha Husayn, *'Ala Hamish al-Sirah* (On the Margin of the Life of the Prophet), and for excellent treatment of Toha Husayn, see M.M. Badawi, *Modern Arabic Literature and the West* (London: Ithaca Press, 1985), pp. 58-60.

¹⁵Charles J. Adams says that in contrast to Muslim biographers, Western students of the Prophet have often been unsympathetic, "Islam", *A Reader's Guide* ..., p. 414.

¹⁶M.M. Badawi deals with Islam in modern Egyptian literature which consider that character of the Prophet is central in their writing, *Modern Arabic* ..., pp. 55-65.

military leader, statesman and organizer as well husband and father.¹⁷

In dealing with Western colonization to many Muslim countries, 'Abd al-Rahman Sharqawi, in *Muhammad, the Messenger of Freedom*, pronounces that Muhammad's mission is the way of liberalization and revolution from colonization, an exploitative economy, capitalism and any appression. He also states that Muhammad is the one who wanted to unify humanity based on notions of brotherhood and equality, love and mercy, whose ultimate goal was to produce a better future for people and the world, *rahmah li al-'alamtn* (mercy for all over the world). Inherent in Muhammad's message was progress and liberalization through a veritable revolution.¹⁸

Some Iranian intellectuals¹⁹ opposed the Westernization²⁰ of Iran, especially, during the reign of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979) on the one hand. On the other hand, some Muslim writers agree with the rationalization. Ali Dashti, dead shortly after the Iranian revolution at the age about 85, presented a full rationalization of prophethood in his book *Twenty Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad*. He says that many biographies of Muhammad in Iran constitute poison for a nation's mind and stop man's capability to think. Moreover, Dashti says that the events in Muhammad's lifetime were determined by natural causes which may happen in every time and place. Nothing supernatural occurred in Muhammad's life: everything can be accounted for by modern psychology and sociology. The lack of rationality in matters of belief has caused the spread of superstition and illusion. Concerning Muhammad's wives and various references to them in scripture, Dashti says, "Every reader of the Qur'an must be amazed to encounter these private matters in a scripture and moral code valid for all mankind and for all time".²¹

Based on literary works, some Muslim writers of biography of Muhammad look Muhammad in different character and role for modern time. Iqbal, in some of his poetries, thinks that Muhammad is faithful, loving, counseling friend and concise in his sayings. In addition to modern crises, Iqbal thinks that Muhammad is the light for the lost existence of humanity,

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 55-59.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 61-63.

¹⁹Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-1969), Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977) and Samad Behrangi (1939-1968) established a strong critic of the pace and direction of Iran's modernization. See Faisal Ismail, "Jalal Al-e Ahmad: His Assessment and Critique of the 'Westtoxication' of Iran", unpublished, p. 1.

²⁰According to Jalal, Westernization means *Gharbzadengi* (Westtoxication or Westruckness). See Faisal Ismail, *ibid.*

²¹Ali Dashti, *Twenty Three Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Muhammad*, trans. F.R.C. Baqley (Boston: George Allen, 1985), pp. 52-71, 137.

especially for the Western world.²² On the contrary, Naguib Mahfouz, born in 1911 and probably the best known of all contemporary Arab writers, in his novel *Aulād Hāratinā*, illustrates that insofar as his mission was for all races and colours, Muhammad was a prophet of mercy and love, but that Muhammad thought that it could be achieved only by violent means. Moreover, the success of Muhammad was short lived, and his teaching were distorted. According to Naguib Mahfouz, in a world that has become impure, full of evil, hatred and wars, Muhammad's religious teaching can not solve basic human quests, namely the search for a just and meaningful existence any longer; in other words, the Divine has become irrelevant to modern life because of the way in which he has been made absent from human existence. Naguib Mahfouz's *Aulād Hāratinā* is the portrait of the frustration of the goal of Muhammad by later followers, and this is what the work goes on to explore in its final section. Scientists have become the prophet and their only mission is science, and science is the true religion.²³ This is a biography for the modern world,²⁴ one in which the message is deeply veiled by the curtain of the medium and the form. One cannot help thinking of Salman Rushdi's attempt at the same feat, but Rushdi goes too far in his illustration that is charged a blasphemy.

With respect to modern women's issues, Fatima Mernissi (b. 1940)²⁵, in her *Women in Islam*, thinks that Muhammad always interacted with his wives in a democratic environment. Further, she says that Muhammad is a champion of women's role and the legitimation of women's aspirations and that he stands as the man who shows what is lacking in the new male-female relation, namely, that women are not treated properly as members of society in the spheres of politics, economy and religion. For Mernissi, Muhammad's character reflects precisely what is lacking in contemporary male-female interactions:

Muhammad was a chief of state who publicly acknowledged the importance of affection and sex in life. And, during expeditions, his wives were not just background figures, but shared with him his strategic concerns. He listened to their advice, which was sometimes the deciding factor in thorny negotiations.²⁶

In connection to women's issues, Leila Aslaoui, an Algerian magistrate, says that Muhammad was a liberal man for his time. He helped menage his various

²²See also Iqbal's works pronoun "a Greeting from East".

²³See also his *Qasr al-Shawq* (Cairo: Maktabah Misr, 1973), pp. 371-372.

²⁴Andrew Rippins, *Muslims* ..., p. 59.

²⁵Fatima Mernissi is a sociologist and university teacher in Morocco. His work is as close as one might conceive to being a feminist biography of Muhammad. See Andrew Rippin, *Muslims* ..., p. 59.

²⁶Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 104.

households, mended his own clothes and indicated that sexual satisfaction was a woman's right. For Aslaoui, the religion he founded outlawed female infanticide, made the education of girls a sacred duty and established a women's right to own and inherent property.

Lisa Beyer, a Western writer, published an article "Life Behind the Veil", hoped to prove a positive picture of Muhammad for non-Muslim readers. She says that Muhammad favored women's right, but today Islam often means oppression for women's right in various spheres of life. For Beyer, Muslim women might not be paying a high price for independence although some women hold relatively high position in Muslim countries today. In contrast to Muhammad's time, Beyer says it is the facts that the wives of the Prophet Muhammad were vibrant, strong-willed women. Khadija was at prosperous business women who at one point engaged Muhammad as her agent for caravan trade,²⁷ who did so much to support him during difficult times in his life.²⁸ 'Aisha, "the Prophet's favorite", was at various time a judge,²⁹ a political activist and, after his death, an interpreter of his teaching.

Some modern Western scholars have based their views and analysis of the biography of Muhammad on a scientific approach and attitude. Maxime Rodinson,³⁰ in his *Muhammad*, states that in the light of the role of women in modern times, Muhammad with his polygamous marriages faced big problems with his harems that have different style.³¹ The reason for Muhammad's wars and conquests, according to Rodinson, has traditionally been considered a purely religious phenomenon. He says that disciples of a new religion wish peoples who profess other faiths to adopt the new one.³² On the contrary, Frederick M. Denny says that the ways in which Muhammad spread Islam and conversion to Islam was forced on idolaters, but not on People of the Book.³³ Denny says that the conquest in fact were not primarily religious, but economic and political, enabling the newly united Arab tribes to continue their momentum as a politically and economically feasible community.³⁴

²⁷Lisa Beyer, "Life Behind the Veil", *Time*, December 3, 1990, p. 41.

²⁸Frederick M. Denny, *Islam and the Muslim Community* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), p. 25.

²⁹Lisa Beyer, *loc. cit.*,

³⁰Maxime Rodinson is a contemporary biographer of Muhammad. See F.E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol. 23, No. 3, August 1991, p. 302.

³¹Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammad* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

³²Maxime Rodinson, "The Life of Muhammad and the Sociological Problem of the Beginning of Islam", *Diogenes*, No. 20, Winter 1957, p. 31.

³³Frederick M. Denny, *Islam and the Muslim Community* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 38.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 37.

In contrast to Rodinson's examination, Michael Cook,³⁵ in his book *Muhammad* gives an incisive account of Muhammad who inspired Islamic belief, drawing on the traditional Muslim sources to describe Muhammad's life and teaching. He also attempts to stand back from this traditional picture to question how far it is historically justified. For Michael Cook, Muhammad's mission has admittedly changed. Although Islam is now many things to many men, Islam still has made the final and most complete contribution to the world because its conception of the relationship between God and man is authentic, and unadulterated.³⁶ Using a sociological approach, Montgomery Watt,³⁷ in *Muhammad Prophet and Statesman*, says that based on his research, he concludes that Muhammad was an intelligent statesman and administration. Finally, on the aspect of Muhammad's psychology, Reynold A. Nicholson quoted M.J. de Goeje's view saying:

We find in him that sober understanding which distinguished his fellow-tribesman: dignity, tact, and equilibrium; qualities which are seldom found in people of morbid constitution: self-control in no small degree. Circumstances changed him from a Prophet to a Legislator and a Ruler, but for himself he sought nothing beyond the acknowledgment that he was Allah's Apostle, since this acknowledgment includes the whole of Islam. He was excitable, like every true Arab, and in the spiritual struggle which preceded his call this quality was stimulated to an extent that alarmed even himself; but by the most solemn asseveration, against the charge that what he had seen was an illusion of the senses. Why should not we believe him?³⁸

There is no doubt that the writing of the biography of Muhammad has always been changing. It reflects the ideas and ideals of the writers' times. The majority of medieval Muslim writers tended to be sympathetic and perceptive, on the one hand. On the other hand, the majority of medieval Christian writers tended to portray the character of Muhammad negatively. While some modern Muslim writers tend to be pragmatic, others tend to be influenced by scholarly interest. Indeed, the writing of Muhammad's biography displays different trends influenced by its writers' backgrounds and interests.

³⁵Michael Cook is a lecturer at the School of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London.

³⁶Michael Cook, *Muhammad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 83-90.

³⁷W. Montgomery Watt was Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies, University of Edinburgh, 1964-79, and he has been Visiting Professor at the College de France, and the Universities of George Town and Toronto.

³⁸Reynold A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the Arabs* (Cambridge: Cambridge of the University Press, 1969), p. 179.