

## **Orientalist vs Islamic Perspectives: A Comparative analysis of the Seerah**

**Dr. Mufti Muhammad Iltimas Khan**

Lecturer Department of Islamiyat University of Peshawar

### **Abstract**

This paper will reveal the methods of interpretation applied by the Orientalists and Islamic tradition in their examination of Seerah. Orientalists are established historians, who use critical source evaluation and factual historic context to write about social, political, and psychological aspects that characterized Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) life. Such an approach proves to be important by providing us with an elaborate historical context, however, may be restricted by its potential biases and lack of the transcendental view. The very idea behind the Islamic research, indeed, is to focus the efforts on the verifiability of the sources and to explain the Prophet (PBUH) life by means of guidance of the Allah. It portrays his remarkable personality and wondrous deeds that can give rise to enough deep-seated veneration amongst the Muslim community. Although it is responsible for the conservation of the custom, a less strict one leaves the interpretation borders. Through a critical comparison of the different views, this paper is going to demonstrate how they impact Muslims' outlook on their history and faith. To conclude, the paper contends for both the validity of the joint Seerah study and the significance of critical thinking and an observational aspect when engaging with different approaches in this field.

**Keywords:** Orientalist, Seerah, Islamists, Observational Aspects, Historical Context

### **Introduction**

The word "Seerah" as described by Ibn Ishaq (8th century CE) and Ibn Hisham (9th century CE) translates into Arabic as "life story" or "illustrated biography." In Islam, the term "Seerah" specially denotes the life event of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) starting from his birth to the time of his death including The Seerah of the Prophet means much to Muslims, it acts as a first read which helps to bring in some guidance and inspiration (Malik, 2005). This book embodies the Prophet's (PBUH) whole character, behavior, and teachings, which brings to Muslims a personal model to follow for personal life (Huda, 2002). In the process of Seerah study Muslims develop a deeper recognition of the source of their religion and what the early Muslims community had to overcome to thrive despite those challenges. For this reason, the Seerah is a source that can never be totally exhausted, since it discusses, for example, the subjects like patience, endurance, justice and kindness.

The rise of Orientalism, the striving for the academic study of the East in Europe, in the 18th and 19th centuries took place along with the development of the colonialism of the West. Orientalists, motivated by the need to comprehend and thus, to some extent, to control over the colonized populations, threw serious research efforts into the field of Eastern philology and, as well as the history, cultural and religious aspects of the East, including Islam. Their systematic approach to Islamic civilizations was largely informed by linguistics and historical research as they sought to extract a complete understanding of the very texts and traditions they were seeking to understand. The main objective was to make sense of the Islamic society by

analyzing the internal realities in the system of belief and then make the colonialism feasible by facilitating the effective governance following due understanding of the "Muslim mind." While Orientalist research on one hand, has been facing considerable criticism for its fundamental biases, on the other, it serves as a lens, through which the interpreter tries to understand the culture. Critics, particularly as noted by Edward Said in his most famous book "Orientalism" (1978), strongly favor the opinion that the Orientalists often observed the Islam and Islamic societies through non-rational and unchanging lenses implying that they were substantially different from the Western world. This representation not only maintained the traditional culture of the native people but also gave them advancement and completely domination. The outcome of the Orientalist scholarship through the time was not it used to be an explanation but a hegemonic narrative portraying the West as more advanced and Asia as less developed. And the cycle of power and culture divide was going on and on.

Given the contrasting motivations and methodologies employed by Orientalist scholars and Islamic tradition, a central question emerges: What are their various perception passages and how do they account the Seerah? The Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) biography the Seerah. Their focus generally based upon historical and social background of the key events narrated in the Seerah (Hodgson, 1974), Orientalists aesthetically driven placed colonial agenda and secular frameworks in priority. Contrariwise, Islamic research sheds light on the authenticity of the source material and its divine origin as it was guiding the Prophet's life. This approach proves to be more effective than the others as it elucidates the moral values of Muhammad and his miraculous life (Motylinski, 2006). There cannot be any doubt of why it is really necessary to be acquainted with these different approaches as they are crucial in view of drawing a coherent, and multi-dimensional outlook of Islamic historical understanding.

### **Orientalist Perspectives**

Orientalists employ the method of critical scholarship of Seerah in search for objectivity and historical accuracy. The goal, here, is to use the source application method which is based on document critical analysis to establish if the documents are reliable and reliable. Orientalists examine the process of source examination competently namely how the facts have been derived, authorship, authenticity of the sources (Robinson, 2003). Moreover, the scholars underline the impact of establishing the preferred time or point of the events' occurrence that corresponds to the Islamic Era. Discussing these factors provides direction for better understanding and analyzing the social-political-and-economic contexts of the early Arabs in comparison with other historical events, understanding the motivations of the actors could shed some light Hereby, contextualization plays a crucial role in the Orientalists' effort to achieve a more complex picture of history, based not only on the imposed religious dogmas but also on the social and political forces that dominated the era.

The Orientalist examination of the Seerah, however, not only deals with the religious interpretations; it also expands its horizons to tackle a wider range of themes. Through careful examination of historical factors that weighed on the events and the decisions, Orientalists check

if their view is consistent with what was actually witnessed by Prophet Muhammad. For example, this could lead to examining Muhammad's face up in terms of tribal factionalism, economic pressures, and the power relations of Mecca at that time. The psychologization evidence is evident not only among the pro-Orientalists who attempt to delve into the minds of the Prophet (PBUH) and other key religious personalities in an attempt to understand their motivations (Watt, 1961). This is about analyzing his childhood, life activities, and the manner in which he was under psychological stress to divulge those revelations. While such studies have received criticism for attempting to correlate things that are hard to agree on and losing the religious significance (Brown, 1993), they have also been applauded. However, there is much to be said for the Orientalist view of these themes as this opens up a new perspective on the Seerah. This includes how religious reckoning; social contexts and human actions are connected to history given that they all have a significant role to play in shaping historical events. The Orientalist's 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.

The Orientalist perspective on the study of the Seerah, endorsing the significance of historical context, has been criticized for its narrow focus. The debatable part is whether there is objectivity or not in an ethical judgement. As critics point out, Orientalist knowledge, often emerged in a colonist era with its own bias, is consequently prejudiced and faulty (Said, 1978). Such a main belief relies secular explanations as well as diminishes the role of the heliocentric Islamic history, may unconsciously represent the Western values onto Islamic history. This can often result in misinterpretations and skewed viewpoints, presenting Islam as a uniform entity without the ability to undertake meaningful changes because of the misrepresentation of the complexity of Muslim thinking (Hodgson, 1974). But in spite of the bias, which Orientalist scholars brought along, the field positively worked to our knowing of Seerah through such methods as employing the critical approach and giving us a historical frame for the events' interpretation. Through the fine details with which they examine sources materials, they have shed some light of the complexities of early Islamic history. At the end, the appropriate strategy, who combines the Orientalists' strengths and weaknesses to gain a comprehensive understanding of the Seerah is essential.

### **Islamic Perspectives**

In contrast to Orientalist opinion, traditional Islamic literature applies an alternative approach in studying the Seerah. What this approach has in common is the high precision of crosschecking of sources making sure that the materials are authentic and true narrations about the life of Mohammed (PBUH) (Paramount to this procedure is an accurate verification of sources materials, to make sure that they are real and relate Mohammed's (PBUH) life). Islamic scholars are distinguished due to their integral legitimate strategies, including isnad, which is a rigorous method to trace the origin of each narration back to eyewitnesses, evaluating the reliability of each transmitter in the chain (Robinson, 2003). Moreover, this emphasis puts an end to verse

fabrication which eventually leads to Al-seerah being free from fabrications and embellishments. Secondly, Islam clearly states about the Islamic Scholarship that divine direction made a big part in the Prophet's (PBUH) personal life and mission. The Quran builds its case on the miracles of the Prophet (PBUH) as a perfect model (uswa hasana) for the Muslims; the Seerah is seen as another pillar to support the Quran Text and prove the Prophet's role in revealing it (Haykal, 1976). The Seerah therefore provides an avenue for Muslim scholars to explore through which the life of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH) described the precepts of Islam into his conduct and character. Such a technique inspires profound appreciation and emotional bonding within the Islamic society with Rasoolullah (PBUH) and his trayaqat (the term used for the legacy or results left by the Prophet).

The Islamic experts even pay more attention to the themes which shows that prophet Muhammad was an example for all human beings and his life was directed by God. According to the author, patience, honesty, and compassion are the different distinctive Islamic characters which are all seen in the Prophet's (PBUH) demeanor (Nadwi, 2002). With a fine-combing precision, Islamic scholarship teases out value and meaning from the Seerah on how the Chosen one bloomed through real-life experiences and navigated through similar circumstances we face today. This inclines towards identifying model behavior in order to enable Muslims to be imitating in their dealings the Prophet's (PBUH) manner of behavior. Furthermore, Islamic sages, commenting on the eventful aspect of the Prophet's mission, stress some miraculous incidents that accompanied the Prophet's message including Moon-splitting and the "Shab-e-Miraj" (Muhammad Bukhari, 8th century CE). Such incidents are viewed as the miracles of the Prophet (PBUH) and, as such, they solidify believers' faith and bring upon them comfort. Through such endeavor, Islamic scholarship nourishes a profound respect for the Prophet (S.A.W.) who is not only the model on which Islam was shaped, but also the axis around which the message revolves and therefore the centrality of his life is imprinted on the life of those who follow his footsteps. The chronological learning of the Seerah, the personalization, and the integration of the Islamic values and theology are some of the strengths of the traditional Islamic approach. One of the most significant roles it plays is for it to diligently preserve as well as transfer historical records of the life of the Prophet (PBUH).

The stringent ways of looked up sources by Islamic scholars help them make sure that the transmission of the Prophet's sayings and actions have being aided by their authenticity evidence and prevented from deterioration by the way of inaccuracy (Robinson, 2003). So, the importance is put on transmitting the heritage which makes believers to feel that they are members of the generation of the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) with the long connection to his legacy. More importantly, according to Islamic perspective, the Seerah holds greater sacredness and shows the importance of Allah's commandment which has significantly influenced Muhammad's (PBUH) mission. Furthermore, Haykal considers it from the point of view of someone personally affected by this phenomenon (Haykal, 1976) and as a result he draws a great well of inspiration and strengthens the faith of Muslims because he shows the resources provided by revelation [divine].

The problem then becomes that, recognizing a flaw, there could be a limit to the effectiveness of our solution. The concentration on religious meanings sometimes can produce a particular opinion or a less expansive analysis of historical parameters (Landau-Tasserou, 1989). Nonetheless, that is the Islamic way of dealing with Seerah, which performs a significant role in maintaining Islamic theology, generating piety amongst believers and presents us with characteristics that are exclusive to the prophet (PBUH).

### **Comparative Analysis**

One significant divergence in the analysis arises from the way specific incidents are interpreted. For instance, an Orientalist could analyze Prophet Muhammad's (S.A.W) migration from Mecca to Medina (Hijrat), regarding this event from a political perspective; specifically, mentioning clashes between tribes or backlashes against the Prophet. On the other hand, Islam as a scholarship maintains that the Hijrat could have been the sign of the first Muslim community as it was done (Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, 10th century). In doing so, the complimentary role of the prophet is clearly highlighted, investigating its religiously significant nature and acting as a key pillar in the Islamic understanding of the Prophet's (PBUH) status as a divinely guided leader. Similarly, orientalist might depict Prophet's (PBUH) engagements in war against the Quraysh tribe as sophisticated or calculated military expeditions (Goldziher, 1981). Islamic scholars though tend to regard Allah's pen as establishing the book's centrality and outline the necessity for armed Jihad (i.e. defense) against oppression and further support the legitimacy of armed Jihad when the Muslim society faces oppression (Nadwi, 2002). The dominant interpretation here is the Islamic that is closely related to theological foundations of the Islam and serve as a platform how the Muslims view their faith. The rigid studies within Islam greatly differ in their different aspects, yet the basic core remains over the emphasis of divine guidance and behavior of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as an ideal character.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the orientalist and Islamic academia take very different approaches to the Seerah, the biography of Prophet Muhammad (SAWS). The orientalist concentrate on historical background which is often followed by scholars who attribute secular or even non-religious meanings to the prophet to discredit the Prophet's role as a religious figure. From the historical times, Orientalists always contributed to the dark side of Western power by arranging themselves side by side with them in propagating imperialism in eastern lands. This is the reason Orientalism is considered as a common tool that was specifically used by western powers to disperse western culture. What is meant here by Orientalists have actively participated in the distortion of Islam's image, they are mainly known for the opinion created around Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) They have dispersed by various means unreliable and untrue stories which could confuse people and thus promote skepticism toward the life and impact of the great prophet Muhammad had on the world of Islam. In the present atmosphere of the Orientalism present regarding the Siya Rusi

studies, the current approaches remain almost the same as they were previously. They largely carry the questions of their predecessors while constantly changing their research methods. The orientalist work with prejudice and bias, which result in insufficient fairness and neutrality in their studies that are strongly influenced by modernism and the West view on the nature of knowledge. While researchers divulge on this issue from the point of view on the credibility of sources, the divine influence on the Prophet, and on the outstanding example for Muslims to follow, Islamic researches (research) bases their decision from the exact and true sources of human memory and knowledge, the concept of divine guidance inspiring the Prophet's acts, and his exceptional conduct, which serves as the model for Muslims to follow. By incorporating many perspectives into Seerah, it enables the Muslims to gain a higher level of esteem and respect for the Prophet's legacy and they become comprehensible of the extreme influence of the Prophet's legacy on Islamic faith and history and then try to criticize it in the most balanced way. By doing this, this multiplicity of perspectives helps us to know more and more about the life of the Prophet, but also to give us a better understanding of his historical legacy.

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