



Analysis of the Selected Writings of William Montgomery Watt and Karen Armstrong on Prophet Muhammad

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Abstract:

Edward Said consider that the notion of Orientalism has frequently been associated with the concepts like Racism, Marxism, Imperialism, Spenglerism, Utopianism and Freudianism. Nonetheless some Orientalists have also made substantial contribution to Islamic Studies and the biographical study of Prophet Muhammad in the positive sense. Moreover the approach, conclusion and opinions of such intellectuals are highlighted as cardinal if one considers their work in a proper fashion. The common pattern discerned in their writings is the adoption of 'dialogue' method as they aspired to vouchsafe substantial consummations. In other words if one compares them with the Orientalists of the prior times they while making the attempt to comprehend Prophet Muhammad through the perception of his followers neither resorted to the casuistry of dubbing him an imposter nor envisage the knowledge he imparted as mere counterfeited version of the Abrahamic tradition. Passably they considered to a certain degree the originality of Muhammad's Revelation and the teachings he accorded. So in this paper sui generis status of two eminent British writers on Islam and its Prophet namely William Montgomery Watt and Karen Armstrong have been accentuated.

Key words: *Islam, Muhammad, Orientalism, Prophethood, Qur'an.*

Introduction:

In this article two prominent British writers on Prophet Muhammad namely William Montgomery Watt and Karen Armstrong have been taken into consideration. Both of them use critical-historical method while analyzing the life of Prophet Muhammad. William Montgomery Watt's approach of Prophet's life is extensively contemplated as multi-methodological besides taking into view historical aspects like highlights social, economical and phenomenological features. Watt's work on Prophet Muhammad has been acknowledged by various virtuosos to be one of the classics in the bailiwick. According to Dr. Jabal M. Buaben, Watt is tremendously influential intellectual in the domain of Islamic studies and reputed even among Muslims throughout the world. In other words Watt's name appears conspicuously as the prolific scholar on Prophet Muhammad, when the deliberation regarding the British intellectual on Islam of twentieth century are considered [1].

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Karen Armstrong's work on the life account of Prophet is likewise historical, even though not well versed with the Arabic language nevertheless she still indirectly refers to the classical sources on Prophet Muhammad's life. Moreover she also focuses attention on the religious and spiritual depth of the resolutions and compromises made by Muhammad. Additionally she endeavors to develop proper nexus between the teachings of Prophet and the modern day Muslim psychology. Karen in her work also tries to make sturdy connection among Semitic faiths by drawing similarities between Judo-Christian tradition and Islam.

As the Christian perception of faith is concerned, they do not consider Bible as the foundation of divine revelation on the contrary they take Jesus Christ as the basis of it, observed from the narrative of Christology. According to this perception 'Muhammadanism' is more befitting term for the religion normally called as Islam and any academic analysis of it ought to be inevitably established on the character of Prophet Muhammad. It was from this frame of reference various accounts of materialistic and historicistic nature were accorded to demonstrate that the Prophet of Islam was an inauthentic Prophet who had his determinants planted in political, economical or tribal aspects.

Evaluating William Montgomery Watt and his selected works on Prophet Muhammad:

The eminent western academicians of Islam namely William Montgomery Watt has written extensively on Islam and its Prophet but here we would focus more on his two volume book on Prophet Muhammad's life i.e. Muhammad at Mecca and Muhammad at Medina. It has been praised for its objective approach usually based on historically grounded sources, not certainly following the imprints of historically bequeathed bigotry and crudeness regarding Islam and its Prophet. Sheikh Ahmad Zaki Yamani gives indirect reference to the prominence of Watt among contemporary scholars in particular and English speaking academicians in general [2].

At-Tawhid describes William Montgomery Watt as one of the important and well known Orientalist, who has deliberated expensively on various paramount aspects by compiling and writing on diverse Islamic subject matter, historical development of Muslims and multitudinous thought pertaining to them [3].

Watt while according reliability to his readers asserts that he has endeavored, although containing to be faithful to the paradigm of historical scholarship in the west i.e. not to resort to any such thing which would necessitate dejection of any principle doctrine or article of faith in Islam; moreover if certain conclusions or denouncements of western academicians have remained offensive or undesirable to Muslims, there is always possibility that academicians have not constantly been reliable to their own standards of comprehension and that sometimes even from the essentially historical viewpoint there inferences and deductions stand in need of suitable revision [4]. Khurram Murad also positions William Montgomery Watt among the crowing academicians in the domain and

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acknowledges his candidness and integrity by at times being quite categorical because of the stand he has resorted to. Khurram Murad claims:

“Watt is a sort of doyen of that ‘new’ school of Orientalists even though to have been kind enough to send a sympathetic ear and pen to Islam. He is also aware of the serious difficulties he faces as an heir of deep seated prejudices from which, he frankly admits, we are not yet wholly freed...” [5].

Benaboud remarks about Watt as an academician that he welcomed critical remarks about him or his adversaries to admire him. Watt unlike various other Orientalist appreciated the Islamic civilization and in turn consecutively admired by Muslim intellectuals [6].

Watt while being in harmony with the opinion of Thomas Carlyle regarding the sincerity of Prophet Muhammad asserts that in order to comprehend him in the slightest degree and amend the misapprehensions which have been lingering from the past, the desideratum in each specific condition is to be convinced of his sincerely as far as the antithetical condition is convincingly not proved [7].

Prior to the evaluation of the essentiality of revelation which Prophet Muhammad received Watt with no strings attached unconditionally asserts that the need is to explicitly differentiate between revelation received by Prophet Muhammad candidly from his God and the other words which were the byproducts of his normal usual, consciousness. Furthermore Watt asseverates that although the manner in which he made the differentiation is vague and not crystal clear however the fact that he made it is as irrefutable as any other thing in history [8].

Joseph Massad while reviewing Jabal Muhammad Buaben’s work alleged that in spite of various advancements in methodology and the inclusion of different tools for the purpose of historical analysis, there is still the influence of pre-Enlightenment thought on the psyche of various Orientalists who deliberate on Prophet Muhammad; such kind of disposition causes them to manifest unobjective and non secular prejudices against Prophet Muhammad [9]. Watt who largely wrote in later part of the 20th century, proved to be one of the paramount basis for the transformation of the biographical approach of Christian intellectuals towards Prophet Muhammad which convincingly shifted to dialogue from the confrontational form [10].

This conspicuous shift which has occurred from Watt’s time can easily be discerned in the works of later writers and a special place among those mentioned is held by Karen Armstrong who although not well versed with classical Islamic works in Arabic language, imbibes appropriate interpretations and conclusions of diverse incidents and events from the work of William Montgomery Watt.

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So when the name of Watt comes forth to discuss Orientalistic scholarship in the domain of Islam in 20th century especially in the study of the Prophet Muhammad's biography it is quite hard to find many who are tantamount to his stature which he holds taking into cognizance reference to various qualities which he has mostly availed while conducting his academic research.

Analyzing Karen Armstrong and her books on Prophet Muhammad:

The ridiculous and incongruous description of the Prophet of Islam has regrettably become a stereotypical notion in the west. In the context of this sequence of events various academicians felt that it's their duty to assay the condition properly by analyzing the nitty gritty of the things under consideration. Among various scholars who ventured in this novel cause we have the name of Karen Armstrong which in some aspects stands out among others.

Karen Armstrong while analyzing Islam and various other religions, present the historical account of the facts, conjointly endeavors to make clear and elaborate the religious acquaintances and the manners in which adherents fathom the tenets and articles regarding professed faith. Like Watt, Karen Armstrong endorses the absolute apprehension of religious beliefs by properly reading other faiths as Karen herself asserts that it was her encounter with various other faiths which caused her to get rid of the parochial perspectives which she used to hold in case of religious analysis, furthermore such an enterprise caused Karen to preserve her own faith in a distinct manner [11].

Karen Armstrong argues that the desideratum of the time is that West ought to eliminate itself of all intolerant and prejudiced views which it had gathered and amassed over hundreds of years against Islam and its Prophet. West should now try to adopt more compassionate and broad minded analysis of the religion [12]. In the vision of Karen Armstrong Islam demonstrates theology which is deeply characterized by notions like tolerance and peace [13].

Karen asseverates that,

“We can no longer afford to indulge in this type of bigotry, because it is a gift to extremists who can use such statements to ‘prove’ that western world is indeed engaged on a new crusade against the Islamic world. Muhammad was not a man of violence; we must approach his life in a balanced way in order to appreciate his considerable achievements.” [14].

The books of Karen Armstrong sincerely aspire to amend the perception which west has inherited from its predecessors, affirming that the need is to approach Prophet Muhammad as a perfect model in the neoteric time as he was the real harbinger of global peace, pluralism and amicable interfaith affiliation. Additionally Karen Armstrong emphatically focus attention on the accomplishments of Prophet Muhammad as meritorious guide,

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sociable reformer and more compellingly, the applicability of his saying, instructions, actions and approvals in our time [15].

The first biographical account which Armstrong wrote of Prophet Muhammad against a backdrop of controversial book titled 'The Satanic Verse' written by Salman Rushdie. Thereupon she wrote the book titled "Muhammad: A biography of the Prophet" keeping in view western audience in such a manner that fabrication and ancient legends about personality of Prophet Muhammad and various other aspects of his life could be jettisoned, which otherwise was explicitly visible in colossal Christian writing till the contemporary era. After the detestable incident of September 9/11 attack on the twin towers of world trade center, the promoters of Christian norms along with extensive segment of media consider it their duty to altercate the basic cause for such violence by unmitigated Prophet of Islam who underscores his inveterate fascination for violence, conquests and war.

Consequently Karen's second biography of the Prophet Muhammad severed adequately to extinguish the flames of castigation and hostility against Prophet Muhammad in west particularly after the horrifying incident of 9/11 [16].

In her second book on the life account of Prophet Muhammad titled as 'Muhammad: A Prophet for our times' Karen states categorically that Prophet Muhammad was not in any way a pacifist as he considered that at times warfare becomes necessary and even inevitable either for the sake of defending or as a means of taking advantage over our enemy. Furthermore Karen Armstrong assets that prophet Muhammad in actual sense became victorious and dominant because of his compassion, intellect and ultimate submission before the will of God [17].

Writing extensively on other faiths Karen Armstrong does not only aspire her readers to get proper comprehension of other faiths and culture, but she also endeavors to foster and promote values such as care, love and compassion for one another. In pursuit of this noble cause she initiated the 'charter for compassion' in order to accord expression to ethical priority belonging equally to various faith traditions, which could encourage all embracing brotherhood and an amicable world [18].

According to the observation of Karen Islam holds common many visions and prospects that is encouraged both by Christianity and Judaism. Therefore it has bolstered people to develop values that are common to our culture [19]. Karen assets that besides highlighting the military and political account of Prophet Muhammad, she also underscores and accords special importance to his spiritual awareness and his acumen in the religious matters which caused him to undertake various cardinal steps all along his career as a Prophet. Karen emphatically advocates that the need of the time is that west must get rid of all bigotry and clear out all ill conceptions regarding Islam and its Prophet which they had carried on since earlier times and thus engross in a more open minded and comprehensive analysis of the religion [20].

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On that account her two most paramount books on the life of Prophet Muhammad have tried enough to disjuncture the antagonistic stereotypes regarding Prophet Muhammad. In accordance to her audacious endeavors to abnegate the inappropriate and counterfactual portrayal of Prophet Muhammad, Karen in her books emphatically accentuates the Islamic conception of the status of Prophet (Prophethood) and the original interpretation of the term Holy war i.e. Jihad [21].

Conclusion:

An essential version of the advanced flections to religion has manifested itself in the twentieth century in the development of fundamentalism, which according to Karen Armstrong is an imprudent political face of faith that definitely is jeopardizing for societies and masses. According to this apprehension Armstrong insists that its cardinal to comprehend religion and its demonstration not particularly in society which we are part of but over and above in other cultures [22]. Furthermore, there is a developing inclination of knowledge from devotional tradition extraneous to one's belief system as people acknowledge the fact that there appears a deeper consonance in mankind's experience in the matter of religion [23].

Watt's work on Islam in general and Prophet Muhammad's biographical account in particular are considered established works in the subject of Islamic Studies. Besides being assiduously well researched, they decisively and conclusively address various suspicious and ambiguous claims that western academic analysis of Islam and Prophet Muhammad raised. Furthermore Watt's objective attitude on various matters of contention has caused a shift in methodology in the manner west perceives Islam [24]. His books and opinions have both particularly and theoretically directed the westerners towards unprejudiced discernment and understanding of Islamic civilization. Watt's work is beyond any doubt noteworthy, it will continue to be analyzed and in fact will be refuted where ever essential [25].

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