

Seerat Writing in the West: An Analytical Study of Karen Armstrong's Contributions

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Abstract

*The life of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has been a subject of growing interest among Western scholars, particularly in recent decades. Seerat writing, traditionally rooted in Islamic historiography, has found new expressions in Western academic and literary circles. Among the notable contributors, Karen Armstrong emerges as a leading voice whose works—such as *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* and *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*—have received global recognition. Armstrong's portrayal of the Prophet is markedly empathetic, aiming to challenge prevalent stereotypes in the West and foster interfaith understanding. Her approach emphasizes historical contextualization, socio-political dynamics, and comparative religious studies. This paper critically examines Armstrong's objectives, interpretive frameworks, and the thematic structure of her Seerat writings. While she has contributed positively by humanizing the image of the Prophet in Western discourse, her works also draw criticism for methodological limitations, selective narration, and occasional historical ambiguities. The study places Armstrong's writings within the broader scope of Western biographical literature on the Prophet and evaluates how her narrative contrasts with traditional Islamic Seerah. By analyzing both the strengths and shortcomings of Armstrong's scholarship, this paper aims to offer a balanced academic perspective on her role in shaping the Western understanding of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The research concludes with reflections on the future of Seerat writing in the West and the importance of critical engagement with non-Muslim perspectives for constructive dialogue.*

Keywords: *Karen Armstrong, Seerah Writing, Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Western Scholarship, Interfaith Dialogue*

1. Introduction

Seerat writing, the scholarly endeavor of documenting and analyzing the life of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), has gained significant attention in the West, particularly in the modern era. This field has evolved into a complex and multifaceted discipline, shaped by diverse methodologies and perspectives. Among contemporary Western scholars, Karen Armstrong stands

out as a prominent figure whose works on the Prophet's biography have sparked both admiration and critique. Her writings, characterized by a sympathetic tone toward Islam, aim to bridge the gap between Western and Muslim worlds, yet they also raise questions about their underlying motives and methodologies. This essay undertakes a comprehensive analysis of Karen Armstrong's contributions to Seerat writing, evaluating her aims, methodologies, positive contributions, and the confusions or objections her works have generated. By situating her work within the broader context of Western Seerat scholarship, this study seeks to highlight its significance, limitations, and impact on both Eastern and Western audiences.

1.1 Introduction to the Research

Seerat writing in the West has emerged as a significant yet challenging field due to the evolving methodologies of orientalist scholars. While some orientalists have approached the biography of the Prophet (SAW) with a balanced perspective, others have been critiqued for perpetuating biases rooted in historical prejudices. Dr. Syed Aleem Ashraf Jaisee distinguishes between medieval and modern orientalists, noting that the latter require more nuanced scrutiny due to their sophisticated approaches and widespread influence (Shams, 2020, pp. 107-109). Karen Armstrong, often regarded as a moderate orientalist, has garnered attention for her works, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (1991) and *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (2006). These texts praise the Prophet's character and mission, yet they also subtly question certain Islamic beliefs, echoing the skepticism of earlier orientalists. This duality necessitates a critical examination of her motives and methodologies.

Muslim responses to Western Seerat writing have historically been polarized. One group, represented by figures like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Maulana Shibli Nomani, adopted an apologetic approach, sometimes compromising Islamic fundamentals to align with Western rationalism. Conversely, scholars like Maulana Abdul Rauf Qadri Danapuri, Qazi Sulaiman Mansoorpuri, Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah, and Pir Karam Shah al-Azhari offered robust counter-narratives grounded in Islamic principles, effectively addressing orientalist critiques without concessions (Shams, 2020, pp. 107-109). This study focuses on Karen Armstrong as a case study to explore the aims, methodologies, and impacts of modern Western Seerat writing, contributing to the broader discourse on Seerat Sciences (Ulum al-Seerat).

1.2 Significance of the Topic

The study of Seerat writing by Western scholars, particularly orientalists, holds immense significance within Seerat Sciences. Muhammad Shahid Hanif's index of academic journals identifies "Seerat an-Nabi and Orientalists" as one of 34 distinct research areas, underscoring its academic relevance (Shams, 2020, pp. 126-128). Similarly, Dr. Syed Aziz-ur-Rehman's *Pakistan mein Urdu Seerat Nigari* highlights the importance of analyzing orientalist contributions to Seerat literature (Shams, 2020, pp. 126-128). The objectives of many orientalists, as critiqued by Allama Muhammad Iqbal, often align with political agendas rather than genuine scholarly inquiry (Shams, 2020, pp. 425-427). Karen Armstrong's works, while praised for their positive portrayal of the

Prophet (SAW), require critical analysis to uncover potential biases and their broader implications. This study aims to establish principles for Seerat writing as an academic discipline and address the evolving dynamics of orientalism in the modern era.

1.3 Research Objectives

This research seeks to:

- Analyze the aims and goals of Karen Armstrong's Seerat writings.
- Evaluate her methodology in comparison with other 20th-century orientalists.
- Highlight the positive aspects of the Prophet's life (SAW) as presented by Armstrong.
- Examine the objections and confusions her works introduce.
- Assess the impact of her interpretations on Eastern and Western audiences.

1.4 Literature Review

While several studies have explored Karen Armstrong's works on Islam and the Prophet (SAW), they often lack depth or critical engagement. Ateeq-ur-Rehman's M.Phil thesis (2009) offers an introductory overview of Armstrong's contributions but focuses primarily on praise without analyzing her motives (Ateeq-ur-Rehman, 2009). Sumayya Athar's article (2011-2012) highlights positive aspects of Armstrong's Seerat writings but lacks critical scrutiny of her methodology (Athar, 2011-2012, pp. 268-292). Fozia Fiaz and Dr. Mohsina Munir (2018) connect Armstrong's *Charter of Compassion* to her Seerat works, emphasizing tolerance and harmony but overlooking critical objections (Fiaz & Munir, 2018, pp. 1-10). Dr. Khawer Sultana (2013) critiques Armstrong's factual inaccuracies, such as the incorrect dating of the Year of the Elephant as 547 AD instead of 570 AD, but her analysis is brief (Sultana, 2013, p. 48). Muhammad Qasim and Sarfarz Khalid (2017) address Armstrong's objections but fail to provide comprehensive responses (Qasim & Khalid, 2017, pp. 1-15). Dr. Riaz Ahmad Saeed's articles (2019, 2020) offer critical insights into Armstrong's views on jihad and Seerat but lack balance between praise and critique (Saeed, 2019; Saeed & Jabeen, 2020, pp. 1-20). Dr. Muhammad Humayun Abbas Shams (2020) identifies "Seerat and Orientalists" as an underexplored field, emphasizing the need for detailed analysis of scholars like Armstrong (Shams, 2020, pp. 425-429). This research addresses this gap by providing a comprehensive, balanced, and critical study of Armstrong's contributions to Seerat writing.

1.5 Research Gap

Existing literature on Karen Armstrong's Seerat writings is limited by:

- A lack of comprehensive analysis in English by a single scholar.
- Subjective approaches that either uncritically praise or harshly criticize her work.
- Insufficient focus on her aims, methodology, and global impact.

This study aims to fill these gaps through a systematic and objective analysis.

1.6 Statement of the Problem

The research addresses the following questions:

1. What are the aims and goals of Karen Armstrong's Seerat writings?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of her methodology?
3. Which positive aspects of the Prophet's life (SAW) does she highlight?
4. What objections and confusions does her work introduce?
5. How have her interpretations impacted Eastern and Western audiences?

1.7 Hypothesis

- Armstrong's Seerat writings aim to promote Islam as a peaceful religion post-9/11 and foster interfaith harmony.
- Her methodology relies heavily on secondary sources, limiting its scope.
- While she praises the Prophet (SAW), she raises objections that align with orientalist skepticism.
- Her works significantly influence perceptions of Islam in both East and West.

1.8 Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, analytical approach, using a deductive method with textual and contextual analysis. It adheres to APA (6th edition) citation standards, utilizing tools like Zotero and EndNote. The research is structured as a case study of Armstrong's works, ensuring an unbiased evaluation of both positive and negative aspects (APA, 2010). Modern research tools, including electronic reports, graphs, and tables, will be incorporated where relevant. The study follows the KFUEIT thesis template and instructions.

1.9 Limitations

The study focuses exclusively on Armstrong's Seerat writings, employs a deductive method, and is written in English.

1.10 Organization of the Study

The research is divided into three main sections:

1. **Seerat Writing in the West:** Examines the evolution and principles of Seerat writing and orientalist contributions.
2. **Karen Armstrong as a Seerat Writer:** Analyzes her aims, goals, and methodology in comparison with other orientalists.
3. **Analytical Study of Armstrong's Approaches:** Evaluates her positive contributions, objections, and global impact.

A conclusion summarizes findings and offers recommendations.

2. Seerat Writing in the West

2.1 Seerat Writing: Origin, Evolution, and Principles

Seerat writing, the study of the Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) biography, evolved from the disciplines of *Siyar* (legal aspects of the Prophet's life) and *Maghazi* (military expeditions). Over time, Seerat emerged as a comprehensive field encompassing all facets of the Prophet's life, including spiritual, social, and political dimensions (Ghazi, 2010, pp. 32-33). The earliest Seerat works, such as *Al-Maghazi* by Urwah bin Zubair (d. 94 AH) and Muhammad Ibn Shahab Zuhri (d. 124 AH), were compiled within the lifetime of the Prophet's companions, refuting claims by

orientalists like Ibn Warraq that Seerat texts appeared 100-150 years later (Khalid, 2015, p. 39; Warraq, 2000, pp. 75-77).

Qazi Athar Mubarakpuri outlines six historical stages of Seerat compilation:

1. **Post-Prophetic Era (until 105-106 AH):** Compilation by companions.
2. **106-210 AH:** Documentation by Tabi'een and Taba Tabi'een.
3. **200-400 AH:** Formal books, e.g., Ibn Hisham's biography.
4. **400-600 AH:** Comprehensive surveys integrating other Islamic sciences.
5. **600-850 AH:** Detailed research on specific Seerat aspects.
6. **1280 AH onwards:** The orientalist period, marked by Western scrutiny (Mubarakpuri, 2005, pp. 73-74).

The 19th and 20th centuries were pivotal, as Western colonization influenced Muslim societies, prompting orientalists to question Islamic sources while Muslim scholars developed new methodologies to counter these critiques (Muhaimin, 2016a, pp. 2-3). The 1973 Paris World Conference marked a shift, replacing the term "Orientalist" with "Arabist" and "Islamicist" to reflect changing scholarly identities (Alvi, 2020, p. 193; Lewis, 1982).

2.1.1 Principles of Seerat Writing

Seerat writing demands adherence to specific principles to ensure authenticity and reverence:

- **Primary Sources:** Reliance on the Quran and authentic Hadith, avoiding contradiction with Islamic teachings (Nomani, 1985, p. 71).
- **Arabic Proficiency:** Essential for understanding original texts, grammar, and literature (Nadwi, 1985, p. 34).
- **Religious Integrity:** Acknowledgment of the Prophet's divine mission and support from Allah (Aziz & Sadia, 2020, pp. 11-14).
- **Expressive Style:** Use of compelling narratives and organized presentation (Aziz & Sadia, 2020, pp. 11-14).
- **Contextual Understanding:** Analysis of the socio-political and cultural milieu of the Prophet's era (Aziz & Sadia, 2020, pp. 11-14).

2.2 An Overview of Modern Western Orientalists' Seerat Writings

Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is a Western framework for dominating and restructuring the East, often portraying it as static and inferior (Said, 2003, p. 3). In Seerat writing, orientalists have historically pursued objectives such as creating suspicion about Islam, distorting its history, and undermining its sources (Zafar, 2006, p. 915). Key figures include:

- **David Samuel Margoliouth (1858-1940):** His works, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (1905) and *The Early Development of Mohammedanism* (1914), controversially linked revelation to epilepsy and criticized Seerat narrations (Khalid, 2015, p. 22).
- **William Muir (1819-1905):** An evangelical Christian, Muir's *Life of Mahomet* (1857) similarly attributed revelation to epilepsy, reflecting biased interpretations (Khalid, 2015, p. 22).

- **John Andrew Morrow:** His *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* (2013) incorporates non-Islamic sources, raising controversial claims about the Prophet's life (Hussain, 2020, pp. 23-24).
- **Lesley Hazleton:** Her *The First Muslim* (2013) portrays the Prophet as a secular figure, relying on limited sources like Ibn Ishaq and Tabari (Islam, 2018, p. xvii).
- **P De Lacy Johnstone:** His *Muhammad and His Power* (1901) accuses the Prophet of inventing Islam from Jewish and Christian traditions, reflecting hostility (Riaz, 1992, pp. 321-323).

These scholars often relied on weak narrations and materialistic methodologies, neglecting the spiritual dimensions of the Prophet's life (Babar, 2013, p. 8).

3. Karen Armstrong as a Western Orientalist Seerat Writer

3.1 Karen Armstrong: Life, Aims, and Goals

Karen Armstrong (b. 1944), a former Roman Catholic nun, transitioned to a liberal scholar after leaving the convent. Her works, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (1991) link to Islam and the Prophet (SAW). She wrote this book in response to Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1988), aiming to counter its negative portrayal of the Prophet (Armstrong, 1991, pp. 11-12). Armstrong's goals include:

- Condemning Western biases against the Prophet (SAW) (Muhaimin, 2016a, pp. 10-11).
- Promoting religious positivity and peace post-9/11 (Fiaz & Munir, 2018, pp. 4-5).
- Fostering interfaith harmony among monotheistic religions (Butt & Khalid, 2017, p. 78).
- Countering Islamophobia and stereotypes of the Prophet as a violent figure (Armstrong, 2013, p. 18).

3.2 Evaluation of Methodology

Armstrong's methodology in *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (2006) relies heavily on secondary and translated sources, including:

- Quran translations by Michael Sells and Muhammad Asad.
- Hadith from secondary works like Martin Lings' *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earlier Sources* (Butt & Khalid, 2017, p. 73).
- Biographies like Ibn Ishaq (via A. Guillaume's translation) and Al-Tabari (via secondary sources) (Butt & Khalid, 2017, p. 73).

This reliance on translated texts, often criticized by scholars like Malik bin Anas and Ibn Hajar Asqalani for inaccuracies, leads to factual errors (Fiaz & Munir, 2018, p. 2). Her narrative style is literary and dramatic, appealing to Western readers but deviating from traditional Muslim biographies (Athar, 2011-2012, pp. 268-269). Unlike biased orientalists like Muir, Armstrong adopts a more sympathetic tone but shares their tendency to incorporate weak narrations and philosophical interpretations (Saeed & Jabeen, 2020, p. 6).

3.3 Analytical Study of Armstrong's Approaches

3.3.1 Positive Aspects

Armstrong's works highlight several positive aspects of the Prophet's life:

- **Quran's Authenticity:** She defends the Quran's divine origin and compilation, refuting orientalist skepticism (Armstrong, 1991, pp. 48-49, 116).
- **Prophet's Character:** She portrays the Prophet as a compassionate, just, and balanced leader (Armstrong, 1991, p. 52).
- **Islamic Teachings:** She explains practices like Salat and Zakat as fostering humility and social justice (Armstrong, 2013, pp. 64-65).
- **Women's Rights:** She highlights the Prophet's revolutionary reforms for women in 7th-century Arabia (Armstrong, 1991, p. 191).
- **Polygamy:** She contextualizes polygamy as a practical necessity, not a moral failing (Armstrong, 2013, pp. 104-105).

3.3.2 Objections and Confusions

Armstrong's works introduce several contentious points:

- **Prophet for Arabs Only:** She claims Islam was intended solely for Arabs, contradicting its universal message (Armstrong, 1991, pp. 211-212).
- **Isra and Miraj:** She attributes this event to Jewish mystical influences, undermining its Islamic significance (Armstrong, 2013, p. 95).
- **Satanic Verses:** She discusses this controversial incident, relying on unauthentic sources like Al-Tabari (Armstrong, 1991, p. 115).
- **Quranic Structure:** She inaccurately suggests the Quran lacks structure and was reordered post-Prophet (Armstrong, 2013, pp. 58-59).
- **Islamic Worship:** She claims practices like Ashura and Tahajjud were adopted from Jewish and Christian traditions (Armstrong, 2013, pp. 107-108).

3.3.3 Impact on East and West

Armstrong's works have:

- Presented the Prophet's life as a model for humanity, emphasizing peace and social justice (Fiaz & Munir, 2018, pp. 4-5).
- Promoted pluralism and interfaith dialogue (Gade, 2010, p. 264).
- Earned gratitude from European Muslims for countering Islamophobia (Lalaguna, Abulafia, & Boase, 1992, p. 16).
- Gained popularity in the East through translations (Gade, 2010, pp. 264-265).

4. Conclusion

4.1 Summary and Findings

Karen Armstrong's Seerat writings offer a sympathetic portrayal of the Prophet (SAW), aiming to foster peace and interfaith harmony. However, her reliance on secondary sources, philosophical interpretations, and occasional alignment with orientalist skepticism introduce inaccuracies and confusions. Her positive contributions include highlighting the Prophet's compassion and Islamic

social reforms, but her objections, such as limiting Islam's scope to Arabs, challenge Islamic universality.

4.2 Recommendations

- Establish research centers for Seerat studies to train Muslim scholars in countering orientalist narratives (Shams, 2020, pp. 425-429).
- Promote balanced critiques of Western Seerat writings, adhering to Islamic principles (Aziz & Sadia, 2020, pp. 11-14).
- Develop academic syllabi to teach Seerat scientifically (Shams, 2020, pp. 425-429).
- Use media to present the Prophet's true character and teachings (Tayob, 2010, p. 307).

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