

Modern *Sirah* Literature: An Overview

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Abstract

*In the nineteenth century, Islamic world faced the Western understanding of science, as it gradually started to go under the influence of the latter in political, economical and military aspects. The studies done in this period were now carried out in the face of the offerings of the Western worldview. Although there were some works, if scarce, done without concerning the Western methods of research, some others were written as criticisms of the orientalist studies and some were produced under the influence of the orientalist ideas. In any case, most of these works were carried out under the influence or the pressure of the modern scientific paradigm. This paper aims at giving a panorama of the modern *sirah* literature.*

The modern scientific thought which emerged in the West, spread with the help of colonialism in the 19th century and began to have a global influence. Backed by the power of technology, modern science attracted other societies and led them to develop their thought depending on it, approaching the physical and metaphysical issues according to the modern perspective. This situation had its effect in the Muslim world. Defeats of the Ottoman Empire, which was at that time the biggest power in Islamic world, against the West caused a sense of admiration of Muslims towards the military power of the West and the world view that produced that power. Thus, the superiority of the scientific and the philosophical view of the West were accepted in advance. This admiration directed the Muslim intellectuals to learning the western way of thinking and to interpreting the entire Islamic civilization according to this point of view.

History/tradition as a reference point of ego and identity is a source for shedding light into “now” and future. However, history/tradition might not anyway support “now” and constitute an opposition. In such a case, while the motive for being consistent and sustainable necessitates protecting history/tradition, dynamism wanted equally and the motive for coping with the age will see it as an obstacle. Renewal and change, if accepted as inevitable and desirable thing, either history/tradition loses its function of being example for “now” and future and it is denied systematically, or some dependable points, which would legalize renewal and change, are searched. In both cases, renewal and change are the basic determiners, but in the second case, this is being done in a secret way.¹ From the 19th century on, this issue started to be seen in some Muslim intellectuals’ using the past as a vehicle for renewal and change and their interpreting it accordingly.²

Modern scientific thought is based on a positivist and rationalist foundation. Especially after the second half of the 18th century on, in terms of discussions on Christian theology and Jesus Christ, the tradition of looking into religious and metaphysical issues from a critical perspective was shaped and considerable progress was made in this regard. Muslim intellectuals who are raised within the Western thought or influenced by it fell into discrepancy, when they evaluated their culture and civilization with this notion or perspective.

¹ Hagen, Gottfried, “The Prophet Muhammad as an Exemplar in War: Ottoman Views on the Eve of World War I”, *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Spring 2000, 22, pp. 145-146.

² *ibid*, p. 151.

On the one side, there is a reality which imposes itself to the entire world and indisputably dominates it with all its power and glory; and on the other, the religion of Islam and its civilization upon which there is no doubt. Muslims, who had no option of totally ignoring religion as Westerners did, found the problem in misunderstanding the main sources of Islam.³ Thus, they did not give up religion and the modern scientific thought surrounding them. In this perspective, the main elements of religion are true and unchangeable. However, scholars who strove to understand them, either was not able to understand them correctly, or made additions to the original data. The course of action is to correct the misunderstandings or deficient approaches and to remove the additional parts.

Accordingly, one of the things discussed about is the issue of understanding the classical sources. The situation that their language was not understood was being made an excuse for composing new works. There are two reasons why the language is not understood: 1. a use of scientific, complex and pompous language. 2. The issue that the work points at has no equivalent in its reader's mind, or even if it has, it is not accepted as true and clear. The first issue, i.e. the use of a simple and clear language indicates that the audience of these publications is only average people who can understand it, if written with that kind of language, not educated people who are accustomed to the pompous language. Directly channeling the information to the public is an issue particularly emphasized by intellectuals in the 19th century. As stated by İsmail Kara, "thus, "the masses- the educated people" classification loses its foundations, people actively and directly contact the religious area of culture without the necessary intercession of scholars, in the activity of transmitting and interpreting the religious knowledge, which was once at the hands of ulama, *mekteb* graduated people or intellectuals who were educated in Europe gradually started to participate."⁴ In order to convey the modernization movements to the public, there was a need to remove these intermediaries; and the solution is to write the way people can understand. For that reason, writing with the simple language, is a tool for conveying and imposing the modernization movements to the public, for standardizing the knowledge and the superior culture and for weakening any opposition which might come from the public. It coincides with the newspaper publications or the fact of "journalese".⁵

The second issue indicates that the contents of the works written in the previous period do not coincide with the mentalities of the readers anymore. To put it more precisely, the readers do not see the contents of the works as convincing. As a consequence of the Western style of thinking in the modernization period, people started to shed doubts on some information included in the classical sources, since they have metaphysical and supernatural references. This data was accepted as weak or even fake, although some of it was found in sound sources, for reasons like they are superstitions or they had entered the Islamic sources because of the interaction with other cultures.

As mentioned above, negative approach of Westerners to Islam and its founder aroused feelings in Muslims and reactions came from all over the Islamic world. Reactions, although they aim at removing the negative image, they also contain interiorizing the modern historical/critical perspective.

Movements in the Ottoman lands began at the end of the 19th century and faced their most active period in the environment of the Second Constitution. In his *Büyük İslâm Tarihi*⁶, Namık Kemal presented the early years of Islam as an Arab convention against the threatening enemies accumulated nearby, and the Prophet as a person who made his business to deal with social injustices and Arab people's backwardness and whose mind was full of struggling with those issues.⁷ Another writer who adopts the same perspective is Ahmet Refik. In his *Büyük Târîh-i Umûmî*⁸, he takes a similar attitude. While in the classical *sirah* books, the stress was made upon the Prophet's reconstruction of the *tawhid* belief, which was corrupted before, both presented the Prophet as someone who initiated the necessary renewals and changes in his society.⁹

³ Kara, İsmail, "Tarih ve Hurafe: Çağdaş Türk Düşüncesinde Tarih Telakkisi", *Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi* 11, March 2002, pp. 31-70; p. 37.

⁴ Kara, İsmail, *İslamcıların Siyasi Görüşleri*, İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 1994, p. 84.

⁵ Kara, İsmail, "Tarih ve Hurafe", p. 42.

⁶ Namık Kemal, *Büyük İslâm Tarihi*, İstanbul: Hürriyet Yayınları, 1975.

⁷ Ibid, 22-25; moreover see Hagen, *ibid* p. 155.

⁸ Ahmed Refik, *Büyük Târîh-i Umûmî*, I-VI, İstanbul: Agop Matyosyan Matbaası, 1328.

⁹ Hagen, *ibid*, p. 156; Ahmed Refik, *ibid*, V, 27-28.

“In Islamic world, one of the authors who intended to write a history of Islam “free from superstitions and simply written” and fulfilled his wish with his *Kısâs-ı Enbiya* to a great extent”¹⁰ was Ahmed Cevdet Paşa. Intended to write a history of Islam depending on the Quran and sound traditions¹¹, he skipped the Ottoman sirah literature by directly using primary sources. Hence, this can be understood as “the nearest source to the event is true”, and it is quite clearly a modern attitude.¹²

At the top of the relevant works in this area comes *Hatemü'l-Enbiya* by Celal Nuri. Early in the book, he criticizes the sirah and hadith literature, so much so that one does not need to look into the source criticism of the Orientalists. In some cases, he even leaves them behind in his criticisms.¹³ Apparently, judging from a materialist approach, he understands the religion only in a social environment. Accordingly, he refers to the Prophet as an eminent leader who had accomplished the social change. Regarding the Prophet as an important psychologist, he does not hesitate to compare him to the contemporary leaders.¹⁴

Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi's *Târîh-i İslâm* is another important source in the field. In the work, which was written as a criticism of Dozi's History of Islam, the classical sources of history were defined as “not having any analysis and critique”, “consisting of recorded events depending on rumors”, “of the duplications of the same information”, even “of the *israiliyat* and superstitions” and “mixed with imagination and lies, even in facts based on personal observations”.¹⁵ In this sense, “while his criticisms towards Dozi are restricted to the secondary issues (some historical mistakes and remarks), those which are directed towards his world of meaning are related to the essential issues (the mentality and the world of imagination)”¹⁶. He seems to be so much under the influence of the scientific thought that he does not accept any miracles except the Quran and the ascension of the Prophet (*miraaj*) to which he gives an esoteric meaning.¹⁷

İzmirlî İsmail Hakki's *Siyer-i Celîle-i Nebeviyye*¹⁸ is one of the books that should be mentioned in this regard. This work is totally restricted to the source criticism. Evaluating the sirah and hadith sources, he dedicates most of his work to the weak and the fabricated narrations and thus, sets an example of a modern source criticism.

The notable example in the Indian Subcontinent for the reaction against this Western image, is the reaction of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan.¹⁹ As a criticism of William Muir's four-volume *The Life of Mahomet*, which was published in 1861, he wrote a book titled *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* in 1870²⁰. He gave very much importance to the reaction in this issue. This is because Muir is not a brochure writer who embarked on his journey to attack Islam; rather, he is totally depending on the Arabic sources. Moreover, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was worried about the influence of a presentation which depends on sound sources on Muslim youth, who are educated according to the Western values. Thus, he gave his response with his own work.²¹

¹⁰ Kara, İsmail, “Tarih ve Hurafe”, p. 40.

¹¹ For the reasons of Ahmed Cevdet Pasa's attitude and a remark on it see Kara, *ibid.* p. 41-44.

¹² Hagen, *ibid.*, 156.

¹³ Celal Nuri, *Hatemü'l-Enbiya*, Istanbul: Yeni Osmanlı Matbaası, 1332 a.h., pp. 17-30. In this regard, he contends that “European scholars does not raise any objection to the sirah sources. They look at the history of the Prophet with a correct perspective. However, we will claim that the sources of the history of the Prophet are not perfect, in spite of the fact that Muslim and European scholars think otherwise”. Thus, he states that there are lots of mistakes in the early sirah works and one cannot rely on them. See p. 19.

¹⁴ Hagen, *ibid.*, 158-159; Ahmed Refik, *ibid.*, p. 152 ff.

¹⁵ Şehbenderzade Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi, *İslâm Tarihi I-II*, Istanbul: Anka Yayınları, 2005, p. 28.

¹⁶ Kara, İsmail, “Osmanlı-İslâm Dünyasında Yeni Tarih Telakkileri: Şehbenderzâde Örneği”, *Dergâh*, vol. XI, no: 126, August 2000, pp. 16-20, p. 16.

¹⁷ Hagen, *ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁸ İzmirlî İsmail Hakki, *Siyer-i Celîle-i Nebeviyye*, Istanbul: Sebülürreşad Kütüphanesi Neşriyatı, 1332.

¹⁹ Schimmel, Annemarie, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, p. 228.

²⁰ Syed Ahmad Khan, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*, Lahore: Sh. Mubarak Ali Oriental Publishers and Booksellers, 1979.

²¹ Wessels, Antonie, “Modern Biographies of the Life of the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic”, *Islamic Culture*, vol. XLIX, year 2, April 1975, p. 100.

Another apologia written in the same period is a work by Sayyid Amir Ali, titled *The Life and Teachings of Muhammad*. The book later became the first chapter of his *The Spirit of Islam*²². In his work, he described the Prophet as a modern man and, ignoring the miracles, he stressed the Prophet's human side and how important things he accomplished.²³ He regarded the Prophet as someone who "dedicated his life to God and humanity"²⁴ and someone who was totally "modern"²⁵ in intellectual way.²⁶

Muhammad Hamidullah's *The Prophet of Islam*²⁷, which was written in 1959 and received well acceptance is also worth mentioning. Distancing himself from classical classifications, the author gives a very intricate example of research. Even if he mostly chooses not to deal with disputed issues, it can be seen that he adopts modern ideas in issues like Monk Bahira and the Ascension.²⁸

While Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent started to write "modern" biographies at the second half of the 19th century, similar movement was seen in the Arab world in 1930's.

The first person worth mentioning is Taha Hussein. In 1933, he published his work titled '*Alâ Hâmişi's-Sîra* (On Sirah). Intended to narrate stories about the Prophet Muhammad one way or the other, not to give a historical description of the Prophet's life, he wanted to write something which cause young people to feel the beauty of the classical Arabic language. Like the West formed Renaissance based on the Greek-Roman heritage, he hoped that turning to the classical Arabic literature might lead to a similar awakening (*nahda*). He did not care about the historical veracity. However, when he talked directly about the Prophet, he referred to *Tabaqat* by Ibn Sad which he accepted as the most dependable source among the history books. He expressed his ideas on the Prophet Muhammad and Islam in his story titled el-Faylasûfî'l-Hâir (*the perplexed philosopher*). There, he defined Islam as the religion of reason and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as someone who brought a religion that satisfy both reason and feelings. This is a good summary of his understanding about religion.²⁹

Another well known Egyptian author Abbas Mahmud el-'Akkad related his purpose to write *Abkariyyetü Muhammed*³⁰ (*the Genius of Muhammad*) to an incident that happened at his mansion thirty years ago. At the time, in a meeting on the occasion of the birth of the Prophet Muhammad, when the young people were talking about an article by Thomas Carlyle, one of them asked Akkad why he did not similarly write an article which deals with the heroic side of the Prophet. Akkad could only write this book in 1940s, a book in which he intended to describe the Prophet as a huge personality in ever aspects. He stated that he did not at all care about the historical reality and he confessed that he wanted to express his awe for the Prophet in every phase of his life.³¹ Akkad defines the Prophet as an important statesman and military leader, prophet/preacher, organizer and an exemplary husband. Particularly when his marriages and his attitude towards war, he seems to adopt a defensive approach against the criticisms of the Western writers.³²

In 1962, he wrote his *Muhammed Rasûlü'l-Hurriyyet*³³ (*Muhammad the Prophet of Freedom*). In this book, he presents the Prophet as a social reformist, under the influence of the social injustice in his society. He suggests a socialist message and he sees the Prophet as a "Marx" who taught a kind of Marxism before the real Marx and implemented it.

²² Syed Emir Ali, *The Spirit of Islam*, Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1978.

²³ *ibid*, p. 32-33

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 117.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 121.

²⁶ Hamadeh, Muhammad Maher, *Muhammad the Prophet: A Selected Bibliography*, unpublished doctoral thesis, The University of Michigan, Michigan 1965, p. 82.

²⁷ Hamidullah, Muhammad, *Islâm Peygamberi*, trans. Salih Tuğ, Istanbul: İrfan Yayımcılık, 1990.

²⁸ *ibid*, pp. 47-48, 119-134.

²⁹ Wessels, *ibid*, pp. 100-101.

³⁰ Akkad, Abbas Mahmûd, *Abkariyyatu Muhammad*, Baghdad: Maktaba al-'Urûba.

³¹ Akkad, *Abkariyyetü Muhammed*, p. 4.

³² Hamadeh, a.g.tz., p. 86; Wessels, *ibid*, pp. 101-102.

³³ Şarkavi, Abdurrahman, *Özgürlük Peygamberi Hz. Muhammed*, trans. Muharrem Tan, Alternatif Düşünce Yayınevi, Istanbul 2004.

Being a worker himself, the Prophet supports workers who are subjected to injustice. Sharqawi sees a class conflict between the rich merchant of Quraysh, Jewish bankers, capitalists, colonialists, pawnbrokers and racketeers on the one side, and poor, slaves and women on the other. The struggle against polytheism was dealt within the context of the struggle against capitalism.³⁴ This situation reminds us Hubert Grimme, an orientalist who lived at the second half of the last century. In his work *Mohammad* which was written in 1892, he explained the Prophet with the socialist terms.³⁵ In his work, Sharqawi only deals with the social aspect of the issue, even at the cost of ignoring the religious and metaphysical elements. Sharqawi deliberately does not want to write something about the prophecy of Muhammad. According to him, there are lots of books in which his prophecy is supported and his miracles are defended. However, when he talks about Muhammad, he gives his attention to the human side, not his prophethood.³⁶

Another worth mentioning work is *Hayatu Muhammed*³⁷ by Muhammed Hüseyin Heykel. This book has been translated into many languages and received well acceptance. Heykel' intention from the beginning is to write a historical/critical study about the life of Muhammad.³⁸ For that purpose, he composed a readable sirah book which depends on Ibn Hisham and other sources, skipping the exhausting chain of narrators and the miracle which can be found in other sirah books. Apart from what Taha Hussein and Aqqad wished to do, he aimed at depicting a real "historical" portrait of the Prophet. Depending on the classical sources, especially Ibn Hisham, he succeeded to give this portrait. However, the prophet as drawn by him is not a personality who teaches Islam in accordance with the divine direction and observation. He is rather someone who has contemplated on nature since his childhood, and who, pondering about the injustices and the inconveniences surrounding him, thought how to struggle with these problems. To this point of view, the Prophet was sensitive and clean person who accordingly shaped his consciousness.³⁹ Besides, he frequently refers to *La Vie de Mahomet*⁴⁰ by Emile Dermenghem, a well known book in the Muslim world.⁴¹

The above-mentioned work of Heykel can be seen as apologetic. He holds that the marriages of the Prophet were because of political and social reasons, not of love.⁴² This approach is a typical reaction to the "pleasure" of the West for every marriages in general, and his marriage to Zaynab in particular. Furthermore, Heykel is persistent on that the Prophet only waged war for defensive purposes.⁴³

Another work worth mentioning is Izzat Darwaza's *Siretü'r-Rasûl*.⁴⁴ Referring only to the Noble Quran and its commentaries if needed, he shows us that he does not see the hadith and sirah literature as sound and dependable sources.⁴⁵ In this regard, producing an example of the trend of distrust towards the classical sources in the modern times, the author eliminated many stories which are not mentioned in the Quran.⁴⁶

These books which were written about the life of the Prophet, leads us to compare them to a very common literature about the life of Jesus Christ. *Vie de Jesus*⁴⁷ by Ernest Renan is the most known among them. The intellectual developments of the time were reflected in the presentation of Jesus in the biographies. Hence, a romantic, liberal, socialist or communist image of Jesus came into scene and this is quite similar thing we observe in the image of the Prophet Muhammad in Muslims.

³⁴ See *ibid*, pp. 9, 41-43, 58, 82, 87, 150-151, 227.

³⁵ Jeffrey, Arthur, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad", in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. Ibn Warraq, New York: Prometheus Books, 2000, p. 349.

³⁶ Şarkavi, *ibid*, pp. 9-10; Wessels, *ibid*, p. 102.

³⁷ Heykel, Muhammed Hüseyin, *Hazreti Muhammed Mustafa*, trans. Ömer Rıza Doğrul, Istanbul: Ahmed Halid Kitabevi, 1945.

³⁸ *ibid*, pp. 31-32, 61-62.

³⁹ See *ibid*, pp. 115-116, 128-131.

⁴⁰ Dermenghem, Emile, *Hazreti Peygamber ve Risaleti*, trans. Ahmet Ağırakça, Istanbul: İnsan Yayınları, 1997.

⁴¹ Hamadeh, a.g.tz., p. 84-85; Wessels, *ibid*, p. 102-103.

⁴² Heykel, *ibid*, pp. 316-323.

⁴³ *Ibid*, pp. 250-255.

⁴⁴ Derveze, Muhammed İzzet, *Sirah al-Rasûl*, I-II, Matbaat 'İsa al-Bâbî al-Halebî wa Shurakâhu, 1965.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁶ Hamadeh, a.g.tz., p. 87.

⁴⁷ Renan, Ernest, *İsa'nın Hayatı*, trans. Ziya İhsan, Ankara: Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1945.

Social, political and ideological changes are reflected in the way Muhammad is presented.⁴⁸ Two years after Jamal Abdul Nasser took over control with the 1952 coup, one of his ministers Fethi Ridwan wrote a book titled *Muhammad the Big Revolutionist*⁴⁹. The work of Sharqawi is about the later developments in Egypt, i.e. events when Nasser put socialism into action at the beginning of 60s. In this new book, the image of Muhammad revives itself according to the period. This was done more clearly in Mahmud Shalabi's *İstişrakıyyetü Muhammed* (Socialism of Muhammad). Shalabi confessed that he wrote the book depending on a speech by Nasser in which he pointed to the lack of a work which deals with the socialism of Muhammad.⁵⁰

“One of the striking features of these biographies is the lack of any deep evaluation of the religious experience of the Prophet, or any new assessment of his prophethood. It can be seen that some authors deliberately are interested in non-prophetic aspects and leave aside his religious function. However, it does not seem possible to do that without misrepresenting him. If Muhammad was a great statesman, one can debate if others were not greater. If he was an exemplary husband or organizer, one can easily find other exemplars. By speaking of his greatness in this and that, the modern writers are evading any approach to the “secret” in his person. One can object that the political, military, and social aspects of Muhammad are as important as the religious one.” However, it leads to “neglect the religious experience” and the divine aspect.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ernst, Carl W., *Hız Muhammed'in Yolunda*, İstanbul: Okuyan Yayın, 2005, p. 137.

⁴⁹ Rıdvan, Fethi, *Muhammed: es-sairü'l-a'zam*, Kuwait: Dâr al-Hilâl, 1994.

⁵⁰ Wessels, *ibid*, s. 104.

⁵¹ *ibid*, p. 105.