
Being an epitome of scintillating scholarship interspersed with critical insights, *The Lives of Muhammad* by Kecia Ali, who teaches Religion at Boston University, USA, unravels much about the diverse vantage points from which *Sirah* has been approached down the ages by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. While it focusses on the construction of the various images of Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) by certain Orientalists, pious Muslim writers, and deranged Islamophobes of our time, its originality consists in explaining their (mis)representations in the broader context of the present gender discourse, sexuality, marital bond, Islam bashing, role modelling and other raging concerns and challenges of today. Ali perceptively analyses the depiction of the Prophet by the Indian Muslim scholars, Sir Syed (1817–1898), Syed Ameer Ali (1849–1928), the New-Age guru, Deepak Chopra (1947–), the Egyptian Muslim scholar, Muhammad Husayn Haykal (1888–1956) and the Orientalist, William Muir (1819–1905). Equally illuminating is her critical examination of the Prophet’s maligned construction by a host of televangelist, and journalists in the West, though briefly.

Regrettably, there has flourished for long in the West the deplorable tradition of the hate-inspired portrayal of the Prophet since the days of the Prophet’s contemporary, Bishop Isiodre (ca. 560–636 CE), accentuated by the Arabic speaking Orthodox Byzantine Christian polemicist, John of Damascus (675–749 CE), Peter the Venerable’s Toledan collection (1142 CE), the eleventh-and twelfth-century French oral poetry, *Chanson de Geste* and *Chanson de Roland*, Medieval Romances and Mystery plays, the Italian masters, Dante’s
(1265–1321 CE) Divine Comedy, and Petrarch’s (1304–1374 CE) Canzonier (1360 CE), works by Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274 CE), Ramon Llull (1232–1315 CE), Ranulf Higden’s (1280–1364 CE) Polychronicon (1482), John Mandeville’s (1300–1371 CE) Travels (1496), Martin Luther (1483–1546), the first English translator of the Qur’ān, Alexander Ross (1590–1654), Humphrey Prideaux’s (1648–1724) The True Nature of Imposture Fully Displayed in the Life of Mahomet (1698), and Voltaire’s play, Mahomet (1743).

Fed on such mendacious and tendentious sources and also on those by the propagandist clergy, zealot polemicists and reckless travellers, the English men of letters too, depicted the Prophet in odious light. The Prophet is the object of their vilification and invectives, in varying degrees, in the creative writings of English poets, playwrights, novelists, and prose writers of all eras, from Langland to Chaucer, Lydgate, Dunbar, Raleigh, Marlowe, Shakespeare, Greene, Daborne, Massinger, Greville, Donne, Marvell, Butler, Cowley, Dryden, Addison, Pope, Johnson, Cowper, Southey, Coleridge, Byron, Landor, Moore, Shelley and Carlyle.

Since the appearance of Norman Daniel’s pioneering Islam and the West (1961), the fabrication of the Prophet’s distorted image has been documented and examined threadbare in the following valuable studies: (1) Philip C. Almond’s Heretic and Hero (1989), (2) Zafar Ali Qureshi’s Prophet Muhammad and His Western Critics (1992), (3) Jabal M. Buaben’s Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the West (1996), (4) Ahmad Gunny’s The Prophet Muhammad in French and English Literature, 1650 to the Present (2000), (5) Minou Reeves’s Muhammad in Europe (2000), (6) John V. Tolan’s Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination (2002), (7) Tarif Khalidi’s Images of Muhammad (2009), (8) Suzanne Conklin Akbari’s Idols in the East (2009), (9) Abdelwahab El-Affendi’s About Muhammad: The Other Western Perspective of Islam (2010), and (10) Matthew Dimmock’s Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture (2013).

However, Kecia Ali’s Lives of Muhammad surpasses all of these in exploring energetically and effectively some hitherto unnoted aspects of the making of the Prophet’s image in the West. An instance in point is her brilliant analysis of the latest, though baseless charges hurled against the Prophet by some American televangelists—of his being a terrorist and a paedophile. Their preference for such sensational accusations, rather than criticising him on theological grounds underscores their sinister design of provoking utmost revulsion against him. It does not pay any longer today in branding him as the Antichrist or arch-heretic or impostor (pp. 233–34). Moreover, the emotionally surcharged invectives of terrorism and child sex abuse conjure the “vision of Islam as an archaic and evil force.” (p. 235)
Likewise, the recent obsession with ‘Ā’ishah’s age at her marriage seeks to link
the Prophet directly with sexual perversion and child sex which is the ultimate
condemnation of someone today. Ali’s other equally valid inference is that
most of the recent Sirah writings by Muslims “have been deeply conditioned
by and implicated in those onslaughts [perpetrated by the West]” (p. 240).
That recent Muslim works on Sirah are embedded deep into the on-going
debates on gender parity, globalisation, role models, power equations and
hegemony is evidenced by their revealing titles. Take the following as
illustrative: i) Golam W. Chaudhary, *The Prophet Muhammad: His Life and
Muhammad as a Model for Muslim Husbands* (2004), iii) Tariq Ramadan, *In the
Footsteps of the Prophet* (2007), iv) Taiyba Nasrin, *The Prophet Muhammad As A
Man* (2008), v) Omid Safi, *Memories of Muhammad: Why the Prophet Matters*
*Muhammad in the Digital Age*.

While Ali tracks down some valuable clues to the formation of the
Prophet’s image down the millennia, her knowledge of the South Asian
Muslim writers on Sirah is enviable. Notwithstanding her extensive coverage
of Sir Syed and Amīr ‘Ali, and to a lesser extent of Qāsim Nānōtāvī, Ashraf
‘Ali Thānāvī, Shibli, and Sulaimān Nadvi, she would have done well to discuss
some other influential Sirah writers of the region, as for example, Ahmad Rażā
Khān Barailvī, Ṣādiq Siyālḵōṭī, Sayyid Mawdūdī, Abū ‘l-Ḥasan ‘Ali Nadvī, and
Na‘īm Ṣiddīqī.

The absence of John Adair’s trendsetting *The Leadership of Muhammad*
(2010) from both her analysis and even Bibliography strikes a jarring note.
Adair, chair of Leadership Studies at the United Nations System Staff College,
Turin, has brought into sharper relief the Prophet’s exceptional leadership
prowess with reference to the current bench marks of leadership qualities and
skills. Her description of Tariq Ramadan’s brilliant *In the Footsteps of the
Prophet* (pp. 223–226) misses many of its hallmarks. For instance, she eludes
its elucidation of the meaning and message of the Prophet’s exemplary life in
today’s pluralistic world, especially in the light of the Prophet’s bonds with
non-Muslims; its relating of Sirah to the concerns and challenges faced by
Muslims in the West, and its elaboration of the Prophet’s balanced, fair stance
on the gender issue.

Ali’s extended discussion on the Sirah writings by the nineteenth century,
such as of Sir Syed and William Muir, though illuminating in its own right, is
somewhat disproportionate to the importance of these dated works. One
wishes she would have devoted her attention to some of the following
positive, significant developments in the field which have gone unnoticed in her study:

(a) The Austrian-German poet, Rainer Maria Rilke’s (1875–1926) poem “Mohammed’s Berufung” (Muhammad Calling published in 1907) stands out as a sincere attempt to represent the Prophet faithfully in the West. More significant and gratifying is Rilke’s disapproval of and regret at the conversion of mosques in Spain.

(b) Some eminent English literary figures as W. B. Yeats (1865–1939), E. M. Forster (1879–1970), T. S. Eliot (1888–1965) and Dorris Lessing (1919–2013) have projected a positive picture of Islam, especially in the context of Sufism.

(c) Both the British military commander, R. V. C. Bodley’s The Messenger; The Life of Mohammed (1946) and the American best-selling author, Michael H. Harts’s The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History (1978) celebrate the Prophet’s achievements and his glorious legacy. Far from bestowing the coveted top rank on Jesus, Plato, Luther or any other Western intellectual giant, he accords this honour to Prophet Muḥammad.

(d) The distinguished scholar of comparative religion, Karen Arsmtrong’s aptly titled, Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time (2006) has gone a long way in breaking some negative stereotypes about the Prophet. Also, she rues the rampant demonisation of Islam and Muslims in the West.

(e) The doyen of Islamic Studies in the West, Professor William Montgomery Watt’s following affirmation of the Prophet’s genuineness in his Companion to the Qurʾān (1967/1994) marks a highly welcome sea-change in the perception of the Prophet: “I think it important to state publicly that I believe Muhammad to have been a prophet on a similar level to the Old Testament prophets.”

(f) The American academician, John Esposito has dispelled some of the Western misconceptions and misperceptions about the Prophet, Islam, and Muslims.

(g) In his magisterial The Sum of All Heresies: The Image of Islam in Western Thought (2008), the Episcopal priest and Professor of History, Utah University, USA, Frederick Quinn minces no words in lambasting the Islam-bashers namely, Jerry Falwel, Don Richardson, and Bernard Lewis.

(h) Significantly enough, the appellation, “Prophet” figures in the very title of British scholar, Professor of English, University of Sussex, UK, Matthew Dimmock’s masterly study, Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture (2013). Unequivocally, he declares the Prophet’s

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image in the West as “a caricature and misinformation placed at the centre of Christian conceptions of Islam.”

Notwithstanding these omissions, Ali’s study accomplishes admirably the task of charting out the history of the Prophet’s misrepresentation and of laying bare some of the base motives behind disfiguring his illustrious life and career. The range of her scholarship is impressive, her “Notes” and “Bibliography” run into more than eighty pages. By all means, her study ranks as an indispensable work for all those keen on fathoming the intercivilisational encounter between Islam and the West.

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