

## Imaging Prophet Mohammed and the Orient Prototype in English Biographies

**Hadeer Abou El Nagah**

University of Ottawa/Prince Sultan University

### Abstract:

From the Crusades to the present, generations of Western scholars and writers have presented and portrayed Prophet Mohamed in their writings. Many claim to be objective, while others do not hide their bias views and animosity. Many episodes from the prophetic biography were highlighted and frequently depicted in Western writings and were demonstrated in English literature as examples of the *Orientalists* from the East to simply fit the Romanticism prototype of the *Orient*. Nevertheless some less bias writings and portrayal of the Prophet appear from time to time in English writings. Michel Hart's ranking of Prophet Mohammed as the first of the top 100 most influential men in history is one of these examples. Hart's purely secular choice was justified as he viewed Prophet Mohammed as a successful personality both as a religious and war leader. During the last two centuries, some other research based writings like those of Sir William Muir, D. S. Margoliouth, Montgomery Watt and Karen Armstrong are also considered as slightly deviant from the traditional prototype of the prophet. This paper overviews the development of the image making of Prophet Mohammed in English biographic writings. Through the lights of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a qualitative reading of Montgomery Watt's *Mohammed in Mecca* 1953 and Karen Armstrong's *Mohamed a Prophet for Our Times* 2006 are critically examined as examples.

**Key Words:** Islam and the West, Orientalism, Prophet Mohammed's biography, stereotyping, writings about Islam.

**Cite as:** Abou El Nagah, H. (2015). Imaging Prophet Mohammed and the Orient Prototype in English Biographies. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no2.6>

**Introduction:**

Islam as a subject in the Western writings has greatly developed in recent years. In addition to the traditional topics of philosophy, history theology and culture, the scope of Islam-related topics covered by Western media and writings has increased to include politics, economics, military and social matters. Yet this increasing interest is not necessarily a positive indication. In the last few years, for instance, Pope Benedict's XVI remarks about *jihad*, the Danish cartoons of Prophet Mohammed as a violent and bloody leader and he most recent presentation of the Prophet in the French Carlie Hebdo cartoons are only examples of a long history of Western Islamophobia<sup>i</sup> which roots goes back to the middle ages.

The first attempt to translate the Qur'an in English in 1649 was an inaugural start to a long history of interest in Islam and its Prophet in England and the West forming a then new branch of research interest and study to be known as Orientalism. Despite their drawbacks, numerous translations continue to appear stimulating English researchers and readers' curiosity about the religion of Islam and its Prophet. However, as noticed by Gunny and others, since the late seventeenth century onward the Orientalist<sup>ii</sup> scholarly attention has shifted from Islam to Mohammed himself (Gunny, 2010, p. 22). Such interest was mainly fueled by the increasing Romanticism attentiveness given to the "Other" or the "*Orient*" as Europe struggled to get over the spelling of the Ottoman Empire. Later on the motives behind the interest of studying and writing about Islam and Muslims vary from scholarly and religious curiosity to imperial and political authority. Such interest was later developed to become a branch of study in itself, it attracted academics and scholars across the globe to examine the complex relation between the East and the West with the special focus on Islam and its Prophet at the core, Edward Said's magna opus *Orientalism* is only an example of the towering attention. Eventually such curiosity and attention crossed the boundaries of academia and became the occupation of an increasing body of writers.

Prophet Mohammed<sup>iii</sup>, as a subject in Western writings has its own attraction across history, it represents a living example of how the "orient" is viewed and fanaticizes by the West. Though, extremely rooted in his period, paradoxically Prophet Mohammed has become a timeless personality, the variety of Western writers' views to Prophet Mohammed is insurmountable. The wide span of the Western interest in Islam in general and in Prophet Mohammed in particular makes it extremely difficult to cover in one research or academic work as for the last fourteen centuries many Western writers have been reacting to him and to his message as a rich subject matter to their writings, therefore the point of research focus is to be narrowed down here.

During the late nineteenth and the twentieth century, three particular British biographers are generally known for their relative sympathy towards Islam and dependence on authentic sources. They seem to have slightly shifted from the traditional approach of the Western biographers and writers namely; Sir William Muir, Professor David Samuel Margoliouth, Professor William Montgomery Watt and Karen Armstrong are the most latter-day renowned Western non- Muslim biographers of the Prophet. Their writings are considered to have played a key role in reshaping the inherited distorted image of the Prophet in the minds of the Western readers. Ali Mohar's study brought the three biographers into a comparative prospective and sheds light on the development of imaging prophet Mohamed's personality in English writings (1997)<sup>iv</sup>. Out of these three biographers, Professor Montgomery Watt's works like *Mohammed in*

*Mecca* (1953), *Mohammed in Medinah* (1956) and *Mohammed Prophet and Statesman* (1961), are probably the most read. Amongst many of his well-known works, these particular ones about the Prophet were the most popular in the Muslim and the non-Muslim worlds alike. They have been reprinted several times and translated into many languages like Arabic, French, Japanese, Spanish and Turkish.

Karen Armstrong is one of the examples of non-Muslim writers who belong to the Western hemisphere who are known for writing fairly objectively about Islam. Her clearly unbiased views about Prophet Mohammed came after a long history of antagonism and injustice to his personality and the message he carried. Such views have developed across history, forming a whole mass of literature that is worth close examination. Martin Ling's *Muhammad His life Based on the Earliest Sources* (2006), is probably one of the most popular biographies of the prophet, however it is not to be discussed here as he converted to Islam and naturally his views will be more reflective to the Islamic perspective. On the other hand, both Watt and Armstrong are chosen here as examples of the non-Muslims writers as both are comparatively recent and because of their considerable academic and scholarly approaches and research methods. The imaging of Prophet Mohammed in both Watt's *Mohammed in Mecca* (1953) and Armstrong's *Mohammed a Prophet of Our Time* (2006) are to be critically examined here. The main research question here, is how far the image created about Prophet Mohammed has changed in modern times from the traditional medieval prototype of the Orient? Using Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, the aim of this research is to examine how Prophet Mohammed is portrayed by the two biographers, and explore how far imaging his personality and leadership has changed in recent years in the English biographies as it appears in the two specific works. My analysis is neither historical nor theological but it is rather a textual analysis of these two biographies to examine their conformity / deviation with the stereotypical image of the Orient.

### **The Image of the Prophet in the Middle Ages:**

In the Medieval thinking, because of the circumstances of the crusades, Islam had to be painted as an enemy and hence Mohammed was mainly created as an "imposter", a "charlatan" who "imposed his religion with sword" and a "sexual pervert" (Gunny, 2010, p.26). This distorted image became one of the received ideas of the West and formulated the Western line of thought about Islam and the character of its Prophet. It was during that time when a certain biased image against Islam was formed, or what Noeman Daniel called a "*communal opinin*" (qt. in Buaben, 1996, p.2). Literary and non-literary works alike were equally influenced by these Orientalist biased outlooks to Prophet Mohammed and continually misrepresent him accordingly<sup>v</sup>. Presenting a negative and subjective image of the Prophet was and continues to be a result of the supremacist vision of the European race which leads many of the Western writers, according to Buaben (1996), to be highly selective in their collection of material and analysis. It also drives them to see the "Other" or the "Orient" as inferior and backward. In that sense Orientalism as a field of study in Edward Said's words, can be seen as one of the ways of "Western style for dominating restructuring and having authority over the Orient" (qt. in Bayoumi & Robin, 2000, p.69). The whole field of Orientalism, thus has originated out of political and economic pragmatic necessity and is utilized for centuries to establish Western and Occident supremacy. Such divisive outlook to the world throws its shades in different degrees on almost all the writings about Islam and its followers for centuries, and explicitly sets the division of the world into the binary opposites: "Orient" and "Occident" (Buaben, 1996, p. 338). The idea of the Orient

is thus a European creation to fanaticize them as exotic beings, the religious tint may add an extra dimension to the fanaticized image and therefore, attract more writers and readers alike.

The methodology of Orientalists and their approaches in writing about the East can be categorized into four approaches according to Anouar Abdel Malak; ranging from focusing on the past studies, the narrative style, separating religious form linguistic aspects and neglect and denying the Eastern and Islamic achievement (Sardar, 1999, p.60). Stemming from the medieval roots, the majority of the Orientalists studies can easily fall in one or more of these four categories with very rare exceptions even till recent times.

### **Modern Views of the Prophet in the West:**

Undoubtedly the field of Orientalism has changed greatly after the Enlightenment and the eighteenth century Europe as stated by Said, for instance, and others. A new approach to rereading the East which Edward Said called "modern Orientalism" (Bayoumi & Robin, 2000, p.88). Though the presentation of Prophet Mohammed has greatly changed accordingly in modern era, most if not all Orientalists remained entrapped in varying degrees in the pre Enlightenment thought with their natural antagonism to the Arab and Islamic culture at the core (Gunny, 2010, p.17). More recently, the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 2001, gave the extremist Christian right in the West more reasons to re-launch their war against Islam and revive the deeply rooted traditional Orientalist image of its Prophet. The current views of Mohammed have their roots in the Medieval era. Though, late nineteenth and twentieth century British writings, which is the focus of this study, tend to take a more positive and sympathetic approach towards the life of Prophet Mohammed, his personality and views, we can hardly say that they were fully objective. Noeman Daniel, for instance, looks at the Medieval cannon and summarizes its percepts concerning Islam, the Qur'an and Prophet Mohammed, he concluded that a distorted image about the Prophet in particular and about Islam in general was zealously passed on to even later generations and that the twelfth and thirteenth's centuries negative views about Islam and the intellectual aggression were simply carried out for political reasons despite the allegations of impartiality and objective scholarship of the Enlightenment (1993, p302, Talib 2014, p 440) .

For more than ten centuries Prophet Mohammed continued to suffer at the hands of Western intellectuals all the disrespect that they were capable of inflicting on him, and very few writers were willing to remove the stigma that was attached to his name (Ghuny, 2010, p.207). However, the context of the twentieth century especially in view of the political development made Islam and its "originator" an important theme in the West, many people are becoming more interested in knowing more about the personality of the Prophet. The personality of Prophet Mohammed topped the list with wide margins of many surveys of biographies that interest readers in Europe (Rodison, 1988). Three particular twentieth century biographers are merely considered key players in the formation of Daniel's *Communis Opinio*; namely; William Muir, David Margoliouth and Montgomery Watt, their works during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries are considered as main sources to many later biographers and writers like Canon Edward Sell and others Despite the fact that both Muir and Margoliouth attempted to follow the Enlightenment in their biographic writings and the Prophet and showed slight sympathy with his personality, they showed minimum deviation from the prototypical imaging of the Prophet (Buaben, 1996).

**Montgomery Watt's *Mohamed in Mecca*:**

Amongst the wealth of literature about the Prophet during the twentieth century W. Montgomery Watt (1909- 2006), is distinguished as one of the most respected Prophet's biographer since the then. Besides being the most prolific writer on Prophet Mohammed in the West during the twentieth century, Watt's views of the Prophet have had a considerable impact on British students and writers of Islam. His academic approach to the prophetic life had contributed greatly to the significant shift in the Christian biographical approach to the Prophet from "confrontation to dialogue" (Buabenp.317). He depended in the Quran as a reliable source of documenting the Prophet's life which marks a significant shift in the methodology of writing the prophetic biography different from his predecessors. Ahmed Zaki Yamani wrote in the foreword of Watt's above-mentioned book that it was due to Watt's efforts that Western mentality is being freed from the shackles of the medieval prejudices that have blinded the West for long (ix). Watt has a clear respect and sympathy to Islam and its Prophet which was evidently noticed from the amount of the positive reviews his books gained. Imamudeen Khalil for instance states that Watt was the first to maintain respect and partiality to the prophet in his works while discussing events that depend on unseen events of the Prophet's life (1975, p.99). Watt's relative impartiality and fairness to his scholarly approach with regards to the personality of the Prophet can be seen in his own words introducing his *Mohammed in Mecca* as he stated that faithfulness to scholarly approaches is what most Western writings about Islam lack and the reason they are generally not acceptable by Muslims (p.x).

Unlike many of the biographers before him, Watt acknowledges the Islamic sources which is considered a remarkable deviation in the formation of a new communal opinion about Islam and the prophet during the Twentieth century. Besides his consultation of Islamic authentic sources as Al Tabarai, Ibn Hisham and Ibn Ishaq<sup>vi</sup>, one of Watt's points of strengths in writing about the Prophet is his referencing from the Qur'an and his acknowledgment of it as the main source of authenticity to the *Sirah* (Prophetic biography). On the back jacket of his book *Mohammed in Mecca*, for instance, it is stated clearly that Watt is presenting a fresh outlook to Mohammed within the socio-political factors that were operating during the period.

This first encounter of the book gives the reader the impression that this study provides a different outlook to the Prophet which separates it from the mass of the material produced in the West over the ages on the subject. Watt's interpretation of the prophet's personality breaks free from the dominant paradigm of the subjects and clearly contradicts the earlier prototypical imaging. Watt pictures Mohammed as being unsatisfied with the religious practices common amongst his people and continually searching for a monolithic religion. The examples in which Watt depends on the Qur'an as a main source of writing authenticating the Prophetic biography are numerous and can easily be spotted in his narration of the episode of the revelation (p.116), the account of the change of the Qibla (p.181), the and many other incidents. The contextual correlation approach followed by Watt in presenting the chronological development of the Prophet's life also allowed the reader to situate the different episodes in their socio-political and geographical milieu. Such presentation of the prophet's life allowed the reader to examine the quality of the prophet's personality with in relation to his environment not in the reader's own registry of reference.

Additionally Watt calls for a complete rejection of the medieval charges of "imposter" and "liar" leveled against Mohammed explaining that contemporary sound scholarship does not

accept such frivolous charges anymore. Prophet Mohammed's proven sincerity leaves no room to question the fact that he was able to discriminate the revelation from his other activities. Watt's description of Mohammed introduces a variant from the traditional image in the West, he emphasizes:

His readiness to undergo persecutions for his beliefs, the high moral character of the men who believed in him and looked up to him as leader, and the greatness of his ultimate achievement - all argue his fundamental integrity. To suppose Mohammed an impostor raises more problems than it solves. Moreover, none of the great figures of history is so poorly appreciated in the West as Mohammed (p.9).

Watt strongly supports the theory of Prophethood of Mohammed. He admits that Mohammed was sent by Allah to mankind and encourages Christians to admit his Prophethood as well:

Personally, I am convinced that Mohammed was sincere in believing that what came to him was a revelation, it was not the product of conscious thought on his part. I consider that Mohammed was truly a prophet, and think that we Christians should admit this on the basis of the Christian principle that "by their fruits you will know them", since through the centuries Islam has produced many upright and saintly people. If he is a prophet, too, then in accordance with the Christian doctrine that the Holy Spirit spoke by the Prophets, the Qur'an may be accepted as of Divine origin (p.1).

Accepting the fact that Mohammed is a Prophet led Watt to believe that the Qur'an is the message of God or Allah and in turn directly refutes the allegations of the falsity of the Qur'an and Prophet Mohammed at the same time. In addition to his views about Mohammed, the importance to this book lies in his critique not only of the Western prejudices and academically inaccurate approaches to Islam and its Prophet but also to his equal criticism of the Muslim public and Muslim scholars as well. According to Watt, the self-image that the Muslims usually present about themselves promotes the Oriental stereotypical expectations and therefore recycles the Orientalists divisive outlook of "Orientals" and "Occidentals", an idea that was also suggested by Said about the responsibility of the Orientals themselves about the self-image they have about themselves (*Said's Reader* p.67). Therefore Watt advises Muslim scholars to develop a scholarship and deep research on the points of *Asbab Al Nuzul* (the occasion of revelation for each *surah*) in order to link the *Surahs* (chapters) of the Qur'an with the Prophetic biography or the Prophetic traditions (242-3). His rejection of backwardness is two-fold; on the one hand he criticizes the Western medieval line of thought yet on the other hand he criticizes the Muslims. His views were clearly stated in his *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity*, 1988. The book contains his critique of the Muslims for portraying Prophet Mohammed as an archetype and not to present his humanistic side and reveal some of the human qualities to non-Muslims.

We can conclude that Watt's presentation of Prophet Mohamed depends mostly on his rereading of the prophet's life through other Islamic authentic sources like the Quran, Quranic exegeses and *Hadith*. Despite the fact that he deviates from the traditional prototype imaged by the general paradigm of biographers, he clearly lacks some crucial aspects of the Prophet's personality; mainly the understanding of the universality of the Prophet and his message, a

deficiency which makes his writings less convincing especially to Muslims ( Angawi, 1992, p241). Watt's scholastic approach undoubtedly distinguishes him from his predecessors, however his presentation remains very general and holistic and some specific issues should have been addressed with more details to make it clearer to the non-Muslim reader, like the issue of the Meccan position.

### **Karen Armstrong's *Mohammed A Prophet for Our Time*:**

A relatively recent and less scholarly short biography of the Prophet is written by Karen Armstrong in 2006. A British writer and commentator who went from Christian conservatism to a more liberal and mystical views about religion, her works focus on commonalities between the three major religions and expresses openness and compassion towards Islam and Prophet Mohammed in general. Her major books include: *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (1993), *Mohammed: A Biography of the Prophet* (1991), *Islam: A Short History* (2000) and many others. Her 2006 short biography; *Mohammed A Prophet for Our Time*, is known to be one of the most impartial and objective biography by a Western non-Muslim author. Armstrong's 1991 long biography of the prophet was awarded the Muslim Public Affairs Council Media Award<sup>vii</sup>.

Armstrong's title "A Prophet for Our Time" probably summarizes her outlook to prophet Mohammed's prophecy and message, as it connects it to the present rather than describing it as a purely historic narrative. Evidently, the possessive "our" in the title indicates the relative appropriateness of his personality and ethos and their transnational cross historic quality, a fact that she continually emphasizes throughout the book. The back cover of the book presents some of the reviews by the *Economist* and *New York Times*, both stress its importance in presenting a fresh understanding to the character of Prophet Mohammed which is different from the traditional prospective on him and Islam as a religion. Unlike Watt's, the book is meant to give a general timeline of the Prophet's life and does not claim any scholarly investigation or analysis. However, Armstrong shares with Watt the importance of seeing Prophet Mohammed through the political and socio-economic environment of his time. The book is divided into an introduction and five subsequent chapters each corresponding to a chronological phase in the Prophet's life. She explains in her introduction the importance of Prophet Mohammed's life in understanding all aspects of Muslim life and its relevance to the lives of all Muslims:

The life of Prophet Mohammed (c.570-632 CE) was as crucial to the unfolding Islamic ideal as it is today. His career revealed the inscrutable God's activity in the world, and illustrated the perfect surrender (in Arabic, the word for "surrender" is Islam) that every human being should make to the divine. Beginning during the Prophet's lifetime, Muslims had to strive to understand the meaning of his life and applied to their own (p.2).

In order to appreciate the greatness of Prophet Mohammed's personality, according to Armstrong, it is crucially important to understand the challenges he faced, therefore she devoted the first chapter of her book to describe the social, economic and political life in Mecca before the Prophet began to receive the revelation. Armstrong emphasizes that many of his moral and ethical foundations, belong to his upbringing in the desert or "*badawah*", and to the strong and well-founded moral system that depends mostly on generosity, courage, honest and "*muruwah*"<sup>viii</sup>, a genuine Arabian quality that she thoroughly explained (10-18). Armstrong praises the predominant virtues of the tribal system at that time to the point that she criticizes the

class and economic distinction that *Quraish* (the prophet's tribe) developed later as being a practice that is alien to the "*muruwah*" ideal (p.27).

Despite her reputation as a more tolerant, unbiased and Christian writer about Islam, her views of Prophet Mohammed as it appears in her short biography, which is the main interest of this study, cannot be judged as fully objective. She presented Prophet Mohammed as a courageous and wise leader more than a Prophet. In her introduction, for instance, she narrates the episode of the Prophet's revelation in Cave Hira and clearly stated that it was his personal belief that what happened to him was a revelation from God (p.3).

Undoubtedly Armstrong created an image of Prophet Mohammed that is clearly more sympathetic and less biased than any other non-Muslim biographer did. She managed to reveal his humane and sensitive personality. She also remained consistent with the meaning of Jihad which is to "strive", she stated in her introduction and managed to convey this to her readers. One of the examples on which she managed to create this sympathetic relation between the Prophet's character and the reader is in her description of the prophet's trip to Al-Taif and the physical and emotional strains he endures to deliver his message. She narrates the episode with great sensitivity and empathy allowing the reader to emotionally relate with the Prophet's ordeal. Moreover, she concludes with a long quotation from Ibn Ishaq to the widely known Prophet's prayers that exposes his agony and sadness, she, then, commented on the quotation that it was very unusual from Ibn Ishaq to give such an "intimate account" which she did herself in narrating the episode (p.79).

Despite her unbiased presentation of the moral qualities of Prophet Mohammed's personality, Armstrong's presentation of Mohammed focused on his moral and spiritual strengths and leadership more than his Prophethood, this can be clearly seen in her use of Qur'anic quotations. Though she frequently quotes from the Qur'an, she writes the quotation in poetic formats which imply their human composition, though she conversely herself admits the divinity of the Qur'an and its resemblance to the *Turah* or the Old Testament:

In the Qur'an, therefore, God spoke directly to the people of Mecca, using Mohammed as his mouthpiece, just as he spoke through the Hebrew prophets in Jewish scriptures. Hence the language of the Qur'an is sacred, because-Muslims believe—it records the words spoken in some way by God himself (p.45).

This can be seen as a result to her dependency on Michael Sells' translation of the Qur'an which is written in the same form.<sup>ix</sup> Sells' approach to the Qur'an as a poetic text, by which Armstrong seems to be very much affected, is evident in many examples<sup>x</sup>, her description of the Night Journey or "Israa and Mirage" is probably the clearest. In a lengthy comparison she quoted Sells' appropriation between the poetic experience of the ode and the Prophetic journey.

The nocturnal journey or the *Israa and Mirage* are, to some, one of the most controversial experiences in the Prophetic biography. Armstrong retells the story with unhidden suspicion and somehow denies its authenticity. She totally doubts the reality of the event and compared it to Jewish mystics (p.83).

He had been visiting one of his cousins who lived near the *Haram*, so he decided to spend the night in prayer beside the *Kabah* as he loved to do. Eventually he

went to sleep for a while in the enclosed area to the northwest of the shrine, which housed the tombs of Ismael and Hager. *Then it seemed to him that he was awakened by Gabriel and conveyed miraculously to Jerusalem, the holy city of the Jews and Christians (Italics are mine, ibid. p. 82).*

As mentioned in the above quotation, Armstrong questions the event and described it as a hazy vision that cannot be proved, she continued to compare this episode to similar experiences in Jewish mysticism. She then explains:

Later Muslims began to piece together *these fragmentary references to create a coherent narrative*. Influenced perhaps by the stories told by Jewish mystics of their ascent through the seven heavens to the throne of God, *they imagined their prophet making a similar spiritual flight (Italics are mine ibid 83).*

Additionally, Armstrong's lack of referring to original sources and her dependency on secondary material quoted by other writers can be seen as a major weakness in her work. Though she refers to some major biographies of the Prophet like Ibn Ishaq, Al Siouty, and even more recent biographers like Lings and others, she never refers to the original text but rather quotes other writers who use these texts. Another example of Armstrong's misuse of the language and translation of the Qur'an is in her comment on *Surah of Sincerity* or "*Ikhlas*" or Devotion; as she translates the word "*tawhid*" as "*unity*" which has a totally different meaning (p.62). Whereas the first refers to the oneness of Allah and the other refers to getting together and unite.

Armstrong's concluding chapter expressively titled "Salam" and remarks are probably the most indicative to her views regards the Prophet. She clearly stated that Prophet Mohammed was sent with a message to the whole humanity as she mentioned the peace and tolerance he brought after the overtake of Mecca. She clarifies that this was not to be seen as a military victory, it is rather a dawn of a new era of human relation, as evidence, she quoted the Prophet recitation of the Aya of the Qur'an which emphasizes the equality of mankind:

Behold, we have created you all out of a male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of him. Behold God is all-knowing, all-aware. (Qur'an 49:13 quoted in Armstrong's translated by Asad 189)

Unlike most of the Quranic quotations in Armstrong's biography, this *Aya*, is selected from a different source, which is seen in its different format and it also shows her appreciation to the quality of mercy and humanity in the personality of the Prophet. Her comment on the above *Aya* clearly demonstrates her understanding of the impact Prophet Mohammed had on the moral system of the Arabs since that time and the universality of his human message; "Mohammed had managed to redefine the concept of nobility in Arabia, replacing it with a more universal, compassionate, and self-effacing idea"(ibid).

Armstrong's concluding remarks to the book significantly summarize her perspective to the greatness of the personality of Prophet Mohammed and the position it should occupy in today's world in order to reach a better understanding of one another and avoid the perceived

clash between the East and the West, the "occident" and the Orient or the Muslim and the non-Muslim worlds, she states:

The brief history of the twenty-first century shows that neither side has mastered these lessons. If we are to avoid catastrophe, the Muslim and Western worlds must learn not merely to tolerate but to appreciate one another. A good place to start is with the figure of Mohammed: a complex man, who resists facile, ideologically driven categorization, who sometimes did things that were difficult or impossible for us to accept, but who had profound genius and founded a religion and cultural tradition that was not based on the sword but whose name – "Islam" – signified peace and reconciliation (p.202).

This concluding statement does not only reflect her views of the greatness of the Prophet's personality but also provides an Islamic solution and remedy to the long term divisive antagonism and hostility between Islam and the West, the key personality in this tolerance and mutual appreciation, as she sees it, is embodied by Prophet Mohammed.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations:**

One of the main occupations of Western writers of the Prophet's biography is to challenge the validity of the Islamic sources used by Muslim biographers. The image of Islam in general and Prophet Mohammed in particular were merely informed by the imperialist views and the divisive vision of the world into "orients" and "occident". During the age of Enlightenment such image has developed into a, somehow more objective and to some extent less distorted one. Prophet Mohammed continues to be one of the most written about personalities in the world and his life continues to attract an increasing numbers of biographers especially in Western hemisphere. Some more objective studies and writings about his life appeared on the surface and a whole wealth of literature about Islam was being introduced. Increasing numbers of scholars, writers and researchers are becoming known for their more sympathetic approaches to Islam. Writers like Montgomery Watt, Karen Armstrong and others are becoming generally accepted in the Muslim world as they show some deviation from the traditional divisive and subjective approaches followed by earlier biographers and writers. Though their writings are considered as deviant from the general paradigm of the prototypical imaging of the Prophet, they can still be considered as fully objective and free from the traditional prejudices. Despite the apparent sympathy and relative impartiality, writers like Watt and Armstrong are to be approached with caution and attentiveness to the embedded discriminative remarks and hesitant tints. Their reliance on authentic Islamic sources is not to overwhelm the Muslim reader and prevent him from questioning their motives and methodology. Like many other orientalists, their writings are to be read deeply from a Muslim lenses and such works need to be scholastically examined before being introduced to the public as fully objective works. The work of sincere Muslim scholars is extremely needed in the present time to assist in reshaping and recreating the image of Islam, its concepts and Prophet in the Western minds.

### **About the Author:**

**Dr. Hadeer Abo El Nagah** is associate professor of English at Prince Sultan University at Al Riyadh. A Fulbright International scholar, taught at The University of Ottawa and Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada & The State University of New York and Misr international University in Cairo. She authored a series of 9 English books and an Arabic book introducing the

Arab and Islamic Islam to non-Muslims and translated a large number of books. She blogs to New York Times and she is a frequent contributor to newspapers in North America.

### Notes:

- (1) The term Islamophobia is prejudice against Islam, a term recently coined and used to indicate the increasing fear from Islam and its followers
- (2) The term Orientalist is generally used to describe a scholar, writer or researcher with interest and area of interest focus on Islam and the East. It is used here in this meaning.
- (3) Muhammad and 'The Prophet' have become synonymous in recent times though for centuries Muhammad was known as imposter. In this research Muhammad, Prophet Muhammad and The Prophet are all used to indicate Prophet Muhammad unless otherwise is stated sometimes variation of spelling the name Muhammad is to be used based on the different sources consulted.
- (4) These three in particular are usually included in books about Western views of Prophet Muhammad More details will be given below about these three major biographers. (see Buaben's and others)
- (5) Since it is not the core interest of this paper to detail the image of the Prophet during the Middle-ages, only a brief account is given here. For more details about the misrepresentation of Prophet Muhammad in literary works see Ahmed Gunny's *The Prophet Muhammad in French and English Literature* 2010.
- (6) Watt also criticizes other Orientalist and Western scholars for their avoidance to the Muslim sources entirely (*Mecca* 250)
- (7) See Mohammad Mohar Ali valuable study *Sirat Al Nabi and the Orientalist*, 1997.
- (8) For more information about Armstrong and her works please see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen\\_Armstrong#Bibliography](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karen_Armstrong#Bibliography).
- (9) A term that is according to Armstrong hard to translate or to find a single equivalent in English language. It roughly encapsulating all qualities of chivalry camaraderie and doing one's due to other's
- (10) See Michel Sells' *Approaching the Qur'an*, most of the Qur'an quotations used by Armstrong are from Sells' unless otherwise is stated. See *Our Times* pp. 34, 37-8,50, 51-2, 62,74, 82.....etc.

### References:

- Ali, M. (1997). *Sirat Al Nabi and the Orientalist*, with Special Reference to the Writings of William Muir, D. S. Margoliouth and W. Montgomery Watt, Medinah, King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur'an.
- Angawi, S. (1992). Mohammed and the Universal Message, *Journal of Islamic Studies*. 3, 2,UK, Oxford University Press,( 240-43)
- Armstrong, K. (2006). *Mohammed a Prophet of Our Time*, USA,Harper Collins.
- Bayoumi M. & Robin, A. (2000). *The Edward Said Reader*, New York,Vintage Book.

- Buaben, M. (1996). *Image of the Prophet Mohammed in the West: A Study of Muir, Margoliouth and Watt*, UK, Islamic Foundation.
- Daniel, N.(1993). *Islam and the West- the Making of an Image*, UK, Edinburgh.
- Gunny, A. (2010). *The Prophet Mohammed in French and English Literature, 1650 to the Present*, United Kingdom, The Islamic Foundation.
- Khalieel, I. (1975). Modern Biographies of the Life of the Prophet in Arabic ,*IC*, April, (99-105).
- Ibn Ishaq, M. (1978). *Kitab Al Sirahwa Al Magahzi*, Beirut: Suhayl Zakkar.
- Ling, M. (2006). *Mohammed; His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, USA: Inner Traditions.
- Margoliouth, D. (1905) *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*; New York: Putnam, Knickerbocker Press.
- Muir, (Sir) W. (1988). *The Life of Mahomet and the History of Islam*, London: 1858- 1861.
- Rodinson, M. (1988).*Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, (trans.)R. Veinus, London: I.B. Tauris.
- Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sardar, Z. (1999). *Orientalism*, Bukinham:Open University Press.
- Sells, M.(1999). *Approaching the Quran*, USA: White Cloud Press.
- Talib N., Sidik N. & Jamsari E.(2014), Orientalist Methodology in the Study of Islamic History and Civilization, *ISICAS*, 438-455
- Watt, M. (1953).*Mohammed in Mecca*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watt, M. (1956). *Mohammed in Medina*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watt, M.(1961). *Mohammed The Prophet &the Statesman*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watt, M.(1988). *Islamic Fundamentalism and the Modern World*, Edinburg University Press,.