



Muhammad ﷺ Through the Lens of Dr. Annemarie Schimmel

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Abstract

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the world of Islam serves as an exemplar for the entire Muslim community but same does not hold true for the orientalist as he ﷺ in the European sphere was taken as the one who was anti-Christ whereas, for others he ﷺ stood as the one who has deviated from his original religion (Christianity). In fact, many labeled him as someone who venerated idols, thus his name was changed to Mahmound which meant soul of darkness. Interestingly, scholar from the land of Germany, Dr. Annemarie Schimmel had an entirely different view from rest of the orientalist as she viewed Muhammad ﷺ as an epitome of personality both spiritually as well as morally. In this paper, researcher tries to explore opinion that Prof. A. Schimmel holds for Muhammad ﷺ and how Muslims view him.

Keywords: *Muhammad, Muslim, Sirah.*

Introduction

There is no figure on this globe on whom this amount of literature has been composed as that of Muhammad ﷺ in all the major languages of the world. And this number keeps on growing daily. The works composed emphasize on multiple facets of his life thus bringing to notice his personality. However, the methods, methodology and intention vary from scholar to scholar, especially of the scholar from the east and that from the west. As eastern (majority among whom are Muslims) intellectuals write mostly with reverence whereas majority of western scholars abhorred him for extended period of history due to many reasons like prejudice,

ignorance, illiteracy, etc. The trend continued even after 18th century when the scholars of west started to explore the classical Arabic literature that started to become available in the European sphere.¹

However, A. Schimmel² is one among such scholars who tried to be objective in her research. Her fascination with the Muhammad ﷺ started right from her school years in whose works she delved deep and whose veneration she learned precisely during her stay in Turkey when she was engaged as a professor in the faculty of Theology. This led her to discover literature of varied genre dealing with the love of Prophet ﷺ in Muslim sphere, resulting in abundant material on part of A. Schimmel with respect to Muhammad ﷺ. Her work/research forms part of books, journals, lectures, etc³ discussing what her personality meant for the believers of Allah accompanied by bizarre stories that were weaved around his character with time. Hence, A. Schimmel mainly worked to draw the sketch of his personality, how important is He ﷺ, in the spiritual and religious life of Muslims and how is he ﷺ viewed by Muslims. However, it is out of the scope of this paper to discuss and analyze all that has been written by A. Schimmel about Muhammad ﷺ, hence, here in this paper we will discuss brief biographical sketch of Muhammad ﷺ from A. Schimmel's perspective.

Muhammad ﷺ

Annemarie Schimmel writes Muhammad, also known as al-Amin, came to this world in 570 C.E. in the city of Mecca in the elite clan of Hashimite. He was an orphan who was raised first by his grandfather, Abdul Muttalib and after that by his uncle, Abu Talib. In the initial years of his life he earned his living like most of his compatriots, by trading by means of which he came in contact of Khadija which resulted in their marriage who otherwise was older than him by many years. From Khadija he had six children whom he adored. Dr. A. Schimmel also maintains that Muhammad did not marry any other women during her lifetime, contrarily to the West's perception of him being a sensual man due to his multiple marriages after demise of Khadija.

Talking about his previous life Prof. A. Schimmel comments that during pre-prophetic period Muhammad had routine of spending time in solitude on hillock of Hira.⁴ During one such occasion he had an

¹ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of Prophet the in Islamic Piety*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, n.p.

² A. Schimmel (d. 2003 C.E.) was a scholar from Germany who was born in 1922 C.E. She was an expertise in history of religions, however, gained fame in the field of Islamic Studies especially sufism in which she had completed two Ph.d's. She lectured around the world about Islam in world famous institutes including Harvard where she held the chair that centered around Islamic Studies for nearly two decades. She has an incredible amount of literature credited to her name depicting her broad range of knowledge in different types of cultural phenomena including western as well as Islamic.

³ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of Prophet the in Islamic Piety*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1985, n.p.

⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction*. U.S.A., State University of New York Press, p. 111

encounter with arch-angle, the incidence which took him aback for few moments; however, he immediately realized that it is a divine mandate.⁵ In this spiritual whirlpool it was his wife, Khadija, who handled him with utmost care and affection.⁶ Soon after realizing his mission of giving good tidings as well as threatening against evil, he started preaching that one who lives in accord with God's command will have pass to *jannah*, where they will have every luxury from streams of honey to virgins maidens, the aspect A. Schimmel says has been criticized by Christian polemicists for its sensuality.⁷

Furthermore, Miss A. Schimmel mentions that Muhammad was sent as a flawless ideal, an exemplar who was to be sedulously followed by the Muslims in even minutest detail in entire fabric of life as well as death. Dr. A. Schimmel says the words that were chanted by Prophet became formulas that found their place in no time in distinct Muslim rituals and rites as a means of gaining Divine grace and blessing, accompanied by acting as a source of succor.⁸ As per Miss A. Schimmel, to emulate Muhammad point by point was meant to ensure that Muslims form a likeness of the Prophet, thus demonstrating Lord's unity by means of each act of a person.⁹ Hence, because of such diligent imitation of this perfect model one can find in every nook and corner a sort of uniformity be it in matters of apparel, consuming food, travelling, behavior, etc as far as Muslim is concerned. However, A. Schimmel notes that with the exposure of western elements, there has been a threat to this fascinating Muslim culture.¹⁰

Muhammad and the Hadith Literature

Dr. A. Schimmel writes, as far as Qur'an is concerned it maintains that Ahmad¹¹ is only a human, who himself has always emphasized that he is no superhuman.¹² After presenting the view that Muhammad ﷺ is only a servant of Allah, A. Schimmel points out that there are however verses in Qur'an that bring to forefront the phenomenal status of Muhammad as Qur'an mentions that He has been sent "as a mercy to the worlds"¹³, also "God and His angels utter blessings over him",¹⁴ at another place in the Qur'an it is written, "Say: if you love God, follow me, then God will love you and forgive your sins"¹⁵ and also "obey God and obey His messenger". A. Schimmel remarks that such verses accompanied by other verses on similar pattern culminated in exceptional, not required, veneration of Muhammad. Eventually, it metamorphosed into a sort of devotion that

⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

⁸ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, op. cit., n.p.

⁹ Ibid., n.p.

¹⁰ Sadia Khan, *Prophet Muhammad In The West: A Study Of The Writings Of William Montgomery Watt, Maxime Rodinson, Annemarie Schimmel and Karen Armstrong*, New Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia, p. 204.

¹¹ Another name for Muhammad.

¹² Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, op. cit., p. n.p.

¹³ Qur'an 21:107.

¹⁴ Qur'an 33:56.

¹⁵ Qur'an 3:29.

was beyond what could be attached to the status of a prophet. Thus Dr. A. Schimmel remarks that a number of such sentences of the Qur'an that shed light on his traits gave birth to boundless poetry where he was viewed as a being beyond all other human beings, who was embodied with matchless qualities. Hence A. Schimmel says in the web of such unhealthy elaborated illustration of Muhammad, his actual personality was lost,¹⁶ which necessitates the process of de-mythologization as per A. Schimmel.¹⁷

Moving further, there is an intimate relationship between Muhammad and the *hadith* literature as Muhammad serves as "a beautiful model",¹⁸ thus A. Schimmel comments that what he has said, what he did, the behavior he approved developed into a full-fledged science known by the title of *hadith*. A. Schimmel maintains that she has followed the evolution of this science minutely which she says started within the generation of *shahabah* who narrated it to the next generation, who in-turn informed about it to next one thus, "To the chain of transmitters, the *isnad*, every generation added new members, until long lines of traditionists developed, each link connected with the previous one, in a well-established relationship."¹⁹

Further Schimmel maintains that in the third century of *hijri* calendar, the standard compilation of *hadith* came into existence. In fact, with it came into existence extensive domain of scholarship that dealt with testing reliability of all *ahadith*. In it meticulously text of the *hadith* and trustworthiness of the narrator who formed the part of *isnad* was examined and each was categorized as per the level of the rank they achieved. It resulted in two most valued books after Qur'an in Muslim sphere that were called *sahihan* "the two sound ones" (al-Bukhari and Muslim). In addition to it, four more books on *hadith* were composed that are still held in high regard. All these six works gained immense importance in Muslim world as for the believers they are of exceptional authority because they provide elaborated information about doings and sayings of Muhammad. Apart from them, A. Schimmel says that other books on *hadith* like *masabih-as-sunna* of Bhaqawi, *Kanz al-ummal* of al-Mutaqqi, etc also came out later in time and with different structure.²⁰

Dr. A. Schimmel mentions that all these traditions were first and foremost employed to understand Qur'an. Apart from it, *hadith* also aided in solving novel issues that emerged from day to day life, thus revitalizing Muslim masses spiritually.²¹

However, at the same time A. Schimmel says that there were questions about the authenticity, credibility and reliability of these traditions because a number of conflicting traditions emerged which were attributed to Muhammad resulting in a number of people advocating the thought that it is best to rely on Qur'an alone in order to attain guidance and avoid traditions. In fact, many western intellectuals were critical of this aspect of

¹⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, op. cit., n.p.

¹⁷ Ibid., n.p.

¹⁸ Qur'an 33: 21

¹⁹ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety*, op. cit., n.p.

²⁰ Ibid., n.p.

²¹ Ibid., n.p.

Muslim life, the charge Muslims rejected. But with the advent of scientific era A. Schimmel shows that Muslims' attitude on a whole somewhat changed towards *hadith*. In fact, there were elaborated discussion with regard to the traditions which deal with non-doctrinal matters, the sphere in which it was said we can forgo traditions. Thus on one hand there were those who clung to the *hadith* without any question (like those who adhered to *ahli-hadith* school) whereas on the other hand there were modernists the example of whom we find in Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan who advocated acceptance of *hadith* in specific areas only like that of religious belief and not in worldly matters.²² However, there were other Muslims also who blatantly criticized *hadith* like Chirag Ali and Ghulam Parvez. However A. Schimmel maintains that maximum people stuck to *hadith* teachings in all spheres of life²³ but she herself is of the opinion that it is not the unadulterated version of how prophet lived or what he advised as she maintains that it was infiltrated by many non-Islamic elements which with time appeared in Islamic grab.²⁴

Conclusion

Generally orientalist have painted Muhammad ﷺ with the colors of contempt as they perceived him to be like any other man having intense desires. They were never comfortable to accept anything from him and always maintained that it is only Qur'an which should serve as a fountainhead for Muslims. However, as far as A. Schimmel is concerned, she had a positive take on Muhammad's ﷺ personality, in fact, her overall assessment of Islam viz-a-viz Muhammad ﷺ seems right. But still in a number of cases it is not appropriate; firstly, due to not following proper methodology like in case of hadith science as one has to be very cautious when claiming anything as hadith because it will automatically reflect personality of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ thus one has to be very careful so that nothing fictional is attached to the persona of Muhammad ﷺ (or Islam).

Secondly, using unreliable sources and materials from the west as well as east which seem to be in need of refinement before making any further use of Schimmel's work on Muhammad ﷺ so as not to compromise the message of Muhammad ﷺ.

²² Ibid., n.p.

²³ Ibid., n.p.

²⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam: An Introduction, op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.