The Expression of Religious Positivity in Karen Armstrong’s Sirah Work

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Abstract
Orientalists contributed much regarding their study of the Holy Qur’an, Hadith and Sirah since eighteenth century. Few of them attracted Muslim scholars due to the quality of their work about Islam, like the translation of the Holy Qur’an, the indexes of Hadith literature and the translations of Arabic Sirah books in English. These orientalists have left a positive impression regarding their contributions in introducing Islamic literature in West in their native languages. This research paper aims to present the expression of religious positivity in modern orientalist Karen Armstrong’s Sirah work. This selection is based on the status of this Sirah writer in present time. Her books are best sellers written on comparative religion and a huge number of people study her books and appreciate her for expressing the positive image of Islam in West. In this study, it will be found out that in which style and angle she has presented her works regarding religious positivity especially the presentation of the personality of the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) to the non-Muslims and non-religious societies.

Keywords: expression, religion, positivity, modern, orientalist, sirah.

Introduction:
Expression is the appearance or the look of a face. When this phrase is used for a document, it is an act or a process of representing some ideas in words. Word expression in this title shows the representation of selected orientalist Karen Armstrong in her Sirah works regarding religious positivity. Positivity is the state of being positive. While Religious Positivity shows that a believer of a religion is representing to the society the positive face of that religion by his actions. When we say the expression of religious positivity in the Sirah works of Karen, then it means that when Karen writes about the last holy Prophet (SAW) of Almighty Allah she shows her reader the positive face of Islam with the help of her own perception. This research paper is highlighting those points and angles of this Sirah work of Karen by which she expresses the positivity of Islam. The paper analyzes this work in the limits of Islam or standards of Muslim Sirah writing also. The paper chooses these
points:
  a. The importance of Sirah in present human age
  b. The role of Sirah in social betterment
  c. The role of Sirah in creating peace among three sematic religions

Literature Review:
Contemporary orientalists’ Sirah work intend to express religious positivity to eliminate violence and hate from human society. One of which is the book of Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu (1916-1992), entitled “Le Vie de Muhammad”. Gheorghiu was a Romanian professor of religion and philosophy in Heidelberg University and University of Bucharest. He wrote the Sirah of the holy Prophet (SAW) in Romanian language. In his book he presented a brief sketch of the life of Allah’s last Prophet (SAW) in scholarly manner. His positive work provided a chance to the European readers to understand the message of Sirah for humanity. His wise narrative about Mi’raj shows scientific methodology used in understanding this incident. Gheorghiu embraced Islam. A modern American Sirah writer, Michael Cook wrote a book named Muhammad (Past Masters).

He introduced the holy Prophet (SAW) as a successful leader, reformer and politician. This book of Michael Cook shows the expression of partiality and dishonesty about Sirah and Islam. His efforts of creating religious harmony could not be fruitful because he has consulted biased orientalists works of Sirah in this book. Biased orientalists carry a long list of writers starting from William Miur and W. Montgomery Watt. They misguide their readers about Sirah and the personality of the holy Prophet (SAW). They consult unauthentic translated secondary sources to narrate the life of the holy Prophet (SAW). They basically consult Sirah Ibn e Ishaq and pick those narrations from this book which are rejected by group of expert Muslim scholars among them are Malik bin Anas, Ibn e Hajr ‘Asqalani and Dhahi etc. They consult Sirah Ibn e Ishaq’s translation of A Guillaume.

This translation of A Guillaume acquires unavoidable mistakes of translation. When orientalists consult this translation they distort historical evidences about Sirah and try to fabricate human mind to misconceptions about the life of the Holy Prophet (SAW). Religious positivity is a vast subject of study today. William E Arnall, Willy Braun, Russell T. McCutcheon write their experience in this regard in their book “Failure and Nerve in the Academic Study of Religion”. This group of scholars have emphasized on the study of religion in its own kind which is free from criticism and bias. This scholarly work is remarkable in relation to the positive study of Islam. Yetkin Yıldırım in his research article entitled “Peace and Conflict Resolution in Medina Charter” highlights the importance of Sirah in resolving issues of modern age humanity.

Karen Armstrong and Her Sirah work:
Karen Armstrong is a religious personality, a renowned religious writer and an impressive speaker on current religious issues about
comparative study. Religion attracted her as a natural deep compassion for humanity. She left her regular study and joined church for learning her life as a future nun. During her stay in church, she tried to find out the positive and practical life style of a nun but her search remained incomplete\textsuperscript{12}. She started her study of other religions when she needed to discuss and compare religions in her TV talk show\textsuperscript{13}. Karen Armstrong’s command on English language and literature remains remarkable. This quality of her helped her in achieving the position of successful writer of best seller books on different religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism etc. Her search for a positive and practical face of religion took her to Jerusalem. She studied Judaism and the history of sematic religions in this historic city of religion. From here she started to show an expression of positvity as a common characteristic of religion. Then she tried to write on Sirah of the last Prophet (SAW) of Islam. Her books named Muhammad: A Biography of The Prophet (1991)\textsuperscript{14} and Muhammad: The Prophet of our Time (2006)\textsuperscript{15} are her Sirah works.

She won Muslim Public Affairs Council Media Award on book Muhammad: A Biography of The Prophet. In these books she presented personality aspects of The Holy Prophet (SAW) as a wise and successful political and religious leader. She admires The Holy Prophet (SAW) as a great reformer. Then she takes her reader to a conclusion that the personality of The Holy Prophet (SAW) is a true role model for creating peace in present society, interfaith tolerance and positive harmony in multi-ethnic communities.\textsuperscript{16}

Karen Armstrong and Religious Positivity:

Unlike the conventional and traditional trend of religious positivity shown by the previous scholars like Hegel which only was limited to Christianity, Karen’s concept of religious positivity desires to take all religions close to each other. Her life experiences took her to a turning point when she presented a charter of compassion on 12\textsuperscript{th} November 2009. It urges believers of all religions of the world to live together with a true feeling of love for each other. Her main thesis for this project was that religion is the best tool for achieving the level of awareness for a compassionate world. Karen says that religious people are more positive towards humanity. Her concept is, infact, scientifically proven. She wrote a lot by this angle on many religions of the world. She wants to prove that no religion of the world guides its believers to hate others. No religion supports its people to violence of any kind in society. The universal concept of a positive religion is that the religion is near the human nature. Thus, Karen struggles to present all religions of the world as positive religions.

Karen’s Criticism on Religious People:

Besides Karen’s philosophy of compassion present in all religions, we see that she criticizes religious people for their violent actions and their brutality which they showed during wars. For example, she criticized the crusades for their brutal killing of innocent people during wars. This was, she
said, the negative evolution of the actions of Christians. So, by this criticism, she is showing another positive manner of religious people which is confession of wrong doings. She did not justify wrong doings of her own religion’s believers.

Karen’s Concept of Religious Harmony:

Karen Armstrong narrates the journey of religious thoughts of believers of semantic religions. She takes help from Bible and the Holy Quran for seeking information about the history of semantic religions. She assimilates compares and concludes the historic evidences of the Bible and the Quran. Then she announces that the semantic believes are harmonious to each other. The believes of monotheism, the day of judgement, Prophets (AS) and the values of humanity show strong connection between the Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This is her basic thesis about religious harmony. Then she desires to think and work for a peaceful positive harmonious relationship in the believers of these religions. On the ground of her findings about semantic religions she feels that it is possible that all the religions (semantic and non-semantic) are based on positivity for human society. So she in her charter of compassion invites all religions to come forward and think and work for the betterment of humanity. Many famous personalities of the world joined her in this task and an organization came into being on the base of her charter of compassion.\(^\text{17}\)

Karen’s Thesis about Role of Religious Harmony for Creating Peace:

Karen in her book “Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life” explains thoroughly about her map of religious harmony which can be resulted in a peaceful universal environment for humanity. She has highlighted the main aim of religious life saving humanity and avoiding violence. In this book she relates non-semantic religious thought in detail. She quotes all religious personalities for their positive directions for humans to love and respect each other.\(^\text{18}\) She wants her readers to think seriously about creating peace in world, as the world cannot survive in present most destructive war weapons.\(^\text{19}\) So she presents her love for each and every religion of the world and is hopeful for creating peace with the help of religious positivity and a harmonious emotional and ethical action plan for the whole world.

Karen’s Expression of Religious Positivity as a Sīrah Writer:

Karen Armstrong expressed her deep understanding of the life of holy Prophet (SAW). She presents examples from hadith and the traditions of Sīrah about compassion for other communities of the society. In her twelve steps for being compassionate she has quoted a hadith in which the holy Prophet (SAW) said that a person cannot be a true believer unless he likes for his brother that which he likes for himself.\(^\text{20}\) She presents the personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW) as a reformer of our time who achieved peace for those people who were indulged in long wars.\(^\text{21}\) Karen wrote two books about Sīrah of the Holy Prophet (SAW) in a very crucial time when western world was kept in fear of Islam and Muslims after the incident of 9/11. She says that it
was a great challenge for her to write on Sirah at that time and publishers tried to stop her for writing these books at that time. Karen has tried to write Sirah for her western readers and she succeeded to keep them out of their fears about Islam and Muslims. She explained Sirah as a guideline for present time on following aspects:

The importance of Sirah in present human age:

Karen Armstrong in her book “Muhammad Prophet of our Time” depicts that Islam is the religion of decency and respect for each other. She says that the Prophet of Islam does not present violence of any kind. She advises her western readers to approach the biography of the Holy Prophet (SAW) in balanced way. She criticizes biased non-Muslims on their attitude of prejudice for the personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW), Islam and Muslims. She realizes that prejudice harms basic positive social behaviors like tolerance, compassion and broadmindedness. Karen proves the Holy Prophet (SAW) as the successful leader of our time. His strategies for resolving major problems consisted of peaceful actions for example; after Hijrah towards Madinah, the brotherhood among Muhājirīn and Ansār solved many major problems of Muslims. The state of Madīnah presents great revolutionary solutions of disputes and the ummah is a divine unity. While writing on hijrah she appears as a great admirer of the successful and positive personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW). Karen’s soft language and admiring impression made her non-Muslim readers feel and view the importance of Sirah in present human age as a comprehensive human personality.

The role of Sirah in social betterment

Sustainable humanity vests in the socially strong life of humanity. Karen is among those orientalists who present their scholarship about Sirah as guideline for human society. She presents examples from Sirah about social and cultural strengthening of humanity by making divine laws like hijab, and qisas etc. She feels no hesitation in writing that all the basic work of Sirah about social strength of humanity is full of kindness and compassion. Here she invites her western readers to correct their negative impressions about the Holy Prophet (SAW). The Prophet of our time is a great kind and sensible human being. Karen says that Prophet Muḥammad (SAW) ordered His followers to accept pluralism and diversity as the will of God. She highlights in her book the concept of ummah created by the Holy Prophet (SAW) was not on any worldly base like blood, cast, creed or tribe. This concept took the populace towards peaceful universal social group. The Holy Prophet (SAW) presented himself as a most tolerant man during ordering the obligations of salah, zakat, hajj and jihad etc.

The role of Sirah in creating peace among three semantic religions

Karen’s thesis about the peace in present age of believers of semantic religions takes her readers to a long journey of the history of the presence of God in human life on earth. She starts from the biblical concepts of God and ends on the future perceptions of people about God. In her book “A History
of God”, she has presented Islamic fundamental belief of monotheism as “Unity”.31 She indicates that the Holy Qur’ān demands from its reader a specific quality of human wisdom for understanding the attributes of God presented in the Holy Qur’ān. This wisdom produces as a result of true living of the life as the orders of God.32 Thus, she feels that the semantic religions have signs of unity regarding the monotheism and her thesis is that if people do not spoil their belief they can live a universal group of positive religious human beings33. This is evident in the conclusion of her book where she writes about the religiosity of Americans. She writes that almost 91% Americans claim that the believe on God but the increasing rate of crime and social problems shows that their actions are not in line with their belief.34 Here she has missed the guideline of Sīrah which demands the believers of Allāh to follow the last Prophet (SAW) to win Allāh’s will and Allāh’s will leads us to a peaceful universal human community.

Criticism on Karen Armstrong as Sīrah Writer:

Karen Armstrong as a Sīrah writer could not save her from few mistakes while writing about the holy Prophet’s biography. She misinterprets the personality of Ḥadīrat Aīshah (RA)35 and few companions of the Holy Prophet (SAW).36 She, as other orientalists criticizes on the Prophetic Personality of the Holy Prophet (SAW). She presented the occurrence of Mi’rāj as the spiritual selfcreation of the Holy Prophet (SAW). She trusts on primary sources in Sīrah writing but she takes help from the English translations of Sīrah Ibn e Iṣḥāq by Alfred Guillaume also. Besides all the weaknesses as a contemporary Sīrah writer, Karen is listed in a successful positive analyst of religion. She counts the Islamic and Sīrah approach on human society as the major need of today to be adopted. She in her statement criticized and rejected Ayaan Hirsi Ali on her point of view about Islam as a religion of violence.37

Conclusion:

Karen Armstrong’s belief on religion is based on that religion is only a positive life style which is able to return peace, love and unity in society. Specially, Islam is a set of decent social and cultural values which westerns followed for designing their society. To prove her strong belief about the practical importance of Sīrah for today she wrote about the Sīrah of the last Prophet (SAW).

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