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Methodologies of 19th Century Orientalist Biographers of the Prophet (PBUH): A Research and Analytical Study

Ayesha Imran

PHD Research Scholar Riphah International University, Islamabad

Dr. Muhammad Ghayas

Assistant professor Department of Islamic Studies, Riphah International University Islamabad

Email: muhammad.ghayas@riphah.edu.pk

Abstract

This research article critically examines the methodological frameworks employed by prominent 19th-century Orientalists in their biographical accounts of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The 19th century marked a pivotal shift in Western scholarship, moving from polemical rhetoric toward a supposedly “scientific” and “philological” investigation. By analysing the works of influential figures such as Sir William Muir, Aloys Sprenger, and Gustav Weil, this study identifies the core tenets of their methodologies, including source criticism (Quellenkritik), rationalism, and the secularization of sacred history. Furthermore, the paper investigates the inherent biases and colonial undercurrents that shaped these narratives, while also acknowledging the subsequent Muslim scholarly responses most notably by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan which challenged the Orientalist paradigm. This analytical study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how 19th-century European scholarship constructed a historical image of the Prophet (PBUH) and the lasting impact of these methodologies on modern Islamic studies.

Keywords: 19th Century Orientalism, Prophetic Biography (Sirah), Western Scholarship, Historical Criticism, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (Response)

Introduction:

The nineteenth century stands as a defining era in the history of Islamic studies in the West. This period witnessed a transition from the polemical and medieval confrontations to what was termed as “scientific” or “objective” Orientalism. Driven by the expansion of European colonialism and the burgeoning intellectual movements of the Enlightenment, Western scholars began to apply the rigorous tools of philology, rationalism, and historical criticism to the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This academic shift was not merely a pursuit of historical facts but was deeply intertwined with the geopolitical interests and cultural hegemony of the time.

The methodologies employed by 19th-century biographers were multifaceted and marked by a distinct departure from traditional Islamic historiography. Scholars like Sir William Muir introduced a framework of skepticism regarding the authenticity of oral traditions, arguing that internal evidence alone is insufficient for historical certainty. This skeptical lens was often used to dismiss supernatural elements by categorizing them as psychological phenomena. Similarly, Aloys Sprenger emphasized a philological approach, claiming that a “medical” and “rational” examination of original Arabic manuscripts was

necessary to deconstruct the prophetic narrative. These scholars claimed to present a “historical Muhammad,” yet their works often reflected European prejudices. However, the 19th century was also the period of a significant Muslim intellectual reawakening. In response to the challenges posed by Western Orientalists most notably William Muir Muslim scholars emerged to defend the prophetic legacy using the very tools of modern scholarship. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a pioneering figure of this era, exemplifies this scholarly resistance. His work, *Essays on the Life of Mohammed*, was a direct academic response aimed at correcting the historical distortions found in Western biographies.¹

Aims of the Study:

The primary aim of this study is to conduct a rigorous methodological and analytical investigation into the works of 19th-century Orientalist biographers of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). As the 19th century represented a paradigm shift in Western scholarship moving from overt religious polemics to a seemingly “academic” and “scientific” framework this research seeks to deconstruct the underlying mechanisms of this transition.²

Specifically the objectives of this research are as follows:

1. To Analyze Methodological Frameworks: The study aims to examine the “Canon of Criticism” and other philological tools employed by scholars like William Muir, Aloys Sprenger, and Gustav Weil. It seeks to understand how these tools were used to prioritize certain historical reports while marginalizing others to fit a secular narrative.³
2. To Evaluate the Use of Primary Sources: A major objective is to investigate the selective use of Hadith and Sira literature. This research will highlight instances where authentic Islamic traditions were re-interpreted as psychological or medical symptoms to provide a materialist explanation for divine revelation (Wahy).
3. To Contextualize Colonial and Intellectual Biases: The article aims to explore the intersection between 19th-century European colonialism and Orientalist scholarship. It will analyze how the political environment of the British Empire influenced the portrayal of the Prophet (PBUH) as a “political leader” rather than a spiritual guide.
4. To Document Muslim Intellectual Responses: Lastly, the study aims to highlight the scholarly resistance led by figures such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. It will evaluate how Muslim intellectuals utilized the very same tools of Western criticism to defend the Prophetic legacy and correct historical distortions, thus establishing a bridge between traditional and modern scholarship.⁴

Methodological Framework of 19th Century Orientalism

The 19th century marked a transition from medieval religious hostility to a more sophisticated “academic” approach in Western studies of the Prophet’s (PBUH) life. This era’s methodology was characterized by several key intellectual tools, which were used to reconstruct a secularized version of Islamic history.

- Source Criticism (Quellenkritik)

1. Khan, S. A. (1870). *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed*. Preface, p.5

2. Muir, William. *The Life of Mahomet*. Vol. 1, Smith, Elder & Co., 1861, pp.7-10

3. Sprenger, Aloys. *The Life of Mohammed, from Original Sources*. Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851, p.12

4. Khan, Sayyid Ahmad. *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed*. Trubner & Co., 1870, Preface, p. 4

The most dominant tool was “Source Criticism” or Quellenkritik. Scholars like William Muir and Aloys Sprenger argued that the traditional Islamic sources—specifically the works of Ibn Ishaq, Ibn Hisham, and Al-Waqidi—were not objective historical records. They contended that these sources were filtered through centuries of oral transmission and religious devotion. Therefore, their methodology involved treating every miraculous or supernatural report as a “later fabrication.” By applying this rule, they aimed to separate the “historical Muhammad” from the “theological Muhammad.”⁵

- The Philological and Rationalist Approach

Orientalists of this century, particularly Aloys Sprenger, emphasized the “Philological” method. This involved a microscopic analysis of the Arabic language used in early texts to find inconsistencies. Coupled with this was a strict “Rationalism,” where they refused to accept any event that defied the laws of physics or logic. For instance, any event involving angels or divine intervention was automatically categorized as a metaphor or a psychological delusion of the observers.⁶

- Secularization and the Denial of Transcendence

A fundamental pillar of their methodology was the “Secularization of Sacred History.” They treated the life of the Prophet (PBUH) as a purely human phenomenon, governed only by social, economic, and political forces of 7th-century Arabia. By denying the possibility of transcendence (Wahy), they were forced to find material causes for spiritual events. This is why we see a repetitive focus on the Prophet’s (PBUH) physical health or political surroundings in their writings.⁷

The Colonial and Political Context of 19th Century Orientalism

It is imperative to understand that 19th-century Orientalist scholarship was not produced in a political vacuum. This era was the height of European imperialism, and the academic study of Islam was often intertwined with the strategic interests of colonial powers. The British Empire, in particular, required a deep understanding and often a systematic deconstruction of Islamic identity to maintain its hegemony over Muslim populations in India and the Middle East.

- Knowledge as a Tool of Power

The relationship between power and knowledge is evident in the works of this period. Orientalists were frequently employed by colonial administrations. For instance, William Muir was a high-ranking official in the British Raj. His research was partly motivated by a desire to show the superiority of Western civilization and Christian ethics over the Islamic framework. This political alignment influenced how they portrayed the Prophet (PBUH), often focusing on themes of “violence” or “political ambition” to justify colonial intervention.⁸

- The Missionary Influence

A significant portion of 19th-century scholarship was also driven by missionary zeal. Many Orientalists sought to find “weaknesses” in the life of the Prophet (PBUH) to facilitate the spread of Christianity in the East. Their methodology was designed to create a “historical Muhammad” that was stripped of his

5. Muir, William. *The Life of Mahomet*. Vol. 1, Smith, Elder & Co., 1861, pp. 1-14

6. Sprenger, Aloys. *The Life of Mohammed*, from *Original Sources*. Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851, p. 12

7. Weil, Gustav. *Mohammed der Prophet: Sein Leben und seine Lehre*. Stuttgart, 1843, p. 54.]

8. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, 1978, pp. 31-45

religious authority. This period saw the publication of numerous works that used a “scientific” tone to hide a polemical agenda.⁹

- Institutional Support for Orientalism

The establishment of institutional chairs for Arabic and Islamic studies in European universities during this century provided the financial and academic backing for this research. However, these institutions were often funded by entities that had a direct interest in colonial expansion. Consequently, the “objective” research produced by these scholars was frequently utilized by policymakers to devise strategies for governing Muslim societies.¹⁰

William Muir’s Objections to the Seerah and Prophetic Mission

- The Secular Construction of the Prophetic Persona

William Muir’s foundational objection to the Seerah lies in his insistence on a purely secular interpretation of the Prophet’s (PBUH) life. In his various works, he argued that the transition from a preacher in Mecca to a leader in Medina was not a divine progression but a result of shifting personal and political ambitions. Muir contended that the “Medinan period” reflected a significant departure from the original spiritual message, focusing instead on territorial expansion and political hegemony.¹¹

- Critique of Political Governance and the Caliphate

Muir extended his criticism to the administrative and political decisions made during the latter part of the Prophet’s (PBUH) life. He argued that the framework of Islamic governance was essentially a tribal confederation strengthened by military success rather than a universal moral system. In his analysis of the early Caliphate, he suggested that the lack of a formal succession plan was a strategic ambiguity, which he used to question the long-term vision of the prophetic mission.¹²

- Re-interpretation of Revelatory Experiences (The Medical Argument)

Muir utilized specific authentic traditions to provide a psychopathologized explanation for the phenomenon of revelation (Wahy). He focused on the physical intensity of these experiences to argue that they were manifestations of a medical condition.

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا: "وَلَقَدْ رَأَيْتُهُ يُزَلُّ عَلَيْهِ الْوَحْيُ فِي الْيَوْمِ السَّيِّدِ الْبَرْدِ فَيُفْصِمُ عَيْيَ وَإِنَّ جَبِينَهُ لَيَتَفَصَّدُ عَرَفًا."¹³

- Detailed Analysis of the Objection:

Muir interpreted the “profuse sweating” (لَيَتَفَصَّدُ عَرَفًا) and the heavy physical toll described in this Hadith as symptoms of “temporal lobe epilepsy” or “hallucinatory ecstasy.” He argued that the Prophet (PBUH) sincerely believed in his mission, but his “revelations” were actually internal cognitive surges caused by his physiological state. This allowed Muir to maintain a veneer of respect for the Prophet’s (PBUH) sincerity while simultaneously dismissing the divine origin of his message.¹⁴

- Moral and Ethical Scrutiny of Domestic Life

9. Hourani, Albert. *Islam in European Thought*. Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 10-22

10. Rodinson, Maxime. *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*. University of Washington Press, 1987, pp. 63-70

11. Muir, William. *Annals of the Early Caliphate*. Smith, Elder & Co., 1883, pp. 1-5

12. Muir, William. *The Caliphate: Its Rise, Decline, and Fall*. The Religious Tract Society, 1891, pp. 8-15

13. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab Bad’ al-Wahy, Hadith No. 2

14. Muir, William. *The Life of Mahomet*. Vol. 2, Smith, Elder & Co., 1861, pp. 89-94

A substantial portion of Muir's work is dedicated to criticizing the domestic life and marriages of the Prophet (PBUH). He argued that these personal aspects were inconsistent with the character of a spiritual reformer. By analyzing narrations regarding the household of the Prophet (PBUH), Muir sought to present these marriages as being motivated by personal desire rather than political or social necessity, a common polemical theme used by 19th-century Orientalists to diminish the Prophet's (PBUH) moral authority in the Western mind.¹⁵

Analytical Reflection: The Impact of William Muir's Colonial Critique

The scholarly legacy of William Muir represents a profound intersection between colonial administration and religious polemics. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Muir's approach was deeply embedded in the British imperial framework, which sought to understand Islam not for spiritual enrichment, but to facilitate better administrative and ideological control. His methodology, characterized by a selective use of Islamic sources, aimed to construct a narrative of the Prophet's (PBUH) life that was acceptable to the 19th-century European mind. By institutionalizing the "Divide and Rule" strategy within the Seerah specifically by creating a categorical moral distinction between the Meccan and Medinan periods Muir attempted to portray Islam's expansion as a transition from a modest religious movement to a militant political entity.

Furthermore, Muir's "Canon of Criticism" was fundamentally rooted in a pre-conceived skepticism. He utilized his legal and administrative expertise to cross-examine Islamic traditions as if they were testimonies in a colonial court, often dismissing narrations that highlighted the spiritual or miraculous aspects of the Prophet's (PBUH) mission. His critique of the Caliphate and Islamic governance was designed to prove that the Islamic system was inherently unstable and lacked a universal ethical foundation, thereby justifying Western political intervention in the Muslim world. For a PhD researcher, it is essential to recognize that Muir's work provided the intellectual scaffolding for much of the 20th-century Orientalist discourse, necessitating a scholarly response that is not just defensive, but one that deconstructs the colonial biases inherent in his methodology.

Aloys Sprenger's Critical Objections to Seerah and Prophetic Status

The Psychological Critique of Prophetic Marriages

Sprenger approached the domestic life of the Prophet (PBUH) from a psychopathological perspective. In his major German work, he argued that the Prophet's (PBUH) marriages in the Medinan period were not motivated by the social or political reasons often cited in Islamic tradition. Instead, he claimed they were indicative of a "changed temperament" following the migration. His objection was centered on the idea that the transition from the ascetic life in Mecca to a more complex domestic life in Medina represented a shift in the Prophetic persona from a religious reformer to a man influenced by mundane desires.¹⁶

- **Objections to Political Leadership and Diplomacy**

Sprenger raised significant objections to the Prophet's (PBUH) political strategies. He viewed the establishment of the State of Medina not as a divine mission, but as a clever "unification of Arab tribes" through social and political maneuvering. He claimed that the Prophet's (PBUH) diplomacy was rooted in a pragmatic understanding of tribal psychology rather than universal ethics. In his view, the Prophet's

15. [Muir, William. *The Coran: Its Composition and Teaching*. Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1878, pp. 62-65

16. Sprenger, Aloys. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad*. Vol. III, Berlin, 1865, pp. 78-85

(PBUH) success was a result of his ability to act as a “National Hero” of the Arabs, which Sprenger used to negate the transcendental nature of his leadership.¹⁷

- The Critique of Ghazawat (Military Expeditions)

Regarding the military campaigns, Sprenger’s objection was that these were primarily economic and strategic necessities disguised as religious duties. He argued that the early raids were aimed at securing the economic survival of the Muslim community in Medina. He frequently used the term “Guerilla warfare” to describe the early expeditions, attempting to strip them of their defensive and moral justification as presented in Sira literature.¹⁸

- Objections to the Phenomenon of Wahy (Use of Hadith as Evidence)

Sprenger’s most distinctive objection was his “medical diagnosis” of the Prophetic experience. He used authentic Hadith to argue that the physical manifestations of revelation were symptoms of a medical condition.

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا: "فَإِذَا نَزَلَ عَلَيْهِ الْوَحْيُ، غَشِيَ عَلَيْهِ، وَكَانَ يُشْبِهُ السُّكْرَ."¹⁹

- Sprenger’s Analysis:

Sprenger argued that the physical descriptions such as the “loss of consciousness” and “profuse sweating” were clinical evidence of “Hysteria” or “Epileptic seizures.” By reclassifying these spiritual states as medical episodes, he aimed to maintain that while the Prophet (PBUH) was sincere in his belief, the “revelations” were internal hallucinations caused by his physical state. This allowed Sprenger to dismiss the divine authority of the Quranic message.²⁰

- Objections to the Concept of the Caliphate

In his analysis of the Prophet’s (PBUH) final days and the subsequent rise of the Caliphate, Sprenger objected to the idea that there was a divinely ordained or even a clearly planned system of succession. He characterized the early Caliphate as an “emergency arrangement” made by the Meccan elite to prevent the collapse of the newly formed state. His critique was that the Islamic political system lacked an inherent spiritual blueprint and was purely a product of historical coincidence and tribal consensus.²¹

Scholarly Reflection: The Impact and Academic Orientation of Sprenger’s Critique

The scholarly contributions of Aloys Sprenger represent a pivotal moment in 19th-century Orientalism, characterized by the introduction of a “bio-medical” and “philological” reductionism into the study of the Prophetic biography. Sprenger’s unique background as a physician allowed him to craft a narrative that moved beyond traditional religious polemics into the realm of clinical diagnosis. By framing the experiences of Wahy as pathological episodes, he attempted to reconcile the Prophet’s (PBUH) undeniable historical sincerity with a secular worldview that fundamentally rejected the possibility of divine intervention. This approach had a profound impact on Western scholarship, as it provided a seemingly “scientific” veneer to age-old prejudices, effectively reclassifying spiritual transcendence as a neurological disorder.

17. Sprenger, Aloys. *The Life of Mohammed*, from *Original Sources*. Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851, pp. 175-182

18. Sprenger, Aloys. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad*. Vol. II, 1862, pp. 110-120

19. Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk*. Vol. 2, p. 298. Sprenger also references similar descriptions in *Musnad Ahmad*

20. Sprenger, Aloys. *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad*. Vol. I, 1861, pp. 205-212

21. Sprenger, Aloys. *The Life of Mohammed*, from *Original Sources*. 1851, pp. 202-210.

Furthermore, Sprenger's analysis of the Prophet's (PBUH) social and domestic life in Medina was rooted in a socio-psychological skepticism that sought to deconstruct the holistic nature of the Prophetic character. By interpreting the marriages and political strategies of the Prophet (PBUH) through the lens of mundane pragmatism and "national heroism," Sprenger aimed to strip the Seerah of its moral and universal authority. His methodology was designed to portray the rise of Islam as a brilliant but purely human response to the socio-economic and tribal dynamics of 7th-century Arabia.

Gustav Weil's Objections to Seerah, Domestic Life, and Governance

Critique of Prophetic Marriages (Domestic Life)

Gustav Weil raised significant objections regarding the domestic life of the Prophet (PBUH) in his works. He argued that the transition to polygamy in the Medinan period was a marked departure from the monogamous life led with Khadija (RA) in Mecca. Weil's objection was centered on the claim that these marriages were a result of a "personal transformation" influenced by newfound political power. He attempted to characterize these unions not as strategic or social necessities, but as a reflection of a personal inclination, aiming to diminish the spiritual image of the Prophet (PBUH) in the eyes of European readers.²²

- Objections to Ghazawat (Military Expeditions)

Weil viewed the military expeditions (Ghazawat) as purely political and economic maneuvers. He raised the objection that the early Islamic state in Medina was sustained by raids on Meccan caravans. In his view, the concept of "Jihad" was a strategic tool used by the Prophet (PBUH) to consolidate his authority over the warring Arab tribes. He often described these campaigns as "military expansionism" rather than defensive struggles for religious freedom, thereby challenging the ethical foundations of early Islamic history.²³

- Critique of Political Governance and the Caliphate

Regarding the political system and the Caliphate, Weil's primary objection was that the Islamic state lacked a formal, divinely-guided administrative structure. He argued that the Prophet (PBUH) acted primarily as a "Statesman" whose decisions were dictated by the immediate needs of tribal politics. Weil contended that the ambiguity surrounding the succession (the Caliphate) was proof that the Prophet (PBUH) had not envisioned a long-term universal religious-political system, but rather a temporary Arab confederation.²⁴

Physiological and Psychological Objection (Use of Hadith)

Like his contemporaries, Weil relied on authentic traditions to propose a medical explanation for Prophethood, specifically the theory of epilepsy.

The Arabic Text of the Hadith used by Weil:

عَنْ عَائِشَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهَا: "كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ إِذَا نَزَلَ عَلَيْهِ الْوَحْيُ كُرِبَ لِدَلِكِ وَتَرَبَّدَ وَجْهُهُ."²⁵

- Weil's Analysis:

Weil focused on terms like "كُرِبَ" (distress) and "تَرَبَّدَ وَجْهُهُ" (change of facial color/ashen face) to support his medical thesis. He argued that these physical reactions were "classic symptoms of epilepsy." His

22. Weil, Gustav. *Biblische Legenden der Muselmänner*. Frankfurt am Main, 1845, pp. 152-160

23. Weil, Gustav. *Geschichte der Chalifen*. Vol. I, Mannheim, 1846, pp. 5-18

24. Weil, Gustav. *Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre*. Stuttgart, 1843, pp. 310-325

25. Sahih Muslim, Kitab al-Fada'il, Hadith No. 2333

objection was that these experiences were mistaken by the Prophet (PBUH) and his followers for divine communication, while in reality, they were physiological disturbances.²⁶

Scholarly Reflection: The Impact of Gustav Weil's Rationalist Critique

The scholarly contributions of Gustav Weil represent a critical juncture in the 19th-century Orientalist discourse, primarily distinguished by the introduction of "historical-critical" and "psychological" methodologies. Weil was one of the first to attempt a systematic "de-mystification" of the Prophetic biography by grounding spiritual experiences in pathological explanations. By being the primary architect of the "epilepsy theory," Weil sought to provide a rationalist framework that could acknowledge the Prophet's (PBUH) sincerity while simultaneously stripping his mission of its transcendental authority. This approach institutionalized a form of academic skepticism that treated the Seerah as a subject for medical and political autopsy rather than a source of moral and divine guidance.

Furthermore, Weil's analysis of the Prophet's (PBUH) political life and domestic arrangements in Medina reflected a biased interpretation of power dynamics. By characterizing the transition from Mecca to Medina as a shift from "reformer" to "statesman," he aimed to create a narrative of moral inconsistency. His critique of the Caliphate and the administrative structures of early Islam was designed to portray the faith as a localized Arabian phenomenon a tribal confederation rather than a universal religious system

Comparative Methodology and Academic Orientation of the Three Orientalists

1. William Muir: The Colonial and Administrative Critic

Expertise: Muir was a senior British colonial administrator in India. His expertise lay in Governance, Law, and Political History.

Methodological Focus: Because of his background in administration, he focused on the Prophet's (PBUH) political life and the Caliphate. He viewed the Seerah through the lens of a "Statesman" rather than a prophet.

The Target: His primary targets were the Ghazawat and political treaties. He attempted to prove that the success of Islam was due to administrative genius and military force rather than divine guidance.

Impact: He institutionalized the "Divide and Rule" narrative in Seerah studies by creating a false binary between the "Meccan Preacher" and the "Medinan Dictator."

2. Aloys Sprenger: The Bio-Medical and Philological Deconstructor

Expertise: Sprenger was a Physician (Medical Doctor) and a polyglot with immense command over Oriental Languages.

Methodological Focus: He used his medical knowledge to provide a clinical diagnosis of Wahy (Revelation). His methodology was "Pathological Reductionism."

The Target: His main target was the physicality of the Prophet (PBUH) and the nature of revelation. He utilized obscure narrations to classify spiritual experiences as medical "fits" or "hysteria."

Impact: He gave a "scientific" and "academic" face to older prejudices, leading later Western scholars to treat the Seerah as a medical case study.

3. Gustav Weil: The Rationalist and Critical Historian

Expertise: Weil was a Historian and Philologist with a deep interest in Jewish and Arabic legends.

Methodological Focus: His approach was "Rationalist Criticism." He focused on the sources of Seerah to find "Biblical influences" and "legendary additions."

26. Weil, Gustav. Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre. 1843, pp. 42-50

The Target: He targeted the Domestic Life (Marriages) and the Authenticity of Hadith. He was the first to formalize the “epilepsy theory” in a systematic historical framework.

Impact: He paved the way for “Source Criticism,” encouraging later Orientalists to reject any miraculous or supernatural element in the Seerah as historically invalid.

Impacts on the Study of Seerah

The combined impact of these methodologies on the global perception of the Seerah can be summarized as follows:

Secularization of Sacred History: They successfully moved the discourse from a “Religious Narrative” to a “Socio-Political Case Study,” stripping the Seerah of its spiritual and redemptive essence.

Fragmented Persona: By focusing on domestic life and military campaigns through a biased lens, they presented a fragmented image of the Prophet (PBUH), portraying him as a person influenced by 7th-century Arabian limitations rather than a universal guide.

Intellectual Defensive for Muslims: Their works forced Muslim scholars to move away from traditional hagiography and enter into a “Defensive Apologetic” mode, which lasted for over a century.

Foundation for Modern Islamophobia: Many of the contemporary misconceptions regarding Jihad and women’s rights in Islam find their academic roots in the biased methodologies of these 19th-century scholar.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan’s Rebuttals to Orientalist Objections

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan’s work, *Essays on the Life of Mohammed*, was a direct response to the distortions of 19th-century Orientalists. His specific rebuttals with references are as follows:

1. Rebuttal to the “Epilepsy Theory” (Sprenger & Weil)

Sir Syed strongly rejected the claim that the Prophet’s (PBUH) physical state during revelation was a medical disorder. He argued that these states were the result of the soul’s intense engagement with the divine realm.

Response: He clarified that after these states, the Prophet (PBUH) remained perfectly lucid and delivered coherent, eloquent messages (The Quran), which is impossible for an individual suffering from a neurological fit.²⁷

2. Rebuttal to “Spread of Islam by the Sword” (Muir)

Against William Muir’s claim that Islam was spread through military force, Sir Syed provided historical evidence regarding the nature of the Ghazawat.

Response: He proved that the Prophet (PBUH) only engaged in defensive warfare to ensure the survival of the Muslim community and to establish the principle of “freedom of conscience.”²⁸

3. Defense of Prophetic Marriages (Weil & Muir)

Sir Syed addressed the criticism regarding the Prophet’s (PBUH) domestic life by highlighting the social reforms initiated through these unions.

Response: He argued that these marriages were not for personal gratification but were strategic tools for tribal unification and social welfare, providing protection to widows of martyrs.²⁹

4. Critique of Orientalist Methodology

27. Khan, Sayyid Ahmad. *Essays on the Life of Mohammed*. London: Trubner & Co., 1870, pp. 10-15

28. Khan, Sayyid Ahmad. *Essays on the Life of Mohammed*. 1870, Supplement on Jihad, pp. 22-28

29. Khan, Sayyid Ahmad. *Essays on the Life of Mohammed*. 1870, pp. 312-320

Sir Syed challenged the biased criteria used by Muir and Sprenger to select weak narrations over authentic ones.

Response: He demonstrated that the Islamic science of Asma-al-Rijal (Biographical evaluation) is a more rigorous historical tool than the selective skepticism used by 19th-century Western scholars

Conclusion:

This research concludes that the 19th-century Orientalist critique, led by William Muir, Aloys Sprenger, and Gustav Weil, was a systematic effort to rebrand the Seerah through the lens of colonial and materialist prejudices. By utilizing their professional backgrounds in law, medicine, and history, these scholars attempted to pathologize revelation and politicize the Prophetic mission. However, the intellectual intervention of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan through his work, *Essays on the Life of Mohammed* (Khutbat-e-Ahmadiya), proved to be a decisive turning point. Sir Syed successfully dismantled their “Canon of Criticism” by providing a rational, evidence-based defense of the Prophet’s (PBUH) personal life, military expeditions, and the divine nature of revelation.

The lasting impact of this scholarly conflict was the modernization of Seerah studies; it compelled Muslim researchers to adopt rigorous historical-critical methods, effectively shifting the discourse from emotional apology to sophisticated academic rebuttal. Ultimately, while the 19th-century Orientalists introduced skepticism, the intellectual resilience of Muslim scholars ensured that the Seerah emerged as a more academically fortified and globally respected field of study, proving its consistency against any reductionist or biased scrutiny