



The Impact of Seerah Literature on Contemporary Muslim Identity

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Abstract:

It examines the significant role played by Seerah literature in the formation of modern Muslim self-identity, highlighting the ways in which the Prophet Muhammad's biography and examples persist to be a determinant factor in the thought, conduct, and behaviour of most Muslims at the present time. Consequently, through focusing on particular works within the genre of Seerah, this research sheds light on their didactic function, which is to offer a paradigm for conduct that people and societies need to follow in the contemporary world. The study also looks at the way these texts are used as a reference point by Muslims who want to live a contemporary life that reflects the principles of the prophet. Moreover, the study focuses on the cultural and educational importance of Seerah literature, especially, its role in shaping the Islamic educational system and the culture in the Muslim societies. In this way, these texts promote a collective identity that goes beyond the geographical and cultural divisions and connects Muslims through the shared history and values. Last but not the least, the study also looks into the modern trends in the light of emerging issues and how the Seerah literature is adapting to such change, including the new styles of understanding the Seerah as well as the utilization of technological means in presenting it to the young generation. This versatility also guarantees the applicability of Seerah literature in the Muslim world for a long time in the future, besides the constant confirmation of the part it plays in forming a constructive and integrated Muslim identity in the modern world.

Keywords: *Seerah Literature, Muslim Identity, Changing World, Shared Values, Younger Generation*

Introduction

The genre of Seerah is the accounts of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and is highly valued in Islamic tradition as a means of guidance, education, and spiritual development for Muslims. This form of literature gives an account of the way of life, the doctrines as well as the modes of behavior of the Prophet (PBUH) and serves as a pattern of behavior within interpersonal relationships as well as religious observances. Seerah literature is not only valued as history, but as an integral part of the development of the ethical and moral character of Muslim societies in history (Lings 2006). Modern Muslims experience numerous problems of identity such as the influence of globalization, acculturation and the issues of the conflict between the traditional and the post-modern values. Nevertheless, Seerah literature continues to be an important instrument



for Muslims in their endeavour to define themselves in the context of globalisation (Ramadan 2007).

Muslim identity in the modern world is a rather diverse concept, which is influenced by both religion and culture, political views, and other aspects of people's lives. The globalised world of today has seen numerous changes in technology, population mobility, and cross-cultural interactions and so Muslims globally are faced with the dilemma of how to be religious and cultural Muslims in the midst of the global village (Esposito 2010). This has given a new twist to Seerah literature as it provides a permanent source of reference for Muslim individuals and communities in their daily endeavour to live a modern life but within the teaching of the Islamic faith. The Seerah literature, thus, offers the Muslim readers' narratives which go beyond history and contain ethical and spiritual values that assist Muslims in constructing their identity in light of the teachings of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) (Khan 2013).

This article argues that Seerah literature has a very crucial role in constructing and stabilizing modern Muslim identity. Thus, Seerah literature presents a system where the problems of the modern age are addressed with the help of the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), while at the same time the people remain rooted in the Islamic tradition. It offers a framework for making sense of the Islamic tradition in the modern world and locating Muslims in the contemporary context. It offers a story that illustrates the Muslim way of going on in the face of modern problems, and finding meaning in the experience; it is a story of hope (Safi 2009). In addition, Seerah literature promotes unity among the Muslims and creates identity that makes all the Muslims to feel that they belong to one nation irrespective of their nationality or colour. Thus, Seerah literature serves a double purpose, of transmitting the account of the life of the Prophet (PBUH) and of making sure that it remains meaningful for generations of Muslims to come (Wadud, 2006).

It is crucial to emphasize that Seerah literature occupies a rather important position in relation to modern Muslim identity. In Seerah literature, there are accounts of what the Prophet and his companions went through and it is from these that Muslims can draw strength when facing the ordeals of the modern world. This literature connects the past with the present in a way that enables Muslims to learn from the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as well as being a source of solutions to the problems that Muslims face in the contemporary world. The significance of Seerah literature is that it has given identity formation that is continuous and authentic to Muslims irrespective of their culture or society (Abou El Fadl, 2014). In more ways than one, Seerah literature remains a key element in determining the principles, creed, and conduct of modern Muslim subjects.

Seerah Literature: A Historical Overview

Seerah writing started right from the infancy of Islam as the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) started jotting down his speeches, deeds and attributes. Such early accounts laid down the foundation of what was to grow into a distinct literary category dealing with the biography of the Prophet. The first serious collection of Seerah was done by Ibn Ishaq in the



second century AH whose work was abridged and translated by Ibn Hisham. Abu Abd Allah Muhammad Ibn Ishaq's *Sirat Rasul Allah* is one of the most crucial texts on the Prophet's biography and has set the groundwork for later Seerah literature (Ibn Hisham 1997). The genre developed over time, and assumed different forms and features, and addressed not only purely historiographical concerns, but also the didactic and moral-spiritual lessons learnt from the life of the Prophet (Robinson 2003, p. 22).

Some of these Seerah works have had significant roles in the development of this branch of knowledge and have influenced the Islamic scholarship. In addition to Ibn Ishaq's work other authors like al-Waqidi, Ibn Sa'd and al-Tabari have added greatly in the development of the Seerah literature. The history of al-Waqidi's *Kitab al-Maghazi* concentrated on the military aspects of the Prophet which gave accurate descriptions of the wars and the generalship that shaped early Islamic history (Al-Waqidi 1966). Ibn Sa'd in his *Tabaqat al-Kubra* gave a detailed description of the life of the Prophet and his companions, and al-Tabari in his *Tarikh al-Rusul wal-Muluk* gave a more general historical setting into which the life of the Prophet could be placed (Al-Tabari 1989). Some of these works among the others have played crucial roles in the remembering of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and have acted as main source of reference to the later generations of scholars.

Seerah writings have been a significant part of early Islamic education and have been an essential facet in shaping the religious and moral character of Muslims. In classical Islamic education the subject known as 'The Prophet's Biography' was not only an academic discipline but also a way to introduce moral and religious values in the students. Seerah was also taught together with the Qur'an and Hadith making them the trinity of knowledge as far as the understanding of the Islamic faith was concerned (Berkey 2003). Classes in Seerah helped students understand the personality of the Prophet from angles of character, leadership, and concern with justice and mercy. This form of education was intended to instil in learners immense affection and respect for the Prophet, as well as to follow his actions and behaviors in their own lives (Graham 1993). This was done by passing the Seerah both orally and in writing so that the lessons learnt out of the life of the Prophet remained a part and parcel of the Muslim culture and practice in different generations.

The growth and conservation of Seerah literature over the ages point to the fact that it has been held in high esteem in the Islamic scholarship. Seerah literature over the years has developed from simple word of mouth passing to more complex written documentation by scholars, this has been in an effort to cater for the needs of the Muslim society while at the same time being centered on the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The incorporation of Seerah in the traditional Islamic education is evidence of its importance as history but also as a source of ethics and inspiration. Muslims in different countries have been able to directly relate with the Prophet in the Seerah and use his example in their modern lives in their practices and choices (Cook 2000). Hence, the Seerah literature has continued to be an important part of Islamic studies or science and an invaluable legacy of Muslims.



The Contemporary Muslim Landscape

Muslims in the modern society encounter numerous issues that affect their citizenship, religion, and spirituality. Globalization, political strife, social oppression and cultural integration pressures have all compounded the situation of Muslims all over the world. In most regions, Muslims face challenges like racism, prejudice, and exclusion that make them feel out of place and fight for their place in society (Esposito 2011). Furthermore, the political and social conflicts associated with Muslim nations affects Muslim people in other countries particularly in the western world hence a struggle to be proud and confident Muslims in a world that is changing at a very fast pace (Said 1997).

The problem of identity and belonging has emerged as one of the most significant concerns for the modern Muslim, especially for the young generation in the period of globalization between the secularized modernity and the religion of Islam. This quest for identity is most often accompanied by the conflict of being a member of a pluralistic society and at the same time being a Muslim. Young Muslims are questioning how they should live in the West, whether they should be following all the Islamic rules, and how they can maintain their culture (Ramadan 2004). In this context, the Seerah of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) plays an important source of guidance and inspiration for the Muslim community because it gives not only ethical model of the conduct but also the model of resilience and compassion which helps the Muslim to find the way of reconciling the religion with the modern life (Khan 2007).

Religion remains relevant and vibrant in the lives of the twentieth century Muslims in as much as it provides spiritual comfort, ethical guidance, and social integration. The forces of secularization and individualization do not seem to have severed the Muslims' ties with their religion, as they continue to rely on it inasmuch as their experiences are concerned. The religion of Islam with the teachings as contained in the Qur'an and Hadith and the Seerah provides Muslims with principles that are relevant in their day to day conduct in the social context. To many, especially the Seerah, literature is a source of ethical and practical guidelines for dealing with modern problems, in addition to historical information (Esposito 2011). At a time when Muslims are always struggling for their existence the continuity of the Prophet's life and his teachings provides Muslims with the much-needed religious solidarity.

The Role of Seerah in Modern Muslims' Perception

Seerah or the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is a rich source that provides the Muslim with direction and solutions to issues in the present world. For Muslims living in modern and post-modern societies where the challenges of living a Muslim life becomes more and more difficult due to secularisation and pluralism, Seerah presents a mode of ethical behaviour, tenacity and flexibility. The Seerah of the Prophet gives accounts of how to face challenges, relate with people of different colour, race and background as well as how to enforce justice and exhibit mercy. But in addition to fortifying faith in the individual, it builds continuity and history that allows Muslims to pick up from the past while dealing with the present problems (Lings 1983).



The Seerah is significant in the development of good moral values within the Muslim community. From the examples of the Prophet Muslims learn about the vices of dishonesty and pride, virtues of patience and compassion the understanding of which are crucial for an individual growth and society. The actions, decisions and interpersonal relations of the Prophet as recorded in the Seerah can be seen as a practical illustration of how an Islamic ethic can be realized in the real world. This moral compass is helpful for Muslim engaging in Islamic practice that desperately seek moral direction in the complex modern world. Through emulation of the Prophet's character, Muslims not only build up their own character but also enhance ethical texture of the society (Gülen 2000). The Seerah also provides a significant means through which 'how' a Muslim should view the world and also engage with it is prescribed.

It provides a worldview about life, stressing the relations between faith, work, and the society. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also had a balanced lifestyle where on one hand he was totally devoted to his God but on the other hand he was a leader of people and a statesman. This integrated worldview allows Muslims to see their Islamic duties as encompassing all areas of life, in tune with social justice, environmental and knowledge. The Seerah thus assists the Muslims in the process of achieving the correct attitude to life where on the one hand, one strives for spiritual health and, on the other hand, is an active member of the society (Ramadan 2007).

Furthermore, the Seerah is a means of social and political involvement informing Muslims how to positively engage in society. The authority, negotiating skills and endeavour to introduce fairness in the society of a multicultural community is relevant to Muslims in the contemporary world who want to be change agents in their communities. Whether it is concerning the social justice, the rights of oppressed groups in Muslim society, or the proper manners of governance the Seerah motivates the Muslims to be catalysts of change in their society. This aspect of the Seerah is most useful in the modern day fight for social justice and human rights where the Muslims use the life of the Prophet as an example in the fight for a better society for humanity, with justice for all (Esposito 2002).

Last but not the least; the Seerah has a lot of importance in the context of practicing and understanding the relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book. The Seerah is replete with instances of the Prophet's encounter with those of other faiths and the lessons that can be gleaned from the Seerah are respect, dialogue and non-aggression. In a time when religious conflicts and misconceptions are on the rise the Seerah offers the basis for approachable dialogue with people of other faiths. Through the articulation of tolerance, compassion, and justice that the Seerah embodies, the interfaith relationships have a chance of emerging. This aspect of the Seerah is very vital in uniting the community, reduce barriers and make the society a more receptive one (Sachedina 2001).

Seerah Literature and Contemporary Issues

In the contemporary era, Muslims find themselves grappling with the questions of modernity, the answer to which lies in the Seerah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). With the globalisation and modernisation processes in the social, cultural and technological dimension many Muslims face



the problem of losing religious orientation while integrating into the new world. The Seerah provides the necessary principles on how to live between the dualisms of continuity and change because it is the story of the Prophet's ability to manage the challenges of his age while staying Muslim. In a practical sense, Muslims learn about the ideal way of behaving in the light of today's problems by taking lessons from the Seerah and these are leadership, formation of a society, and the acquisition of knowledge in a world that is becoming more and more secular (Rahman 1980).

Hence in the light of the contemporary challenges that face Muslims, the Seerah provides the much-needed ethical framework through which the challenges of the modern world can be understand and addressed. In issues of social justice and gender relations, of stewardship over the environment, challenges of forgiveness, and many others, one sees the Seerah of the Prophet (PBUH) and sees the answers to these questions as being answered with wisdom, mercy, and balance. For example, his teachings on women and the poor give us a way to deal with present day social injustices. Furthermore, it is also worth to notice, that the Prophet also concern with the protection of environment, while the contemporary problem of sustainability and climate change. According to Safi, using the lessons from Seerah, one is able to come up with solutions to the modern day problems while at the same time, keeping it Islamic (Safi 2009).

Seerah plays a significant part in the fight against extremism and radicalism. At a time when extremism has taken the message of Islam to the extreme, the Seerah acts as a reminder of the Prophet's (PBUH) pursuit of justice, moderation and especially, peace. From analyzing the Seerah of the Prophet, one is left with the strong belief the Prophet was a true symbol of mercy, tolerance and respect to human beings. They are true counter-narratives to extremism and the violent response that his life and actions were to be interpreted by those who seek to harm others in the name of their own religion. Through improved understanding of the Seerah Muslim scholars and leaders can prepare their congregations for the knowledge that will enable them not to support radicalism but instead embrace a kinder, more tolerant brand of Islam (Safi 2017).

In addition, Seerah literature helps in the promotion of interfaith dialogue in the modern society. The Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) relations with other people of different faiths according to the Seerah offers a framework for Muslim people to attain positive and polite interactions with the non-Muslims. His negotiations and debates with Christian, Jewish and other people present a model of intercultural relations that is sorely lacking in the contemporary world. Thus, referring to these examples, Muslims can help to improve the relations between the representatives of different religions and cultures and contribute to the development of tolerance and peaceful relations between people of different cultures (Brown 2011).

The Future of Seerah Literature

The Need for Contemporary Seerah Interpretations:

With the ever-changing society, there is a growing desire for updated Seerah literature that is relevant to the present day society. The prophetic tradition is eternal but the life of the Prophet and the revelations he received must be understood in relation to the modern world. Academics and teachers are beginning to realise the need to revisit the Seerah in order to offer lessons on



contemporary matters such as relations between the genders, political leadership, human rights and Islamic relations with other religions which are more relevant than ever. In this respect, these interpretations can assist Muslims to live in the modern world by offering the Seerah in a relevant manner (Safi 2009).

The Role of Technology in Disseminating Seerah:

The use of technology has now made it easier to spread the Seerah literature to the global world as compared to the past. Through websites, applications of smart devices, and social networks, the Seerah became available to Muslims regardless of the territories of the world. Electronic media in form of electronic books, pod casts as well as video lectures offer different approaches through which people can learn and understand the Prophet's life. The change from text to technology is not just a question of availability but of engagement; it makes the Seerah more familiar to younger generations (Eickelman and Anderson 2003).

Seerah Education in Modern Islamic Curriculum:

Integrating the Seerah into the current Islamic curriculum is significant to shape the character and morality of the Muslim students. Thus, as many educational institutions try to combine traditional religious values and modern knowledge, the Seerah permits it. Incorporation of the life of prophet into various subjects such as History, literature, ethic, leadership and many other teaching subjects is the way through which the educators can educate the students about the religion of Islam. In addition to that, this approach assists the students in the enhancement of their knowledge about their faith and the culturing of the abilities of critical thinking, as well as the acquisition of the historic values embodied in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (Esposito, 2011).

Conclusion

This article has shed light on the role of "Seerat-ul-Nabi" in the Islamic studies, in its cultural and educational aspects, and on the dynamics of the Seerah literature due to the society's needs. It has stressed the call for contemporary Tafseer that takes into consideration the life of the Prophet Muhammad, the use of technology in presenting Seerah to the masses and the incorporation of Seerah into today's curricula. Altogether, these findings show the depth and continuity of the effect of Seerah literature on the past and present Islamic thought. The reason why Seerah literature remains central to the Muslim today is that it provides the followers with direction, individual and collective/proper conduct, and motivation. Nonetheless, the world is today a different place than it was 14 centuries ago, and yet these teachings from the Prophet Muhammad remain relevant to Muslims all over the world as a guideline of right and wrong conduct in all spheres of human endeavour and as a unifying force for the world's Muslims. With new problems as they come, the Seerah is a reliable guide, which makes it a corner piece of Islamic science and religion. If Seerah is to be looked at in terms of what it can contribute to the formation of a positive Muslim future, then the possibilities are enormous. Employing the principles of modern hermeneutics and using the resources of modern technology, Muslims can turn to the model of the Prophet's life to find solutions to today's problems. Such an approach not only helps to



maintain the numerous Seerah texts relevant but also help the future generations to construct a better and more tolerant society with reference to the Prophet Muhammad's Seerah.

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