

## Book Review

Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Images of the Prophet Muhammad in English Literature*, New York: Peter Lang, 2018. 168 pages

This essay serves as a personal reflection on the book, rather than a formal review, with the goal of extracting insights to navigate the current pressing issue of Islamophobia, which is a growing concern at the global level, including in India.

The book under discussion is authored by Abdur Raheem Kidwai, a former Professor of English at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), who currently serves as the Honorary Director at the K.A. Nizami Centre for Quranic Studies at the same university.

The book draws primarily from the works authored by scholars like Norman Daniel (1919-1992), Fredrick Quinn (b. 1935), Mathew Dimmock (b. 1975), Adnan Muhammad al-Wazzan (1951-2024), Abdul-Settar Abdul-Latif Mal-Allah, and others. Notably, the first three are Christian scholars, while the latter two are Arab Muslim scholars. Prof. Kidwai draws from these works, especially al-Wazzan's *Surat al-Islam fi'l-Adab al-Inklizi*, to achieve his goal of encouraging "the study of literary Orientalism, especially among the budding Muslim scholars of English studies." (p. xii).

The book is structured into three chapters, in addition to a preface and an index. The chapters are organized chronologically, examining the depiction of the Prophet Muhammad (*The Final Prophet of Allah, Peace be upon him, his Progeny and Companions*) in medieval Western literature, analyzing his portrayal in various literary works, and exploring contemporary shifts toward more nuanced and accurate depictions, highlighting emerging trends.

The first chapter is entitled "The Distorting Mirror: Representation of the Prophet Muhammad (*The Final Prophet of Allah, Peace be upon him, his Progeny and Companions*) in Medieval Writings in the West". The second chapter is titled "The Crescent in the West: Representation of Prophet Muhammad (*The Final Prophet of Allah, Peace be upon him, his Progeny and Companions*) in the Literary

Works,” while the third chapter is “Towards Fairness and Truth: Recent Trends in the Representation of Prophet Muhammad (*The Final Prophet of Allah, Peace be upon him, his Progeny and Companions*)”.

Amidst the rapid rise of Islamophobia globally and in India, situating the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) and his teachings becomes imperative to foster an atmosphere of peace and coexistence among diverse faith communities. Why focus on Prophet Muhammad (*The Final Prophet of Allah, Peace be upon him, his Progeny and Companions*)? The Prophet (Peace be upon Him) was sent as a “mercy to the worlds” (*Rahmantan Lil Ālamīn*), as categorically described by Allah Almighty in the Holy Qur'an: “We have sent you [O Prophet] only as a mercy for the whole world” (21: 107). His mercy extends beyond humanity to encompass all existence. The Muslims, being his Ummah, are entrusted with spreading the message of peace (Islam) to the world. If they fail to do so, then they must face dire consequences in their destiny.

Prof. Kidwai explores the origins of the negative, “hate-inspired” portrayal of the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) and Islam in the West, tracing its evolution toward a more positive representation. How this “hate-inspired” wave changed into a positive transformation is what I intend to reflect here. The tide of change requires knowledge and courage, which when combined, create a civilization built on truth, tolerance, beauty, and cooperation.

### **Knowledge**

While reading Images of the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) in English Literature, I came across a notable section that highlighted the work of the orientalist Henry Stubbe (1632–1676). Almost all Western writers before Stubbe had portrayed the Prophet in an extremely negative manner. However, Stubbe's work, penned in the 1670s, was not published until 1911, when it was brought to light by the efforts of some Indian and Turkish Muslims. Over a century later, in 2013, Columbia University Press republished it under the title *The Original and Progress of Mahometanism*.

In this book, Stubbe refers to the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) as “a great law-giver” and “the wisest legislator” (p. 27). Why? He, too, could have easily conformed to the prevailing negative sentiments of his time, depicting the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) as a “fraud” or “impostor” as many others did. But he didn't. Why?

The reason lies in his background, specifically his association with Oxford's Bodleian Library, one of the richest repositories of

manuscripts and historical texts. Furthermore, Stubbe's exposure to Islamic history was significantly enhanced by his engagement with three chronicles authored by Arab Christians, which provided him with a deeper and real understanding of the subject. As Professor Kidwai notes, "Stubbe's positive assessment of Islam and the Prophet may be explained partly on account of using as his source the Latin translations of the following three Christian Arab chroniclers: i) Jijis b. al-Amid al-Makini's *Tārīkh al-Muslimīn*, translated by the Dutch Orientalist, Thomas Erpenius, and published in 1625 as *Historia Saracenia*; ii) Sa'id b. al-Bitrig's *Kitāb al-Tārīkh al-Majmi*, translated by John Selden and published in 1642 as *Eutuchii Patriarche Alexandrini Annalium*, and iii) Abul-Faraj's *Tārīkh Mukhtaṣar al-Duwal*, translated by Edward Pococke and published in 1663 as *Historia Compendiosa Dynastiarum*." (p. 27)

### **Courage**

As noted above, Stubbe's book couldn't see the light until the beginning of the second decade (1911) of the twentieth century. But in the nineteenth century, a man made a courageous contribution to redefining the Prophetic image towards fairness and truthfulness. The man is none other than a British statesman, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). On May 8, 1840, he delivered a lecture entitled "The Hero as Prophet", and since then, a smooth wave of positive change has taken place that culminated in the original image of the Prophet in the subsequent years and decades. He boldly presents the Prophet (Peace be upon Him) as a Hero delving into the heart of the prophetic essence—sincerity. Professor Kidwai quotes him: "A silent great soul; he was one of those who cannot but be in earnest; whom Nature herself has appointed to be sincere. While others walk in formulas and hearsays, contented enough to dwell there, this man could not screen himself in formulas: he was alone with his own soul and the reality of things. The great mystery of existence glared-in upon him.... Such sincerity, as we named it, has in very truth something of divine. The word of such a man is voice direct from Nature's own heart." (p. 99)

Prof. Kidwai adds the beauty of many aspects of the Prophet's life while criticizing Carlyle with these words: "This lecture does not exhaustively cover the multi-faceted genius of the Prophet." (p. 105). Apparently, Carlyle was not lecturing to elucidate the details of the life and works of the Prophet. It was a lecture in a series of lectures, intended to provide the audience with an introduction or a glimpse into the life of the Prophet (Peace be upon Him). Nonetheless, here Prof. Kidwai adds some of the important aspects of the Prophet's life, such as his married

life, *jihād* with one's base self or ego, *hijrah* (migration), tolerance, coexistence, and others (p. 105).

Courage is a highly praised attribute across traditions. Had it not been for the courage shown by Carlye, it may have been too late for later scholars like Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003), Michael Hart (b. 1932), Karen Armstrong (b. 1944), etc., to contribute positively to Sirah studies.

### Civilizational Aspect

Beyond the aforementioned reflection, I observed that Prof. Kidwai explores a new dimension in the vast realm of Sirah studies, specifically the civilizational aspect of the Prophet's biography. This aspect, which remains largely unexplored, is particularly relevant amidst the clash of civilizations. The Prophet (Peace be upon Him), no doubt, has been studied from numerous perspectives, yet his role as the founder of a great and enduring civilization rooted in the Divine revelation has been overlooked. The Prophet (Peace be upon him) was not only sent as a religious guide to humanity or as a leader to the world, but he was sent for his universal role embedded in mercy, in "giving mankind a new sense of direction, a noble goal to achieve, a higher ideal to attain, and a life-long mission to work for worshipping and serving Allah. The new ideal which he gifted to mankind resulted eventually in the emergence of a new, glorious civilization and numerous contributions to all branches of learning. Prior to grasping the meaning of *tawhīd* (Oneness of God), articulated by him, man was lost in darkness. Mankind had degraded itself so much that it felt no qualms about bowing before such lifeless objects as the man-made idols of wood and stone. Likewise, they led lives, fearful of demons, devils, ghosts, and the ilk. Their mental confusion, cowardice, and indecisiveness were replaced by him with courage, self-reliance, and clarity of mind and goals. He thus removed the sense of inferiority from among the polytheistic people." (p. 106)

From the above discussion, it is evident that the fusion of knowledge and fearless courage sparks a beacon for creating a civilization driven by the light of knowledge and enlightenment, rather than the darkness of ignorance and prejudice. It is not only the Muslim community that must adhere to the teachings of Islam to foster a just society, but also fellow citizens of all faiths who must stand up against the "orchestrated" Islamophobia that threatens our country and our world. A country hurtles toward destruction when it is driven by hatred toward the "other", blinding the majority and creating a negative image of a religion that once led the country with not only the highest GDP, but also created a civilization that still captivates global attention.

In a world desperately seeking meaning, the Prophet's teachings and words of wisdom offer a way forward for humanity, for his mission embodied mercy, which is described in the Holy Qur'ān (21:107). Without embracing the Prophet's message, it's unlikely the world can improve amidst its current devastating challenges.

A soulful and heartfelt return to the Prophet's city—Madinah—is essential for bringing peace to the world. As Prof. Kidwai aptly notes, "What the world needs today for the lasting peace and happiness of Muslims, the West and entire humanity is to imbibe the life-giving and life-ennobling message of the Prophet which is anchored deep into the ideals of mutual respect and large-hearted tolerance for all, irrespective of faith, ethnic or other labels." (p. xiii)

I would like to conclude with the author's own words, which aptly encapsulate the essence of his book as well as the spirit of this reflective piece: "In emulating the Prophet's role model lies salvation." (p. 138)

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