Refracting Orientalism: Prophet Muhammad, Empathy and Biography Writing

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Abstract

Developments in the fields of narratology that investigate empathy in literary and non-literary sources have come in handy for the study of biographies of Prophet Muhammad written by Western scholars aiming at bridgebuilding rather than stoking cultural binarism. Suzanne Keen argues convincingly that authors of biography may aim at avoiding the bias towards characters from outgroups through, "Strategic empathizing" which, "works by calling upon familiarity; it attempts to transcend differences in order to deflect biased reactions to characters from outgroups. It can also rely on representations of universal human experiences to connect through shared feelings" (20). The empathetic tendency is clear in the biographies of Prophet Muhammad written by Hazelton and Armstrong which emphasize with the Prophet's common humanity as well as situate him as a historical figure deeply entangled in human affairs. Hazleton and Armstrong had in mind the orientalism and negativity that are associated with the Prophet's character and name.

Keywords: Prophet Muhammad, Empathy, Biography, Cross-cultural understanding, The ineffable

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The life of Prophet Muhammad has been told and retold hundreds of times during almost all the centuries since his death. The place of the Prophet in the cultural memory of Arabs and Muslims is beyond doubt an established one. Biographies were written long and short, in Arabic and in many other languages spanning the whole history of Muslims. Prophet Muhammad's memory is evoked in all aspects of life and as such is identity-forming for Muslims, a moment where everything started. Suzan Keen argues convincingly that authors of biography may aim at avoiding the bias towards characters from outgroups where, "Strategic empathizing works by calling upon familiarity; it attempts to transcend differences in order to deflect biased reactions to characters from outgroups. It can also rely on representations of universal human experiences to connect through shared feelings." (20). The empathetic tendency is clear in the biography written by Hazelton which emphasizes the human side of Muhammad, and his embodied feelings. Empathy is an effective way of using affect to draw the Prophet's character from a purely human perspective that emphasizes the Prophet's feelings during key episodes in his life as a man and as a Prophet.

I will use Keen's insights into empathy as an analytical tool to analyse the two biographies of Prophet Muhammad written by Lesley Hazleton and Karen Armstrong. The two writers present the Prophet in an empathetic manner using literary techniques such as focalization as well as humanization to try and alter the negativity of Orientalism that depicts the Prophet in monstrous terms. The reason why the Prophet's character is important for cross-cultural understanding has to do with its importance for Muslims as well as its being a locus classicus of both memory and identity which makes it an important space for cultural understanding. The motivations of the Prophet are basically discussed in the two biographies in an empathetic light. I am going to investigate the use of Strategic empathy in Lezely Hazelton's *The First Muslim* and *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* by Karen Armstrong.

In an article entitled "Life Writing and the Empathetic Circle" Suzanne Keen argues that:

> Sometimes motivated by the desire to effect social change or raise awareness, narrative artists employ representational techniques to move their readers. I think we can see those aims quite vividly reflected in works of life writing, and especially in testimonio. This is especially the case in nonfiction narratives that link up with the advancement of human rights. Aiming for popularity and robust sales may also inspire writers to try to craft empathy-evoking works. Strategic empathizing works by calling upon *familiarity; it attempts to transcend differences in order to deflect biased reactions to characters from outgroups. It can also rely on representations of universal human experiences to connect through shared feelings. (*Emphasis added 20)

That last sentence is key to analysing the biographies written by Hazleton and Armstrong. Prophet Muhammad is presented as a human being with all the desires and

needs that an average Westerner can easily identify with. So, biographies that often present Prophet Muhammad as an antichrist or a saint remove him from the realm of the average human. So, representing Muhammad in his averageness and visceral humanity practically removes him from both hagiographic biographies that give him a sacred quality and other biased biographies that demonize him. Therefore, his religious experience is secularized and presented without an argument about its veracity or duplicity. Thus, Prophet Muhammad is individualized as a character with set dimensions that make for a real human being not a distant figure of history. The focus is on Muhammad the average Meccan who was orphaned and whose fortunes in life changed when he worked for Khadijah, an Arab businesswoman who trusted him with leading her caravan to trade in Syria. Attracted by his honesty, Khadijah proposes to him, and they get married after that. A period of religious seclusion starts when Muhammad experiences a spiritual height and a connection with the divine according to traditional sources. Hazleton and Karen Armstrong show a strong awareness of the traditional sources and zoom in on those moments when Muhammad is most vulnerable as a human being. But first, as in any narrative genre, both present the character through physical description.

This centrality of the Prophet as both cultural memory and practical identity is at stake in the biographies written by Hazleton and Armstrong. The narrative empathy of *The First Muslim* (2013) by Lesley Hazleton and *Muhammad* by Karen Armstrong (2001) reconfigures Sirah literature walking a tightrope to represent a central moment in Muslim civilization. The reconfiguring of the cultural memory in many a Muslim country always involved some re-narrating or re-writing of his biography and his lifestyle and as such evoked his exemplariness and hence the hundreds of biographies re-telling his life story. Therefore, his biography can be considered as constitutive of Muslim practical and social identities and is embedded in the cultural memory of all Muslims. That should explain the moral injury Muslims feel when the Prophet's person is maligned in literature as in the case of Salmane Rushdie or the Danish cartoons as it is considered an outright attack on the collective cultural memory of Muslims and subsequently an attack on their identity as individuals having internalized or immanentized the Prophet's life narrative as an identity element. The Muslim imaginary is intrinsically entangled with the Prophet's life which serves as a fundamental source of cultural memory and practical wisdom. This makes empathetic narratives of his life a necessary step towards cross-cultural understanding.

In his book, *Islam and the West: the Making of an image*, Norman Daniel wonders at the fact that although centuries passed and technology made the world a small village, the West's medieval view of Islam is still thriving. Daniel appeals to Western scholars of Islam to approach Islam in an empathetic way. He encourages a perspective-taking approach where he requires them to look at Prophet Muhmmad as holy as Muslims view him through a 'suspension of disbelief' and subsequently share in the 'the state of mind of Muslims in many ages' (336). This is captured most accurately by Saba Mahmoud,

> The sense of moral injury that emanates from such a relationship between the ethical subject and the figure of exemplarity (such as Muhammad) is quite distinct from one that the notion of blasphemy encodes. The notion of moral injury I am describing no doubt entails a sense of violation, but this violation emanates not from the judgment that "the law" has been transgressed but

> from the perception that one's being, grounded as it is in a relationship of dependency with the Prophet, has been shaken. (Asad et al. 78)

The Prophet as John Tolan argues, "figures as the embodiment of Islam, alternatively provoking fear, loathing, fascination, or admiration, but rarely indifference" (2). Therefore, countless biographies have been written to praise the Prophet or damn him. No historical figure has been accorded that endless focus of interest. The life story of the Prophet interests those who seek the historical Muhammad for edification or damnation. Biography writing has become a battleground for cultural bridge-building which was reeling off the controversy surrounding Salman Rushie's satirical and highly offensive book, which parodies the life of Prophet Muhammad. *The Satanic Verses* betrayed a high insensitivity to the moral injury that it caused Muslims who are emotionally connected to Prophet Muhammad's exemplary life or Sunna (conduct of life). Thus, there is a difference between knowledge that stands for a better understanding and knowledge that further aggravates an already maligned character in Western culture. In his preface to his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said explained that,

> … there is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge—if that is what it is—that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency and outright war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external dominion" (xiv).

In the middle of so much controversy regarding the Prophet's character and its representation in Western contexts, empathy in biographical writing is employed to give narrative its human and narratable edge and is the strategy followed by both Lesley Hazleton and Karen Armstrong evenly. Derek Matravers argues that, "Indeed, one reason to embark on writing a biography (or a history, for that matter) is the thought that there are generalizable truths about the human condition to convey. To write a book that uses the story of a life as an exemplar of such a generalizable truth would be to write a book that has that as a constitutive theme" (165). This is handy for the study of biographies of Prophet Muhammad written by Western scholars aiming at bridgebuilding rather than stoking cultural stereotypes.

Stereotypes undermine the humanity of characters and cultures. Therefore, it is in that specific all too human response to the doubt created by the 'strange' encounter that spells Prophet Muhammad's humanity in modern consciousness. He is a human '*bashar*'[1] and 'a man from among men' says the Qur'an. The Qur'an represents him as totally human. No divinity is attributed to him. Authorial empathy here works against an intrenched misrepresentation of Prophet Muhammad as an imposter and an antichrist starting from medieval times up to our modern times. Although Muslims might not agree with all of Hazleton's characterizations of Prophet Muhammad, her work is an important step in our modern intolerant times dominated by the discourse of the powerful.

The quest for Muhammad the human is at the heart of this battle. The humanizing tendency is clear in the biography written by Hazelton and Armstrong where the Prophet is portrayed as a young man who was born in modest circumstances and who tries hard to give to his people a new hope and tries to push social change to a certain direction. The biography of the Prophet is directed towards

secular as well as religious audiences. Strategic empathizing used by both biographers is designed to mitigate the secular bias against religious figures especially the character of Prophet Muhammad. A strain of Orientalism is keen on largely depicting Prophet Muhammad as heretical, anti-Christ and a preacher of a violent dogmatic religion. In his book, *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion* Robert Spencer reaches the conclusion that, "The words and deeds of Muhammad have been moving Muslims to commit acts of violence for fourteen hundred years now. They are not going to disappear in our lifetimes; nor can they be negotiated away," and advices Western policy makers to, "recognize their character and move to limit their influence within their countries and around the world, calling upon Muslims who call themselves moderate to renounce definitively these elements of Islam, and formulate their policies bearing in mind that most Muslims will continue to regard Muhammad as "an excellent example of conduct" (149).

The biographical urge which characterizes both Hazleton and Armstrong is geared towards countering polemical biographies that attack Islam through disqualifying the Prophet's character. These biographies tend to take an external approach to the Prophet's life which shows little sympathy for the Prophet and are often skewed in their approach by often concentrating on character 'failures' that are only failures through a Western cultural perspective. Dismissing Arab sources as mere 'salvation history' makes it next to impossible to write a biography of Prophet Muhammad as argues Gregor Schoeler (2010). So, there is a negation of both the Prophet's historicity and humanity that runs through narratives of the Prophet. Hence, the importance of a genre of contemporary biographies of the Prophet that approach him historically as well as empathetically. In her biography of Prophet Muhammad, Lesley Hazelton makes her purpose and method clear at the start: Empathy and imagination are her tools in writing the biography. She explains that "the great British philosopher and historian R. G. Collingwood maintained in *The Idea of Histor*y that to write well about a historical figure, you need both empathy and imagination" (qtd in Hazleton 8). Thus, an empathetic writing\ reading, is an attempt at unburdening Prophet Muhammad from the stereotyping that accrued over the centuries. "A truly external biography, one that successfully limited itself to depicting objectively observed actions and documented attitudes, would not enter into a discussion of motivation" (14). Drawing attention to the homily details of the Prophet's life is an empathetic strategy:

> There was a hint, perhaps, in his clothing. By now he could certainly have afforded the elaborate embroidered silks of the wealthy, but his clothing was low-key. His sandals were worn, the leather thongs sun-bleached paler than his skin. His homespun robe would be almost threadbare if it hadn't been so carefully patched, and it was hardly enough to shield him against the night-time cold of the high desert. Yet something about the way he stood on the mountainside made the cold irrelevant. Tilted slightly forward as though leaning into the wind, his stance seemed that of someone who existed at an angle to the earth. (Hazleton 4)

Hazleton starts off by giving Muhammad a human shape through description so the readers can move from a vague name with many negative associations to a human living in a city and inhabiting the normal world of an average person. She uses the second person narrative point of view to

get the reader involved by addressing him/her directly to make him share in the emotionally invested description:

> On the surface, you might conclude that he was an average Meccan. At forty years old, the son of a man he had never seen, he had made a far better life for himself than had ever seemed possible. The child born an outsider within his own society had finally won acceptance and carved out a good life despite the odds against him. He was comfortably off, a happily married business agent with the respect of his peers. (Hazleton 3-4)

In the passage, Prophet Muhammad's humanness and averageness is emphasized by portraying him as a man seeking a foothold in his society against all the odds that accompany orphans. In the following quote, she invites the reader to share her ruminations about Prophet Muhammad. The reader is made to identify with an outsider to his society who starts from scratch. The American dream is thrust back more than a thousand years back to the Arabian deserts of pre-Islamic society. So, if Muhammad was framed in the most unflattering images, words and ideas, the biographies of both Hazleton and Armstrong counter-frame the Prophet in the most human terms. The biography writing of Prophet Muhammad thematizes universal themes such as doubt, fear and adversity which raise in precise terms the humanity of the Prophet who had to deal with all the human fears and doubts that define the human condition. The re-thematization of Prophet Muhammad in a counter discourse casts him as an ordinary man who comes without planning into an experience that would not only change his life but the whole of world history. Thus, Muhammad is presented from the inside out in a psycho narrative that connects all the human feelings he went through with all the outward actions that will later define his mission.

In her book *Narrative Form*, Keen explains that, "Psycho- narration consists of the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness. Often employed in an authorial narrative situation, psycho-narration allows the narrator to generalize about what a character has thought about for a long time, as well as reporting in the narrator's language on the gist of characters' thoughts and feelings" (61). Psycho-narration involves the direct emotional participation of the reader to empathize by directly asking the reader to be a close observer of the subject of biographical writing. Muhammad's loneliness and precariousness are brought in observing his conscious mind about his place in the world, imperative verbs involve the reader in a close-up narrative of identification and hence empathy, "Look closer and you might detect the shadow of loneliness in the corners of his eyes, something lingering there of the outsider he had once been, as though he were haunted by the awareness that at any moment everything he'd worked so long and hard for could be taken away" (Hazleton 4).

Muhammad is portrayed as an outsider to his society and an outlier; this way of looking at him brings him closer to an Anglo-American culture of pioneers. America is enamoured of success stories by outsiders, the authorial empathy strategy is used here to frame Muhammad within the American dream. This is an attempt to present Muhammad's life as a success story unencumbered by theological baggage. However, after all it is an attempt by a non-Muslim to understand the Prophet and is addressed to a largely secular and non-Muslim audience. Despite its limitations, the work of Hazleton is noteworthy for its quest for Muhammad the human and individual. It does not differ very much from the Qur'anic description of the Prophet as human not

divine. Physical appearance is used to the maximum to grasp him as embodied rather than a divine and inaccessible entity. Physical description of his eyes and mouth creates a vividness and a nearness in his character. It betrays his humanness, "You might see a hint of that same mix of vulnerability and resoluteness in his mouth, the full lips slightly parted as he whispered into the darkness" (Hazleton 4).

The soul-tearing encounter is elaborated, and the authorial empathy is at work. It leads us into the very soul of Muhammad and the crushing encounter with the divine. The reader is allowed through the narrative voice of the third person to peek into his mind. The thoughts that were jostling in his mind about that experience which almost drove him to put an end to all experience:

> Whatever happened up there on Mount Hira, the sheer humanness of Muhammad's reaction may be the strongest argument for its historical reality. Whether you think the words he heard came from inside himself or from outside, it is clear that Muhammad experienced them, and with a force that would shatter his sense of himself and his world. Terror was the sole sane response. Terror and denial. And if this reaction strikes us now as unexpected even shockingly so, that is only a reflection of how badly we have been misled by the stereotyped image of ecstatic mystical bliss. (Hazleton 6)

The first responses from the Prophet were as affable as those he encountered. His physical reaction was that of an extreme feeling of cold in the heat of Mecca. The affable so heavy and inexpressible is manifested physically. It is portrayed along almost the same lines of traditional *Sira* [2]where the whole event shows the Prophet not as "holy" or a larger-than-life figure who takes the entire thing in his stride. He is portrayed as wholly ordinary and in total confusion. This has tempted the two authors to defend the authenticity of the Prophet's feelings and his ordeal on Hira's Mount. That dramatic encounter with the divine is however mitigated by what happens next. Returning home, the Prophet regains some sense of normality. Talking to his wife about what he had seen, and her assuring statements succeed in calming him down. The ineffable forces of the divine find a match in the assuring presence of the common and homely.

The Unhomely versus the Domestic

The encounter with the divine in both biographies is drawn in empathetic tones, not theological arguments. Muhammad is a normal human nearly crushed by an uncanny power. This encourages the reader to identify with the terror Muhammad felt. His distress is described in an almost poetic style. The agony and the heaviness of Muhammad's feelings as he encounters the divine are described in terms of Kierkegaardian doubt and leap of faith. He was trembling in fear as befits mortals:

> "I have been in fear for my life," was the first thing he said. "I think I must have gone mad." Trembling, shuddering almost convulsively, he begged Khadija to hold him and hide him under her shawl. "Cover me, cover me," he pleaded, his head in her lap like a small child seeking shelter from the terrors of the night. And that terror alone was enough to convince her that what her husband had experienced was real. (Hazleton 83)

The readers are invited to enter Muhammad's private world as he relates what happened to him to his wife hardly believing himself. The terrors Muhammad experienced are balanced by a homely image of a man seeking

assurance and support from his wife through venting his fears and doubts. The uncanniness of the divine encounter that shakes Muhammad to the foundation is balanced by the unstinted support of his wife Khadija. A doubting Muhammad is very near the sensibilities of a modern secular world where scepticism is valorised to reach the truth. Hazleton argues for the authenticity of Muhammad's feelings by contrasting him this time with the Christian encounter with the divine which is often described in terms of self-assurance and divinity. The religious figures and saints of Christianity are sealed off from the raw emotions experienced by Muhammad through the often-hagiographic descriptions that set them off from the rest of humanity. However, the parallels between Prophet Muhammad and the Biblical Abraham regarding trembling in fear cannot be ignored. The authenticity of the Prophet's feelings of fear and terror are reminiscent of Kierkegaard's descriptions of the feelings of Abraham when he was ordered to sacrifice Issac on Mount Moriah according to the traditional Christian storyline. The terror of the divine command that nearly crushed Muhammad on Mount Hira is not dissimilar to Abraham's terror at the divine command: "He said, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you" (Genesis 22:2). When pressed hard by the Angel that required him 'to read' Muhammad's response was "I cannot read". The overwhelming divine presence was characterised by the Angel Jibreel appearing everywhere in the sky. Like Abraham, Muhammad was as eaten up by doubt and terror:

> So the man who fled down Mount Hira trembled not with joy but with a stark, primordial fear. He was overwhelmed not with conviction, but by doubt. He was sure of only one thing: whatever this was, it was not meant to happen to him. Not to a middle-aged man who had hoped perhaps at most for a simple moment of grace instead of this vast blinding weight of revelation. If he no longer feared for his life, he certainly feared for his sanity, painfully aware that too many nights in solitary meditation might have driven him over the edge. (Hazleton 6)

According to the most cited and trusted book of traditions of the Prophet,

> "The Prophet added, "The angel caught me (forcefully) and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read and I replied, 'I do not know how to read.' Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read but again I replied, 'I do not know how to read (or what shall I read)?' Thereupon he caught me for the third time and pressed me, and then released me and said, 'Read in the name of your Lord, who has created (all that exists) has created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous." (96.1, 96.2, 96.3) Then Allah's Apostle returned with the Inspiration and with his heart beating severely. Then he went to Khadija bint Khuwailid and said, "Cover me! Cover me!" They covered him till his fear was over and after that he told her everything that had happened and said, "I fear that something may happen to me." (*Sahih Al-Bukhari, Volume 1, Book 1, Number 3:*)

The narrator describes Muhammad's feelings in Kierkegaardian terms that can hardly be missed. Here is how Kierkegaard

describes Abraham's experience on Mount Moriah, "Then Abraham would not be forgotten, nor would Mount Moriah. Then it would not be mentioned in the way Ararat, where the ark landed, is mentioned, but it would be called a place of terror, for it was here that Abraham doubted." (Kierkegaard 22). Both Abraham and Muhammad are tested by God and both doubt. Doubt makes them human and approachable and paradigmatic of the human crisis of faith and helplessness coupled by awe in the face of the ineffable. Hazleton elaborates, that "Muhammad was left cowering on the ground, depleted. Covered in sweat yet shivering, he was inhabited by those words that were his and yet not his, the words he repeated out loud into thin air, pure air of the mountain, into the emptiness and darkness. (82). This focalization of the lonely man and the physical symptoms in his encounter with the divine was set to draw the reader's attention to his pure humanity that suffers as he moves away from normality to a world that is closed to human understanding: an encounter that shakes his self-composure. The encounter here is generalized as an example of a man set in opposition to the ineffable, unhomely and transcendent. The verbs used in the description of the Prophet's reaction are usually ones that convey his loss of the ability to stand, and they emphasize the weight of the revelation as if it was not only spiritual but physical too. So, the Prophet, crawled, cowered, shook, flung himself.

This same scene is redrawn by Karen Armstrong in a similar manner that focalizes the paralysing shock of Muhammad's first meeting on mount Hira: "Crawling on his hands and knees, the whole upper part of his body shaking convulsively, Muhammad flung himself on her lap. 'Cover me! Cover me!' he cried begging her to shield him from this terrifying presence." (Armstrong, 84). The Prophet's pleas for help bring his humanity in for an empathetic response. Muhammad is not the licentious debauched character propagated by Orientalism and taken up by authors like Salman Rushdie; on the contrary he is a man who struggles to come to terms with the revelation that suddenly thrust him into a fit of fear and consternation.

Both biographies therefore circumvent orientalism and try to overcome its fictions that were disseminated by *The Satanic Verses* written by Rushdie. In a sense, by bringing Muhammad into the empathetic generic humanity, Armstrong and Hazleton hope to bring dignity and respectability not only to him but to a whole culture and civilization for whom the Prophet is a centralizing figure, an identity figure to whom ends the hopes of Muslims culturally and religiously.

Between Sanity and Madness

The same empathetic portrayal of that key episode in the Prophet's life is narrated in captivating terms that evoke a human at the borderline between sanity and madness where the mystical and ordinary interlace. The traditional narrative of revelation depicts Prophet Muhammad's feelings of fear as he encountered the ineffable. This has been capitalized on by Hazleton and Armstrong as they sought to delineate the human side of the Prophet. Hazleton and Armstrong read the classical Arabic biographies of the Prophet and drew heavily on those sources thus avoiding the tilted narratives of Western sources and in a sense were able to overcome the orientalist urge to see Islam from the outside, not the inside as put through by Daniel's comments.

Clearly, Karen Armstrong integrates Prophet Muhammad in the tradition of the Old Testament Prophets by discussing many of his experiences in the light of scripture stories. In her narrative, Muhammad is recalled as one of the Prophets who share in the tradition of Biblical Prophets.

Armstrong's background as a Catholic nun assists her much in portraying the Prophet in the light of the Prophets of the Old Testament. The spiritual journeys of Old Testament Prophets are used as a bridge experience that puts Prophet Muhammad's spiritual experience in the terms of the familiar. Armstrong tries to make that experience even more accessible to a modern secular reader. This authorial intervention is meant to create sympathy for the Prophet's experience in Hira Cave where he came into the presence of the ultimate. It is an exercise in cultural bridge-building through the technique of ambassadorial strategic empathy as explained by Suzan Keen (487). Armstrong is an ambassador of Islam to her own culture. She sees the biography of Prophet Muhammad as a possible way to understand Islam and bridge the gap between two cultures at loggerheads with each other. She resorts to the self-same episode of Muhammad's encounter with the divine which by now becomes not just a turning point in the life of Prophet Muhammad but a standard proof of his humanity:

> Muhammad came to himself in a state of terror and revulsion. The idea that he had, against his will, probably become a *jinn*-possessed *kahin* filled him with such despair says the historian Tabari that he no longer wanted to go on living. Rushing from the cave, he began to climb to the summit of the mountain to fling himself to his death. (83)

The scene on Mount Hira is portrayed as a near traumatizing experience that left Prophet Muhammad exhausted physically and mentally unable to come to terms with what he had seen and heard. The border between the mundane and the divine was blurred which shattered his sense of normality and sanity. Prophet Muhammad is seen and represented as one in a long line of Prophets who have been through that mystical yet harrowing experience. The transportation from the normal and explainable to the ineffable and bewildering:

> …. the experience was terrible because it had taken each prophet into an uncharted realm far from the consolations of normality where everything was a profound shock but it was also fascinating experience an irresistible attraction because it was somehow a reminder of something already known intricately bound up with the deepest self but unlike Isaiah and Jeremiah Muhammad had none of the consolations of an established religion to support him and help him to interpret his experience. (84)

The revelation to Prophet Muhammad is described in Kafkaesque comparisons:

> Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony," you will think instantly of the prisoner suffering the words of his penitence being carved letter by letter into his flesh. Imagine, then, the unimaginable: the agonizing pain of a sharp blade carving deep inside you as you lie beneath it, conscious but unable even to struggle against it. (Hazleton 82)

The divine words given to Muhammad are described in Kafkaesque terms where the words of the revelation were deeply engraved on his inner psyche. Still, their ineffability defied utterance rendering the Prophet speechless, and language fails to communicate not because of lack of words but because of the newness of the experience and its ineffability.

> Then Allah's Messenger returned with the Revelation and with his heart beating severely. Then he went to Khadija bint Khuwailid and said, "Cover me! Cover me!" They covered

> him till his fear was over and after that he told Khadija everything that had happened (and said), "I fear that something may happen to me." Khadija replied, "Never! By Allah, Allah will never disgrace you. You keep good relations with your kith and kin, help the poor and the destitute, serve your guests generously and assist the deserving calamity-afflicted ones." Khadija, then accompanied him to her cousin Waraqa bin Naufal bin Asad bin 'Abdul 'Uzza, who, during the Period of Ignorance became a Christian and used to write the writing with Hebrew letters. He would write from the Gospel in Hebrew as much as Allah wished him to write. He was an old man and had lost his eyesight. Khadija said to Waraqa, "Listen to (the story of) your nephew, O my cousin!" Waraqa asked, " O my nephew! What have you seen?" (Al-Bukhari 49)

The ineffability of the scene is contrasted to the homely scene when Prophet Muhammad hurries home all exhausted by the trial on Mount Hira which was *unheimlich* German for "not from home". The uncanny encounter and its ineffability are resolved through the homely scene when Khadijah intervenes to support the Prophet by arguing that nothing evil can happen to him as he is known for his good deeds. There is a movement from the ineffable to the homely with Muhammad returning home shaken and exhausted. This scene of doubt and encounter with the ineffable is juxtaposed, following the traditional Sira narrative, with a homely scene where the Prophet hurries back to his wife Khadijah whose assurances bring the Prophet some peace regarding what he has seen. The feminine is confirmed in Islam. The Prophet's recourse to his wife is again a statement against the accusations of misogyny levelled at Islam and the Prophet. Muhammad is after all a human who flings himself at Khadija exhausted and terrified.

Regardless of the accuracy of every detail, Prophet Muhammad emerges from both biographies exonerated from the attributions of Orientalism. Empathetic writing overcame orientalism and its devil theory of Islam. To conclude, empathetic biography writing speaks to a world full of violence and wars. Hazleton and Armstrong are sensitive to the audience in their presentation of Prophet Muhammad. Theirs are neither hagiography nor a polemic aimed at scoring points. Such writings navigate the cultural divides of our modern world aiming at creating a middle ground employing strategic ambassadorial empathetic narratives in the hope of convincing a general reader to empathize with a longtime 'enemy' in the narratives of Western writings. Muhammad comes out in both biographies as a figure who is all too human to quote Nietzsche. The main scenes focused on here, are the Prophet's encounter with the angel and the home scene that follows. Empathy as a narrative technique aims at drawing attention to an outgroup that is culturally marginalized through the association of Prophet Muhammad with all that the West considers dark and immoral. The empathetic re-writing of the classical Sira of Prophet Muhammad to a Western audience that is not only skeptical of the Prophet as relevant to modern times but also is skeptical of the religious in general was taken up by both authors who deftly returned Muhammad to the fold of humanity by portraying him as human for a Western culture that despite its enlightenment and reason still views Islam and Muslims and the Prophet through the tinted glass of Orientalist tropes.

Notes

[1] See the Qur'anic characterization of Prophet Muhammad as human not divine: Say (unto them O Muhammad): I am only a mortal like you. It is inspired in me that your Allah is One Allah, therefor take the straight path unto Him and seek forgiveness of Him. And woe unto the idolaters, The Qura'n (41:6) Translation by Pickthall (2005)

[2] For more extensive understanding of the sources used by the two authors in their biographies check the classical biographies of Prophet Muhammad such as Sirat Ibn Hisham (d. 833), a redaction of Ibn Ishaq's (704-768), Sirah which survives only in Ibn Hisham's redaction; almost all universal histories written by Muslim scholars contain a section on revelation or *Wahyy*. More examples include The History of Tabari by Ibn Jarir Al-Tabari (d. 932) Sirat Ibn Kathir, Maghazi of Waqidi (c. 747- 823).

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