Orientalist Approach to Hadith literature and Muslim Critique: A Study of Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi'

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Abstract

Hadith literature is what constitutes the sayings, acts and tacit approval of the Prophet(SAW). Origin of Hadith literature in its rudimentary form can be traced back from the time of the Prophet. It was developed during the subsequent generations by Hadith scholars. Most of the Companions used to record Hadiths under the supervision of Prophet. Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi has noted 50 collections of the Companions. During the time of the Prophet it was almost impossible to fabricate Hadiths. But Hadiths were fabricated as the civil strife occurred between 'Ali and Mu'awiyyah. Hadith science was developed to eliminate that fabricated stuff from the Hadith literature from time to time. From the 19th century, Orientalists began to study Hadith literature mostly in order to pose arguments against it, leading to the response from the Muslim Scholars, one amongst them is Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi, who explicitly responded to the arguments of prominent Orientalists like Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph Schacht etc.

This paper is a humble effort to highlight the response of Muslim Scholars to Orientalist approach regarding Hadith literature. It will however focus specifically on the contribution of Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi.

Keywords: Mustafa 'Azmi, Response, Orientalist, Hadith, literature.

Introduction

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This paper is a humble effort to highlight the response of Muslim scholars to Orientalist approach regarding Hadith literature. It will however focus specifically on the contribution of Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi. It will analyze the arguments of Orientalist scholars on Hadith literature focusing on Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht and the response of Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi to their arguments.

Orientalist views and works on Hadith literature in the 19th and 20th century

During the 17th century Orientalists began to take interest in Hadith literature. Barthelemy d'Herbelot (1625-95) was the first who presented some critical views about Hadith literature; he even portrays Prophet as a 'false Prophet'. His main aim in doing so was to disregard the value of Hadith literature. Ernest Renan (1823-92) was the second Orientalist to put forward his observations regarding Hadith literature. He tried to disregard the value of Hadith literature by saying that the Hadith deserves less attention than Qur'an.[i]

Beginning of scholarly Orientalist discourse on Hadith literature

Early critical remarks challenging the authenticity of Hadith literature were put forward by the 19th century Orientalist historians, Gustav Weil (1808-89) and Aloys Sprenger (1813-56).[ii] William Muir after going through Islamic sources considered Hadith alongside Qur'an, the chief material for the biography of Prophet. He also sought to identify reliable traditions to be used for this purpose.[iii]

Another group of Orientalists during 1870's, which were specialists in Islamic law became aware of position of Hadith in Islam and sought to answer the question related to Islamic law and its development. According to Harald Motzki, the first person in the 19th century to realize the strong relation between Hadith and Islamic law was a German Orientalist, Edward Sachau (1845-1930), he recognized this relationship alongside the Qur'an, in forming the basis from where the Shari'ah derives its values and ordinances.[iv]

Until 1890, Hadith literature was not taken as an independent discipline but it was taken alongside with Sirah and Islamic legal system. Since 1890's Orientalist scholars considered it entirely different discipline of Islam. During the period of 1890 to 1950 major studies were published that led to the foundation of modern Orientalist attitude towards Hadith. This new attitude began with the publication of *Muslim Studies* of Ignaz Goldziher and it ended with the publication of *The origins of Muhammadan jurisprudence* of Joseph Schacht in 1950.

Outline of the views of Goldziher

In the preface, he stated that the bulk of Hadiths were in fact the result of the social and religious growth, that occurred in the early Muslim community.[v] He suggests from this assumption that a large scale fabrication of Hadith took place in the early period.

The most important results and discussions put forward by Goldziher are as follows:

1. The essence of the Sunnah was primarily "the ancient customs of patriarchal times" of early Islam which existed in Madina, the stronghold of the Sunnah, where the pious circles helped theoretically and practically in its rise and growth so that it prevailed beyond the borders of their city.[vi]

2. What the Companions handed on to those who came after the Prophet's death was the basic material of Hadith. The Companions added to this basic material some salutary sayings which were considered legitimate to be ascribed to the Prophet. The core material of traditions was largely extended during the succeeding generations.[vii]

3. Hadith should be regarded as a mirror reflecting the changes and developments of different aspects of the Muslim society during the formative period of Islam not " the infancy of Islam."[viii]

4. It is not accurate to presume that the first systematic compilation of Hadith started with Muhammad b. Shihab al-Zuhri by the instruction of 'Umar-II.[ix]

5. It was during the period of the theocratic Abbasid Caliphate that Hadith began in a large scale proliferation which gave way to the organization of a systematic arrangement of Hadith starting with the Muwatta of Malik b. Anas. The invention of Hadith was encouraged by the Abbasid government in order to fill the gap that Qur'an left as being insufficient for their project of developing the Shari'ah as a base for public life. This necessitated the existence of Hadith literature and led to the recognition of the Sunnah as the fundamental source of Islamic law.[x]

6. Muslim Hadith criticism focused more on *Isnad* and paid little attention to the study of *matn* that is the reason for the existence of great deal of contradictions among the traditions.[xi]

7. The main factors that contributed to the emergence of the fabrication of Hadiths were the personal disputes and factional rivalries between groups of Muslim scholars. Also, it was due to a tussle between pious scholars and secular Umayyad rulers, animosity between Umayyads and Abbasids,

and the tension between rationalists and traditionists that forced each group to support their claims and attitudes by inventing Hadiths for their own interests.[xii]

It is clear from the above points that he systematically questioned the historicity and authenticity of the entire contents of Hadith. He builds his study on analyzing and examining the contents of Hadith texts and ignores to consider the Isnad as a useful tool in determining the dating or the reliability of Hadith. Methodology adopted by Goldziher has invited critical responses from various specialists of this field. Johann Fueck considers methods used by Goldziher as unlimited skepticism which opned flood gates to caprice.[xiii] Nabia Abbott argues against Goldziher and states that Hadith passed through the early generations of Muslims in written form alongside the oral form of Hadith. She argues that Hadith collections contain a large amount of authentic traditions.[xiv]

Work and views of Joseph Schacht

The work of Goldziher paved way to many specialized writings on Hadith literature like that of Snouck Hurgronje (1857-1936), Henri Lammens (1862-1937) and David Samuel Margoliouth (1858-1940) but most of these writings borrowed the ideas from Goldziher without making new premises that could take the arguments to a higher level of thought.

To fulfill the need to discover a reliable method of positive Hadith criticism, emerged Joseph Schacht with his influential work entitled *The Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. It carries four major themes: The development of legal theory in early Islam, The growth of legal Hadiths, The transmission of legal doctrine in the Umayyad time conflicts within legal schools and finally the development of technical legal thought.

He challenged the validity of the classical notion that Islamic jurisprudence was established on four main elements: the Qur'an, Hadith, Ijma' and Qiyas and held that this traditional thought was a secondary stage product developed during transmission of the legal system which began at the end of the first century. As a result, the Qur'an and Hadith were not believed to be the chief sources of Shari'ah until the middle of the second century.

According to his thesis, the legal Hadiths found in the six canonical collections emanated after the time of the Prophet by more than 100 years. So, during this time legislative rules were derived from the local customs enhanced by the Umayyad administrative regulations and popular practices based largely on personal reasoning which was later embodied by the jurists into traditions from the Companions and Successors to interpret them into their own living tradition and allow them to be superseded by it.[xv] Traditionists circulated some Prophetic traditions before 150 A.H in order to counter the arguments of rationalists; they did to strengthen their arguments.[xvi] Schacht concludes that traditions from the Companions and Successors are earlier than those from the Prophet[xvii] and most of the legal traditions originated during and after the time of Al-Shafi'i until a large proportion of them settled in the classic collections.[xviii] This gives an idea of

introduction of Isnad to any Hadith, Successors opinions being the starting point for the growth of legal Hadiths in its conventional form.[xix] Schacht followed Goldziher in the argument that authoritative nature of Hadith evolved with the theory of Al-Shafi'i who introduced the new concept of Sunnah altogether different from the earlier concept of living tradition. Al-Shafi'i regarded Hadith synonymous with Sunnah.

Schacht attempted to provide the approximate date to when the Hadiths were fabricated. He applied the technique of comparing the sources which discuss the same legal matter and concluded by declaring the later source as fabricated after the earlier source.[xx] Schacht used Isnad as an important tool for dating the Hadiths. He argued that there existed in every Isnad a common link who appeared somewhere in the middle of each Isnad. That common link according to Schacht is the fabricator of the Hadith.[xxi] In this way Schacht became the first Orientalist to divide the Isnad into two parts, genuine and invented.

Schacht's views can be summarized as follows:

1. Law has nothing to do with the religion that means Prophet has no legal role.
2. Schools of law emerged in the 2nd century till then there was no concept of law in Islamic sources and concept of Sunnah was treated as the 'living tradition' that is the ideal practice of the community expressed in accepted doctrine of school of law which was devoid of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet.
3. Opposition parties prevalent in that era used sayings of the Prophet as a tool to establish the authority of their school of law.
4. They merged the traditions of the Prophet with the concept of Sunnah.
5. It became customary for the 2nd and 3rd century scholars to fabricate traditions.
6. There is hardly any Hadith which can be termed as authentic.
7. *Isnad* system has no historical value, it was a tool used by forgers of Hadith.[xxii]

Response of Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi

M.M 'Azmi has argued against the common notion that there were only seventeen persons who knew how to write. He terms it a strange statement because it seems impossible to assume that in Makkah, which was a cosmopolitan city, a barter market and a junction for caravan routes that such illiteracy could exist.[xxiii]

He tries to prove by quoting various classical sources that in Makkah there were adequate schools and literary activities in pre-Islamic Arabia. He also talks about the educational policy of the Prophet and its outcomes. He explains that Prophet used to send his Companions outside Makkah and also built Mosques to educate people. By this process education spread very fast in and outside Arabia.[xxiv]

Then he talks about literature in the first century and divides it into two types religious and non religious. He brings thirteen subjects under these two types like poetry, history, Qur'an, collections of Hadith etc. by this he tries to clarify the notion of Orientalists like Goldziher and Nicolson that there was illiteracy prevalent in

Arabia at the time of Prophet which was enough proof for the lack of Hadith literature in that period. M.M 'Azmi notes down adequate number of material in order to refute such claims. By analyzing the conception of Goldziher about early Muslim community he comes to the conclusion that the references and deductions made by Goldziher are irrelevant as in the case of Malik b. Huwairith, who was sent by Prophet to teach people the method of performing prayer but Goldziher deduces from it that the whole community was ignorant about performing prayer.[xxv] This type of deducing irrelevant conclusions can be found in all the seven cases mentioned by Goldziher.

In response to the arguments of Goldziher and Schacht regarding the recording of Hadith literature M.M 'Azmi says that they became victims of misinterpretation of the words *Tadwin*, *Tasnif* and *Kitabah* which were all understood in the sense of recording. However these words were distinguished in their meaning *Tadwin* is used for collection and *Tasnif* is used for classification. They also had the misconceptions about the terminology like *Hadathana, Akhbarana, 'An* etc. they were understood in the meaning of oral transmission. 'Azmi argues that it was the trend those days to refer to the author rather than the book of the author. They further claimed that Arabs had unique memory and felt no need to record anything and Prophet prohibited recording Hadiths. 'Azmi argued that the prohibition of writing Hadith was meant to avoid writing of Qur'an and Hadith on the same material but not to prohibit the writing of Hadith in general. He also argued that many scholars disliked writing Hadiths due to their personal prejudice and not based on any Prophetic order[xxvi]

'Azmi proved that Goldziher was wrong in his argument that traditionists invented Hadiths against rationalists. According to 'Azmi, traditionists like Ibn Sirin, 'Abidah etc were extremists against writing of Hadith and rationalists like Hammad, Zuhri etc were in favor of writing Hadith. So, how could it be possible for traditionists to invent Hadith?[xxvii]

He argued that there existed an ample amount of literature regarding Hadith in the Prophetic era in the form of *Nuskhah*, *Sahifah*, *Kitab* and *Risalah*. He explicitly explains the meanings of these terms and clarifies the doubts and misinterpretations related to them. He provides examples from various classical sources to give weight to his argument.[xxviii]

He comes up with the names of fifty collections from the Companions of the Prophet such as collections of Abu Bakr, Abu Huraira, Abdallah b. Amr and others. Then he gives names of forty nine collections of first century successors and eighty seven collections from late first and early second century scholars. Finally he provides names of two hundred and fifty one collections from early second century scholars.[xxix]

Orientalists differed in their opinions about Isnad system and in conclusion date the *Isnad* system after the period of Abdal Malik more than sixty years after the Prophet's death. 'Azmi quotes Horovitz, who argues that all of the *Isnads* of Urwah have not been taken into account by the Orientalists which created confusion in their opinions, to prove his argument that Isnad system existed from the period of Companions and

successors. He also quotes J. Robson, who also argues similar to Horovitz, to further strengthen his argument.[xxx]

'Azmi quoted verses from the Qur'an[xxxi] to argue that law has its due place in Islam. He concluded that Allah is the only law giver who instructed Prophet about the legislation power and the Prophet explained that law by words and deeds. His orders are on equal footing with Allah; these orders were noted by the Companions and were put in practice by them.

He mentioned that the Prophet had four roles in the legal system. He was expounder of the Qur'an[xxxii], legislator[xxxiii], to be obeyed[xxxiv] and model for human behavior[xxxv]. These roles can be assigned to the Prophet only if law lies within the sphere of Islam, not outside the Islam as argued by Schacht.

According to 'Azmi, in the 1st century; judges were appointed, legal codes were drawn and legal literature appeared. It is enough proof that Islamic law did exist from the time of the Prophet[xxxvi]. 'Azmi has provided adequate examples of these three activities to support his arguments.

Schacht uses e silentio principle to prove that Hadiths along with their *Isnads* were fabricated by the later scholars to justify the views of their schools of law. 'Azmi points out mistakes in the principle of Schacht like inconsistencies within the theory and use of source material, unwarranted assumptions and unscientific methods of research, mistakes of fact, ignorance of political and geographical realities of the time and the misinterpretation of the meanings of the texts quoted and misunderstanding of the method of quotation of early scholars.[xxxvii]

Conclusion

In conclusion we can say that the Orientalists from time to time tried to pose their arguments against the Hadith literature. Their arguments were by and large based on their biased approach towards Islam in general and specifically towards Hadith literature. They tried to distort the facts in order to fit their arguments. They also quoted out of context and that too devoid of primary sources to fulfill their biased approach. Muslim scholars came up with academic response in order to highlight the deficits in the approach of Orientalists. one amongst them is Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi who dealt with the arguments of Orientalists regarding Hadith literature in detail and in academic manner to provide an explicit response.

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[v] Goldziher, Ignaz, *Muslim Studies*. Vol. II, Trans. from the German by C. R. Barber and S.M. Stern, London, 1971, p.19

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ix Ibid, 159

x Ibid, 196

xi Ibid, 144

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xvii Ibid, p.3

xviii Ibid, 140

xix Ibid, 156

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xxiii 'Azmi, Muhammad Mustafa, *Studies in early hadith literature,* American trust publications, Indianapolis, 1978, p.1

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xxv Ibid, p.13

xxvi Ibid, p.20-26

xxvii Ibid, 27

xxviii Ibid, p.30-33

xxix Ibid, p.34-182

xxx Ibid, p.213-215

xxxi Al Qur'an, 7:54, 16:116, 45:18, 7:157

xxxii Al Qur'an, 16:44

xxxiii Al Qur'an, 7:157

xxxiv Al Qur'an, 4:64

xxxv Al Qur'an, 33:21

xxxvi 'Azmi, Muhammad Mustafa, *On Schacht's Muhammadan Jurisprudence,* Suhail academy, Lahore Pakistan, 2004, p.20

xxxvii Ibid, p.115-122