Orientalist Perspective on Hadith and the Response of Muslim Scholarship: The Case of Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi's Approach

Wasim Sadiq, Research Scholar, Shah-i-Hamadhan Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir, Jammu & Kashmir.

Abstract

Whatever constitutes up the Prophet's sayings, deeds, and implied approval is found in the Hadith literature. The earliest known recordings of Hadith literature date back to the Prophet's era. Scholars of the Hadith developed it in the years that followed. Under the guidance of the Prophet, the majority of the Companions used to record hadiths. Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi has recorded fifty Companions' collections. Producing fabricated Hadiths was nearly impossible during the Prophet's lifetime. However, Hadiths were made up while 'Ali and Mu'awiyyah were at odds with one another. The primary objective of Hadith science was to eradicate the occasionally erroneous content from the Hadith literature. Orientalists started studying Hadith literature in the 19th century primarily to make arguments against it. This prompted Muslim scholars to respond, and Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi was one of them. He specifically addressed the arguments made by eminent Orientalists like Joseph Schacht and Ignaz Goldziher.

The article aims to illustrate Muslim scholars' reactions to Orientalist approaches to Hadith literature. Nonetheless, Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi's contribution will be the main subject of attention.

Keywords: Hadith, Mustafa 'Azmi, Critique, Orientalist, Muslim Response.

Introduction

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The article aims to illustrate Muslim scholars' reactions to Orientalist approaches to Hadith literature. Nonetheless, Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi's contribution will be the main subject of attention.

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 perspectives and writings on Hadith literature during the 18 and 19 Century

Orientalists started to get interested in Hadith literature in the seventeenth century. The first person to offer critical perspectives on Hadith literature was Barthelemy d'Herbelot (1625–1695), who even refers to the Prophet as a “false Prophet.” His primary intention was to minimize the significance of Hadith literature. The second Orientalist to present his thoughts about Hadith literature was Ernest Renan (1823–1892). He attempted to downplay the significance of Hadith literature by arguing that the Qur'an is more important than the Hadith.
Onset of academic Orientalist discussion on Hadith writings

Early criticism of the validity of Hadith literature was made by Orientalist historians Gustav Weil (1808–1899) and Aloys Sprenger (1813–56) in the 19th century. William Muir examined Islamic sources before deciding that the Hadith and the Qur'an should be the primary sources for the Prophet's biography. In order to use them for this purpose, he also looked for trustworthy traditions.

In the 1870s, a different set of Orientalists who were experts in Islamic law learned about the significance of Hadith in Islam and made an effort to address issues about the origins and evolution of Islamic law. In the words of Harald Motzki, German Orientalist Edward Sachau (1845–1930) was the very first individual in the 19th century to notice the close connection between the Hadith and Islamic law. He observed this connection alongside the Qur'an, which forms the basis from which the Shari'ah takes its tenets and regulations.

Hadith literature was studied alongside Sirah and the Islamic legal system until 1890, when it was recognized as a separate academic field. Orientalist academics have viewed it as a completely distinct branch of Islam since the 1890s. Significant research was published between 1890 and 1950, which laid the groundwork for the current Orientalist perspective on Hadith. The publication of Ignaz Goldziher's Muslim Studies marked the beginning of this new mindset, and Joseph Schacht's The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence marked its conclusion in 1950.

Summary of Goldziher's opinions

He said in the introduction that the majority of Hadiths were actually the outcome of the early Muslim society's social and religious development. Based on this assumption, he proposes that there was a widespread fabrication of Hadith during the initial period.

The following are Goldziher's most significant findings and discussions:

1. The core of the Sunnah was essentially "the ancient customs of patriarchal times" of early Islam, which were practiced in Madina, the Sunnah's stronghold, where religious circles contributed both practically and conceptually to the movement's ascent and expansion, enabling it to spread outside of their city.

2. The foundational knowledge of Hadith was passed down by the Companions to those who followed the Prophet after his death. The Companions supplemented this foundational knowledge with a few healthful proverbs that were accepted as authentically attributed to the Prophet. The next generations saw a significant extension of the fundamental elements of traditions.

3. The hadith should not be viewed as "the infancy of Islam," but rather as a mirror depicting the evolution and changes of all facets of Muslim culture during this formative time of Islam.

4. It is incorrect to assume that Muhammad b. Shihab al-Zuhri assembled the Hadith in its initial methodical fashion at the behest of 'Umar-II.

5. The large-scale growth of hadith began during the theocratic Abbasid Caliphate, and this led to the establishment of a systematic arrangement of hadith, beginning with Malik b. Anas's Muwatta. The Abbasid government promoted the creation of Hadith to fill the void left by the Qur'an's inadequacy in supporting their endeavor to establish the Shari'ah as the cornerstone of public life. As a result, Hadith literature was required, and the Sunnah was acknowledged as the primary source of Islamic law.
6. Muslim critique of the Hadith gave less emphasis to the study of matn and more weight to Isnad, which is why there are so many inconsistencies in the traditions.\textsuperscript{xii}

7. The factional rivalries and interpersonal conflicts among Muslim scholars were the primary causes of the genesis of Hadith falsification. Additionally, the struggle between rationalists and traditionists, the rivalry between Umayyads and Abbasids, and the rivalry between religious experts and secular Umayyad rulers all contributed to the pressure on each group to fabricate Hadiths in order to justifying their positions and beliefs.\textsuperscript{xii}

The aforementioned facts make it evident that he methodically questioned the historical accuracy and veracity of the Hadith. He bases his research on dissecting and evaluating the textual substance of Hadith and fails to take the Isnad into account as a valuable resource for establishing the authenticity or chronology of Hadith. The methodology that Goldziher used has prompted criticism from a number of experts in this subject. Johann Fueck saw Goldziher's techniques as unrestricted skepticism that opened the floodgates to whimsy.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Nabia Abbott challenges Goldziher, claiming that in addition to being transmitted orally, hadith was also written down during the early Muslim era. She contends that a significant number of genuine traditions can be found in Hadith collections.\textsuperscript{xiv}

The concepts and works of Joseph Schacht

Many specific writings on Hadith literature, such as those by Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936), Henri Lammens (1862–1937), and David Samuel Margoliouth (1858–1940), were made possible by Goldziher's work, but most of these writings simply borrowed Goldziher's ideas without adding new premises that could advance the arguments. With his seminal work The Origin of Muhammadan Jurisprudence, Joseph Schacht addressed the necessity to find a trustworthy approach to positive Hadith criticism. The evolution of legal theory in early Islam, the expansion of legal Hadiths, the transmission of legal doctrine throughout the Umayyad period, disputes within legal schools, and lastly the advancement of technical legal thought are its four main themes.

He contested the legitimacy of the conventional wisdom that holds that the Qur'an, Hadith, Ijma, and Qiyas are the four primary sources of Islamic jurisprudence. Instead, he maintained that this traditional view was a byproduct of the legal system's transmission, which started at the end of the first century. Consequently, it was not until the middle of the second century that the Qur'an and Hadith were acknowledged as the primary sources of Shari'ah.

His thesis states that the legal Hadiths included in the six canonical collections were produced more than a century after the Prophet's lifetime. Legislative rules were therefore developed during this period from regional customs that were strengthened by Umayyad administrative regulations and popular practices, which were primarily based on personal reasoning. Later, the jurists embodied these customs into traditions from the Companions and Successors, interpreting them into their own living tradition and permitting it to supersede them.\textsuperscript{xv}

Traditionists circulated some Prophetic traditions before 150 A.H in order to counter the arguments of rationalists; they did to strengthen their arguments.\textsuperscript{xvi} Schacht comes to the conclusion that customs from the Companions and Successors predate those from the Prophet\textsuperscript{xvii} and that the majority of legal customs began during and after Al-Shafi'i's reign before becoming largely included into the canonical collections.\textsuperscript{xviii} This provides an overview of the introduction of Isnad to all Hadith, with the opinions of successors serving as the foundation for the development of legal Hadiths in their traditional form.\textsuperscript{xix} Schacht concurred with Goldziher that the notion of Al-Shafi'i, who created the new concept of Sunnah, which is entirely distinct from the previous concept of living tradition, is responsible for the evolution of the authoritative nature of Hadith. Al-Shafi'i considered the Hadith to be the same as the Sunnah.
Schacht made an effort to pinpoint the roughly chronological period of the Hadiths' fabrication. He used the method of comparing sources that address the same legal issue and came to the conclusion that the later source was made up after the older source.\textsuperscript{xx} Schacht employed Isnad as a crucial resource for Hadith dating. According to his argument, there is a common connection that appears somewhere in the middle of every Isnad. Schacht claims that the person who created the Hadith is that common link.\textsuperscript{xxi} Schacht emerged as the first Orientalist to distinguish between the authentic and fabricated portions of the Isnad in this way.

The following is a summary of Schacht's opinions:

1. Since religion and law are unrelated, the prophet has no legal significance.
2. Before the establishment of schools of law in the second century, the concept of law was absent from Islamic texts, and the Sunnah was regarded as a "living tradition," or the community's ideal behavior as expressed in the school of law's widely accepted doctrine—which lacked the words and deeds of the Prophet.
3. The Prophet's sayings were employed by the opposing parties of that time to prove the legitimacy of their legal system.
4. They combined the Sunnah concept with the customs of the Prophet.
5. The scholars of the second and third centuries developed a habit of making up traditions.
6. It is difficult to find any Hadith that is considered authentic.
7. The Isnad system was a technique employed by Hadith forgers; it has no historical significance.\textsuperscript{xxii}

\textbf{The Critique of Muhammad Mustafa 'Azmi}

The widely held belief that there were only seventeen people who could write has been refuted by M.M. Azmi. He refers to it as a bizarre assertion since it defies logic to suppose that such illiteracy could exist in Makkah, a barter market, cosmopolitan metropolis, and intersection of caravan routes.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

By using a number of ancient texts, he attempts to demonstrate that Makkah had sufficient educational opportunities and literary pursuits in pre-Islamic Arabia. He also discusses the results of the Prophet's educational policy. He tells how the Prophet used to build mosques to educate people and send his Companions outside of Makkah. Through this technique, education quickly expanded throughout Arabia and beyond.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

Next, he discusses first-century literature and distinguishes between religious and nonreligious works. He groups thirteen topics, including poetry, history, the Qur'an, Hadith compilations, etc., into these two categories. By doing this, he attempts to dispel the theory advanced by Orientalists such as Goldziher and Nicolson, who claimed that the lack of Hadith literature during the Prophet's lifetime was sufficient evidence of the widespread illiteracy in Arabia at the time. M.M. 'Azmi' jots down sufficient evidence to dispute such statements. Through an analysis of Goldziher's conception of the early Muslim community, he concludes that the references and deductions made by Goldziher are meaningless. For example, Malik b. Huwairith was sent by the Prophet to teach people how to pray, but Goldziher concludes from this that the community as a whole was ignorant of how to pray.\textsuperscript{xxv} All seven of the examples that Goldziher cited include this kind of drawing unrelated conclusions.

M.M. 'Azmi responds to Goldziher and Schacht's arguments concerning the recording of Hadith literature by stating that they were misled by the terms Tadwin, Tasnif, and Kitabah, which were all interpreted in the context of recording. Nonetheless, the meanings of these terms were differentiated: Tasnif is used for classification, while Tadwin is used for collection. Additionally, they misunderstood terms like Hadathana, Akhbarana, "An," etc., which they interpreted to signify oral transmission. Azmi contends that referring to the author rather than the author's book was popular at the time. They added that the Prophet forbade writing Hadiths and that Arabs had a special memory, so they didn't feel the need to record anything. According to 'Azmi, the prohibition against writing Hadith was not intended to forbid writing Hadith altogether, but rather
to prevent publishing Hadith and the Qur'an on the same subject. Additionally, he made the case that many academics disapproved of producing Hadiths since they were biased and not based on any prophetic sequence.xxvi

"Azmi disproved Goldziher’s claim that Hadiths were created by traditionists to oppose rationalists." According to 'Azmi, rationalists like Hammad and Zuhri supported publishing Hadith, but traditionalists like Ibn Sirin, 'Abidah, and others were radicals opposed to it. Thus, how is it possible that Hadith was created by traditionists?xxvii

He maintained that there was a wealth of writing on hadith from the Prophetic period, including Kitab, Risalah, Sahifah, and Nuskhah. He removes any misconceptions and misperceptions about these terminologies by providing clear explanations of their meanings. He backs up his claims with examples drawn from a variety of classical texts.xxviii

He cites fifty collections from the Prophet's Companions, including those of Abu Bakr, Abu Huraira, Abdallah b. Amr, and others. Next, he lists the names of eighty-seven collections from scholars from the late first and early second centuries, as well as forty-nine collections from first century successors. Lastly, he lists the names of 251 collections created by intellectuals in the early 2nd century.xxix

Orientalists held varying views regarding the Isnad system, ultimately determining that it was established more than sixty years after the Prophet's passing during the Abdal Malik era. "Azmi supports his claim that the Isnad system dates back to the time of the Companions and their successors by quoting Horovitz, who contends that the Orientalists' failure to consider all of the Isnads of Urwah caused ambiguity in their views. In order to bolster his case even further, he also cites J. Robson, who makes a comparable point to Horovitz.xxx

‘Azmi used passages from the Qur'an xxxi to support his claim that Islam gives law its proper place. He came to the conclusion that the Prophet interpreted the law via his words and deeds, and that Allah alone is the source of law. His commands are equal in authority with Allah's; the Companions took note of and carried out these commands.

He mentioned that the Prophet had four roles in the legal system. He was expounder of the Qur'anxxxii, legislatorxxxiii, to be obeyedxxxiv and model for human behaviorxxxv. 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.

"the judges were elected, codes of law were drafted, and legal literature appeared in the first century," claims Azmi. It provides sufficient evidence that Islamic law has existed since the Prophet's time.xxxvi ‘Azmi has provided adequate examples of these three activities to support his arguments.

Schacht applies the silentio principle to demonstrate how subsequent academics invented Hadiths and their Isnads in order to support the legal schools' positions. Azmi identifies errors in the Schacht principle, such as inconsistencies in the theory and application of source material, unjustified assumptions and unscientific research methods, factual errors, ignorance of the political and geographic realities of the time, misinterpretation of the meanings of the texts cited, and a misunderstanding of the early scholars' method of quotation.xxxvii

Conclusion

In summary, we may state that Orientalists occasionally attempted to present their counterarguments to the Hadith literature. Most of their arguments stemmed from their prejudiced views of Islam in general and Hadith literature in particular. To make their points more compelling, they attempted to twist the truth. Along with taking quotes out of context, they did so without using any original sources to support their biased viewpoint. Muslim academics developed a scholarly reaction to draw attention to the shortcomings in Orientalist methodology. Muhammad Mustafa ‘Azmi is one of them; he addressed the claims made by Orientalists about Hadith literature in a thorough and scholarly manner, offering a clear refutation.
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