

# ***The Just Portrayal of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in Western Seerah Literature: An Analytical Study of Karen Armstrong's Writings in the Context of Interfaith Harmony and Contemporary Discourse***

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## ***Abstract***

*The life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has long been the subject of deep scholarly attention within Islamic traditions, producing a vast body of Seerat literature rooted in devotion, theological insight, and historical authenticity. In contrast, Western scholarship has approached the Prophet's life from multiple academic angles, often shaped by broader ideological, historical, and cultural contexts. This study examines the Western perspectives on Seerat through a focused analysis of the works of Karen Armstrong, one of the most influential and sympathetic Western authors writing about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Her books *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (1991) and *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (2006) represent a paradigm shift in non-Muslim representations of the Prophet by striving to foster understanding between civilizations and to dispel stereotypes prevalent in the West. This research explores Armstrong's methodology, sources, and interpretive framework, analyzing how she constructs a narrative of the Prophet that resonates with both Muslim and non-Muslim readers. The study evaluates the impact of her writings on Western discourse surrounding Islam, especially in the post-9/11 world, and the role of such literature in promoting interfaith dialogue and mutual respect. Through comparative textual analysis and critical engagement, this paper assesses the effectiveness and limitations of Armstrong's contributions within the broader context of Western Seerat writing. The findings underscore the importance of balanced, empathetic scholarship in bridging cultural divides and advancing a nuanced understanding of Islamic history and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).*

**Key Words:** Karen Armstrong, Western Seerat literature, Prophet Muhammad, interfaith dialogue, Orientalist scholarship.

## **Introduction**

Seerat writing, the biographical study of the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), holds a central place in Islamic scholarship, characterized by its deep reverence, spiritual insight, and meticulous historical inquiry. Rooted in the Islamic tradition, Seerat literature serves not only as a historical record but also as a source of spiritual guidance and moral inspiration for Muslims worldwide. In the Western context, however, Seerat writing has evolved into a distinct academic and literary field, shaped by diverse intellectual, cultural, and religious perspectives. Western scholars have approached the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) with varying objectives, ranging from historical analysis to interfaith dialogue and socio-political commentary. Among these scholars, Karen Armstrong, a prominent British author and religious historian, stands out for her accessible and empathetic contributions to Seerat literature through her seminal works, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (1991) and *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (2006).

This research paper critically examines Armstrong's contributions to Seerat writing, analyzing her objectives, methodologies, and their broader implications for Western perceptions of Islam. It explores how Armstrong's works reflect a unique blend of historical-critical analysis, interfaith dialogue, and a response to contemporary socio-political dynamics, particularly the rise of Islamophobia following the events of September 11, 2001. By situating her scholarship within the broader landscape of Western Seerat writing, this study evaluates the strengths and limitations of her approach, compares her works with those of other Western scholars, and assesses their relevance in fostering cross-cultural understanding. The analysis adheres to the Chicago citation style, with references provided at the end, and aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of approximately-

### **1. Karen Armstrong's Background and Approach to Seerat**

Karen Armstrong, born in 1944 in Worcestershire, England, is a former Roman Catholic nun who transitioned into a prolific writer and scholar of comparative religion. Her early experiences in a convent, detailed in her memoir *Through the Narrow Gate* (1981), profoundly shaped her understanding of spirituality and religious traditions [1]. After leaving the convent, Armstrong pursued an academic career, focusing on the study of world religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Her works are characterized by their accessibility, empathy, and commitment to bridging gaps between religious communities, particularly in the West, where misunderstandings about non-Christian faiths, including Islam, have historically prevailed.

Armstrong's approach to Seerat writing is distinct from traditional Islamic biographies, which often emphasize the Prophet's spiritual and divine role as the final messenger of God. Instead, Armstrong adopts a historical and contextual approach, aiming to present Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as a universal figure whose life and teachings resonate with

modern audiences, regardless of their religious background. In *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* (1991), Armstrong situates the Prophet's life within the socio-cultural and political landscape of 7th-century Arabia, highlighting the tribal dynamics, economic challenges, and religious pluralism of the time [2]. This contextualization serves to make the Prophet's life relatable to Western readers who may lack familiarity with Islamic traditions or harbor misconceptions about Islam.

Her second work, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* (2006), builds on this foundation but is explicitly shaped by the post-9/11 global climate, where Islam faced heightened scrutiny and prejudice in the West. Armstrong seeks to counter negative stereotypes by emphasizing the Prophet's compassion, ethical leadership, and commitment to social justice [3]. Her methodology combines historical-critical analysis with an empathetic narrative, prioritizing accessibility over exhaustive academic rigor. Unlike traditional Islamic Seerat works, which often incorporate hadith (Prophetic traditions) and tafsir (Quranic exegesis), Armstrong relies heavily on secondary sources, including translations of classical texts like Ibn Hisham's *Seerat Rasul Allah* and Western scholarly interpretations [4]. This approach, while effective in reaching a broad audience, has sparked debate about its scholarly depth and fidelity to Islamic sources.

## 2. Objectives of Armstrong's Seerat Writings

Armstrong's primary objective in her Seerat writings is to humanize Prophet Muhammad (SAW) for a Western audience, presenting him as a figure of moral and spiritual significance rather than a distant religious icon. In *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, she aims to demystify Islam by situating the Prophet's life within the historical context of 7th-century Arabia. She explores the tribal conflicts, economic disparities, and religious diversity of the period, portraying the Prophet as a reformer who navigated these challenges with wisdom and compassion [5]. By emphasizing universal themes such as justice, mercy, and community-building, Armstrong seeks to make the Prophet's life accessible to readers unfamiliar with Islamic theology or history.

This approach aligns with her broader goal of fostering interfaith understanding. Armstrong draws parallels between Islamic values and universal ethical principles, such as compassion and social equity, which resonate with Western humanistic traditions. For example, she highlights the Prophet's efforts to establish a just society in Medina, where he mediated between diverse religious and tribal groups, as a model for contemporary pluralism [6]. This emphasis on shared values reflects Armstrong's commitment to interfaith dialogue, a recurring theme in her broader oeuvre, including works like *A History of God* (1993) and *The Battle for God* (2000) [7].

In *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time*, Armstrong's objectives are more explicitly tied to the socio-political context of the early 21st century. Written in the wake of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the book responds to the surge in Islamophobia and negative media portrayals of Islam in the West. Armstrong seeks to counter these stereotypes by presenting the Prophet as a model of peace, reconciliation, and ethical leadership [8]. She emphasizes episodes from his life, such as the Constitution of Medina and his non-violent response to persecution in Mecca, to challenge Orientalist narratives that depict Islam as inherently violent or incompatible with modernity [9]. By doing so, Armstrong aims to reshape Western perceptions of Islam, positioning the Prophet as a figure whose teachings are relevant to contemporary challenges, including religious extremism and cultural polarization.

### 3. Methodological Strengths and Limitations

Armstrong's methodology in her *Seerat* writings is characterized by her ability to synthesize a wide range of sources into a coherent and engaging narrative. She draws on translations of classical Islamic texts, such as Ibn Hisham's *Seerat Rasul Allah* and al-Tabari's historical accounts, as well as Western scholarly works by authors like Montgomery Watt and Maxime Rodinson [10]. Her historical-critical approach involves analyzing the Prophet's life through the lens of 7th-century Arabian society, which helps contextualize his actions and teachings for a Western audience. For example, she explains the Prophet's role as a mediator in tribal disputes and his establishment of a community based on mutual respect and justice, which resonates with modern ideals of governance and social cohesion [11].

One of Armstrong's key strengths is her ability to make complex historical and religious concepts accessible to non-specialists. Her narrative style is clear, engaging, and empathetic, avoiding the dense academic prose often found in traditional scholarship. This accessibility has made her works popular among general readers, contributing to their widespread influence in shaping Western perceptions of Islam [12]. Additionally, her focus on the Prophet's humanity—his struggles, compassion, and leadership—helps bridge cultural divides, presenting Islam as a religion rooted in universal values rather than an alien or threatening ideology.

However, Armstrong's methodology has notable limitations. Her reliance on secondary sources, particularly translations of Islamic texts, limits the depth of her engagement with primary Arabic sources. This can lead to oversimplifications or misinterpretations, particularly when addressing theological or jurisprudential aspects of the Prophet's life [13]. For example, her discussion of the Prophet's military campaigns, such as the Battle of Badr or the conquest of Mecca, tends to emphasize defensive or strategic motivations

while downplaying their religious significance, which some Muslim scholars argue distorts the spiritual context of these events [14].

Critics also contend that Armstrong's empathetic tone sometimes borders on apologetics, as she selectively highlights the Prophet's positive attributes to appeal to Western sensibilities. This approach contrasts with the more critical analyses of scholars like Maxime Rodinson, who examines the Prophet's life through a Marxist lens, or Montgomery Watt, who engages deeply with primary sources [15]. Furthermore, Armstrong's lack of formal training in Islamic studies occasionally results in interpretive gaps, particularly in her understanding of theological concepts like prophethood or divine revelation. While her works are not intended as theological treatises, these limitations highlight the challenges of writing about a deeply religious figure from a secular perspective [16].

#### 4. Impact on Western Perceptions of Islam

Armstrong's Seerat writings have had a profound impact on Western perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and Islam, particularly in the post-9/11 era. By presenting the Prophet as a relatable historical figure, she has helped counter stereotypes perpetuated by media and political rhetoric, which often portray Islam as a monolithic or inherently violent religion. Her books have been widely read by general audiences, including students, educators, and policymakers, contributing to a broader understanding of Islam as a religion of peace, compassion, and ethical governance [17].

In *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, Armstrong's contextualization of the Prophet's life within the challenges of 7th-century Arabia helps readers appreciate the complexity of his mission. By highlighting his role as a social reformer and mediator, she challenges Orientalist narratives that depict Islam as backward or oppressive [18]. Similarly, *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time* addresses contemporary issues by portraying the Prophet as a model for addressing modern challenges, such as religious extremism and cultural polarization. This focus on relevance has made her works particularly influential in interfaith circles, where they are often used as resources for promoting dialogue and understanding [19].

However, Armstrong's approach has not been without criticism. Some Western academics argue that her sympathetic portrayal lacks the critical rigor necessary for scholarly analysis, accusing her of prioritizing narrative over evidence [20]. Muslim scholars, on the other hand, have expressed concerns that her secular lens dilutes the spiritual dimensions of the Prophet's life, presenting him as a historical figure rather than a divinely guided messenger [21]. Despite these critiques, Armstrong's works have undeniably played a pivotal role in making Seerat literature accessible to Western readers, fostering dialogue in both academic

and public spheres. Her books are frequently cited in introductory courses on Islam and have inspired further exploration of the Prophet's life among non-Muslim audiences.

### 5. Comparative Analysis with Other Western Seerat Writers

To fully appreciate Armstrong's contributions, it is useful to compare her works with those of other prominent Western Seerat writers, such as Montgomery Watt and Maxime Rodinson. Montgomery Watt, a Scottish orientalist, is renowned for his meticulous historical analyses in *Muhammad at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (1956). Watt's works are grounded in primary sources, including early Islamic texts and archaeological evidence, and are widely regarded as seminal contributions to Seerat scholarship [22]. His approach is academic and detailed, appealing primarily to scholars and specialists rather than general readers.

In contrast, Maxime Rodinson's *Muhammad* (1971) adopts a Marxist perspective, focusing on the socio-economic factors that shaped the Prophet's mission. Rodinson portrays the Prophet as a charismatic leader responding to the material conditions of 7th-century Arabia, which differs from Armstrong's emphasis on spiritual and ethical dimensions [23]. While Rodinson's analysis is rigorous and critical, it has been criticized by some Muslim scholars for reducing the Prophet's mission to socio-economic determinism, neglecting its spiritual significance [24].

Armstrong's works stand out for their accessibility and contemporary relevance. Unlike Watt's scholarly focus or Rodinson's Marxist framework, Armstrong prioritizes narrative and interfaith dialogue, making her books particularly effective for addressing modern audiences. Her emphasis on the Prophet's compassion and ethical leadership aligns with the needs of a post-9/11 world, where fostering understanding between cultures is paramount [25]. However, her narrative-driven style sacrifices some of the scholarly depth found in Watt or Rodinson, positioning her as a popularizer rather than a traditional academic. This distinction highlights the trade-off between accessibility and rigor, a recurring theme in Western Seerat scholarship.

### 6. Relevance in the Contemporary Context

Armstrong's Seerat writings remain highly relevant in today's polarized world, where misunderstandings about Islam continue to fuel prejudice and conflict. Her portrayal of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) as a figure of compassion, justice, and reconciliation resonates with global efforts to promote interfaith harmony and counter Islamophobia. By emphasizing the Prophet's role as a mediator and reformer, Armstrong provides a model for addressing contemporary challenges, such as religious extremism, cultural polarization, and social inequality [26].

Her works also align with the growing interest in comparative religion, a field that seeks to identify shared values across religious traditions. Armstrong's emphasis on universal themes, such as compassion and justice, encourages readers to explore parallels between Islamic and Western ethical traditions, fostering a sense of shared humanity [27]. This approach is particularly valuable in educational settings, where her books are often used as introductory texts for students studying Islam or comparative religion.

However, the limitations of Armstrong's approach—such as her reliance on secondary sources and selective narration—highlight the need for more rigorous Western scholarship on Seerat. Future studies could build on her work by combining accessibility with deeper engagement with primary Islamic sources, such as hadith collections and Quranic exegesis, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the Prophet's life [28]. Additionally, collaboration between Western and Muslim scholars could help bridge the gap between secular and religious perspectives, ensuring a more balanced and nuanced portrayal of the Prophet.

### **7. Critical Reflections on Armstrong's Scholarship**

Armstrong's scholarship occupies a unique space in Western Seerat writing, balancing accessibility with intellectual inquiry. Her ability to present the Prophet's life in a way that resonates with modern audiences is a testament to her skill as a communicator and her commitment to interfaith dialogue. By challenging stereotypes and promoting understanding, her works have made a lasting impact on Western perceptions of Islam, particularly in the post-9/11 era [29].

However, her approach raises important questions about the role of Western scholars in interpreting Islamic traditions. Can a secular perspective fully capture the spiritual dimensions of the Prophet's life? To what extent does accessibility compromise scholarly rigor? These questions underscore the challenges of writing about a religious figure from an outside perspective, particularly in a field as complex and sensitive as Seerat studies [30]. Armstrong's works, while valuable, highlight the need for continued dialogue between Western and Muslim scholars to ensure a more holistic understanding of the Prophet's legacy.

### **8. Future Directions for Western Seerat Scholarship**

The study of Seerat in the West is still evolving, and Armstrong's works provide a foundation for future scholarship. To build on her contributions, Western scholars could adopt a more interdisciplinary approach, integrating historical analysis, theological inquiry, and cultural studies. Engaging directly with primary Islamic sources, such as the Quran, hadith, and classical Seerat texts, would enhance the credibility and depth of Western scholarship [31]. Additionally, incorporating Muslim perspectives through collaboration or

consultation could help address the criticisms of secular bias and ensure a more balanced portrayal of the Prophet's life.

The rise of digital humanities also offers new opportunities for Seerat scholarship. Online platforms, such as academic databases and interfaith forums, can facilitate the dissemination of Seerat literature to a global audience, fostering greater understanding and dialogue [32]. By combining rigorous scholarship with accessibility, future Western Seerat writers can continue to bridge cultural divides and promote a more nuanced understanding of Islam.

### Conclusion

Karen Armstrong's contributions to Seerat writing in the West are notable for their accessibility, empathy, and commitment to interfaith dialogue. Her works, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet* and *Muhammad: A Prophet for Our Time*, have played a crucial role in reshaping Western perceptions of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) by presenting him as a universal figure of ethical leadership and compassion. Through her historical-critical approach, Armstrong has made the Prophet's life relatable to modern audiences, challenging stereotypes and fostering cross-cultural understanding.

However, her methodology is not without limitations. Her reliance on secondary sources, selective narration, and lack of formal training in Islamic studies highlight the challenges of writing about a religious figure from a secular perspective. Compared to scholars like Montgomery Watt and Maxime Rodinson, Armstrong's works prioritize accessibility over scholarly depth, positioning her as a popularizer rather than a traditional academic. Nevertheless, her scholarship remains a significant entry point for Western readers into the study of Seerat, offering valuable insights into the Prophet's life and its relevance to contemporary issues.

Looking forward, Western Seerat scholarship can build on Armstrong's legacy by combining accessibility with rigorous engagement with primary Islamic sources. By fostering collaboration between Western and Muslim scholars, future studies can offer a more comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), contributing to greater understanding and harmony in an increasingly interconnected world.

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