

SIR SAYYID AḤMAD KHĀN AND THE METHODOLOGICAL SHIFT IN SOUTH ASIAN *SĪRAH* WRITING: A STUDY OF *KHUṬUBĀT-I-AḤMADIYYAH*

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Abstract: Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān’s contribution, with a focus on his important work on Prophetic *sīrah*, *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah* [Essays on the Life of Prophet Muhammad], marks a momentous shift from traditional *sīrah* writing to modern scientific study through emphasis on the authenticity of narrations, historical contextualisation, and a contemporary academic writing style. Sir Sayyid’s pioneering approach and effort are accredited as a basis in modern Urdu *sīrah* literature, focusing on the Divine worldview without leaving behind rational interpretation of the text, critical examination of narrations, and rejection of irrational and weak elements. The current study, employing analytical methodology, highlights Sir Sayyid’s endeavours to reconcile sources with modern academic paradigms, primarily in response to the objections of Orientalists regarding Prophetic *sīrah*. Through assessment of his efforts, this article emphasises the methodology employed in *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, examines its content, and explores Sir Sayyid’s reinterpretation of some key *sīrah* events, such as Prophet Muhammad’s miraculous birth, his childhood trip to Syria with Abū Ṭālib, and the *Ṣaqq al-Ṣadr* event. By situating his contribution within the broader intellectual landscape of 19th century Indian scholarship, the study underscores his enduring legacy in shaping modern *sīrah* discourse and the lasting impact of his approach on succeeding scholars.

Keywords: *Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah, Sir William Muir, Sīrah writing, methodology, Orientalists*

INTRODUCTION

Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (d. 1898), a celebrated educationist, intellectual, and reformist thinker, left an indelible mark on 19th century Muslim scholarship in the Indian subcontinent. He championed intellectual awakening and progress among Muslims, focusing on education, social reform, and scientific advancement. Through tireless efforts, Sir Sayyid sought to revitalise the Muslim community in India, driven by the conviction that embracing modern Western scientific education was essential for their advancement and preservation of

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identity.¹ To this end, he pioneered the establishment of the Mohammedan Scientific Society in Ghazipur in 1864,² intending to translate modern English literary works into Urdu to anchor Muslim cultural thought in scientific and rational principles.³ Sir Sayyid's charismatic leadership and the impact of his movement on the younger generation were pivotal in shaping the social and educational landscape of Muslim India. His influence extended to the realm of Urdu language and literature, as he laid the groundwork for a new intellectual movement through the Scientific Society of Aligarh with the intent to encourage critical thinking in the Muslim community. This movement turned into a college (Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College) in 1875, which became Aligarh Muslim University in 1919. The institution "gave new ideas to the Muslims"⁴ and fostered a remarkable generation of thinkers and scholars. Subsequently, Sir Sayyid "won to his side many distinguished writers."⁵

Among Sir Sayyid's noteworthy literary achievements, *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah* stands out as an inspiring work on the subject of *sīrah*⁶ during that period. This significant work addresses the criticisms of the English Orientalist Sir William Muir (d. 1905). It introduces new principles of *sīrah* writing, tailored to meet the scientific demands of the modern era. Many succeeding authors, including Shiblī Nu'mānī (d. 1914), developed his methodology and have drawn on these principles in their works on the subject.⁷ This study commences by exploring the Indian education system during the second half of the 19th century, particularly the challenges it posed for Muslim academia and its implications for Muslim scholarly pursuits. Moreover, it examines the factors that influenced Sir Sayyid's pioneering approach to *sīrah* writing. Along with an assessment of *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*'s content, this study explicitly discusses the impact of his contributions to modern Urdu *sīrah* writing in the Indian subcontinent.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs an analytical-historical methodology, drawing on primary texts and a range of secondary scholarly sources to critically explore Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān's contributions to Urdu *sīrah* literature. Special attention is given to his *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*,⁸ with a focus on its methodological framework and thematic content to explore

¹ Altāf Husayn Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid* [Lasting Biography] (Farid Book Depot Pvt. Ltd, 2014), 347. Note: *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid* metaphorically implies a life whose impact remains eternal. *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid* is considered the most exhaustive and reliable biography on Khān.

² M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Low Price Publications, 2004), 2/1598.

³ Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid*, 122–23, 332–33.

⁴ Sayyid Fayyaz Mahmud, *A Short History of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1960), 609.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Sīrah* is an Arabic term that refers to the biography of Prophet Muḥammad.

⁷ 'Allāmah Shiblī, in the *Muqaddimah* of his *Sīrah al-Nabī*, an academic work on Prophetic *sīrah* in Urdu, adopted the same approach and employed the principle of *dirāyah* (rational understanding of the text) and presenting events. See Shiblī Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī* [The Life of Prophet Muḥammad] (Dār al-Muḥannifin Shiblī Academy, 2019), 1–71.

⁸ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah* [Essays on the Life of Muḥammad], ed. Khauthar Fatima Aligarh (Milli Publications, 2020).

the intellectual, theological, and literary dimensions of his work, as well as its influence on subsequent scholars and the broader development of the field.

DIVISION OF THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The onslaught of European colonial powers precipitated a complex array of discourses, including rationalism, Orientalism, modernism, and others, which reverberated throughout the Muslim world, with significant repercussions in the Indian subcontinent.⁹ The dawn of the 19th century saw the British in India posing substantial challenges to the traditional educational system of Muslims, causing a split among the educated class into two distinct camps: Traditionalists and Modernists. The Traditionalists, adopting a defensive stance, sought to preserve the core Islamic sciences. In contrast, the Modernists advocated for the rationalisation of traditional sciences, their integration with contemporary disciplines and natural sciences, to reform society in line with the modern scientific worldview. This dichotomy inevitably led to the bifurcation of education into two distinct streams: religious and secular sciences. The former group adhered to traditional methods of education, leading to the establishment of institutions like Dār al-‘Ulūm Deoband in 1866, and similar seminaries with “particular emphasis on scriptural religion.”¹⁰ In the words of Ziya-ul-Hasan Faruqi, “rejecting all official interference and depending entirely on Divine assistance and the sincere religiosity of their brethren.”¹¹ In contrast, another group recognised the importance of modern scientific education not only for the educational advancement of Muslims but also for their visibility and recognition in the modern world. Consequently, they sought to ground Muslim socio-religious thought in scientific and rational principles, giving rise to initiatives like the Mohammedan Scientific Society in 1864, which eventually evolved into Aligarh Muslim University. Shiblī Nu‘mānī (d. 1914) expressed his concern about both groups: “This dichotomy has led to a division between the two groups, making it challenging for them to find a common ground.”¹²

ORIENTALISTS’ ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT

The advent of colonial powers in the Muslim world ushered in a new phase of studying *sīrah*. As a result of the intense intellectual encounter, Dr Maḥmūd Aḥmad Ghāzī (d. 2010) states, “new dimensions in the study of Sīrah were explored, and a new genre of literature came to be foremost in response to the abundance of works produced by Western writers on the subject.”¹³ This period also witnessed a surge of intellectual engagement among Western

⁹ This debate has been thoroughly discussed by numerous scholars, including Maulānā Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī (d. 1999). See Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī, *‘Athar-i-Ḥādīr Mei Dīn Kī Tafhīm wa Tashrīḥ*, (Majlis Tahqeeqat wa Nashriyat-i-Islam, 1980), 18–19.

¹⁰ Francis Robinson, *The New Cambridge History of Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 226.

¹¹ Ziya-ul-Hasan Faruqi, *The Deoband School and the Demand for Pakistan* (Asia Publishing House, 1963), 24.

¹² Akhtar al-Wāsey and Farhat Ehsas, *Shiblī Nu ‘mānī* (Al-Bālagh Publications, 2009), 10–11.

¹³ Muḥammad Ḥamīdullāh, *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, trans. Mahmood Ahmad Ghazi (Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2007), i.

scholars, prompting a re-evaluation of the Prophetic *sīrah* across the Islamic world, including the Indian subcontinent. In response, a modern scientific approach emerged, characterised by new debates such as the nature of prophethood, Prophetic infallibility, the *Mu'jizāt*, the Prophet's multiple marriages and other related themes. These debates predicted subsequent developments in *sīrah* studies.

During this era, a few German scholars, including Prof. Sachau, Dr. Sprenger and others, published rare manuscripts, contributing to Islamic scholarship. Likewise, notable Western scholars such as Godfrey Higgins (d. 1833),¹⁴ John Davenport (d. 1877),¹⁵ Lamartine (d. 1869),¹⁶ Carlyle (d. 1881),¹⁷ and Bosworth Smith (d. 1908),¹⁸ offered a relatively impartial assessment of the *sīrah*. Nevertheless, many works were still marred by prejudice, and certain events, such as the *Ghazwāt*, were often misinterpreted to disparage the Prophet's persona.¹⁹ However, Dr Ghāzī opines that some other motivations often come into play. For instance, the Prophet established a state in Madīnah to implement Islamic principles across various domains, including religious, social, cultural, economic, and family reforms. In contrast, Orientalists, particularly Christian scholars, are accustomed to an ascetic model of prophethood, as exemplified by prophets Yaḥyā and 'Īsā, where seclusion and detachment from worldly affairs are seen as the essence of prophethood. Consequently, the Prophet's efforts to establish a state and govern society in Madīnah were often perplexing to them. Even moderate Orientalists, such as Scottish scholar Montgomery Watt (d. 2006), have expressed surprise at this aspect of the Prophet's life. Watt objects that the Prophet's role shifted from that of a messenger in Makkah to a statesman in Madīnah.²⁰ It looks like he had a critical approach to the Muslim teaching for the universality of Islam and the finality of the Prophet's message.²¹

Despite relying heavily on weak and tertiary sources, many Orientalists, such as D. S. Margoliouth (d. 1940), Muir and others, demonstrated proficiency in Arabic and had access to primary Islamic sources. For instance, Shiblī affirms that Orientalists like Margoliouth had thoroughly gone through the Islamic literature but, despite their command of Arabic and their exhaustive study, they disappoint us with their misinterpretations.²² Consequently, their criticisms of the *sīrah* resonated with modern rationalistic minds. The adoption of modern scientific methodologies and emphasis on reason-based argumentation made their objections appealing to this emerging class, including Muslim readership. For instance, 'Abd al-Mājid

¹⁴ Godfrey Higgins, *An Apology for Mohamed* (Allahabad Reform Society, 1829), 5–25.

¹⁵ John Davenport, *An Apology for Mohammed and the Koran* (J. Davy & Sons, 1869).

¹⁶ Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire de la Turquie* [History of Turkey] (Librairie du Constitutionnel, 1854).

¹⁷ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. Henry David Gray (Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906).

¹⁸ Bosworth Smith, *Mohammed and Mohammedanism* (Smith, Elder & Co, 1874), 236–37.

¹⁹ Prof. Abdur Raheem Kidwai (Aligarh Muslim University) devotes the first chapter of his work to evaluating those Western scholars, from the early to medieval eras, who attempted to distort the ideal character of Prophet Muhammad owing to their lack of access to primary sources and prejudices. See Abdur Raheem Kidwai, *Images of Prophet Muhammad in English Literature* (Peter Lang, 2018), 1–25.

²⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford University Press, 1961), 233–40.

²¹ Maḥmūd Ahmād Ghāzī, *Muhāḍrāt-i-Sīrat* [Lectures on *Sīrah*] (Areeb Publications, 2011), 323.

²² Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, 1/65–66.

Daryābādī (d. 1977) openly admitted that he had been highly influenced by Western authors, leading him to view the Prophet as a tyrannical conqueror. However, Shiblī's *Sīrah al-Nabī* transformed his perception of the Prophet from that of a ruthless leader to a great reformer, kind-hearted ruler, and compassionate guide.²³

Meanwhile, local Christians such as 'Imād al-Dīn (d. 1900),²⁴ along with other non-Muslim writers under the patronage of the British government, launched a campaign against Muslims in the early 19th century by authoring debated works on the Prophet. In response, scholars like Karāmat 'Alī Jūnpūrī (d. 1873), Maulawī Chirāgh 'Alī (d. 1895), Maulānā Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī (d. 1914),²⁵ and others responded to their charges; however, the literature was primarily written in polemical and traditional style.

SIR WILLIAM MUIR'S CONTROVERSIAL WORK AND ITS CHALLENGE

Meanwhile, in the 1860s, a well-known Scottish Orientalist and lieutenant governor of the British colonial era, Sir William Muir (d. 1905),²⁶ penned a book on the Prophet's biography, titled *The Life of Mohammad*.²⁷ Although the author had extensively studied Islamic sciences, like other contemporary Orientalists, he was oblivious to the principles of *sīrah* and *ḥadīth* studies.²⁸ As a result, the author tried to disprove established narratives of the *sīrah*.²⁹ For instance, Sir William Muir showed enthusiasm in ridiculing the Prophet on his marriages.³⁰ Owing to growing concern, a few Muslim scholars felt the need to respond to the bigoted objections raised by Orientalists and the local Christian authors about some events of Prophetic *sīrah* often deemed to be biased and offensive. As a result, keeping the prerequisites of the time at the front, the Muslim scholars, while adopting modern methodology, critically evaluated the works of the Orientalists and clarified their doubts. Meanwhile, after making a reflective assessment of the early *sīrah* literature, they came up with new works on the Prophetic *sīrah*. Among these scholars, Sir Sayyid, Shiblī and Justice Sayyid Amīr 'Alī (d. 1928)³¹ held distinguished places.³² Dr Maḥmūd Aḥmad Ghāzī states

²³ 'Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī, *Āp Bītī* [Autobiography] (Majlis Nashriyāt-i-Islam, 1996), 248.

²⁴ He, along with his family, converted to Christianity in 1866. See 'Imād al-Dīn, *Mohammedan Brought to Christ: The Autobiography* (Church Missionary House, 1885), 3.

²⁵ Both scholars were colleagues of Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān.

²⁶ Sir William Muir was a Scottish Orientalist who played a prominent role as an administrator in the intelligence department of British India during the 1857 revolt. He later served as the Lieutenant Governor of the North-Western Provinces.

²⁷ William Muir, *The Life of Mahomet* (Oliver and Boyd/John Grant, 1923).

²⁸ Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, 1/72.

²⁹ Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid*, 158, 422.

³⁰ Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, 290–92.

³¹ Sayyid 'Amīr 'Alī (d. 1928) offered strong intellectual responses through works such as *A Critical Examination of the Life and Teachings of Muḥammad* (1873) and *The Spirit of Islam* (1891). Robert Durie Osborn (d. 1889), a British army officer and author, after reading the former, regarded it as the finest literary achievement of its time on the subject, particularly for the educated class. For more details, see Abdus Subhas, "Profile: Syed Ameer Ali [1849–1928]," *The Milli Gazette* August 16-31 (2000), <https://www.milligazette.com/Archives/15-8-2000/Art19.htm>.

³² Ghāzī, *Muḥāḍrat*, 651.

the writings of these scholars were the best examples typifying this response as it emerged in the Subcontinent.³³

The first scholar to recognise the detrimental impact of Sir William Muir's work and to lead the charge in critically examining it was none other than Sir Sayyid. Christian W. Troll, a German theologian and Islamic scholar, states "this was the most dramatic challenge by critical historical scholarship which Sir Sayyid encountered in the early 1860s was Sir William Muir's work."³⁴ A scholar well-versed in Islamic sciences, he was also knowledgeable in Biblical studies and modern scientific methodology. He penned a commentary of the Bible that began with a discussion on the importance of prophethood.³⁵ To access essential primary sources, he travelled to England, where he spent nearly two years conducting research. The result of his rigorous efforts was a compelling rebuttal titled *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, published in 1869, which "gained a great vogue in India."³⁶ Maulānā Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī (d. 1999), while recognising Sir Sayyid's groundbreaking initiative, remarks:

In response to Sir William Muir's work '*The Life of Mohammed*,' a book replete with Christian biases and factual distortions, Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, a trailblazing advocate of modern Western education and a respected figure in British Indian circles, felt impelled to issue a rebuttal. To this end, he undertook a journey to London in 1869, making considerable personal sacrifices, including selling a substantial portion of his property and assets. The resultant work, '*Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*,' constitutes a landmark achievement in Islamic scholarship, arguably its first systematic refutation. Its significance and value in promoting a nuanced understanding of Islam remain uncontested.³⁷

SIR SAYYID'S CONTRIBUTION TO URDU AND EARLY *SĪRA* EFFORTS

As a trailblazing writer of his time, Sir Sayyid made significant contributions to academia and the evolution of Urdu literature. His legacy was aptly acknowledged by numerous notable scholars. For instance, Shiblī while highlighting his profound impact on the intellectual and literary landscape of the region, acknowledges:

Sir Sayyid achieved significant accomplishments in the reformation of the nation, notably in the development of the Urdu language and literature. Thanks to his efforts, Urdu transcended its traditional themes of love and romance to address various imperative subjects, including politics, ethics, history, and others. He infused Urdu with emphasis, impact, depth, simplicity, and clarity that, to this day, Persian has not matched. All the great writers in the country today owe a debt of gratitude to him.³⁸

³³ Ḥamīdullāh, *The Life and Work of the Prophet of Islam*, i.

³⁴ Christian W. Troll, *Sayyad Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (Vikas Publishing House, 1978), 112–13.

³⁵ Harlan O. Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth-Century India* (Yoda Press, 2008), 211.

³⁶ Masood Ali Khan, *Islam in Modern India* (Mohit Publications, 2008), 9.

³⁷ Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī, *Islāmīyāt Aur Maghribī Mustashriqīn wa Muslamān Muṣannifīn* [Islamic Studies, Orientalists and Muslim Scholars], trans. Mohiuddin Ahmad (Majlis Taḥqīqāt wa Nashriyāt Islām, 2012), 21.

³⁸ Shiblī Nu'mānī, *Maqālāt* [Articles] (Dār al-Muṣannifīn Shiblī Academy, 2020), 2/55.

Sir Sayyid's contributions to the Urdu language and literature have received widespread recognition from esteemed scholars. Similarly, Dr. Sayyid 'Abdullāh (d. 1986), a renowned litterateur of the Urdu language, and former Principal of Oriental College Lahore, illustrates:

Sir Sayyid not only played a pivotal role in preserving the Urdu language but also made significant contributions to the development and evolution of Urdu literature. His greatest achievement in this regard was shaping Urdu prose into a vehicle for collective purpose, making it a clear and effective medium for expressing social and academic concerns.³⁹

Before *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, the first renowned work on *sīrah* written after 1857, Sir Sayyid had composed a short *Maulūd Sharīf* in Urdu prose in 1843, titled *Jilā' al-Qulūb bi Dhikr al-Mahbūb* (Polishing of the Hearts by Remembering the Beloved).⁴⁰ Its primary sources include Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥaqq Dehlawī's (d. 1662) *Madārij al-Nubuwwah* [Stages of Prophethood] and Shāh Walīullāh's (d. 1762) *Surūr al-Maḥzūn*.⁴¹ In this treatise, themes have been illustrated concisely in chronological order, like the names of the Prophet, his parents and ancestors, his birth, feeding, upbringing, journey to Syria, marriage to Ḥaḍrat Khadījah, first Revelation, *da'wah*, hardships, *Mi'rāj*, *Hijrah*, other *Mu'jizāt*, *Ghazwāt* and *Sarāyā*,⁴² conquests, *Hajj* and *'Umrah*, *ḥilyah* (physical appearance), morals and character, *'ibādah*, foodstuff, Clothing, Spouses, Children, *khuddām* (servants), scribes, envoys, Close Companions, arms, illness, demise, sadness of Companions and final rest. Sir Sayyid composed this treatise following the prevailing custom of his time, incorporating many traditions that had gained popularity through earlier *Maulūd Nāmahs*. However, he recognised that such treatises were often filled with unauthentic narrations and saw the need for a different kind of *Maulūd Nāmah*. He articulates this need in one of his articles:

During this period, I encountered numerous treatises that, in keeping with the customs of the time, relied on weak narrations. Rather than providing a genuine account of the Prophetic *Sīrah*, these works resembled elegies and mourning pieces, typical of those recited during the month of *Muḥarram*. This led me to conceive a new treatise that would present a concise and sequential narrative of the Prophet's life, grounded in authentic narrations.⁴³

However, in later years, due to his shift in thinking from traditionalism to modernism,⁴⁴ Sir Sayyid distanced himself from this treatise.⁴⁵ He remarked, "It is unfortunate that not only

³⁹ Sayyid Muḥammad 'Abdullāh, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan Aur Unkei Nāmwar Rūfāqā Kī Urdu Nathar Kā Fannī Aur Fikrī Jā'izah* [A Critical Analysis of the Urdu Prose of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his Notable Colleagues] (Educational Book House, 2006), 12.

⁴⁰ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Jilā' al-Qulūb Bi Dhikr al-Mahbūb* [Invigorating Hearts with the Remembrance of the Beloved] (n.p., 1843), accessed March 3, 2025, <https://archive.org/details/JilaUlQaloobBezikaAlMahboobBySirSyedAhmadKhanAliGarh>.

⁴¹ Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 37–38.

⁴² A *sariyyah* (pl. *sarāyā*) refers to a military expedition dispatched by the Prophet in which he did not personally participate and was carried out solely by his Companions. In contrast, a *ghazwah* (pl. *ghazawāt*) is an expedition in which the Prophet took part.

⁴³ Muḥammad Ismā'īl Pānīpattī, *Maqālāt-i-Sir Sayyid* [Articles of Sir Sayyid] (Majlis Tarriqī-i-Adab, 1962), 31.

⁴⁴ Anwar Maḥmūd Khālid, *Urdu Nathar Mei Sīrat-i-Rasūl* [The Prophetic *Sīrah* in Urdu Prose] (Iqbal Academy Pak, 1989), 267.

⁴⁵ Sir Sayyid declares his thought transformation as "maturity in religious issues." See Pānīpattī, *Maqālāt*, 32.

unreliable narrations, but even some absurd stories have found their way into this treatise.”⁴⁶ His criticism extended beyond this work; he also questioned the reliability of the sources he had initially relied on – particularly *Madārij al-Nabuwwah* – which he later regarded as containing countless dubious and exaggerated accounts.⁴⁷ Despite his later reservations, Sir Sayyid’s review highlights the presence of fabricated narrations within the treatise.⁴⁸ Therefore, this work cannot be dismissed outright when discussing the genre of *Maulūd Nāmāhs*. It neither consists entirely of fabricated events – a hallmark of many *Maulūd Nāmāhs* – nor does it entirely forsake authentic traditions. As is customary in *Maulūd Nāmāhs*, *Durūd Sharīf*⁴⁹ is frequently cited and the text is imbued with strong religious sentiment. A notable quality of the treatise is its ability to summarise key events from the Prophet’s life concisely and elegantly in just a few phrases.

KHUṬUBĀT-I-AḤMADIYYAH: THE FIRST SCIENTIFIC EFFORT IN URDU SĪRAH LITERATURE

Sir Sayyid’s most important work on *sīrah*, *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyah*, holds a distinguished place among his literary, academic, and religious contributions. This work stands as a testament to the author’s deep devotion to Prophet Muhammad. Professor Rafī‘ullāh Shihāb (d. 2003) – a renowned educationist, historian, intellectual, researcher, and expert in Islamic sciences, as well as the former Head of the Department of Islamic Studies at Government College Lahore – acknowledges the merit of Shiblī’s *Sīrah al-Nabī*. Yet, in the foreword to *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyah*, he emphasises its unique importance:

However, it’s worth noting that ‘Allāmah Shiblī’s work, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, was inspired by the scholarly endeavours of Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān. Progressive scholars already held Sir Sayyid in high esteem, and some traditional scholars even considered his work superior to ‘Allāmah Shiblī’s. One notable scholar who shared this opinion is Maulānā ‘Abd al-Mājid Daryābādī.⁵⁰

The compilation of *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyah* was motivated by a desire to respond to the biased allegations against the Prophet made by Sir William Muir in his 1861 publication, *Life of Mohammed*. Sir Sayyid was the first scholar to recognise the need for an academic rebuttal, “demonstrating his rational and scientific approach to the issue.”⁵¹ His colleagues found him restless over Muir’s work, which he measured as a serious attack on Islam.⁵² Although Muir had studied Islamic sources extensively and employed a methodology distinct from earlier Orientalists, his work was marred by a tendency to interpret and distort certain narrations and events to suit his perspective, thereby offending the Prophet. Sir Sayyid was

⁴⁶ Pānīpattī, *Maqālāt*, 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 30–35.

⁴⁹ Salutations on Prophet Muḥammad.

⁵⁰ Muḥammad Mohsin, “*Urdu Adab Mei Sīrat Nighārī Kā Irtiqā*” [The Evolution of Sīrah Writing in the Urdu Literature] (PhD diss., Maharshi Dayanand Saraswati University, Ajmer, 2017), 79.

⁵¹ Hafiz Muhammad Naeem et al., “A Comprehensive Appraisal of the Movements aiming at Fostering Sīrah Studies in British India during 1857-1947 CE,” *Journal of Al-Tamaddun* 19, no. 1 (2024), 300.

⁵² Troll, *Sayyad Ahmad Khan*, 113.

deeply troubled by Muir's work and went to great lengths to craft a rejoinder, even selling his household belongings to fund his research. Ultimately, he travelled to England in April 1869 to "gain access to Islamic and Western source material in the libraries of London, in order to write a comprehensive reply to Muir's work,"⁵³ addressing his objections with scholarly rigour and authority. Notably, Muir acknowledged that his criticisms had missed the mark.⁵⁴ After reading *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, he is reported to have said that he did not question Sir Sayyid's Islam, but opposed the version of Islam followed by the majority of Muslims.⁵⁵ Sir Sayyid fearlessly⁵⁶ subjected William Muir's work to critical examination, scrutinising its content and conclusions. In the *Muqaddimah* of *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, he explored the fundamental nature of religion, positing that the only true faith must align with the natural order and its governing laws. In this context, he made a profound assertion about Islam:

As far as my research about true religion is concerned, I sincerely and conscientiously assert that I have found Islam certainly to be the truest religion. That is, its genuine and chief principles are in perfect harmony with that true one I have defined as true religion; therefore, I hope that every devotee of truth will candidly and impartially investigate the truth of Islam.⁵⁷

In addition to drawing on the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, Sir Sayyid counters the arguments of Sir William Muir and other Christian authors by referencing earlier scriptures – such as the *Torah* (Torah of Moses), *Zabūr* (Psalms of David), and *Injīl* (Gospels of Jesus) – as well as citing statements from various Christian writers. Sir Sayyid's response not only refuted the critic's allegations but also involved a meticulous compilation of *Bashārāt* (Glad Tidings) concerning the Prophet from earlier scriptures, presented systematically and methodically.⁵⁸ Through critical examination of sources, he integrated essential themes into the Prophetic *sīrah*, which, although previously absent from contemporary discourse, were rooted in early Islamic literature. This approach not only bolstered the narrative but also provided a fresh perspective on the Prophet's life and legacy. For instance, the history and genealogy literature encompasses the data on pre-Islamic Arabian society. However, Sir Sayyid – while answering Sir William Muir's allegations on the Prophet's lineage, family, and the antiquity of Ka'bah and the holy city of Makkah – discussed the Arabian society and geography before describing the individual biography of the Prophet. Islamic culture was added as a part of Prophetic *sīrah* to the subject for the first time. The later scholars followed the same method and carried this novel approach in their works.⁵⁹ The cultural and historical context of Arabia before and during the Prophet's time was considered a part of *sīrah* to better understand the circumstances in which the Prophetic events occurred. Therefore, Sir Sayyid established the

⁵³ Ibid., 127.

⁵⁴ Ghāzī, *Muhāḍrāt*, 617.

⁵⁵ Hālī, *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid*, 464.

⁵⁶ Maulānā Altāf Ḥusayn Hālī mentions that some of Sir Sayyid's associates, who were employed under the British administration, advised him – while he was preparing for his trip to London – not to respond to Muir's book. However, Sir Sayyid did not heed their advice and instead began working on his response on arriving in London. See Hālī, *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid*, 416.

⁵⁷ Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed* (Idarah Adabiyat Delli, 2009), XI.

⁵⁸ Ghāzī, *Muhāḍrāt*, 625.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

foundation of modern *sīrah* writing in Urdu prose. The scholars, including Shiblī, Qādī Sulaymān Maṣṣūpūrī (d. 1934), and Sayyid Sulaymān Nadwī (d. 1953), are the most significant authors who developed and promoted this modern scientific style.

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTERS

Sir Sayyid designed *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah* into 12 inclusive chapters with the key objective of defending Prophet's *sīrah* events against Muir's criticisms. The opening chapter provides a thorough historical and geographical account of Arabia, rectifying several misconceptions raised by Muir, such as the location of Paran (Farān) in Makkah,⁶⁰ and the status of Hājirah, whom Sir Sayyid argues was a princess rather than a slave. The second and third chapters analyse pre-Islamic Arabia by unfolding its religious beliefs, customs, ethical values, and the existence of Christianity and Judaism, while signifying how Islam reformed earlier religious traditions by preserving their true teachings and countering later distortions. The fourth chapter highlights the universal contributions of Islam to human civilisation, mentioning the testimonies of prominent Western scholars such as Edward Gibbon (d. 1794) and Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881), and rebutting common criticisms related to polygamy, slavery, and the lives of previous prophets.⁶¹ The fifth and sixth chapters concentrate on Islamic sources, elucidating the methods of *sīrah* literature and *ḥadīth* corpus, differentiating the standards of criticism applicable to each science, and defending questioned events through scholarly analysis of the narratives. The seventh chapter is dedicated to the Qur'ān, deliberating its Divine authenticity while highlighting imprecisions in European translations. The eighth and ninth chapters cover the historical significance of the Ka'bah, rebutting Muir's claims concerning their origins, and tracing the genealogy of Prophet Muhammad to Prophet Ismā'īl through historical evidence and the testimonies of numerous Western writers. The tenth chapter presents prophecies regarding the advent of Prophet Muhammad mentioned in earlier revealed scriptures, with special to the *Torah* and *Injīl*. The eleventh chapter critically analyses the events of *Mi'rāj* and *Shaqq al-Ṣadr*, distinguishing between several narrations and concluding that only the Qur'ānic account of *Mi'rāj* is fully dependable, while interpreting both events as visionary experiences rather than physical miracles, thereby differing from the *jumhūr maslak* (mainstream ideology).⁶² Finally, the twelfth chapter recounts the Prophet's childhood including him using only reliable narrations, while declining several legendary accounts generally recorded in classical *sīrah* literature, such as

⁶⁰ Khān, *A Series of Essays*, chapter 1, 80–82.

⁶¹ In this chapter, Sir Sayyid elucidates that Islam restored the reverence and rightful status of previous Prophets, such as Ibrāhīm, Ishāq, Ya'qūb, Lūṭ, Dāwūd, Sulaymān, Hārūn and others, whereas in some Christian scriptures they had been portrayed in a derogatory manner, almost as convicts.

⁶² Khān, *Khuṭubāt*, 431–60. Aṭf Husayn Hālī (d. 1914), a close associate of Sir Sayyid, in his review of *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, observes that while the book contains nothing that directly contradicts the fundamental principles of Islam, there are two instances where the author diverges from the views of mainstream scholars. These are the events of *Mi'rāj* and *Shaqq-i-Ṣadr*, both of which the author describes as dreams rather than physical occurrences. See Hālī, *Ḥayāt-i-Jawaid*, 463.

the collapse of Kisrā's palace and the drying of Lake Sāwah.⁶³ Collectively, these 12 chapters reflect Sir Sayyid's historical, analytical, and critical methodology, relying on authentic sources with rational examination and historical evidence to defend the Prophet's *sīrah* and present Islam in a manner envisioned to engage diverse readership with scholarly objectivity.

SIR SAYYID AḤMAD KHĀN'S RESPONSE TO SIR WILLIAM MUIR

Sir William Muir aimed to interpret several events from the Prophetic *sīrah* in a distorted way – narratives that are neither supported by reliable sources nor consistent with the fundamental teachings and character of Prophet Muhammad. While referring to the Prophet's childhood journey to Syria with his uncle, Abū Ṭālib, Muir states:

On this journey, too, he passed through several Jewish settlements and came in contact with the Christians of Syria. Hitherto, he had witnessed, if at all, only an isolated and imperfect exhibition of their faith: now he saw its rites in full and regular performance by a whole community. The national and social customs founded upon Christianity; the churches with their crosses and images, their pictures and other symbols of the faith; the ringing of bells; the frequent assemblages for worship, were all forced on his attention.⁶⁴

Sir Sayyid not only raised numerous questions about the reliability of this tradition, mentioning the Prophet's journey to Syria with Abū Ṭālib, and held the event as a fabricated account, but also critically evaluated its textual content. While highlighting the weakness in *Jāmi' Tirmidhī's* tradition⁶⁵ mentioning this event, Sir Sayyid attempts to "prove the absurdity of the tradition in question."⁶⁶ Thereafter, he states, "Tirmizi says that Abū Ṭālib sent Mohamed back from Syria by Abū Bakr and Bilāl, which is absurd, seeing that the former was two years younger than Mohamad, and the latter not then born."⁶⁷ Sir Sayyid subsequently refuted Sir William Muir's claim mentioned above:

We somewhat hesitate to coincide with this remark, because this very boy, whose youthful mind was so much affected upon seeing the cross, the images, and other symbols of Christianity, did, in his after life, oppose these very things, strongly prohibit the adoption of any one of them, forbid the use of the cross and the worship of images, declare that God had no son, and in opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity, preach, inculcate, and propagate the worship of the one only God.⁶⁸

Since the narration of Prophet Muhammad's meeting with the Christian monk during the said journey has also been coloured by numerous Western scholars, including John William Draper (d. 1882), many modern Muslim scholars, including Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khān and

⁶³ Khān, *Khuṭubāt*, 461–79. Following him, 'Allamah Shiblī also rejects these events. See Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, 37–38. However, the other scholars, including Alṭāf Ḥusayn Hālī and Maulana Idrīs Kāndhalwī (d. 1974), believe in the authenticity of these events. Idrīs Kāndhalwī, *Sīrah al-Muṣṭafā* [The Life of Prophet Muhammad] (Kutub Khanah A'zāziyah, 2008), 1/75–80.

⁶⁴ Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, 11.

⁶⁵ Muhammad bin Īsā Tirmidhī, *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī* [Tirmidhī's Compilation], ḥadīth no. 3620, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi>.

⁶⁶ Khān, *A Series of Essays*, chapter 12, 24.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 24–25.

Shiblī Nu‘mānī, while rebutting such claims, examined the chain of transmission of the narration and critically evaluated its text, leading them to question the event’s validity. However, many classical and traditional scholars have accepted the narration as reliable.⁶⁹

Similarly, Sir William Muir, in the first chapter, *The Birth and Childhood of Mohammad*, while discussing the Prophet’s childhood at Banū Sa‘ad with his foster mother Ḥalimah, concluded that Ḥalimah witnessed a “fit of epilepsy” by the Prophet. Accordingly, while recording the story, the author states:”

Some strange event occurred which greatly alarmed his nurse. It was probably a fit of epilepsy, but Muslim legend has invested it with so many marvellous features as make it difficult to discover the real facts.⁷⁰

The “strange event” referred to here is the incident of *Shaqq al-Ṣadr* (the splitting of the chest). Sir Sayyid devotes the entire 11th chapter to debating this event alongside the *Mi‘rāj* event (Ascension to the Heavens), interpreting the latter as a dream and the former as part of that dream. Therefore, he states:

In our “Essay on the Shaqq-i-Ṣadr and Mi‘rāj,” we have dwelt upon this subject at some length, and have proved, to the best of our ability, that it was nothing more than a portion of, or episode to, the dream of the Prophet on the night of the Meraj, or journey to heaven; that it never occurred in the body, but was purely imaginary.⁷¹

In the same chapter, he not only rejected the narrations reported by Hishāmī and al-Wāqidi but also criticised the related narration of Anas bin Mālīk reported in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*.⁷² However, at the outset of the final chapter, Sir Sayyid examined the same account mentioned above and subsequently evaluated Muir’s claim:

Sir William Muir says that Hishami and other later writers add that the husband of Halimah concluded that the boy had “had a fit.” But this translation of the passage from Hishami is incorrect. We here quote the original passage verbatim.

قالت و قال لي ابوه يا حليمه لقد خشيت ان يكون هذا الغلام قد أصيبَ فَأَلْحَقِيهِ بِأَهْلِهِ

Halima said she was told by his (the Prophet’s) foster-father (Halima’s husband) that ‘O Halima, I fear that the infant has received an evil spirit—that is, is under the influence of an evil spirit—therefore let him be sent back to his family.” The fact that Halima’s husband did not mean to infer, by these words, that the infant was suffering from any actual disease, is also verified by the following remarks of Amina, made by her on the occasion of Halima’s returning the infant to her. “Ah!” exclaimed she, “didst thou fear that he was under the influence of evil spirits?” اتخوفت عليه الشيطان. We do not find in Hishami the word Omeeb, أميب, mentioned in Sir William Muir’s note, p. 21, v. i.; neither does that word imply “had a fit,” as the writer had been led to understand. In Hishami, the word

⁶⁹ For further details, see the author’s previous article on the subject: Javeed Amhad Malik and Showkat Hussain Dar, “Bahīra’s Meeting with Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and Argumentative Muslim Scholarship: A Critical Assessment,” *Afkar Journal of Islamic & Religious Studies* 4, no. 1 (2020), [https://afkar.com.pk/previousissues/Vol_4/Issue_1/article02\(english\).pdf](https://afkar.com.pk/previousissues/Vol_4/Issue_1/article02(english).pdf).

⁷⁰ Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, 6.

⁷¹ Khān, *A Series of Essays*, chapter 12, 15.

⁷² Muslim bin Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, The Book of Faith, ḥadīth no. 162c, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:162c>.

Oseeb أصیب is given. As there is but very little difference in the appearance of the two words, Sir William appears to have fallen into a mistake, from having quoted a faulty manuscript.⁷³

Therefore, Sir Sayyid attempted to critically evaluate Muir's claims, employing the principles of *riwāyah* (narration) and *dirāyah* (rational understanding of the text).

PROPHET'S MIRACULOUS *WILĀDAH*: SIR SAYYID'S CRITICISM OF RELATED NARRATIONS

The Prophet's *wilādah* (birth) has been described in various ways by different *sīrah* writers, each based on their research and sources. Many of the *muḥaddithīn* (Traditionists) and *Ahl al-Siyar* (biographers of the Prophet) have recorded numerous miraculous events said to have occurred at the time of the Prophet's *wilādah*. One well-known narration, cited by reliable scholars such as Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), recounts that on the night of the Prophet's *wilādah*, a tremor struck the palace of Kīsrā, the emperor of Persia, causing 14 of its minarets to collapse. Additionally, the sacred fire that had been continuously burning for centuries in the Zoroastrian fire temple was extinguished, and the Lake Sāwah dried up.⁷⁴ Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, in the concluding chapter of his *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, offered his perspective on the narrations concerning the *Mu'jizāt* reported to have occurred at the time of the Prophet's *wilādah*:

آنحضرت کی ولادت کی نسبت بہت سی عجیب روایتیں مشہور ہیں کہ ولادت کی رات کو کسری کے محل میں زلزلہ آیا اور اُس کے چودہ کنگورے گر پڑے۔ فارس کا مقدس آتشکدہ جس میں سالہا سال سے برابر آگ جلتی چلی آتی تھی، دفعۃً بجھ گیا۔ وہاں کے مریدوں نے عجیب عجیب خوابیں دیکھیں اور چشمہ ساوہ دفعۃً خشک ہو گیا۔ مگر ان روایتوں کی معتبری کی قابل اعتماد سندیں نہیں ہیں اور نہ یہ مذہبی روایتیں سمجھی جاسکتی ہیں۔ آنحضرت کی ذات بابرکات کے سبب اسلام نے رونق پائی اور مسلمانوں کو فتوحات نمایاں حاصل ہوتی گئیں اور تمام مملکت فارس مسلمانوں کے ہاتھ پر فتح ہوئی اور وہاں کے قدیم آتش کدے برباد ہوئے اور کسری کے محلوں میں زلزلہ ڈال دیا۔ ان واقعات کو جو بعد کو وقوع میں آئے، شاعروں نے اپنے شاعرانہ خیالات میں آنحضرت کی ولادت سے منسوب کیا کہ گویا اُن کا پیدا ہونا ہی فارس کے آتش کدوں کا بجھنا اور کسری کے محل میں زلزلہ پڑنا تھا۔ رفتہ رفتہ یہ شاعرانہ خیال بطور روایت کے مروج ہونے لگے اور عین ولادت ہی سے منسوب کر دیئے گئے۔ پس ان روایتوں کو مذہبی روایتیں تصور کرنا اُن لوگوں کی غلط فہمی ہے جو مسلمانوں کی مذہبی روایتوں کی حقیقت سے واقف نہیں ہیں۔⁷⁵

Many strange narrations are celebrated related to the *wilādah* of the Prophet that on that night, an earthquake occurred in the palace of *Kīsrā* which led its 14 minarets down on the ground, the sacred synagogue of Persia in which the fire had been burning for years got abruptly extinguished. The devotees there saw bizarre dreams and the Lake *Sāwah* suddenly dried up. But there is no reliable evidence about the authenticity of these narrations and surely these cannot be termed as religious narrations. Undoubtedly, owing to the blessed personality of the Prophet, Islam flourished and the Muslims gained significant victories and conquered the empires of Persia. The ancient fire temples met

⁷³ Khān, *A Series of Essays*, chapter 12, 15–16.

⁷⁴ 'Imād al-Dīn bin Kathīr, *Sīrah al-Nabī* [The Life of Prophet Muhammad], trans. Maulana Hidayatullah Nadwī (Hafzi Book Depot, n.d.), 1/151. Also see 'Imād al-Dīn bin Kathīr, *Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah* [The Beginning and the End], trans. Muḥammad Arshad Hasan (Maktabah Danish, 1999), 2/573; 'Abd al-Ḥaqq Dehlawī, *Madārij al-Nubuwwah* [Stages of Prophethood] (Adabi Duniya, 2015), 1/34.

⁷⁵ Khān, *Khuṭubāt*, 462.

their destruction which shook the palace of *Kisrā*. The events that took place later were attributed by the poets to the Prophet's *wilādah* in their poetic notion, as it extinguished the fire of Persia and brought an earthquake in the palace of *Kisrā* in real. Gradually, this poetic idea began to spread as a narration and thus was attributed to the Prophet's *Wilādat*. Therefore, considering these reports as religious traditions is a sheer misunderstanding of those who are not aware of the validity of the religious traditions of Muslims.

Thus, Sir Sayyid was the first modern Indian scholar to categorise such narrations concerning the Prophet's *wilādah* as fabricated, firmly rejecting their classification as miracles. The same critical approach was subsequently adopted by later scholars, including Shiblī.

IMPACT ON ‘ALLĀMAH SHIBLĪ NU‘MĀNĪ

Although Shiblī has described the Prophet's *wilādah* in an exceptionally literary style – one that is virtually unparalleled in the entire corpus of Urdu *sīrah* literature – he has not only omitted the traditions reporting the *Mu‘jizāt* associated with the Prophet's *wilādah* but has also dismissed them as mere exaggerations and overstatements. In support of this position, he presents an argument:

Exaggerated narrations related to *Faḍā'il* and *Manāqib* found in Bayhaqī, Abū Nu‘aym, Bazzār, Ṭabarānī, etc., and even in Nasā'ī, Ibn Mājah, Tirmidhī etc. have not been reported by Bukhārī and Muslim. This establishes that as the level of research and criticism increases, exaggerated narrations decrease. For instance, Bayhaqī, Abū Nu‘aym, Kharrātī, Ibn Asākir and Al-Ṭabarī report that on the occasion of the Prophet's *Wilādah*, fourteen minarets of the castle of *Kisrā* fell on the ground, the fire in the Zoroastrian synagogue in Persia got extinguished, and the *Ṭabariyyah* Sea dried up. But *Bukhārī* or *Muslim*, or any other book of *Siḥāḥ Sittah*⁷⁶ has not given place to such narrations.⁷⁷

In the *Muqaddimah* of *Sīrah al-Nabī*, while commenting on the science of *sīrah*, Shiblī describes the narrations concerning the *Mu‘jizāt* related to the Prophet's *wilādah* as purely exaggerated. Nevertheless, the refined literary style in which he presents these accounts in the section on the *wilādat* makes it evident that he was deeply influenced by Sir Sayyid.⁷⁸ Like Sir Sayyid, ‘Allāmah Shiblī regarded this tradition as unreliable and, rather than accepting it as a *Mu‘jizah*, sought to present it as an unrealistic event cloaked in refined literary expression. Sir Sayyid is likely the first among modern scholars to assert that nearly all the narrations of the well-known *Mu‘jizāt* – as recorded in the books of *Dalā'il* and *Maulūd Nāmahs* – fall short of meeting the criteria of authenticity.⁷⁹ Consequently, this critical stance also influenced Shiblī; however, unlike Sir Sayyid, he chose to overlook such traditions rather than explicitly reject them or subject them to rational scrutiny. For this reason, he

⁷⁶ *Siḥāḥ Sittah* refers to the six most authentic *ḥadīth* collections in Sunni Islam: *Bukhārī*, *Muslim*, *Abū Dāwūd*, *Tirmidhī*, *Nasā'ī* and *Ibn Mājah*.

⁷⁷ Nu‘mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, 1/37–38.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1/120.

⁷⁹ Pānīpattī, *Maqālāt*, 31.

omitted any mention of *Mu'jizāt* in the portion of the book that he authored.⁸⁰ In his critique of the chains of transmission, he dismissed them as exaggerated. Likewise, while discussing the account of the Prophet's meeting incident with the monk Buḥīrah during the trading journey to Syria with Abū Ṭālib, Shiblī adopted the same approach and reasoning of Sir Sayyid, ultimately deeming the incident unreliable.⁸¹

ANALYSIS OF THE APPROACHES

Among the earlier scholars, this narration concerning the aforementioned *Mu'jizāt* at the time of the Prophet's *wilādah* has also been recorded by Ibn Sa'ad.⁸² Furthermore, Al-Bayhaqī (d. 1066) mentioned it referring to Makhzūm bin Hānī.⁸³ In addition, the renowned subcontinental scholar Shāh 'Abd al-Ḥaqq Dehlawī (d. 1642) discussed it in detail in his celebrated work *Madārij al-Nabuwwah*.⁸⁴ Similarly, Maulānā Idrīs Kāndhalwī (d. 1974), a traditional scholar of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, narrated several *Mu'jizāt* associated with that occasion, including the one under discussion.⁸⁵ Kāndhalwī not only detailed this narration with references to authorities such as al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), Ibn Ḥajar (d. 1449), and Suyūṭī (d. 1505), but also affirmed its authenticity by critically examining the chains of transmission. For instance, narrators Sa'īd and Ma'rūf – both affiliated with this tradition – are confirmed to appear in the collections of Al-Bukhārī (d. 870), Al-Muslim (d. 875), Abū Dāwūd (d. 889), and Al-Nasā'ī (d. 915).⁸⁶ While classifying this narration as *mursal*,⁸⁷ Kāndhalwī elaborated on a key principle upheld by Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 767), Imām Mālik (d. 795), and Imām Aḥmad (d. 855): that a *mursal ḥadīth* can form a valid basis for theological argumentation. He also cited the view of Ibn Ḥajar, who, based on the criteria discussed in *Fath al-Bārī's Muqadimmah*, categorised this narration as *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) or *ḥasan* (fair).⁸⁸

Moreover, Shiblī's claim – that this tradition is exaggerated because it is not recorded in *Bukhārī* or *Muslim* nor in the rest of the books of *Siḥāḥ Sittah* – stands weak because it is a

⁸⁰ Shiblī does not address *Mu'jizāt* anywhere in the portion of the book he authored. Even the most significant *Mu'jizah* of the Prophet – the *Mi'rāj* – is notably absent. This omission is striking given that the final section of the first *Muqaddimah*, which outlines the anticipated methodology, structure, and content of the work, explicitly states that certain *Mu'jizāt*, such as the *Mi'rāj*, would be recorded under their respective dates. See Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, 1/70.

⁸¹ Nu'mānī, *Sīrah al-Nabī*, 1/126–28.

⁸² Muḥammad bin Sa'ad, *Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* [Great Generations], trans. 'Abdullah 'Imādī and Muḥammad Asghar Mughal (Hafzi Book Depot, 1998), 1/96.

⁸³ Abū Bakr Aḥmad bin Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-Nabuwwah* [Proofs of Prophethood], trans. Muḥammad Ismā'īl Al-Jārūwī (Dār al-Ishā'at, 2009), 1/182.

⁸⁴ Dehlawī, *Madārij*, 1/34.

⁸⁵ Kāndhalwī, *Sīrah*, 1/81.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1/82.

⁸⁷ A *mursal ḥadīth* is a narration in which a link in the *sanad* (chain of narration) is missing, explicitly when a narrator reports directly from the Prophet while overlooking an in-between narrator. There are two types.

- *Mursal Ṣaḥābī*: When a Ṣaḥābī (Companion of the Prophet) recounts a *ḥadīth* from the Prophet about an incident where he was not an eyewitness, overlooking the Companion from whom he heard it.
- *Mursal Ṭābī'ī*: When a Ṭābī'ī (Companion of the Ṣaḥābī) directly narrates from the Prophet without mentioning the name of the Ṣaḥābī.

⁸⁸ Kāndhalwī, *Sīrah*, 1/82.

peculiar approach to proving the fabrication of this narration. How can the absence of the *ḥadīth* in *Bukhārī*, *Muslim* and *Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah* be evidence of its being a *mauḍūʿ* (fabricated) or *ḍaʿīf* (weak)? Al-Bukhārī and Al-Muslim have undoubtedly committed to recording *Ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth* only; nevertheless, they have not encompassed the entire corpus. In addition, no scholar has performed such a task nor Al-Bukhārī or any other Muḥaddith have claimed that any *ḥadīth* omitted in *Bukhārī* or *Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah* is not a *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth*.⁸⁹ Moreover, Ibn Ṣalāḥ (d. 1245),⁹⁰ discussed the statements of Al-Bukhārī and Al-Muslim that, although they have compiled only the *ṣaḥīḥ* traditions in their books, they declare they left out scores of *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth*, and did not claim that whatever they have omitted should be referred to as *mauḍūʿ* narrations. Subsequently, while strongly contesting the stance of Shiblī regarding this tradition, Kāndhalwī argues:

Similarly, the absence of a Ḥadīth in the *Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah* is neither an argument of being fabricated nor any Muḥaddith has ever made such a blatant statement. On the contrary, ‘Allāmah Shiblī himself has cited hundreds of traditions in his ‘*Sīrah al-Nabī*’ that are found neither in *Bukhārī* or *Muslim* and nor in any other book of *Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah*. It is simply obvious that this principle (stating any narration not found in *Ṣiḥāḥ Sittah* to be *Ḍaʿīf*) is neither acceptable nor conventional before Shiblī himself. So, I wonder why he declared this Ḥadīth to be unreliable.⁹¹

Likewise, one of the prominent modern scholars, Maulānā Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī (d. 1999), also appears to have affirmed the reliability of this tradition. In his work *Nabī-i-Raḥmat* (The Prophet of Mercy), while discussing this narration, argues that *sīrah* scholars who reported such traditions related to the Prophet’s *wilādah* possessed deep and comprehensive expertise in the science of *ḥadīth*. He then cites this narration with references to Bayhaqī (d. 1066), Dhahabī (d. 1348), Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), and Al-Ḥalabī (d. 1567). Furthermore, by referring to Ibn Ḥajar (d. 1449), he affirms that the latter acknowledged the authenticity of these traditions in *Fath al-Bārī*.⁹² Therefore, when several reputable scholars – classical and modern – not only recorded this narration but also vouched for its reliability, it cannot be dismissed outright as an exaggeration.

SIR SAYYID AḤMAD KHĀN: THE PIONEER OF MODERN URDU *SĪRAH* WRITING

To write down a scholarly rebuttal to Muir’s *Life of Mohammed*, Sir Sayyid travelled to Europe, where he benefitted from British libraries to compile *Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*. In a letter to Nawāb Muḥsin al-Mulk, Sir Sayyid expresses from London:

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1/82-83.

⁹⁰ Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 1245), a Shafīʿī *ḥadīth* expert, is famously known for his technical work on the science of *ḥadīth*, titled *Muqaddimah Ibn Ṣalāḥ*.

⁹¹ Kāndhalwī, *Sīrah*, 1/83.

⁹² Abu al-Ḥasan Nadwī, *Nabī-i-Raḥmat* [The Apostle of Mercy] (Majlis Tahqīqāt wa Nashriyāt Islam, 2010), 132.

Today, I saw *Office India library*, I was stunned. It is not a mere library but a city of books. I am allowed to visit there, and to study and copy whatever I need.⁹³

He first prepared an English translation of *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah* and published it in London.⁹⁴ According to Alṭāf Ḥusayn Ḥālī, Sir Sayyid, rather than adopting the prevalent polemical approach – which often incites hostility – chose a balanced and respectful method of engagement. His approach neither offended his opponents nor alienated readers, setting an important precedent for Muslims to emulate in intellectual discourse.⁹⁵ In this work, Sir Sayyid effectively refutes the misconceptions propagated by William Muir and argues convincingly that Islam poses no obstacle to worldly progress. His treatment of debates rooted in historical and geographical inquiry is so exhaustive and reasoned that any fair-minded reader is compelled to admit his arguments. One of the book's most significant contributions is its restoration of Muslim confidence in the *sīrah* tradition. Following its publication, a wave of new works defending the life of Prophet Muhammad emerged – a literary movement that continues to this day. This enduring impact marks Sir Sayyid's work as a foundational cornerstone in the tradition of authentic *sīrah* writing in Urdu. *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, grounded in rigorous research, stands as one of the earliest and most authentic examples of *sīrah* writing in the Urdu language. Beyond chronicling the life of the Prophet,⁹⁶ the work also addresses related subjects such as pre-Islamic Arab culture, the Prophet's genealogy, and the nobility of the Quraysh. Sir Sayyid systematically established the foundational principles for modern *sīrah* scholarship. As Dr. Sayyid ‘Abdullāh highlights:

This work can hardly be classified as a complete or traditional *Sīrah*. Rather, it is a compilation of diverse yet interrelated subjects. Alongside biographical details of the Prophet up to the age of twelve, the book addresses topics such as the geography of Arabia, the glad tidings in the Gospels, and the reality of the *Mi‘rāj*. It also features a scholarly discussion on the methodological principles of writing *Sīrah*. In the modern era, Sir Sayyid was perhaps the first to stress the importance of new methodological frameworks in *Sīrah* writing. The scientific and intellectual principles he introduced – or refined – through *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah* include:

- Critical examination and authentication of *Sīrah* sources.
- Presenting evidence for the truth of the Qur’ān using the Bible and other earlier scriptures.
- Analysing the geographical and ethnic landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia.
- Engaging with Western scholarship through critical and objective research.
- Exploring the cultural and civilizational role of Islam.⁹⁷

Sir Sayyid's efforts helped narrow the intellectual gap between the East and West. Sayyid Fayyaz Mahmud states,

⁹³ Pānīpattī, *Maktūbāt-i-Sir Sayyid*, 1/416–17.

⁹⁴ Khālīd, *Urdu Nathar*, 401. Also see Khān, *Khutubāt*, 480.

⁹⁵ Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-i-Javāid*, 421.

⁹⁶ Although the biography of the Prophet was compiled over 12 years, it covers 19 pages only in the last chapter. See Khān, *Khutubāt*, 461–80.

⁹⁷ ‘Abdullāh, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 37.

He realised the mistake the Muslims were making and he conceived the idea of persuading them to open up their minds, to understand the new ways brought to the world by the West, and to take what was good in them. He in fact advocated a union of West and East and encouraged realism and the scientific attitude.⁹⁸

Beyond defending Islam and the Prophet, he called for a realistic, reverential and empathetic approach to understanding other religions. He strongly advocated for employing reason and reflection as essential tools in the pursuit of truth. It is a well-established fact that Sir Sayyid had a profound influence on subsequent scholars – most notably ‘Allāmah Shiblī – and laid the foundation for a new school of thought, commonly referred to as ‘*Dabistān-i-Sir Sayyid*’ (Sir Sayyid’s School of Thought). This influence has also been acknowledged by modern scholars, including Dr. Maḥmūd Aḥmūd Aḥmad Ghāzī (d. 2010).⁹⁹ M. M. Sharif (d. 1965), a well-known Muslim philosopher, identifies:

He tackled each problem (the Muslim community encountered in those days) in a scientific way, studied its pros and cons and gave a most judicious solution. It is important to note that in our times many follow the course set up by him in this field. There is no gainsaying the fact that by his scientific and critical thinking, he became the first great thinker whose patterns of thought proved very fruitful. He was the first Muslim in the Indo-Pak sub-continent who was able to see the potentialities of the contact of Western culture with the Islamic way of life and suggested the ways and means to meet the challenge of modern ideas for the future development of Muslim thought.¹⁰⁰

Sir Sayyid deliberately avoided complex and ostentatious language, opting for simple but academic writing instead for clarity and accessibility. To strengthen his arguments, he extensively referenced Qur’ānic verses, earlier scriptures, and Arabic proverbs. *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, as the first major effort of its kind, stands as a foundational work in Urdu *sīrah* literature. It is significant for its focus on addressing and refuting the misconceptions propagated by Orientalist scholars about Islam. To this end, Sir Sayyid presented authentic and well-researched information about Islam and the life of Prophet Muhammad, while systematically challenging the fabricated claims made by Sir William Muir. Dr. Kauthar Fātimah,¹⁰¹ who has edited a recent edition of *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, asserts:

Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah is the first systematic work on the Prophetic Sīrah in the Urdu language, composed with a scholarly and rational approach grounded in authentic history and divine revelation. The author makes a conscious effort to steer clear of fictitious tales and *Isrā’iliyāt*, ensuring the narrative remains both credible and insightful. From this perspective, the work is regarded as the foundation for ‘Allāmah Shiblī’s magnum opus, *Sīrah al-Nabī*. Indeed, Sir Sayyid marked the beginning of a new era in the writing of authentic Sīrah literature in Urdu.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Mahmud, *A Short History of Islam*, 609.

⁹⁹ Ghāzī, *Muḥāḍrāt*, 625.

¹⁰⁰ Sharif, *Muslim Philosophy*, 2/1614.

¹⁰¹ Dr. Kauthar Fātimah is a faculty member in the Centre for Promotion of Educational and Cultural Advancement of Muslims of India at Aligarh Muslim University, where she teaches courses on interfaith and intra-faith understanding.

¹⁰² Khān, *Khutubāt*, 11.

Thus, in response to Orientalists' objections, Sir Sayyid, while identifying weaknesses, scrutinised early *sīrah* literature and redeveloped the principles of *sīrah* writing.¹⁰³ Notably, at the time Sir Sayyid compiled *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, reliable sources were limited and not easily accessible. It is therefore important to keep this context in mind when assessing the significance of the work. The book laid down essential guiding principles for future Urdu *sīrah* writers, paving the way for subsequent contributions. As a result, new works emerged and a consistent tradition of authentic *sīrah* writing was firmly established in Urdu literature.

CONCLUSION

Sir Sayyid played a pivotal role in reforming and elevating Urdu into an academic language. He introduced Urdu prose to serve broader intellectual and social purposes, transforming it into a medium for expressing societal concerns and addressing the demands of modern thought.¹⁰⁴ Through his writings, he underscored the importance of applying a scientific approach to the study of Islamic sciences – an effort aimed at achieving precision and contemporary relevance. In his *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah*, Sir Sayyid addressed numerous objections by William Muir, including those concerning the nobility of the Prophet's lineage – tracing to the family of Prophet Ibrāhīm – as well as the historical and geographical significance of Makkah. He critically examined the sources, advocated for a rational and analytical approach in discussing *sīrah* events to uncover logical and verifiable facts, and underscored the universal values Islam contributed to other faith traditions, particularly Christianity and Judaism. By restoring the integrity of earlier prophets and refuting the immoral and unfounded accusations made against them, Sir Sayyid sought to reposition their prophethood within a proper theological and moral framework. Additionally, he demonstrated how selective arguments advanced by certain Orientalists could be constructively used in defence of Islamic narratives. In doing so, he laid down new methodological principles, marking a significant departure from traditional *sīrah* writing to the modern scientific approach.

Simultaneously, the current study highlights that there are certain instances in *Khutubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah* where the author diverges from mainstream scholarly interpretations – particularly regarding some *Mu'jizāt*, such as the *Mi'raj* and *Shaqq al-Ṣadr*, as discussed above. His explanations of these events appear to be heavily influenced by the Enlightenment reasoning and rational analysis. He eliminated miraculous events from his understanding of the Qur'ānic text as much as possible and supernatural phenomena that were not compatible with his scientific opinion.¹⁰⁵ He employed 'rationalism' to justify offering natural explanations for such supernatural events reported in Islamic texts, and believed that Muslims needed to shift their 'subjective' interpretation of the texts to align with the 'objective' reality

¹⁰³ Naeem et al., "A Comprehensive Appraisal," 299.

¹⁰⁴ 'Abdullāh, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Hakan Coruh, "The Qur'an and Interpretation in the Classical Modernism," *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 2 (2019): 14.

reflected in Western philosophy.¹⁰⁶ However, this departure must be understood within the context of his time, shaped by the intellectual climate and the significant challenges posed by modern Western thought to faith and its traditional narratives. Despite this, Sir Sayyid's emphasis on approaching religious texts critically and scientifically – rather than emotionally – served as a guiding light for forthcoming generations. His legacy in research, methodology, and writing style significantly influenced succeeding scholars and marked a turning point in Islamic intellectual discourse in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, Sir Sayyid was not only the pioneer of the first scientific effort in modern *sīrah* writing in Urdu but also arguably the first to articulate and emphasise new methodological principles in the field.

Khuṭubāt-i-Aḥmadiyyah laid the groundwork for subsequent Urdu *sīrah* scholars such as ‘Allāmah Shiblī, Qāḍī Mansūrpurī, S. S. Nadwī, and others who built on and refined his contributions, further expanding the field into new academic dimensions. As a result, previously unexplored themes – such as the cultural landscape of Arabia, its geography, and the genealogy of the Quraysh tribe – began to be incorporated in *sīrah* literature.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, a new and authentic tradition of *sīrah* writing emerged in Urdu. Arabic and Western works on *sīrah* were translated into Urdu, and eventually, even non-Muslim Indian scholars began contributing to the field. Over time, Urdu *sīrah* literature gained such prominence in the academic realm that it was translated into major world languages, including Arabic, Persian, and English.

¹⁰⁶ Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival*, 210.

¹⁰⁷ Ghāzī, *Muḥāḍarāt*, 625.

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