
Deconstructing Orientalist's Misrepresentations in the Khadija-Prophet Muhammad Conjugal Narrative

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Abstract

The divine message of Prophet Muhammad has precipitated an impactful transformation in human civilization, universally promoting humanity regardless of religious, cultural, or racial attachments. As a unique figure in human history, the enduring legacy of the Prophet has greatly contributed to the socio-spiritual growth of mankind. However, despite his model personality, he has been distorted by different adversaries such as orientalists, who employ diverse devices to defame his reputation. This paper, therefore, aims to specifically examine the orientalist misrepresentations surrounding the Khadija-Prophet Muhammad marital narrative, which has reinforced a false tale that has sowed doubt among Muslims, especially women, regarding the moral decorum and behavioral integrity of Prophet Muhammad. The research employs a historical methodology to trace the narrative of the marital relationship between the Prophet and Khadija while utilizing an analytical method to examine the orientalist agenda that have been spread to foster unjustified skepticism within the Muslim community. The study reveals that the age disparity between the Prophet and Khadija was not as pronounced as overstatedly depicted by Orientalist scholars, which later gained currency among Muslim historians and their writings. Additionally, the research exposes how orientalists have promulgated an inappropriate narrative representing Khadija as an affluent widow who exercised financial control over the Prophet, which insinuates a patron-client relationship. This paper concludes that the union between Khadija and the Prophet was an honest partnership, preceding his prophet hood and political ascendancy. By recommending, this research issues a clarion call to Muslims, especially their intellectuals and scholars, to mobilize their resources and expertise to vindicate the integrity of their religion and the exemplary character of the Prophet against orientalist misrepresentations.

Keywords: Khadija, political ascendancy, orientalists, mutual respect, misrepresentations.

Introduction: Islam has encountered, throughout the Quranic revelation, diverse defamation from antagonists who have employed various strategies to misinterpret its message (Tibi 2012).¹ These adversaries have not only engaged in uninformed criticism of the Prophet's character in which they level judgmental accusations such as "*Sāḥir*" (sorcerer), "*Majnūn*" (possessed), and "*Kādhīb*" (liar) against his personality but have also fabricated

sayings and actions then attributed them to the Prophet himself or his companions (Darsey 1999).²

Not only various groups of antagonists but also some individuals, have engaged in denting and misrepresenting the message of the Glorious Qur'an and Islam. As a matter of record, the issue of misrepresentation has long been a persistent facade throughout Islamic history. Thus, in recent times, these prejudiced falsifications have been reinforced by taking different forms of condemnation which include the creation of erroneous Hadiths, and unverified interpretation of the Qur'an as well as dissemination of false information about the life and teachings of the Prophet (Ameli et al. 2007).³

These confusions were not put up without mastermind agenda. In reality, different factors have been discovered as the stirring cause for these misrepresentations. Gaining social, religious and political interest over Islam and Muslims are part of these agenda. Also, in some cases, they embark on these distortions to eradicate the credibility and believability that Islamic teachings have deservedly gained since immemorial (Elimam 2019).⁴

However, due to the divinity of Islam and its mission, with all the challenges, the religion continues to prosperously spread conveying its message of justice, peace, freedom and compassion to all people from different backgrounds (Nigosian 2004).⁵ Moreover, the steadfast commitment of the Prophet to this course who lived – a life of almost infallible – due to the divine guidance of Almighty Allah, is to be credited for this inspiration as he did not give the antagonists any loophole which they might justly use to turn down the history of Islam utterly.

Notorious bodies such as Islamophobic Think Tanks, Gatestone Institute, Hudson Institute, Centre for Immigration Studies (CIS), and Hindutva Extremists have persistently engaged in pernicious campaign of misrepresenting Islamic teachings, maliciously disparaging the character of the Prophet, and vilifying his household and companions (Kazi 2021).⁶ These organizations have exploited the amplifying effects of technology and social media to disseminate their unfair and misleading narratives, increasing their global reach and influence.

While addressing the root that causes this distortion, it is pragmatic to identify these organizations as manifestations of Orientalism, as they share one common ideological tradition which is their desire to study non-Western religions and cultures to undermine and destabilize them. It is imperative, therefore, for Muslim scholars and researchers to recognize the grave harm imposed by these organizations and actively deconstruct their misrepresentations with accurate information and research to counter their narratives by promoting integration, understanding, and respect for Islam.

Towards protecting the image of Islam, Muslims also have the advantage of leveraging technology and social media to globally set a clear portrait of Islam which can spill out the ignorance and bigotry being levelled at their religion.

Orientalism's History and Missions:

Western scholars employ the term 'Orientalism' to cover an inclusive examination of all aspects of Eastern cultures, encompassing the scrutiny of their populations, historical narratives, religious beliefs, linguistic diversity, social structures, territorial entities, and the riches and resources contained within (Said 1977).⁷

Initially, the primary objective of Western scholars in adopting this all-encompassing approach, which subsumes the entirety of the Eastern world, including both Muslim and non-Muslim populations, was to camouflage their underlying intent. Thus, this covert goal was two-sided: firstly, to conduct exhaustive research on Islam and Muslim societies to facilitate proselytization, and secondly, to lay the groundwork for the Western colonization of Muslim-majority countries (Mufti 2010).⁸

The origins of Western engagement with Eastern studies cannot be certainly underscored, and it remains unclear who the pioneering Westerner was to embark on this intellectual journey or precisely when it commenced. However, it is a well-established fact that certain Western monks travelled to Andalusia during its zenith, a period marked by unparalleled cultural and intellectual flourishing. These monks availed themselves the opportunities offered by Andalusian schools, where they pursued rigorous education and training (Lin 2006).⁹

These orientalist had even gone the extra mile to comprehend the Qur'an and Islamic teachings, translating them into their native languages. They embarked on this to simplify their mission by reaching a broader audience. On the same track, the biographical notes of some Muslim scholars were studied. During that time, the Islamic world was the leading figure in some scientific disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics and medicine, thus they mastered everything before their return to their respective lands (KUR'ÂN'IN, n.d.).¹⁰

This remarkable convergence of intellectual curiosity and cultural exchange, as per the submission of Abannakah, paved the way for Western monks to acquire a deep understanding of Eastern thought and learning, which laid the foundation for future generations of Orientalist scholars to build upon. The heritage of this early commitment continues to influence the route of Western scholarship to a rich tradition of cross-cultural exchange and discovery (Al-Maidani 2000).¹¹

Among the pioneering monks who embarked on this intellectual journey was the French monk Gerbert, who, after his studies in the institutions of Andalusia, returned to his native land and was elected as the Pope of the Church of Rome in 999 AD. His tenure, based on the submission of Abannakah, was marked as a noteworthy milestone in the history of intercultural exchange, perhaps in the history of Orientalism. Another notable figure was monk Peter (1092-1156), whose contribution earned him a place of respect among his peers. Additionally, the monk Gerardi Cremon (1114-1187) was a prominent scholar who made significant contributions to the field of Eastern studies (Al-Maidani 2000).¹²

Driven by their thirst for knowledge, these monks, during the time, traversed the realms of Andalusia, immersing themselves in the rich cultural and intellectual heritage of the East. Moreover, their quests and translations of Arabic texts into Latin played a crucial role in disseminating Islamic knowledge throughout the Western world, as it installed the foundations for a reflective and persistent cross-cultural exchange (Al-Maidani 2000).¹³

Upon their return to their lands, these monks started disseminating the written culture of the Arabic language and the works of Muslim scholars. This led to the inception of institutes dedicated to Arabic studies, such as the school of “Badoi” in Arabic. Concurrently, Western monasteries and schools commenced the study of Arab works translated into Latin, which was the lingua franca of science across all European countries at that time (Al-Maidani 2000).¹⁴

The mission of Orientalism has been multidimensional as it incorporates the realms of knowledge production, political expansion, and cultural domination. As per the submission of Abannakah, Orientalist scholars initially sought to decipher the languages, texts, and traditions of the Orient (East), which can facilitate dialogue and understanding. However, this presumed pursuit of knowledge contradicted latent agenda, as Orientalism became a tool for the validation of colonial expansion and political domination (Alghamdi 2020).¹⁵

Through a process of crystallization, Orientalists condensed the heritage of Eastern cultures into a stagnant, unhistorical, and pervasive object, as they started spreading the falsifications that justified Western intervention and control. Based on historical fact, the stare of Orientalists was later infused with a sense of superiority and dominance. Thus, they depicted the Orient, by misrepresenting its cultures and subjects, as mere spectacles for Western exhaustion (Salvatore 1994).¹⁶

Orientalist’s Distortion of Khadija’s Marriage:

The conjugal narrative of Khadija and Prophet Muhammad has been one of the focal points of Orientalist scholarship, which underlines various misrepresentations and distortions surrounding the marriage. This model couple, as admired by millions, has been reduced by Orientalists to a simple-minded, orthodox framework, in which they substantiate their relationship as a discord of caricatures.

Orientalists have historically held an unfair and partisan view of the age discrepancy between Khadija and Prophet Muhammad. To insinuate a power imbalance and exaggerate their relationship, she was often portrayed as an older, wealthy widow who seduced the younger Prophet. They disseminated this false narrative to debase the character of the Prophet by suggesting that he was motivated by material gain or romantic fascination (Akhtar et al. 2021).¹⁷

Sir William Muir, as one of their patricians, indoctrinated falsification that Khadija was an older woman who seduced the younger Prophet, emphasizing their age difference to imply a power inequality in their relationship. His argument in his book submits that:

“Khadija, a widow of considerable wealth and social rank, had reached the ripe age of forty, while Mahomet was only twenty-five... She had already had several husbands, and her age and experience gave her a commanding influence over the young prophet (Richardson 2008).”¹⁸

A German Orientalist, Gustav Weil, in an exaggerated manner, also shared the same view of Muir, as he composed the age disparity between Khadija and Prophet Muhammad in his book, “Mohammed der Prophet, sein Leben und seine Lehre”:

Khadija, a well-off and influential widow, was 40 years old, while Muhammad was only 25... She had already had several husbands and was known for her beauty and *cunning*... Muhammad was deeply in love with her and was indebted to her wealth and support (Weil 1843).¹⁹

They also misrepresented the essence of the relationship between Khadija and Prophet Muhammad, as it was represented as a romanticized tale of love and obsession. Their goal under this false narrative was to distort the respectful and loving nature of the relationship between the two couples. In this regard, Ernest Renan, not different from other orientalists, distortedly depicted the relationship in his work: “History of the Origins of Christianity”:

Khadija was an old woman, a widow, and a merchant... She was a practical and sensible woman, who saw in Muhammad a young man with a promising future... She married him, and he became her protégé (Zeitlin 2007).²⁰

They have often side-lined the significance of Khadija as a compassionate partner, companion, and mother of the children of Prophet Muhammad, as she was reduced to a mere “*benefactor*” or “*matron*”. They claim that her wealth and social status were the key motives for the Prophet’s marriage to her, in this vein, they ignored the chronicles of their loving and respective relationship. One Scottish Orientalist supports this view in his book as well:

Khadija was a wealthy widow, who had reached the ripe age of forty, and was therefore beyond the age of *childbearing*... She was a woman of considerable wealth and social rank, and Muhammad was her *dependent* and *protégé*... She was a shrew and sensible woman, who saw in Muhammad a young man with a promising future, and was willing to support him (Zeitlin 2007).²¹

With the storylines, it is discernible that the way Khadija was painted by orientalists, she has been denied her spiritual strength and her role as a supportive partner, and her relationship in that marriage has been reduced to mere power supremacy.

Likewise, as they claim that the wealth and social status of Khadija were the reason for the Prophet to gain popularity and influence among his people, some orientalists vehemently disrespected the relationship and reduced it to only political motivations. Gustav Weil, as one of the perpetrators of this misrepresentation, has conveyed their idiosyncratic opinion which suggests that the marriage was nothing except a devious relationship to achieve four ambitions (Robinson 1996).²²

- i. Social Mobility: Orientalists assumed that the Prophet considered marriage to gain access to the elite circles among the VIPs in the city of Makkah.
- ii. Economic Interests: It is also their assumption that the wealth and business connections of Khadijah were what smoothed the way for the Prophet to become a successful and desirable person in the city, not any godly message.
- iii. Political Alliance: they rumoured as well that the marriage was not agreed upon except to draw a political alliance between the clan of Hasim (Prophet Muhammad's clan) and Asad (Khadija's clan), simply to strengthen the political position of Prophet Muhammad by tempting people to his followership and companionship.
- iv. Political Convenience: they also argued that the marriage was a result of the desire of Prophet Muhammad to gain political convenience among the people of Makkah, which he later accomplished through the wealth and political status of Khadija (Robinson 1996).²³

In a capsule, the perception of orientalists on the marriage between the Prophet and his first wife, Khadija was utterly centred on a set of assumptions which proffer to condense or completely remove any marital significance such as spiritual and emotional link. It is incontrovertibly clear that, while reducing conjugal union to sheer political or economic interests, there is no existence of an unpretentious bond between the Prophet and his wife. Therefore, the fundamental feature of a genuine marriage as set by Islam, which is a spiritual and emotional connection, is wanting.

Moreover, this orientalist perception overlooks the mutual respect and trust that have been demonstrated throughout their relationship, as highlighted in Islamic teachings. This orientalists' lapse establishes an unfair interpretation of their marriage as it neglects the intelligence, and spiritual strength that Khadija brought to the partnership. Furthermore, it fails to recognize the sincere love and respect shown by the Prophet for Khadija, which is well-documented in Islamic tradition.

Deconstructing their Distortions:

As previously pointed out, the conjugal narrative of Khadija and Prophet Muhammad has been subjected to diverse misrepresentations and distortions within Orientalist culture. Conversely, Islamic scholarship has preserved a rich and real picture of the relationship that occurred between Khadija and the Prophet within the historical context of the 6th century in Arabia peninsular.

Through primary sources and theoretical frameworks, the dynamism of the relationship between the Prophet and his wife can be affirmed to excavate the repressed truth

and deconstruct the orientalist scandalization as it contradicts not only the teachings of Islam but also the characters of this Prophet who was known, since his childhood, with honest and sincerity in all his endeavours and encounters with others. Moreover, Orientalists selectively emphasise certain historical accounts that suggest a significant age disparity between Khadija and Prophet Muhammad, specifically highlighting a 40 to 25 – year age difference. Their primary motive is to cast a shadow of doubt among Muslims regarding the exemplary character of their Prophet.

However, some other authentic historical sources reveal that Khadija had not yet reached the age of 40 when she married the Prophet. This connotation diminishes the perceived significance of the age difference between the two. It is noteworthy that different great Muslim historians, including but not limited to, Ibn Hisham (d. 833 CE) (al-Nabawiyyah, n.d.)²⁴, Ibn Sa'd (d. 845 CE) (Salloomi and Abd Allah 1996)²⁵, Al-Tabari (d. 923 CE) (Jarir 1993)²⁶, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (d. 1449 CE) (A. A. Al-Asqalani 1997)²⁶, Al-Albani (d. 1999 CE), Dr Akram Diya al-Umari (b. 1945 CE) (Riyadi, Saerozi, and Savitri 2021)²⁷, Dr Muhammad Ibn Abdullah al-Sultan (b. 1954 CE) (Walusimbi 2023)²⁸, concur in their opinions that Khadija had not attained the age of 40 at the time of her marriage to Prophet Muhammad. This consensus among reputable scholars underlines the prospect that Khadija was indeed younger than commonly perceived by orientalists and some Muslims.

In this vein, Ibn Hisham reported that Khadija was 28 years old when she married Prophet Muhammad. This opinion is recorded in his book, "Sirat Ibn Hisham", which is considered one of the most authoritative sources on the life of the Prophet.

"وروي أن عمرها كان ثمانية وعشرين عاماً. فقد أخرج ابن سعد في الطبقات قال: أخبرنا هشام بن السائب، عن أبيه، عن أبي صالح عن ابن عباس قال: كانت خديجة بنت خويلد (رضي الله تعالى عنها) يوم تزوجها رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وسلم) ابنة ثمان وعشرين سنة، ومهرها اثنتي عشرة أوقية، وكذلك مهر نسائه"

According to the report of Ibn Sa'd in *Aṭ-Ṭabaqāt*, the age of Khadija bint Khuwaylid at the time of her marriage to the Prophet was twenty – eight years old. This is based on the submission of Hisham bin As-Saib's father, via Abu Salih, who reported that Ibn Abbas informed him that Khadija was 28 years old on the day the Messenger of Allah married her. Her dowry was twelve ounces (of gold), which was also the dowry of his other wives (al-Nabawiyyah, n.d.).²⁹

In this context, the justification of Ibn Hisham is deemed to contradict the commonly assumed age of Khadija, which is likely to be an error or exaggeration from the end of the previous historians. It is pertinent as well that the opinion of Ibn Hisham is shared by other

Muslim historians, who reported the age of Khadija to be around her late 20s or early 30s at the time of her marriage to the Prophet.

Regarding the strong emotional bond between Khadija and the Prophet, which the Orientalists have inaccurately distorted, Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani, amongst other scholars, has refuted this claim. He posits that Khadija occupied an exceptionally noble position in the heart of the Prophet. She was his most beloved wife during the time, surpassing all others in his affection. Moreover, she was not only his trusted companion, confidant, and unwavering supporter, but also lived to provide him solace and fortitude in times of need. Therefore, seeking her counsel and guidance, was a sign of deep respect and reciprocal love from the Prophet (A. bn H. Al-Asqalani 852).³⁰

Additionally, Ibn Hajar references one popular Hadith narrated by Aisha, “The Prophet would often mention Khadija with love and praise”, till Aisha said: ‘I became jealous of Khadija, even though she had passed away, because of the frequent mentions of her name by the Prophet’ (A. bn H. Al-Asqalani 852).³¹ Thus, the corroborations provided by Muslim scholars, notably Ibn Hajar, and others, coupled with the relevant testimony of Aisha, have effectively dismantled the insinuations concocted by Orientalists aimed at diminishing or obliterating the intense emotional connection between Khadija and her husband.

Likewise, the proximity of Aisha to the Prophet, which was unmatched by any other reporter, lends incomparable credence to her testimony which unequivocally establishes that the relationship between Khadija and Prophet Muhammad transcended the conventional bounds of a husband-wife dynamic. Thus, the attempts of Orientalists to reduce their relationship to a mere social status or convenience are to be debunked and deconstructed.

The Need to Deconstruct Their Distortions:

It is imperative to emphasize that the distorted interpretation of the marital relationship between Prophet Muhammad and Khadija as presented by Orientalists is merely one instance among myriad examples of misrepresentations. Unfortunately, some Muslims have unwittingly accepted these falsehoods, which have been disseminated through various channels, including written records in their literature (Sbailhat 2022).³² Thus, this highlights the urgent need for acute examination and correction of such misrepresentations, lest they become deep-rooted facts in the Muslim community.

The exponential growth of the internet and social media, in modern times, has enabled the rapid dissemination of misrepresentations and different ideas, which can now spread with uncontrollable speed and reach every corner of the globe (Aimeur, Amri, and Brassard 2023).³³ This phenomenon poses a substantial threat, particularly when it comes to religion, as the varying levels of understanding among Muslims worldwide make some of them fall for these misrepresentations (Hazzan 2023).³⁴ Particularly, laymen can be easily persuaded by the distorted narratives fabricated by Orientalists, which can lead to delusions and create misconceptions about their religious teachings (Islam 2019).³⁵ Even some scholars may

accidentally fall prey to these misrepresentations, which are often cunningly disguised as praise for some personalities or sugar-coated with sounding rhetoric.

However, if the Muslim communities come together to disrepute these falsehoods and deconstruct the misrepresentations, as epitomized by the International Conference organized by 'My University' in Pakistan in 2024, and Al-Hikmah University, Ilorin, Nigeria in 2022, they can collectively expose the fallacies of orientalists and restore the dignity of Islam globally, and this will ensure the teachings and historical events of Islam to be accurately presented for those who seek to learn.

The Effects of Orientalist's Misrepresentation:

The ancient adage, 'no one is safe when the scholars among people are in jeopardy,' echoes the myriad of vulnerabilities that surround the beliefs of Muslim Ummah, as the effects of orientalists' misrepresentations continue to shake the root of belief and the bond between the present and past of Islam. Put differently, the consequences of the distortions employed by these orientalists have led to a crisis of faith among many Muslim brethren, causing them to question the divine essence of their religion (Sidorov and Melnik 2021).³⁶

A glaring and recent illustration of this consequence can be grasped in the case of a Nigerian Muslim who presented himself as a social media propagator. Having fallen victim to the misrepresentations about the relationship between the Prophet and Khadija, he publicly asserted that having a 'Sugar Mummy' is ideally and religiously acceptable, as he cited the marriage of Prophet Muhammad to Khadija as a precedent. This distorted notion is a direct result of the manipulations of Orientalists, which have treacherously insinuated the minds of some Muslims ("Islamic Cleric Claims That Prophet Mohammed Had a Sugar Mummy during His Time" 2024).³⁷

If left unchecked and deconstructed, these misrepresentations will continue to corrode the faith of some defenseless Muslims, particularly those with limited knowledge about the history and teachings of their religion, who may succumb to the whims of their desires, even if it means contradicting the fundamental teachings and cultural norms of Islam.

Conclusion

Attempts have been made in this paper to critically deconstruct the misrepresentations surrounding the conjugal narrative of Khadija and Prophet Muhammad, which has been grossly exaggerated by orientalists in a deliberate attempt to malign the character of the Prophet and sow seeds of doubt among Muslims, particularly women, who hold the relationship in high esteem as an epitome of love, affection, and mutual respect.

Throughout history, Islam has faced a string of unjustified misrepresentations from its detractors. Still, the contributions of orientalists to this animosity necessitate a swift and robust response from Muslim scholars, who serve as the vanguard of the Ummah, to debunk the falsehoods cooked up by these entities, and also continually project an accurate representation of the religion through various means of dissemination.

This study has also revealed that the foundational aspects of the knowledge of orientalists are rooted in Islamic sources, as they traitorously studied the language, teachings, and cultural heritage of Islam to subsequently condemn and misrepresent them. Furthermore, it has been observed that orientalists capitalize on perceived lapses in some Muslim historical records, which they exaggerate to further their plan of distorting the religion, the Prophet, his companions, and the entire Ummah.

Recommendations:

In furtherance of challenging the prevailing narratives that have manipulatively distorted the character of the Prophet and misrepresented the history of Islam, the following recommendations are submitted:

- i. Muslim scholars and researchers should collaborate in meticulous analyses of orientalists' literature to detect and deconstruct misrepresentations.
- ii. They should use media and technology to propagate precise information about Islam and its history.
- iii. Critical thinking and media literacy should be encouraged among Muslim youths.
- iv. Educational programmes and resources should be developed to address the caricatures.
- v. They should also develop modern approaches to uncover the veiled adopted orientalism within Muslim communities.

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