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Zia-un-Nabi by Justice Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari

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Book Review

Zia-un-Nabi by Justice Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari

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Abstract

Zia-un-Nabi by Justice Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari (1918-1998) represents one of the most comprehensive Urdu Seerah works of the modern era. Spanning seven volumes published between 1972 and the 1990s, it traces the Prophet Muhammad's PBUH life from pre-Islamic Arabia to the final years in Madinah, integrating Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith scholarship, and historical analysis. Distinctively, Karam Shah grounds his narrative in the Qur'an and authentic Hadith, employing rigorous methodologies of isnād evaluation and tarjīh to reconcile classical sources. The concluding volume addresses and refutes major Orientalist critiques, particularly those of Goldziher, Muir, and Watt, by highlighting methodological biases and affirming the Qur'an's divine coherence as ultimate evidence of prophethood. Combining devotional reverence with scholarly precision, Zia-un-Nabi stands as both an intellectual defense of Islamic tradition and a spiritually enriching contribution to modern Seerah literature.

Keywords: Book Review, Zia-un-Nabi, Seerah literature, Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari, Orientalist.

When it comes to Seerah literature, it is evident that an extensive body of work has been produced by scholars across the world. While oral Seerah reports date back to the 1st century AH, the first dedicated compilation was Ibn Ishaq's *Kitāb al-Maghāzī* (d. 150 AH / 767 CE), later preserved through Ibn Hisham.¹ From these early foundations, Seerah writing evolved through the works of al-Wāqidī, Ibn Sa'd, al-Ṭabarī, and Ibn Kathīr, and has continued into modern times. *Seerat-un-Nabi*, initiated by Allama Shibli Nomani around 1910 and later completed by his student Syed Sulaiman Nadwi, arguably stands as the first

¹ Guillaume A, translator. *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1955.

comprehensive and scholarly Urdu biography of the Prophet ﷺ.² In the Urdu-speaking world, *Zia-un-Nabi*, authored by Justice Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari (1918–1998), occupies a distinguished place in modern Islamic scholarship, with its first volume published in 1972 and the seven-volume set completed in the 1990s shortly before the author’s passing.³

Justice Karam Shah’s *Zia-un-Nabi* is a monumental seven-volume work that systematically covers the life of the Prophet ﷺ, from the conditions of pre-Islamic Arabia to modern responses to Orientalist critiques, combining historical detail with Qur’anic, Hadith, and moral insights, *Zia-un-Nabi* unfolds across **seven** volumes, with each dedicated to a distinct phase of the Prophet’s ﷺ life and mission while forming a seamless narrative. Volume I delves into the socio-political and religious landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia, including the Prophet’s ﷺ ancestry and early life. Volumes II through IV cover the Makkan and early Madinan periods, revealing the unfolding of revelation, persecution, migration, and the initial formation of the Islamic state, culminating in the battles of Badr, Uhud, and Khandaq. Volume V explores the later Madinan years, spotlighting treaties, international correspondence, the Conquest of Makkah, and the Farewell Pilgrimage. Volume VI reflects on the Prophet’s ﷺ character, personality, and Shama’il (miraculous attributes), while Volume VII shifts to address Orientalist critiques and non-Muslim scholarship, offering reasoned responses to modern challenges. Each volume elegantly interweaves historical narration with Qur’anic exposition, Hadith references, and moral insights, enriching readers both intellectually and spiritually.

Probably, one of the most striking feature of Justice Pīr Muḥammad Karam Shāh al-Azhari’s *Ziyā’ al-Nabī* is its methodological rigor, authenticity and depth of research. He frames the Seerah primarily through the Qur’an, using verses and their *asbāb al-nuzūl* as the chronological and theological backbone. Ḥadīth reports, particularly from the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*, are treated as the evidentiary spine of the narrative, and his later volumes (esp. vol. 7) begin with an extensive defense of Hadith transmission before deploying them in the Sīrah. For historical scaffolding, he triangulates Ibn Ishāq/Ibn Hishām for narrative flow, al-Ṭabarī for isnād-based variants, and Ibn Kathīr for ḥadīth-critical evaluation, thereby

² Nomani S, Nadwi SS. *Seerat-un-Nabi*. Azamgarh: Darul Musannifeen; 1918–1950. 7 vols.

³ Karam Shah M. *Zia-un-Nabi*. Lahore: Al-Karam Publications; 1972–1998. 7 vols.

applying *tarjīh* (weighing of reports) to harmonize the accounts.^{4,5,6} At Badr, for example, he anchors the campaign in Qur'an 8:5–19, enriches the detail with *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*'s Maghāzī traditions, and checks chronology against al-Ṭabarī's annals. Similarly, at Ḥudaybiyya he interprets the treaty through *Sūrat al-Fath* (48:1–4,18) while relying on *Ṭabarī* and authenticated reports to show its long-term strategic success. Justice Karam Shah demonstrates an impressive command of both classical sources and modern scholarship. His referencing is meticulous, and his insistence on grounding the narrative in Qur'an and Hadith provides an aura of authenticity.

In Volume 7 of *Zia-un-Nabi*, Justice Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari engages with some of the most influential Orientalist critiques of Islam and its sources. He begins with Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), the Hungarian-German Jewish orientalist often considered the pioneer of modern Western Hadith criticism, who alleged that most Hadith were fabrications of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH created to legitimize sectarian or political agendas. Karam Shah refutes this by emphasizing the rigorous isnad system and jarh wa ta'dil methodology developed by classical Muslim scholars, which ensured early preservation and authenticity, and by exposing the methodological flaws and biases in Goldziher's conclusions. He then turns to the works of Sir William Muir and W. Montgomery Watt, whose biographies of the Prophet ﷺ reflected missionary-colonial hostility and secular reductionism respectively.^{7,8} While acknowledging Watt's relatively balanced tone, Karam Shah critiques both for sidelining revelation and portrays them as products of their intellectual environments rather than objective scholarship. Finally, he addresses the allegation of Dr. Pokok, who claimed that the Prophet ﷺ suffered from epilepsy, an argument that Karam Shah dismantles by invoking Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's philological critique in *Sirat-i-Muhammadi*, which exposed the mistranslations and distortions underlying Pokok's conclusions. Through

⁴ Ibn Hisham A. *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya; 1990.

⁵ Al-Tabari M ibn Jarir. *The History of al-Tabari, Vol. 8: The Victory of Islam: Muhammad at Medina A.D. 626–630/A.H. 5–8*. Fishbein M, translator. Albany (NY): State University of New York Press; 1997.

⁶ Ibn Kathir I. *The Life of the Prophet Muhammad (al-Sira al-Nabawiyya)*. Le Gassick T, translator. Reading: Garnet Publishing; 2000. 4 vols.

⁷ Muir W. *The Life of Mahomet and History of Islam to the Era of the Hegira*. London: Smith, Elder & Co.; 1858–1861.

⁸ Watt WM. *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*. London: Oxford University Press; 1961.

these engagements, Karam Shah not only dismantles Orientalist allegations but also demonstrates that the Holy Qur'an, the greatest miracle of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, remains the ultimate proof of his divine mission and the most enduring refutation of all skeptical claims.

Conclusion

In sum, *Zia-un-Nabi* by Justice Muhammad Karam Shah al-Azhari is one of the most comprehensive and methodologically rigorous Seerah works produced in the Urdu language. Its unique strength lies in combining meticulous use of Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Seerah sources with critical engagement of Orientalist scholarship, culminating in Volume 7, which stands as both a defense of Islamic tradition and a reasoned counter-narrative to modern critiques. While its multi-volume scale and Urdu language restrict its accessibility for a wider global audience, the scholarly precision and devotional spirit of *Zia-un-Nabi* ensure that it remains a landmark in modern Seerah literature—one that reaffirms the Prophet's ﷺ timeless relevance and provides an enduring resource for students, scholars, and believers alike.