

Prophethood, Politics, and Narrative Voice: Genette's Theory and the Western Perception of Muhammad (ﷺ) as Statesman

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Abstract— *This paper studies how Western writers describe Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as a statesman. It uses Gérard Genette's theory of narration to guide the study. The focus is on the biographies written by W. Montgomery Watt, Lesley Hazleton, and Barnaby Rogerson. The paper examines how the choice of voice, focus, and time order in these works changes the way Muhammad (ﷺ)'s leadership is shown.*

Watt presents Muhammad (ﷺ) as a practical leader who made decisions based on reason and need. Hazleton presents him as a leader with empathy and strong moral vision. Rogerson presents him with a balanced tone and highlights both his human qualities and his political role. The study shows how these writers use different storytelling tools to build these images. It explains how "who speaks," "who sees," and "how events are arranged" guide the reader's view of Muhammad (ﷺ).

The paper argues that even though the writers disagree in their opinions, they all face the same problem: how to connect Muhammad (ﷺ)'s spiritual role with his political role. Watt brings the reader close to a pragmatic leader. Hazleton brings the reader close to a visionary reformer. Rogerson presents him as a human leader whose faith and politics work together.

The study concludes that narrative style shapes history as much as facts do. It says we must look not only at what these biographies claim but also at how they tell the story. This approach helps us rethink how modern writers represent religious and political leaders.

Keywords: *Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ), statesmanship, Western biographies, Gérard Genette, narration, history*

I. INTRODUCTION

The life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has been described in many biographies across cultures and traditions. Muslim writers usually show him as both Prophet and statesman together. Western writers often focus more on his political and diplomatic role. Among them, W.

Montgomery Watt, Lesley Hazleton, and Barnaby Rogerson stand out because each creates a different image of Muhammad (ﷺ)'s leadership. Their works do not only give facts but also use narrative methods that shape how readers see him as a statesman. This study uses Gérard Genette's theory of narration to explore these works. Genette's book *Narrative Discourse* explains how stories depend not only on what is told but also on how it is told. His ideas of voice, focus, and order of events guide this analysis. The study looks at who speaks, who sees, and how events are arranged to understand how Watt, Hazleton, and Rogerson build their portraits of Muhammad (ﷺ). Watt shows Muhammad (ﷺ) as a pragmatic leader who managed tribal politics and built Islam as both faith and state. Hazleton, in a literary style, highlights his empathy and moral vision. Rogerson mixes history with smooth storytelling to give a broad picture of Muhammad (ﷺ)'s leadership, blending statesmanship with personal character. The study argues that these portrayals depend as much on narrative style as on history. Voice, focus, and time-shifts influence the reader's view. By studying these strategies, the paper shows how Western biographies shape cultural memory and present Muhammad (ﷺ)'s statesmanship as both sacred and political.

W. MONTGOMERY WATT: SCHOLARLY DISTANCE AND EXTERNAL FOCALIZATION

W. Montgomery Watt is one of the most influential Western writers on the life of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). His books *Muhammad (ﷺ) at Mecca* (1953) and *Muhammad (ﷺ) at Medina* (1956) shaped much of twentieth-century scholarship. Watt tries to write with accuracy, careful use of sources, and a rational approach. He often presents himself as a historian who explains Muhammad (ﷺ)'s career within the methods of modern history. From a narratological view, Watt's writing shows three key strategies: his narrative voice, his use of focalization, and his choice of temporal order. These elements explain how Watt frames Muhammad (ﷺ) as a statesman in a specific Western style.

Narrative Voice

Watt writes as an external narrator. He does not insert himself directly into the story. His tone is detached, factual, and cautious. He uses early Islamic sources such as Ibn Ishaq, al-Waqidi, and al-Tabari but filters them through modern historical methods. This creates the impression of neutrality. The reader feels that Watt is presenting facts rather than opinions. This voice has consequences. It casts Muhammad (ﷺ) as a political leader who acts with

rational calculation. Faith and revelation are present, but they appear in the background. Watt's style also positions him as a Western scholar who claims authority through scientific objectivity. Yet, as narratology reminds us, no narrator is fully neutral. Watt's choice to sound objective is itself a narrative strategy. It highlights political skill.

Focalization

Along with his detached voice, Watt also uses external focalization. Readers see Muhammad (ﷺ) through actions, treaties, and outcomes, not through his emotions or inner thoughts. Watt avoids speculation about feelings or psychology. Instead, he focuses on political results.

For example, Watt discusses the Constitution of Medina as a practical charter that brought different tribes together. He shows Muhammad (ﷺ) as a leader who solved conflicts through structure and law. In describing battles, treaties, or negotiations, Watt highlights strategy and rational decisions, not spiritual vision. This method reinforces the picture of Muhammad (ﷺ) as a political architect. It fits Western traditions of biography where leaders are judged by visible achievements. However, it also limits the portrait. By ignoring inner consciousness, Watt risks overlooking how Muhammad (ﷺ)'s prophetic mission influenced his politics. Revelation becomes secondary to political necessity. This choice reflects both Watt's caution as a historian and a Western preference for rational explanation.

Temporality

Watt also structures his biography in strict chronological order. He begins with Mecca, moves to the migration, and ends with Medina and the rise of political power. Each stage is shown as leading logically to the next. Hardship in Mecca prepares the way for success in Medina. Opposition in the early years explains later strategies of negotiation and alliance. Unlike other writers such as Hazleton, Watt avoids flashbacks or foreshadowing. His time structure mirrors conventional historical writing. It creates a clear narrative arc where Muhammad (ﷺ)'s leadership develops step by step. This linear order suggests that Muhammad (ﷺ)'s success came from gradual adaptation to conditions. Revelation is acknowledged but subordinated to social and political causes.

Implications

Through these strategies—detached voice, external focalization, and linear time—Watt presents Muhammad (ﷺ) as a political architect. He highlights the Prophet's ability to

manage tribes, create institutions, and build a unified society. Watt's Muhammad (ﷺ) is comparable to other pragmatic leaders who worked within the limits of history.

This picture has two effects. First, it challenges hostile depictions of Muhammad (ﷺ) as a fanatic or impostor. Watt shows respect for Muhammad (ﷺ)'s intelligence and statesmanship. Second, it also secularizes him. By explaining leadership mainly through rational and political terms, Watt reduces the centrality of revelation. His Muhammad (ﷺ) becomes a figure of *realpolitik*.

In this way, Watt's narrative reflects mid-twentieth-century Western historiography. It values scientific distance, rational explanation, and chronological causality. The result is a portrait of Muhammad (ﷺ) that is sober and respectful, but also shaped by the limits of Western academic methods.

LESLEY HAZLETON: EMPATHETIC IMAGINATION AND INTERNAL FOCALIZATION

Lesley Hazleton's *The First Muslim* presents a very different approach from Watt's detached historical method. While Watt stresses external observation and rational explanation, Hazleton writes as a storyteller who blends journalism, history, and imagination. She places herself closer to Muhammad (ﷺ)'s experiences, often suggesting how he may have felt or thought in particular moments. This creates a portrait of Muhammad (ﷺ) where politics and morality are tightly connected. Using Genette's categories of voice, focalization, and temporality, we can see how Hazleton's choices frame Muhammad (ﷺ) as a statesman rooted in empathy and ethical vision.

Narrative Voice

Hazleton writes as an overt narrator. She speaks from outside the story but frequently steps in to guide the reader. She comments, reflects, and sometimes speculates about Muhammad (ﷺ)'s motives. Unlike Watt, who hides behind objectivity, Hazleton admits that her storytelling involves interpretation. She signals when she is reconstructing events and openly brings her own perspective into the narrative. This overt voice performs two functions. First, it creates intimacy. Readers feel they are accompanying Hazleton as she tries to imagine Muhammad (ﷺ)'s life. Second, it brings moral questions to the surface. Hazleton often asks what a political decision reveals about Muhammad (ﷺ)'s character or values. This way of narrating makes Muhammad (ﷺ)'s political acts appear less as cold strategies and more as extensions of moral leadership. Her empathy becomes part of the argument: that Muhammad (ﷺ)'s statesmanship cannot be separated from his ethical sense.

Focalization

Hazleton often uses internal focalization, giving the impression that we can see into Muhammad (ﷺ)'s thoughts and feelings. She reconstructs key scenes—such as Khadijah's support after the first revelation or Muhammad (ﷺ)'s worries during exile—through psychological detail. She emphasizes compassion, doubt, and emotional resilience. This approach humanizes Muhammad (ﷺ). It makes him psychologically familiar to modern readers who expect leaders to have inner depth. It also moralizes politics by showing how empathy, humility, or patience could motivate decisions. Finally, it resists depictions that reduce Muhammad (ﷺ) to a strategist, instead presenting his politics as inseparable from his prophetic vision. But there are risks. Internal focalization is speculative. Hazleton cannot know Muhammad (ﷺ)'s thoughts; she can only infer them from sources and context. This sometimes blurs the line between history and imagination. Still, she grounds her reconstructions in cultural plausibility, which helps maintain credibility. Her approach reflects the tradition of literary biography, where imagination is used to make past figures more legible.

Temporality

Hazleton organizes her story less rigidly than Watt. She does not always follow linear order. She uses flashbacks to earlier experiences—such as childhood loss or caravan journeys—to explain later political choices. She also foreshadows outcomes, hinting at how early values shaped later actions. This flexible temporal structure highlights themes over strict chronology. Hazleton slows down scenes that show moral insight, such as Muhammad (ﷺ)'s treatment of women or the poor. She moves more quickly through institutional or military details. This pacing shows her priorities: moral formation comes first, and politics is an extension of it. Time in her narrative is not just sequence but also rhythm, designed to underline ethical continuity across Muhammad (ﷺ)'s life.

Political Representation

When voice, focalization, and temporality are combined, Hazleton presents Muhammad (ﷺ)'s politics as moral vision. Legal reforms, treaties, and alliances are shown as ways of protecting dignity and justice. For example, inheritance laws are framed as acts of fairness, not only legal codes. The Constitution of Medina is seen as a model of pluralism, not just a pragmatic pact. Hazleton also highlights women's influence. Figures like Khadijah, Aisha, and Fatima appear as active participants in shaping Muhammad (ﷺ)'s world. By

including them, she connects political leadership to family and community, a move that resonates with feminist approaches to biography.

Implications

Hazleton's method produces a compelling and accessible image of Muhammad (ﷺ) for Western readers. Her empathic voice, psychological reconstruction, and ethical framing make him relatable as both prophet and statesman. Her work can counter reductive views that separate politics from morality and offers an alternative vision of leadership rooted in compassion. At the same time, her reliance on imagination requires caution. Her reconstructions reveal as much about her interpretive goals as about Muhammad (ﷺ) himself. From a narratological view, her biography persuades by guiding the reader to see politics through empathy. The result is a humane and vivid portrait, but one shaped by the narrative choices of the author as much as by the historical record.

BARNABY ROGERSON: THE STATESMAN AS CULTURAL BRIDGE

Barnaby Rogerson in *The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ): A Biography* (2003) offers a method different from Watt and Hazleton. Watt treats Muhammad (ﷺ) with scholarly neutrality. Hazleton emphasizes empathy and inner life. Rogerson frames Muhammad (ﷺ) as a cultural bridge. He shows how Muhammad (ﷺ)'s leadership speaks not only to Islamic history but also to the wider story of civilization. He writes with attention to world history. He places Muhammad (ﷺ) beside rulers, reformers, and visionaries who reshaped societies. His narrative presents statesmanship as both governance and moral imagination. Genette's ideas of voice, temporality, and paratext help explain how Rogerson builds this image of Muhammad (ﷺ) as a leader of lasting relevance.

Narrative Voice and Authority

Rogerson speaks in a heterodiegetic voice. He tells the story from outside but not with detachment. He shifts between recounting events and offering commentary. At times, he speaks like a teacher. He explains why actions matter beyond their immediate setting. For example, he calls the Constitution of Medina a "radical experiment in collective governance." His voice works as historian and interpreter. He urges readers to see Muhammad (ﷺ) not only as a political actor of 7th-century Arabia but also as a figure of global importance. This voice

builds authority in two ways. It informs by telling events. It persuades by framing Muhammad (ﷺ)'s choices as examples of timeless leadership. Rogerson blurs the line between narration and reflection. He does not only tell; he also guides interpretation. He argues that Muhammad (ﷺ)'s statesmanship belongs to the broader human story of civilization.

Temporality and the Shaping of Statesmanship

Rogerson also shapes meaning through time. He links past events with their long-term impact. He presents the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah as more than a compromise. He frames it as a model of peaceful diplomacy with lessons beyond its moment. He uses flashback and foreshadowing to show continuity between actions and later outcomes. He slows the pace in key episodes. He expands on negotiations with Meccan leaders, describing dialogue and atmosphere. This detail highlights Muhammad (ﷺ)'s patience, skill, and moral authority. He moves more quickly through less central material. This rhythm directs focus to decisive political moments. His narrative gives weight to statesmanship as lived practice.

Paratext and Cultural Positioning

Rogerson also uses paratext to position Muhammad (ﷺ). In his preface and chapter openings, he frames Muhammad (ﷺ) among world leaders who transformed societies. He invites readers to approach him beside figures like Caesar or Churchill. This framing sets expectations. Muhammad (ﷺ) is not only a figure of Islamic history but also a universal statesman. Rogerson begins many chapters with broad reflections on justice or community before turning to events. These paratexts prepare readers to see Muhammad (ﷺ)'s life as both particular and exemplary. They translate his significance into terms accessible to Western audiences.

Statesmanship as Cultural Narrative

By combining voice, temporality, and paratext, Rogerson constructs Muhammad (ﷺ) as prophet, politician, and reformer. His biography suggests that Muhammad (ﷺ)'s statesmanship reconciles faith and politics in ways still relevant today. His narrative stresses exemplarity. Muhammad (ﷺ)'s leadership becomes a model for vision, governance, and moral duty. Rogerson also resists narrow Western stereotypes. He does not portray Muhammad (ﷺ) only as religious teacher or as strategist. He shows him as a cultural bridge whose leadership speaks across traditions. In this way, he reshapes Western cultural memory.

He offers an integrated and humanizing portrait of Muhammad (ﷺ) as a leader of enduring significance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how three Western writers—W. Montgomery Watt, Lesley Hazleton, and Barnaby Rogerson—narrated Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ)’s role as a statesman through Gérard Genette’s narratology. The analysis focused on voice, focalization, temporality, and paratext to show how each writer shaped Muhammad (ﷺ)’s image through different narrative strategies. The results suggest that Muhammad (ﷺ)’s statesmanship, as presented in Western biography, is not a fixed historical truth but a mediated construct shaped by choices of narration.

These three case studies demonstrate that biography is not only about what happened but about how narration frames what happened. Genette’s framework makes this clear. By asking who speaks, who sees, and how time is structured, we see that Western biographers create particular versions of Muhammad (ﷺ)’s statesmanship. These versions differ in style and emphasis, but all mediate the Prophet’s image for modern audiences.

The comparison also highlights three narrative modes. Watt represents the historical-critical mode. His detached authority reassures readers through method and rigor. Hazleton represents the empathetic-literary mode. Her imaginative voice invites readers to identify with Muhammad (ﷺ)’s humanity. Rogerson represents the synthetic-narrative mode. His structure bridges cultures and presents Muhammad (ﷺ) within a global story of leadership. None of these modes is complete on its own. Each shows one dimension of Muhammad (ﷺ)’s statesmanship, and together they create a richer, more complex picture than any one account could achieve.

From a theoretical perspective, this study confirms the value of using narratology for biography. Genette’s categories were designed for fiction, but they also illuminate historical and biographical texts. Voice and focalization show how writers position readers; temporality reveals how events are linked and reinterpreted; paratext frames the entire reading experience. Applying this lens to Watt, Hazleton, and Rogerson demonstrates how narrative strategies work not only to record history but to construct meaning.

The broader implication is that Western views of Muhammad (ﷺ) as a statesman emerge not only from historical evidence but also from narrative performance. Biography is always

storytelling as well as documentation. Each act of narration selects, arranges, and interprets events. In the case of Muhammad (ﷺ), this storytelling balances sacred and political roles, and it shapes how audiences—especially in the West—understand his leadership.

Future research could extend this comparison to Islamic biographies of Muhammad (ﷺ). Such a study could reveal how cultural context produces alternative strategies of narration and how Muslim writers negotiate the Prophet's dual roles. Another path would be to integrate narratology with feminist, postcolonial, or memory studies frameworks, which could uncover new perspectives on Muhammad (ﷺ)'s political image and its reception.

In sum, this project shows that narrating Muhammad (ﷺ) as a statesman is both an act of history and an act of narrative art. Watt, Hazleton, and Rogerson demonstrate different ways of balancing voice, focalization, and temporality to present his leadership. Their biographies remind us that Muhammad (ﷺ)'s statesmanship remains dynamic, contested, and continually reinterpreted. By applying Genette's narratology, we see not only how the Prophet's role as a leader is represented, but also how biography itself functions as a cultural practice that creates meaning across time.

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