

**RECONSTRUCTING ḤADĪTH CRITICISM THROUGH ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTICS AND IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES**

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<b>Abstract</b>	<p><i>This study examines contemporary transformations in ḥadīth criticism, with particular attention to the epistemological challenges posed by modern hermeneutical approaches, ideological influences, and digital religious discourse. Classical Islamic scholarship developed a rigorous methodology of ḥadīth verification through the combined processes of isnād and matn criticism, aimed at preserving the authenticity and authority of Prophetic traditions. In the contemporary context, however, various interpretive trends, particularly those influenced by modern hermeneutics, feminist readings, reformist thought, and digital media discourse have encouraged renewed engagement with ḥadīth texts and their meanings. Adopting a qualitative library-based methodology, this study analyses selected contemporary approaches to ḥadīth criticism and evaluates them through the lens of Islamic epistemology, particularly the tawḥīdic paradigm and the Qur’ānic worldview. The study argues that although contemporary hermeneutical models may offer useful insights for contextual understanding, some approaches raise epistemological concerns when they rely heavily on subjective, relativistic, or ideologically shaped criteria. This is especially evident when ethical reinterpretation is prioritised without sufficient attention to established principles of authentication and isnād-based validation. The paper proposes a reconstructed framework for ḥadīth criticism that integrates classical methodologies with contemporary awareness while maintaining epistemological integrity. It concludes that a balanced approach, anchored in revelation (wahy), reason (‘aql), and authoritative transmission (naql), is essential for safeguarding the authenticity and relevance of ḥadīth in the digital era. The study further proposes a structured three-stage model integrating authentication, analysis, and contextualisation within a tawḥīdic epistemological framework.</i></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Ḥadīth, Criticism, Epistemology, Digital, Religion.</p>
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**INTRODUCTION**

The question of authority in Islamic knowledge has become increasingly complex in the contemporary digital age, where religious texts are no longer confined to traditional scholarly institutions but are widely disseminated, interpreted, and contested across digital platforms. Among the most affected domains is the study of ḥadīth, which historically occupies a central position as a primary source of Islamic epistemology and legal guidance.

Classical Muslim scholars developed a rigorous and highly structured methodology for the authentication and interpretation of ḥadīth, grounded in the dual processes of *isnād*

(chain of transmission) and *matn* (textual content) criticism. This methodological framework ensured that Prophetic traditions were preserved with a high degree of epistemic reliability and integrity (‘Itr, 1981; al-A‘zamī, 1990; al-Idlibī, 2013; al-Khayrābādī, 2009).

However, the contemporary intellectual landscape has witnessed a significant shift in the way ḥadīth is approached and understood. Modern hermeneutical trends shaped by influences such as Western critical theory, feminist thought, and postmodern epistemology have introduced new interpretive frameworks that often prioritise textual reinterpretation over traditional modes of authentication.

These approaches frequently question the epistemological foundations of classical ḥadīth sciences, particularly the reliance on *isnād*-based validation, and instead advocate for content-based evaluation grounded in ethical, rational, or ideological considerations (Brown, 2009; Brown, 2008; Rahman, 1984; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2011).

In this study, “contemporary hermeneutics” refers to modern approaches to textual interpretation that emphasise the process of understanding texts, including context, reader perspective, socio-historical setting, and renewed engagement with inherited meanings (Al-Ajmi, 2017; Qatawneh, 2020). In Islamic textual studies, such approaches have been applied to Shariah texts, revelation, and religious issues, including discussions related to the Qur’an and ḥadīth (Al-Ajmi, 2017).

In the context of this study, contemporary hermeneutics refers more specifically to recent approaches that reread or re-evaluate ḥadīth texts in light of modern intellectual trends such as feminist, reformist, postmodern, and digital religious discourses (Brown, 2009; Rahman, 1984; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2011; Campbell, 2013). Hermeneutics differs from ideology: hermeneutics is a method or theory of interpretation, while ideology refers to the assumptions, values, or worldviews that may influence interpretation.

Thus, this study does not reject hermeneutics itself, but critically examines cases where contemporary hermeneutical approaches to ḥadīth become shaped by external ideological frameworks rather than Islamic epistemological principles (Al-Ajmi, 2017; Qatawneh, 2020).

In particular, Muslim feminist scholarship has become an influential strand within contemporary ḥadīth discourse, critically engaging with narrations that are perceived as conflicting with ideals of gender equality, justice, and ethical coherence within Islam. Scholars such as Fatima Mernissi, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas have argued that certain *ḥadīths* reflect patriarchal socio-historical contexts rather than divine intent, thereby necessitating critical re-evaluation through alternative hermeneutical lenses (Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 2006; Barlas, 2011; Badran, 2009; Hidayatullah, 2014).

These approaches often employ frameworks such as the *tawḥīdic* paradigm and the *Qur’ānic* weltanschauung, which emphasise overarching ethical principles derived from the *Qur’an* as criteria for assessing the validity of *ḥadīth* texts. While such developments have contributed to renewed engagement with Islamic texts, they also raise critical epistemological concerns.

One of the central issues lies in the shift from an objective, methodologically grounded system of verification to a more subjective and interpretive mode of analysis. As highlighted in recent scholarship, many contemporary approaches to ḥadīth criticism tend to prioritise perceived ethical coherence over established principles of authentication, thereby introducing elements of relativism and ideological bias into the evaluation process (Abdullah, 2025; al-Khaṭīb, 2011).

This raises an important question: to what extent can these modern hermeneutical frameworks be reconciled with the epistemological foundations of Islamic scholarship? Furthermore, the digital age has amplified these challenges by facilitating the rapid circulation of religious interpretations through social media, online forums, and digital content platforms.

The accessibility of religious texts, while beneficial in promoting knowledge dissemination, has also led to the proliferation of unregulated interpretations that often lack

scholarly rigor. This phenomenon, commonly associated with the concept of “digital religion,” has transformed the dynamics of religious authority, shifting it from traditional scholars to a more decentralised and participatory model (Campbell, 2013). Consequently, interpretations of *ḥadīth* are increasingly shaped by popular discourse, ideological trends, and individual perspectives, rather than established scholarly methodologies.

In addition to its epistemological implications, the digital age also presents practical challenges related to misinformation and the spread of unverified religious content. Recent studies have demonstrated that the methodological principles of *ḥadīth* criticism can be effectively applied as a framework for verifying information circulating on social media platforms.

The systematic processes of source verification, chain evaluation, and content analysis parallel contemporary needs for digital information validation, particularly in combating hoax narratives and fabricated religious claims (Fauzi, 2020). This highlights that the classical sciences of *ḥadīth* are not only historically significant but also functionally relevant in addressing modern epistemic crises within digital environments.

In light of these developments, there is a pressing need to critically re-examine the framework of *ḥadīth* criticism within the context of contemporary intellectual and technological transformations. This study seeks to address this gap by analysing modern hermeneutical approaches to *ḥadīth* through the lens of Islamic epistemology.

It argues that while contemporary interpretations may offer valuable insights, they often suffer from epistemological inconsistencies due to their detachment from the foundational principles of *wahy* (revelation), *naql* (transmission), and *‘aql* (reason), which collectively constitute the core of Islamic knowledge systems (al-Attas, 2023; Wan Daud, 2005).

Building upon classical scholarship and contemporary critiques, this paper proposes a reframed approach to *ḥadīth* criticism that integrates the strengths of traditional methodologies with an awareness of modern intellectual challenges. It emphasises the necessity of maintaining epistemological discipline while engaging with contemporary issues, thereby ensuring that the authenticity and authority of *ḥadīth* are preserved without disregarding the need for contextual understanding.

Accordingly, this study is guided by two primary research questions: (1) How has *ḥadīth* criticism been reframed through contemporary hermeneutical and ideological influences? and (2) To what extent are these approaches epistemologically consistent with the principles of Islamic epistemology? By addressing these questions, the paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on Islamic thought, *ḥadīth* studies, and the impact of modern intellectual trends on the production and interpretation of religious knowledge.

This study distinguishes itself from existing scholarship by extending the discourse on *matn* criticism beyond descriptive and classificatory analysis towards an epistemologically grounded reconstruction. Rather than proposing a wholly new method detached from the classical tradition, it offers an integrative refinement of existing approaches by situating *ḥadīth* criticism within a *tawḥīdīc* framework rooted in Islamic epistemology.

Its contribution lies in synthesising classical *ḥadīth* methodologies, contemporary hermeneutical debates, *maqāsid*-based evaluation, contextual criticism, and digital religious discourse into a coherent epistemological model. Through this synthesis, the study seeks to reconcile the authority of classical *isnād-matn* criticism with contemporary intellectual challenges while preserving the hierarchy of *wahy*, *naql*, and *‘aql*.

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ISLAMIC EPISTEMOLOGY**

Islamic epistemology provides the foundational framework through which knowledge is understood, validated, and applied within the Islamic intellectual tradition. Unlike secular epistemological systems that often separate revelation from rational inquiry, Islamic epistemology is characterised by an integrated approach that harmonises *wahy* (revelation), *‘aql* (reason), and *naql* (transmission) as interdependent sources of

knowledge. This framework ensures that knowledge is not only rationally coherent but also metaphysically grounded in divine truth (al-Attas, 2023; Wan Daud, 2005).

At the core of Islamic epistemology lies the principle of *tawhīd*, which signifies the absolute oneness of God and serves as the ultimate ontological and epistemological foundation. *Tawhīd* establishes a unified vision of reality in which all forms of knowledge are interconnected and oriented towards recognising divine truth. In this sense, knowledge is not merely a cognitive construct but a means of attaining certainty (*yaqīn*) and fulfilling the purpose of human existence as servants of Allah (al-Attas, 2023).

Consequently, any epistemological framework that introduces fragmentation, relativism, or ideological bias is considered inconsistent with the *tawhīdic* worldview. Within this paradigm, *wahy* (revelation) occupies the highest epistemic authority. The *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muḥammad (PBUH) are regarded as primary sources of knowledge that provide definitive guidance on matters of belief, law, and ethics.

The authority of *ḥadīth*, therefore, is intrinsically linked to its authenticity as a representation of Prophetic teachings. Classical scholars developed the sciences of *ḥadīth* (*'ulūm al-ḥadīth*) to ensure that only verified narrations are accepted as valid sources of knowledge. This process involved rigorous scrutiny of both the *isnād* (chain of transmission) and the *matn* (textual content), reflecting a comprehensive epistemological methodology that integrates transmission and rational evaluation (Itr, 1981; al-A'zamī, 1990; al-Khayrābādī, 2009; al-Idlibī, 2013).

In addition to revelation, *'aql* (reason) plays a significant role in Islamic epistemology as a tool for understanding and interpreting revealed knowledge. However, unlike in modern Western epistemology where reason may function independently of revelation, Islamic thought positions reason as subordinate to and guided by *wahy*. This ensures that rational inquiry operates within a framework that is consistent with divine guidance, thereby preventing the emergence of speculative or relativistic interpretations that contradict established truths (al-Attas, 2023).

Reason is thus not rejected but disciplined, functioning as a means to comprehend, rather than redefine, revelation. The third component, *naql* (transmission), refers to the preservation and conveyance of knowledge through reliable chains of narration. In the context of *ḥadīth* studies, *naql* is operationalised through the *isnād* system, which serves as a mechanism for verifying the authenticity of transmitted reports.

The emphasis on *isnād* reflects the Islamic commitment to preserving knowledge with historical and epistemic accuracy. As such, any attempt to evaluate *ḥadīth* solely on the basis of content, without due consideration of transmission, risks undermining the integrity of the entire epistemological system (al-Khaṭīb, 2011).

This systematic structure also reflects the epistemological foundations of Islamic knowledge, where verification is not based on isolated criteria but on an integrated evaluative process. The layered conditions established by the *muḥaddithīn* illustrate how epistemic certainty is achieved through cumulative validation, rather than reliance on a single method of assessment (Dzulraidi et al., 2026).

In addition to the integration of *wahy*, *'aql*, and *naql*, Islamic epistemology also emphasises the concept of *adab* (proper discipline in knowledge), which ensures that knowledge is acquired, interpreted, and applied within a morally and intellectually coherent framework. As articulated by Wan Daud (2005), following the thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the loss of *adab* leads to confusion in knowledge and the emergence of erroneous interpretations that deviate from the true hierarchy of knowledge.

This perspective underscores the importance of maintaining epistemological discipline in the study of *ḥadīth*, particularly in the face of contemporary approaches that prioritise subjective or relativistic interpretations over structured methodological principles.

A key concept relevant to this study is the distinction between *isnād*-based and content-based *matn* criticism, as discussed in contemporary scholarship. *Isnād*-based *matn* criticism involves analysing textual variations through comparison of transmission chains,

often identifying inconsistencies such as interpolation or transcription errors. In contrast, content-based *matn* criticism evaluates the internal coherence of the text, particularly in relation to established principles derived from the *Qur'ān*, authentic *Sunnah*, and rational consistency.

While both approaches exist within the broader framework of *ḥadīth* criticism, classical scholars exercised content-based criticism with caution and within strict epistemological parameters (al-Dumaynī, 1984; Balhī, 2021; Abdullah, 2025). Contemporary Islamic scholarship itself reflects an ongoing debate regarding the scope and application of *matn* criticism.

Some modern Muslim thinkers argue that classical scholars placed greater emphasis on *isnād* analysis than on systematic textual criticism, thereby opening space for renewed internal critique of *ḥadīth* authenticity through *matn* evaluation. However, such critiques are generally framed within the methodological boundaries established by classical scholarship, emphasising that internal criticism must remain disciplined and methodologically grounded rather than purely subjective (Hafid & Mahmuddin, 2022).

This indicates that the tension between transmission and content-based evaluation is not exclusively a modern or external phenomenon but also part of internal scholarly discourse. This typology is further supported by studies demonstrating that early *ḥadīth* scholars did, in practice, engage in forms of *matn* criticism, even if such methods were not always explicitly theorised or systematically codified (al-Malībārī, 2003).

Among these perspectives, the conditional affirmation view represents the most balanced position, as it acknowledges the role of textual evaluation while preserving the primacy of *isnād*-based verification within the broader epistemological framework of Islamic scholarship.

In the context of *ḥadīth* studies, *naqd* (criticism) refers to the systematic evaluation of both the transmitters and the textual content of narrations in order to distinguish between acceptable (*maqbul*) and rejected (*mardūd*) reports (ʿItr, 1981; al-Aʿzamī, 1990; al-Idlibī, 2013). This dual-layered process reflects the integrated epistemological structure of Islamic scholarship, in which authenticity is established not only through transmission but also through controlled textual scrutiny.

This distinction becomes particularly significant in the context of contemporary hermeneutical approaches, which tend to prioritise content-based evaluation while marginalising *isnād* analysis. For instance, modern interpretive frameworks especially those influenced by feminist and reformist thought often assess *ḥadīth* based on their perceived alignment with ethical ideals such as equality and justice, sometimes independent of their authenticity as established through traditional methodologies (Rahman, 1984; Badran, 2009; Hidayatullah, 2014).

While such approaches aim to address contemporary concerns, they risk introducing subjective criteria that may conflict with the epistemological principles of Islamic scholarship. Another important dimension of Islamic epistemology is the concept of *Qur'ānic weltanschauung* (worldview), which refers to a comprehensive ethical and metaphysical framework derived from the *Qur'ān*.

This worldview encompasses values such as justice (*ʿadl*), compassion (*raḥmah*), and balance (*mīzān*), and serves as a guiding principle for interpreting religious texts (Izutsu, 1964). Within the classical tradition, the *Qur'ān* functions as the ultimate criterion (*mi'yār*) against which other sources of knowledge are evaluated. However, this evaluation is conducted within a structured methodological framework, rather than through subjective or ideological reinterpretation.

In contrast, contemporary applications of the *Qur'ānic* worldview often employ it as a basis for selectively accepting or rejecting *ḥadīth* texts. As observed in recent studies, such approaches may emphasise overarching ethical principles while overlooking the methodological processes required to establish textual authenticity (Abdullah, 2025; al-Khaṭīb, 2011). This shift reflects a broader epistemological tension between tradition and

modernity, where the authority of transmitted knowledge is increasingly challenged by interpretive autonomy.

Recent scholarship has also explored the role of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* as an epistemological parameter in *ḥadīth* evaluation. As demonstrated by Junianto et al. (2024), *maqāṣid* can function not only as a tool for interpreting *ḥadīth* but also as a criterion for assessing their authenticity, particularly in relation to broader values such as justice, public benefit, and moral coherence. This reflects an emerging trend in contemporary *ḥadīth* studies that seeks to expand the scope of epistemological evaluation beyond purely technical criteria while remaining anchored in the objectives of the *Sharī'ah*.

In summary, Islamic epistemology offers a comprehensive and balanced framework for understanding and evaluating knowledge, particularly in the field of *ḥadīth* studies. By integrating revelation, reason, and transmission within a *tawḥīdic* paradigm, it ensures that knowledge remains both authentic and meaningful. Any attempt to reframe *ḥadīth* criticism in the contemporary context must therefore engage critically with this epistemological foundation, rather than bypassing it in favour of purely interpretive or ideological approaches.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a qualitative research design based on a library-oriented approach, which is commonly employed in Islamic studies, particularly in fields such as *ḥadīth* studies, epistemology, and theology. The qualitative nature of this research allows for an in-depth exploration of conceptual, methodological, and epistemological issues related to contemporary *ḥadīth* criticism (Bowen, 2009; Long, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **Research Design And Approach**

The study utilises a textual-analytical and epistemological approach, focusing on critical examination of both classical and contemporary discourses on *ḥadīth* criticism. The analysis is guided by the framework of Islamic epistemology, particularly the integration of *wahy* (revelation), *naql* (transmission), and *'aql* (reason) as foundational sources of knowledge (al-Attas, 2023; Wan Daud, 2005).

In addition, this study incorporates a comparative analytical method, whereby classical methodologies of *ḥadīth* criticism are compared with contemporary hermeneutical approaches, including feminist and reformist interpretations. This enables a systematic evaluation of their respective epistemological assumptions, strengths, and limitations. The use of a qualitative and library-based approach is particularly appropriate for studies in Islamic epistemology and *ḥadīth* sciences, where analysis is primarily text-driven and conceptually oriented (Bowen, 2009; Long, 2014; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

### **Data Sources**

The data for this study are derived from two main categories, namely primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of classical works on *ḥadīth* sciences (*ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*), foundational texts on Islamic epistemology, and selected *ḥadīth* literature relevant to discussions on *matn* criticism.

Meanwhile, the secondary sources include contemporary academic works on *ḥadīth* studies and hermeneutics, feminist and reformist interpretations of Islamic texts, modern scholarship on digital religion and epistemological shifts, as well as the analysed article on *matn* criticism and Muslim feminist thought. All of these sources were carefully selected based on their relevance to the research objectives and their contribution to ongoing scholarly discourse.

### **Analytical Method**

This study adopts a qualitative, library-based analytical framework. The analysis is conducted through four main methods. First, descriptive analysis is used to identify and explain the key concepts related to classical *ḥadīth* criticism, contemporary hermeneutics,

ideological influence, and Islamic epistemology. Second, comparative analysis is applied to compare classical methodologies of ḥadīth criticism, particularly isnād and matn criticism, with contemporary hermeneutical approaches, including feminist, reformist, and digital religious interpretations.

Third, close reading and thematic comparison are used to examine selected classical and contemporary texts in order to identify recurring themes, methodological assumptions, and epistemological patterns. Fourth, epistemological evaluation is employed to assess the consistency of contemporary approaches with the principles of Islamic epistemology, especially the relationship between waḥy, naql, and ‘aql within the tawḥīdic paradigm.

Through these methods, the study evaluates whether contemporary approaches to ḥadīth criticism remain methodologically grounded or whether they are influenced by subjective or ideological assumptions. This multi-layered analytical process ensures that the study remains both descriptively grounded and critically rigorous. The unit of analysis in this study consists of selected classical and contemporary scholarly texts on ḥadīth criticism, particularly those addressing matn analysis and hermeneutical reinterpretation.

These texts are analysed through close reading and thematic comparison to identify underlying epistemological assumptions and methodological patterns. This qualitative and library-based approach is consistent with established methodologies in ḥadīth research, where textual analysis and critical evaluation are central to determining authenticity and meaning.

As noted by Rohman et al. (2020), ḥadīth criticism involves a systematic examination of both sanad and matn in order to distinguish between authentic and non-authentic reports, making qualitative textual analysis an essential methodological tool in this field.

## **SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS**

This study focuses specifically on *matn* criticism and its contemporary reinterpretations, particularly within feminist and digital contexts. While it acknowledges the broader field of *ḥadīth* studies, it does not aim to provide an exhaustive analysis of all classical methodologies or contemporary perspectives. Additionally, the study is limited to theoretical and conceptual analysis, without empirical fieldwork. As such, its findings are intended to contribute to theoretical discourse rather than empirical generalisation.

## **EPISTEMOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF ḤADĪTH CRITICISM**

Classical Muslim scholarship developed a highly sophisticated and integrated methodology for the authentication and interpretation of *ḥadīth*, centred on the complementary processes of *isnād* (chain of transmission) and *matn* (textual content) criticism. Scholars such as al-A‘zamī (1990) and ‘Itr (1981) emphasised that the evaluation of *ḥadīth* requires not only verification of narrator reliability but also critical examination of textual coherence and integrity.

This dual-layered approach reflects the epistemological rigor of early *ḥadīth* scholarship, in which transmission and content were assessed as interdependent components within a unified methodological framework (al-Idlibī, 2013; al-Khayrābādī, 2009). The contemporary challenges facing ḥadīth studies are further compounded by the phenomenon of distortion (*tahrīf*), which includes the alteration, misrepresentation, or fabrication of narrations within both traditional and digital contexts.

Such distortions have historically posed significant threats to the integrity of Islamic knowledge, particularly during periods of political and ideological conflict. In modern scholarship, this issue extends into digital environments, where manipulated or decontextualised ḥadīth can circulate widely without verification, thereby complicating efforts to maintain epistemological authenticity (Salman, 2024). This reinforces the necessity of maintaining rigorous methodological standards in both transmission and interpretation.

Classical scholars further established detailed criteria for evaluating both *sanad* and *matn*, including continuity of transmission, narrator reliability, absence of defects (*'illah*), and consistency with the *Qur'ān*, established Sunnah, and sound reasoning. These principles demonstrate that *ḥadīth* criticism was not limited to technical transmission analysis but constituted a structured epistemological system aimed at safeguarding the authenticity of knowledge.

The five conditions of *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth ittīṣāl al-sanad*, *'adālah*, *ḍabt*, absence of *shudhūdh*, and absence of *'illah* function as layered mechanisms that collectively filter unreliable narrations (Dzulraidi et al., 2026). In addition, classical scholarship recognised the importance of both textual and contextual interpretation. While textual approaches focus on the literal meaning of narrations, contextual approaches situate *ḥadīth* within their socio-historical circumstances.

As noted by Hasanah (2023), these approaches operated complementarily within a structured epistemological framework. Although *isnād* criticism was prioritised, classical scholars did not neglect *matn* analysis; rather, textual evaluation was applied within strict epistemological constraints, including identifying contradictions, anomalies, and inconsistencies (al-Dumaynī, 1984; al-Jawwābī, 1991; Brown, 2008).

The debate surrounding *matn* criticism is further enriched by the distinction between the approaches of *muḥaddithūn* (traditionists) and *uṣūliyyūn* (jurisprudents). While traditionists prioritised *isnād* verification as the primary means of establishing authenticity, jurists often incorporated broader interpretive considerations, including legal reasoning and contextual coherence.

This disciplinary variation highlights that *matn* criticism has historically functioned within multiple epistemological frameworks, rather than as a singular or uniform method (al-Khatib, 2020). Such diversity underscores the importance of situating contemporary debates within a broader intellectual tradition.

Recent scholarship further supports this distinction by demonstrating that methodological differences between the *muḥaddithūn* and *uṣūliyyūn* were not limited to *matn* criticism alone, but extended to broader issues such as narration evaluation, the definition of *ṣaḥābah*, reports transmitted by *ahl al-bid'ah*, conflicts between *al-waṣl* and *al-irsāl*, *al-raḥ* and *al-waqf*, the status of *al-mastūr* narrators, and the acceptance of *ziyādah al-thiqah*.

Ramle et al. (2022) argue that while the *uṣūliyyūn* tended to formulate general theoretical principles, the *muḥaddithūn* often evaluated individual narrations through specific contextual indicators (*qarā'in*). This distinction is significant for the present study because it shows that methodological plurality existed within the Islamic tradition itself, yet such plurality remained governed by disciplined epistemological parameters rather than unrestricted subjective interpretation.

The development of *matn* criticism reflects a dynamic methodological evolution within *ḥadīth* studies. While early scholars emphasised coherence with *Qur'ānic* principles and established legal norms, contemporary approaches have expanded the analytical scope to include *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, linguistic analysis, and contextual interpretation, thereby broadening the framework of *ḥadīth* criticism (Razak et al., 2025).

Contemporary *ḥadīth* studies have also demonstrated a shift from purely textual analysis towards interdisciplinary approaches that integrate historical, sociological, and epistemological perspectives. This development reflects a broader transformation in the study of *ḥadīth*, from classical transmission-focused paradigms to more context-sensitive and analytical frameworks in modern scholarship (Rohman, 2025).

Recent studies have further highlighted the importance of contextual understanding in determining both the validity and applicability of *ḥadīth*. Wasman et al. (2023) argue that beyond technical verification, comprehension of contextual meaning is essential for accurate interpretation. At the same time, while the authority of the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* has generally been upheld, limited forms of internal critique have existed within the tradition, typically confined to specific narrations rather than the collections as a whole (Husayn, 2022).

In contrast, modern scholarship has introduced diverse and often competing perspectives on *ḥadīth* criticism. Orientalist approaches have historically expressed skepticism regarding the authenticity of *ḥadīth*, particularly concerning transmission processes and the late codification of *ḥadīth* literature.

Early scholars such as Ignaz Goldziher argued that many *ḥadīths* reflect later socio-political developments rather than authentic Prophetic teachings (Goldziher, 1971), while Joseph Schacht contended that legal *ḥadīths* were retrospectively attributed to legitimise evolving juristic doctrines (Schacht, 1967). This skeptical orientation was further developed by G. H. A. Juynboll through the “common link” theory, which questions the historical reliability of *isnād* structures (Juynboll, 1983).

Orientalist critiques, particularly those of Joseph Schacht, have been criticised for their disproportionate emphasis on *isnād* analysis while neglecting the role of *matn* evaluation. As highlighted in recent studies, Schacht’s approach tends to adopt a reductionist perspective that overlooks the integrated nature of classical *ḥadīth* methodology, which combines both transmission and textual analysis within a structured epistemological system (Azam et al., 2025).

Furthermore, contemporary scholarship has demonstrated that integrative methodologies such as the *isnād-cum-matn* approach provide a more comprehensive framework for evaluating *ḥadīth* authenticity. These approaches challenge earlier reductionist models by combining transmission verification with systematic textual analysis, thereby aligning more closely with classical Islamic methodologies (Azam et al., 2025).

Subsequent developments in Western *ḥadīth* studies demonstrate that post-Schachtian scholars such as James Robson and John Burton continued to engage critically with the question of *ḥadīth* authenticity, albeit with varying methodological positions. While Robson exhibited a degree of openness towards elements of the traditional Muslim framework, Burton adopted a more sceptical stance, proposing that *ḥadīth* originated primarily as exegetical developments of the *Qur’ān* rather than as historically transmitted Prophetic traditions.

These divergent perspectives reflect the continued influence of earlier orientalist scepticism while also illustrating the methodological diversity within Western *ḥadīth* scholarship (Alshahri, 2011). However, contemporary scholarship has demonstrated that Western *ḥadīth* studies are not monolithic.

While early orientalist approaches were characterised by methodological skepticism, more recent scholars such as Harald Motzki have proposed integrative frameworks through the *isnād-cum-matn* method, combining transmission analysis with textual evaluation and demonstrating the possibility of tracing *ḥadīth* to earlier historical layers (Motzki, 1991; Baihaqqi & Kholis, 2024). Similarly, Schoeler (2006) highlights the interplay between oral and written transmission, offering a more nuanced understanding of *ḥadīth* preservation.

This diversity within Western scholarship reveals methodological tensions between skeptical and integrative approaches. Juynboll’s methodology has been criticised for selective use of evidence and predetermined conclusions (Khan, 2021), whereas integrative approaches such as those of Motzki align more closely with classical Islamic methodologies (Ayaz, 2015).

Moreover, orientalist scholarship is increasingly understood as shaped by broader intellectual and ideological frameworks (Idri et al., 2024), prompting contemporary Muslim scholars to reassess and strengthen classical methodologies through interdisciplinary approaches (Khairullah et al., 2026; Kurniawan, 2021; Nawafil & Suparwany, 2021).

Contemporary Muslim scholarship has also responded to orientalist skepticism by reaffirming the rational and methodological integrity of classical *ḥadīth* criticism. As highlighted in recent studies on the thought of Syarif Ḥātim al-‘Aunī, classical *ḥadīth* criticism operates within a rational-universal framework and should be understood as a scientifically grounded method rather than a purely traditional or uncritical practice (Huda

& Fadil, 2023). This perspective aligns with revisionist approaches that defend the reliability of classical methodologies while engaging critically with modern challenges.

Alongside orientalist discourse, feminist and reformist hermeneutics have emerged as influential approaches in contemporary *ḥadīth* studies. Scholars such as Mernissi, Wadud, and Barlas argue that certain *ḥadīths* reflect patriarchal socio-historical contexts rather than normative Islamic teachings (Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2011; Badran, 2009; Hidayatullah, 2014).

While these approaches contribute to renewed engagement with Islamic texts and highlight important ethical concerns, they have been criticised for relying on subjective and ideologically influenced criteria that may lack methodological consistency (Abdullah, 2025; al-Khaṭīb, 2011; Barazangi, 2017).

From an epistemological perspective, contemporary hermeneutical approaches exhibit significant limitations. One of the most critical issues is the shift from objective, methodologically grounded verification to subjective evaluation based on ethical or ideological considerations. Classical scholarship emphasised systematic verification through *isnād* analysis (ʿItr, 1981; al-Aʿzamī, 1990), whereas contemporary approaches often prioritise content-based evaluation independent of transmission.

Although classical *matn* criticism was governed by structured criteria such as contradiction with established *Sunnah*, inconsistency with historical realities, and deviation from Prophetic linguistic style (Abdullah, 2025; al-Dumaynī, 1984) modern approaches may apply evaluative criteria inconsistently or selectively.

This epistemological shift introduces subjectivity and undermines methodological coherence. Feminist hermeneutics, for example, has been described as “relatively subjective rather than conclusively objective,” thereby limiting its capacity to function as a definitive basis for rejecting authenticated narrations (Abdullah, 2025). Furthermore, the marginalisation of *isnād*-based validation represents a critical weakness, as the authority of *ḥadīth* is intrinsically linked to the reliability of its transmission (Brown, 2009).

Contemporary approaches also frequently exhibit methodological inconsistency in applying the *Qurʾānic* worldview as a criterion for evaluating *ḥadīth*, often without adherence to established principles such as *jamʿ*, *tarjīh*, and *taʿwīl* (al-Khaṭīb, 2011; al-Idlibī, 2013). In addition, the influence of external ideological frameworks—particularly those derived from Western liberal and postmodern thought—may introduce interpretive standards that are not fully aligned with Islamic epistemology (al-Attas, 2023; Wan Daud, 2005; Rahman, 1984).

These epistemological challenges are further intensified in the digital age. The rise of digital religion has transformed the production and dissemination of religious knowledge, decentralising authority and enabling widespread participation in interpretive discourse (Campbell, 2013; Campbell & Tsuria, 2021). While this has increased accessibility, it has also contributed to the fragmentation of epistemic authority, where credibility is often determined by visibility and engagement rather than scholarly rigor.

As noted by Brown (2009), the dilution of methodological standards in digital discourse poses a significant threat to the preservation of *ḥadīth* authority. This transformation can also be understood in light of broader shifts in religious authority within contemporary Muslim societies. As observed in recent studies on post-Salafism, the fragmentation of traditional religious authority and the emergence of alternative interpretive voices reflect a wider reconfiguration of epistemic structures in modern Islam (Sinani, 2022).

This development further reinforces the need for a structured and epistemologically grounded framework for evaluating *ḥadīth* in the digital age. Moreover, contemporary research highlights the importance of incorporating socio-historical analysis into *ḥadīth* evaluation. Studies such as Hartati et al. (2025) demonstrate that factors such as scholarly networks and regional practices influence transmission, while Amir et al. (2021) show that *ḥadīth* narratives may be shaped by socio-political motivations. These findings reinforce the need for a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to *ḥadīth* criticism.

In response to these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need for an integrative epistemological framework that reconciles classical methodologies with contemporary concerns. Such an approach must preserve the primacy of *wahy*, while incorporating disciplined use of *'aql* and maintaining the integrity of *naql* (al-Attas, 2023). It should also balance authenticity, interpretation, and contextual application, ensuring that *ḥadīth* remains both epistemologically grounded and contextually relevant.

Despite the extensive literature on *ḥadīth* criticism and contemporary hermeneutics, a significant gap remains in integrating these discussions within a coherent Islamic epistemological framework, particularly in the context of the digital age (Rahman, 1984; Abdullah, 2025). This study addresses this gap by offering a systematic epistemological evaluation of contemporary approaches while proposing an integrative model that bridges tradition and modernity.

### **RECONSTRUCTING ḤADĪTH CRITICISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE: TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED TAWḤĪDIC FRAMEWORK**

In light of the epistemological challenges identified in the preceding analysis, there is a pressing need to reconstruct the framework of *ḥadīth* criticism in a manner that preserves the integrity of classical methodologies while engaging constructively with contemporary intellectual realities (Abdullah, 2025; al-Khaṭīb, 2011). This section proposes an integrated model grounded in Islamic epistemology, particularly the *tawḥīdic* paradigm, which seeks to harmonise revelation, reason, and transmission in the evaluation of *ḥadīth* within the context of the digital age.

#### **Foundational Principles Of Reconstruction**

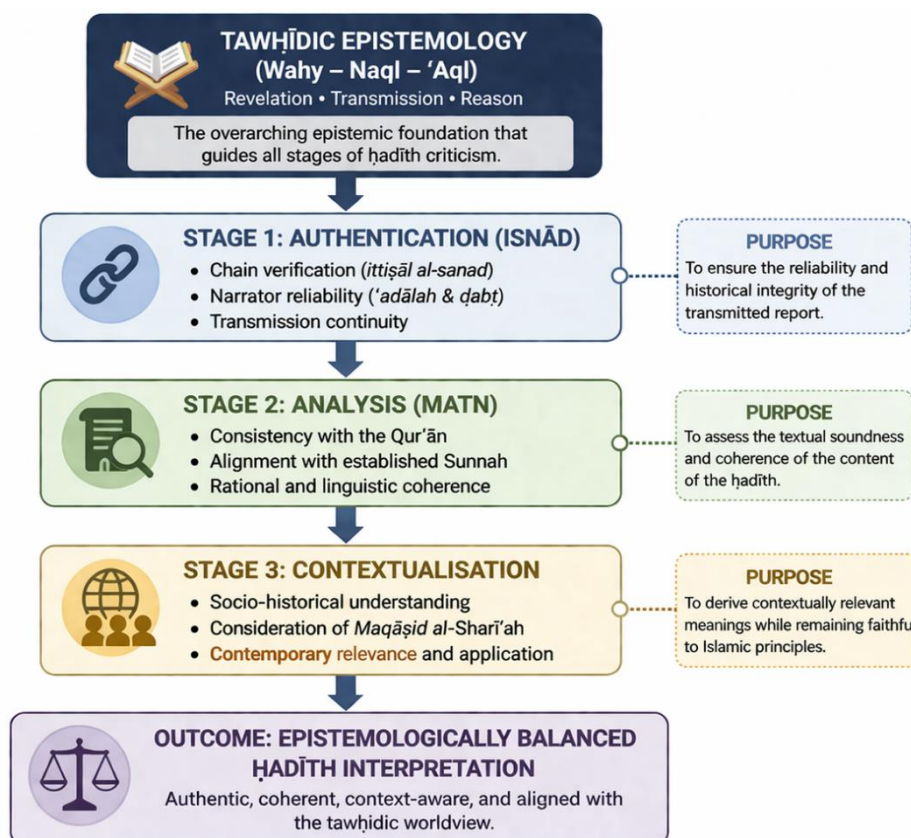
Any attempt to reconstruct *ḥadīth* criticism must begin with a reaffirmation of the epistemological hierarchy in Islam, wherein *wahy* (revelation) occupies the highest authority, followed by *naql* (authenticated transmission) and *'aql* (disciplined reason) (al-Attas, 2023; Wan Daud, 2005). This hierarchy ensures that interpretive efforts remain anchored in divine guidance, thereby preventing the emergence of relativistic or ideologically driven readings.

Within this framework, the *tawḥīdic* paradigm functions as a unifying principle that integrates all sources of knowledge into a coherent worldview. It affirms that truth is singular and originates from Allah, and thus cannot be subject to arbitrary reinterpretation based on fluctuating social or ideological trends (al-Attas, 2023). Consequently, any contemporary approach to *ḥadīth* criticism must operate within the boundaries of this paradigm, ensuring consistency with both the *Qur'ān* and the authentic *Sunnah*.

#### **Reintegrating Isnād And Matn Criticism**

A central component of the proposed reconstruction is the reintegration of *isnād*-based and *matn*-based criticism into a unified methodological framework. As demonstrated in both classical and contemporary scholarship, these two dimensions are not mutually exclusive but rather complementary processes that collectively ensure the authenticity and coherence of *ḥadīth* (al-Idlibī, 2013; Brown, 2008).

Building on contemporary classifications, this study proposes the following structured approach as shown in **Figure 1**: Integrated *Tawḥīdic* Framework for *Ḥadīth* Criticism.



**Figure 1. Integrated Tawhīdic Framework for Ḥadīth Criticism: A Three-Stage Model of Authentication, Analysis, and Contextualisation.**

The proposed framework is illustrated in Figure 1. Figure 1 presents the proposed integrated *tawhīdic* framework for *ḥadīth* criticism, which is structured around three sequential stages: authentication, analysis, and contextualisation. The entire process is grounded in the overarching epistemological foundation of *tawhīd*, which integrates revelation (*wahy*), transmission (*naql*), and reason (*‘aql*) as complementary sources of knowledge.

The first stage, authentication (*isnād*), focuses on verifying the reliability of the chain of transmission through the evaluation of narrator integrity, precision, and continuity of transmission. This stage ensures that only historically reliable reports are considered for further analysis. This stage ensures epistemic legitimacy (‘Itr, 1981; al-A‘zamī, 1990).

The second stage, analysis (*matn*), involves examining the textual content of the *ḥadīth*. This includes assessing its consistency with the *Qur’ān*, its alignment with established *Sunnah*, and its rational and linguistic coherence. This stage functions to ensure that the content of the *ḥadīth* does not contradict foundational Islamic principles. This stage ensures interpretive coherence (al-Dumaynī, 1984; al-Idlibī, 2013).

The third stage, contextualisation, situates the *ḥadīth* within its broader socio-historical context while also considering its contemporary relevance. This includes evaluating the objectives of *Sharī‘ah* (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*) and ensuring that interpretation remains faithful to Islamic epistemological principles while addressing current realities. The outcome of this integrated process is an epistemologically balanced interpretation of *ḥadīth* that preserves authenticity, maintains coherence, and ensures contextual relevance.

The figure thus visually represents the systematic and hierarchical nature of the proposed framework, highlighting the interdependence of its stages within a unified epistemological structure. This stage ensures relevance without distortion (Rahman, 1984). This tripartite model addresses the imbalance observed in contemporary hermeneutics,

where *matn* criticism is often detached from *isnād* verification, leading to epistemological inconsistency (Abdullah, 2025).

This framework emphasises a balanced integration between *isnād* verification and *matn* analysis, ensuring that both transmission and textual content are evaluated within a coherent epistemological structure. The integrative nature of this framework is consistent with contemporary scholarship on *ḥadīth* methodology, particularly the *isnād-cum-matn* approach developed by Harald Motzki.

As highlighted by Ramdhani (2021), this method is not constructed in isolation but is rooted in a broader epistemological structure that combines classical sources, transmission analysis, and textual evaluation to ensure validity. This demonstrates that a balanced integration of *isnād* and *matn* is not only methodologically necessary but also epistemologically grounded in both classical and modern scholarship. Therefore, the proposed model does not represent a departure from classical methodology, but rather a continuation and refinement of established epistemological principles.

The proposed framework is also aligned with recent developments in *ḥadīth* studies, where classical methodologies are being adapted into structured and systematic models to enhance clarity and applicability in contemporary contexts. As highlighted by Ibrahim et al. (2025), modern approaches to *isnād* evaluation increasingly adopt layered and systematic frameworks while maintaining the foundational principles established by classical scholars.

The integration of contextual and historical analysis within this framework is consistent with contemporary approaches that emphasise the importance of situating *ḥadīth* within their original socio-historical context while maintaining methodological discipline. This ensures that interpretation remains both relevant and epistemologically grounded (Hasanah, 2023).

Empirical applications of integrative methodologies further reinforce the validity of combining *isnād* and *matn* analysis. For instance, recent studies employing the *isnād-cum-matn* approach have demonstrated the ability to identify textual interpolations (*idrāj*) and trace the socio-political motives underlying certain narrations, thereby providing a more comprehensive evaluation of *ḥadīth* authenticity (Amir et al., 2021).

## **REGULATING CONTEMPORARY HERMENEUTICS**

Rather than rejecting contemporary interpretive approaches entirely, this study proposes a regulated engagement model that allows for critical reinterpretation within epistemological limits. This involves the formulation of several guiding principles:

### **1. Principle of Epistemic Boundaries**

No *ḥadīth* may be rejected solely on the basis of perceived ethical discomfort without rigorous authentication analysis (al-Khaṭīb, 2011).

### **2. Principle of Methodological Continuity**

Contemporary interpretations must remain continuous with the *uṣūl* (principles) of classical scholarship, including *jamʿ* (reconciliation), *tarjīh* (preference), and *taʿwīl* (interpretation) (al-Idlibī, 2013).

### **3. Principle of Non-Ideological Filtering**

External ideological frameworks must not function as primary determinants of textual validity (al-Attas, 2023).

### **4. Principle of Qurʾānic Centrality (Disciplined)**

The *Qurʾān* serves as the ultimate criterion, but its application must follow established exegetical methodologies rather than subjective interpretation (al-Khaṭīb, 2011).

These principles aim to preserve the integrity of *ḥadīth* criticism while allowing space for meaningful engagement with contemporary concerns. This regulatory framework

reflects the *ḍarūrah* of maintaining methodological continuity with classical scholarship, as emphasised by critiques of unstructured *matn* rejection (al-Khaṭīb, 2011; Abdullah, 2025).

### **ADDRESSING THE DIGITAL KNOWLEDGE ENVIRONMENT**

The digital age necessitates an additional layer of epistemological awareness, particularly in relation to the production and dissemination of religious knowledge. The decentralisation of authority in digital spaces has created an environment in which interpretive claims can circulate widely without scholarly verification (Campbell, 2013).

As highlighted by Brown (2009), the preservation of ḥadīth authority is intrinsically dependent upon the maintenance of rigorous methodological standards which are frequently diluted within digital discourse. In response to these challenges, the proposed framework emphasises the reassertion of scholarly authority grounded in recognised epistemological credentials, alongside the development of digital literacy in Islamic studies to enable users to distinguish between *mu'tabar* (authoritative) and *ghayr mu'tabar* (non-authoritative) interpretations.

Furthermore, it advocates for active institutional engagement with digital platforms in order to provide credible, accessible, and methodologically sound scholarly content. This approach acknowledges that the challenges posed by the digital age are not merely theoretical in nature but are also structural, thereby requiring proactive and systematic engagement with the evolving realities of digital knowledge production.

### **TOWARDS A BALANCED EPISTEMOLOGICAL FUTURE**

The reconstruction of ḥadīth criticism in the digital age ultimately requires a balance between preservation and adaptation. While classical methodologies must be upheld as the *mi'yār* of authenticity, contemporary contexts demand a level of interpretive responsiveness that ensures the continued relevance of Islamic teachings (Rahman, 1984; Abdullah, 2025).

This study argues that such balance can only be achieved through an epistemologically grounded framework that integrates authenticity (*ṣaḥīḥ*), understanding (*fahm*) and application (*taṭbīq*). By maintaining this balance, ḥadīth criticism can remain both faithful to its origins and responsive to contemporary challenges, thereby safeguarding its role as a central component of Islamic epistemology.

This integrative approach reflects the *ḍarūrah* of maintaining epistemological coherence while addressing contemporary interpretive challenges (Abdullah, 2025; al-Khaṭīb, 2011). Future research may apply this framework to selected ḥadīth case studies in order to further validate its methodological applicability and practical relevance.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study has examined the transformation of ḥadīth criticism in the digital age through the lens of Islamic epistemology, with particular focus on contemporary hermeneutical approaches and their underlying ideological influences. It has demonstrated that while modern interpretive trends especially those influenced by feminist and reformist thought have contributed to renewed engagement with Islamic texts, they simultaneously introduce significant epistemological challenges that cannot be overlooked.

At the core of this analysis lies the tension between classical methodological rigor and contemporary interpretive flexibility. Classical ḥadīth scholarship developed a sophisticated and integrated system of verification grounded in *isnād* and *matn* criticism, ensuring that the authority of the *Sunnah* is preserved through objective and systematic processes.

In contrast, many contemporary approaches tend to prioritise content-based reinterpretation, often guided by ethical, ideological, or contextual considerations that are not always anchored in established epistemological principles. As highlighted in this study, such approaches risk reducing ḥadīth evaluation to subjective interpretation, thereby undermining its epistemic authority.

The digital age further complicates this landscape by reshaping the dynamics of knowledge production and dissemination. The decentralisation of religious authority and the proliferation of unverified interpretations across digital platforms have intensified the epistemological crisis in *ḥadīth* studies. In this context, the authority of *ḥadīth* is increasingly contested not only at the level of methodology but also at the level of public perception, where popular narratives often supersede scholarly rigor.

In response to these challenges, this study has proposed an integrated *tawḥīdic* framework for reconstructing *ḥadīth* criticism, emphasising the *ḍarūrah* of maintaining epistemological hierarchy *wahy*, *naql*, and *ʿaql* while engaging constructively with contemporary concerns. By reintegrating *isnād* and *matn* criticism within a structured methodological process and regulating the application of modern hermeneutics, the proposed model seeks to balance authenticity with relevance.

This approach affirms that meaningful reinterpretation is not inherently incompatible with tradition, provided it operates within the boundaries of Islamic epistemology. Ultimately, the preservation of *ḥadīth* authority in the digital age depends on the ability of scholars to navigate the complexities of modern intellectual discourse without compromising foundational principles.

This requires not only methodological clarity but also epistemological discipline, ensuring that the *Sunnah* remains a reliable and authoritative source of knowledge. Future research may further explore the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and digital media, in shaping religious interpretation and authority, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Islamic knowledge in the contemporary world. This has important implications for the development of digital religious literacy and future scholarship in Islamic epistemology and *ḥadīth* studies.

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