



Rational Criticism of the Prophetic Hadiths among Modernists: "An Applied Study of Selected Models"

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Abstract

Modernist thinkers approach the Sunnah through the primacy of "reason" and the de-sacralization of texts, promoting interpretive autonomy and re-evaluation of ḥadīth beyond classical disciplines. They claim that early scholars neglected textual (matn) criticism in favor of isnād analysis. This study refutes such claims by demonstrating, through examples from works on hidden defects ('ilal) and major compilations, that Muslim scholars had already developed a rigorous methodology integrating both chain and text. The article further shows modernists' reliance on imported frameworks—historicism, anthropology, and hermeneutics—to reinterpret revelation, often resulting in the relativization of rulings and weakening of the Sunnah's authority. Examples include rejecting reports on miracles, forgiveness, and intercession, or contesting narrations viewed as conflicting with "reason" or modern conceptions of gender and society. The study concludes by distinguishing between classical, evidence-based criticism and ideologically driven modernist approaches, calling for reaffirming authentic methodologies to preserve the Sunnah against skeptical reinterpretations.

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Introduction

The Prophetic ḥadīth constitutes the second principal source of Islamic legislation after the Qur'ān and occupies a foundational position in shaping the doctrinal, legal, and ethical system of Islam. Through the ḥadīth, the Sunnah of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) is transmitted, preserved, and operationalized as the lived and practical explanation of Qur'ānic guidance. For this reason, engagement with the ḥadīth cannot be reduced to a purely historical or documentary exercise; rather, it is intrinsically connected to the religious, cultural, and social fabric of the Muslim ummah across time and space (Al-Shāfi'i, 2004; Brown, 2009).

From the earliest centuries of Islam, Muslim scholars developed a sophisticated and unparalleled critical tradition dedicated to safeguarding the Sunnah from fabrication, distortion, and error. This tradition produced rigorous methodological frameworks for the examination of both the chains of transmission (isnād) and the textual content (matn) of reports. Disciplines such as *Muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth* (ḥadīth terminology), *al-Jarḥ wa al-Taṣlīl* (narrator criticism), and *'Ilal al-ḥadīth* (hidden defects) emerged as highly refined sciences, reflecting an epistemological sensitivity to authenticity that remains without parallel in other civilizations' approaches to textual criticism (Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, 2002; Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, 2008).

In the modern period, however, new intellectual currents have arisen that seek to reinterpret religious texts through alternative rational-critical lenses. Influenced largely by Western modernist paradigms—particularly historicism, anthropology of religion, and philosophical hermeneutics—some contemporary thinkers have advanced approaches that fundamentally reshape the relationship between reason and revelation. These approaches range from questioning the reliability of transmission mechanisms to advocating a re-reading of Prophetic traditions according to contemporary rational, ethical, and scientific standards (Arkoun, 2006; Ḥanafī, 1988).

This development raises a central research problem: **How have modernist thinkers approached Prophetic traditions through rational criticism, and to what extent are their approaches compatible with the methodological foundations of classical ḥadīth sciences on the one hand, and with the epistemological requirements of Islamic thought on the other?** This question occupies a critical intersection between the preservation of Islamic intellectual heritage and the pressures exerted by modern global epistemologies.

The importance of this inquiry lies in its reflection of a longstanding yet renewed tension between the authority of reason and the authority of transmitted revelation (*naqīb* in contemporary Islamic thought). While this tension is not new in Islamic intellectual history, modernity and postmodernity have endowed it with unprecedented dimensions, particularly through the elevation of autonomous human reason as the ultimate arbiter of truth. Modernist discourse often seeks to restructure the Muslim relationship with foundational texts, thereby necessitating a careful scholarly reassessment of its critical tools, assumptions, and epistemological limits (Hallaq, 2013).

Moreover, examining selected models of modernist engagement—whether in Arab intellectual circles or beyond—enables a clearer understanding of the methodologies employed, the extent of reliance on Western paradigms of textual criticism, and the relative marginalization or dismissal of classical Islamic mechanisms of ḥadīth evaluation. Such an examination opens the door to a comparative analysis between two fundamentally different frames of reference: one rooted in the epistemology of revelation, and the other grounded in secular rationalism.

Rational criticism of Prophetic traditions among modernists thus extends beyond a technical methodological debate into deeper epistemological and philosophical territory. It is intimately tied to a comprehensive vision of religion, revelation, and the role of the Sunnah within Islam's legislative and cognitive structure. Any meaningful evaluation of these approaches must therefore situate them within their broader intellectual contexts rather than treating them as neutral critical procedures (Soroush, 2002).

Accordingly, there is a pressing scholarly need to revisit modernist readings of the Sunnah through a balanced academic methodology—neither reactionary nor uncritically accommodating. The objective is to assess their claimed contributions while exposing their methodological inconsistencies and epistemological tensions. This is particularly significant given the influence of such readings on contemporary audiences, especially university students and cultural elites, who increasingly question the authority of the Sunnah, the legislative status of ḥadīth, and the boundaries of reason in engaging with revelation.

1. Foundations of Criticism among Modernists

Understanding modernist approaches to ḥadīth criticism requires first identifying the epistemic premises from which their readings of the Prophetic Sunnah proceed. Criticism, as a secondary operation, is necessarily shaped by its foundational assumptions. At the heart of modernist criticism lies the removal—or significant reduction—of the sacred character of religious texts, whether Qur'ān or Sunnah. In this framework, reason is elevated as the sole and ultimate authority, while revelation, metaphysics, and transcendence are subordinated or reinterpreted through human-centered rational categories (Abu Rayyah, n.d.; Arkoun, 2006).

By “reason,” modernists do not refer to the classical Islamic conception of ‘*aql*/as a faculty operating within the bounds of revelation, but rather to what they term the “new reason”—a historically conditioned rationality that seeks to interrogate what was previously considered beyond human inquiry. This reconceptualization gave rise to notions such as the “sacred text,” which, in modernist usage, denotes a text rendered authoritative merely through historical accumulation rather than divine origin. Consequently, the Sunnah is often portrayed as a heterogeneous collection in which authentic and fabricated reports coexist indiscriminately (Sharafī, 2001).

Within this epistemic framework, reason—defined as that which is grounded in sensory experience or prior human knowledge—becomes the decisive criterion for judgment. Since many Prophetic traditions address matters beyond empirical verification, such as divine legislation, eschatology, and metaphysical realities, modernists argue that such reports cannot be authenticated through rational means and must therefore be subjected to skepticism or reinterpretation. This stance overlooks the historical reality that apparent conflicts between revelation and empirical knowledge have frequently been resolved through the evolution of scientific understanding, rather than through the invalidation of revealed texts (Al-Ma'ālīmī, n.d.).

From this foundational position—characterized by the absolutization of reason, the perception of tradition as an impediment to progress, and intellectual dependence on Western modernity and orientalist scholarship—modernists have articulated a set of critical principles. Among the most prominent of these is the prioritization of textual criticism over chain criticism.

1.1 Emphasis on Textual Criticism (*Naqd al-Matn*)

Modernists adopt an approach to ḥadīth criticism that diverges sharply from that of the classical *muḥaddithūn*. They largely dismiss the centrality of isnād analysis and instead focus almost exclusively on the textual content (*matn*), subjecting it to rational scrutiny, ethical evaluation, and conformity with modern scientific and social norms. Traditional scholars are frequently accused of having neglected textual criticism in favor of formal chain analysis (Mahmūd Abu Rayyah, n.d.).

One modernist assertion encapsulates this view:

“What concerns us in ḥadīth studies is the matn, not the isnād. It is the matn that shaped jurisprudence, legislation, and the religious, social, and political heritage of Muslims; therefore, it is the matn that must be studied” (Abu Rayyah, n.d.).

Accordingly, modernists argue that textual criticism should function as the decisive criterion for judging authenticity, irrespective of the reliability of transmitters. As one proponent states:

“The methodology of matn criticism in authenticating or weakening reports operates independently of isnād criticism, focusing solely on the textual content regardless of narrators’ status” (Banna, 2021).

A frequently cited example is the ḥadīth narrated by Ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) and recorded in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) stated that none of those alive at that time would remain after one hundred years. Modernists have questioned this report on rational and historical grounds, despite its acceptance by classical scholars, who interpreted it within a precise contextual and linguistic framework consistent with established principles of ḥadīth interpretation (Al-Bukhārī, n.d.; Ibn Ḥajar, 2001).

1.2. The Claim That ḥadīth Scholars Neglected Textual (Matn) Criticism

Among the recurring assertions advanced by modernist critics is the claim that classical ḥadīth scholars confined their critical efforts almost exclusively to the examination of chains of transmission (isnād), while neglecting the scrutiny of textual content (matn). This allegation is often presented as evidence of methodological inadequacy within the traditional sciences of ḥadīth. In reality, however, this claim is neither novel nor original; it echoes earlier orientalist critiques that were later adopted—often uncritically—by modernist writers in the Muslim world.

A frequently cited statement in this regard is that of Aḥmad Amīn, who argued:

“Even al-Bukhārī, with his renowned precision, recorded traditions that were later proven false by the course of events and empirical observation, because his criticism focused solely on transmitters.”

This assertion effectively constitutes an accusation against Imām al-Bukhārī (d. 256 AH)—may Allah have mercy on him—of including in his *Sahīh* reports that are allegedly defective in meaning. Yet classical scholars unanimously affirmed the authenticity of the report in question, both in its chain and its content. The Prophet’s statement merely indicated that none of those alive at the time of its utterance would remain alive after one hundred years, a meaning that is historically accurate and free from any rational or empirical contradiction (Ibn Ḥajar, 2001).

Far from neglecting matn criticism, traditional *muḥaddithūn* exercised it extensively, as is abundantly documented in the literature of ‘*ilal al-ḥadīth* (hidden defects), *su’ālāt* (scholarly inquiries), and comparative transmission analysis. A well-known example is the ḥadīth reported by al-Tirmidhī stating: “Four practices belong to the Sunnah of the Messengers: *siwāk*, perfume, *ḥinna*’, and marriage.” Leading scholars such as al-Mizzī identified this as a textual error, noting that the original wording was *khitān* (circumcision), not *ḥinna*’. The error was traced to a scribal omission of the final letter (*nūn*), demonstrating how textual anomalies were detected and corrected through meticulous scholarly comparison (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1970).

Such examples illustrate that classical scholars did not merely transmit reports mechanically; rather, they employed keen intellectual discernment, deep familiarity with the Sunnah corpus, and rigorous comparative analysis. Their dedication is further evidenced by their extensive travels—sometimes spanning months or years—to verify a single report. This level of scholarly rigor stands in stark contrast to the caricature often presented by modernist critics.

Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH), for instance, rejected a report attributed to ‘Ā’isha (may Allah be pleased with her) in which the Prophet allegedly said to a menstruating woman: “Leave the prayer during your *aqrā*’.” Imām Aḥmad clarified that ‘Ā’isha intended by *aqrā*’ the days of purity rather than menstruation, thereby resolving the apparent contradiction through linguistic and contextual analysis rather than dismissing the report outright (Ibn Rajab, 1996).

Orientalist Roots of the Allegation

The claim that Muslim scholars neglected textual criticism was first systematically articulated by orientalists. Among the most influential figures in this regard was Ignaz Goldziher, who asserted that Muslim ḥadīth criticism relied exclusively on external evaluation of isnād, while ignoring internal textual analysis. He wrote:

“Whenever a chain of transmission is continuous and consists of trustworthy authorities, the ḥadīth is deemed authentic, even if its content conveys an impossible notion that clearly indicates fabrication” (Goldziher, as cited in ‘Itr, 1988, p. 158).

Similarly, Leone Caetani alleged that Muslim scholars refrained from scrutinizing the content of ḥadīth texts out of reverence for the Companions, fearing that such criticism would undermine the foundations of Islam. According to him, once a report reached a Companion through a sound chain, compilers such as al-Bukhārī and Muslim elevated it to a quasi-divine status, immune from further examination.

Joseph Schacht echoed this view, remarking that Muslim scholars “concealed their criticism of the ḥadīth material itself behind their criticism of the isnād” (Schacht, 1950).

These orientalist assertions were later reproduced almost verbatim by modernist writers, who employed them as a gateway for undermining the authority of the Sunnah under the banner of rational criticism. Among the earliest and most influential transmitters of this discourse into the Arab intellectual sphere was Maḥmūd Abū Rayyah. His book *Adwā’ alā al-Sunnah al-Muḥammadiyyah* became a foundational reference for contemporary critics of the Sunnah. Much of what is today presented as innovative critique is, upon closer examination, a reiteration of Abū Rayyah’s arguments, themselves heavily indebted to orientalist thought (Abū Rayyah, n.d.).

In the introduction to his book, Abū Rayyah wrote:

“Scholars confined their scrutiny to the chain of transmission, placing full trust in narrators, while showing no concern for the meanings of the reports themselves. Thus, they neglected the most critical matter: verifying the authenticity of the text as spoken by the Prophet.”

Classical Response: Isnād and Matn as Complementary Pillars

A careful examination of the science of ḥadīth reveals that the acceptance of any report rests upon two inseparable pillars: the isnād and the matn. During the era of the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them), scrutiny of isnād was minimal due to the widespread prevalence of honesty. Nevertheless, Companions such as ‘Ā’isha openly critiqued the content of certain reports when their apparent meanings conflicted with the Qur’ān or with established Prophetic practice—demonstrating that matn criticism predates systematic isnād evaluation (Muslim, n.d.).

As historical circumstances changed and fabrication increased, isnād criticism became indispensable. Ibn Sīrīn famously stated:

“They did not use to ask about isnād, but when the tribulation occurred, they began to ask for isnād, so that they might accept the reports of Ahl al-Sunnah and reject those of innovation” (Muslim, n.d.).

Ibn al-Mubārak similarly affirmed:

“The isnād is part of religion. Were it not for isnād, anyone could say whatever he wished.”

Thus, isnād functions as the gateway to the matn. If a chain is demonstrably unsound—such as when a narrator is known to be a liar or fabricator—there is no methodological need to analyze the text further. Ibn al-Jawzī records the confession of Nūḥ ibn Abī Maryam, who admitted fabricating reports to encourage Qur’ān recitation, thereby rendering any textual analysis of his narrations irrelevant (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1966).

This methodological sequence explains why some observers mistakenly assume that classical scholars ignored matn criticism. In reality, they examined the text only after establishing the reliability of the chain. Moreover, evaluations of narrators in *al-Jaḥī wa al-Ta’ādil* were frequently grounded in analysis of the content of their reports. As al-Mu’allimī observed:

“Because the imams scrutinized narrators by examining their ḥadīths and rejecting those who transmitted objectionable reports, it is rare to find a munkar text without a defective isnād” (Al-Mu’allimī, n.d.).

2. Examples of ḥadīth Scholars’ Attention to Textual Criticism

Classical ḥadīth criticism did not revolve around isnād evaluation alone. Rather, the tradition developed a layered critical practice in which matn assessment—through rational plausibility, historical verification, linguistic precision, and comparison with established Sunnah—played a central role, particularly within the sciences of ‘ilal (hidden defects), *mushkil* (problematic reports), and *mukhtalif* (apparently conflicting reports) (Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, 2002; Ibn Rajab, 1996).

A clear illustration appears in Ibn al-Jawzī’s (d. 597 AH) *al-Mawdū’āt*, where he records a fabricated narrative attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās and Anas (may Allah be pleased with them). The report claims that when the Meccans denied the Prophet’s Night Journey (*isrā’*), a star fell from the sky, and the Prophet allegedly declared: “Look at this star; whoever’s house it falls into shall be my successor.” The narrators then claim it fell into the house of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, after which the Meccans accused the Prophet of nepotism, and the opening verses of Sūrat al-Najm (Q 53:1-4) were supposedly revealed in response.

Ibn al-Jawzī rejects the report not merely because of weakness in transmission, but because of **manifest textual and rational impossibility**, noting that a “star” falling into a house and remaining visible is absurd. He further employs **historical criticism**, pointing out that Ibn ‘Abbās was extremely young at the time and could not plausibly have witnessed and narrated such an event (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1966). He likewise dismisses the version attributed to Anas on

historical grounds, since Anas's companionship with the Prophet began in Medina, not Mecca—demonstrating the critics' awareness of chronology and biography as tools for matn assessment (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1966).

This pattern—detecting impossibilities, anachronisms, and contextual contradictions—recurs frequently in the works of early critics and compilers. Imām Muslim, for example, rejected a report attributed to Umm Salama suggesting that the Prophet commanded her to attend Ṣalāt al-Ṣubḥ with him on the Day of Sacrifice in Mecca. Muslim explicitly identifies the flaw as stemming from Abū Mu'āwiya's transmission, explaining that the Prophet performed the dawn prayer at Muzdalifa on that day in accordance with established Sunnah, and thus could not have been simultaneously in Mecca instructing Umm Salama there (Muslim, n.d.). This is a direct instance of **matn criticism grounded in established ritual chronology**, coupled with precise attribution of error to a specific transmitter.

Likewise, the critical culture of ḥadīth scholarship includes numerous episodes reflecting minute verification practices. Reports indicate that 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Mahdī corrected Abū 'Awana regarding a narration that Abū 'Awana assumed he possessed in written form; later he discovered that he had merely memorized it from a youthful encounter and confused it with a confirmed transmission. Such cases reflect the seriousness with which early critics distinguished between reliable transmission, loose recollection, and informal reception (Ibn Rajab, 1996).

A major theoretical articulation of matn scrutiny appears in Ibn al-Qayyim's *al-Manār al-Munīf*, where he enumerates textual indicators of fabrication and illustrates them through applied examples. He discusses a report claiming that the Prophet exempted the people of Khaybar from jizya and demonstrates its falsity through multiple **textual-historical criteria**: (a) the mention of Sa' d ibn Mu'ādh, who had died prior to Khaybar; (b) attribution of authorship to Mu'āwiya, who entered Islam later; (c) legislative anachronism regarding jizya; and (d) conflict with well-established authentic reports about Khaybar's legal arrangement. This is not isnād reductionism; rather, it is a layered model of rational, historical, and comparative matn criticism (Ibn al-Qayyim, 1970).

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that Muslim scholars applied a rigorous intellectual framework to matn evaluation long before modern academic criticism. Indeed, entire genres emerged precisely to address textual complexity: *Mushkil al-ḥadīth*, *Mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, and *al-Nāsikh wa al-Mansūkh*, all designed to clarify meanings, reconcile apparent contradictions, and identify interpretive and transmission-related distortions (Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, 2002; Ibn Rajab, 1996).

3. Reliance on Subjective Understanding in Modernist Critiques of ḥadīth

Building upon their epistemic premise that “reason” is the ultimate authority, modernist critics often call for autonomous interpretation of ḥadīth texts without substantive reliance on the methodological constraints established by the classical tradition. They argue that the appeal to early scholars and inherited interpretive authorities amounts to a form of intellectual substitution—“assuming the personalities” of predecessors—thereby subordinating independent reasoning to transmitted scholarship (Arkoun, n.d.; Islambouli, 2019).

From this standpoint, modernists contend that classical critique—especially the work of major compilers such as al-Bukhārī and Muslim—has been treated by Muslims as final and untouchable, almost “closed” like the Qur'ān. They therefore advocate what they frame as a “renewed” or “comprehensive” critique of inherited sources, claiming that the traditional critical system is insufficient for decisively purifying the Prophetic legacy from defects (Arkoun, n.d.; Niazi, 2007).

Some modernist texts explicitly discourage recourse to ḥadīth specialists and exegetes, presenting direct, unmediated engagement with revelation as a safeguard against scholarly influence. Niazi, for example, argues that turning directly to the Book of Allah protects the individual from the interpretations and ijtihād of ḥadīth scholars and exegetes (Niazi, 2007). On this basis, the science of ḥadīth is depicted as a “traditional” discipline lacking adequate critical instruments to guarantee decisive purification of the Prophetic text—an assertion that collapses a millennium of methodological refinement into a simplistic stereotype (Abū Rayyah, n.d.; Al-Ma'ālimī, n.d.).

A striking feature of this discourse is the replacement of Islamic scholarly terminology with modern conceptual frames. Foundational sources are described as “closed official compilations,” while Islamic epistemology is portrayed as lacking theoretical frameworks and being resistant to critique. Arkoun, for instance, reframes “Islamic thought” as “religious thought” in opposition to “scientific thought,” claiming that the former cannot withstand scientific-critical interrogation and tends to respond either by denying objections or by asserting an unbridgeable gap between faith and critical reason (Arkoun, n.d.). Such framing implicitly delegitimizes traditional methods by relocating the debate from methodological detail to epistemological hierarchy.

3.1 Outcomes of Subjectivist Critique

Under the banner of “rational critique,” modernists reject broad categories of reports. Examples include: (a) ḥadīths concerning physical miracles, on the assumption that they conflict with texts emphasizing the Prophet's human limitations; (b) narrations about the awaited Mahdī, interpreted as politically disabling and socially passive; and (c) extended narrations, rejected on the claim that human memory cannot preserve lengthy texts (Islambouli, 2019). Yet such claims often rest on generalized assumptions rather than controlled methodological evaluation, especially given that memory capacity varies significantly across individuals and historical cultures, and the early ḥadīth milieu was

demonstrably shaped by intense memorization practices and disciplined transmission norms (Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, 2002; Ibn Rajab, 1996).

Modernists also cast suspicion on narrations of divine forgiveness and eschatological glad tidings—such as the virtues of Laylat al-Qadr, the accepted pilgrimage, and intercession—arguing that they resemble “indulgences.” They similarly reject reports that criticize excessive attachment to worldly life, attributing them to “ascetics,” “worshippers,” or “state scholars” who allegedly fabricated such narrations to legitimize political domination. Such judgments frequently proceed from ideological suspicion rather than the integrated isnād-matn system characteristic of classical verification (Abū Rayyah, n.d.; Al-Ma‘ālīmī, n.d.).

3.2 Historicism and the De-Sacralization of Revelation

The most consequential component of modernist critique is the adoption of historicist assumptions that reduce revelation to a product of social context and interpretive evolution. In this view, Qur’ān and Sunnah become historically conditioned texts shaped by early community needs, and therefore open to abandonment or reconstruction when societies “progress.” Such an approach effectively removes sacred authority from revelation and transforms it into a tool serving human communities, rather than a normative source governing them (Sharafī, 2001; Ḥanafī, 1988).

Modernists also elevate interpretive plurality as inherent to religion, arguing that the transition from revelation to interpretation situates meaning within human cognition, which necessarily varies by culture and experience. Consequently, they embrace the multiplicity of readings as a long-term positive process, even if it destabilizes normative certainty (Sa‘di, 2020; Soroush, 2002). However, such a paradigm risks dissolving key juridical foundations—including consensus (ijmā‘), analogy (qiyās), and structured interpretive constraints—by turning the text into a field of boundless reinterpretation.

In practice, modernist readings frequently draw upon hermeneutics and literary theory, including interpretive approaches associated with “the death of the author” and the deification of the reader, thereby repositioning meaning as produced by the interpreter rather than discovered through disciplined philological and legal methodology. This move opens a path for ideological readings—secular, Marxist, modernist—to impose external frameworks upon revelation (Arkoun, n.d.; Ḥanafī, 1988).

Al-Sharafī articulates the normative implication of this approach when he frames the Prophetic message as opening horizons for human responsibility rather than fixing permanent boundaries, implicitly contesting the binding authority of inherited juristic constructions (Sharafī, 2001). This reveals an attempt to establish an alternative interpretive paradigm that competes with the traditional approach of the ḥadīth scholars and jurists.

3.3 Types of Modernist Approaches

Modernist approaches can be analytically grouped into two broad patterns:

1. **Internalized critique using selective traditional tools:** Some employ fragments of ḥadīth methodology—attacking specific narrators, alleging contradictions with Qur’ān, or invoking rational objections—yet often without the comprehensive constraints and interpretive principles established by the critical tradition.
2. **Externalized critique grounded in Western paradigms:** Others subject ḥadīth to historicist, anthropological, and hermeneutical theories that treat revelation as a human cultural artifact, producing claims of relativized rulings and open-ended interpretive freedom, regulated only by subjective conscience (Arkoun, n.d.; Sharafī, 2001; Soroush, 2002).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that modernist rational critiques of the Prophetic ḥadīth are not methodologically neutral inquiries but are instead grounded in a set of epistemological premises largely derived from Western intellectual traditions. Chief among these premises is the deliberate de-sacralization of revealed texts and the elevation of autonomous human reason as the supreme and final arbiter of truth. Within this framework, revelation is reduced to a historically contingent discourse, while the Sunnah is treated as a mutable human product rather than a divinely guided source of legislation and ethical normativity. As a consequence, the modernist approach tends to marginalize or bypass the rigorous scholarly criteria established by the classical *muḥaddithūn* for evaluating both the chains of transmission (*isnād*) and the textual content (*matn*).

The analysis has further shown that the modernist claim—namely, that ḥadīth scholars neglected textual criticism—is historically and methodologically untenable. A careful examination of the sciences of *‘ilal al-ḥadīth*, *al-jarḥ wa al-ta‘dīl*, *mushkil al-ḥadīth*, and *nukhtalif al-ḥadīth* reveals a deeply rooted tradition of internal textual critique that predates modern Western methodologies by many centuries. Muslim scholars not only scrutinized the plausibility, coherence,

and historical consistency of transmitted reports, but also developed sophisticated mechanisms for detecting subtle textual errors, scribal interpolations, chronological inconsistencies, and conceptual anomalies. In many respects, these methods represent one of the most comprehensive and systematic models of textual criticism in human intellectual history.

The findings also indicate that modernist reliance on historicist, anthropological, and hermeneutical frameworks has produced interpretive outcomes that undermine the normative authority of the Prophetic Sunnah. By recontextualizing ḥadīth within foreign epistemological paradigms, modernist readings frequently detach the texts from their religious and legislative contexts and subject them to arbitrary reinterpretation. This process often results in the relativization of legal rulings, the dismissal of eschatological and metaphysical dimensions of revelation, and the erosion of foundational principles of Islamic jurisprudence such as consensus (*ijmā*), analogy (*qiyās*), and disciplined interpretive continuity. Ultimately, such an approach threatens not only the authority of the Sunnah but also the coherence of the Islamic legal and theological system as a whole.

Moreover, the study has highlighted that modernist critique often operates selectively, adopting fragments of traditional methodologies when convenient, while discarding their epistemic constraints and cumulative scholarly discipline. This selective appropriation, combined with the privileging of subjective judgment and ideological presuppositions, produces a form of critique that lacks internal consistency and methodological rigor. Rather than offering a constructive alternative, it frequently leads to interpretive arbitrariness, whereby the meaning of the Prophetic text becomes contingent upon the reader's intellectual orientation, cultural assumptions, or ideological commitments.

Accordingly, this research underscores the critical importance of distinguishing between two fundamentally different modes of critique: the disciplined, cumulative, and evidence-based criticism practiced by classical ḥadīth scholars, and the modernist critique, which is often driven by external philosophical agendas rather than by the internal logic of Islamic epistemology. Reaffirming this distinction is essential for preserving the integrity of the Sunnah and for safeguarding the intellectual continuity of Islamic scholarship.

Finally, the study calls for a renewed appreciation of the contributions of Muslim scholars in preserving, critiquing, and transmitting the Prophetic legacy. Engaging contemporary intellectual challenges does not require abandoning these methodologies, but rather revitalizing and applying them with scholarly precision and contextual awareness. Only through such an approach can the Muslim intellectual tradition respond effectively to modern critiques while remaining faithful to its foundational sources. In this sense, the authentic sciences of ḥadīth remain not a relic of the past, but a living and indispensable framework for navigating the complexities of reason, revelation, and modernity.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on qualitative analysis of classical and contemporary published texts in the fields of ḥadīth sciences, Islamic jurisprudence, and modern intellectual thought. No human participants, interviews, surveys, or personal data were involved. Therefore, ethical approval was not required. The research adheres to principles of academic integrity, objectivity, and scholarly responsibility, ensuring accurate citation, faithful representation of sources, and respect for intellectual diversity.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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