



The Epistemology of Interpreting Hadith Texts: An Intertextual Deconstruction of the Narrative of the Creation of Woman from a Rib (*Dhila'*)

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Abstract: The hadith *al-mar'atu khuliqat min dhila'in* ("woman was created from a rib") sits at the center of a methodological deadlock in contemporary hadith studies. Literalist readings freeze a rhetorical idiom into a biological-ontological dogma of female subordination, while feminist and revisionist scholarship tends to dissolve matn criticism into pure sociology and to demand wholesale rejection of the text (*rafd al-matn*). This article argues that neither move is necessary, because the internal apparatus of Ulum al-Hadith already contains the instruments to dismantle literalist distortion without amputating a sound narration. Using a qualitative-philological design grounded in intertextual theory, it executes a sequence of integrated procedures. A *takhrij* that separates transmitter-grading (*jarh wa ta'dil*) from generational transmission (*tabaqat*) recovers the simile narration (*kal-dhila'*) recorded as *muttafaq 'alayh*. A lexical dissection through *Gharib al-Hadith*, drawing on *Lisan al-'Arab* and Ibn al-Athir's *al-Nihaya*, shows that the crookedness (*i'wija'*) of the rib denotes protective function rather than moral deficiency. An intertextual *munasabah* binds the report to the *qat'i* premise of *nafs wahidah* (Q. 4:1) and the hadith of *shaqa'iq al-rijal*, while tracing the literal reading to *isra'iliyyat* material transmitted into al-Tabari's exegesis and parallel to Genesis 2:21–22. The discussion advances a deliberately dialectical position. Internal critique is necessary and powerful, yet the claim that it is fully self-sufficient overstates the unanimity of the classical tradition and understates the catalytic role of external critique. The study proposes a transferable three-layer intertextual model for matn analysis.

Keywords: *matn criticism; rib hadith; intertextuality; Gharib al-Hadith; gender; al-jam' wa al-tawfiq.*

Abstrak: Hadis *al-mar'atu khuliqat min dhila'in* ("perempuan diciptakan dari tulang rusuk") berdiri di pusat kebuntuan metodologis kajian hadis kontemporer. Pembacaan literalis membekukan idiom retorik menjadi dogma biologis-ontologis tentang subordinasi perempuan, sementara arus feminis dan revisionis cenderung melarutkan kritik matan ke dalam sosiologi murni serta menuntut penolakan teks secara totalistik (*rafd al-matn*). Artikel ini menegaskan bahwa kedua langkah itu tidak diperlukan,

sebab perangkat internal Ulum al-Hadith telah memuat instrumen untuk membongkar distorsi literalis tanpa mengamputasi riwayat sahih. Dengan desain kualitatif-filologis yang berlandas teori intertekstualitas, penelitian mengeksekusi sejumlah prosedur terpadu. Takhrij yang memisahkan jarh wa ta'dil dari tabaqat menemukan kembali riwayat tasybih (*kal-dhila'*) berstatus muttafaq 'alayh. Pembedahan leksikal melalui Gharib al-Hadith dengan rujukan Lisan al-'Arab dan al-Nihaya Ibn al-Athir membuktikan bahwa kebengkokan (*i'wija*) tulang rusuk menunjuk fungsi protektif. Munasabah intertekstual mengikat riwayat itu pada postulat qat'i nafs wahidah (QS. 4:1) dan hadis shaqa'iq al-rijal, sembari melacak genealogi pembacaan literal pada material isra'iliyyat yang masuk ke tafsir al-Tabari dan paralel dengan Kejadian 2:21–22. Diskusi mengajukan posisi dialektis bahwa kritik internal bersifat niscaya dan kuat, sedangkan klaim swasembada penuh atasnya melebih-lebihkan kebulatan tradisi klasik dan meremehkan peran katalitik kritik eksternal. Penelitian menawarkan model interteks tiga-lapis yang dapat dialihkan untuk analisis matan.

1. Introduction

Hadith studies on gender relations and the ontological origins of humanity are often trapped in a reductive methodological dualism. The first pole presents a literalist-textualist reading that isolates the *matn* from its historical and linguistic context, then draws rigid theological conclusions that violate the universal principles of sharia. The second pole features modernist currents and feminist hermeneutics that dissolve hadith criticism into sociological analysis, impose contemporary value frameworks onto 7th-century texts, and ultimately lead to the rejection of the matn (*rafd al-matn*) without an epistemological foundation that is accountable within the discipline of *Ulum al-Hadith* (Brown, 2007). The sharpest focal point of this tension is the hadith *al-mar'atu khuliqat min dhila'in*.

The hadith occupies a complex epistemological position. It is believed to be a secondary revelation (*al-wahy al-ghayr al-matlu*), while at the same time being articulated, transmitted, and codified through oral media and the social structures of Arab society from the first to the third centuries of the Hijri calendar (Motzki, 2002). The historical-critical method underscores one fundamental point: the matn which contains metaphorical language, similes (*tasybih*), and local idioms is a multi-layered rhetorical instrument. The failure to identify these pragmatic layers of language has given rise to anomalies in

the modern exegetical tradition, where cultural idioms have been frozen into biological dogmas that justify subordination (Barlas, 2002).

There is a structural reason why single hadith can become such a battleground. A text that touches on the origins of creation functions like the keystone of a Roman arch. It is small compared to the entire structure, yet bears a disproportionate argumentative burden, for from its interpretation claims regarding hierarchy, capacity, and rights are derived. Each faction understands that whoever controls the interpretation of this keystone helps determine the shape of the entire arch. The battle is epistemological on the surface and axiological at its core.

The stakes of this debate extend beyond a single text. The way a scholarly community treats the *dhila'* hadith reflects its stance on two broader questions: to what extent is the authority of the Sunnah binding in the face of reason and the principle of justice, and to what extent does the classical tradition possess the resources to renew itself. Islamic feminist discourse uses this hadith as a litmus test for the claim that patriarchy is embedded in sacred texts, while traditionalists use it as a litmus test for the claim that the authority of the text is resistant to reevaluation. This article rejects the false dilemma between the two and demonstrates that philological rigor can serve justice without sacrificing authority.

The argument is constructed along a gradually ascending line of reasoning. First, it is shown that the quality of the isnad does not guarantee the literal accuracy of the wording; then, that narrations of comparable authenticity provide the key to interpretation; next, that classical lexicography constrains deviations to functional meanings; and finally, that contextual coherence with definitive texts (*nas qat'i*) closes all literalist loopholes. Each step builds upon the previous one, and together they form a cumulative argument that does not rely on postulates from outside the discipline of hadith. In this way, ethical conclusions are drawn from within the machinery of tradition, rather than being imposed upon it.

The thesis of this article is rooted in a claim formulated cumulatively. The problem of interpreting hadith stems from weaknesses in analytical procedures at the downstream level, and these weaknesses have accumulated due to the failure of later generations to distinguish the anatomy of the sanad from the pragmatics of the matn. The popular assumption that accuses the

classical tradition of being a wholly patriarchal and literalist entity is an academically flawed simplification. A philological examination of authoritative commentaries reveals a high degree of epistemological caution. Al-Nawawi in *al-Minhaj* and Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani in *Fath al-Bari* derive an ethical-prescriptive meaning from this hadith as an imperative to be gentle (*istawshu*), and refrain from using it as ontological evidence for the inferiority of creation.

This study limits its focus exclusively to the field of *Ulum al-Hadith*, thereby distinguishing itself from sociological literature. The intertextual approach operates on three interrelated layers. The first layer involves the deconstruction of editorial variations through *takhrij* to distinguish the transmission of meaning (*riwayah bi al-ma'na*) across generational layers (*tabaqat*). The second layer involves lexical integration through *Gharib al-Hadith*. The third layer is the linking of the matn to the Qur'an's macro-narrative regarding creation from the *nafs wahidah*. The contribution of this research lies in the formulation of these three layers into a single model that can be applied to other hadith corpora, as well as in its willingness to dialectically test the limits of its own claims.

The structure of this article follows the outline below. The second section maps out five schools of thought and identifies the *research gap* among them. The third section outlines the theoretical framework and methodological procedures. The fourth section conducts a three-tiered analysis of the target hadith. The fifth section discusses the theoretical implications, limitations, and future research directions. The concluding section summarizes the findings and conclusions.

Academic discourse on this hadith has produced a wide spectrum of literature. A clear mapping requires the identification of schools of thought. Listening to articles is insufficient. Five schools of thought can be distinguished based on their epistemological assumptions, and from this map, the *research gap* addressed by this study becomes apparent. Each school of thought is identified along two axes: the degree of authority attributed to the text and the degree of interpretive freedom claimed over it.

This faction interprets the phrase *khuliqat min dhila'in* as a proposition of literal creation. Eve is understood to have been created from the physical matter of Adam's rib, and the "crookedness" is interpreted as an inherent inferior trait. The authority of the text is elevated to the utmost, while the

interpretive leeway is compressed to near zero. This position is the primary target of criticism in this article. It will be shown that it occupies a place as one interpretation among several competing ones dating back to the earliest times, and that the classical tradition never recognized it as the sole representation.

The internal logic of this faction deserves to be fairly understood before being criticized. It adheres to the principle that the original meaning of a term (*al-asl fi al-kalam al-haqiqah*) is its literal meaning, and that a shift to a figurative meaning requires an indicator (*qarinah*). For the literalist faction, the absence of what is considered a sufficient indicator makes a literal reading the default option that is valid according to *usul*. The principle of *usul* itself remains valid. Its weakness lies in the failure to recognize that the *kal-dhila*'s simile provides an adequate textual *qarinah*, and that the context of *istawshua* along with its contrast with *nafs wahidah* reinforces that indicator. Criticism of this faction, therefore, is internal and based on its own principles.

Drawing on the work of Goldziher and Schacht, this school of thought questions the historical authenticity of the narrations attributed to Abu Hurairah and links them to a layer of post-prophetic fabrication. Juynboll (2007) refines his methodology through an analysis of the *common link* that is, the narrator at whom a chain diverges which he regards as an indicator of a hadith's historical origin. In *Muslim Tradition*, Juynboll lays the groundwork for the argument that many single *isnad* in the early layers are later reconstructions. Motzki (2002) takes a more moderate stance in this line of thought through the *isnad-cum-matn* method, which provides tools for some Muslim scholars to reconstruct the history of transmission with greater precision. It is this internal tension within the faction that is often overlooked by readers who treat "Orientalism" as a monolithic bloc.

The roots of this school of thought lie in two foundational theses. Ignaz Goldziher argued that many hadiths reflect the controversies and interests of the post-prophetic generation; consequently, he treated the *matn* as a mirror of social history rather than a transcript of the Prophet's words. Joseph Schacht went a step further with the retroactive projection thesis the hypothesis that *isnad* tended to be constructed retroactively and refined to legitimize doctrines that emerged later, supported by the argument from silence (*argumentum e silentio*). Both these are strong as working hypotheses

but fragile as universal conclusions, since both generalize from a limited sample to the entire corpus.

This study draws on the historical sensitivity of the revisionist school without adopting its radical skepticism. The question of transmission layers is treated as a genuine issue and addressed using the internal *tabaqat* framework, without assuming fabrication as a preliminary hypothesis.

Mernissi (1991) bases her argument on the biography of Abu Hurairah. She points out that this narrator did not occupy a social position typically considered masculine in early Medinan society, and that some of his narrations were once corrected by Aisha. From this premise, Mernissi concludes that the text of the “rib” narrative reflects the cultural biases of its narrator. Wadud (1999) takes a different approach. In the opening chapter of *Qur'an and Woman*, she interprets the creation of humanity from *nafs wahidah* as a postulate of monotheistic equality and then rejects any hadith that conflicts with that premise. Riffat Hassan adds a theological layer by challenging three inherited assumptions: the superiority of male creation, the primordial sin of women, and the purpose of women’s creation for the sake of men. Wadud constructs a monotheistic paradigm the belief that the oneness of God necessitates the radical equality of all creatures before Him such that any interpretation that subordinates’ women is considered to undermine monotheism itself. Based on this paradigm, Wadud openly states that she will reject any hadith that conflicts with the premise of equality a methodological stance that is internally consistent but severs dialogue with the apparatus of hadith authentication.

This faction grants high authority to Qur’anic principles and maximum interpretive freedom regarding hadith texts, to the point of total rejection. Its strength lies in its incisive dismantling of the ideological burden of traditional exegesis. Its weakness lies in its methodological leap. Mernissi’s critique imposes 20th-century human rights parameters to judge 7th-century rhetorical frameworks, while ignoring the fact that classical *muhaddithin* had established a comprehensive ethical foundation for these texts without distorting the authentic narrations. In Indonesia, this school of thought is most systematically articulated in Ilyas (2008), who compiles and analyzes misogynistic hadiths as a single corpus, including the “rib” narrative and critiques of Abu Hurairah.

Represented by Jonathan Brown (2007, 2014) and Khaled Abou El Fadl, this faction upholds the integrity of the canon while allowing room for disciplined textual criticism. Brown demonstrates that the canonization of al-Bukhari and Muslim was a lengthy socio-intellectual process, and that the authority of the canon does not preclude interpretive work. In *Misquoting Muhammad*, he directly analyzes the “*rib*” hadith as a case study of how a single sahih text accommodates a spectrum of interpretations from the literal to the metaphorical and asserts that the sophistication of classical interpretive tools is often underestimated by modern critics. The position of this study aligns most closely with this faction, with one additional emphasis. Reconciliatory tools must be fully implemented down to the level of lexicography and *munasabah* and must not stop at soothing generalizations.

Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir (2019) developed *qira’ah mubadalah* as a framework of reciprocity that interprets hadiths on gender relations through the principle of reciprocity in three steps: affirming the universal principles of Islam, identifying the main ideas of the text, and then applying them reciprocally to the gender not explicitly mentioned. Gunawan (2022), who analyzes the interpretations of M. Fethullah Gülen, and Fadlillah (2019), who derives metaphorical meanings through *ma’anil hadith*, align with this school of thought. The work most closely related to this study is that of Wangsa and Bunganegara (2021), who reconstructed the “*rib*” hadith through an intertextual approach and concluded that it carries a symbolic meaning of tenderness. Applying the three-step *mubadalah* method to this hadith transforms the command “be kind to women” into a reciprocal imperative to be kind to one’s partner. The contribution of this faction is significant, yet its reconstruction remains at the symbolic level and within the framework of reciprocity and has not yet integrated the distinction between *tabaqat* and *jarh wa ta’dil*, the lexicography of *Gharib al-Hadith*, and *qat’i munasabah* into a single procedure.

Mapping the five factions along two axes yields one illuminating observation. The literalist faction grants the text maximum authority and allows for minimal interpretive freedom. The feminist-rejectionist faction reverses both. The remaining three factions occupy the middle ground with varying combinations. The gap that remains unfilled lies at one specific point. No formulation has yet emerged that combines the rigor of historical-

transmission criticism, the incisiveness of *Gharib al-Hadith*, and the intertextual anchoring of the *qat'i* postulate of the Qur'an into a single, coherent procedure, while honestly testing the limits of its own claims. This study fills that gap.

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2. Results and Discussion

Anatomi sanad, tabaqat, dan evolusi redaksional matan

The most essential tool in determining the meaning of a hadith is to separate the analysis of the narrators' credibility from the analysis of the dynamics of the chain of transmission. A common misconception in contemporary hadith studies is the assumption that the authenticity of all narrators (*thiqah*) guarantees that every word in the matn is a literal transcription of the Prophet's words (Brown, 2007). This assumption overlooks a fact that has been recognized since the earliest times, namely the validity of the transmission in terms of meaning.

The literary context of the hadith's appearance reinforces this interpretation from the outset. Al-Bukhari placed this metaphorical passage in the Book of Marriage, under the chapter on treating one's wife well; thus, the hadith compiler himself understood this text as a guide for marital relations, rather than as a cosmogonic account. This editorial placement is a methodological cue that is often overlooked. The imams who compiled the hadith classified them according to their legal and ethical functions, and their classification of this narration links it to the realm of *mu'asharah bi al-ma'ruf*, that is, proper conduct in marital relations.

This hadith is classified as *muttafaq 'alayh* with a sound chain of transmission, and its main chain is traced back to Abu Hurairah. Supporting narrations are also found in *Musnad Ahmad*, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, and *Sunan al-Darimi*, and al-Darimi also recorded a chain of transmission from Abu Dzar. The breadth of its dissemination rules out the possibility that the hadith is the product of a single, isolated narrator. In *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the literal wording

is recorded in the Book of the Hadiths of the Prophets, in the chapter on the creation of Adam, as follows.

حَدَّثَنَا أَبُو كُرَيْبٍ وَمُوسَى بْنُ حِرَامٍ قَالَا حَدَّثَنَا حُسَيْنُ بْنُ عَلِيٍّ عَنْ زَائِدَةَ عَنْ مَيْسَرَةَ
الْأَشْجَعِيِّ عَنْ أَبِي حَازِمٍ عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ
وَسَلَّمَ: اسْتَوْصُوا بِالنِّسَاءِ، فَإِنَّ الْمَرْأَةَ خُلِقَتْ مِنْ ضِلْعٍ، وَإِنَّ أَعْوَجَ شَيْءٍ فِي الضِّلْعِ أَعْلَاهُ،
فَإِنْ ذَهَبَتْ تُقِيمُهُ كَسَرْتَهُ، وَإِنْ تَرَكْتَهُ لَمْ يَزَلْ أَعْوَجَ، فَاسْتَوْصُوا بِالنِّسَاءِ.

“Treat women kindly, for they were created from a rib, and the most crooked part of the rib is its upper part. If you try to straighten it, you will break it, and if you leave it alone, it will remain crooked. So, treat women kindly.” (al-Bukhari, no. 3331).

An examination of the *rijal* in this chain reveals a line of narrators of sound reliability. Maysarah al-Ashja'i is considered *thiqah* by critics. Zaidah bin Qudamah al-Thaqafi is known as a *thiqah thabt* who was meticulous in his transmission of hadith. Husain bin 'Ali al-Ju'fi was among the leading *huffazh* of Kufa. Abu Hazim Salman al-Ashja'i was a *tabi'i* who heard directly from Abu Hurairah. According to the *maratib al-jarh wa al-ta'dil*, there are no flaws that would invalidate this chain of transmission. An analysis through *'ilm al-tabaqat* reveals the phenomenon of *riwayah bi al-ma'na*. The generations of the *Tabi 'in and atba' al-Tabi'in* transmitted the meaning of hadiths without always preserving every original lexical particle, if the legal essence was preserved.

The strength of this chain of transmission is reinforced by the networks of *mutaba'at* and *shawahid*. *Mutaba'at* refers to support at the level of narrators of the same rank, while *shawahid* refers to support at the level of Companions of different ranks. The presence of these two types of corroboration eliminates any concerns regarding *syadz* or hidden *'illat*. Malik's chain from Abu al-Zinad from al-A'raj itself is considered one of the most noble isnads according to critics, often described as comparable in status to *silsilat al-dhahab*. When an ethical message emerges through isnads as strong as these and from diverse transmission routes, the burden of proof shifts to those who claim a defect.

This chain of transmission can be verified using the classical *atraf* method. The book *Tuhfat al-Ashraf bi Ma'rifat al-Atraf* by al-Mizzi compiles

the sources of the Companions' narrations along with their distribution across canonical collections, enabling researchers to systematically map the entire chain of a hadith. It is this *atraf* method that distinguishes disciplined *takhrij* from random citation. It compels researchers to examine every node in the chain of transmission, mark points of convergence and divergence, and thereby assess whether a textual variation constitutes a narrator's error or a valid trace of the transmission of meaning. In the case of the hadith about the rib, the map reveals a strong convergence of meaning amidst controlled variations in wording.

Bukti pendukung paling menentukan muncul pada jalur lain dari sahabat yang sama melalui *tabaqat* al-A'raj kepada Abu al-Zinad. Imam al-Bukhari merekamnya pada Kitab al-Nikah.

حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ الْعَزِيزِ بْنُ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ قَالَ حَدَّثَنِي مَالِكٌ عَنْ أَبِي الزِّنَادِ عَنِ الْأَعْرَجِ عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ أَنَّ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ قَالَ: الْمَرْأَةُ كَالضِّلَعِ، إِنْ أَقَمْتَهَا كَسَرْتَهَا، وَإِنْ اسْتَمْتَعْتَ بِهَا اسْتَمْتَعْتَ بِهَا وَفِيهَا عَوْجٌ.

“A woman is like a rib (kal-dhila’). If you try to straighten her, you’ll break her, and if you enjoy her, you’ll enjoy her even though she has a certain crookedness.” (al-Bukhari, no. 5184; muttafaq ‘alayh dengan Muslim, no. 1468).

The chain of transmission from Malik, via Abu al-Zinad ‘Abd Allah bin Dhakwan, via al-A’raj ‘Abd al-Rahman bin Hurmuz, via Abu Hurairah, is one of the most noble chains in the tradition, and all three are considered elite narrators. The letter *kaf* in *kal-dhila’* functions as *adat al-tasybih*, and this is the key to the epistemological shift. Metaphorical narration possesses a chain of transmission as strong as that of a literal narration. Muslim’s narration reinforces this with the addition of *fa-in dhahabta tuqimuha kasartaha wa kasruha talaquha* that is, breaking it means divorcing her a clause found in the text and commented on by Ibn Hajar.

The supporting chain of transmission from Abu Dzar, as recorded by al-Darimi, broadens the base of testimony beyond Abu Hurairah’s circle, and the presence of such a *syahid* refutes the accusation that the entire narration relies on a single, suspect narrator. The distribution of these chains reaches different centers of transmission, from Medina in the chain of Malik to Kufa in the chain

of Husain bin ‘Ali. The convergence of meaning across these geographical transmission paths, when analyzed through the lens of *isnad-cum-matn*, reinforces the conclusion that the core ethical message of the hadith has remained stable since its earliest layers, while its lexical packaging varies according to the nature of the transmission of meaning.

The summary of the *takhrij* clarifies the landscape of editorial variations and their implications.

Chain of Transmission (Companion → ...)	Compiler (Mukharrij)	Key (Matn)	Phrase	Authenticity Status
Abu Hurairah → Abu Hazim → Maysarah → Zaidah → Husain b. ‘Ali	al-Bukhari 3331		khuliqat min dhila’ (literal)	Sahih (Authentic)
Abu Hurairah → al-A’raj → Abu al-Zinad → Malik	al-Bukhari 5184; Muslim 1468		kal-dhila’ (tashbih/metaphor)	Sahih, Muttafaq (Agreed upon)
Abu Hurairah (supporting chain)	Ahmad; al-Tirmidhi; al-Darimi		Literal & tashbih variations	Corroborator (Mutabi’ / Shahid)
Abu Dharr	al-Darimi		Parallel in meaning	Corroborator (Shahid)

Based on the principle of *al-jam’ wa al-tawfiq*, the absolute phrase (“created from a rib”) is interpreted considering the specific metaphorical phrase (“like a rib”) when both are authentic. Thus, within the hadith tradition itself, the biological-ontological claim is nullified and replaced by the rhetorical use of a metaphor. This resolution arises as the result of a thoroughly executed internal procedure, without owing anything to external pressure.

The transmission of meaning as a theoretical foundation

The phenomenon of *riwayah bi al-ma’na* is not an arbitrary concession. It is strictly regulated in methodological literature. Ibn al-Salah, in his *Muqaddima*, stipulates that the transmission of meaning is only accepted from narrators who have a thorough grasp of the intricacies of language and the implications of verbal expressions, so that the substitution of words does not alter the ruling. Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, in *al-Kifaya*, discusses the conditions and limits of its permissibility in detail. The consequences are methodological and decisive. The presence of both a literal version and a metaphorical version from the same Companion, transmitted through equally authentic chains of

transmission, is best understood as evidence of the transmission of meaning, and the metaphorical narration serves to clarify the actual intent.

This implication debunks an assumption that has permeated modern debate. The *thiqah* status of all narrators guarantees that the *meaning* of the hadith is conveyed faithfully, but it does not guarantee that the *wording* itself is strictly literal or technical. Interpreting “created from a rib” as an embryological statement contradicts the very mechanism of transmission as understood by hadith scholars themselves.

The mechanism of transmitting meaning can be directly illustrated in this case. A narrator who understands that the intended meaning of the saying is a likening of character may convey that essence by inserting a particle of likening, so that “created from a rib” and “like a rib” become two expressions of a single meaning. The presence of both forms in the same companion’s narration, rather than indicating a contradiction, signifies that the early layers of transmission had already grasped the metaphorical nature of the text. The metaphorical narration serves as the most authentic interpretation of the literal narration, since both originate from the same source and shed light on one another. This principle aligns with the rule that some hadiths interpret others.

Lexical surgery (Gharib al-Hadith): dhila’ and a’waj

Understanding the idiom *dhila’* requires the discipline of *Gharib al-Hadith*. An anachronistic approach interprets “crooked” (*a’waj*) as moral deficiency, irrationality, or intellectual disability. Ibn Manzur, in *Lisan al-‘Arab*, explains that *dhila’* refers to the anatomical structure of the ribs and is classified as an *isim mu²annath*. Ibn al-Athir, in *al-Nihaya fi Gharib al-Hadith*, classifies this phrasing under the category of attributing characteristics by analogy, and emphasizes that the reference to the rib’s origin points to a similarity in character, not to an embryological account.

Morphological analysis supports these findings. The root ‘-w-j gives rise to two nuances that must be distinguished. The form ‘*iwaj* with a kasrah refers to a perceptible, physical-structural curvature, such as a bend in wood or bone. The form ‘*awaj* with a fathah tends to refer to an abstract deviation in religion, opinion, or character. The hadith text operates within the first semantic field through *a’waj* and ‘*iwaj* in the anatomical context of the ribs; therefore, an interpretation that drags it into the second semantic field namely, moral

deviation in women constitutes a lexical categorization error. Lexicographers classify structural curvature as a neutral or even functional trait, distancing it from negative connotations.

Authoritative lexical analysis proves that the curvature (*i'wija*) of the *dhila* is a *conditio sine qua non* for its function. The ribs must curve to create a protective space for the heart and lungs. Straight ribs (*mustaqim*) fail to perform their protective function and are, in fact, fatal. The curvature here is by design, not a defect. Interpreting the protective curve as a defect is just as erroneous as accusing the arch of a suspension bridge of being a construction failure, when in fact it is precisely that curve that bears the load.

The rhetorical structure of the text reinforces this interpretation. The passage is framed by two commands, *istawshu bi al-nisa*², at the beginning and end, giving the core message a prescriptive-ethical nature. In between are a description (*inna a'waja shay²in fi al-dhila' a'lahu*) and a warning (*fa-in dhahabta tuqimuhu kasartahu*). The description points to the innate nature (*fitrah*) that is rich in sensitivity and tenderness attributes vital for nurturing future generations, just as the ribs serve a protective function for the heart. The warning points to *tahdhir* for masculinity. Imposing a framework of rationality and the harsh decisiveness typical of men upon women constitutes violence against *fitrah* and leads to the breakdown of relationships or divorce, as affirmed by the hadith of Muslim and explained by Ibn Hajar.

Classifying this hadith within the genre of *amthal nabawiyyah* that is, prophetic parables preclude a literal interpretation. The Prophet often taught through parables that condensed ethical advice into concrete imagery, such as the parable of believers as a single body or as a date palm tree. Interpreting these parables as factual accounts is akin to interpreting proverbs as scientific reports. The idiom “like a rib” operates on the level of wisdom rhetoric, and its function is to shape attitudes, not to provide information about the embryology of creation. It is the failure to recognize this genre that transforms a piece of family advice into an anthropological dogma.

The anatomical-functional argument can be taken a step further. The rib was chosen as a metaphorical image precisely because it combines two seemingly contradictory qualities: flexibility and strength. They are flexible enough to expand during breathing, and strong enough to protect vital organs. This image, in the logic of the parable, suggests that a gentle character harbors

another form of resilience, and that gentleness itself is a strength that operates in a different way. Interpreting that curvature as a flaw is akin to judging a murky spring simply because it is not as hard as stone. Prophetic parables work by exalting qualities that are often underestimated, and by guiding men to preserve not break structures designed to protect.

Reasoned Interpretation: Intertextuality with the Qur'an and the Genealogy of Isra'iliyyat

The final stage of text analysis is to compare it with the Qur'an. If the *dhila'* hadith is interpreted strictly in a literal-ontological sense, this *ahad* narration conflicts with the *mutawatir* premise in Surah al-Nisa' [4]: 1.

“O mankind, fear your Lord, who created you from a single soul (*nafs wahidah*), and from it He created its mate.”

The phrase *nafs wahidah* affirms existential monism. Men and women were created from the same single essence (Saeed, 2006; Wadud, 1999). The interpretation of *minha* as “from a part of Adam’s body” originates from *isra'iliyyat* sources, and its traces can be concretely traced. Al-Tabari, in *Jami' al-Bayan*, compiled creation narratives, some of which were transmitted through figures such as Ka'ab al-Ahbar and Wahb bin Munabbih two figures known as gateways through which the traditions of the People of the Book entered early exegesis. The narrative of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib parallels directly with Genesis 2:21–22 in the Hebrew tradition. Ibn Kathir subsequently established the critical principle that *isra'iliyyat* material contradicting the Qur'an and authentic hadith is rejected. It is this provenance that explains why the literal reading feels “classical,” even though its origin is external to the linguistic structure of the Qur'an.

Rejection of this interpretation is not a recent scholarly innovation. The reformist movements of the 19th and 20th centuries had already adopted this approach within the tradition of exegesis. Muhammad Abduh and his student Rashid Rida, in *Tafsir al-Manar*, assert that *minha* in the verse *nafs wahidah* refers to sameness of kind and substance, and reject the *isra'iliyyat* interpolation that posits Eve as having been created from Adam’s physical rib. The modern contextualist approach expands on this argument by positioning the creation verses as the foundation of ontological equality (Saeed, 2006). The convergence between classical internal criticism and modern exegetical reform

demonstrates that non-literal readings have a long lineage and did not arise solely from the pressures of contemporary feminism.

Ultimately, this is a theological issue. A literal interpretation that ontologically subordinates women conflicts with two pillars of faith: tawhid and divine justice (*'adl*). Tawhid necessitates that the true value of all human beings stems solely from submission to Allah, and that the measure of honor is piety, not gender or order of creation. Divine justice rejects the idea that half of humanity was created inherently inferior, as this would render the imposition of equal religious obligations a form of structural injustice. Upholding a literal reading means sacrificing the coherence of these two pillars for the sake of a mistaken understanding of an idiom. At this point, textual criticism becomes a defense of faith.

To resolve this apparent dissonance, authentic hadiths are cited. In *Sunan Abi Dawud*, the Prophet affirms ontological equality through his response to Ummu Salamah, and similar hadiths are also found in *Sunan al-Tirmidhi* and *Musnad Ahmad*.

قَالَتْ أُمُّ سَلَمَةَ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، هَلْ عَلَى الْمَرْأَةِ تَرَى ذَلِكَ غُسْلٌ؟ قَالَ: نَعَمْ، إِنَّمَا النِّسَاءُ شَقَائِقُ
الرِّجَالِ.

“Ummu Salamah asked, “O Messenger of Allah, is a woman required to perform ghusl if she experiences that?” He replied, “Yes, for a woman is the twin (equal) of a man.” (Abu Dawud, no. 236).

The phrase *shaqa'iq al-rijal* means identical halves and equal siblings. Through intertextuality, its meaning is constructed with precision and in a cumulative manner. Ontologically, women are equal to men through *nafs wahidah* and *shaqa'iq al-rijal*. The creation narrative of *dhila'* serves as an *akhlaqi* metaphor to mitigate violence and mandate protection. The *dhila'* hadith answers the question of how men should treat women, leaving the question of the origin of creation to be answered by other scriptural texts.

The choice of *al-jam'* over other resolution options is methodological and justifiable. Tradition provides a standard sequence of options when two texts appear to conflict: harmonization (*jam'*), followed by the prioritization of one (*tarjih*), followed by abrogation (*naskh*), and finally suspension (*tawaqquf*). Harmonization takes the highest priority because it preserves both texts without sacrificing either one. In this case, harmonization is both feasible and

elegant; therefore, rejecting the text would mean skipping procedural steps unnecessarily.

This logic of prioritization is based on the economic principle of interpretation. *Tarjih* sacrifices one of the authentic narrations, *naskh* requires chronological evidence of abrogation which is not available here and *tawaqquf* defers the ruling without resolving the issue. Harmonization preserves all the data and reconciles it, making it the most economical approach while also most fully respecting the integrity of the text. Its application to the hadith of the rib is straightforward. The literal wording is brought in line with the figurative wording, and both are interpreted under the umbrella of *nafs wahidah* and *shaqa'iq al-rijal*; the result is a single, coherent meaning free of any remaining contradictions. This is the structural advantage of the internal method: its ability to preserve all the testimonies while organizing their meanings.

When combined, these three layers of analysis produce a coherent and mutually reinforcing interpretation. The transmission layer uncovers the history of *tasybih*; the lexical layer anchors the distortion within a protective function; and the *munasabah* layer places both under the umbrella of ontological equivalence. None of these layers works convincingly on its own; rather, it is their combination that closes every loophole for a literalist reading. The result is a hadith that stands firm as ethical counsel, free from the burden of dogma imposed upon it by a history of misguided reception.

The Strengths and Limitations of the Epistemology of Internal Criticism

The findings above offer a fundamental theoretical contribution. Patriarchal bias in the interpretation of the hadith on *dhila'* is dismantled without relying on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and without disregarding authentic narrations, but rather through *takhrij*, *Gharib al-Hadith*, *tabaqat*, and *al-jam' wa al-tawfiq*. The discovery of *tasybih* narrations in the transmission by the Companions is an epistemological triumph of the classical critical method. Scholars of the past have provided sophisticated tools to prevent literalism, and the problem lies in the reluctance of modern scholars to use them thoroughly.

The tension between Juynboll and Motzki sharply illuminates that boundary. Juynboll would point out that the widespread adoption of this anti-literalist approach only occurred following the pressures of modernity and conclude that the meaning of a text is determined by the pressures of the

times. Motzki would counter that the *isnad-cum-matn* method uncovers the core stability of the narrative from its earliest layers, so that corrections to literalism constitute a restoration of the original meaning, rather than a new discovery. This study stands at the intersection of these two perspectives. The stability of ethical meaning is historically proven to be ancient, while the collective awareness to interpret it explicitly in a non-literal manner was indeed accelerated by external pressures. Acknowledging this catalytic role is a matter of historiographical integrity. This acknowledgment reinforces the claim that the solution originates from within, and skepticism gains no ground from it.

Academic integrity demands a qualification that is often missing from apologetic studies. The claim that internal criticism is fully *self-sufficient* harbors two vulnerabilities. First, the *al-jam'* procedure which prioritizes metaphorical interpretations over literal ones presupposes an interpretive hierarchy that is precisely what revisionist factions challenge; thus, the argument risks becoming circular if that hierarchy is assumed rather than proven. Second, from a historiographical perspective, the push to reinterpret this hadith non-literally gained strength precisely after the pressure of 20th-century feminist and modernist criticism. Critics in the Juynboll tradition would point to this historical fact as evidence that the tradition shifts due to external pressures, and Motzki would counter that the instruments of correction ultimately originate from within. The most accurate position combines both. Internal instruments are necessary and sufficient to resolve the issue, while external criticism serves as a catalyst that compels the tradition to actualize its own potential.

Deconstructing Assumptions About Classical Scholars and the Plurality of Traditions

Historical accusations against medieval *scholars* need to be clarified and qualified. A holistic reading of *Fath al-Bari* and *al-Minhaj* reveals that the normative conclusions of both works are grounded in the imperative *istawshu*. Al-Nawawi was careful to ensure that the word “crooked” served as a rationalization for why men are required to exercise extra patience (*hilm*), and to preclude its use as a justification for belittling others.

The generalization that characterizes literalism as “a pure aberration of a regressive era” is too neat to account for the data. Some authoritative exegetes and *commentators* accept the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib

literally, while others interpret *minha* as *min jinsiha* (from her kind) without perceiving a contradiction with *nafs wāhidah*. Al-Tabari, in *Jami' al-Bayan*, synthesizes these two tendencies, while al-Qurthubi, in his exegesis, tends to accept the creation from the rib in its literal sense. Both are mainstream authorities, not marginal figures of the period of decline. The classical tradition is therefore pluralistic, and the thesis of this article is more accurately formulated as a defense of one of the most rigorous internal currents, rather than as a description of a consensus that never existed. This plurality is the strength of the tradition. A tradition that fosters its own critical readers is more resilient than a tradition that demands uniformity, just as a legal system is strengthened by differing opinions in the courtroom.

The Limits of Literalism and the Threat of Distortion of Faith

Imposing a literal interpretation on figurative language undermines the theological coherence of Sharia. If the hadith on *dhila'* is interpreted literally, it creates a direct contradiction with Quran 4:1. In the axiology of hadith science, a text that explicitly contradicts the Qur'an is classified as *syadz* or *munkar*, no matter how strong its chain of transmission (al-Qaradawi, n.d.). An intertextual approach saves this authentic hadith from such a verdict. By restoring *dhila'* to its metaphorical lexical meaning and using the *tasybih* tradition as a check, this saying proves to be an elegant pedagogical guideline and *siyasat al-'a'ilah*, harmonizing human psychological reality with the Qur'an's universal values of justice.

The fiqh context of the hadith *shaqa'iq al-rijal* lends further weight to this argument. The hadith was uttered in response to a question regarding the legal obligation of ritual bathing; thus, the equality it affirms is operational in the context of worship and extends far beyond mere rhetoric. Women and men are subject to equal obligations and purification rituals because they share the same nature of creation. When this ontological equality is upheld in the most technical realm of ritual, the claim of ontological subordination in the realm of creation loses its footing. These two texts, when read together, form a coherent framework from the source of creation to the practice of worship.

Theoretical contribution: a three-layer intertextual model

The research findings can be abstracted into a model that can be applied to other hadith corpora deemed problematic. The first layer is *transmission*

decomposition, namely the separation of the narrators' qualities from the dynamics of *tabaqat* to determine whether editorial variations hold the key to *tasybih* or *qayd*. The second layer is *lexical reconstruction*, namely the restoration of idioms to their pragmatic meanings in the pre-canonical era through *Gharib al-Hadith*. The third layer is *munasabah integration*, which involves reconciling the results with the *qat'i* text by prioritizing *jam'* resolution before *tarjih*, *naskh*, and *tawaqquf*. This model offers a third path between rigid literalism and amputating rejectionism, and the entire process operates within the framework of *Ulum al-Hadith* without borrowing external postulates.

The transferability of this model can be tested on a variety of corpora that are often considered problematic. Hadiths regarding women's lack of reason and religious understanding require the first layer to examine their context and textual variations. Narratives that appear to disparage certain social groups require a second layer to unpack their cultural idioms. Hadiths that conflict with historical or scientific data require a third layer to be tested against *nas qat'i* and the principles for resolving contradictions. In every case, this same procedure prevents two symmetrical errors: freezing a *tamsil* into dogma and discarding authentic narrations simply because they are uncomfortable. The value of a model is measured by the breadth of cases it can handle using consistent instruments, and this three-layer model is designed to pass that test.

3. Conclusion

A methodological exploration of the hadith *al-mar'atu khuliqat min dhila'in* confirms that accusations of gender subordination against the hadith tradition stem from weaknesses in analytical procedures at the downstream level, and that these weaknesses can be corrected from within the discipline itself. Through the separation of *tabaqat* from *maratib al-jarh wa al-ta'dil*, the analysis of *Gharib al-Hadith*, and the intertextual harmonization with *nafs wahidah* and *shaqa'iq al-rijal*, this study demonstrates that this prophetic articulation is designed as a rhetorical metaphor that serves to mitigate domestic violence and mandate the protection of women's natural disposition.

This study represents a defense of the methodological integrity of internal hadith criticism, with one dialectical qualification that distinguishes it from

apologetic scholarship. Internal methods are necessary and sufficient, while external criticism serves as a historical catalyst. The classical tradition has proven to be pluralistic and capable of self-correction, and the integrity of the text is preserved when meaning is repositioned within a coherent constellation of sharia networks.

The main contribution offered here is a three-layered intertextual model as a third way between literalism and rejectionism. Testing this model on a broader corpus of hadiths concerning gender relations, as well as its controlled dialogue with the *isnad-cum-matn* method, represents a promising direction for the development of contemporary *matn* criticism.

Ultimately, the case of the hadith about the rib holds a lesson that transcends itself. It demonstrates that sacred texts are not fragile in the face of critical inquiry, and that the fragility long attributed to them lies in the procedures of interpretation, not in the texts themselves. The discipline established by the *muhaddithin* since the first century of the Hijri calendar turns out to contain antibodies against its own misuse. The task of the current generation is to activate those antibodies with honesty, meticulousness, and the courage to acknowledge where the tradition has been pluralistic from the very beginning.

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