In-depth Analysis on the Methodology of Sanad and Matan Criticisms: The Perspective of Hadith Scholars

Abstract: Knowledge on the classification (Mustalah) and sciences (’Ulama) of the Hadith that has long existed is the platform for religious scholars to debate the preservation and safeguarding of the originality and authenticity of the Prophet’s SAW Hadith. The topic is to determine whether to accept or reject the circumstances surrounding the chain of narrators (Sanad) and the text of the Hadith (Matan). The evaluation of a Hadith is made based on the Sanad and Matan criticisms. What is the relationship between these two aspects and to what degree does the role and significance of these two aspects affect the evaluation of a Hadith, notwithstanding the criteria needed by parties that intend to evaluate the Hadith? Hence, these are some of the questions that reflect the issues in this article. This brief study on the writings by experts in the field has produced a few latent points that can be summarised as; the criticisms of the Sanad and Matan had begun since the time of the Prophet’s SAW companions although criticisms on the Matan took preference and dominance due to the need at that moment in time. In the context of evaluating the Hadith, both these aspects need to be jointly criticized and not in a separate context. At times, the Hadith might have been authenticated based on the Sanad, nevertheless criticism of the Matan would still be initiated to ascertain that the text of the Hadith is safe from contradictory facts or void of any hidden flaws.

Keywords: Hadith, Criticisms, Methodology, Sanad, Matan, Hadith and Scholars.

INTRODUCTION

Hadith is reports of the words, actions, tacit approvals or disapprovals of Prophet Muhammad. It is also called the Sunnah, which is the second source of Islamic teachings after the al-Qur'an. In fact, the detail aspects of Islamic law, theology, and morals are found in the Hadith. However, unlike the al-Qur'an, not all Hadith that exist and spread among Muslims are authentic. Therefore, Muslim scholars have developed a method to evaluate the authenticity of these reports. The method then matured into a formal discipline called ‘ulûm al-hadîth, the science of Hadith. Science then, the method has been recognized as a valid and effective way to scrutinize Hadith narrations. Unlike the Muslim community who have accepted ‘ulûm al-hadîth as an adequate method to authenticate Hadith reports, Western scholars, understandably, have been very skeptical toward Hadith literatures. As early as 1848, Gustav Weil had suggested that substantial amount of Hadith should be regarded as spurious (Hallaq, 1999: 75). It was Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht’s theories that paved the way of critical study of the authenticity of Hadith, especially after the publication of Schacht’s The Origin of Muhammad an Jurisprudence in 1950 in which he argues that (legal) Hadiths must be examined authentic until the contrary is proven (Schacht, 1950: 1-4). Since then, many scholars, Western and Muslim alike, have proposed their theories on this topic. According to Hallaq, there are three main approaches in recent Hadith scholarship; those who sought to reinforce Schacht’s conclusions; those who seek a synthesis conclusion; and scholars that develop counter arguments against his thesis (Hallaq, 1999: 76). The scholars of first and second “camp” clearly do not consider traditional Hadith criticism as an adequate method, therefore they consider many Hadiths as unauthentic although they have been proven to be sahih according to traditional criteria.

According to al-A’zhomi (1990, p. 10), what is assumed as the current method of criticizing the Sanadis actually the outcome or findings of criticisms on Sanadby former Islamic scholars. This is because scholars of the al-Jarhwa al-Ta’dil would not have been able to ascertain the status of a narrator; whether he is accepted or rejected, trustworthy or otherwise, carefully safeguard the Hadith or is forgetful and froth with mistakes, unless the scholars have studied the narrated text of the Hadith by comparing the Matan of their Hadith with the Matan of other narrators, including views from the logical aspect. Hence, narrators who added the Matan of the Hadith that is incongruous, contradictory and froth with mistakes would have the Hadith rejected. Comparisons between narratives and logical criticisms are Matan criticisms, which are a part of the methodology of Sanad criticism.
Objectives of the Study
The article is written with the intention of explaining the close relationship between Sanad criticism and Matan criticism of the Hadith because without the Matan criticism, the Sanad criticism would be incomplete. In fact, the methodology of Sanad criticism creates the realization of the Matan criticism.

Objectives of the Sanad and Matan Criticisms
The aim of criticizing the Hadith, either its Sanad or Matan, is to identify the authenticity of a Hadith. The eventual outcome of this criticism is to ascertain if the Hadith fulfills the condition on authenticity and enables the differentiation of an acceptable (maṣbūṭ) or rejected (mardūd) Hadith.

Definition of Hadith Criticism
Method of Hadith criticism may be defined as a branch of sciences of Hadith which is used to verify Hadiths for differentiating between authentic one and not. [Addumaini, t.t] The process of Hadith authentication should be done as a consequence of Hadith transmission which through one generation of people to others. As we know, the people are characterizable difference; some have integrity and good personality, while some are amoral and less intelligent.

In other words, method of Hadith criticism came out as a consequence of existence of information need to verify. Method of Hadith criticism includes two aspects, which are sanad (chain of narrators) and Matan (content of the Hadith). Muslim scholars have constructed principles in doing Hadith criticism, either sanad or Matan. Some of them are relevant to be contextualized in verifying information spreading on social media.

The Basis of Sanad Criticism
In the Sanad criticism, the Hadith scholars had evaluated three main issues, such as
1. The piouness and dignity of a narrator would attest to the biasness and competence of a narrator. Narrators who do not fulfill the condition of fairness would have the Hadith rejected considering there might be some untruthfulness in the narrations.
2. The care shown by the narrator and the prudence in narrating the Hadith (dbabt) would attest to the narrator’s carefulness, either by him memorizing it or writing in down. Narrators who do not fulfill this condition would have the Hadith rejected due to the probability of mistakes. To determine the duty of care the critics of the Hadith would have to evaluate the texts presented by the narrator. Thus, only after the Matan criticisms have been made will the status of care be determined.
3. To ascertain if the chain of Sanadis continuous or otherwise because if the chain has been broken, the Hadiths not authenticated and will be rejected since there is a possibility of untruthfulness or mistake when the identity of the narrator in the broken chain is unknown. Knowledge on these three issues are found in literature related to the history of narrators or also known as ‘ilmrijal al-Hadith or ‘ilm al-rowmah. Briefly, it could be said that the basis for the Sanad criticism is the study to answer these three questions, such as:
   i. What is source of the narrator’s text?
   ii. How did he obtain it?
   iii. How credible is the narrator?

When these three issues are studied, two other issues related to Sanad, which is the absence of syaz and ‘illah, must also be looked into. Moreover, the study of the two latter issues is deemed more difficult compared to the three former issues.

The Basics of Matan Criticisms
The basics of Matan criticism is the comparing of one narrator’s Hadith texts with that of another and the comparisons made based on numerous aspects iterated earlier. Thus, by comparing the narrations, the critics are able to recognize the narrator’s level of prudence and issues that might exist in the Matan that contradicts other facts or inconsistencies that are difficult to detect. The Matan would then be compared with Matan criticism standards consisting of religious referrals from the Qur’an, Hadith or even logical deductions in order to ascertain the accuracy and validity of the Matan contained in the Hadith.

The Standards for Matan Criticism of the Hadith
Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyyah was once asked whether a false Hadith could be identified by only through the Matan of the Hadith and without studying the Sanad. His answer was in the form of a book entitled Naqd Al-Matan, which explained the standards that could be used to identify false Hadith with ease. He mentioned 13 standards for Matan criticism that could be summarised as follows:
First: Hadith that contradict the al-Qur’an
Second: Hadith that contradict other authenticated Hadith
Third: Hadith that contradict the basics of the syarak
Fourth: Hadith that have a severe, aggravated or grievous connotation
Fifth: Hadith that contradict authenticated historical facts
Sixth: Hadith that have illogical connotations
Seventh: Hadith that contradict reality
Eight: Hadith that does that reflect the words of the Prophet SAW

The first three standards can be combined and called the syarak standards because it is based on the al-Qur’an and Hadith plus the deductions (istinbat) made from both these sources. There maiming five standards can be combined as logical and realistic standards because it is based on the elements of logic and reality.
The Position of Sanad and Matan Criticisms in Evaluating the Hadith

Based on the criteria for an authentic Hadith, it is clear that Hadith scholars, when evaluating a Hadith, do pay attention to both tenets of the Hadith, namely the sanad and matan and adhere to the sanad and matan criticisms.

This is because the authenticity of the sanad does not guarantee that the criteria for an authentic Hadith are fulfilled. The sanad could be authentic because it fulfilled the required conditions but the Hadith cannot be authenticated just yet due to contradictions or ‘Allah discovered hidden from the naked eye. On the other hand, sometimes the matan of a Hadith is authentic based on the facts that support its authenticity; hence it is not assumed authentic because there are ‘illah in its sanad. According to Ibn al-Juzi, “there are Hadith with the sanad from narrators who are ihija but found to be false.” Ibn al-Qayyim (Furusiyyah: 245) also said, “It is known that the authenticity of the sanad is one of the conditions for an authentic Hadith, hence it cannot establish the authenticity of a Hadith”.

The Priority of Matan Criticisms in the Practice of Evaluating Hadith by Hadith Scholars

The basis of evaluating the Hadith using both the sanad and matan was founded since the time of the Prophet SAW; hence, the matan criticism aspect was practiced even before that. This is because there was no need to evaluate the sanad at that time since the Prophet SAW was still alive and any concern could be addressed to the Prophet SAW himself. After the honorable passing of the Prophet SAW, there was still no need to evaluate the sanad of the Hadith because the Prophet’s SAW companions (sahabat) were very capable and truthful. According to al-Bara’ bin ‘Azib, “Not all the Hadith narrated to you was from what we heard from the Prophet SAW; some we heard ourselves from the Prophet SAW and some were narrated by our friends, hence we were never untruthful”. In one of his narrations he said, “In Allah’s SWT name, we have never been untruthful and we do not know what the untruth is” (Ibn ‘Adi: 157-159).

The era of political turmoil in the Islamic world began during the time of the Othman Caliphate. This situation continued until his murder in 35H. After the demise of Osman r.a, an even greater political turmoil erupted that brought about deep divides among the Muslims. This turmoil eventually brought the split in religious beliefs because each group went about seeking authoritative claims to buttress their beliefs.

There was the munafiq (disbelievers) group who took the opportunity during this period of disunity to destroy Islam from within and with this emerged Abdullah bin Saba’ (40H) and his followers. He was a Jew from Yamen who became a Muslim during the time of the Osman Caliphate. He was responsible for the political turmoil that eventually took the life of Caliph Osman r.a. and brought about the disunity among Muslims. After Ali r.a was appointed the Caliph, he worshipped Caliph Ali r.a. as God. His followers were called al-Sabaiyyah and they were burnt alive by Ali r.a. and he too was burnt along with them (al-Zarkali, 4:88, al-Zahabi, 3:289).

Political and religious turmoil became worse when al-Mukhtar bin Abi Ubaid al-Thaqafi came into the scene in67H. The trouble caused by him started around 65-67H. His revenge for the death of al-Hussein bin Ali was his agenda for disrupting political unity. Among his teachings were that Gabriel (Jibril) came to him as a divine revelation (wahyu). Imam Nawawi said that consensus by religious scholars assumed that he was the liar referred o by the Prophet SAW in the Hadith narrated by Asma’ binti Abu Bakar that within the Thaqif tribe there would be one who lies and murders extensively (al-Nawawi, 16: 100). According to Umar Falatah (1981, 1: 212-213) he was the first person found to pay narrators to falsify the Hadith for his political interests.

In addition, many of the Prophet’s SAW companions had passed on and the religious atmosphere among the people was not the same as during the times of the companions. This situation had warranted the need to evaluate the narrators of the Hadith. According to Ibn Sirin, “Basically, the companions and their followers never questioned the sanad but after the political turmoil they would enquire: Say who was your narrator”’. Hence, if the narrator was among the members of the Sunnah, then the Hadith was accepted and if the narrator was among the propagators of bid’ah (innovations that displeases Allah SWT), then the Hadith was rejected” (Sahih Muslim, 1:34)

Referring to the matan criticism, it was obviously practiced earlier than the sanad criticisms, back during the time of the noble companions. It was practiced by Abu Bakar r.a, who requested a narrator to prove that grandmother would inherit 1/6 of the grandchild’s property, because according to Abu Bakar r.a. there was nonreligious reference in the Qur’an or Hadith on this property, because according to Abu Bakar r.a. there was nonreligious reference in the Qur’an or Hadith on this matter. So too did Umar r.a, who requested Abu Saida-Khudi to prove that the matan of a Hadith related to seeking permission from Umar r.a. had truly come from the Prophet SAW. One that clearly proves the occurrence of matan criticism was the matan criticism by Aisyahr.a., as quoted by al-Zarkasyi.

Hence, some examples of Hadith scholars evaluating a Hadith were quoted earlier and they always prioritized the matan criticisms. According to al-Muhammad (2005, p. 25), when a sanad of a Hadith is brought before religious scholars, they would firstly look at the matan to determine if it contradicts any elements of the syara’ or logic, or if the matan appears
in any other narrations. Thus, if there are problems with the 
matan, Hadith scholars would reject the matan.

Criteria for a Hadith Critic according to the 
Perspective of Hadith Scholars

Hadith scholars who are eligible to evaluate or 
criticize a Hadith such as Imam Malik, Ahmad, al-
Bukhari, Muslim and others are people who possess the 
qualifications and criteria to become critics of the sanad 
and matan of a Hadith. According to Imam al-Zahabi, 
"There is no other way to mould a skilful and 
knowledgeable narrator other than to continuously learn 
and study the subject matter, have a lot of discussions, 
be focused, always be prudent and understand the 
subject matter, possess characteristics of piousness 
(taqwa) and religion, be impartial, have a good memory 
and always refer to scholars". According to Dr Faruq 
Hamadah (2008: 142), religious scholars are of the 
consensus that a narrator’s critic should be someone of 
knowledge, pious, devout, truthful, humble and know 
the reasons why a narrator is accepted or rejected. Dr 
Najm Khalaf (1989, p. 29) stressed that criteria for a 
matan critic is based on Imam al-Balhaqi, who quoted 
that: “The capability to differentiate between an 
authentic Hadith or a weak one is not dependent on 
whether the narrator is fair or not but on how much of 
the Hadith he has learned, socializing with experts on 
Hadiths, constant referrals with these experts, reading 
the Hadith and studying narrations by scholars on the 
Hadith”.

Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyyah when asked about the 
possibility of identifying a false Hadith based on the 
matan, said that the criteria for a matan critic is that one 
should be among the scholars of the Hadith. He also 
said, “The one who can identify a false Hadith that way 
would be an individual who is beaming with knowledge 
on a tajdiic, which has become a part of his 
flesh and blood. He has reached the level of an expert 
in the knowledge of Hadith and the athar; the life 
of Prophet’s SAW (sirah) and his teachings either in the 
form of his commands or prohibitions; what he has 
said, what he has preached, what he likes and dislikes 
and what he has bestowed on his followers, so much so 
that he feels he is with the Prophet SAW and his 
companions” (al-Jauziyyah, 1990)

Based on these statements by the scholars, the 
author has summarised that not anyone is capable of 
evaluating Hadith, either its sanad or its matan. 
Evaluation by an unqualified individual would render 
the evaluation void of quality from an academic 
perspective and eventually rejected. Hence, we find that 
Imam Muslim (1990, p. 218) had iterated for a long 
time, saying that, “The study on Hadith and 
differentiating between an authentic and weak Hadith is 
the work of experts on Hadith because they safeguard 
the narrations and know about it compared to other 
people”. It is not surprising that Imam al-Auza’ie would 
refer to a scholar in Hadith initially before quoting 
Hadith although he is a famous faqih himself (al-
Ramahurmuzi, 1404H: 318).

Method of Hadith Criticism: Formal Criteria and 
Substantial Criteria: The perspective of Hadith 
Scholars

The authenticity of Hadith has been a concern of 
classical Islamic scholars since the early days of Islam. 
To do that, they make benchmarks to analyze which 
Hadiths are valid and not. These benchmarks or criteria 
include external criteria (al-kharji) and internal (al-
dakhili). Ibn Shalah said that the authentic Hadith is 
“the one which has a continuous ad, made up of 
reporters of trustworthy memory from similar 
authorities, and which is found to be free from any 
regularities (i.e. in the text) or defects (i.e. in the 
isnad)”. This definition described by Ibn Shalah is a 
definition that was chosen by many scholars. However, 
the definition is not without criticism. The criticism 
does not only come from Western scholars, but also 
from contemporary Muslim scholars. It is because the 
criteria are considered - although they cover two criteria 
– only emphasize to external criteria, and tend to ignore 
internal criteria. This is actually understandable because 
indeed classical Islamic scholars when testing the 
internal validity of Hadith put more emphasis on the 
Matan format; is there an addition (zyādah), insertion 
(idrāj), reversal (iqāl) or subtraction (maqsūn) which 
can result in a contradiction in the Hadith or among 
Hadith, which in turn it will impact the Hadith to be 
weak. They (classical Islamic scholars) paid less 
attention – to say no at all - to the substance of the 
Hadith which is actually no less important for testing. 
Looking at these criticisms, contemporary Islamic 
Scholars do not remain silent, and then try to formulate 
a method (manhaj) to examine the internal aspects of a 
Hadith, especially in terms of their substance. This 
internal testing of the Hadith in its development, is 
commonly referred to as the criticism of the Matan 
Hadith.
Whereas according to jurists, the Matan Hadith is accepted if it is coherent, and vice versa it is rejected if it conflict to (a) the Qur’an, (b) Hadith that has been proven authentic, (c) ijma’ (practice of shahabah), (e) qiyas, (f) general principles of shari’ah, and (g) prevalence in common cases. Referring to the criticism of the Matan Hadith above, Syamsul Anwar then classify into two preferences, namely; formal criteria of the authenticity of Matan and substantial criteria of the authenticity of Matan. According to Syamsul Anwar, the criteria included in the formal criteria of the authenticity of Matan are two of the criteria for the validity of the Hadith that have been made by the scholars, namely free from syāţ (anomaly) and ‘illah. What “free from syāţ” means is it has three elements; (a) free from opposition, (b) free from pollution, and (c) free from error. While what “free from ‘illah” means is it includes some elements; (a) free from internal contradictions, and (b) free from social interpenetration (mixing one Matan with another). Therefore, as a whole the elements of the formal criteria of the Matan criticism are five: three are elements that are free from shāţ and two are elements that are free from ‘illah.

The substantial criteria for authenticity of the Matan referred to by Syamsul Anwar in this case is the liberation of a Matan Hadith from incoherence. What “free from incoherence” means is emerging the harmony of meaning among the Hadith, and the substance of its meaning is free from incoherence with a number of meanings that have been accepted and acknowledged. Free from incoherence is also actually included in one of the free elements of ‘illah. This criterion is more related to the substance and meaning that is the content of the Hadith than it relates to the format of Matan. If in formal criteria, the Hadith is more seen in terms of the format of the Matan such as whether the Matan of Hadith is reversed in order or not, is it different from other similar Matan of the Hadith, whether there are additions or there are written errors and so on, then in substantial criteria, Hadith is seen in the substance of meaning contained in it.

The Relationship between the Results of Sanad and Matan Criticisms

If we scrutinize the relationship between the results of the sanad and matan criticisms, we would find four situations, such as:

i. The sanad and matan are authentic
ii. The sanad and matan are weak
iii. The sanad is authentic but the matan is weak
iv. The sanad is weak but the matan is authentic

In these situations, only the first situation makes the Hadith authentic. The law on Hadith for the three remaining situations renders it weak and the situations are subsequently rejected. The first two situations are normal in aHadith whereby the sanad and matan are authentic and both the sanad and matan are weak. The third situation arises when there is some hidden flaw or contradiction in the matan. In the fourth situation, the matan is authentic because the contents of the matan are authentic. However, the narration is not authentic due to problems in the sanad.

CONCLUSION

Based on discussions, obviously there is a close relationship between sanad and matan criticisms when evaluating the Hadith. Both of these criticisms are essential when criticizing the Hadith and in fact, the matan criticism is part of the sanad criticism. It would be incorrect to allege that Hadith scholars are inclined or focus more on sanad criticisms when evaluating a Hadith, when in fact the allegation portrays the fact that Hadith scholars do not ignore matan criticisms when evaluating the Hadith.

Because of its important position as the second source of Islamic teachings, Hadith has been subject of study by Muslim scholars since the era of the Companion. After the wide spreading of Hadith forgery following the fitnah, Muslim scholars have developed method to determine authentic Hadiths from the forged ones. Their method is called ‘ulum al-hadith that consists of isnād and matan criticism. Despite the critics of many modern scholars that traditional ‘ulum al-hadith only cares about isnād, it has been proven that matan criticism has played important rule in Hadith authentication since the early period. The important role of matan criticism is to find the ‘illah and shādh in the matn.

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