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MATN CRITICISM AND ITS ROLE IN THE EVALUATION OF HADITH AUTHENTICITY

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, Muslim community has taken 'ulūm al-ḥadīth for granted as a valid method in hadith verification; if a hadith is declared as an authentic hadith after examined using the method, then they will accept the hadith as an authentic one. Nevertheless, the traditional discipline has been criticised by various modern scholars who argue that traditional 'ulūm al-ḥadīth is not a sufficient method to evaluate the authenticity of hadith reports. One of their reasons is that the traditional hadith criticism only examines the chain of narrations (sanad) of hadith reports and ignores the content (matn) of the hadith. This essay will discuss the role of matn criticism in the authentication of hadith; whether it is included in the traditional method of 'ulūm al-ḥadīth or not, and if so, what is the criteria and how the scholars apply them.

Keywords

*Matn criticism,
'ulūm al-ḥadīth,
hadith
authentication*

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 *'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, 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 *'ulūm al-ḥadīth* as an adequate method to authenticate hadith reports, Western scholars, understandably, have been very sceptical toward hadith literatures. As early as 1848, Gustav Weil had suggested that a 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 Muhammadan Jurisprudence* in 1950 in which he argues that (legal) hadiths must be assumed unauthentic 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.

Their main objection toward traditional hadith criticism is that the method is only concern about the *isnād* of the hadith and proven to be inadequate when it comes to *matn* criticism. In Goldziher's words, "The judgment of the value of the contents depend on the judgment of the correctness of the *isnād* (...) An impossible sentence full of inner and outer contradictions is appended withstands the scrutiny of this formal criticism, if the continuity of the entirely trustworthy authors cited in them is complete and if the possibility of their personal communication is established, the tradition is accepted as worthy of credit (...) Muslim critics have no feeling for even the crudest anachronisms provided that the *isnād* is correct" (Goldziher, 1971: 140-141). Following Goldziher, Schacht points out that the method employed Muslim scholars might have eliminated some forged hadiths but there are still considerable number of unauthentic hadiths in the cannon collections because the traditional method fails to recognize and eliminate those fake hadiths with often self-contradiction contents. Schacht argues that the major shortcoming of traditional method that "Muhammadan scholars" employ is its invariably restricted to a purely formal criticism of *isnād* (Schacht, 1950: 3).

Critical discussion on *matn* criticism not only heated among Western scholars but also among modern Muslim intellectuals. Some of them also raise similar criticism toward traditional '*ulūm al-ḥadīth*'. Israr Ahmad Khan, for example, regards the overemphasizing on *isnād* in '*ulūm al-ḥadīth*' as "delusion of reliable narrators." He highlights the fact that whenever hadith commentators face a problematic *matn*, instead of examining the *matn* itself as a possible source of unreliability, they tend to blame the narrators, assuming that they had a misunderstanding or misconception about the *matn* (Khan, 2010: xix). Ahmad Amin, an Egyptian thinker points out that traditional hadith scholars pay more attention to the *isnād* than to the *matn*. Furthermore, Abū Rayyāh even accused scholars of hadith of completely ignoring the essential content of hadith and failing to look at historical evidence (Amin, 2005: 262).

These accusations have been answered by many scholars, western and Muslim alike. Coulson regards Schacht's approach to be too narrow for he draws a general and radical claim based only on his analysis on legal hadith. While Coulson agrees with Schacht's conclusion about the unreliability of the *isnād* system, he argues that the substance of the hadith might reflect an authentic decision of the Prophet (Coulson, 1983: 321). Burton states that the complaint about overemphasizing on *isnād* among Muslim scholars is an overstatement. Burton provides an example of a hadith about female *jinn* that was rejected by Muslim critics because of its illogical content. Burton says that "criticism of the *matn* is not so rare as it sometimes claimed" (Burton, 1994: 169). Abbot even argues that Muslims have employed content (*matn*) criticism to verify a hadith since the era of the Companions who frequently compared the *matn* of their hadith collections. The emphasis on *isnād*, she

argues, only started after the period of the *fitnah*. Therefore, Abbot insists that the view that *matn* has been treated only as secondary to *isnād* as the basis of acceptability of hadith need to be modified (Nabia Abbot, 1967: 75).

Muslim scholars such as Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'ī, Muḥammad Abū Shuḥbah, and Nūr al-Dīn 'Itr argue that the emphasise on *matn* can be seen in the criteria laid down by the traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*), in which they state that sound hadith must be free from *shādh* and *'illah*. These two terms refer not only to *isnād* but also *matn* (Nabia Abbot, 1967: 75). Zubair cites al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, one of the earliest author on *'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, who says that sometimes hadith with sound *isnād* can be classified as a weak hadith. This indicates that al-Ḥākim far from only using *isnād* as solely standard of authenticity (Muḥammad Zubair Shiddiqi, 1961: 113).

Scholars who argue that *matn* criticism has been employed in hadith criticism since early period of Islam often support their case by providing evidences of *matn* criticism conducted by early scholars. One of the famous example is 'Ā'isyah's rejection of Ibn 'Umar's hadith report that a dead relative would be punished for his family's excessive mourning because she believed that it violated the Qur'anic principle that 'no bearer of burdens bears the burden of another'. However, these evidences are considered by Brown as not satisfactory, especially the evidence from the Companions for the lack of surviving documentary evidence of how they approached hadith criticism. According to Brown's assessment, Luqmān al-Salafī and Ḥamzah al-Malībārī have been only two modern Muslim scholars that are able to provide substantial evidence for *matn* criticism from the early hadith tradition (Brown, 2008: 154).

Brown explains that early critics disguised their *matn* criticism by using the language of *isnād* criticism, therefore it is not easy to find the evidences (Brown, 2008: 143). Nonetheless, Brown manages to find examples of *matn* criticism in the works of early hadith critics that often thought to only employ *isnād* criticism. There are 15 examples presented by Brown, 12 of them were conducted by hadith scholars of the third/ninth century; al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870), Muslim (d. 261/875), Ya'qūb ibn Sufyān al-Fasawī (d. 277/890) and Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb al-Jūzajānī (d. 259/873). The rest were conducted by critics who lived in fourth/tenth century, namely Muḥammad ibn Ishāq ibn Khuzaymah (d. 311/923) and Muḥammad ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī (w. 354/965) (Brown, 2008: 154-162). Brown's findings prove that *matn* criticism has been utilized by early Muslim scholars. The next part of this article will discuss their practice.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Development of Hadith Authentication

The impetus behind the birth of *'ulūm al-ḥadīth* was the wide spreading of hadith forgery. As described by Abbot, early hadith criticism conducted by Muslim scholars was "the angry reactions of Companions and early Followers (*tābi'ūn*) to unscrupulous and careless circulators of illegitimate information about the Prophet" (Nabia Abbot, 1983: 287). That "angry reactions" eventually developed into a formal discipline known as *'ulūm al-ḥadīth*. Therefore, in order to understand the development of the discipline, including the role of *matn* criticism, one should pay attention to this historical context. Hadith fabrication can be traced to the early period of Islam. The murder of the third rightly-guided caliph Utsman

was one of the fateful moment in Islamic history, the moment had triggered chain of tragic events including civil wars and formation of various theological sects. In their debate, these groups utilized hadith reports to support their theological and political stances, they even go as far as to fabricate hadith to support their case. Therefore, according to some historians, hadith forgery taken place for the first time around that time of political turmoil (*fitnah*) (J. A. Brown, 2009: 77). Reportedly, it was initially done by Ibn Saba' to promote the imamate of 'Alī (Khan, 2010: xix). Al-'Umarī, on the other hand, argues that the first hadith fabricator was Ibn 'Adīs, who forged hadiths to condemn caliph 'Uthmān.

Apart from political motivations following the civil war, there are some other motives behind hadith forgery. Al-Nawawī mentions their reasons in his *taqrīb*, (and later on explained by al-Suyutī) According to these towering scholars of hadith, the reasons behind hadith fabrication include; those devout figures who forged hadith to persuade people to be more pious such as Nūḥ al-Jamī' and propagandists of the al-Karamiyah, al-Nawawī states that this type of hadith fabricators are the most harmful; those who forge hadith to support their heretical sects; Ibn Ṣalāḥ also added, those who forged hadith to support their theological or legal schools (*madhāhib*), those who fabricated hadiths to praise political rulers; and those who fabricated hadith to support their legal decisions.

The phenomenon of hadith fabrication had fostered Muslim scholars to develop a systematic intellectual tool to determine the quality of a hadith; whether it is an authentic report that originated from the Prophet himself or otherwise. According to traditional account accepted among Muslims, Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110), an influential scholar of the *tābi'īn* generation, was reportedly said, "In the beginning they would not asked about *isnād*. But when the political turmoil happened, they demanded, 'Name your man to us.' The narrators of *ahl al-sunnah* would be accepted, while those who *ahl al-bid'ah* would be rejected." This practice produce the branch of hadith science called *al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl* with main purpose to distinguish reliable narrators from the unreliable ones (Philips, 2007: 50).

From the narration of Ibn Sīrīn it seems that the focus of scrutiny in the early period following the civil war was mainly on *isnād*. However, that is not the case. Citing al-A'zamī, Ismail argue that *isnād* criticism was actually the outcome or findings of *matn* criticism by earlier scholars. A scholar would not able to ascertain the status of narrators in a chain of *isnād* unless they have studied the narrated texts of the hadith of the narrator in question. Narrators who adduced the *matn* of the hadith that is incongruous, contradictory and froth with mistakes would be regarded as not a very reliable narrator (Ismail, Baru, Hassan, Bin Salleh, & Amin, 2014: 152). Thus, *al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl* which is the essential of *sanad* criticism cannot be separated from act of *matn* criticism conducted by earlier scholars.

The Role of *Matn* Criticism

Matn criticism of earlier scholars mainly conducted by method of comparison as stated by Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181) a second century scholar, "To reach authentic statement one needs to compare the words of scholars with each other as well." The method of comparison was practiced in many ways, al-A'zamī mentions some of them; 1) comparing between the hadith of different students of one scholar; 2) comparison between the statements of single scholar at different times; 3) comparison between oral recitation and written document and

4) comparison between the hadith and related verse of the al-Qur'an (A'zamī, 1977: 52). After doing these procedure, a scholar of hadith will be able to determine not only the quality of a hadith but also the quality of its narrators. For example, Ibn Ma'in (d. 233) was able to grade seventeen students of Hammād after their narrations (A'zamī, 1977: 53).

Along with *al-jarḥ wa'l-ta'dīl*, there is also a branch of hadith science called *muṣṭalāḥ al-ḥadīth* (classification of hadith), which is a discipline concerning the evaluation of the hadith. The classification is initiated in "to understand and determine whether a hadith is accepted or rejected and explain the decision with its justifications" (Ismail et al., 2014: 152). The science of hadith has multiple branches, therefore, al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 450), the author of the one of earliest comprehensive works on hadith, named his book, *Ma'rifah 'Ulūm al-Ḥadīth*, (mastering the sciences of hadith) indicating that there are several branches in the discipline (Kamali, 2014: 8). After undergoing a process of scrutiny by means of *'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, the hadith would be classified as *ṣaḥīḥ* (sound), *ḥasan* (good), *ḍa'īf* (weak) and *mawḍū'* (fabricated, forged) (Hasan, 1994: 8).

In the third/ninth century there was an emergence strong traditionalists opposition against the rationalists who tend to ignore the *Sunnah* and rely solely on human intellect in their *ijtihād*. Part of the impact of the traditionalist movement was increasing numbers of hadith compilations (Hallaq, 1999a: 21). *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875) were undoubtedly the most influential and reliable compilations, even until today. However, according to Brown, neither of these scholars listed down tangible criteria of hadith that they consider to be *ṣaḥīḥ*. He points out his finding that it was Ibn Khuzaymah (d. 311/923), one of Muslim's student, who gave the earliest surviving definition of *ṣaḥīḥ*. Ibn Khuzaymah notes that he will not accept a hadith unless it is a hadith that is narrated by an upstanding (*'adl*) transmitter from another upstanding transmitter continuously to [the Prophet] without any break in the *isnād* nor any impugning of the reports' transmitters (J. A. Brown, 2009: 271).

Nevertheless, Brown's explanation does not mean that Muslim or al-Bukhārī did not set any criteria. In fact, in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Muslim states that one should know how to differentiate between sound narrations and the weak ones. He then explains the criteria including the personality and integrity of the narrators in the *isnād* (Muslim, n.d., I: 8). Muslim's criteria of *ṣaḥīḥ* also explicitly displayed in the complete title of his monumental work; "*al-Musnad al-Ṣaḥīḥ al-Mukhtaṣar bi'l-Naqli al-'Adl 'an'l-'adl ilā Rasūlillāh*." Ibn Salah gave a more detailed definition of *ṣaḥīḥ* as he states that, "*Ṣaḥīḥ* is the one which has a continuous *isnād*, made up of reporters of trustworthy (*'adl*) with good memory (*ḍābiṭ*) from similar authorities, and which is found to be free from any irregularities (*shādh*) or defects (*'illah*)" (Ibn Ṣalāḥ, 2002: 79).

The last two criteria are not only applied to *isnād* but also to *matn* (Amin, 2005: 262). Later scholars would translate *'illah* and *shādh* of *matn* in more tangible criteria. In *al-Kifāyah fī 'Ilm Uṣūl al-Riwāyah*, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī explains that forged hadiths identified by one of the following indications: first, they contradict reason (*al-'uqul*), for example, the statement that no Creator exists. Second, the hadith contradicts the al-Qur'ān, a widely established precedent of the Prophet (*al-sunnah al-mutawātirah*) or a report that the Muslim community has agreed upon (*ijmā'*) as being authentic. Third, the report conveys information that is so essential for Muslims that God would not allow it to be

reported by a means other than one that assured its certainty. Finally, a report about some evident, unmistakable event that, if it had occurred, would have necessarily been described via widely transmitted reports (J. A. C. Brown, 2008: 152) Ibn al-Qayyim also provide criteria that is adapted by many scholars after him. His criteria are, hadith that contradict the al-Qur'an; Second, hadith that contradict other authenticated hadith; Third, hadith that contradict the basics of the *sharī'ah*; 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; and Eight, hadith that does that reflect the words of the Prophet (Ismail et al., 2014: 155).

CONCLUSION

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 '*ulūm al-ḥadīth*' that consists of *isnād* and *matn* criticism. Despite the critics of many modern scholars that traditional '*ulūm al-ḥadīth*' only cares about *isnād*, it has been proven that *matn* criticism has played important rule in hadith authentication since the early period. The important role of *matn* criticism is to find the '*illah*' and *shādh* in the *matn*.

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