



THE DEBATE ON ANTI-WOMAN DISCOURSE IN THE HADITH LITERATURE

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Abstract

In Islam, Hadith has been regarded as a secondary source after the Qur'an and covers various aspects including the rights and protection for women. It refers not only to the words of the Prophet but also covers on his attitudes, behaviour and advices towards women. Many have recorded that he was the kindest and the gentlest to his wives, and he had shown the best action to women as a whole. However, there are arguments on few hadiths which reported as authentic but have been claimed as anti-woman hadith because of its bias content and discrimination against women. This issue has been gradually raised since the nineteenth century and has been seriously debated in the twentieth century until present day. This paper aims to discover the discourse on anti-woman issue or also known as misogyny, particularly in the Hadith literature. The misogyny is clearly against the equality between genders, but the question is whether the Hadith intrinsically hostile to women or is it the interpretation of the Hadith that has a serious problem in gender discrimination? Therefore, this study attempts to examine some scholar's interpretation in understanding the related hadiths which have been claimed as anti-woman. Those hadiths have been exclusively selected from *Sahīh al-Bukhāri* due to a reason that it carries the highest rank in terms of its reliability and authenticity among the collections of hadith. The finding shows that although there might be anti-woman discourse in *Sahīh al-Bukhāri*, however, there are imbalance numbers of hadiths to prove that the Hadith encourages gender bias. Moreover, new approach is needed in evaluating and understanding these hadiths concerning women.

Keywords: Anti-Woman, Gender, Hadith, Misogyny, Woman

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1. INTRODUCTION

The position of Hadith as a principal source in Islam remains contentious among Muslims. It refers to the narration about the life of Prophet Muhammad, including his utterances, deed, tacit approval, and descriptions of his physical features and moral characteristics. The collection of these narrations begun as early as in the seventh century (Azami, 1992; Siddiqi, 1993). However, the publication of hadith literature has started late in the ninth century which became a subject for discussion and argument among the scholars particularly in the aspect of authentication of the hadith. Therefore, the status of hadith as an infallible source of law has been questioned and there are continuous challenges and criticism to the hadith from every direction (Rehman, 2005; Sookhdeo, 2006). One of the critical issues that have been debated is the negative references to women and their rights in the content of the Prophetic traditions. There are arguments that the hadith promotes gender bias which leads to the discrimination against women, and it contributes to the view that women in Islam are oppressed, secluded, exploited and mistreated, simultaneously promoting the patriarchal nature of Muslim society (Afshari, 1994; Hasan, 2012).

Is the hadith intrinsically hostile to women? While this question raises concerns among both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, it receives little attention in published academic discussions. However, it is vital to discover how the debate on anti-women issue has been gradually developed among the scholars. The emergence of debates about Hadiths concerning women among scholars cannot be traced back much earlier than the end of the eighteenth century with the exceptional of ‘Aisha’s debate. There are many examples that ‘Aisha solved the ambiguity found in the Hadith, but one of them was her refutation towards unfavourable statements concerning woman. The Hadith says “three things bring bad luck: houses, women and horses” or in another narration: “the evil omen is in the woman, the house, and the horse” which has been reported in *Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Sahīḥ Muslim*. According to Imam al-Zarkashi (1980), ‘Aisha criticised Abu Hurayra who reported only the second part of the Prophet’s word in the Hadith above. The complete Hadith as mentioned by ‘Aisha should be “May Allah refute the Jews, they say three things bring bad luck: houses, women and horses” as been mentioned by al-Hākīm with authentic *Isnād* in

Mustadrak ‘ala al-Sahihayn and al-Tayālīsī in his *Musnad*. Another example is regarding to a ruling that a prayer is voided if a dog, a donkey and a woman pass in front of the person who is praying as reported in *Sahīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Sahīḥ Muslim*, which also responded by ‘Aisha as fabricated.

‘Aisha’s critical observations on the Hadiths concerning woman are the best example to prove that any Hadith that contains bias or negative perceptions may not be accurate or may need more justification. She stood up for the rights of women in many Hadiths such as praising women who seek knowledge, giving equal rights to women and etc. She was also can be regarded as a pioneer in preventing wrong assumptions about Hadith concerning woman. ‘Aisha’s debate obviously not occurred at the time of the Prophet. It can be regarded as the earliest debate towards several Hadiths that clearly misjudged the image of woman. She automatically responded to those misogynistic statements which indicate that the Hadith concerning the negative image of women had started to circulate when ‘Aisha was still alive.

2. THE EMERGENCE OF ANTI-WOMEN DISCOURSE

According to Tuksal (2014), the regression towards woman started before the first two centuries had been completed, and that was because of political disruption and rapid geographical expansion. During the first two Islamic centuries, the Hadith was orally transmitted and not completely compiled into a written form. The official documentation of the Hadith was only made in the ninth century and several collections were produced at the beginning of the tenth century, particularly the six canonical collections (Azami, 1977). In the early tenth century, Hadiths concerning woman have been used as *dalil* or intellectual reasoning and discussed in the Qur’anic exegesis work. For example, the story of human creation were circulated in Imam al-Tabari’s (d. 923) Hadith-based Qur’an commentary, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān fī Ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*. His commentary regarding to the stories of Adam and Eve (The Qur’an, 20: 116-123) were sent to the earth was kind of blaming the weakness of woman for listening to the Satan’s temptation. He also quoted the Hadith saying that Adam’s wife who called as *Hawwa* was created from his rib to be his company in the interpretation of “He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her” (The Qur’an, 7: 189). Another example; Imam al-Razi (d.



1209) in *Tafsīr al-Kabīr* ('The Great Exegesis') has quoted the Hadith woman as a crooked rib which reflects the origin of Eve in Adam and to describe female nature. Al-Razi also interpreted that the Qur'anic verse that contains a command to the angels to prostrate them before Adam means to glorify him and not to worship him, has similar meaning as in the Hadith saying that woman to prostrate herself before her husband. Similarly, Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) also used the same hadith to prostrate husband as a supporting argument regarding to Adam (The Qur'an, 2: 34). He also used the same Hadith in the interpretation of Qur'anic verse saying that "men are the protectors and maintainers of women" (The Qur'an, 4: 34) in addition to the Hadith saying that a wife will be cursed until morning if ignoring her husband's sexual need. These examples show that the use of Hadiths concerning women in the Qur'anic exegesis works appears to be followed, has developed selectively, and was never debated during their times.

According to Stowasser (1994): "The Hadith materials on women's inferior nature were accepted and propagated by the consensus (*ijma'*) of the learned doctors of law and theology until eighteenth century pre-modern reformists began to question their authoritative status. Since the nineteenth century, Islamic modernists have denied the authenticity and doctrinal validity of what they viewed as medieval extraneous interpretative "lore" while re-emphasizing the Qur'anic notion of the female's full personhood and moral responsibility". Thus, the Hadiths concerning woman which contain misogynistic features were generally accepted until the eighteenth century, and gradually to be debated in the early nineteenth century. The nineteenth century was a period of the birth of Islamic modernism and the appearance of reformist figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d. 1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashid Rida (d. 1935). Among the principles of the Islamic reformism are the rejection of blind adherence (*taqlīd*), the promotion of rationality and progress and the need of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning and individual interpretation to decide a point of law), and the emancipation of women. Particularly on the woman's issue, these reformists promoted equal rights for women to access to education and work and to vote in political election, for during this century, it was a period characterised by social, economic and political change. The numbers of publication on woman's rights increased and many hadiths concerning women have been interpreted based on new perspectives. Among the

books that have huge influence until present day are *al-Islām wa al-Mar'a fī Ra'y al-Imām Muhammad 'Abduh* ('Islam and Women in the View of Muhammad Abduh'), *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah* ('The Liberation of Women') by Qasim Amin (1899), and *Tahrīr al-Mar'ah fī 'Asr al-Risālah* (translated as 'Liberation of Woman in the Age of Revelation') by Abd al-Halim Abū Shaqqa.

In the twentieth century, Guillaume was among the first who criticising the Hadith concerning women from a negative perspectives, in addition to his support towards the idea of Goldziher in rejecting the Hadith. In Guillaume's book, *The Traditions of Islam*, he chose five Hadiths from numerous Hadiths concerning women and they are: woman as a source of discord; woman is a bad omen; woman leader will never prosper; woman has defects in intelligence and religion; and a disobedient wife will be cursed. He claimed that these Hadiths were fabricated reflecting the political and religious tendencies of different groups, and only few of the Hadiths are belong to the authorities to whom they were attributed (Guillaume, 1966, p.124). Although Guillaume emphasised more on the issue of fabrication Hadiths, he indirectly highlighted that misogyny can be found in the Hadith literature. However, during his time, there was no term of 'anti-woman' introduced. The terms 'woman-demeaning' and 'woman-unfriendly' statements were might be first used by Juynboll (1996) in his *isnād*-critical methods of Hadiths, referring to the number of Hadiths that he interpreted as anti-woman. Images of women presented in the Hadith literature has led to negative interpretations, which have been applied in socio-historical contexts, and influenced by diverse geographic locations and customs. Although a significant number of Hadiths promote equal treatment for women, the Hadith has been claimed to be not only anti-science and anti-reason, but also anti-woman (Ahmad, 1997).

The contemporary label of 'anti-woman' is academically known as misogyny, which can be defined as a hatred of women (Allen, 2001), and the term was used theologically – though not sociologically – in many works on discrimination against women, labelling them subordinate to men. The label of misogyny or 'anti-woman' is consistent with "patriarchalism theological oriented" and "male-dominated religious epistemology", due to the belief that the Hadith has been previously reported based on patriarchal cultures and traditions (Ramli et al., 2013). Patriarchy can be understood as the dominance of the

male gender, where females are given no formal power and public position. It is “a politics of male privilege based on the idea of sexual differentiation”; “the confusion of sex (biology) with its social constructions”; “sexual differences with gender hierarchies and inequalities” (Barlas, 2001, 2002); and “a hegemonic presumption of dominance and superiority that leads to the eradication of women’s agency” (Wadud, 2006). In fact, patriarchy had a very big impact on women in Islam even though there is no inherent or logical link with between patriarchy and Islam (Mir-Hosseini, 2003), which has been claimed it was a practice among the tribe in pre-Islamic era. These patriarchal cultures and misogynistic practices were also believed to have originated in other cultures, such as the Persians, Byzantines, and Greeks, but later embedded in the social practices of Muslims. Some scholars also believe that the anti-woman establishment in Muslim society has no sacred sanction, either from the Qur’an or the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad or even from the early traditions of Muslim society (S. M. Ali, 2004; Mernissi, 1991a). But Azizah al-Hibri (1982) has asserted that “Patriarchy co-opted Islam after the death of the Prophet.”

Many scholars believe that no ‘anti-women’ hadith exist at the time of the Prophet but emerged only after his death (Afshari, 1994). One of the reasons is the special position that has been given to women when Prophet Muhammad protects their rights in the light of the revelation of the Quran and his Sunnah. There was no more difference in gender, both men and women are equally in encouraged to acquire an education; in carrying commitments and responsibilities; in attaining honour and respect; in receiving rewards and punishments for their deeds; and both are accountable for all of their actions (Jawad, 1998; Sulaimani, 1986). In fact, some women at the time of the Prophet are known to have had a noble and favourable position following their involvement in social and educational projects. Although most of the Companions (*ṣaḥāba*) and Successors (*tābi’īn*) who collected, memorized and preserved the hadith were men, women too undertook a special role in this work and were involved in the transmission of hadiths. As transmitters, they were no different from men because the main condition of an authentic hadith is not based on the gender of the transmitter but that it should have “... a continuous *isnād*, made up of reporters of trustworthy memory from similar authorities and which is found to be free from any irregularities (i.e. in the text or *matn*) or

defects (i.e. in the *isnād*)” (Ibn al-Ṣalāh, 1986). In other words, any ‘anti-woman’ or gender bias has been not reported found at the time of the Prophet.

Hence, if women contributed as much as men, why their positions vis-à-vis the hadith have been contested? We are told that women at the time of the Prophet were not restricted at home or secluded from society. They sought knowledge, participated in warfare and in related activities and also managed businesses and occupations as much as their male counterparts. But these positive images of Muslim women were underrepresented; generally characterized as submissive creatures, and oppressed by later socio-economic changes. This negative image has gradually extended from the eighteenth century until today. However, one of the arguments debated is the existence of anti-woman discourse in the religious texts particularly the hadith which some claims should be blamed as a reason of the patriarchal culture in Muslim society. These debates have been continuously highlighted among the female scholars who advocate the equality and justice for woman’s rights. Riffat Hassan, for example, questioned the status of authentic hadith that contain anti-woman discourse and emphasised the importance to discover the reason of anti-woman argument that rooted in the Islamic theology. A saying that ‘woman is a crooked rib’ that she found from the Hadith literature is one of her main focus, for the issue on woman’s creation is philosophically and theologically more important than any other, and it was the reason of “women’s inferior status in the Islamic tradition” (Hassan, 2002a, p.195). She analysed the hadith from both *sanad* and *matn* in many of her writings and consequently rejecting the hadith as authentic (Hassan, 1985, 1987, 1991, 1995, 2001, 2002).

Fatima Mernissi is another scholar who discovered the anti-woman discourse in the authentic collection of hadith. She called them as misogynistic hadith which includes few hadiths from *Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and analysed them in her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (Mernissi, 1991a). She believed that none of the misogyny reports in the Hadith has been narrated by female, but from male narrators, and interpreted by male scholars, for their own benefit. Therefore, she blamed the male particularly who hold the authority on the religious narratives which resulted in promoting the misogyny traditions. For Mernissi, all Hadiths, including the authentic, are open to be questioned and must be re-examined, not to mention

misogynistic Hadith that might have been fabricated or manipulated by the male Companions of the Prophet. There are more other feminists who used the similar argument that the hadith literature contains this anti-woman and misogyny interpretation. Among them are Barbara Stowasser (1994), Ruth Roded (1994, 2012), Kecia Ali (2006) and others. One active NGO in Malaysia, Sisters in Islam (SIS) also used the same debate on questioning the hadith that claimed to promote gender bias particularly disregarding the woman's status in Islam.

It is difficult to claim those reports are originally came from the Prophet, therefore the male companions who narrated those reports were blamed for being misogynist (Mernissi, 1991a). Besides, the interpretations produced by male scholars also were argued to be responsible for the existence of such anti-woman reports. Khaled Abou El-Fadl said: "The very real possibility that most or all of the anti-women traditions were produced as a form of male resistance to the active public role played by women in early Islam" (Abou El-Fadl, 2003, p.230). According to Tobin (2007), the development of conservative interpretation has become another factor that contribute to the manipulation of anti-women reports in the Hadith literature.

3. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The methodology of this research is textual alone; in order to achieve the main objectives, the texts of selected collections of hadith will be critically analysed. According to Siddiqi (1993) and Kamali (2005), there are ten collections of hadith literature: *Sahifa*, *Musannaf*, *Musnad*, *Sahih*, *Sunan*, *Jami*, *Mu'jam*, *al-Mustadrak*, *al-Mustakhrāj* and *al-Juz*. However, this research will cover only the *Sahih* collections, mainly the works of Imam al-Bukhari (194 A.H – 256 A.H/810 CE – 870 CE. The main reason is because his collection of hadith has been considered by Muslim as the most authentic book of hadith (Stork, 2004) and as an authority book second only to the Qur'an (Siddiqi, 1993). According to Ibn al-Salah (1986), the actual title of *Sahih al-Bukhari* is *al-Jami' al-Sahih al-Musnad al-Mukhtasar min Umuri Rasulillahi wa Sunanihi wa Ayyamihi* (translated as 'The Abridged Collection of Authentic Hadith with Connected Chains regarding Matters Pertaining to the Prophet, His Practices and His Times'). It contains 7563 totals of hadith. However, it has been argued that this total number of hadiths is repeated, and only 4000 hadiths in *Sahih al-Bukhari*

are without repetition. All hadiths are arranged according to *Musannaf* i.e. collections of hadith which classified by subject matter. Thus, they are grouped under 97 chapters (*kitab*) and 3,450 subject headings (Al-'Asqalani, 1960; Ibn al-Salah, 1986).

Sahih al-Bukhari has become the main focus in this paper also because of an accusation of being 'anti-woman' for considering misogynistic hadiths as authentic in his collections (Malik, 2010; Peru, 2014), and for verifying some transmitters of hadiths, in particular Abu Hurayrah, who had been labelled 'anti-woman' (Mernissi, 1991a; Malik, 2010). There are more feminists other than Riffat Hassan and Mernissi claimed numbers of hadith contain some features of misogyny or anti-woman in *Sahih al-Bukhari*. For instance, Ruth Roded (1999) also has gathered numbers of famous hadith pertaining to women from *Sahih al-Bukhari*, and four of them in any case actually contain 'anti-women' discourse. Syed Mohammed Ali (2004) also criticised eight hadiths to be misogynistic and all of them can be found in *Sahih al-Bukhari*. The argument remains questionable when women have been given so much negative attention and none of them were dedicated to men, and these kinds of hadith are found in the authentic collection of hadith. For example, It can be found in the Hadiths such as if a wife ignoring her husband, she will be cursed; if a wife ungrateful to her husband, she will be in the Hellfire; if a woman need to be straighten, it will make it worst which will break her; if a woman passing a praying person, it will nullify the prayer; and so on. Another example of hadiths are also reporting that: woman is created from a crooked rib; woman has lack of intellectual and religion; woman is an evil omen; woman is temptation and trial for men; woman is not allowed to travel alone; and woman leader will never prosper (see table 1.1).

| Topics | Sources |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Women are crooked | <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> 7: 62: 114; 7: 62: 113; 4: 55: 548 |
| Women are Lack of Intelligence | <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> 3: 48: 826; 1: 6: 301; 2: 24: 541 |
| Women are Evil Omen | <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> 4: 52: 110; 4: 52: 111; 7: 62: 31; 7: 71: 649 & 666 |
| Women are Weak | <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> 8: 73: 230; 8: 73: 228; 8: 73: 229) |
| Women are Harmful to Men | <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> 7: 62: 33 |
| Majority of Women are in the Hellfire | <i>Sahih al-Bukhari</i> 1: 6: 301; 7: 62: 124; 1: 2: 29; 2: 18: 161 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Women are Lack of Gratitude towards their husband | <i>Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri</i> 1: 2: 28-29; 7: 62: 125; 1: 6: 301 & 2: 24: 541 |
| curses on disobedient wife | <i>Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri</i> 7:62:121; 7: 62: 122; 4: 54: 460 |
| Disallowing women participate in public sphere: Disallow women to be a ruler | <i>Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri</i> 9: 88: 219; 5: 59: 709 |
| Disallowing Women to Travel Alone: | <i>Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri</i> 2:20:192; 2:20:193; 2:20:194; 2:21:288; 3:31:215; 3:29:85; 3:29:87; 4:52:250) |

The sources used in this research to verify the numbers of hadiths in *Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri* is *The Translation of The Meanings of Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri* by Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1997) and refer to the original source from Dar al-Salam publication, year 1999, second edition. In addition to that, a digital web www.sunnah.com also has been used to discover any hadith related to women issues. Each hadith pertaining to woman is given a serious attention, and has been categorised in different themes. From this categorisation, there are familiar hadiths that have been regarded to contain the anti-woman or gender bias discourse by the feminist – as shown in the table above.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The status of *Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri* as the most authentic collection of hadith is undeniable among the Muslim society. However, this fact has been questioned not only by those who reject the hadith as a whole, but also has been criticised by those who claimed that the hadith has been influenced by the patriarchal culture. The patriarchy has been practised long ago before the emergence of Islam, and continuously has big influence in the Islamic culture and tradition (S. M. Ali, 2004; Mernissi, 1991a; Mir-Hosseini, 2003; Roded, 2012). The religious texts including the hadith of the Prophet also has no exception from this influence. Therefore, the anti-woman discourse in the hadith literature particularly the authentic hadith has been questioned, argued and debated.

This paper found that al-Bukhari in his collection of hadith collected 696 hadiths pertaining to woman out of 7563 hadiths, which can be found in 82 chapters out of 97 chapters of *Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri*. Those hadiths cover wide range of issues related to how the Prophet

deals with women during his lifetime; generally to all women and specifically to his family members: wives. There are also narrations from the Companion on what they heard from the Prophet which pertaining to woman's issues. All of those hadiths concerning women are still relevant and practical to be used as references for Muslim women nowadays. However, those hadiths must be applied contextually based on the reason of why it has been narrated which is one of the most important factor before generate any interpretation towards the hadith. It can be concluded that the percentages of hadith pertaining to women in *Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri* is approximately 9.2%.

From these 696 hadiths, only 36 hadiths have been interpreted negatively which they have been assumed as threatening the status and position of woman as portrayed by the feminists (Table 1.1). The percentages of these hadiths are 5.17% from all hadiths concerning women. Therefore, the number of hadiths which contain anti-woman discourse in *Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri* is only 36 hadiths and the percentage is 0.48%. It is undeniably a tiny percentage of claims that *Sahīḥ al-Bukhāri* promotes gender bias. The argument of anti-woman discourse in al-Bukhari's authentic collection of hadith can be denied based on this finding.

Asma Barlas (2002) has raised a question why a small number of misogynous Hadiths, compared to the number of positive narrations on women, has gained so much attention and a big controversy due to the misinterpretations and misunderstandings of Muslims towards those Hadiths. According to her, among the positive Hadiths are: "that emphasize women's full humanity; counsel husbands to deal kindly and justly with their wives; confirm the right of women to acquire knowledge; elevate mother over fathers; proclaim that women will be in heaven, ahead, even of the Prophet; record women's attendance at prayers in the mosque during the Prophet's lifetime, including an incident where a girl played in front of him as he led the prayer; affirm that many women (including women from the Prophet's family), went unveiled in the later years of Islam; and record that the Prophet accepted the evidence of one woman over that of a man" (Barlas, 2002, p.46). Besides, there are might be another reason why woman were treated differently and the hadith literature has been victimised from such claim. Those traditions that are actually existed and they are anti-women are not originally from Islam and have no basis that they are from the authentic hadith.

5. CONCLUSION

The debate on the existence of anti-woman or misogynistic interpretation in the hadith literature can be found as early as in the nineteenth century. However, this debate has different perception from different scholars, past and present. Although there are only few scholars have argued on the anti-woman discourse particularly in the hadith, it is vital to evaluate the argument and reject it with valid justification. The hadith literature ranges from authentic, sound, weak, and fabricated and so on. However, if the authentic hadith is criticised, it is a responsibility to examine any problem matters from both sources and the claims. Other than *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*, other hadith collections also met a similar challenge that they indirectly support the ‘anti-women’ message. But calling all hadiths as ‘anti-women’ and ‘misogynistic’ (Mernissi, 1991; Ahmad, 1997) casts doubt on their connection with the Prophet and besmirches the image of Islam.

The hadith literature has been equally transmitted by both male and female transmitters, and the topics covered in the hadith also embrace both genders. Gender bias that has been debated – if it is found in the hadith literature can be regarded as human interpretation because it has been understood differently with different context. It has been argued that the interpretations of the Hadith by previous scholars – which dominated by men – have certain impacts on women’s social and religious life, became a reason of the appearance of many women interpreters or commentators of the Islamic texts particularly during this modern period. Therefore, some women scholars who claimed the existence of anti-women discourse in the hadith – as stated previously – not only rejected those misogynistic interpretations, but also came with their woman-friendly interpretation towards the Hadith. New method of interpretation of these hadiths also should be introduced by emphasising the importance of *asbāb wurūd* (the reason of narrating the hadith) and the root meaning of specific terms – before arguing any assumption. Contextual method of interpretation is also important tool to interpret the hadith (Al-Qaradawi, 2006).

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