

Reading the Hadith Anew: Gadamerian Hermeneutics and the Reconstruction of Marriage Criteria in Islamic Thought

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Abstract:

The prophetic hadith concerning criteria for selecting a marital partner, “Women are married for four reasons: for their wealth, their lineage, their beauty, and their religion; so choose the one who is religious,” has historically been subjected to selective and literalistic interpretations that privilege material qualities over spiritual and ethical dimensions, thereby reinforcing patriarchal assumptions about marital eligibility. Such readings, which treat the hadith as a prescriptive hierarchy rather than a descriptive social commentary, fail to account for the sociohistorical circumstances that shaped its articulation and perpetuate reductive frameworks for evaluating prospective spouses. This study offers a systematic reinterpretation of the hadith through the lens of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, emphasizing the constitutive roles of historically affected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*), and the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) as instruments of critical interpretive engagement. Drawing on a qualitative-critical methodology that integrates classical Islamic heritage (*turāth*) with contemporary scholarship in philosophical hermeneutics, gender studies, and Islamic epistemology, this research concludes that religion within the hadith functions not merely as one among four equivalent criteria but as a normative corrective to the materialistic and prestige-driven social hierarchies endemic to pre-Islamic Arab society. Non-material qualities comprising ethical uprightness, moral responsibility, and reciprocal regard constitute the essential religious values that ought to take precedence in spousal selection. By repositioning the hadith as a dynamic moral compass through the Gadamerian framework, this study contributes to the broader project of constructing marital relationships that are equitable, balanced, and liberated from patriarchal constraints, while reaffirming the centrality of substantive religious values in contemporary Muslim practice.

Keywords: Gadamerian hermeneutics; hadith interpretation; marriage criteria; gender studies; patriarchal critique.

Introduction

Guidance on matrimony and the selection of a life companion frequently draws upon the prophetic tradition attributed to Muhammad, which conveys that “Women are taken as wives for four things: their wealth, their family background, their physical appearance, and their faith. Prioritize the one with faith, and you will prosper” (HR. al-Bukhari No. 4700; HR. Muslim No. 2661; HR. Abu Daud No. 1751; HR. an-Nasa’i No. 3178). Despite its widespread recognition, the practical interpretation of this hadith tends to be selective and text-bound, giving rise to a hierarchical framework for evaluating the qualities a woman should possess in order to be considered a desirable marriage partner. A common reading holds that the four elements enumerated by the Prophet, namely wealth, lineage, beauty, and religion, constitute a normative and prescriptive ranking of priorities rather than a descriptive reflection of prevailing social conditions. This dominant interpretive orientation, which leans toward a literal and fragmentary engagement with the hadith, risks narrowing the essential moral message the Prophet intended to convey. In numerous instances, readings that treat wealth, lineage, and beauty as normative standards for selecting a life partner tend to obscure the transcendent moral and ethical dimension, namely the imperative to place religion and spiritual quality at the very core of the marital foundation.

The persistence of literalistic readings is not a minor textual problem but reflects a deeper epistemological tension within Islamic hadith scholarship: the tension between treating prophetic utterances as context-free legal prescriptions and approaching them as historically situated responses to specific social conditions. Fazlur Rahman, in his foundational work on Islamic intellectual methodology, identifies this tension as central to the crisis of religious thought in the modern Muslim world, arguing that the failure to distinguish between the specific contexts of prophetic communication and the universal moral principles embedded within them has produced interpretations that are simultaneously too rigid and too narrow.¹ Jonathan A.C. Brown’s comprehensive study of hadith scholarship similarly demonstrates that the trajectory of hadith interpretation has been profoundly shaped by the social and intellectual horizons of successive generations of scholars, each bringing its own presuppositions to the prophetic corpus.² These observations underscore the urgent need for a hermeneutical framework capable of critically negotiating the distance between the seventh-century Arabian context of prophetic discourse and the moral and social imperatives of contemporary Muslim communities.

Against this backdrop, there is a compelling need for deeper engagement with the contextual grounding and substantive values embedded in hadith through a more holistic and theoretically rigorous framework. The epistemological challenge in hadith comprehension mirrors a wider interpretive crisis within Islamic scholarship,

¹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5–22.

² Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 256–270.

wherein normative texts are frequently approached in a purely textual manner, without thorough exploration of their deeper significance.³ In this regard, the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a particularly fitting analytical lens. Gadamer argues that the act of understanding a text is not confined to its surface-level meaning but unfolds through a dialogical engagement among the text, its author, and its reader.⁴ He challenges the notion of a singular, fixed meaning within any text, advocating instead for what he terms the fusion of horizons, the convergence of the author's temporal and cultural context with the reader's interpretive framework, as a pathway toward uncovering the layered, contextual significance of a text.⁵

The application of Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics to hadith analysis has been pursued by a number of scholars in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly within the Indonesian academic context. Existing scholarship has deployed Gadamer's conceptual apparatus in rereading the hadith regarding "the deficiency of reason and religion in women,"⁶ the hadith concerning "the command for wives to prostrate to their husbands,"⁷ hadiths addressing "the right to freedom of religion and warfare,"⁸ and hadiths conventionally regarded as misogynistic.⁹ A further strand of scholarship focuses on hadiths relating to preferences in spousal selection, including contributions on the principle of *kafa'ah* in partner-selection hadiths¹⁰ and a hermeneutical study of partner-selection criteria by Nurun Najwah.¹¹

Drawing on this body of scholarship, it is evident that further critical engagement with hadiths explicitly articulating recommendations regarding the selection of a marital partner remains both warranted and necessary. The prevailing tendency to read the hadith on four criteria in a literal and hierarchical fashion constrains the interpretive horizon and perpetuates materialistic and patriarchal social frameworks in the context of spousal choice. The present study undertakes a

³ Rahmatullah Rahmatullah, "Menakar Hermeneutika Fusion of Horizons H.G. Gadamer dalam Pengembangan Tafsir Maqasid Alquran," *Nun: Jurnal Studi Alquran dan Tafsir di Nusantara* 3, no. 2 (2019): 149.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), xii–xxiv.

⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 300–307.

⁶ Lia Andriyani, "Pembacaan Hermeneutika Hadits tentang Perempuan Kekurangan Akal dan Agama: Perspektif Hans-Georg Gadamer" (Bachelor's thesis, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2016).

⁷ 'Azzah Nurin Taufiqotuzzahro', "Pembacaan Hermeneutika Hadis tentang Perintah Istri Bersujud kepada Suami: Perspektif Hans-Georg Gadamer," *Jurnal Living Hadis* 4, no. 1 (2019): 45.

⁸ Nurul Ihsanuddin, "Hak Kebebasan Beragama: Analisis Hadis Perang Perspektif Hermeneutika Gadamer," *KALAM* 11, no. 2 (2017): 397.

⁹ Moh. Muhtador, "Memahami Hadis Misoginis dalam Perspektif Hermeneutika Produktif Hans Gadamer," *Diya Al-Afkar: Jurnal Studi al-Quran dan al-Hadis* 6, no. 2 (2018): 257.

¹⁰ Arif Maulana and Usep Saepullah, "Telaah Prinsip Kafa'ah dalam Hadis tentang Kriteria Memilih Calon Pasangan (Pendekatan Kaidah al-'Adatu Muhakkamah)," *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Ushuluddin* 4, no. 1 (2024): 33.

¹¹ Nurun Najwah, "Kriteria Memilih Pasangan Hidup (Kajian Hermeneutika Hadis)," *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an dan Hadis* 17, no. 1 (2016): 95.

systematic reinterpretation of this hadith through Gadamer's hermeneutical framework, treating the text not as a static bearer of singular meaning but as a dialogical medium whose horizon of significance remains open and evolving in relation to successive historical contexts. This allows readers to move beyond literal interpretation and engage with the historical and contextual circumstances surrounding the hadith's emergence,¹² with the aim of bringing to light the ethical and spiritual dimensions embedded within the text while articulating them in a manner that speaks meaningfully to contemporary concerns.¹³

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in a library research approach, involving systematic and thorough engagement with a wide range of written sources pertinent to the research theme.¹⁴ These sources encompass classical hadith texts and their commentaries, the philosophical writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and contemporary scholarship on hermeneutical theory, gender studies, and hadith criticism. The adoption of qualitative methods aligns with the core characteristics of qualitative inquiry, namely the exploration of meaning and understanding within social phenomena or texts through interpretive depth.¹⁵ Data were collected through a review of both primary and secondary sources.¹⁶ Primary sources consisted of hadiths concerning marriage preferences alongside their classical commentaries, notably *Syarh Sahih Muslim* by Imam Nawawi and *Syarh Sunan Nasa'i* by Ibn Ruslan. Secondary sources included the philosophical writings of Gadamer, most notably *Truth and Method*, alongside contemporary scholarship in hermeneutics, gender studies, and Islamic epistemology.

Theoretical Framework: Gadamer's Hermeneutical Concepts and Their Relevance to Hadith Interpretation

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, as elaborated in his magnum opus *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)*, (1960), represents a significant reorientation of the hermeneutical tradition. Departing from the methodological hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and building on the ontological hermeneutics of Martin Heidegger, Gadamer develops a philosophical account of understanding that foregrounds its fundamentally historical and dialogical character. Three concepts are of particular importance for the present study: historically effected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*), and the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*).

Historically effected consciousness refers to the condition of all human understanding whereby the interpreter's comprehension of any text or event is

¹² Muhtador, "Memahami Hadis Misoginis," 258.

¹³ Taufiqotuzzahro', "Pembacaan Hermeneutika Hadis," 46.

¹⁴ Wahyudin Darmalaksana, *Metode Penelitian Kualitatif Studi Pustaka dan Studi Lapangan* (Bandung: UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, 2020).

¹⁵ Fildza Malahati et al., "Kualitatif: Memahami Karakteristik Penelitian sebagai Metodologi," *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar* 11, no. 2 (2023): 341.

¹⁶ Burhan Bungin, *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif: Aktualisasi Metodologis ke Arah Ragam Varian Kontemporer* (Jakarta: Rajawali Pers, 2011), 60–63.

already shaped by the effects of history. Gadamer argues that we can never step outside of history to achieve a view from nowhere; rather, history constitutes the very medium within which understanding occurs.¹⁷ This insight carries significant implications for hadith interpretation: the interpreter's received tradition, institutional formation, and sociocultural position are not obstacles to understanding but constitutive elements of the interpretive encounter. Recognizing this condition is not a counsel of relativism but an invitation to reflective awareness of the historicity of one's own interpretive horizon.

The concept of pre-understanding refers to the prior knowledge, assumptions, and horizon of expectations that every interpreter brings to a text before the interpretive encounter begins. Gadamer draws here on Heidegger's notion of the fore-structure of understanding, arguing that interpretation does not begin from a blank slate but from within a tradition that has already shaped the interpreter's basic orientations.¹⁸ In the context of hadith interpretation, this concept invites critical reflection on the gender assumptions, social norms, and theological presuppositions that readers bring to prophetic texts. When interpreters approach the marriage hadith with prior assumptions about female subordination or about the normative status of patriarchal social arrangements, these pre-understandings inevitably inflect the meanings they extract from the text.

The fusion of horizons is arguably Gadamer's most productive concept for Islamic hermeneutics. It describes the process by which understanding emerges from the meeting and merging of the horizon of the text, understood as the historical, cultural, and semantic environment within which the text was originally produced, with the horizon of the reader, comprising the social background, values, and contemporary experiences the reader brings to the text.¹⁹ This fusion does not involve the suppression of either horizon but constitutes a form of productive dialogue in which the reader neither imposes external meaning onto the text nor passively receives its historical meaning unchanged. Rather, understanding emerges as a dynamic achievement that transforms both the reader's horizon and the reader's grasp of the text's significance. For hadith interpretation, this framework enables a reading that is faithful to the historical integrity of the text while remaining genuinely responsive to the moral and social questions of the present.

Paul Ricoeur's complementary concept of "distanciation" is also pertinent here. Ricoeur argues that the fixing of discourse in writing, or by extension in oral transmission as text, creates a productive distance between the original speech event and the subsequent act of reading, enabling the text's meaning to exceed its original context and speak to new situations.²⁰ In this sense, the hadith's transmission across

¹⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300–307.

¹⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 265–271.

¹⁹ M. Ilham Muchtar, "Analisis Konsep Hermeneutika dalam Tafsir Alquran," *HUNAFa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 13, no. 1 (2016): 70.

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 131–144.

fourteen centuries of Islamic history represents not merely a faithful preservation of the Prophet's words but a repeated act of textual encounter in which each generation has engaged with the text's horizon through its own. The tension between the text's original situatedness and its ongoing relevance across time and cultures is not a problem to be resolved but the very condition that makes hermeneutical engagement both necessary and fruitful. These theoretical resources converge in supporting an approach to the marriage hadith that is simultaneously attentive to historical context, critical of patriarchal pre-understandings, and responsive to the aspirations of contemporary Muslim communities for equitable and spiritually grounded marital relationships.

Interpreting the Hadith on Marriage Guidance Through the Lens of Gadamer's Hermeneutics

When discussing marriage and the selection of a spouse, people frequently invoke the hadith: "Women are taken as wives for four things: their wealth, their family background, their physical appearance, and their faith. Prioritize the one with faith, and you will prosper." This hadith enjoys widespread recognition and is routinely cited as a foundational reference for determining the qualities one should seek in a future spouse. The full text as transmitted in *Sahih al-Bukhari* reads:

"Musaddad told us, Yahya told us from Ubaidullah, he said, Sa'id bin Abu Sa'id told me from his father from Abu Hurairah, may Allah be pleased with him, from the Prophet ﷺ, he said: 'A woman is married for four reasons: for her wealth, for her lineage, for her beauty, and for her religion. So choose her for her religion, and you will be blessed.'" (Reported by al-Bukhari, No. 4700)

The *takhrij al-hadith* process represents a critical step in hadith scholarship, as it functions to confirm and establish the authenticity and reliability of a given hadith text.²¹ Through this procedure, a scholar is able to trace the origin, chain of narrators, and overall standing of a hadith in order to confirm its legitimacy as a credible source of religious authority. A prominent figure in hadith scholarship, Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, categorized hadiths concerning the recommendation to select a spouse based on four criteria as belonging to the *muttafaq 'alaih* grade, meaning their authenticity has been mutually affirmed by the two eminent imams, al-Bukhari and Muslim. This particular hadith is transmitted through seven chains of narration, of which six attain the level of *sahih*, as documented in: *Sahih al-Bukhari* No. 4700, *Sahih Muslim* No. 2661, *Sunan Abu Dawud* No. 1751, *Sunan Ibn Majah* No. 1848, *Sunan al-Nasa'i* No. 3178, and *Musnad Ahmad* No. 9158. The remaining chain carries a *hasan* grade, as recorded in *Sunan al-Darimi* No. 2076.

²¹ Muhammad Qomarullah, "Metode Takhrij Hadits dalam Menakar Hadits Nabi," *El-Ghiroh: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 11, no. 2 (2016): 24.

Table 1. Biographical Data of Hadith Transmission Authorities (*Ruwat al-Hadith*)

No.	Name	Kunya	Domicile	Death (H)	Category	Scholarly Assessments
1	'Abd al-Rahman ibn Shakhr	Abu Hurairah	Madinah	57 H	Companion (<i>Sahabat</i>)	Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani: <i>Sahabat</i> (highest level of trustworthiness)
2	Kaysan	Abu Sa'id	Madinah	100 H	Senior <i>Tabi'in</i>	Al-Nasa'i: <i>La ba'sa bih</i> ; Ibn Hajar: <i>Thiqah Thabt</i>
3	Sa'id ibn Abi Sa'id Kaysan	Abu Sa'ad	Madinah	123 H	Middle <i>Tabi'in</i>	Ibn al-Madini, Al-Nasa'i, Ibn Kharash: <i>Thiqah</i>
4	'Ubaidullah ibn 'Umar	Abu 'Uthman	Madinah	147 H	<i>Tabi'in</i>	Ibn Hajar, Al-Dhahabi, Abu Hatim: <i>Thiqah</i>
5	Yahya ibn Sa'id ibn Farrukh	Abu Sa'id	Basra	198 H	<i>Tabi' al-Tabi'in</i>	Al-Nasa'i, Abu Hatim: <i>Thiqah</i> ; Al-Dhahabi: <i>Hafiz Kabir</i>
6	Musaddad ibn Musarhad	Abu al-Hasan	Basra	228 H	<i>Tabi' al-Atba'</i>	Yahya ibn Ma'in, Ahmad ibn Hanbal: <i>Saduq</i> ; Al-Nasa'i: <i>Thiqah</i>

Based on an examination of the table and *sanad* diagram, the hadith concerning priorities in selecting a spouse as narrated by Abu Hurairah holds the status of *sahih* (authentic). This authenticity is established through the unbroken continuity of the *sanad* (*ittishāl al-sanad*), whereby the entire chain of transmission remains consistently linked back to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. This linkage can be confirmed through historical data, such as the birth and death dates of the narrators, which suggest a strong likelihood of direct encounters and the transfer of knowledge among them. Moreover, every narrator within the *sanad* of this hadith possesses a commendable standing in terms of integrity (*'adalah*) and precision (*ḍabt*), as evidenced by favorable assessments from scholars of *jarh wa ta'dil*. No evidence of *syādzdz* (contradiction with stronger narrations) or *'illah* (concealed defects) has been identified in the transmission of this hadith that would undermine its credibility. Therefore, from a methodological standpoint, this hadith satisfies all requirements of a *maqbul* (acceptable) and *shahih* (authentic) hadith.

Historical Background of the Hadith

Examining the hadith concerning preferences in selecting a life partner from a historical perspective is an indispensable step toward comprehending the social construction and cultural realities of Arab society during the period of revelation. This hadith did not emerge in isolation; rather, it arose within a society characterized by particular value structures, gender norms, and power dynamics that must be examined both sociologically and historically.

Within the framework of Gadamer's hermeneutics, interpreting a text requires critical engagement with the horizon of the past, that is, the historical, social, and cultural circumstances that gave rise to the text.²² By engaging with this horizon, contemporary readers can not only guard against ahistorical readings but also uncover deeper substantive meanings that transcend mere literal references.²³ This historical-hermeneutical engagement is particularly important for hadiths that address social relations, since the social realities of seventh-century Arabia differ profoundly from those of contemporary Muslim societies.

Pre-Islamic Arab society, known in Islamic sources as the age of *Jahiliyyah*, was characterized by deeply patriarchal social structures in which women's legal, social, and moral standing was severely circumscribed. Leila Ahmed's foundational study of women and gender in Islam documents the variety of marriage forms practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia and traces how the emergence of Islam introduced a more restrictive but simultaneously more protective framework for women's marital rights.²⁴ While the Qur'an and prophetic tradition introduced significant reforms in women's legal standing, including rights to inherit, to divorce, and to retain their own property, these reforms operated within, and were shaped by, the social realities of their context. Amina Wadud's influential study similarly argues that the Qur'anic text engages in a dialogical relationship with the gender assumptions of its historical context, sometimes endorsing and sometimes challenging prevailing social norms.²⁵ This observation applies equally to the hadith corpus: the Prophet's teachings on marriage should be read not as a wholesale endorsement of pre-Islamic gender hierarchies but as a graduated moral intervention that sought to reorient the community's values toward higher ethical standards within the constraints of its social context.

Among the most glaring manifestations of this structural injustice was the institution of marriage and divorce. Husbands of that era wielded authority to dissolve a marriage at will, whether justified by cause or entirely arbitrary, and a divorced woman had no guarantee of financial support, shelter, or social protection. Within the social order of *Jahiliyyah*, divorce functioned as an instrument of male domination over women, with no mechanism in place to uphold justice or safeguard the wife's welfare.²⁶ This reality exposed the precarious position of women and underscored how the patriarchal system of that time systematically excluded and marginalized them.

²² Saifuddin Zuhri Qudsy et al., *Lebih Dekat dengan Ma'nā-cum-Maghzā Sahiron Syamsuddin* (Yogyakarta: SUKA Press, 2022).

²³ Sahiron Syamsuddin, *Hermeneutika dan Pengembangan Ulumul Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: Pesantren Nawasea Press, 2017).

²⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 41–63.

²⁵ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34–78.

²⁶ Asghar Ali Engineer, *Hak-hak Perempuan dalam Islam*, 1st ed. (Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya, 1994), 42–56.

Imam Nawawi's commentary in *Syarah Shahih Muslim* offers a particularly significant interpretive guidance for grasping the substantive meaning of the hadith regarding criteria for selecting a life partner. The phrasing of this hadith is not intended as an unconditional normative directive but rather as a portrayal of the general tendencies prevalent in society at that time. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ observed that most people, when seeking a life partner, were inclined to prioritize three attributes: physical appearance, material wealth, and noble lineage. These three attributes constituted the dominant social benchmarks in pre-Islamic Arab culture and remained deeply ingrained in the customs of the community during the Prophet's lifetime. Nevertheless, amid these prevailing social constructs, the Prophet intervened morally and spiritually by urging his followers to place religious devotion at the forefront when choosing a life partner.

The expression *taribat yadak* is a quintessential Arabic idiom, characteristically employed as a form of earnest admonition or firm recommendation. Accordingly, the context of this hadith reveals that the Prophet was speaking in direct engagement with the realities of Arab society at that time, acknowledging existing cultural tendencies while simultaneously redirecting people toward more virtuous values. Within Gadamer's hermeneutical framework, this understanding can be interpreted as a process of fusion of horizons, wherein contemporary readers engage with the text not merely as a static representation. This interpretation resonates with the perspectives of several classical scholars. Ibn Ruslan in *Syarh Sunan al-Nasa'i*, Nashiruddin al-Baidhawi in *Tuhfah al-Abrar Syarh Mashabih al-Sunnah*, and Jalaluddin al-Suyuthi in *Hasyiyah al-Suyuthi 'ala Sunan al-Nasa'i* all assert that the language of this hadith highlights a deliberate contrast between the materialistic inclinations of society and Islamic teachings, which anchor decision-making in piety.²⁷ They further underscore that attributes such as wealth and beauty are transient and incapable of guaranteeing enduring happiness.

The social backdrop of pre-Islamic Arab society paints a vivid picture of how women were structurally marginalized across virtually every domain of life. The deeply entrenched patriarchal culture of that period rendered women subordinate figures whose full standing as independent and dignified social subjects was rarely acknowledged.²⁸ Within the value system of *Jahiliyyah* society, women were frequently relegated to passive roles, stripped of any agency over their bodies, their rights, or their own destinies, including in matters of marriage. Their existence was more often reduced to that of objects serving male desires, symbols of social prestige, or commodities of economic exchange.²⁹ The convergence of this social reality with a dominant culture that exalted lineage, family honor, and material prosperity

²⁷ Maulana and Saepullah, "Telaah Prinsip Kafa'ah," 38–40.

²⁸ Hendri Hermawan Adinugraha, Arif Sulistio Maulana, and Mila Sartika, "Kewenangan dan Kedudukan Perempuan dalam Perspektif Gender: Suatu Analisis Tinjauan Historis," *Marwah: Jurnal Perempuan, Agama dan Jender* 17, no. 1 (2018): 45.

²⁹ Fadlan Fadlan, "Islām, Feminisme, dan Konsep Kesetaraan Gender dalam Al-Qur'ân," *KARSA: Journal of Social and Islamic Culture* 19, no. 2 (2011): 109.

contributed to the formation of a deeply unequal paradigm of gender relations. It is therefore unsurprising that hadiths addressing women often mirror a reality in which women were objectified, particularly with respect to physical attributes such as beauty or lineage. However, it is vital to recognize that this tendency does not represent a normative expression of Islamic teachings but rather a reflection of the social context from which these hadiths emerged.³⁰ Within Gadamer's hermeneutical framework, such conditions form part of the horizon of the past that must be approached by today's readers with critical and reflective discernment.

Hermeneutic Reading of the Hadith

Gadamer's concept of historically affected consciousness (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*) illuminates the mechanism by which successive generations of Muslim scholars have approached the marriage hadith through horizons shaped by their own historical circumstances. Classical scholars who lived within deeply patriarchal social orders brought their own pre-understandings, including assumptions about gender hierarchy and the primacy of male decision-making in marriage, to their engagements with the text.³¹ These pre-understandings were not deliberately ideological distortions but natural expressions of the historically situated consciousness that Gadamer regards as constitutive of all understanding. The cumulative effect of these readings over centuries has been to naturalize a hierarchical interpretation of the four criteria as if it represented the timeless, ahistorical meaning of the prophetic text. Gadamer himself argues that understanding is never a neutral act but is inherently historical and dialogical in nature.³² Accordingly, when a person engages with a text, they do not occupy a position outside time or circumstance; rather, they bring their own historical horizon into the encounter.

Khaled Abou El Fadl's analysis of interpretive authority in Islamic law provides a complementary framework for understanding why patriarchal readings of this hadith have been so influential. He distinguishes between "authoritarian" readings, which treat texts as bearing a single, fixed meaning that the interpreter merely retrieves, and "authoritative" readings, which acknowledge the reader's active role in constructing meaning while remaining accountable to the text's integrity and to the community of interpretation.³³ The dominant interpretations of this hadith have frequently been authoritarian in character, presenting the four criteria as a fixed ranking without adequate engagement with the social context that shaped the hadith's articulation. A Gadamerian approach, by contrast, insists on the reader's critical engagement with both the text and the reader's own historically situated horizon, producing a more nuanced and contextually sensitive understanding.

³⁰ Najwah, "Kriteria Memilih Pasangan Hidup," 100–101.

³¹ Ihsanuddin, "Hak Kebebasan Beragama," 401.

³² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 276–285.

³³ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001), 85–116.

In his landmark work *Truth and Method*, Gadamer maintains that human understanding never emerges from a blank slate but is perpetually shaped by pre-existing understanding formed prior to any interpretive encounter. He dismisses the notion that an interpreter can approach a text in a state of complete neutrality or objectivity. On the contrary, Gadamer argues that it is precisely pre-understanding, comprising the knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and historical horizons readers bring before engaging with a text, that constitutes the very ground of understanding itself.³⁴ From this standpoint, individuals are not autonomous agents who spontaneously construct meaning; rather, they are historically situated beings who have been shaped by their traditions and sociocultural contexts. This notion is closely bound up with the concept of the reader's hermeneutical situation, that is, the concrete circumstances encompassing the reader's background, social position, and historical vantage point at the moment of encountering a text.

The two horizons of text and reader represent the central variables that Gadamer argues must be brought into productive contact through the fusion of horizons. The textual horizon captures the historical, cultural, and semantic environment within which the text was originally produced, while the reader's horizon encompasses the social background, values, and contemporary experiences the interpreter brings to the text.³⁵ The convergence of these horizons does not involve the suppression or elimination of either; rather, it constitutes a form of dialogue between the reader's subjectivity and the text's objectivity. Within this dialogue, readers do not simply project external meaning onto the text but also remain receptive to the messages the text itself conveys. Conversely, the text is not treated as a fixed or inert object but as a living entity that continuously generates new meaning through engagement with successive historical contexts. Understanding is not the terminus of logical reasoning but an existential event in which meaning arises from the reciprocal relationship between reader and text.

Applying the fusion of horizons to the marriage hadith yields a reading that is broader, more contextually grounded, and more responsive to the complexities of contemporary life. The horizon of the text discloses a seventh-century Arab society in which marriage was predominantly governed by considerations of social status, wealth, and tribal affiliation, and in which women's spiritual and ethical qualities were rarely recognized as relevant criteria. Against this social backdrop, the Prophet's instruction to prioritize religious character represented a genuinely countercultural moral intervention. The horizon of the contemporary reader, shaped by modern understandings of gender equality, human dignity, and the social conditions for flourishing families, brings these values into dialogue with the prophetic text, enabling a reading that honors the spirit of the Prophet's moral vision while extending its implications to contemporary contexts.

Once the dialogical engagement between the horizon of the text and that of the reader yields a richer and more well-rounded understanding, the subsequent stage in

³⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 265.

³⁵ Muchtar, "Analisis Konsep Hermeneutika," 74.

Gadamer's hermeneutic framework involves bringing that meaning to bear upon the present context. Gadamer underscores that the meaning generated through interpretation is not merely an intellectual achievement but must carry genuine relevance for the reader's lived experience. He firmly opposes any mode of understanding that confines a text to its original historical meaning. Rather, he advocates for the meaning discovered within a text, including sacred texts such as hadith, to be translated into values that are applicable and consequential in contemporary life.

Within this hermeneutical framework, the criteria for selecting a life partner are no longer construed in a rigid or hierarchical manner based purely on external attributes such as physical attractiveness, material wealth, and social lineage. Instead, these criteria are understood as reflections of the social constructs prevalent during the historical period of revelation. Physical dimensions such as outward appearance and social background retain their descriptive significance as reflections of what Arab society valued; yet they should not be treated as prescriptive Islamic norms, as is also affirmed in the Qur'anic vision of marriage as a relationship founded on tranquility (*sakinah*), affection (*mawaddah*), and mercy (*rahmah*), as articulated in Surah Al-Rum verse 21.

Non-physical dimensions, particularly those falling within the sphere of religiosity, should not be interpreted superficially or reduced to formal religious indicators alone. A conception of religiosity limited to the ability to recite the Qur'an, a background in Islamic boarding school education, or familiarity with classical texts represents a form of religious identity that is largely symbolic and surface-level.³⁶ While these capacities carry their own significance, they do not adequately capture the full depth and quality of a person's religious character, particularly in the context of building a family. From the perspective of *maqasid al-shariah* (the higher objectives of Islamic law), a marriage founded on shared religious values and ethical integrity serves the fundamental objectives of preserving and nurturing human intellect (*hifdh al-'aql*), protecting human dignity (*hifdh al-nafs*), and ensuring the moral formation of future generations (*hifdh al-nasl*). This *maqasid*-oriented reading reinforces the hermeneutical conclusion that religiosity, understood substantively rather than ritualistically, should function as the overarching criterion in spousal selection, consistent with the deeper ethical grammar of Islamic normativity.³⁷

In practical terms, what is more fundamentally required in constructing a family grounded in *sakinah*, *mawaddah*, and *rahmah* is the embodiment of religious values in the form of character and ethical conduct. Qualities such as honesty, responsibility, self-reliance, diligence, patience, and mutual respect between spouses are tangible expressions of substantive religiosity, a form of faith not confined to ritual observance and outward symbols but lived out concretely in everyday attitudes and interactions. These values ultimately constitute a durable foundation for a marital

³⁶ Jumni Nelli and Nia Elmiati Jaafar, "Kontekstualisasi Hadis Anjuran Menikah dan Relevansinya dengan Batas Usia Menikah di Indonesia," *An-Nida'* 47, no. 1 (2023): 82.

³⁷ Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–25.

relationship that is healthy, equitable, and well-balanced. Moreover, the internalization of such values contributes to reshaping the dynamics of household relationships, which have historically been structured along patriarchal lines. By positioning religion as an inclusive and transformative moral framework, the relationship between husband and wife can be constructed on a basis of mutual regard and collaborative partnership rather than the dominance of one party over the other.³⁸ In this light, the hadith's message functions not only as spiritual guidance but also as an ethical framework for cultivating a family life that is more egalitarian and deeply humane.

Conclusion

Applying Gadamer's hermeneutical framework to the prophetic hadith on marriage criteria reveals a reading that is simultaneously historically grounded and ethically responsive to contemporary concerns. The hadith should not be approached in a literal or hierarchical manner, as is commonly done in many communities, but must instead be read as the Prophet Muhammad's direct moral intervention in response to the cultural and social realities of Arab society during that era. The prevailing patriarchal norms, which reduced women's social value to their physical attributes and family background, were challenged by the Prophet's endorsement of selecting a spouse on the basis of religious character. This represented a notably forward-thinking moral stance for its time and constitutes the ethical core of the hadith's message. Within Gadamer's hermeneutical lens, grasping the full meaning of this hadith demands a fusion of horizons: a meeting point between the horizon of the text, encompassing the hadith's historical setting and the social conditions of its emergence, and the horizon of the reader, encompassing the moral aspirations and social realities of contemporary Muslim life. True comprehension can only emerge from an ongoing dialogue between the meaning embedded in the text and the lived experiences and background of the reader. Such understanding is inherently dynamic and context-sensitive rather than fixed within a purely textual framework.

Moreover, the reader's existing assumptions and preconceptions constitute an inseparable element of the interpretive process. Awareness of the patriarchal pre-understandings that have shaped classical readings of this hadith enables contemporary interpreters to approach the text with greater critical reflexivity, distinguishing the Prophet's transformative moral vision from the social norms of his historical context. The normative teaching of the hadith, namely the primacy of religious qualities in selecting a life companion, should accordingly not be confined to ritualistic expressions alone, such as the ability to recite the Qur'an or holding a degree from an Islamic boarding school, but understood more profoundly as the embodiment of Islamic ethical principles, including integrity, perseverance, accountability, and mutual regard.

This study makes several contributions to the scholarly discourse on hadith interpretation and Islamic hermeneutics. First, it demonstrates that Gadamerian

³⁸ Najwah, "Kriteria Memilih Pasangan Hidup," 112–115.

philosophical hermeneutics constitutes a rigorous and productive framework for engaging with hadith texts that have historically been interpreted in patriarchal and literalistic ways. Second, it advances the argument that the Prophet's emphasis on religious character as the primary criterion for spousal selection reflects a deliberate moral intervention against the materialistic and patriarchal values of pre-Islamic Arab society rather than a normative endorsement of those values. Third, by introducing the *maqasid al-shariah* framework as a complementary analytical lens, the study demonstrates that the hermeneutical emphasis on substantive religiosity aligns with the deeper ethical objectives of Islamic law. Fourth, it illustrates how the concept of substantive religiosity, comprising ethical character, moral responsibility, and relational integrity, provides a more adequate framework for contemporary Muslim marital life than formal or ritualistic conceptions of religious identity.

Ultimately, a hermeneutical reading of this hadith underscores that religious values serving as the criterion for choosing a spouse are not simply a marker of personal devotion but the cornerstone of a just, harmonious, and equitable marital bond. When viewed through Gadamer's hermeneutical perspective, the message of this hadith transcends mere textual assertion and emerges as a dynamic, ethically grounded, and reflective guide that remains deeply relevant to contemporary Muslim societies grappling with questions of gender, family, and the conditions for human flourishing within an Islamic framework.

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