

The Ma‘ānī al-Ḥadīth Approach to Understanding Travel Without a Mahram

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 <https://doi.org/10.61987/jmlt.v4i4.0000>

Keywords:

al-ījāz al-bayānī;
Qur’anic linguistics;
lexical precision;
nazm (syntactic
arrangement);

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ABSTRACT

Hadiths concerning the prohibition of women traveling without a mahram are often understood textually, resulting in various social implications, particularly regarding women's mobility in the modern context. This study aims to analyze the understanding of such hadiths through the *ma‘ānī al-ḥadīth* approach in order to uncover their meaning, context, and relevance to contemporary social realities. The research employs a qualitative method with a library research approach, using primary data from hadiths related to travel without a mahram found in authoritative hadith collections, particularly *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, and supported by classical hadith commentaries and relevant scholarly literature. Data analysis is conducted through textual-linguistic, historical-contextual, and hermeneutical analyses, emphasizing the aspects of *asbāb al-wurūd*, *tawārīkh al-mutūn*, and the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*). The findings indicate that the prohibition in these hadiths is preventive and contextual in nature, with the primary objective of safeguarding women's safety and dignity. In the contemporary context, the presence of a mahram may be understood functionally as a system of protection that aligns with the development of modern security measures and social regulations. This study concludes that the *ma‘ānī al-ḥadīth* approach enables a more contextual, humanistic, and relevant understanding of the hadiths without undermining the authority of the text or the fundamental principles of Islamic teachings.

Article History:

Submitted: 10-10-2025, Revised :10-11-2025, Accepted: 19-12-2025

Please cite this article in APA style as:

Abidin, M. Z., & Ghazali, A. Z. (2025). The Ma‘ānī al-Ḥadīth approach to understanding travel without a mahram. DAAR EL-KAMIL: Multidisciplinary Journal, 1(2), 70-79. <https://jurnalstebibama.ac.id/index.php/jmlt/>

INTRODUCTION

The Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) constitutes the second primary source of Islamic teachings after the Qur'an and plays a fundamental role in shaping religious, social, and legal norms in Islam. Nevertheless, the understanding of hadith is not always singular or purely textual; rather, it requires a comprehensive methodological approach so that the normative messages contained within it can be understood proportionally and contextually. One hadith that continues to generate debate and academic discourse is the hadith concerning the prohibition of women traveling without a

mahram. This hadith is often interpreted literally, giving rise to various socio-religious implications, particularly in relation to women's mobility in the modern era.

Women, as the primary subject of this hadith, require an ontologically fair and objective approach. Terminologically, women in the Arabic linguistic tradition are referred to by the term *imra'ah*. As explained in *Kamus al-Munawwir*, this term denotes a woman and is derived from the root *mar'a*, which conveys meanings of goodness and benefit. Ibn al-Anbārī affirms that the terms *al-mar'ah* and *al-imra'ah* carry the same meaning, namely referring to an adult woman. This semantic understanding indicates that Islam, from its earliest foundations, positions women as dignified subjects endowed with full human value and social worth.

At the same time, the understanding of hadith cannot be separated from the study of *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth*. Etymologically, *ma'ānī* is the plural form of *ma'na*, meaning meaning, intent, or the guidance intended by a particular expression. Accordingly, understanding the Prophet's hadith is not limited to reading its textual form but necessitates a deeper exploration of meaning, including the circumstances of its emergence and the social realities surrounding it. Scholars differ in their technical definitions of hadith across disciplines, including among hadith scholars, jurists, and scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. According to hadith scholars, hadith refers to everything attributed to the Prophet (peace be upon him), including his statements, actions, tacit approvals, characteristics, and personal circumstances. These differing definitions illustrate the broad scope of hadith and the complexity involved in its interpretation.

The discipline of *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* emerges as a scholarly framework that bridges the gap between the textual dimension of hadith and social reality. This discipline examines how the Prophet's hadith should be understood by taking into account semantic aspects, linguistic structures, the causes of the hadith's emergence (*asbāb al-wurūd*), the position of the Prophet at the time of delivering the hadith, the intended audience, and the relevance of the hadith's message to contemporary contexts. In this sense, *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* functions as both a theoretical and methodological approach that enables hadith to be read textually and contextually.

In its development, *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* is supported by several auxiliary disciplines, including *asbāb al-wurūd*, which examines the historical background of hadith; *tawārīkh al-mutūn*, which traces the historical development of hadith texts; and Arabic linguistic sciences, such as *nahw*, *ṣarf*, *balāghah*, semantics, and stylistics. Furthermore, hermeneutical approaches play a crucial role as interpretive tools that help uncover the deeper meanings of hadith texts, preventing interpretations that are ahistorical and dehumanizing.

This approach becomes increasingly significant when the hadith concerning women traveling without a mahram is examined in relation to Islam's general view of women. In principle, Islam does not recognize discrimination between men and women. The Qur'an affirms the unity of human origin, as

stated in Q. an-Nisā' [4]: 1, which indicates that men and women share equal ontological status as God's creation. This equality is also reflected in equal moral accountability, access to reward and punishment, the right to education, and property ownership, including inheritance rights, albeit with differing portions as regulated by Islamic law.

Moreover, Islam affirms that both men and women have equal opportunities to attain Paradise based on faith and righteous deeds, as emphasized in Q. an-Nisā' [4]: 56–57. In the field of education, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) explicitly stated that seeking knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim, without distinction of gender. Similarly, in economic matters, Islam grants women inheritance rights as a form of recognition of their property rights and economic independence.

Nevertheless, the Prophet's hadith stating the prohibition of women traveling without a mahram—as narrated by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*—is often understood textually without sufficient consideration of social context, travel security, and the purpose of travel. The hadith states, "A woman should not travel except with her mahram," followed by a dialogue between the Prophet and a companion regarding the obligation of the companion's wife to perform *hajj*. This narrative context demonstrates that the hadith emerged from specific social circumstances, thereby necessitating a comprehensive *ma'ānī al-hadīth* analysis.

Based on this discussion, this article aims to examine the hadith concerning travel without a mahram through the *ma'ānī al-hadīth* approach by positioning women as the primary subjects who possess dignity, rights, and socially recognized roles in Islam. This approach is expected to generate a more just, contextual, and relevant understanding of hadith in relation to the lived realities of contemporary Muslim women, without undermining the authority of the text or the foundational principles of Islamic law.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach, focusing on the analysis of hadiths concerning the prohibition of women traveling without a mahram through the perspective of *ma'ānī al-hadīth*. This approach is chosen because the object of the study consists of normative religious texts that require in-depth interpretation of meaning, context, and implications, which cannot be adequately examined using quantitative methods.

The research adopts a descriptive-analytical approach within an interpretative paradigm. The descriptive approach is used to systematically present the hadith texts along with their various narrations, while the analytical approach is applied to interpret the meanings of the hadiths by considering linguistic, historical, and social aspects. The interpretative paradigm aims to understand the message of the Prophet's hadith in accordance with the context of its emergence and its relevance to contemporary social realities.

The data sources of this study consist of primary and secondary data. Primary data include the Prophet's hadiths addressing the prohibition of women traveling without a mahram, particularly the narration reported by 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, as well as other hadiths with similar thematic content found in authoritative hadith collections. Secondary data comprise classical and contemporary hadith commentaries (*sharḥ al-ḥadīth*), scholarly works on *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth*, *uṣūl al-fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence on women, and peer-reviewed academic journal articles relevant to women's mobility and the concept of mahram in Islam.

Data collection is conducted through documentation techniques by identifying, compiling, and classifying hadith texts and supporting literature related to the research theme. This process includes identifying variations in hadith wording across different narrations and tracing the contextual background (*asbāb al-wurūd*) underlying the emergence of the hadiths.

Data analysis is carried out integratively using the *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* approach. The analysis begins with a textual examination that emphasizes the linguistic aspects of the hadiths, including semantic and Arabic linguistic analyses of key terms such as *imra'ah* (woman), *safar* (travel), and *mahram*. This is followed by a contextual-historical analysis that examines the socio-cultural conditions of society during the Prophet's time, the purposes of travel, and the security considerations associated with travel practices in that period. An intertextual analysis is also employed by comparing related hadiths and Qur'anic verses addressing women, protection, and public welfare (*maṣlahah*). To strengthen the relevance of meaning, a hermeneutical analysis is applied to connect the normative message of the hadith with contemporary social realities, while maintaining the authority of the text and the foundational principles of Islamic law.

The validity of the data is ensured through source triangulation by comparing various hadith narrations, the views of classical and contemporary scholars, and findings from modern academic studies. Additionally, interpretative consistency is examined through the coherence between textual analysis, contextual interpretation, and the normative objectives of Islamic law, ensuring that the conclusions drawn are comprehensive and well-argued.

The research procedure is conducted systematically, beginning with the inventory of relevant hadiths, followed by data classification based on textual variations and contextual backgrounds, analysis using the *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* approach, and concluding with the formulation of findings that emphasize a contextual and applicable understanding of hadith in the lives of contemporary Muslim women.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Textual Understanding of the Hadith on Women Traveling Without a Mahram

The findings of this study indicate that, textually, the Prophet's hadith concerning the prohibition of women traveling without a mahram employs a

prohibitive form (nahy), as recorded in the narration of 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās in *Sahīh al-Bukhārī*: "Lā tusāfir al-mar'ah illā ma' a dhī mahram." According to the principles of *uṣūl al-fiqh*, a prohibition in its original form signifies impermissibility; however, its legal implication cannot be separated from accompanying indicators (qarīnah) within the text. Therefore, understanding the prohibition in this hadith requires a deeper analysis of its wording, context, and normative objectives in order to avoid absolute and ahistorical legal conclusions.

From a linguistic perspective, the term *safar* in classical Arabic does not merely denote physical movement from one place to another, but rather refers to a long journey that reveals (*asfara*) a person's physical and social condition. During the Prophet's time, *safar* was closely associated with arduous desert travel that required extended periods and entailed significant risks, including robbery, physical exhaustion, and limited logistical support. Consequently, the prohibition articulated in the hadith is intrinsically linked to the objective conditions of travel at that time, rather than constituting a general restriction on women's mobility.

The term *mahram* in this hadith also encompasses a broader dimension than mere biological kinship. Juridically, a *mahram* is a person whom one is permanently prohibited from marrying; socially, however, a *mahram* functions as a protector, companion, and guarantor of a woman's safety during travel. This protective function constitutes the core rationale for the presence of a *mahram* in the hadith, indicating that the primary concern of the text lies not in gender distinction but in ensuring safety and preserving dignity (*ḥifz al-nafs wa al-'ird*).

Furthermore, the dialogical structure of the hadith—featuring an exchange between the Prophet (peace be upon him) and a companion—demonstrates the contextual and situational nature of the prohibition. When a companion expressed his intention to join a military expedition while his wife intended to perform the pilgrimage, the Prophet instructed him to accompany his wife instead. This response suggests that the Prophet did not interpret the prohibition of traveling without a *mahram* as a rigid and independent rule, but rather as a guideline aimed at safeguarding women's welfare under particular circumstances.

From a rhetorical and linguistic standpoint, the prohibitive formulation (*lā tusāfir*) may also be understood as a preventive measure (*sadd al-dharā'i*) intended to avert potential harm that could arise from traveling without adequate protection. This prohibition does not negate women's right to mobility; rather, it serves as a caution to ensure that travel is undertaken in conditions that are safe and responsible. Accordingly, a textual understanding of the hadith must be situated within the broader framework of the objectives of Islamic law, rather than being confined to the literal form of prohibition.

Thus, a purely textual understanding of the hadith on women traveling without a *mahram* that neglects its linguistic, dialogical, and contextual dimensions risks producing reductive and gender-biased interpretations. The *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* approach emphasizes that the hadith text cannot be separated

from the Prophet's intent as a messenger who prioritized protection, justice, and public welfare. From this perspective, the hadith is not an instrument of restriction but an ethical guideline oriented toward safeguarding women's safety and dignity in social life.

Historical and Social Context of the Hadith in the Perspective of Ma'ānī al-Hadīth

Contextual analysis reveals that the hadith concerning the prohibition of women traveling without a mahram emerged within a social reality that differs significantly from that of modern society. During the Prophet's time, long-distance travel (safar) was an activity fraught with risks, including threats to physical security, logistical limitations, and moral dangers. Journeys across vast and sparsely populated desert regions lacked structured security systems, rendering travelers—particularly women—vulnerable to robbery, violence, and exploitation.

The social structure of pre-modern Arab society was also characterized by strong patriarchal norms, within which women occupied a relatively vulnerable social position. In such circumstances, the presence of a mahram functioned not as a symbol of male domination but as a socially accepted mechanism of protection. Consequently, the hadith on traveling without a mahram should be understood as a response to the social vulnerability of women at that time.

The *ma'ānī al-hadīth* approach underscores the importance of examining *asbāb al-wurūd*, namely the social and historical background of the hadith's emergence. In his capacity as both a prophet and a community leader, the Prophet did not merely convey normative legal rulings but also offered practical solutions to social challenges faced by the Muslim community. The hadith thus represents a form of social regulation aimed at protecting women's safety and dignity in high-risk travel situations.

Moreover, the Prophet's position as a religious authority and societal leader required consideration of collective welfare. The prohibition of traveling without a mahram can be viewed as a preventive policy (*siyāsah shar'iyyah*) designed to block potential harm (*sadd al-dharā'i*) in the absence of adequate security systems. Accordingly, the hadith does not operate within a rigid legal framework but within a flexible social policy responsive to communal needs.

An analysis of *tawārīkh al-mutūn* indicates that the meanings of key terms and the social realities surrounding them are dynamic. Concepts such as *safar*, *amān* (security), and *mahram* were closely tied to the geographical and social conditions of the Prophet's era. Over time, travel realities have undergone significant transformations due to the advent of modern transportation, public security systems, and legal regulations that ensure individual safety, including that of women.

These contextual changes necessitate a re-examination of the hadith—not to negate the text, but to uncover its normative intent and objectives. Within the *ma'ānī al-hadīth* framework, the text is understood dialogically, bridging its

original context with that of contemporary readers. This approach allows the hadith to remain relevant without compromising its normative authority.

Furthermore, the prohibition articulated in the hadith is closely linked to the objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī‘ah*), particularly the protection of life (*hifz al-nafs*) and honor (*hifz al-‘ird*). Islamic law fundamentally does not seek to restrict women's movement but to ensure that all human activities, including travel, are conducted in conditions of safety and dignity. Accordingly, the presence of a mahram should be understood as a means rather than an end.

Thus, the historical and social context of the hadith affirms that the core substance of the Prophet's teaching lies in the principles of protection and public welfare for women. The prohibition of traveling without a mahram was not intended as a permanent rule negating women's mobility, but as an ethical guideline shaped by specific social needs. The *ma‘ānī al-ḥadīth* approach enables this hadith to be understood proportionally, contextually, and in harmony with the Islamic values of justice and humanity.

Relevance of the Hadith to Women's Mobility in the Contemporary Context

The findings further demonstrate that the hadith on women traveling without a mahram cannot be detached from evolving social dynamics. In modern societies, women's mobility is an integral necessity for access to education, employment, religious activities, and social participation. These structural changes necessitate a renewed reading of the hadith to ensure its continued relevance in contemporary Muslim life.

In the modern era, women are no longer confined solely to domestic spaces but actively participate in various public sectors. High levels of mobility are essential for fulfilling their social, professional, and intellectual roles. A literal and ahistorical interpretation of the hadith risks generating tension between religious texts and social realities, potentially hindering women's participation in public life.

The *ma‘ānī al-ḥadīth* approach provides a methodological framework that allows for reinterpretation by emphasizing the substantive values embedded in the text. From this perspective, the hadith is understood not as a static legal injunction but as an ethical guideline imbued with the objective of public welfare. The central principle derived from the hadith is the assurance of safety and protection for women, rather than an absolute restriction on their mobility.

In contemporary contexts, the protective function historically represented by the presence of a mahram can be fulfilled through various social and institutional mechanisms. Modern transportation systems, legal regulations, security forces, and collective social responsibility serve as effective instruments of protection. Accordingly, the meaning of mahram may be understood functionally rather than structurally or biologically.

This understanding aligns with the Islamic principle of moral and spiritual equality between men and women. The Qur'an and hadith consistently affirm that human dignity is not determined by gender, but by piety and

righteous deeds. Therefore, restricting women's mobility without a clear basis of public welfare contradicts the Islamic spirit of justice and balance.

Furthermore, a contextual approach to this hadith opens space for responsive *ijtihād* that addresses contemporary challenges. The legal maxim *ṣāliḥ li-kulli zamān wa makān* requires Islamic teachings to remain applicable and meaningful across diverse social contexts. Reinterpreting the hadith within the *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* framework does not negate the text but preserves its substantive relevance.

In practice, the principle of precaution (*iḥtīyāt*) remains important in women's mobility, as encouraged by Islamic teachings. However, such caution need not manifest as rigid restrictions, but rather through rational and proportional measures appropriate to prevailing social conditions. In this way, women's protection can coexist with the recognition of their rights and social roles.

Thus, a contextual understanding of the hadith on women traveling without a mahram contributes to strengthening women's participation in public spaces without neglecting the principle of public welfare. The *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* approach allows the hadith to be understood dynamically, humanely, and responsively to social change, while maintaining textual authority and the fundamental values of Islam. This approach serves as a vital bridge between the normative legacy of hadith and the lived realities of Muslim women in the modern era.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, this study concludes that the Prophet's hadith concerning the prohibition of women traveling without a mahram cannot be understood solely through a textual lens without considering its linguistic, historical, and social contexts. Linguistically, the prohibitive formulation in the hadith functions as a preventive measure closely tied to the high-risk travel conditions of the Prophet's era. Its primary objective is the protection and safety of women, rather than an absolute restriction on women's mobility.

The *ma'ānī al-ḥadīth* approach highlights the importance of understanding *asbāb al-wurūd*, the Prophet's position as both a spiritual and social leader, and the dynamics of early Islamic society. The hadith emerged as a normative response to specific social realities and reflects the Prophet's policy-oriented concern for public welfare, particularly the protection of women's lives and honor as central objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*).

In the contemporary context, significant developments in transportation systems, security arrangements, and social regulations necessitate a more contextual and functional reinterpretation of the hadith. The presence of a mahram should not be understood merely in structural terms, but as a symbol of protection that may be realized through public security mechanisms and social responsibility. This interpretation aligns with the Islamic principle of moral

equality between men and women and the legal maxim *ṣāliḥ li-kulli zamān wa makān*.

Accordingly, a contextual reading of the hadith on women traveling without a mahram contributes to a more just, humane, and relevant understanding of hadith in modern life. The *ma‘ānī al-ḥadīth* approach not only preserves the authority of the hadith text but also ensures that Islamic values remain responsive to social change, while reinforcing women’s roles in public life without compromising the principles of precaution and public welfare that constitute the core objectives of Islamic law.

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