

VOLUME 10 ISSUE 1

2025

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Published online: 5 March 2025



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Book Review

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To cite this article:

Hashim, Yumi Zuhanis Has-Yun. "Book Review of Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 10, no. 1 (2025): 126-131. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55831/ajis.v10i1.699>.

BOOK REVIEW OF AL-MUHADDITHAT: THE WOMEN SCHOLARS IN ISLAM

Yumi Zuhanis Has-Yun Hashim*

Nadwi, Mohammad Akram. *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam*. Oxford: Interface Publications Ltd., 2007. pp. 314, AUD 45.00, ISBN 978-09554545-1-6

Abstract: *Al-Muhaddithat* is an English translation and adaptation to the pre-ambule (*muqaddimah*) of a biographical dictionary of the women scholars of *ḥadīth* written in Arabic. At the time of its publication (2007), the 43-volume work was yet to be published such that *Al-Muhaddithat* provides a bibliographical roadmap for the later work. Within its 314 pages, *Al-Muhaddithat* comprises a preface, introduction, ten chapters, reference list and indexes. The author cautioned that the book should not be misused towards ungrounded feminism; rather, it should contribute to understanding women's roles, rights and responsibilities towards upholding Islam, highlighting the lawfulness of women transmitting *ḥadīth*. This review briefly describes the book content with a focus on several early chapters. These chapters discuss types, occasions and venues for *ḥadīth* learning and teachers of the women *ḥadīth* learners. With numerous women *ḥadīth* narrators from all levels (as-Sahabah, at-Tabi'un, *tabi' at-tabi'in*) being described, the book opens new dimensions to non-expert readers who may have limited exposure to the *muhaddithat*. The book is also highly beneficial for those seeking specific information, given its encyclopaedic features.

Keywords: *ḥadīth, women scholars, muhaddithat, narrator*

Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam is a work by Mohammad Akram Nadwi. He is a prominent scholar in Islamic studies, recipient of 'Al-'Allāmah Iqbāl prize for contribution to Islamic thought and the principal and co-founder of As-Salam Institute. The book was published in 2007. It has a total of 314 pages with 10 chapters, a preface and introduction. Written in English, it is a translation and adaptation to the pre-ambule (*muqaddimah*) of a 43-volume Muslim biographical dictionary of the women scholars of *ḥadīth* written in Arabic. At the time of publication of *Al-Muhaddithat* in 2007, this biographical dictionary was yet to be published. The biographical dictionary, titled *al-Wafā'*

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bi Asmā' al-Nisā', was finally published in 2021 by Dār al-Minhāj, Jeddah. It contains around 10,000 entries detailing the lives of female *ḥadīth* scholars.

This review first provides a brief account of all 10 chapters, including the preface and introduction, before focusing on chapters 2, 3 and 4. This is followed by critical evaluation of the book based on several aspects. Following a long but important preface and an introduction, Chapter 1 describes the legal condition for narrating *ḥadīth*, highlighting the lawfulness of women transmitting *ḥadīth*. Chapter 2 is about women as seekers and students of *ḥadīth*, while Chapter 3 describes the occasions, travels, venues for and types of *ḥadīth* learning. This is followed by Chapter 4, which discusses the teachers of the women studying *ḥadīth*. Chapter 5 is about the reading matter and Chapter 6 is on women's role in the diffusion of knowledge. Chapter 7 then describes the women's *ḥadīths* and narration, while Chapter 8 discusses the subject of women and *ḥadīth* critique. Chapter 9 gives an overview of the engagement, study and teaching of *ḥadīth* by period and region, and finally, Chapter 10 highlights the *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *'amal* (righteous deeds) of the women scholars. Each chapter is furnished with footnotes. The book also provides a list of references and has indexes. The references comprise classic sources (*turath*) and Arabic manuscripts that are alphabetically arranged. Meanwhile, the indexes are categorised into the companions (*as-sahabah*) and their successors (*at-tabi'un*), the women scholars excluding companions and their successors, the men scholars excluding companions and their successors, and the names of places that appeared in the book.

In single-spacing format, the book preface spans 11 pages. Despite its considerable length, it is crucial for the author to establish their predispositions regarding the book's purpose and delineate its scope. While not explicitly described, the purpose can be inferred as providing a roadmap to the then unpublished bibliographical dictionary (or encyclopaedia) of the Muslim women scholars of *ḥadīth*. This roadmap pertains to the organisation and arrangement of the material within the book, where information is presented in a dictionary-like format rather than through extended narratives. This approach enables readers to efficiently locate relevant material on subjects of interest.

In the preface, the author also expresses his concern over the potential misunderstanding or misuse of the book towards the Western ideology of feminism such that he emphasised the scope of the book in several iterations of "what the book is not about." First, he affirms that the book is not an exercise in women's studies. Second, the author asserts the book was not written to respond to the question of "if men can, why can't women?" of which this question can be easily refuted at least through three scenarios: i) the Muslim women scholars do not regard their household responsibilities as discrimination towards women; ii) a pressing issue is "what can a woman do," rather than the opposite; and iii) the gender difference does not restrict women's freedom to fulfil their responsibilities.

In the introduction, the author first challenges the common Western view of Muslim women, where they are seen as the subjects of abuse and persecution. Women in Islam are knowledgeable and some of them reach the level of religious scholars and become a resource

in various religious matters. In this section, the author also explains the term *al-muhaddithat* used in the book title. *Muhaddithat* is a plural form of *muhaddithah*, referring to a woman with expert knowledge in *ḥadīth*. A man with expert knowledge in *ḥadīth* is called a *muhaddith*. The term *ḥadīth* is defined as “what was transmitted on the authority of Prophet Muḥammad, his deeds, sayings, tacit approvals, or description of his physical features and moral behaviour.”¹ The study of *ḥadīth* is of utmost importance to understand the guidance of the Qur’ān and implement it in personal life and society, to live as prescribed by the Creator and return to Him in the best manner possible. The introduction further describes three major issues: i) the role of the Qur’ān and *sunna* in transforming society’s attitude towards women; ii) how the content of the Qur’ān and *sunna* preserve the rights of women; and iii) actions taken by women in exercising their rights.

Chapter 1 is on the legal condition for narrating *ḥadīth*, highlighting the lawfulness of women transmitters. The chapter describes the differences between testimony (*ash-shahadah*) versus narration or reporting (*ar-riwayah*), where the former is bound to the Qur’ānic text with specific conditions (for instance, two female witnesses are equal to one male). Meanwhile, the latter (*riwayah*) is based on the foundation that neither men nor women are exempted or excluded from the duty to know their religion (*deen*) and put it into practice. This is an important principle that serves as a solid foundation to Muslim women to learn, teach and transmit *ḥadīth*. Chapter 2 builds on this foundation and discusses women as students of *ḥadīth* in three aspects: i) the disposition to teach women; ii) the women’s efforts to seek and study *ḥadīth*; and iii) women’s preservation of the *ḥadīth*.

Chapter 3 discusses two main aspects: i) the occasions, travels and venues where the women scholars learn (and teach) *ḥadīth*; and ii) the ways of receiving *ḥadīth*. In the first aspect, the author describes that women seek any opportunity to learn *ḥadīth* either routinely by attending sessions in *masjid*, *madrasah* or schools, or even travelling to other places. It is important to note that even in the dire quest of seeking knowledge, all travelling and logistic matters are performed within Islamic teachings.

Chapter 4 is considerably shorter compared to other chapters in the book. However, it relays important information about the teachers of the women scholars in learning *ḥadīth*. In general, the women scholars were reported to study with whoever they had the opportunity to study. This starts within the family circle then local teachers, including teachers visiting the town. In some circumstances, the women scholars also travel to seek knowledge from teachers in other towns. In terms of number of teachers, there is no pattern. Some receive *ḥadīth* from many narrators, but others only have one or two teachers. Nonetheless, this chapter notably records the names of people who are a part of the important history in *ḥadīth* narration and studies, worth remembering and inspirational.

While it is widely known that the Prophet’s wife, *Saidatina* ‘Aishah bint Abi Bakr, and the Prophet’s daughter, *Saidatina* Fatimah az-Zahra’, narrate copious of *ḥadīth*, the thoughts and discourses of women being narrators of *ḥadīth* are minimally deliberated. *Al-Muhaddithat*

¹ Nur al-Din ‘Itr, *Manhaj al-Naqd Fi ‘Ulum al-Hadith*, 3rd ed (Dar al-Fikr, 1992), 26.

challenges this and presents a good landscape to at least make aware of the roles of women scholars in *ḥadīth*. Important figures (which may have been less known to the public reader) from all levels of narrators (*as-sahabah*, *at-tabi'un*, *tabi' at-tabi'in*) also aptly surface in this book. To state a few, Umm ad-Darda', Umm Hudhayl Hafsa bint Sirin, Umm al-Hasan Fatimah bint 'Abd ar-Rahman ibn 'Amr al-Farra' and 'Aishah bint Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Hadi al-Maqdisiyyah. These women scholars have contributed to the continuity and sustainability of *ḥadīth* to today. It is vital to read history and learn from its wisdom. Hence, knowing these incredible women and their stories enable character-building in modern Muslim women who are moulded by the strengths of the *muhaddithat*.

On reading *Al-Muhaddithat*, with a focus on several early chapters, one can derive various observational points and critical evaluations. *Al-Muhaddithat* is a commendable source of information on women scholars in *ḥadīth*. The book effectively introduces numerous women scholars, presenting many *ḥadīths* of which women are the narrators, and most importantly underscores the lawfulness of women transmitting *ḥadīth*. These aspects, taken together, make the book inspirational, especially for a female Muslim audience. The book also gives new knowledge with brief concepts and fundamentals of the field of *ḥadīth*, especially for the non-expert reader. While readers with a general intention to explore and gain initial understanding of the topic could benefit from this book, it is arguably advantageous for those seeking specific answers related to women scholars in Islam in *ḥadīth* studies, given its encyclopaedic-like features.

For readers who do not possess a background in religious studies, the book may initially appear daunting. The classic visual presentation of the front cover, featuring the map of Fatimah bint Sa'd al-Khayr's study journey, one of the *muhaddithat* highlighted in the book, might be perceived as intimidating. Additionally, the writing style requires some acclimatisation, particularly due to the use of transliteration, which may pose initial challenges. The font and typesetting further contribute to the difficulty in maintaining engagement. Consequently, readers might find it beneficial to approach the text in smaller segments to sustain focus.

The dictionary/encyclopaedic feature of the book at least partially fulfils its aim to provide a bibliographical roadmap of the Muslim women scholars of *ḥadīth* (titled *al-Wafā' bi Asmā' al-Nisā'*, published in 2021 by Dār al-Minhāj, Jeddah; mentioned earlier). The book may also guide further reading from other resources given the comprehensive references included. However, the book provides anecdotes rather than full narrations of the topic at hand, making it sometimes hard to understand the context, for instance of the *ḥadīth* mentioned. The dictionary or encyclopaedic nature of the book occasionally results in incoherent content flow, thereby disrupting the reading and thought process. This characteristic further substantiates that the primary beneficiaries of the book are individuals seeking specific information, with the intention of consulting additional resources for comprehensive understanding of topics of interest.

Nevertheless, the book is outstanding in the sense that it is not an easy feat to collate all information or historical data on the *muhaddithat* beginning from 1H to 15H. While it focuses on women scholars, the book is a great contribution to the studies of *ḥadīth*, given the dearth of such content in English. Iqbal addresses *Al-Muhaddithat* as an unusual book that brings flavour of the pre-modern age Islamic scholarship to the English readership in the modern time.² In a broader sense, the book can also contribute to the rediscovery of women's role and importance in Islam, particularly in learning, teaching and sharing *ḥadīth* while fulfilling the 'traditional roles' of mother and wife. The lessons learnt from the book could be valuable to societies, for instance, in Nigeria where despite a substantial Muslim population and rich intellectual traditions, the marginalisation of Muslim women scholarship is particularly pronounced.³ Penned by a renowned scholar in his field, the content is convincing and could be recommended to everyone with an interest in *ḥadīth* studies. The book opens new dimensions to non-expert readers and is highly beneficial for those seeking specific information given its encyclopaedic feature. Earlier reviews on *Al-Muhaddithat* commend the work for the public as the content is not too heavy, but at the same time can be compulsory reading material for academics and students in the field of *ḥadīth*.⁴

Akram Nadwi's *Al-Muhaddithat* is an important contribution to the *sunna* because it offers a nuanced account of not just names of the Muslim women scholars in *ḥadīth*, but more importantly the legacy the *muhaddithat* left for the later generations. Keeping in mind the aim to acquire new knowledge of *ḥadīth* narration and studies, one can appreciate *Al-Muhaddithat* in the path to understanding Islam (*deen al-Islam*) and the role of the *umma*, women and men, in preserving the Islamic tradition while also putting it into practice to change society for the better.

² Muzaffar Iqbal, "Mohammad Akram Nadwi: Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam," *Journal of Islamic and Science* 6, no. 1 (2008).

³ Muhammad Auwal Sulaiman, "An Analysis of the Landscape of Islamic Women's Scholarship and Academic Contributions in Nigeria," *International Journal of Educational Research and Library Science* 5, no. 8 (2024), <https://taapublications.com/tijerls/article/view/257>.

⁴ Nur Saadah Hamisan@Khair, "Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam by Mohammad Akram Nadwi," *Ulum Islamiyyah* 27, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.33102/uj.vol27no1.109>.

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