

Ishārī interpretation of the Prophet's ḥadīth: A Methodological study and its strategic value

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Abstract:

This paper examines ishārī interpretation as a mode of understanding the Prophet Muhammad's (peace be upon him) ḥadīth, a method that has long been underexplored in the study of sharḥ al-ḥadīth (commentary on ḥadīth). Using a descriptive-analytical approach to various classical and contemporary sources, this article highlights the definition, legitimacy, methodology, and concrete examples of ishārī interpretations of ḥadīth, particularly those carried out by Sufi figures from the era of the salaf to contemporary times. Ishārī interpretation is understood as the effort to comprehend implicit spiritual indications contained within the ḥadīth text, a level of understanding attainable only by those who have undergone the path of sulūk (spiritual journey) and possess inner clarity. This study concludes that ishārī interpretation of ḥadīth can be scientifically acceptable if it meets certain criteria: it must not contradict Islamic law (sharī'ah), must be related to the apparent meaning of the text, and must not involve speculative meanings. The strategic value of ishārī interpretation is reflected in three main aspects: as a mediating tool for reconciling seemingly contradictory ḥadīth, as a foundation for reinforcing Sufi teachings rooted in the sunnah, and as a contribution to the formulation of a more spiritual and contextual religious social ethics. This article recommends expanding the study of ishārī interpretation in the field of ḥadīth as a hermeneutical richness of Islam rooted in the Sunni-Sufi tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

In Islam, ḥadīth is the primary source of teachings after the Qur'ān, encompassing aspects of belief, law, and ethics (Maḥmūd, 1997). As a form of non-recited revelation (ghayr matluw), ḥadīth requires explanation, referred to as sharḥ, fiqh, ma'ānī, or tafsīr, like the exegesis of the Qur'ān (Bāzmūl, 1429 H). The tradition of sharḥ al-ḥadīth has existed since the Prophet's time. The Companions frequently sought direct clarification from him when they encountered difficulties in understanding a ḥadīth (Bayānūnī, 2007). A classic example is the Prophet's instruction concerning the 'Aṣr prayer at Banū Qurayzah, which was understood differently by the Companions (al-Bukhārī, 1422 H). Nonetheless, the Prophet affirmed both interpretations as each had a valid basis (Ibn al-Jawzī, 1997). Such differences in understanding were often influenced by variations in Arabic language proficiency and cultural background. Thus, subsequent generations, especially non-Arabs, increasingly required interpretation and sharḥ to grasp the meaning of revelation texts (al-Zarkashī, 1957).

By the 2nd and 3rd centuries AH, the practice of sharḥ developed more systematically, particularly with the codification of ḥadīth, as Islam spread and linguistic integration became more complex. It was in this context that works of sharḥ al-ḥadīth began to emerge (al-Suyūṭī, 1431 H). According to Bayānūnī, the classification of sharḥ al-ḥadīth can be analogized to Qurʾānic exegesis, including the ishārī style. Ishārī interpretation of the Qurʾān has been known since the time of the Companions, and this approach was also applied to ḥadīth by Sufi scholars as a form of deep spiritual understanding. Exegetical works by figures such as al-Tustarī, al-Sulamī, and others reflect this spirit (al-ʿAydrus, 2015).

Unfortunately, the ishārī approach in sharḥ al-ḥadīth remains rarely studied within a systematic and methodological framework, unlike Qurʾānic exegesis, even though it has been practiced since the early days of Islam. The ishārī approach holds great potential to bridge the apparent and inner meanings, integrating spiritual depth with normative Islamic values and serving as a means to contextualize the Prophet's messages in the face of evolving social realities (Bayānūnī, 2007).

In the field of ḥadīth, the ishārī approach is more frequently found in Sufi works than in pure ḥadīth texts. For instance, Ibn ʿArabī's interpretations in *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* or Ibn ʿAṭāʾillah's in *Laṭāʾif al-Minan* (al-Ṣafadī, 2015). Works of sharḥ that explicitly include ishārī interpretations are still very limited. One such example is *Fayḍ al-Qadīr* by al-Munāwī, which comments on al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaghīr, although its ishārī elements are only supplementary rather than central to the book's character. This is consistent with the nature of the ḥadīth therein, which often pertains to wisdom and spiritual refinement (*raqāʾiq*), thus lending itself to spiritual interpretation (al-Ṣāʿidī, 1428 H).

These phenomena raise significant questions: What is the validity, methodology, and contribution of ishārī interpretation of the Prophet's ḥadīth in the corpus of Islamic scholarship? Can this approach become a legitimate and functional part of the scientific discourse on sharḥ al-ḥadīth, contributing to the development of ḥadīth studies, the reinforcement of Sufism, and the enrichment of religious social ethics? These questions form the basis for the importance of this research.

METHOD

This research is a qualitative descriptive study aimed at examining and analyzing the ishārī approach to the Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be upon him) ḥadīth. The study seeks to map the understanding, methodology, validity, and significance of this approach as it has developed across generations in the Islamic scholarly tradition, drawing from both classical and contemporary sources. In addition to describing the forms of ishārī interpretation, the study also assesses the Sufi inclination and its contribution to ḥadīth studies, Sufism, and religious-socio praxis.

The data for this research is classified into two types: primary data consisting of ḥadīth texts and ishārī interpretations by scholars, obtained from *matan* and sharḥ al-ḥadīth books as well as related Sufi exegesis literature; and secondary data consisting of studies on the quality of *isnād* and *matan*, expert interpretations, and literature exploring the relationship between ishārī interpretation and Sufism. These secondary sources include works in the fields of ḥadīth science, sharḥ, ishārī exegesis, and Sufism.

Data collection was carried out through library research, examining academic works, manuscripts, and relevant online scholarly sources. Data analysis was conducted descriptively and through content analysis by systematically describing, examining, and critiquing the collected data, with the aim of synthesizing the *ẓāhir* (apparent) and *bāṭin* (inner) meanings and evaluating the validity of the ishārī approach within Islamic intellectual discourse. To support a systematic

presentation, this article is divided into five main sections: introduction, research methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

RESULT

In the context of this research, interpretation is understood as the effort to comprehend and explain the meaning of the *matan* (text) of *ḥadīth*, whether in terms of legal rulings or etiquette (al-Sakhāwī, 2003), based on the rules of the Arabic language and the foundations of Islamic law, according to human interpretive capacity (al-Qinnawjī, 2002). In classical Islamic literature, this is known by various terms such as *tafsīr*, *ta'wīl*, *sharḥ*, *fiqh*, and *ma'ānī* (Bāzmūl, 1429 H).

Ishārī (إشاري), etymologically, is a derivative of *ishārah* (إشارة), which can mean sign, indication, gesture, or signal (Ahmad Warson, 1997).

Terminologically, *ishārī* interpretation of the Prophet's *ḥadīth* can be defined as follows:

تأويل الحديث النبوي على خلاف ظاهره؛ لإشارات خفية تظهر لبعض أولي العلم، أو تظهر للعارفين بالله من أرباب السلوك والمجاهدة للنفس ممن نور الله بصائرهم، فأدركوا أسرار الحديث النبوي، أو انقذت في أذهانهم بعض المعاني الدقيقة بواسطة الإلهام الإلهي، أو الفتح الرباني مع إمكان الجمع بينها وبين الظاهر المراد من الحديث النبوي.

Definition

In this study, interpretation refers to the effort to understand and explain the meaning of the *matan* (text) of *ḥadīth*, both in terms of law and ethics (al-Sakhāwī, 2003), based on Arabic linguistic rules and the foundations of Islamic law, as understood by human capacity (al-Qinnawjī, 2002). In classical literature, such interpretation is referred to using various terms: *tafsīr*, *ta'wīl*, *sharḥ*, *fiqh*, and *ma'ānī* (Bāzmūl, 1429 H).

The term *ishārī* (إشاري), etymologically, derives from *ishārah* (إشارة), which can mean sign, indication, gesture, or signal (Ahmad Warson, 1997).

Terminologically, *ishārī* interpretation of the Prophet's *ḥadīth* can be defined as follows:

It is the interpretation of the Prophet's *ḥadīth* beyond its literal meaning, based on subtle signals perceived by certain scholars or *ʿārifīn* (gnostics)—practitioners of *sulūk* and *mujāhadah* whose hearts are illuminated by God. They are able to grasp the inner secrets of the *ḥadīth*, or some hidden meanings become manifest to their minds through Divine inspiration (*ilhām*) or Lordly unveiling (*fath Rabbānī*). These *ishārāt* (indications) remain reconcilable with the apparent meaning of the *ḥadīth* (al-ʿAydrus, 2005; al-Ṣābūnī, 2011).

Thus, *ishārī* interpretation can be defined as an esoteric reading of *ḥadīth* that transcends the surface of the text, rooted in subtle signs discernible only to gnostics or enlightened Sufis. However, such inner understanding must still be anchored to the outer meaning so as not to deviate from the intended meaning of the text.

Al-Ghazālī emphasized the importance of understanding the outward meaning before accessing the inner one. He likened it to entering the central room of a house: one must first pass through the main door (al-Ghazālī, 1982).

Three Key Elements of *Ishārī* Interpretation:

1. *Mushīr* (Indicator): the apparent or denotative meaning of the *ḥadīth* text.
2. *Mushār ilayh* (Indicated): the esoteric or connotative meaning perceived through subtle signs.
3. *ʿAlāqah rābiṭah* (Connecting Relation): the meaningful link between the two, discerned through deep reflection.

Differences in spiritual rank and inner states among interpreters make ishārī interpretations diverse, yet still valid as long as they remain in harmony with the sharī'ah. The inner meanings perceived by one interpreter may differ from those understood by another due to varying spiritual conditions and levels, as well as Divine grace (al-'Aydrus, 2015).

Relationship Between Ishārī Interpretation and Sufism

Ishārī interpretation is often directly associated with Sufis or practitioners of taṣawwuf, whether in interpreting the Qur'ān or the ḥadīth of the Prophet. This has made ishārī interpretation appear as a distinctive feature of their tradition, given their emphasis on uncovering the inner and esoteric meanings of scriptural texts. In reality, however, many scholars from other disciplines also engage in such interpretation, albeit with different focuses and objectives (al-'Aydrus, 2015).

Numerous sources from both the Qur'ān and ḥadīth support the notion that God grants some of His chosen servants knowledge through true insight (firāsah ṣādiqah), such as the ḥadīth:

"Beware the insight of the believer, for he sees with the light of Allah," and then the Prophet recited: "Indeed, in that are signs for those who discern" (Qur'ān, al-Hijr: 75).

(Reported by al-Tirmidhī, 1998)

In this context, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 AH) acknowledged that certain individuals are divinely gifted to understand the ḥadīth of the Prophet due to their sincere belief, obedience, and adherence to the Prophet's teachings, accompanied by high intellectual and spiritual aptitude that results in unveiling (mukāshafah). These individuals possess sharp analytical skills and accurate dreams and spiritual visions (kashf) (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1995).

Therefore, ishārī interpretation is not derived through empirical knowledge or rational proof as typical in other sciences, nor is it based on guesswork or speculation. It originates from kashf, a spiritual unveiling divinely instilled into the heart of the servant. Through this unveiling, one perceives hidden inner meanings behind the text that often escape the understanding of others (al-'Aydrus, 2015; Ibn al-Qayyim, 2016).

It is undeniable that a person's piety significantly influences their understanding of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth. The more devout and righteous they are, the closer their comprehension aligns with the intent of sharī'ah. When the soul is purified of desire and devoted entirely to God, He grants them knowledge and meaning through intuition and divine inspiration (al-Taftāzānī, 1408 H). Ibn al-Qayyim similarly noted that one of the main causes for someone's capacity to uncover ishārī meanings is the purity of their heart due to their piety. Such purity refines perception and thought, enabling them to grasp subtle truths (Ibn al-Qayyim, 2016).

Hence, ishārī interpretations of a sacred text can vary from one person to another depending on their spiritual levels. Al-Ṭūsī (d. 378 H) acknowledged that conclusions drawn by ishārah scholars differ, just as exoteric scholars also arrive at different interpretations. The difference lies in that exoteric interpretations often lead to assertions of "right" or "wrong," while variations in ishārī interpretation do not imply error but rather reflect virtues, beauty, excellence, spiritual states, ethics, maqāmāt (stations), and degrees (al-Ṭūsī, 1380 H).

Such differences in ishārī meaning are also shaped by the dimensions of time and place. Yet all these variations are considered positive, as each interpretation responds to its own relevant context, provided it aligns with sharī'ah-based legal texts. This plurality reflects divine mercy.

Contemplation (tadabbur) of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth is a fundamental step in uncovering the knowledge and understanding they contain. However, it can only be carried out by those equipped with ijtihād, clear minds, and pure hearts. Sacred text interpretation must go beyond linguistic analysis, incorporating the insights of wise scholars and Sufis, and understanding the broader

maqāṣid (objectives) of religion. Such an approach generates new, relevant knowledge that enriches understanding of revelation.

According to al-Ghazālī (d. 505 H), the secrets of revelation can only be grasped by those with profound knowledge, a pure heart, and tireless reflection and spiritual pursuit. Each person possesses their own spiritual sublimation, but even so, no one ever fully comprehends it all. It is at the level of ishārī interpretation where human understanding begins to diverge, even when their comprehension of the literal text may be similar (al-Ghazālī, 1982; Ibn al-Qayyim, 1991).

Thus, the relationship between ishārī interpretation and Sufism becomes clear. Those who receive such divine insights are individuals who practice zuhd (asceticism) and total devotion to God—commonly referred to by the second century Hijri as the Sufis (mutaṣawwifah). They spent their nights in prayer, fasted by day to purify their souls, and perfected their spiritual selves. Their teachings, thoughts, and insights began to flourish, and no one could deny their presence (al-ʿAydrus, 2015).

The Validity of Ishārī Interpretation of the Prophet's Ḥadīth

Scholarly views on ishārī interpretation of ḥadīth fall into two main camps: those who permit it under certain conditions and those who reject it as a safeguard against potential misinterpretation. The first group, including Companions such as Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and Ibn ʿAbbās (al-Bukhārī, 1422 H; al-Ṭabarī, 2000), and major scholars like al-Tustarī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-ʿArabī, Ibn Taymiyyah, al-Zarqānī, and Ibn ʿAshūr, support ishārī interpretation as long as it remains within the bounds of sharīʿah. In contrast, figures such as Ibn al-Jawzī and Subḥī al-Ṣāliḥ reject this approach due to concerns about possible abuse (al-ʿAydrus, 2015).

The majority of scholars support ishārī exegesis for several reasons:

There are reports from the Companions indicating that the texts of sharīʿah carry multiple layers of meaning.

1. Most interpreters of ishārī meaning are scholars with authoritative knowledge.
2. Ishārī meanings do not negate the apparent meanings.
3. Revelation—whether Qurʾān or ḥadīth—serves as a source for all Islamic sciences, including Sufism, provided interpretations adhere to sharīʿah principles.

Though this article cannot delve into each side's arguments in detail, it may be summarized—as al-ʿAydrus states—that the majority view (jumhūr) permits ishārī interpretation of both the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth of the Prophet. Their arguments are strong due to several points.

First, there are reports from the Companions showing that sharīʿah texts can convey meanings not directly tied to their wording but discovered through deduction (istinbāṭ), inference (iʿtibār), and analogy (qiyās).

Second, most practitioners of ishārī interpretation are scholars with deep knowledge who ensure their readings remain within sharīʿah.

Third, ishārī meanings are not forced into the text but serve as enhancements that do not cancel the apparent meanings, avoiding extremes such as Bāṭinī esotericism or speculative symbolic interpretation.

Fourth, the Qurʾān and ḥadīth, as forms of divine revelation—recited (matluw) or not (ghayr matluw)—are the foundation of all Islamic sciences, including taṣawwuf, as long as interpretations are guided by sharīʿ principles (al-ʿAydrus, 2015).

To maintain the integrity and caution in ishārī interpretations of scriptural texts, scholars have established six key criteria:

1. Rooted in sharī'ah – The interpretation must have a valid basis in the Qur'ān and Sunnah. Any meaning unsupported or contrary to them is invalid (al-Aṣbahānī, 1409 H; Ibn al-Qayyim, 2016).
2. Not contradicting textual evidence (naṣṣ) – The interpretation must align with the explicit meaning of the text (al-Shāṭibī, 1997).
3. Harmonized with the literal meaning – The ishārī interpretation should support rather than replace the outward meaning and adhere to Arabic language norms (Itr, 1414 H).
4. Avoiding Bāṭinī deviation – Any ishārī meaning that strays too far from the text linguistically or logically is rejected as speculative (al-Dhahabī, 2000).
5. Not dismissing the literal meaning – The literal meaning is primary. The ishārī meaning should only serve as a complement and should follow the literal meaning in exposition (al-Zarruq, 2005; al-Ghazālī, 1982).
6. Avoiding confusion – The interpretation must be clear, understandable, and not sow doubt in matters of creed (al-Zarqānī, 1995).

These six criteria work together to ensure that ishārī interpretation remains scholarly, sharī', and avoids deviant meanings or unverifiable spiritual claims (al-'Aydus, 2015). Summarized Criteria:

1. The ishārī meaning must be supported by sharī' evidence.
2. It must not contradict the textual sources of sharī'ah.
3. It must align with the literal meaning.
4. It must adhere to Arabic linguistic principles.
5. There must be a coherent relationship between the ishārī and literal meanings.
6. It must avoid distant symbolic interpretations like those of the Bāṭinī sect.
7. The ishārī meaning should not be claimed as the only true meaning, denying the literal one.
8. The textual meaning should be presented first, followed by the ishārī interpretation.
9. The interpretation must not confuse listeners.

If these conditions are met in an ishārī interpretation of the Prophet's ḥadīth, then such interpretation is acceptable—but not obligatory to adopt. It serves an inferential role, not one based on the principles of legal derivation (uṣūl al-fiqh), and aims to inspire moral excellence and ascetic living, grounded in sharī' principles and Prophetic methodology.

Examples of Ishārī Interpretation of the Prophet's Ḥadīth

As previously mentioned, ishārī interpretation of the Prophet's ḥadīth has existed in practice since the first century Hijri, beginning with the Companions. This section presents several examples of ishārī interpretation of the Prophet's ḥadīth that have been recorded in the works of scholars.

From the second century Hijri, 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak (d. 181 AH) provided an ishārī interpretation of the following ḥadīth:

عن سلمان، قال: سمعت رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم يقول: «رباط يوم وليلة خير من صيام شهر وقيامه، وإن مات جرى عليه عمله الذي كان يعمل، وأجرى عليه رزقه، وأمن الفتان».

From Salmān, he said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) say: "Guarding a military outpost for a day and a night is better than fasting and praying for a month. If he dies, the good deeds he had performed will continue to flow (in reward), his provision will be granted, and he will be safe from the punishment of the Fire." (Muslim: No. 1913)

When Ibn al-Mubārak was asked about the meaning of ribāṭ (military outpost duty), he replied:

رابط بنفسك على الحق حتى تقيمها على الحق، فذلك أفضل الرباط.

From Salmān, he said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) say: "Guarding a military outpost for a day and a night is better than fasting and praying for a month. If he dies, the good deeds he performed will continue to flow (in reward), his provision will be granted, and he will be safe from the punishment of the Fire." (Muslim: No. 1913)

When Ibn al-Mubārak was asked about the meaning of ribāṭ, he replied: "Restrain yourself upon the truth until you establish it firmly upon the truth. That is the best form of ribāṭ." (Abū Nu'aym, 1409 H)

Essentially, the literal meaning of ribāṭ as found in various ḥadīth on jihād refers to staying stationed at a military outpost that separates Muslim forces from the enemy during wartime. The purpose of remaining at the outpost is to be on constant alert in case of sudden attacks by the enemy (al-'Asqalānī, 1379 H).

Thus, the denotative meaning of the ḥadīth above is the mention of ribāṭ, meaning guarding and being stationed at a Muslim base to defend against attacks by disbelieving forces. Meanwhile, the connotative/ishārī meaning, as interpreted by Ibn al-Mubārak, is that a Muslim must constantly guard and commit himself to the truth in order to establish it firmly upon truth and divine guidance.

The connection between these two meanings lies in the analogy between guarding a military outpost and remaining steadfast upon truth and righteousness. Their alignment is reflected in the qualities of consistency (istiḳāmah) and commitment (mulāzamah). This is supported by the root meaning of ribāṭ, which is restraint (ḥabs) (Majma' al-Lughah, 2004) symbolizing the self-restraint necessary to remain obedient to God (al-Nawawī, 1392 H).

From the fourth century, we also find Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d. 334 H), a prominent Sufi, known for offering ishārī interpretations of the Prophet's ḥadīth, including the following example:

عن المقدم بن معديكر الزبيدي، عن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم، قال: «ما كسب الرجل كسبا أطيب من عمل يده.

From al-Miqdām ibn Ma'dīkarib al-Zubaydī, from the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him), he said:

"No one ever earns anything better than what he earns with his own hands." (Ibn Mājah: No. 2138)

When asked about the meaning of this ḥadīth, al-Shiblī said:

إذا كان الليل فخذ ماء، وتهيأ للصلاة، وصل ما شئت، ومد يدك، وسل الله، فذلك كسب يمينك.

Al-Shiblī said:

"When night falls, take water, prepare for prayer, pray as much as you wish, raise your hands and ask Allah. That is the work of your right hand." (Ibn al-Mulaqqin, 1994)

The ḥadīth above encourages Muslims to consume halal sustenance earned through their own labor, not through begging from others (al-'Aynī, 2001). The literal meaning of this ḥadīth is a recommendation to be self-reliant and to work, and that the best thing a Muslim can earn is what he does with his own hands.

The ishārī interpretation by al-Shiblī sees one of the best acts done by one's own hand as engaging in night worship while others are asleep and raising one's hands to Allah in supplication. The link between the two interpretations lies in the concept of righteous action performed by the individual himself, earning a living to feed oneself and one's family in the literal sense and striving in night worship to gain merit and reward in the esoteric sense (al-'Aydrus, 2015).

Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq (d. 405 H) is recorded as a figure from the fifth century Hijri who also offered ishārī interpretations of the Prophet's ḥadīth. One such ḥadīth he interpreted is:

عن أبي الدرداء، عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم، قال: «حبك الشيء يعمي ويصم».

From Abū al-Dardā', from the Prophet (peace be upon him), he said: "Your love for something blinds and deafens." (Abū Dāwūd: 5130)

Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq interpreted this ḥadīth with the following statement:

يعمى عن الغير غيرة وعن المحبوب هيبة.

Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq interpreted this ḥadīth as follows:

"[It] blinds from anything other than Him out of jealousy, and from the Beloved Himself out of awe." (al-Qushayrī, 1989)

The ḥadīth above indicates that there exists a type of love that blinds its possessor from seeing the path of truth and deafens him from hearing guidance. It warns against excessive love for things that should not be excessively loved (al-Munāwī, 1356 H). The literal (mushīr) or denotative meaning of this ḥadīth is that love can blind and deafen its bearer from perceiving and receiving truth and guidance due to immersion in the falsehood of attachment. Meanwhile, the ishārī (mushār ilayh) or connotative meaning, as understood by al-Daqqāq, is that sincere love for God can blind the lover from seeing anything other than Him out of jealousy and divert him from gazing upon the Beloved out of awe and reverence.

The relationship between these two meanings lies in the concept of diversion. On the literal level, one is diverted from the path of truth due to blameworthy love; on the ishārī level, one is diverted from everything but the Beloved due to noble jealousy, and even from the Beloved Himself out of reverent restraint (al-'Aydus, 2015).

From the sixth century, al-Ghazālī emerged as one of the Sufi figures who offered ishārī interpretations of the Prophet's ḥadīth. One example is his interpretation of the ḥadīth:

عن أبي الدرداء، عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم، قال: «حبك الشيء يعمي ويصم».

From Abū al-Dardā', from the Prophet (peace be upon him), he said: "Your love for something blinds and deafens." (Abū Dāwūd: 5130)

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From Abū al-Dardā', from the Prophet (peace be upon him), he said: "Your love for something blinds and deafens." (Abū Dāwūd: 5130)

Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq interpreted the above ḥadīth with his statement: "It blinds from everything other than Him out of jealousy, and from the Beloved Himself out of reverence." (al-Qushayrī, 1989)

This ḥadīth indicates that there is a kind of love that renders its possessor blind to the path of truth and deaf to guidance. It prohibits excessive attachment to things that are unworthy of such love (al-Munāwī, 1356 H).

The literal (mushīr) or denotative meaning of this ḥadīth is that love can blind and deafen a person from seeing and hearing truth and guidance due to being immersed in false attachments. The ishārī (mushār ilayh) or connotative meaning understood by al-Daqqāq is that sincere love for God can blind the lover from everything other than Him out of jealousy and turn him away from gazing upon the Beloved out of awe and veneration.

The link between these two meanings lies in diversion. On the surface, blameworthy love diverts one from the path of truth. In the *ishārī* sense, praiseworthy love diverts one from everything but the Beloved out of jealousy, and from the Beloved Himself out of reverent awe (al-ʿAydrus, 2015).

From the sixth century, al-Ghazālī emerged as one of the Sufi figures who offered *ishārī* interpretations of the Prophet's ḥadīth. One such interpretation is of the ḥadīth:

عن أبي هريرة، قال: قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: «الدنيا سجن المؤمن، وجنة الكافر».

From Abū Hurayrah (RA), from the Prophet (peace be upon him), he said: "The world is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the disbeliever." (Muslim: No. 2956)

According to al-Ghazālī, a disbeliever (*kāfir*) is anyone who turns away from Allah and seeks only the pleasures of worldly life. A believer, by contrast, is someone whose heart is detached from the world and who longs to depart from it. Disbelief can be explicit or subtle. Subtle shirk (idolatry) is measured by the degree to which one's heart loves the world. The truly monotheistic person (*muwaḥḥid*) is one who loves only Allah, the One and Only (al-Ghazālī, 1982).

In contrast, the literal meaning of the term *kāfir* in the ḥadīth refers to someone who does not believe in Allah and His Prophets—the opposite of a believer (al-ʿAydrus, 2015). Every believer is, in a sense, imprisoned in this world—prohibited from indulging in forbidden desires and obligated to perform challenging acts of obedience according to their capacity. Upon death, the believer finds rest and transitions to the eternal bliss prepared by Allah. Meanwhile, the disbeliever may enjoy the world temporarily but faces eternal punishment after death (al-Nawawī, 1392 H).

The literal meaning (*mushīr*) of the ḥadīth is that the world is a test and a form of imprisonment for the believer, who must refrain from the prohibited. For the disbeliever, the world is like paradise because they can enjoy and pursue whatever they desire without restriction. The *ishārī* meaning of this ḥadīth is that the term *kāfir* can also refer to a believer who excessively loves the world—being ungrateful for Allah's blessings and failing to use them in obedience and gratitude (cf. Qur'an, Ibrāhīm: 7). This contrasts with the true believer whose only vision and hope is for Allah's pleasure, not the world or its temptations.

The connection between the two meanings lies in the notion of turning away. The literal *kāfir* turns away from belief in Allah and His Messenger, while the metaphorical *kāfir* remains within the bounds of faith but turns away from seeking Divine pleasure in favor of worldly enjoyment (al-ʿAydrus, 2015).

Ibn ʿAṭāʾ Allāh al-Sakandarī (d. 709 AH) was among the notable Sufi figures of the eighth Islamic century known for offering *ishārī* interpretations of the Prophet's ḥadīth. One of the ḥadīth he interpreted was:

إن الله وتر، يحب الوتر.

"Indeed, Allah is One and loves that which is odd (or singular)." (Muslim: No. 2677)

This ḥadīth affirms that Allah is Unique, One, having no partner or equal. That He loves what is odd indicates the preference for odd numbers in acts of worship and devotion. Hence, the five daily prayers, performing ablution three times, seven circuits in *ṭawāf*, seven laps in *saʿī*, three days of *tashrīq*, and other such practices. The ḥadīth highlights the recommended nature (*sunnah*) of performing righteous deeds in odd numbers. Some scholars also interpret this ḥadīth as highlighting the *sunnah* status of the *Witr* prayer (al-ʿAsqalānī, 1379 H).

The literal meaning (*mushīr*) of this ḥadīth is that Allah, the One and Only Lord, is singular in His essence, actions, and attributes—without partner or likeness. He loves odd numbers in acts of worship.

The *ishārī* meaning (*mushār ilayh*), as interpreted by Ibn ‘Aṭā’ Allāh al-Sakandarī, is that Allah—the One and Only—loves the heart of His servant when it possesses a singular purpose: to seek His pleasure alone. In that heart, there is no room for anything or anyone else. Therefore, Allah bestows goodness and divine favor upon such a heart.

The connection between the two meanings lies in their shared emphasis on singularity. Just as Allah loves odd numbers in rituals, He also loves a servant’s heart that is singularly devoted to seeking His pleasure (al-‘Aydrus, 2015).

Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852 H) was a prominent ḥadīth scholar from the 9th century AH who also offered *ishārī* interpretations of the Prophet’s ḥadīth. One example he commented on is:

عن أبي هريرة، قال: قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: إن الله قال: من عادى لي ولياً فقد آذنته بالحرب، وما تقرب إلي عبدي بشيء أحب إلي مما افترضت عليه، وما يزال عبدي يتقرب إلي بالنوافل حتى أحبه، فإذا أحببته: كنت سمعه الذي يسمع به، وبصره الذي يبصر به، ويده التي يبطش بها، ورجله التي يمشي بها، وإن سألني لأعطينه، ولئن استعاذني لأعيذنه، وما ترددت عن شيء أنا فاعله ترددي عن نفس المؤمن، يكره الموت وأنا أكره مساءته.

From Abū Hurayrah, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Allah the Exalted said: ‘Whoever shows enmity toward a friend (*walī*) of Mine, I declare war against him. My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more beloved to Me than what I have made obligatory upon him. And My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory deeds until I love him. When I love him, I become his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. If he asks Me, I will surely give him. If he seeks My protection, I will surely protect him. I do not hesitate in anything I do as I hesitate in taking the soul of My believing servant. He dislikes death, and I dislike displeasing him.’” (al-Bukhārī: No. 6502)

When commenting on this ḥadīth, Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī cited earlier scholars who explained that no bodily limb moves except by Allah’s will, by His power, and for His sake. The reference to hearing, sight, and limbs being “of” the *walī* is a metaphorical expression indicating Allah’s support for His servant. It is as if Allah places Himself in the position of the tools used by His friend. Allah grants *tawfīq* (divine facilitation) and guidance to His *walī*, enabling him to use these faculties in obedience and preserving him from using them in what He has prohibited (al-‘Asqalānī, 1379 H).

The literal meaning (*mushār*) of the ḥadīth is Allah’s support and protection for His *walī*. Allah guards his limbs from disobedience. The *ishārī* meaning (*mushār ilayh*) is the exhortation for every Muslim to ensure that not a single movement or step is taken except with the intention of seeking Allah’s pleasure and aligning every action with obedience and devotion to Him.

The connection between the two meanings lies in their mutual emphasis on pursuing divine pleasure. A righteous servant is one who is supported and aided by Allah to do good, while a faithful Muslim should consciously aim to seek Allah’s pleasure in every act he performs (al-‘Aydrus, 2015).

From the tenth century Hijri, al-Munāwī (d. 1031 H) is noted for offering *ishārī* interpretations of the Prophet’s ḥadīth in his commentary on al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr, including the following narration:

تحفة المؤمن الموت.

“The gift for the believer is death.” (al-Suyūṭī, 2015)

The literal meaning of this ḥadīth is that death is a blessing for the believer (al-Munāwī, 1988), as it releases them from the trials and burdens of worldly life—such as desires, satanic temptations, and the struggle against the lower self (*nafs*). Death leads them to eternal life, the pleasures of Paradise, and union with Allah. Thus, although death appears to mark the end of life, in reality, it is the beginning of everlasting divine grace (al-Munāwī, 1356 H).

After explaining the literal meaning, al-Munāwī cites the ishārī interpretation from some Sufi scholars:

(تتمة) ذهب بعض الصوفية إلى أن المراد بالموت في هذا الخبر ونحوه فناء اختيار العبد في مراد الله.

Some Sufis interpreted the "death" mentioned in this ḥadīth as the annihilation of personal will in the Divine will (al-Munāwī, 1356 H).

This ishārī interpretation is enriched by the view of Ibn 'Ajībāh (d. 1266 H), who explained that a servant who surrenders all his affairs to Allah and completely submits to His decree has reached spiritual success—even if, outwardly, it appears otherwise. Such a person has "died" from selfish ambition and base desires. In fact, according to Ibn 'Aṭā' Allāh, no one can attain closeness to Allah except through two forms of death: physical death and spiritual death—that is, fanā' (annihilation) of the ego and personal will (Ibn 'Ajībāh, 2016).

Thus, the literal meaning of this ḥadīth points to death as the beginning of eternal joy, while its ishārī meaning refers to the "death of personal will" as the highest form of spiritual surrender. The link between the two lies in the concept of fanā'—self-annihilation, whether physical or spiritual.

This ishārī interpretation fulfills all criteria of validity: it does not contradict Islamic textual sources (naṣṣ), aligns with the outward meaning, does not negate the original message, and is not ambiguous. Al-Munāwī presents it as a complementary interpretation, not the primary one, and cites it from the Sufi tradition without claiming it as his personal view.

'Abd Allāh ibn 'Alawī al-Ḥaddād (d. 1132 H) is noted as one of the scholars who engaged in ishārī interpretation of the Prophet's ḥadīth in the 12th century AH. One example is his ishārī reading of the ḥadīth:

عن عمر بن الخطاب، قال: سمعت رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم، يقول: «من احتكر على المسلمين طعامهم، ضربه الله بالجذام والإفلاس».

From 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, he said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) say: "Whoever hoards food from the Muslims, Allah will afflict him with leprosy and bankruptcy." (Ibn Mājah: No. 2155)

In commenting on this ḥadīth, al-Ḥaddād suggested that the leprosy (judhām) mentioned may either be a physical illness or a metaphor for loss of blessings, as judhām also connotes maḥq (eradication or loss). In other words, the hoarder suffers loss and ruin in both worldly and religious matters. Typically, someone who engages in such hoarding ends up impoverished before they die (Bin Smith, 1427 H).

The ḥadīth clearly prohibits the hoarding of food intended for the Muslim community—buying it in bulk to resell at inflated prices when the commodity is urgently needed. The threat to the perpetrator is both physical (leprosy) and financial (bankruptcy). This represents the literal meaning (mushār), as it warns that hoarding, done for material gain, leads to bodily and monetary harm (al-Munāwī, 1356 H).

The ishārī meaning (mushār ilayh), on the other hand, is that the hoarder also suffers spiritual bankruptcy, as they cause hardship to fellow Muslims. The link between the two meanings lies in the concept of ruin or loss. Hoarding leads to material bankruptcy—and metaphorically, to spiritual bankruptcy. It's as if the one who hoards basic sustenance for Muslims has already forfeited their religion (al-'Aydrus, 2015).

From the 14th century Hijri, Aḥmad ibn Muṣṭafā al-Mustaghānamī (d. 1353 H) is recorded as a figure who provided ishārī interpretations of the Prophet's ḥadīth, such as the one below:

عن سعيد بن رافع بن خديج، عن أبيه، عن جده، قال: قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم: «التمسوا الجار قبل الدار والرفيق قبل الطريق».

From Saʿīd ibn Rāfiʿ ibn Khadīj, the Messenger of Allah (peace be upon him) said: “Seek a neighbor before [buying] a house and seek a companion before [embarking on] a journey.” (al-Ṭabarānī: No. 4379)

Regarding the command to seek a companion before traveling, al-Mustaghānamī interpreted it as an instruction to first seek a spiritual guide—a teacher to serve as a guide on the path toward Allah. Having such a guide helps safeguard the seeker from being led astray by their own lower self (nafs). Following one's nafs without guidance can lead to ruin, due to the absence of a mentor. If even physical travel between locations requires a companion, then how much more necessary is a guide for the spiritual journey through various stages and stations toward Allah (al-Mustaghānamī, 1986).

This ḥadīth highlights the recommendation of choosing a companion before setting out on a journey, as such companionship brings peace and dispels fear (al-Munāwī, 1356 H). The literal meaning (mushīr) of the ḥadīth is the sunnah of selecting a travel companion to aid in avoiding harm and overcoming obstacles along the way.

The ishārī meaning (mushār ilayh) is the necessity of seeking a spiritual guide for the journey toward Allah. This guide introduces the seeker to the laws of sharīʿah in worship and social dealings, exposes the flaws of the nafs, and helps the seeker avoid spiritual misguidance. The connection between the two meanings lies in the concept of safety: just as a traveler seeks a companion for security, so too must a believer seek a guide who, through their teaching and exemplary character, leads them safely on the spiritual journey toward Allah (al-ʿAydrus, 2015).

In the 15th century Hijri, Muḥammad Mutawallī al-Shaʿrāwī became known as a prominent figure who frequently offered ishārī interpretations—both of the Qurʾān and the ḥadīth. Among the ḥadīth he interpreted in this way is:

عن أبي سعيد الخدري رضي الله عنه، عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: من رأى منكم منكراً فليغيره بيده، فإن لم يستطع فبلسانه، فإن لم يستطع فبقلبه، وذلك أضعف الإيمان.

From Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī (RA), the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: “Whoever among you sees an evil, let him change it with his hand. If he is not able, then with his tongue. And if he is not able, then with his heart—and that is the weakest of faith.” (Muslim: No. 78)

Regarding changing evil with the heart, al-Shaʿrāwī viewed this as manifesting in a believer's act of cutting off relations with the perpetrator of wrongdoing. If everyone were to behave coldly toward those who commit evil, the wrongdoer would likely feel disturbed and reconsider their actions. Thus, changing evil with the heart should also be expressed outwardly—through behaviors that reflect one's inner disapproval—causing the wrongdoer to feel isolated from the community (al-Shaʿrāwī, 1997).

The literal meaning of the phrase “if he is not able, then with his heart” in the ḥadīth is a feeling of inner disapproval toward the wrongdoer. While this does not remove or eliminate the wrongdoing itself, it is the minimum level of rejection expected from someone with the weakest degree of faith (al-Nawawī, 1392 H). So, the literal meaning (mushīr) conveyed by the ḥadīth is the obligation to prevent evil, at the very least, by inwardly disapproving of the wrongdoing—an act that reflects the lowest level of faith.

The *ishārī* meaning (*mushār ilayh*) is the act of severing ties with the wrongdoer in a manner that reflects one's inner disapproval, through outward behavior and visible distancing (al-Sha'rawī, 1997).

The relationship between the two meanings lies in the element of disapproval. A Muslim should inwardly reject and disapprove of any wrongdoing and likewise should demonstrate this disapproval through turning away or distancing themselves from the evildoer (al-'Aydrus, 2015).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study show that the *ishārī* interpretation of the Prophet's ḥadīth by various scholars across generations generally meets the validity criteria outlined above: grounded in Sharī'ah, not contradicting textual evidence, consistent with the outward meaning, avoiding Bāṭinī esotericism, not dismissing the literal meaning, and not causing confusion. These six principles are also evident in the approaches of the scholars examined in this study.

The scholars who offered *ishārī* interpretations demonstrated epistemological prudence in exploring the inner meanings of the Prophet's words. Their interpretations were not based merely on personal intuition, but rather on a process of *istinbāt* (meaning derivation) grounded in a combination of literal understanding, spiritual context, and mastery of Arabic linguistic tools. These findings reinforce the idea that *ishārī* interpretation is not to be equated with extreme esotericism; rather, it can enrich the tradition of *sharḥ al-ḥadīth* when conducted with a proper methodology. The *ishārī* interpretations of the Prophet's ḥadīth by classical Sufi figures and other scholars, as shown above, are not only methodologically sound, but also spiritually and pedagogically relevant.

Strategic Value of *Ishārī* Interpretation of the Prophet's Ḥadīth

According to al-Shāṭibī, understanding the inner meanings of revelation is key for those blessed by knowledge from Allah. Focusing only on the outward meanings without uncovering the inner ones leads to an incomplete and limited understanding. In the realm of ḥadīth, the strategic values of *ishārī* interpretation manifest in three main areas:

1. Ḥadīth and Ḥadīth Sciences

Although Sufi-*ishārī* interpretation has not been extensively highlighted in later works on *Sharḥ al-Ḥadīth*, it holds significant importance within the field. One strategic value is its role in resolving contradictory ḥadīth (*mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*) (al-Ṭaḥḥān, 2004). For example, the apparent contradiction between the ḥadīth stating that "death is a gift for the believer" and another that "a believer's life is better than his death" is reconciled through *ishārī* interpretation: "death" is understood as spiritual self-annihilation (*fanā'*). This meaning removes any perceived conflict, framing *fanā'* before Allah as the greater gift, even as extended worldly life with good deeds is itself better. Similar reconciliations occur with contradictory ḥadīth regarding prayers for wealth and for poverty—made coherent through *ishārī* interpretation (al-Ghazālī, 1982; al-Munāwī, 1356 H). Notably, this approach is anticipated in early works like Ibn Qutaybah's *Ta'wīl Mukhtalif al-Ḥadīth*.

2. Sufism

In the domain of Sufism, *ishārī* interpretation strengthens the foundations of Sufi teaching by rooting it firmly in the Qur'ān and ḥadīth. True Sufism is the manifestation of pure Sharī'ah, as affirmed by scholars like al-Junayd: "our knowledge (of Sufism) is tied to the Book and the Sunnah"

(al-Qushayrī, 1989), and “the path to Allah is closed except to those who follow the Prophet’s way” (al-Ghummārī, 2013).

For instance, al-Munāwī’s ishārī interpretation of the ḥadīth commanding believers to guard their faith in private highlights the concept of murāqabah (Divine watchfulness). He explains that if one refrains from uncovering their private parts out of modesty before other people, it is more noble to feel modest before Allah, who sees all. Such interpretations consolidate core Sufi concepts like murāqabah—continuously feeling the presence of Allah in every moment (al-Munāwī, 1356 H).

3. Socio-Religious Life

Beyond its theoretical and mystical benefits, ishārī interpretation holds practical social-religious value: noble outward behavior arises from inner spiritual refinement (al-Munāwī, 1356 H). In contexts like Indonesia, where moral deficits pose social challenges, spiritual and ethical rehabilitation is required. Ishārī interpretation of the Prophet’s ḥadīth can provide spiritual-ethical insights to remedy such issues.

A common problem is the perceived dichotomy between “religious sciences” and “secular sciences.” This dichotomy persists even among national leaders. Gus Mus (A. Mustofa Bisri) has rejected it as a colonial legacy, noting absurd distinctions like “school” vs. “madrasah” or “bookshop” vs. “religious bookshop.” He questions whether Arabic grammar (naḥw and ṣarf) are not religious sciences, and whether natural sciences (‘ulum al-‘ālam)—as signs of Allah—are not religious. Through ishārī interpretation, al-Munāwī resolved such dichotomies by focusing on substance over form: religious knowledge is that which leads to Allah through Sharī‘ah and spiritual realization. Thus, even “secular” sciences that guide one toward spiritual insight are religious; whereas religious knowledge that fails to lead to makrīfah (gnosis) and the Hereafter does not qualify as truly religious.

CONCLUSION

The outward (denotative) and inward (connotative) meanings are regarded as complementary and equally important. The outward meaning serves as a gateway to the inward meaning. Practically, ishārī interpretation has been present since the time of the Salaf (early generations of Muslims) up to the contemporary era.

From the perspective of Sunni Sufi scholars, ishārī interpretation is considered valid as long as it adheres to certain conditions, such as it must not contradict the Sharī‘ah, must not ignore either meaning (outward or inward), must not claim exclusive truth, and must not contain unsettling ambiguities.

The Urgency of Ishārī Interpretation of the Prophet’s Ḥadīth Can Be Seen in Three Aspects: 1) Ḥadīth and Ḥadīth Sciences: It helps reconcile ḥadīths that appear contradictory; 2) Sufism: It consolidates Sufi teachings while also responding to doubts about their validity, and 3) Socio-Religious Life: It encourages a harmonious, ethical society and offers solutions to social issues rooted in a poor understanding of religious morals.

More in-depth studies of interpretative examples are needed to provide a clearer picture of the methods used. The terminology that arises within the ishārī interpretation of the Prophet’s ḥadīth should be further examined for a more specific understanding. Other works related to Sufi thought and ishārī interpretation should be explored to gain a more comprehensive evaluation and to avoid interpretive bias.

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