Textual Distortion in Hadith Transmission: A Critical Philological Analysis of Tashīf and Taḥrīf in Islamic Manuscript Tradition

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji fenomena *tashīf* (kesalahan tulis) dan *taḥrīf* (distorsi makna) dalam manuskrip Arab klasik, khususnya dalam transmisi teks hadis, sebagai kategori analitis mandiri dalam kajian filologi Arab. Tujuan penelitian ini dilandasi oleh minimnya kajian yang secara khusus menyoroti kedua fenomena ini, meskipun keduanya memiliki signifikansi epistemologis dan historis dalam tradisi keilmuan Islam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-deskriptif yang berakar pada sumber filologis klasik dan teori kritis kontemporer, penelitian ini mengumpulkan data dari teks-teks hadis primer dan syarahnya melalui teknik dokumentasi dan analisis isi. Temuan utama menunjukkan bahwa mayoritas kesalahan teks terjadi karena kemiripan bentuk huruf Arab serta tidak adanya tanda baca (titik) pada manuskrip awal, yang sering kali menyebabkan distorsi makna dan memengaruhi kredibilitas perawi. Penelitian ini juga menekankan bahwa *tashīf* dan *taḥrīf* tetap relevan dalam konteks modern, terutama dalam praktik penyuntingan manuskrip dan penafsiran teologis. Fenomena ini memiliki implikasi penting bagi pelestarian keaslian teks, pemahaman terhadap pergeseran ideologi, dan pengembangan metode filologi kritis. Keaslian penelitian ini terletak pada integrasinya antara kajian keislaman klasik dan teori filologi kritis—khususnya gagasan Bernard Cerquiglini tentang keragaman teks—sehingga menawarkan kerangka baru untuk meninjau ulang dinamika otoritas teks dan pluralisme penafsiran dalam studi Islam.

Kata Kunci: filologi Arab; distorsi teks; transmisi hadis; filologi kritis.

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the phenomena of *tashīf* (scribal error) and *taḥrīf* (textual distortion) in classical Arabic manuscripts, particularly in the transmission of ḥadīth texts, as independent analytical categories within Arabic philology. Motivated by the scarcity of focused studies on these textual deviations, the research highlights their epistemological significance and role in shaping Islamic intellectual tradition. Employing a qualitative-descriptive approach grounded in classical philological sources and contemporary critical theory, this study draws data from primary hadith texts and their commentaries through documentation and content analysis methods. The findings reveal that most errors stem from the visual similarity of Arabic letters and the absence of diacritical marks in early scripts, which often lead to semantic distortions and affect the credibility of transmitters. The study also illustrates the ongoing relevance of *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* in both classical and modern contexts, including manuscript editing and theological interpretation. These phenomena have significant implications for preserving textual authenticity, understanding ideological shifts, and developing critical philological methods. The originality of this research lies in its integration of classical Islamic studies with critical philology—particularly Bernard Cerquiglini's theory of textual variance—offering a novel framework to reexamine the dynamics of textual authority and interpretive pluralism in Islamic scholarship.

Keywords: *Arabic philology; textual distortion; hadith transmission; critical philology.*

Introduction

The rapid development of science and technology today has had a significant impact on how Muslims understand religious texts, particularly the Qur'an and Hadith. In the context of globalisation and digitalisation, the dissemination of Islamic texts across various languages and media often results in unintended shifts in meaning. One of the critical challenges arising from this phenomenon is the occurrence of errors in copying or reading texts (*tashīf*, i.e. alteration in word form) and deviations in meaning due to inaccurate interpretation (*taḥrīf*, i.e. distortion of intended meaning). These phenomena affect not only the linguistic aspect but also lead to shifts in values and understandings within the social and religious life of Muslims. Therefore, a more rigorous study of textual change and deviation is necessary as part of the effort to preserve the integrity of Islamic teachings (Wardah, 2002).

Previous studies have made significant contributions to understanding the transmission and authenticity of classical Islamic texts, particularly the Qur'an and Hadith. These studies can generally be grouped into three main categories based on their methodological orientation. First, classical philological research has largely focused on the critique of *isnād* (chain of transmission) and *matn* (text content) within Hadith sciences. Scholars such as Maḥmūd al-Ṭaḥḥān in *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth* (1985) and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ in *Muqaddimah fī ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth* (Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, 2010) have shown how early Islamic scholarship was deeply concerned with preserving textual reliability. Within this framework, the concepts of *tashīf* (copyist errors) and *taḥrīf* (textual distortion) are often mentioned as cautionary issues, yet they are rarely treated as independent subjects of analytical inquiry.

Second, contemporary research on the transmission and interpretation of Islamic texts has increasingly focused on the challenges posed by translation, digitalization, and the evolving socio-cultural landscape of Muslim societies. Scholars have emphasized that translating Qur'anic Arabic into modern languages, particularly English, often results in semantic distortion or interpretive gaps, requiring refined strategies such as semantic balancing, literal translation, and explicative methods to preserve theological nuance (Alhaj, 2024; Chukhanov & Kairbekov, 2024). Efforts to create child-centered Qur'an translations have further complicated this task, as they demand a delicate balance between accessibility and doctrinal accuracy (Kabakci, 2023). At the same time, the digitization of Islamic texts and the use of artificial intelligence for Qur'anic interpretation represent a significant shift in how sacred knowledge is accessed and disseminated (Chukhanov & Kairbekov, 2024; Feener, 2007). These developments parallel broader efforts to reinterpret Islamic scripture in response to contemporary ethical concerns, including gender equity, legal reform, and environmental justice. Saeed (2005) promotes a contextualized, ethico-legal reading of the Qur'an, while Nikmatullah (2024) highlights reinterpretations of gender-related Hadith through reciprocal hermeneutics (*Qira'ah Mubādalah*). Despite this progress, these studies rarely engage with *tashīf* (scribal error) and *taḥrīf* (textual distortion) as distinct methodological problems within textual criticism. Thus, the philological mechanisms underlying textual deviation in Islamic manuscripts remain underexamined in modern discourse, justifying the need for further investigation.

Third, a number of theoretical contributions have attempted to reformulate Islamic textual criticism using interdisciplinary frameworks. Ridlo (2020) emphasizes the importance of philology as a core methodology in reconstructing Islamic knowledge, while Suryadinata (2020) and Rohmah & Rejo (2024) propose models that integrate linguistic, cultural, and historical perspectives. Nonetheless, *tashīf wa taḥrīf* has rarely been studied as a stand-alone analytical category within these models. Its potential as a tool for understanding both textual instability and epistemological shifts remains largely unexplored.

Although considerable work has been done in both classical and modern scholarship, there remains a clear gap in the systematic study of *tashīf wa taḥrīf* as both linguistic phenomena and epistemological challenges. This research seeks to fill that gap by repositioning *tashīf wa taḥrīf* not merely as technical flaws in textual transmission but as key entry points for critically engaging with the dynamics of meaning, authority, and interpretation in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

This study aims to address the aforementioned scholarly gap by offering a systematic and critical investigation of *tashīf* (scribal error) and *taḥrīf* (textual distortion) as independent analytical categories within Arabic philology. Specifically, the research seeks to examine how these phenomena occur in both the *sanad* (chain of transmission) and *matn* (textual content) of Islamic manuscripts, particularly Hadith literature, by identifying their linguistic forms, root causes, and interpretive consequences. By employing a qualitative-descriptive approach grounded in classical and contemporary philological frameworks, this study aims to develop a nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural and epistemological dynamics that contribute to textual variation. In doing so, the research not only reaffirms the relevance of philology as a methodological tool in Islamic studies but also contributes a novel perspective by integrating textual criticism with broader questions of meaning, authority, and authenticity in the transmission of sacred texts.

The central argument of this study posits that *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* are not merely technical anomalies in the transmission of Islamic texts but reflect deeper epistemological disruptions shaped by human limitations, socio-cultural contexts, and interpretive frameworks. The researcher assumes that scribal errors and textual distortions are influenced not only by visual or

auditory misperceptions but also by the ideological and institutional forces surrounding the production and reproduction of religious manuscripts. This hypothesis draws upon the theoretical framework of critical philology, which views textual variation as a product of both material conditions and intellectual intent (Cerquiglini, 1989). In this view, every act of copying, editing, or interpreting a text is embedded within a historical moment that inevitably shapes meaning. Therefore, the study predicts that *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* can serve as indicators of broader epistemic shifts within Islamic intellectual history—highlighting tensions between preservation and reinterpretation, orthodoxy and innovation. This perspective not only challenges the conventional perception of textual stability but also offers a methodological opening to rethink how sacred texts are transmitted, authenticated, and understood across time.

This study focuses its unit of analysis on the concept of *tashīf wa taḥrīf* (scribal errors and textual distortion) as found in classical Arabic texts, particularly religious manuscripts such as the Qur'an and Hadith (Luthfi, 2013). These artifacts are selected for their critical role in Islamic philological studies and their importance in preserving the authenticity of sacred teachings. The research adopts a qualitative-descriptive design using a library research approach (Afifuddin & Ahmad, 2018), which is considered appropriate for analyzing linguistic phenomena within their historical and contextual frameworks. This method enables an in-depth exploration of both classical and contemporary sources, allowing the researcher to trace the development and implications of *tashīf wa taḥrīf* over time (Devi, 2020; Gunawan, 2013).

The data for this study were derived from Islamic scholarly literature, including primary sources such as classical works on Hadith and philology (Fatikhin, 2020), especially *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth* by Maḥmūd al-Ṭaḥḥān, along with various commentaries (*sharḥ*) and treatises on textual criticism. Secondary sources included contemporary academic books, journal articles, and research publications discussing *tashīf wa taḥrīf* from historical, linguistic, and critical perspectives (Akbar, 2022). Data collection was carried out through documentation techniques, involving systematic reading, note-taking, and categorization of texts based on key themes such as definitions, classifications, causes, and implications of textual errors. The researcher ensured reliability through cross-verification of sources to minimize

interpretative bias. Data analysis followed a content analysis technique, beginning with thematic grouping, followed by source triangulation, mapping causal relationships, and finally, synthesizing the findings into a conceptual diagram to visualize the dynamic role of *tashīf wa taḥrīf* in Islamic textual tradition (Suryabrata, 1987).

Results and Discussion

1. Scope of Tashif wa Tahrif: Definition, Division, and Methodology

In the field of Arabic philology, *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* are recognized as central sub-disciplines concerned with textual alteration—either through visual misperception, phonetic confusion, or intentional modification. These terms are not merely descriptive labels but serve as analytical tools for detecting the reliability and transformation of transmitted texts. Hasjim Abbas (2004) underscores that this domain of study focuses on texts whose structure or pronunciation has been altered, whether due to human error or interpretive intention. This assertion is supported by classical philological sources, including the oft-cited definition from Soetari (2000), which describes this science as one that identifies changes that have occurred in both form (*mushahhaf*) and meaning (*muharraf*) of hadiths.

The historical foundation of this distinction is further elaborated in Mahmud al-Ṭaḥḥān's analysis of *tashīf* within the chapter "*al-Mardūd bi Sababi Ṭa'n fī al-Rāwī*" in *Taysīr Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth* (Thahan, 1985). He defines *mushahhaf* as a term derived from *tashīf*, indicating a copyist's error resulting in textual alteration due to misreading a manuscript (*al-Khaṭa' fī al-Ṣaḥīfah*). From this root, the term *as-shuḥufī* arises, referring to someone who misreads and thereby alters the intended meaning (Thahan, 1985). This definition is echoed and nuanced by Rozi (2013), who argues that *tashīf* extends beyond phonetic distortion to include shifts in syntactic and semantic structure, thereby altering the original narrative intent of the transmitter.

Building upon these foundations, as-Sakhawi introduces a slightly broader interpretation by emphasizing semantic deviation—"transforming a word from its familiar form to another meaning" (تحويل الكلمة عن الهيئة غيرها إلى المتعارفة). This conceptualization illustrates that *tashīf* is not limited to orthographic or phonetic flaws but includes any deviation that disrupts the original semantic framework. By contrast, *taḥrīf*—though often used

interchangeably with *tashīf*—carries a wider connotation in both classical and Qur'anic usage. Asriyah (2015) explains that *taḥrīf* encompasses any alteration from an original form, whether by omission, addition, or reinterpretation, and can occur through written or oral transmission.

This broader scope is reflected in Qur'anic discourse itself. In Surah al-Mā'idah (5:13), the term *yuḥarrifūna al-kalim ʿan mawāḍiʿihi* ("they distort the words from their places") is used to describe the deliberate misrepresentation of revealed scripture by the People of the Book. As cited by Salsabila Arrayyan (2023), this verse not only condemns distortion but also frames it as a moral failing—highlighting the theological significance of textual integrity. Consequently, *taḥrīf* is not merely a technical issue but becomes a marker of ethical and doctrinal deviation.

Taken together, these varying definitions illustrate that the scope of *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* is both complex and multilayered—ranging from unintentional scribal mistakes to ideologically motivated reinterpretations. By systematizing these terms within philological inquiry, scholars are able to distinguish between accidental variation and deliberate manipulation, enabling more nuanced judgments regarding textual authenticity. These definitional frameworks, therefore, lay the groundwork for further methodological exploration, particularly in distinguishing between types of textual deviation and in tracing their implications within the broader context of Islamic intellectual history.

Building on the foundational definitions of *tashīf* and *taḥrīf*, Mahmud al-Ṭaḥḥān offers a systematic typology that categorizes textual distortion based on several key criteria ('Itr, 2014). This classification not only aids in understanding the mechanics of textual corruption but also provides a framework for philological analysis in Islamic scholarship. The typology is structured around four primary dimensions: locus of error, sensory cause, linguistic form, and interpretive shift.

First, when examined based on textual position, *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* may occur either in the sanad (chain of transmission) or the matn (content of the text). For instance, in the sanad, Yahya ibn Maʿīn misidentified *al-ʿAwwām ibn Muzāḥim* as *al-ʿAwwām ibn Murājim*, substituting the letters (ز) with (ر), and (ح) with (ج), likely due to visual similarity in handwritten scripts. In the matn, a well-documented case involves the narration of Zayd ibn Thābit, where

iḥtajara fī al-masjid ("he built a wall in the mosque") was erroneously transmitted as *iḥtajama fī al-masjid* ("he cupped in the mosque")—an alteration that significantly shifts the context and meaning of the prophetic action ('Itr, 2014).

Second, considering the sensory cause, *tashīf* may result from either visual or auditory confusion. Visual *tashīf* typically arises due to poor handwriting, deteriorated manuscripts, or the absence of diacritical marks. A prominent example is Abu Bakr as-Shulī's misreading of the word *sittan* (six days) in the hadith about fasting six days of Shawwāl as *shay'an* (something)—a misreading with potential legal and devotional implications. Auditory *tashīf*, on the other hand, stems from phonetic similarity and listening errors, especially in oral transmission. A case in point involves the confusion between *ʿĀṣim al-Aḥwal* and *Wāṣil al-Aḥdab*, where the latter was incorrectly substituted due to similar phonological patterns, known in Arabic morphology as *wazn ṣarf* ('Itr, 2014).

Third, from a linguistic perspective, *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* can be classified based on whether the alteration affects the script or the intended meaning. Some changes are explicit, such as the replacement or omission of letters, which clearly deviate from the original text. Others are more subtle, involving no alteration in spelling or pronunciation but a deviation in comprehension or intended referent. An illustrative case is the misunderstanding by al-Ḥāfiẓ Muḥammad ibn Mūsā al-ʿAnazī, who interpreted the Prophet's prayer "*ṣallā ilā ʿAnazah*" as referring to the tribe of ʿAnazah, rather than to the spear (*ʿanzah*) placed before him as a marker for prayer direction—highlighting how semantic misinterpretation can alter the theological and historical understanding of a hadith ('Itr, 2014).

Finally, Al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar offers a summative classification that bridges prior dimensions by distinguishing between *mushahhaf* and *muḥarraf* traditions. A *mushahhaf* hadith involves changes in diacritical points or script markings, while a *muḥarraf* hadith includes alterations based on misjudgment or incorrect contextual assumptions, even if the script remains intact. This distinction underlines that distortion may occur not only in form but also in hermeneutic process—posing a more complex challenge to textual preservation and interpretation ('Itr, 2014).

Taken together, these layered classifications demonstrate that *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* are not limited to mechanical transcription errors but encompass a spectrum of textual disruptions with significant theological, legal, and epistemological consequences. This structured analysis not only supports the need for rigorous philological verification but also repositions these phenomena as central concerns in contemporary Islamic textual criticism.

Table 1 Typological Classification of Tashīf and Taḥrīf

Dimension	Category	Form of Distortion	Example	Classical Terminology
Location in Text	*Sanad* (Chain)	Letter replacement	*al-ʿAwwām ibn Murājim → al-ʿAwwām ibn Muzāḥim*	*Mushahhaf*
	Matn (Content)	Word substitution	*iḥtajara fī al-masjid → iḥtajama fī al-masjid*	*Mushahhaf*
Sensory Cause	Visual Error	Misreading due to similar letters	*sittan → shay'an*	*Tashīf al-Baṣarī* (by sight)
	Auditory Error	Mishearing during oral transmission	*ʿĀṣim al-Aḥwal → Wāṣil al-Aḥdab*	*Tashīf as-Samāʿī* (by hearing)
Linguistic Form	Orthographic	Change in letters or dots	Change in diacritic marks	*Mushahhaf*
	Semantic	Same spelling, different interpretation	*ṣallā ilā ʿAnazah* interpreted as tribe vs spear	*Muḥarraf*

Philological Framing	Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī	Form distortion (letter-level)	Altered diacritic or form	*Mushahhaf Hadith*
		Meaning distortion (conceptual-level)	Misreading intent/context	*Muḥarraf Hadith*

The preceding typology of *tashīf wa taḥrīf* reveals a multidimensional framework for understanding textual deviation. This is further illustrated in Table 1, which synthesizes the categorization of these phenomena based on textual location (sanad or matn), sensory cause (visual or auditory), linguistic form (written or semantic), and classical classification such as those proposed by al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar. According to his model, *mushahhaf* refers to a hadith altered in form (e.g., diacritical errors), while *muḥarraf* signifies a shift in meaning, even if the script remains unchanged. This conceptual matrix affirms that textual distortion in Islamic literature cannot be reduced to mere scribal mistakes; it requires a comprehensive analytical approach that accounts for physical, cognitive, and interpretive factors in the transmission process.

To operationalize this analysis, scholars of Arabic philology have developed methodological tools that not only detect distortion but aim to restore the original textual integrity. The study of *tashīf*, in particular, is oriented toward reconstruction, requiring techniques that compare variant manuscripts and resolve ambiguities through informed philological judgment. Harun (1998) identifies several foundational methods: first, analysis of ancient manuscripts, which involves collating textual variants across extant codices to approximate the original reading; second, linguistic analysis, which interprets word usage, morphology, and syntax in classical Arabic to recover probable meanings; and third, historical contextualization, which investigates the socio-political and cultural conditions under which texts were produced and transmitted. These methods do not merely aim at restoring correct wording, but at reestablishing meaning within the broader epistemic horizon of the text's intended function.

On the other hand, the methodology applied to *taḥrīf*—textual distortion—leans more heavily on critical detection rather than reconstruction. Since *taḥrīf* often involves deliberate or ideologically driven manipulation, the focus shifts to exposing patterns of alteration that reflect shifts in theological, legal, or sectarian interests. This includes three key approaches: (1) textual criticism, which identifies inconsistencies or interpolations within the manuscript tradition; (2) historical criticism, which contextualizes textual changes within broader historical dynamics of power, doctrine, or reform; and (3) oral tradition studies, which trace distortions arising during oral transmission by comparing multiple chains of narration and performance-based variants. These techniques aim to unearth not just *what* changed, but *why* it changed—highlighting the intersection of text, authority, and ideology.

Thus, while *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* differ in intention and effect—reconstruction versus detection—their shared methodological orientation underscores the central aim of philological inquiry: to discern the authentic voice of tradition amid layers of historical transmission. In Qur'anic and Hadith studies, such methods are vital not only for textual preservation but for the cultivation of interpretive responsibility. By recognizing distortion not as an anomaly but as an inevitable feature of transmission, philology invites scholars to approach sacred texts with both reverence and rigor—balancing fidelity to the source with critical engagement of its historical trajectory.

2. Factors Affecting the Presence of Tashif wa Tahrif Sub-Science in Philology

In the field of philology, the accurate comprehension of ancient texts is fundamental for reconstructing historical narratives, cultural expressions, and intellectual traditions (Fahmi, 2022). However, this process is often complicated by the recurring phenomenon of textual distortion—namely, *tashīf* (scribal misreading) and *taḥrīf* (semantic alteration). These two phenomena are not only relevant as linguistic anomalies but represent a deeper layer of philological concern related to the transmission and reception of texts (Almakki, 2018). Their presence signifies potential epistemic shifts that impact the way texts are interpreted and historically positioned (Deviyanti, 2022). Therefore, identifying and analysing the contributing factors to *tashīf* wa *taḥrīf* becomes crucial for understanding how these distortions emerge and persist in manuscript traditions.

The first and perhaps most evident factor is the human element involved in the process of text reproduction. Human error—whether in copying, interpreting, or reciting—inevitably contributes to the appearance of distortions. Copyists, especially those lacking sufficient training or working under time pressure, are susceptible to visual and auditory misperceptions. These errors can manifest in the misreading of similar-looking Arabic letters or the mishearing of phonetically similar words during oral transmission, resulting in the transformation of *sanad* or *matn* content (Rozi, 2013). Furthermore, human motivations—whether ideological, theological, or political—may consciously or unconsciously lead to the insertion, omission, or reinterpretation of certain phrases, further intensifying the phenomenon of *taḥrīf*.

Beyond individual factors, the socio-cultural context in which a text is transmitted plays a significant role in shaping its form and content. Texts are never circulated in a vacuum; they are constantly negotiated within the norms, power structures, and intellectual climates of their time. During periods of intense political or theological contestation, manuscripts may be subtly altered to reflect dominant ideologies or suppress dissenting voices. Censorship, reinterpretation, or selective transmission of controversial passages can thus be viewed as a socially driven form of *taḥrīf*. As societies evolve, so too does the hermeneutic lens through which ancient texts are understood—sometimes leading to reinterpretations that diverge substantially from the original intent (Asriyah, 2015). This dynamic reveals that *tashīf* wa *taḥrīf* are not merely technical issues but culturally embedded phenomena.

A third influential factor stems from the very practice of textual criticism itself. While intended as a method for safeguarding authenticity, the tools of criticism—if poorly applied or influenced by bias—can become sources of distortion. Misguided efforts to harmonise conflicting narrations or reconstruct incomplete manuscripts can inadvertently introduce changes that deviate from the original. This is especially true in the study of Hadith and the Qur'an, where modern and classical scholars alike grapple with issues of variant readings (*qirā'āt*), weak narrators, and differing manuscript traditions. When critical methodologies are misused or insufficiently grounded in the linguistic and historical context of the text, the result is often a distortion rather than a clarification of meaning (Abbas, 2004).

Taken together, these factors demonstrate that *tashīf* wa *taḥrīf* are multifaceted phenomena, rooted in human limitations, cultural dynamics, and methodological practices. As such, philology plays a pivotal role in not only identifying and classifying these textual changes but also in interrogating the historical and intellectual conditions under which they arise. It is this critical function of philology that enables scholars to distinguish between natural textual variants and those distortions that carry significant epistemological consequences. The challenge, therefore, lies not merely in tracing errors, but in understanding their implications for the transmission of knowledge, authority, and religious authenticity across time.

3. Implications of Tashif wa Tahrif in Arabic Manuscripts

The phenomena of *tashīf* (scribal errors) and *taḥrīf* (textual distortion) in Arabic manuscripts carry profound implications that extend beyond mere linguistic inaccuracies. These phenomena serve as critical entry points for examining theological, philosophical, and political discourses that have shaped Islamic tradition across centuries. Scholars have long regarded the accurate preservation of the Qur'an and Hadith as foundational to maintaining the integrity of Islamic teachings. As Kurniawan (2017) points out, the historical scrutiny of sacred texts reflects not only a scholarly concern for authenticity but also a communal responsibility to safeguard divine revelation from corruption or falsification.

In this regard, the work of Mahmud Thahhān (1985) provides a nuanced lens into how textual inconsistencies are evaluated within the Hadith tradition. Thahhān identifies two broad implications of *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* concerning narrator credibility (*ḍabṭ al-rāwī*). When textual errors are infrequent, they are considered natural and forgivable, reflecting the human limitations of even the most reliable narrators. However, repeated inaccuracies by a transmitter are seen as detrimental to his intellectual trustworthiness, which may lead to the rejection of the narration. This insight illustrates that textual errors, while technical in appearance, can affect the epistemological status of the entire narration and influence juridical outcomes.

The implications of *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* can be both constructive and problematic. On the positive side, their identification reinforces the preservation of textual authenticity. Awareness of these phenomena

motivates scholars to employ rigorous verification methods to ensure that the Qur'an and Hadith remain unaltered across generations (Wahab, 2020). This commitment helps maintain consistency in religious teachings, promotes doctrinal stability, and strengthens communal identity. Moreover, the scrutiny of textual variants fosters the development of robust hermeneutical tools in Islamic scholarship, such as isnād analysis, matn comparison, and philological critique.

However, these benefits are counterbalanced by potential negative consequences. A rigid application of the concept may lead to sectarian conflict or interreligious polemics, especially when *taḥrīf* is used to delegitimize other faith traditions—as implied in some classical readings of Qur'an 5:13. Furthermore, excessive concern with textual purity can stifle critical inquiry and inhibit interpretive pluralism within the Muslim ummah. As religious communities confront modern challenges—ranging from gender discourse to ecological ethics—a narrow insistence on textual fixity may prevent much-needed renewal. Such rigidity can result in the ossification of religious thought, making it difficult for Islam to respond effectively to evolving socio-cultural realities.

Therefore, a balanced approach is crucial—one that safeguards the textual heritage of Islam while also embracing critical engagement and contextual adaptation. The goal should not be merely to preserve words, but to ensure that the message continues to resonate meaningfully across generations. This dialectic between conservation and reinterpretation is precisely what makes *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* such important objects of study in Arabic philology and Islamic thought. These points are concisely summarized in Table 2.

While much of the discussion surrounding *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* centers on classical texts, it is important to acknowledge that these phenomena are not confined to the past. Contemporary instances, though less frequent, continue to occur—primarily due to human oversight such as haste in transcription (*bi sababi al-ʿujlah*) or limited editorial expertise (*qullat al-maʿrifah*), especially in the process of manuscript verification (*ʿilm al-taḥqīq*). In the modern era, these textual deviations often arise not from intentional distortion, but rather from inadvertent errors by copyists, editors, or publishers tasked with producing reliable versions of classical works.

Table 2. Implications of the Concept *of Tashif wa Tahrif*

No.	Positive	Negative
1	Maintaining the Authenticity of the Sacred Texts	Tensions between Groups
2	Encourage the Maintenance of Text Integrity	Limiting Criticism and Interpretation
3	Maintaining the Consistency of Religious Teachings	Inability to Thrive

A pertinent example can be found in *al-Aḥkām al-Wusṭā* by al-Ḥāfiẓ ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq al-Ishbīlī, where a *tashīf* appears in the transcription of a Hadith:

$$((\text{هكذا المتيمم يمسح ، فبدأ من مقدم رأسه إلى آخره}))$$

The problematic word *al-mutyammim* (the one performing tayammum) appears incongruous with the context. Ibn al-Qaṭṭān notes that the correct word should likely be *al-yatīm* (the orphan), suggesting a scribal error influenced by the surrounding topic—*tayammum* (dry ablution)—which may have biased the scribe's choice of vocabulary. This case illustrates how textual context can unconsciously shape reproduction choices, reinforcing the need for meticulous editorial review and philological expertise.

These observations lead to a deeper legal and scholarly debate: should textual errors in *sanad* (chain of transmission) or *matn* (content) be corrected post-discovery? The answer is far from unanimous. One camp of scholars insists that erroneous renderings must remain untouched, arguing that any attempt to "correct" a mistake risks imposing subjectivity onto the transmission and blurring the line between the original and the editorially reconstructed. According to this view, fidelity to the manuscript—even with its imperfections—is paramount. In contrast, another scholarly camp, including figures like Ibn al-Mubārak and al-Awzāʿī, supports emendation where textual corruption is evident, allowing corrected versions to be taught and transmitted. This approach prioritizes the preservation of intended meaning over the preservation of flawed form.

Navigating between these two views, Imam Nawawī offers a mediatory position. He suggests that scribal errors should be left as they are in the original text, but with annotated corrections added in marginal notes or

commentaries. This allows readers to access both the flawed transmission and the scholarly reconstruction, enabling transparency and interpretive discretion. Such a balanced approach reinforces the importance of intellectual humility in philology—recognizing that while textual preservation is critical, so too is the responsibility to guide readers through its potential errors (Rozi, 2013).

Ultimately, these discussions underscore that *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* are not only linguistic anomalies but also hermeneutical challenges that invite ethical and methodological reflection. They compel scholars to grapple with questions of authority, authenticity, and interpretive responsibility—both in classical exegesis and in the ongoing task of preserving the Islamic intellectual tradition in an age of global textual circulation.

4. Rethinking Tashīf wa Taḥrīf through the Lens of Critical Philology

The preceding results reveal that the phenomena of *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* in Arabic manuscripts are not mere technical errors but complex epistemological events that reflect historical, ideological, and cognitive dimensions of textual transmission. This multi-layered nature aligns closely with Bernard Cerquiglini's proposition in *Éloge de la Variante* (1989), which challenges the assumption of a single, stable, and original text. Instead, Cerquiglini proposes that all texts are fundamentally *variant*—produced, reproduced, and altered within the social, material, and intellectual conditions of their time. When applied to the Islamic tradition, particularly the transmission of Hadith and Qur'anic manuscripts, this theory helps recast *tashīf wa taḥrīf* not merely as faults but as windows into the dynamics of textual meaning, authority, and historical change.

From this perspective, the traditional Islamic scholarly effort to identify, classify, and—where necessary—correct distortions mirrors Cerquiglini's emphasis on the importance of textual variation as a historical trace. The typological classification outlined in the results (visual vs. auditory errors, orthographic vs. semantic distortions, etc.) reflects an embedded recognition that textual transmission is inherently susceptible to fluctuation, and that meaning is continually negotiated through this flux. In particular, Ibn Ḥajar's distinction between *mushahhaf* (form-based distortion) and *muḥarraf* (meaning-based distortion) resonates with Cerquiglini's view that every act of copying is also an act of interpretation—no reproduction is neutral.

Furthermore, the cases of mistaken identity in *sanad*, or interpretive misreadings of *matn*, as seen in the *'Anazah* example or the substitution of *al-yatīm* with *al-mutyammim*, illustrate how ideological context, visual limitations, or assumptions of the scribe contribute to textual transformation. Rather than being anomalies, these cases demonstrate that sacred texts are not transmitted in a vacuum but are shaped by human subjectivity and historical contingency. As Cerquiglini argues, the search for a fixed "ur-text" is a modern illusion; the manuscript tradition is inherently plural and contingent.

This theoretical grounding challenges the rigid philological pursuit of an unaltered original and opens up a more reflective stance on textual authenticity. It aligns with the mediatory position of Imam Nawawī, who allowed for the retention of flawed texts with scholarly annotation. His approach, like Cerquiglini's, acknowledges that the scholarly act is not about eliminating variation, but about making variation legible, traceable, and meaningful. Thus, the act of "preserving" tradition necessarily involves an interpretive dimension—what Cerquiglini would call *critical engagement* with variant texts.

Repositioning *tashīf wa taḥrīf* within a *critical philology* framework provides a deeper appreciation for their role in Islamic intellectual history. Rather than viewing these textual phenomena solely as defects to be corrected, they should be approached as evidence of historical processes, shifts in hermeneutic authority, and the evolving nature of scriptural understanding. Such a view invites a more nuanced, dynamic engagement with Islamic texts, one that embraces both the integrity of tradition and the historical realities of its transmission.

Compared to previous studies, the present research offers a distinct analytical contribution by positioning *tashīf wa taḥrīf* not merely as incidental technical issues within textual transmission, but as central and independent objects of philological inquiry. While classical scholarship—exemplified by figures such as Maḥmūd al-Ṭaḥḥān and Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ—has thoroughly examined the integrity of *isnād* and *matn*, their treatment of scribal and interpretive deviations often appears ancillary, subsumed within broader discussions of narrator reliability or textual authentication. In contrast, this study foregrounds *tashīf wa taḥrīf* as phenomena with their own internal

logic, typology, and methodological implications. Furthermore, contemporary research has primarily addressed semantic shifts arising from translation, digitization, and contextual re-interpretation of Islamic texts (Alhaj, 2024; Nikmatullah, 2024; Saeed, 2005), yet it tends to overlook the micro-level textual distortions embedded in manuscript traditions. This study thus fills a critical gap by offering a structured typology of *tashīf wa taḥrīf*, demonstrating their theological, epistemological, and philological stakes. The novelty of this research lies in its systematic integration of classical textual analysis with the conceptual frameworks of *critical philology*, especially Cerquiglini's theory of textual variance, thereby expanding the methodological horizon of Islamic manuscript studies beyond traditional authenticity frameworks.

The findings of this study demonstrate that *tashīf* and *taḥrīf* are not merely anomalies of manuscript transmission but represent deep-seated ideological, social, and historical tensions within the broader landscape of Islamic intellectual tradition. Textual distortions—whether accidental or deliberate—signal more than mechanical errors; they mark the shifting authority structures, theological contestations, and interpretive strategies that accompany the evolution of sacred knowledge. As Chukhanov and Kairbekov (2024) note, the semantic and linguistic integrity of Islamic texts is constantly negotiated through processes of reinterpretation shaped by sociocultural pressures. The fact that translation and digitalization have further exposed texts to semantic drift reinforces the relevance of *tashīf wa taḥrīf* in modern contexts of religious engagement.

Moreover, the persistence of these phenomena into the contemporary era—despite advances in editing technologies and digitization platforms—illustrates the enduring fragility of textual transmission. Even with increasing scholarly attention to precision, human oversight and limited editorial capacity can still lead to critical errors in manuscript reproduction (Alhaj, 2024). As modern Muslim intellectuals like Saeed (2005) and Nikmatullah (2024) advocate for ethico-legal and gender-aware hermeneutics, this study affirms that *tashīf wa taḥrīf* must be recognized not only as technical concerns but also as interpretive fault lines that challenge claims to absolute textual fixity .

Ultimately, the implications of this research align with critical philological concerns. As Feener (2007) show, the interplay between tradition and modernity—especially in areas such as education, sustainability, and gender justice—requires both fidelity to classical frameworks and openness to contemporary reinterpretation. Thus, *tashīf wa taḥrīf*, when critically examined, do not merely disrupt tradition but become productive sites for rethinking the boundaries of textual integrity, editorial ethics, and communal authority in an age of accelerated textual circulation.

Conclusion

This study reveals that *tashīf wa taḥrīf* (textual distortion and alteration) is a critical phenomenon in Arabic philology, particularly affecting the transmission of ḥadīth texts. The key finding emphasizes that most textual errors result from the visual similarity of Arabic letters—such as *jīm* (ج), *ḥāʾ* (ح), and *khāʾ* (خ)—compounded by the absence of diacritical marks in early manuscripts. These orthographic ambiguities often lead to semantic distortions, especially when the oral transmission process (*samāʿ*) and the ethical supervision of teachers or editors are lacking. Beyond mere technical error, such distortions reflect deeper historical and epistemological dynamics that influence the preservation and interpretation of sacred texts. Therefore, the study highlights the necessity of rigorous philological awareness to ensure textual integrity, underscoring that *tashīf wa taḥrīf* are not accidental slips but critical markers of the evolving relationship between language, meaning, and authority in Islamic intellectual history.

The central contribution of this research lies in reinterpreting *tashīf wa taḥrīf* not as mere technical faults, but as productive analytical categories in philological and critical textual studies. By integrating classical Islamic scholarship with the theoretical lens of critical philology—particularly Bernard Cerquiglini's notion of textual variance—the study bridges traditional Islamic disciplines and modern interpretive frameworks. It offers a methodological advance in recognizing *tashīf wa taḥrīf* as historical signals of meaning-making, doctrinal shifts, and the evolution of scriptural authority. Moreover, it brings to light new questions about the role of scribes, editors, and scholars in mediating between textual fidelity and evolving interpretive needs in both classical and contemporary Islamic thought.

Nevertheless, this study also acknowledges its limitations. While the analysis draws on selected classical cases and key theoretical references, it is limited by the absence of a broader empirical survey of manuscript variations across regional traditions and historical periods. Additionally, the exploration of contemporary digital and AI-driven textual reproductions in the context of *tashīf wa taḥrīf* remains underdeveloped and could benefit from deeper investigation. Future research should expand on this foundation by incorporating quantitative textual comparison across manuscript families, as well as exploring how emerging technologies influence modern perceptions of textual integrity and authenticity in the Muslim world.

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