

Laughter and Humour in the Life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and His Companions: A Critical Exploration

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Abstract

Laughter and humour in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his Companions have often been underexplored within the context of Islamic scholarship, yet they offer valuable insights into the human dimensions of Islamic teachings. This paper employs a qualitative, historical research methodology to examine the role of humour in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his closest associates, as documented in early Islamic sources, particularly Hadith literature. Through a critical textual analysis of authentic narrations, the study employs thematic and hermeneutic approaches to explore how humour functioned as a tool for building community, fostering compassion, and diffusing tension. The paper also utilises a comparative analysis of various Hadiths to illustrate the Prophet's use of humour, revealing how his light-hearted interactions were framed not as frivolous but as expressions of wisdom, kindness, and accessibility. Additionally, a sociocultural analysis is applied to explore how the Prophet's Companions, including utilising humour in their daily lives, reflect the ethical and social dimensions of laughter in early Islamic society. The study further contextualises humour within the broader social and moral frameworks of early Islam, assessing how it reinforced community cohesion, challenged arrogance, and emphasised the transient nature of worldly life. Ultimately, this study underscores that laughter and humour in the life of the Prophet and his Companions were integral to cultivating humility, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the divine. By examining the intersection of humour with faith through a multidimensional approach, this paper contributes to a richer understanding of Islamic ethics and spirituality, demonstrating that laughter, in its proper context, can be a meaningful aspect of the believer's relationship with God and society.

Keywords: *Laughter, Humour, Prophet Muhammad, Companions, Hadith, Ethics, Humility, Community.*

Abstrak

Tawa dan humor dalam kehidupan Nabi Muhammad (PBUH) dan para sahabatnya seringkali kurang dieksplorasi dalam konteks studi Islam, namun keduanya menawarkan wawasan berharga tentang dimensi manusiawi ajaran Islam. Artikel ini menggunakan metodologi penelitian kualitatif dan historis untuk mengkaji peran humor dalam kehidupan Nabi Muhammad dan para sahabat terdekatnya, sebagaimana tercatat dalam sumber-sumber Islam awal, khususnya literatur Hadis. Melalui analisis teks kritis terhadap narasi-narasi otentik, studi ini menggunakan pendekatan tematik dan hermeneutik untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana humor berfungsi sebagai alat untuk membangun komunitas, menumbuhkan kasih sayang, dan meredakan ketegangan. Makalah ini juga menggunakan analisis komparatif berbagai Hadis untuk menggambarkan penggunaan humor oleh Nabi, mengungkapkan bahwa interaksi ringan beliau tidak dipandang sebagai hal yang remeh, melainkan sebagai ungkapan

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kebijaksanaan, kebaikan, dan keterbukaan. Selain itu, analisis sosiokultural diterapkan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana Sahabat Nabi, termasuk penggunaan humor dalam kehidupan sehari-hari mereka, mencerminkan dimensi etis dan sosial tawa dalam masyarakat Islam awal. Studi ini juga menempatkan humor dalam kerangka sosial dan moral yang lebih luas dalam Islam awal, menilai bagaimana humor memperkuat kohesi komunitas, menantang kesombongan, dan menekankan sifat sementara kehidupan duniawi. Pada akhirnya, studi ini menekankan bahwa tawa dan humor dalam kehidupan Nabi dan Sahabat-Sahabatnya merupakan bagian integral dalam menumbuhkan kerendahan hati, empati, dan pemahaman yang lebih dalam tentang yang ilahi. Dengan menganalisis perpotongan antara humor dan iman melalui pendekatan multidimensional, makalah ini berkontribusi pada pemahaman yang lebih kaya tentang etika dan spiritualitas Islam, menunjukkan bahwa tawa, dalam konteks yang tepat, dapat menjadi aspek yang bermakna dalam hubungan seorang mukmin dengan Tuhan dan masyarakat.

Kata Kunci: *Tawa, Humor, Nabi Muhammad, Sahabat, Hadis, Etika, Kerendahan Hati, Komunitas.*

INTRODUCTION

Since the Danish Cartoon controversy in 2005 and the subsequent Muslim reactions, questions have been raised by some non-Muslim individuals regarding the sense of humour among Muslims. Can they understand a joke?¹ There have been assumptions that Islam, as a faith, is defined solely by its rigid laws and rules, with its followers perceived as devoid of humour, laughter, or the capacity for enjoyment. Some in the West looked at the Muslim World as either a sensual paradise or a breeding ground for terrorism. Both views are incorrect. There were initiatives like the Canadian Muslim Sitcom of 2007, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, which aimed to demonstrate that Muslims do have a sense of humour.²

On the Muslim side, some individuals, while presenting themselves as devout and committed to the teachings of Islam, have cultivated a persona that suggests a constant seriousness, one that refuses to engage in smiling or laughter. These individuals often portray the Prophet Muhammad as an almost superhuman figure, suggesting that certain human emotions, such as laughter, did not apply to him. Certain Muslim societies, like the example of Malaysian Muslims and their responses and sensitivities towards some comedians and their jokes.³

This paper seeks to challenge such notions by demonstrating that the Prophet Muhammad did indeed engage in moments of humour. Employing a qualitative research methodology, it aims to analyse the Sunni Hadith tradition and classical biographical works (*sīrah*) to provide evidence of the Prophet's involvement in humorous moments.

The scope of this paper does not include an exploration of the technical lexical meanings or nuances of the Arabic words for laughter and humour. It will also refrain from discussing the legal perspectives on permissible and impermissible laughter, as addressed by jurists (*fuqaha*), or from delving into the Sufi stance on laughter, particularly those who are seen as critical of it. These include Imām al-Ghazālī and others who were critical of excessive laughter.⁴ It will avoid the discussion of those who approached the

¹ Amin, Y. *Muslims and Humour*, (University of Exeter, 2020), 3

² Mazolph, U. *Revisiting the Social and Religious Value of Humour*, (2011) 169-171

³ Mahaiyadin, Opir & Abdul Wakil. *Is it Permissible to Make Jokes and use Humour in Islam?*, (2024) 1605

⁴ Amin, Y. *Muslims and Humour*, (2020) 41

topic of humour by relying on anecdotes and storytellers and personalities like Juhā.⁵ Additionally, the paper will not apply modern humour theories to the Hadith, as these theories were developed centuries after the Prophet's time in different contexts and cultures, making them inappropriate for this analysis. A comprehensive review of these topics, including an extensive literature review, can be found in the doctoral thesis by Y. Amin, submitted to the University of Exeter in 2020, which covers these aspects in detail, referencing early works in both Arabic and English, including the writings of Margoliouth (1927), Rosenthal (1956), Qaradawi, Hasan Abu Ghuddah, Seilham, Ludwig, and others.⁶

Moreover, this study will not engage with the subject of laughter in the Qur'an, as this would inevitably lead to discussions surrounding God's laughter and anthropomorphic interpretations, which fall outside the scope of this paper.

The decision to avoid definitional discussions is also because scholars of Hadith have differed in their interpretation of the terms used in the narrations. For example, there is a debate about whether a narration implies the Prophet *smiled* or *laughed*. As such, this paper will adopt a simple approach focusing on practical occurrences. This paper will focus on randomly selected Hadith that depict the Prophet Muhammad in various social situations, identifying humorous elements within these accounts. The analysis will attempt to interpret these statements or moments through the lens of Hadith exegesis, relying on the interpretations of scholars who specialize in this field, addressing whether there are instances or examples of laughter or humour in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, whether these humorous moments were initiated by him or by someone around him, and finally, what impact these humorous moments had on those around the Prophet.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs qualitative and historical research methodologies to examine the role of humor and laughter in the life of the Prophet Muhammad and his closest companions. The research specifically focuses on a critical textual analysis of early Islamic sources, particularly the Hadith literature (the collection of the Prophet's sayings, actions, and tacit approvals) and classical biographical works (*sīrah*).

The study's approach is thematic and hermeneutic, used to interpret and analyze randomly selected authentic narratives (as indicated in the "Selected Hadith" and "Textual Analysis" sections) that depict the Prophet Muhammad in various social situations. The primary objective is to explore how humor served as an effective tool for (1) building community and strengthening social bonds (Affiliative Humor), (2) fostering affection and care, (3) alleviating tension and stress in difficult or serious situations, and (4) conveying wisdom and moral guidance (Humor as a Teaching Tool).

Furthermore, the study adopts a comparative analysis of various Hadith narratives to illustrate the types of the Prophet's laughter or smiles (a typology) and to assert that his lighthearted interactions were not seen as trivial, but rather as expressions of wisdom, kindness, and openness. Finally, a sociocultural analysis is applied to explore how the companions' experiences of humor in daily life reflected the ethical and social

⁵ Corrao, F. Some Observations on Humour in Islamic Culture, (Budapest Studies, 2016) 2-4

⁶ Amin, Y. Muslims and Humour, (2020) 70-82

dimensions of laughter in early Islamic society. This research seeks to answer key questions regarding the existence, initiation, and impact of moments of humor in the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Humour in Human Behaviour and Social Interaction

There is substantial medical research on the effect of humour on the body and metabolism. Some of this research has established that humour has an impact on the immune system, the respiratory and cardiovascular functions. It is established that people who make regular use of humour are less prone to being affected by illnesses.⁷ Army studies in the US have looked at humour extensively, and some of these have established that cadets using humour as a coping mechanism were less likely to quit than those who did not. There have also been some studies on humour as an important quality of a good leader. Humour serves as a tool to establish a better fit with one's environment. While in the workplace, humour is a social lubricant and a tool fostering flexibility and adaptability, which releases tension, eases communication with others and facilitates the establishment of wider social networks. Other studies have established the effect of humorous interventions on patient behaviour in a psychiatric ward. It is effective in dealing with behavioural and emotional issues in the classroom.⁸

Barbara Plester (2009) focuses on humour in the workplace. Her findings could be applied to adults in stressful or pressurised circumstances. Humour is pervasive, ingrained, and a "highly meaningful aspect of human experience"⁹ and is therefore decidedly relevant in organisational contexts. Her research, although concentrated in New Zealand, does address questions that apply to everyone. The specific question explored in her paper is: How do people use humour to cope with the vagaries, tensions, and daily difficulties encountered in their working lives? There is considerable interest in work, leisure, and well-being in modern organisations. Involvement in positive leisure activities promotes physical health and psychological well-being. Humour can be a useful discursive strategy to achieve politeness and assist with team creation at work and productivity. However, there is a need for humour to be used appropriately, or it can backfire and cause disharmony. Humour makes the workplace more pleasant and reduces stress and tension, and can also offer people the chance to discuss painful events within a format that reduces distress and anxiety. Banter between colleagues relieves boredom at work¹⁰ and contributes to group cohesiveness. More managers and organisational leaders are identifying the need for employees to laugh at work.¹¹

⁷ Martin, R A., Humour, Laughter and Physical Health: Methodological Issues and Research Findings, *Psychological Bulletin*, Aug 2001, 127(4): (2001), 504-19, DOI:[10.1037/0033-2909.127.4.504](https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.4.504)

⁸ Fovet, F. The use of Humour in Classroom Interventions with students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 14(4), (2009), 275–289

⁹ Westwood, R & Rhodes, C. Humour, Work and Organization, Routledge, London, (2007) 5

¹⁰ Plester & Sayers, *Taking the piss*, Functions of banter in the IT industry, *International Journal of Humor Research* 20(2), (2007), 157-187

¹¹ Plester, B. Healthy humour, Using humour to cope at work. *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 4(1), (2009). 89–102.

When analysing the Hadith, it will become obvious that the humour used by the Prophet in different situations was effective in maintaining his relationship with his Companions and also served as a means of educating or guiding them.

Faith and Humour

The relation of humour and religion seems to be a strange combination. Both are found in all cultures and periods of history. However, the relationship between the two has received little attention. Classical and contemporary theories of religion make almost no mention of humour. Textbooks, encyclopedias, and reference works on religion rarely contain an entry on humour. Either humour and religion have little connection, or the relation between the two has been overlooked.¹² Within Islamic scholarship, the topic of humour and laughter may have received some attention in the Hadith that describe the Prophet Muhammad and his interaction with his Companions. Some of the jurists (fuqaha) have briefly touched on the legal aspects related to the permissible and impermissible joking, along with some discussion on the ethical considerations.

However, writers like Morreall depict the treatment of Islam of the topic as superficial, and he appears to support the view that Muslims are lacking in humour. He also argues that there are no comic role models in Islam, no emphasis on the love of God, and no sense of playfulness.¹³ While this paper does not intend to engage with and disprove all these inaccuracies, it will focus on the aspect of humour and laughter in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, which by default, will clarify some of these.

Scholars like McFadden¹⁴ argue that humour undergirds faith. Cloete likes to believe that having a positive, humorous attitude towards life and the self signals transcendence and takes people's active participation in being people of faith seriously, but also their embodied experiences. However, he is of the view that we cannot be saved or come to faith by humour, but that humour can be an expression of such¹⁵

Cloete poses a few questions: Does humour serve the common good? What about the ethics of humour? Are certain rules needed to make humour a positive and constructive element of our everyday living? These are indeed valid questions because there is enough evidence to suggest that humour can also be employed to cause harm and can contain important social elements like power. It is useful to present a summary of different individual uses of humour as part of communication. This summary also assists in providing a broader and more nuanced understanding of humour. The summary identifies four ways in which humour can be used: 1. Affiliative humour suggests people spontaneously amuse others and, by doing so, facilitate relationships with others, while reducing interpersonal tensions. 2. Self-enhancing humour describes those who have a humorous outlook and are often amused by the discordance of life. 3. Aggressive humour includes sarcasm, teasing, and generally putting others down. This form of humour can potentially harm others. 4. Self-defeating humour entails the use of humour in a manner

¹² Gardner, R.A. Humour and Religion: New Directions?. In: Derrin, D., Burrows, H. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour, History, and Methodology*. Palgrave Macmillan, (Cham. 2020) 151

¹³ Gardner, R. A. Humour and Religion. (Cham 2020) 159

¹⁴ McFadden, S. H. The Paradoxes of Humour and the Burdens of Despair. *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, 16(3–4), (2004) 13–27

¹⁵ Cloete, A., Revisiting the Social and Religious Value of Humour, *Stellenbosch Theological Journal Supp.* Vol 5, No 2, (2019), 81–94

that is self-destructive. In other words, funny things are said at one's own expense. However, humour does not necessarily fit rigidly into these classifications. There is often an overlap between these.¹⁶ Some factors determine why something may be considered humorous, and these include the context, culture, and language usage that would include how words or phrases evolve with time and communicational dynamics.¹⁷

Humour may be regarded as an expression of a level of tolerance towards the difficulties of social existence. On the other hand, living in the Muslim World proves that beyond the theoretical foundations, the practical evaluations and consequences of humour are limited.¹⁸

Understanding Humour in Islamic Tradition

There seems to be somewhat increased interest in understanding the aspect of humour in Islam, more especially since it appears to be unknown or not discussed. It could also be that not much attention has been given to the topic in contemporary times, given the seriousness of situations in Palestine, Sudan, and other regions.

For the Prophet Muhammad's message to have some impact on the people, his personality had to be one that attracted people or at least made them amenable to want to listen to him. The Quran is, therefore, the point of departure when discussing humour in the Prophet's life.

Verse 159 of Surah al-‘Imrān states: “So by mercy from Allah, (O Muhammad), you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude (in speech) and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from around you.”

It can be clearly inferred from the verse that an abrasive person does not attract people. The verse affirms that the Prophet was of a soft and pleasant disposition. This would imply that he was approachable and accessible, and these characteristics are often associated with someone who is cheerful or at least has a smile.

This may be supported by other reports from the Prophet Muhammad when he encouraged smiling when he said: “Your smile in your brother's face is an act of charity.”¹⁹ While the narration reported by Muslim²⁰ states: “Do not despise any good action, even if it be meeting your brother with a cheerful face.” These narrations would certainly confirm that if the Prophet encouraged smiling, then this would most certainly have been his disposition.

A study of the selected Hadith will highlight the role and relationship between humour and spiritual life in Islam. In doing so, it may demonstrate the instances when the Prophet Muhammad used humour to strengthen spiritual and social bonds with people. It will demonstrate how humour may have been used to foster compassion, and it diffused tension in tense situations. Through an analysis of the selected Hadith, we may be able to demonstrate how the Prophet's humour demonstrates wisdom and wit.

¹⁶ Cloete, A. Revisiting the Social and Religious Value of Humour, (2019). 83

¹⁷ Schweizer, B, Liederman L. M & Amin. Y. Muslims and Humour, Bristol University Press, United Kingdom. (2022) 44-45; Mazolph, U. Revisiting the Social and Religious Value of Humour, (2011) 173

¹⁸ Mazolph, U. Revisiting the Social and Religious Value of Humour, (2011) 184

¹⁹ Al-Tirmidhī, M., *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, hadith 1956, [Jami' at-Tirmidhi - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\)](https://www.sunnah.com/sayings-and-teachings-of-prophet-muhammad)

²⁰ Al-Naysābūrī, M H. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Book 45, 187, hadith 2626, [Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2626 - The Book of Virtue, Enjoining Good Manners, and Joining of the Ties of Kinship - كتاب البر والصلة والآداب - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\)](https://www.sunnah.com/sayings-and-teachings-of-prophet-muhammad)

The Hadith will be used to further elaborate this aspect by depicting the Prophet in different situations and with different members of society.

The Prophet Muhammad and Humour: The typology of the laughter or smile of the Prophet

The Prophet's wife, 'Āishah reported and said: "I never witnessed the Messenger of Allah completely gathered in laughter until I could see his uvula. He used to smile." The uvula is the flesh at the top of the throat. The description of the laughter and the appearance of the mouth further emphasises her description that it was a smile.²¹ In other reports, 'Āishah described him as: "a cheerful smiling person." Although the Arabic word is ضحكا, which is exaggerated or excessive laughter

The narration of one of the Companions, Abū Hurayrah wherein he states that the Messenger of Allah laughed until his molars were exposed.²² This generally describes someone who laughs hard or is bursting with laughter. On another occasion, Abū Hurayrah described the Messenger and said that his face was radiant with light when he laughed.²³

Ibn Abī Hālah stated that most of the Messenger's 'laughter' was a smile. The famous Hadith specialist and commentator confirmed this, Ibn Ḥajr al-'Asqalānī (d. 1449), who stated that the smile was most common. Another Companion, 'Abdullah ibn al-Ḥārith stated: 'I never saw anyone smile more often than the Messenger of Allah.'²⁴ He may have occasionally laughed while Ibn Baṭṭāl (d. 1057) stated that the Prophet needed to be emulated in his most common practice.

In another narration, one of the Companions said to the Prophet: "You joke with us?" The Prophet responded: "Yes, I don't say anything but the truth."²⁵

In contrast, there is a narration that states: "Do not laugh too much because excessive laughter kills the heart."²⁶ and another that describes him as being in a state of ongoing or persistent sadness or grief.²⁷

There is another narration from Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet said the following, although some have attributed part of it as being the words of 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.: "Whoever laughs too much, he belittles his worth; and whoever jokes too much, his dignity fades; and whoever jokes excessively, his dignity is lost."²⁸ The prohibition is generally understood to refer to excessive laughter that could distract a person and possibly hurt a person's feelings.²⁹

²¹ Al-Nabhānī, Y. *al-Anwār al-Muhammadiyah min al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyah*, Hakikat Kitabevi, (Istanbul. 1997) 208

²² Al-Bukhārī, M I. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Book 78, 115, [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari 6087 - Good Manners and Form \(Al-Adab\) - كتاب الأدب - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\)](#)

²³ Al-Nabhānī, Y. *al-Anwār al-Muhammadiyah min al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyah*, (1997). 208

²⁴ Al-Tirmidhī, M. *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, Book 49, 37, hadith 3641 [Jami' at-Tirmidhi 3641 - Chapters on Virtues - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\)](#)

²⁵ Nabḥānī, Y. *al-Anwār al-Muhammadiyah min al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyah*, (1997). 227

²⁶ Al-Qazwini (Ibn Majāh). *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, hadith 4193, [لا تكثر الضحك فإن كثرة الضحك تميت القلب - سنن ابن ماجه](#)

²⁷ Al-Haythamī, A. *Majma' al-Zawā'id wa Manba' al-Fawā'id*, hadith 13380, Muassasah al-Ma'arif, Beirut. (1985);

Al-Bayjūrī, I. *al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyah 'alā al-Shamā'il al-Muhammadiyah*, Idarat Ta'lifāt Ashrafiyah, Pakistan. (1936) 165

²⁸ Al-Ṭabarānī, S. *Mu'jam al-Awsaṭ*, Dar al-Haramayn, Cairo, Egypt. (1995) 6/334

²⁹ Sirāj al-Dīn, A. . *Sayyidunā Muhammad Rasūlullāh*, Maktabah Dar al-Falah, Aleppo, Syria. (1990). 218

There is yet another narration in *al-Adab al-Mufrad* wherein the Prophet went out and noticed some of his Companions laughing and speaking. He said to them: “By Allah, had you known what I know, you would have laughed less, and you would have cried more.” He left, and these words made the people cry. Allah revealed to him (Hadith Qudsi): “O Muhammad! Why do you make my slaves despair?” The Prophet returned and he said: “Give glad tidings, be upright and do that which is closest to perfection.”³⁰

The selection and subsequent discussion of the Hadith will provide a clearer analysis of his behaviour, distinguishing between genuine laughter and the statements advising against it or discouraging it.

Selected Hadith depicting the Prophet’s smile or laughter:

The selection of Hadith will mainly be derived from the books on the Physical Attributes of the Prophet (al-Shamā’il), the Hadith corpus, and possibly the works on the Prophetic biography (sīrah). The latter category of literature complements the Hadith literature, especially when some of the authors employed Hadith criteria in differentiating between narrations, thereby ensuring that authentic reports were documented.

The Hadith will be selected, depicting the Prophet in various situations and with different categories of people. While every Hadith has a story to tell, it is comprised of diverse narrative constituents and sequences. The variations in narrations may provide deeper and more nuanced understandings, and the choice of words and expressions helps enjoy the literature.³¹ This paper does not compare the different narrations but is satisfied with one authentic or acceptable report.

The Prophet with his wives

In a narration reported by Imām Aḥmad in the *Musnad*³² wherein ‘Āishah mentioned that she accompanied the Prophet on some journey. She was still young and had not gained much weight. He asked the rest of the Companions to continue ahead, and he said: “Let me race you.” She beat him. Sometime later, after ‘Āishah had gained some weight, she again accompanied him, and he again asked the rest of the Companions to proceed ahead, and he again suggested that they race. In this instance, he beat her, and he laughed and said, “This for that.”

There is another incident when the Prophet was engaged in prayer, and his wife, Sawdah prayed along with him. The Prophet prolonged one of the postures (bowing). After the prayer, Sawdah informed him that it was so long that she feared that her nose would start bleeding. On hearing this, the Prophet laughed.³³

Hadith Umm Zara’

This hadith is both a literary masterpiece and an example of humour. It involves 11 women who were seated together, each describing their husbands. The descriptions contain elements of humour. The last woman is Umm Zara’ and after hearing about it,

³⁰ al-Bukhārī, M I., *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, book 95, hadith. 254

³¹ ³¹ Schweizer, B, Liederman L. M & Amin. Y. Muslims and Humour, Bristol University Press, United Kingdom. (2022) 284; Gunther, S. Modern Literary Theory Applied to Classical Arabic Texts, (2000) 173

³² Hanbal, A. *Musnad*, hadith 24119, (2001) 40/145

³³ Abu Ghuddah, H. *al-Mazāḥ fi al-Islam*. King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (2008, 2016) 65

the Prophet remarked that he was to 'Āishah like Abu Zara' was to Umm Zara', except that he did not plan to divorce her.³⁴

The Prophet with his children and the young in general

Once Fātimah (Prophet's daughter) came walking, and her gait resembled the gait of the Prophet (ﷺ). The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "Welcome, O my daughter!" Then he made her sit on his right or on his left side, and then he told her a secret, and she started weeping. I asked her, "Why are you weeping?" He again told her a secret, and she started laughing. I said, "I never saw happiness so near to sadness as I saw today." I asked her what the Prophet (ﷺ) had told her. She said, "I would never disclose the secret of Allah's Messenger (ﷺ)." When the Prophet (ﷺ) died, I asked her about it. She replied. "The Prophet (ﷺ) said: 'Every year, angel Gabriel used to revise the Qur'an with me once only, but this year he has done so twice. I think this portends my death, and you will be the first of my family to follow me.' So, I started weeping. Then he said. 'Don't you like to be the leader of all the ladies of Paradise or the leader of the believing women? So, I laughed at that.'" ³⁵

In the above, the Prophet said something to his daughter to relieve her of her sorrow and grief and replace it with laughter and joy. The situation was a sad and sombre one because just moments earlier, he had informed her that he had preferred to die and meet his Creator.

The Prophet addressed a young Companion after the boy's pet bird died. He used the patronymic Abu 'Umayr and asked about *nughayr* (white-eared bulbul). Although many commentators understand this Hadith to be an example of the Prophet's compassion with children, comforting the young boy after the bird died. Some opine that there is an element of humour in the choice of words and the expression.³⁶

The Prophet and his relatives

A lovely example involves the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, 'Alī ibn Abi Tālib. On one occasion, 'Alī and his wife, Fātimah (Prophet's daughter), had a marital misunderstanding. 'Alī left the house and lay down on the sand on one side of the mosque. The Prophet came looking for him and, on seeing him in this condition, wiped the dust off his face while referring to him as Abū Turāb (literally: father of the soil/earth).³⁷

The Prophet and the elderly

In another narration, an elderly lady from the Anṣār came to the Prophet and said: "O Messenger of Allah! Supplicate to Allah to enter me into Paradise (Jannah). The Prophet said, "Old women will not enter Jannah. The Prophet went and performed prayer (Salāt), and then he returned to 'Āishah. 'Āishah said: "The old lady encountered hardship and difficulty as a result of what you said." The Prophet said: "That is the truth because when Allah enters them (old women) into Jannah, He changes them into young unmarried women."³⁸

The Prophet and his Companions

³⁴ Al-Bukhārī, M I. *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Book 67,123, hadith 5189 [Sahih al-Bukhari 5189 - Wedlock, Marriage \(Nikaah\) - كتاب النكاح - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\)](#)

³⁵ Al-Bukhārī, M I. *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, book 61, hadith 129, 3623

³⁶ Sirāj al-Dīn, A. *Sayidunā Muḥammad*, (1990) 214; al-Bukhari, M I. *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, (2000) 100

³⁷ Al-Bukhārī, M I. *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Book 62, 53 hadith 3703; Abu Ghuddah, H., (2016) 54

³⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, M. *al-Shamā'il al-Muḥammadiyah*, hadith 230

‘Awf ibn Mālik learned that the Prophet did not take offence at some humour, so he initiated some light-hearted humour. He said that he went to the Messenger of Allah’s tent at the time of the Battle of Tabūk. He greeted from the outside, and the Prophet responded and asked him to enter. ‘Awf replied: “All of me, O Messenger of Allah?” He (The Prophet) confirmed, and ‘Awf entered. The reason for ‘Awf’s question was that the tent was small.³⁹

On the morning of the Battle of Badr, the Prophet awoke smiling because of the promise of victory. This is significant because it was the first major battle for the Muslims. In addition, the Muslims were only 313 in number, about to face a well-equipped army of about 1000 men. The smile may have allayed some of the concerns and fears that his Companions had. It may have also been a means of boosting their morale. Of significance is that some biographers have described the Prophet as the ‘cheerful fighter’.⁴⁰

While Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqāṣ stated that he saw the Prophet laugh on the day of the Battle of the Trench (Khandaq) until his teeth (molars) were exposed. This was because of the way that Sa’d fired his arrow at the enemy.⁴¹

Zayd ibn Aslam reported that a woman known as Umm Ayman al-Ḥabashiyah came to the Prophet and informed him that her husband had called him. The Prophet asked her if he was the man who had some whiteness in his eyes. She denied this, and the Prophet insisted that there was certainly whiteness in his eyes. She again denied this, to which the Prophet remarked: “There is no person except that there is whiteness in his eyes.” He was referring to the white surrounding the pupil or the iris.⁴²

Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī has a narration about a Jewish rabbi who spoke to the Prophet about the universe and how it was placed on ‘one finger’. Allah will proclaim, “I am the Supreme King.” On hearing this, the Prophet laughed (smiled). This confirmed the rabbi’s words.⁴³

Others who made him laugh

Both men and women made the Prophet laugh. The reasons and circumstances differ. As was his practice, the Prophet often took his afternoon nap at the home of Umm Sulaym. When he awoke, he noticed that she had gathered his sweat in a bottle. He questioned her about this, and she responded that they planned to use it as a perfume. On hearing this, he laughed.⁴⁴

Nu’aymān ibn ‘Amr was a Companion about whom various incidents have been reported in which he made the Prophet laugh. On one occasion, there was a traveller who left his camel outside. Some of the Companions convinced Nu’aymān to slaughter it. He did so. When the owner emerged and noticed this, the Prophet was informed. They went looking for Nu’aymān and found him hiding somewhere. When questioned about his

³⁹ Al-Sijistānī, S (Abu Dāwūd). *Sunan Abi Dāwūd*, Book 43, 228, hadith 5000, [Sunan Abi Dawud 5000 - General Behavior \(Kitab Al-Adab\) - كتاب الأدب - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\)](#)

⁴⁰ Amin, Y. (2020) 90

⁴¹ Al-Bayjūrī, I. *al-Mawāhib al-Laduniyah ‘alā al-Shamā’il al-Muhammadiyah*, (1936) 170

⁴² Sirāj al-Dīn, A., *Sayyidunā Muhammad*, (1990) 216-217

⁴³ Al-Bukhārī, M I., *al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, Book 65, 333, hadith 4811; Syarifuddin, S. Humour in Islam: A Philosophy Study of Humour. *Jurnal Ilmiah Al-Mu’ashirah*. (2023) 64

⁴⁴ Al-Nasāī, A. *Sunan al-Nasāī*, Book 48, 332, hadith 5371 [Sunan an-Nasa'i 5371 - The Book of Adornment \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\) - كتاب الزينة من السنن - Sunnah.com - Sayings and Teachings of Prophet Muhammad \(صلى الله عليه وسلم\)](#)

actions, he told the Prophet that they (Companions) convinced him to do that. The Prophet instructed that the man be repaid from the Public Treasury.⁴⁵

One of the Companions, Abū Rāfi' was praying and during the prayer he passed wind, which meant that his ablution was nullified, and he needed to renew it and then resume his prayer. He continued praying, and his wife notified him. He did not like this and hit/shoved her. When the Prophet was informed, he laughed and said: "O Abū Rāfi', she only instructed you with something good."⁴⁶

There were instances when he laughed as if to overlook some behaviour, or it could be seen as some form of approval.⁴⁷

Some instances could be classified as light-hearted pranks. These include times when a certain Companion grabbed the Prophet from the back around his waist. There are also instances when the Prophet grabbed one of the Companions (Zāhir) from the back. This Companion was unaware that it was the Prophet. When he realised who it was, he treasured those moments.⁴⁸

The Companions were the Prophet's direct students and recipients of his teachings, and they observed his conduct. Many meticulously emulated the Prophet in everything he did. Al-Bukhāri mentioned in his book *al-Adab al-Mufrad* and is supported by Ibn al-Athīr in *al-Nihāyah* that the Companions joked with one another. One of the Companions, Abū al-Dardā, who was also a scholar, smiled whenever he narrated a hadith. He did this to follow the Prophet's example.⁴⁹

L. Amman's assumption of the inconsistencies in the Hadith literature describes the Prophet as a person who laughed, while other reports indicate that he detested joking, while at times he laughed heartily or rarely smiled.⁵⁰ These are not inconsistent, but dependent on the circumstance, the context, and ultimately the narrator describing the situation. One individual's laughter could be another's smile.

This paper also dispels the allegation made by some scholars who are of the view that the Hadith was manipulated and there is a certain disjoint between the Prophet in his biography, in the Hadith and the Sufi depiction. The selection and discussion demonstrated that humour and laughter were not a mere reaction but were intended, and they had a purpose.⁵¹

An appraisal of the incidents related to the Prophet's laughter or smile:

Textual Analysis

The narrations provided illustrate various aspects of the Prophet Muhammad's personality and behaviour, showcasing his engagement in light-hearted moments, his care and compassion for people in different circumstances, and his deep sense of empathy and leadership. These narrations collectively emphasise the Prophet's human qualities and his interaction with a wide range of individuals, including his family, companions, and even strangers, often reflecting his approachability and warmth.

⁴⁵ Al-'Asqalānī, I H, *Fath al-Bārī*, Dar al-Salam, Riyadh, 1995. 6/366-367)

⁴⁶ Sirāj al-Dīn, A, *Sayidunā Muhammad*, (1990) 225

⁴⁷ Schweizer, Liederman & Amin (2022) 56

⁴⁸ Amin, Y. (2020) 97, 229

⁴⁹ Sirāj al-Dīn, A. (1990) 220

⁵⁰ Amin, Y. (2020) 93

⁵¹ Amin, Y. (2020) 238

1. The Race with ‘Āishah – This narration, involving a friendly race between the Prophet and his wife, ‘Āishah, portrays the Prophet's playful side. He creates an opportunity for ‘Āishah to feel competitive and victorious in her youth, only to later engage in a playful return of the favour, symbolising an egalitarian yet tender relationship. The humour here is subtle but significant, showing a husband who engages with his wife in a way that fosters affection, competition, and mutual respect.
2. Hadith of Umm Zara’ – In this literary tale, the Prophet’s humorous response to a description of various husbands points to the Prophet's appreciation for the lighter side of life. His comparison of himself to Abū Zara’ with ‘Āishah’s description suggests both affection and humour in his own marital life. It also reassured her that he was not intending to divorce her.
3. The Prophet and Fātimah – The interaction between the Prophet and his daughter captures a moment of sadness that is alleviated by a mixture of comfort and humour. By offering his daughter a vision of leadership and joy in the afterlife, the Prophet’s words combine empathy with humour to ease her grief.
4. Compassion for Children and Young People – The hadith involving the Prophet's consolation of a young boy who lost his bird shows his emotional intelligence and deep empathy. The humour in his question about the bird (*nughayr*) highlights his ability to lighten a child's sorrow, while recognizing the emotional gravity of the situation.
5. The Prophet and ‘Alī – The playful naming of ‘Alī as "Abū Turāb" (father of the soil) after a marital misunderstanding with Fātimah is an instance of gentle humour. Rather than reprimanding ‘Alī, the Prophet’s affectionate gesture reveals a nuanced way of dealing with tension within his family.
6. The Prophet and the Elderly – The Prophet’s interaction with the elderly woman who asks for a prayer to enter Jannah demonstrates his kindness and compassion. The remark that "old women will not enter Jannah" was meant to be light-hearted and comforting, explaining that women would be rejuvenated in the afterlife. This humour reflects the Prophet’s understanding of human concerns and the capacity to alleviate anxiety with humour.
7. The Prophet and his Companions – Narrations such as the one where 'Awf ibn Mālik initiates humour with the Prophet during the Battle of Tabūk, and the Prophet’s morning smile before the Battle of Badr, demonstrate the role of humour in creating morale and camaraderie among his followers. The Prophet's demeanour served as a source of comfort and encouragement.
8. Nu’aymān ibn Amr's Humour – The playful antics of Nu’aymān, which caused the Prophet to laugh, reveal how humour played a role in daily life, even amid serious matters like the theft of a camel. The Prophet’s ability to laugh at these incidents without judgment showcases his capacity for seeing the lighter side of human foibles. In the case of Abū Rāfi’, it was pleasantly admonishing the husband, approving the wife's action and educating the husband.

Thematic Analysis

The central themes across these narrations are humanity, compassion, understanding and humour. The Prophet’s behaviour reflects a perfect balance between his role as a revered leader and his deep connection with the human experiences of those

around him. His sense of humour serves as a tool for easing tension, building relationships, and imparting wisdom.

1. **Humour as a Teaching Tool** – Humour is not just an end but serves to teach lessons or deepen bonds. In the case of the race with Aishah, the Prophet's humour fosters mutual respect in marriage. The hadith of Umm Zara' also uses humour to communicate the bond between spouses, making light of the serious subject of marital life.
2. **Emotional Intelligence** – In the narrations involving Fātimah and the young boy, the Prophet demonstrates an acute understanding of the emotional landscape of those around him. Humour becomes a means of bridging sadness with hope, sorrow with joy, or frustration with calm.
3. **Affectionate Family Interactions** – The Prophet's interactions with his family members, such as his playful approach to 'Alī and Fātimah, reveal a deep bond built on love, care, and light-heartedness. These moments present the Prophet as both a father and a husband who understands the importance of emotional support and humour in maintaining family harmony.
4. **Compassion for Society's Vulnerable** – The Prophet's interactions with the elderly woman and the young boy reveal his ability to extend empathy to those who are often overlooked in society. Humour in these cases functions as a gentle means of easing existential anxieties, offering comfort and reassurance to the less powerful.

Comparative Analysis

When compared to other figures in religious and historical traditions, the Prophet Muhammad's humour stands out for its universality and accessibility. He is portrayed as compassionately engaging with his followers. Muhammad's humour reflects a leader who is deeply in touch with human needs and emotions.

However, the Prophet's humour is marked by dignity and respect, never descending into mockery or cruelty or lying. While some traditions, like those in Christian texts, may emphasise the piety and seriousness of figures like Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad's humour shows a more relaxed, human side to his leadership. This contrast can be seen in the difference between the formal reverence sometimes ascribed to religious leaders in other traditions and the more approachable, everyday humour that characterised Muhammad's interactions with his companions and family.

Sociocultural Analysis

The Prophet Muhammad's humour also reflects key elements of 7th-century Arabian culture, where social bonds, tribal loyalty, and hospitality were highly valued. His humour was not only a personal trait but also a tool for navigating the complex relationships within his community. The interaction with his Companions and family members reveals a deep integration of cultural norms of respect, camaraderie, and mutual support.

Moreover, the Prophet's humour with women is particularly significant. In a society where women were often marginalised, the Prophet's light-hearted engagement with his wives and female companions marked a progressive stance within his historical context. His playful interactions with 'Āishah and his comfort for Fātimah, when faced

with her sorrow, challenge the norms of the time, positioning him as a figure who promoted both equality and affection within the family unit.

In the case of his interaction with the elderly woman, the Prophet's response reflects a transformative approach to the afterlife, one that would have been culturally novel and encouraging to a society where ageing was often seen as a diminishing stage of life. His humorous suggestion that old women would be rejuvenated in Jannah (Paradise) offers comfort and alleviates societal concerns about ageing.

CONCLUSION

When we examine these incidents and statements, we realise that all of these are used as tools to build the community and strengthen ties with different individuals. Other instances are clear examples of his compassion and display a level of empathy and understanding. There were instances when humour was used to alleviate grief, fear, and possible stress. His humour also served to diffuse tension in tense or conflict situations, as was the case in Badr and Khaybar. Above all, his humour reflected his wisdom, accessibility, and even moral guidance. This is apparent when placed in context with the discouragement of excessive laughter. Many of these incidents also display profound wisdom and contain profound lessons.

From the examples of those Companions who made the Prophet laugh, it is apparent that they felt close to him and knew that he was approachable. It displays the level of interaction that existed between the Prophet and those around him. It also illustrates how humour, at times, was used to reinforce ethical behaviour and societal norms. The incidents that involve 'Āishah, Fātimah and /or other females highlight their role and contributions and the gender dimensions in this regard.

It is evident that humour from the Prophet Muhammad contributed towards building the community and in some way, promoted unity. It challenged arrogance, pride, and inequality. The philosophical and spiritual dimensions of humour and laughter serve as a reminder of life's impermanence. These narrations also demonstrate his ability to use humour as a tool for teaching, comforting, and connecting with people from all walks of life. His humour is deeply tied to his role as a compassionate leader and father, reflecting the broader values of empathy, human connection, and community that are central to Islam. In this light, humour is more than just a source of amusement—it is an integral part of his leadership and his approach to creating a supportive, harmonious society.

While the paper did not intend to focus on the legal rulings related to laughter, it is perhaps appropriate to end with a very balanced approach to this discussion by maintaining that the five legal rulings in Islam may be applied to laughter and humour. There are instances when it could even be considered desirable or recommended (mandūb) to defuse a tense situation and restore peace. If it becomes offensive or prevents one from fulfilling his/her obligations, then it may be prohibited. While many have detailed how laughter can relieve stress etc, the Prophet has added a spiritual dimension to it by confirming that a mere smile at your brother is an act of charity. It also entrenches the view by Layla al-'Ubaydi, who said that this is an attempt to look at a side of Islamic culture that has not received much attention and does not contradict religiosity. Islam is not only about rigidity, beliefs, law, and worship, but there is room and provision for humour and entertainment.

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