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Islamic Theodicy Vs Existential Absurdity: A Literary-Discursive Study of Suffering and Divine Silence in Contemporary Fiction

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Abstract

The question of suffering and the divine silence has long been perceived as a central concern in both theological and modern literature. This study aims to explore the abiding connection of both Islamic theodicy, which highlights suffering within a divine moral order, and existential absurdity that views suffering as primary evidence of an indifferent universe. Thus, this research incorporates a literary-discursive approach to examine how contemporary fiction in modern literature negotiates with the contrasting paradigms of human suffering, silence, and faith. Furthermore, this article draws upon the Islamic theological perspectives of suffering, patience (*sabr*), and divine wisdom that juxtapose with existentialist interpretations and absurdity as the divine perceived intervention. Through close textual analysis of selected contemporary fiction, the research investigates how characters confront trauma, silence, suffering, and injustice while grappling with questions of divine justice and silence. The study further argues that modern literature is a discursive space where modern and theological frameworks intersect, presenting a mutually inclusive space for characters that reimagined divine justice and existential absurdity. They not only offered a nuanced insight into human research for meaning through suffering and hardships, but they also redefined faith, skepticism, and moral resilience.

Keywords: absurdity, divine silence, faith, Islamic theodicy, moral resilience, suffering, Muslim Existentialism

Introduction

1.1. Conceptual and Philosophical Foundations of Suffering and Divine Silence

The concept of pain and suffering has long been a subject of interest to philosophers, theologians, and literary thinkers across generations. Several attempts have been made by scholars to

understand the enduring dilemma of suffering, its existence, and how it can be reconciled with divine justice and wisdom. The contemporary religious trends have frequently addressed the concept of theodicy, which connects with the existence of evil; thus, suffering becomes an obvious outcome. To suffer is to undergo, to bear, to endure, which is an underside of agency.[1] Islamic intellectual history has questioned suffering due to its underlying roots in broader theological discussions, mainly wisdom (*hikmah*), divine decree (*qadar*), and moral accountability.[2] Although the Qur'ān has frequently presented suffering not as a meaningless chaos, but as a divine test of God, through which humans are rewarded with blessings. This test not only aids in cultivating patience (*sabr*) but also enhances their character, reflecting a fundamental trait of a true Muslim having faith (*tawakkul*) in God.[3]

The presence of pain, injustice, and apparent divine silence has raised profound questions about the reality, the moral structures of the universe, and the relationship between human beings and the divine. This has long been discussed in philosophical discourse as a theodicy concept. Many classical Muslim scholars and thinkers have developed an understandable interpretation of suffering, often arguing that human hardships must be understood in relation to divine justice.[4] However, contemporary practitioners have understood that pain and suffering are distinct yet interconnected concepts, often considered inherently bad. They have defined pain as a sensation, which is followed by suffering that ordinarily refers to a person's psychological and spiritual state. This state is driven by a sense of anguish, dread, foreboding, futility, and meaninglessness, or a range of emotions that are associated with loss of meaning and control.[5] Pioneers of theodicy, such as al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), and later Muslim philosophers, have sought to explain how divinity and wisdom guide individuals in unjust situations and suffering. Thus, it is highlighted that suffering is not merely a metaphysical problem, but a spiritual phenomenon that connects human agency and divine providence.[6]

1.2. Existential Philosophy and the Emergence of the Secular Universe

Pain is vital, which tells us that something is wrong. Though the achievements of modernity have reinforced the concept of pain and suffering as intolerable, many people have considered pain as a disposition of anxiety, fear, and distress. Existential philosophy, in this sense, values human experience as a rational reality and discourse, which is derived from human dilemmas, emotions, and manifestations of thinking.[7] Kierkegaard (1813-1855), along with Nietzsche (1844-1900), defined truth and objectivity as a process that transforms any personal matter into fact.

[1]William E. Connolly, "Suffering, Justice, and the Politics of Becoming," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 20 (3), (1996): 251–277, https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00113819

[2]Purwanto Purwanto, "Review Buku 'Major Themes of the Quran' Oleh Fazlur Rahman Dan Teori Double Movement," *MODELING: Jurnal Program Studi PGMI* 12 (4), (2025): 437–484, https://doi.org/10.69896/modeling.v12i4.3096

[3]David A. Harrell, *God, Evil, and Suffering* (Compact Expository Pulpit Commentary Series) (Great Writings, 2019).

[4]Lenn Evan Goodman, "Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over al-Ghazali's "Best of All Possible Worlds" (review)," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (4), (1987): 589–591, https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.1987.0059

[5]Jason T. Eberl, "Religious and Secular Perspectives on the Value of Suffering," *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 12 (2), (2012): 251–261, https://doi.org/10.5840/ncbq201212252

[6]Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung* (Keio University Press Inc., 2015).

[7]Tatjana Schnell, "Suffering as Meaningful Choice. An Existential Approach," in *Ta vare. En bok om diakoni, sjelesorg og eksistensiell helse* [Take Care. A Book about Diaconia, Pastoral Care, and Existential Health], (VID Publishers, 2022), 3-14.

Kierkegaard studied the pattern and philosophy of anxiety, claiming that anxiety is a "dizziness of freedom." We as humans are free to choose, yet we deny our freedom; thus, limiting ourselves to limited roles only.[8] However, many other existentialists defined suffering as "suffering was part of the process that leads to an authentic, proper existence.[9] Furthermore, Heidegger pointed out that angst arises primarily in the confrontation with our mortality. It emerges from the changed perspective that our finiteness opens up: On the one hand, we realize that we are 'thrown' into the world and cannot escape death; a feeling of powerlessness arises. On the other hand, this realization confronts us with the question: What have I done with my life until now? Am I on the right track? Have I used the freedom of my choices sensibly and responsibly?"[10] All these questions call for either a spiritual understanding of life or familiar beliefs or illusions that can further lead to distress and frame life as a shaking case, where existence becomes unheimlich. This may often be accompanied by depression, anxiety, pessimism, and negative mood that may lead to self-doubt.[11] Contrastingly, Islam as a religion provides solutions to all existential anxieties by analyzing ritualistic structures in mainstream Islamic extremism. Islam offers an array of understanding concepts that are integral in existentialism, including freedom, death, and meaning.[12] Religion, in this sense, is a powerful, holistic tool that provides a way of existence in the world.[13]

2. Literature Review

2.1. Understanding Suffering Across Disciplines

Why does a merciful and just God allow suffering and hardship when he is the creator of the universe? [14] This is why it has challenged thinkers and believers for centuries to understand why evil and suffering exist in this universe. Theodicy is a combination of the Greek words "theo," which means God, and "dike," which means creation.[15] It aims to reconcile the existence of God with the existence of evil, a challenge that has been debated for centuries. The concept of evil and divine power has long been debated by theologians and philosophers, in which discussions have been scrutinized, particularly about divine justice and the notion of a Good and perfect God.[16] John Hick (1922-2012) highlights the significant issue of frustration and struggles of believers to believe in the occurrence of an all-good God, where God himself allows suffering. Theodicy aims to resolve this tension between the existence of God and confronting the idea of evil presence; however, Syah pointed out theodicy as a defense of God's justice in the times of injustice and

[8]Duarte Quilao, "Human Suffering," in *Cultura Del Cuidado* 15 (2), (2018): 67–79, https://doi.org/10.18041/1794-5232/cultrua.2018v15n2.5112

[9]Frank Schalow, "Thinking at Cross Purposes with Kant: Reason, Finitude and Truth in the Cassirer—Heidegger Debate," *Kant-Studien* 87 (2), (1996), https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.1996.87.2.198

[10]Jack Reynolds, Ashley Woodward, Felicity Joseph, *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Existentialism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

[11]Tatjana Schnell, *The Psychology of Meaning in Life* (Routledge, 2021).

[12]Scott Gibbs, "Islam and Islamic Extremism: An Existential Analysis," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 45 (2), (2005): 156–203, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167805274728

[13]Charles Daniel Batson, Patricia Schoenrade, W. Larry Ventis, *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

[14]Nurhanisah Senin, Hamidun Mohamad Husim, Nazneen Ismail, Mustafa Kamal Norsaleha Mohd Salleh, "Reconciling Faith and Sufferings: Insights from Sa'id Ramadhan Al-Buti's Theodicy," *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 14 (9), (2024): 1359–1368, http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i9/22640

[15]Lorens Bagus, *Kamus Filsafat* (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2002), 174.

[16]Nasrin Rouzati, "Evil and Human Suffering in Islamic Thought—Towards a Mystical Theodicy," *Religions* 9 (2), (2018): 47, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9020047

human sufferings.[17] Theologians and philosophers have defined evil as something harmful, hurtful, and undesirable; whereas, suffering is the outcome of evil.[18]

2.2. The Existence of Evil and God

Evil has long been explained by the doctrine of dualism. This approach highlights that both good and evil are at war with each other. The notion of evil has been distinctly presented in different religions, yet scholars have claimed that evil and suffering are connected, as undermining concepts. If one is the cause, the other one would be the effect. Many Western thinkers, such as Max Weber (1864-1920) and Peter Burger (1929-2017), found the notion of *karma*; for them, it is similar to the doctrine of theodicy. They were of the view that "God is not involved in people's affairs concerning evil, it is the wrongdoings of humans, which determine them towards their fate through multiple incarnations.[19] Mackie's 1955 paper on "Evil and Omnipotence," states the clear formation of evil, its structures, and the contemporary dispute between atheists and theists, which has long been stretched till now. He defined "The problem of evil, in the sense of a phrase, is a problem only for someone who believes that there is a God who is both omnipotent and wholly good. And it is a logical problem, the problem of clarifying and reconciling a number of beliefs: it is not a scientific problem that might be solved by further observations, or a practical problem that might be solved by a decision or an action. These points are obvious; it is necessary to mention them only because they are sometimes ignored by theologians, who sometimes parry a statement of the problem with such remarks as 'Well, can you solve the problem yourself?' or 'This is a mystery which may be revealed to us later' or 'Evil is something to be faced and overcome, not to be merely discussed.[20] His stance highlighted several key points, considering that omnipotent beings believe that there is a wholly God, the problem of evil is logical, and the existence of evil does not merely rely on personal preferences; it's not a subjective matter. However, in contemporary notions, those afflicted by evil are perceived more as personal, because it is considered to be connected by moral status and the action of an individual that takes us towards the direction of "problem of deontological evil."[21]

Contemporary fiction, however, tends to explain the problem of evil with the presence of suffering and in the absolute silence of existential notions. This makes silence a transitional movement in which the problem of silence moves from a theological direction towards the narrative ambiguity of literary genre.[22] Language and silence have long been connected with the human conscious mind, which is related to memory and human experience.[23] It can be considered a social phenomenon that reflects the tendency to repress and ignore the truth, which makes it a significant obstacle in understanding and communicating emotions. Thus, it develops a space, not

[17]Yoshy Hendra Hardiyan Syah, "Pemikiran teodisi Ibn Arabi tentang keburukan," [Ibn Arabi's Theodicy Thought on Evil], *JAQFI: Jurnal Aqidah Dan Filsafat Islam* 7 (1), (2022): 61-85.

[18]Salih Sayilgan, *God, Evil, and Suffering in Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[19]Sayilgan, *God, Evil, and Suffering in Islam.*

[20]Yujin Nagasawa, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists* (Oxford University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198901884.001.0001

[21]Justin Mooney, "How to Solve the Problem of Evil," *Faith and Philosophy* 36 (4), (2019): 442–462, https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil20191121132

[22]Salinder Ranga, "A Study of Existentialism and Reality in Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence," *Academic Discourse* 6 (2), (2017): 77-79.

[23]Jim Denham-Vaughan, Virginia Edmond, "The Value of Silence," *Gestalt Journal of Australia and New Zealand* 6 (2), (2010): 5-19.

only in emotions but also in identity and meaning, where silence becomes a guiding and safe space for individuals in their own world.[24]

2.3. Individual Confrontation with Suffering, Anxiety, and Despair: An Existential Perspective

Existential philosophy took a turn towards the reorientation of silence and suffering away from the metaphysical systems towards the interiority of human lived experiences, emphasizing the diverse conditions of existence.[25] The philosophy places the individual at the center to inquire about suffering, anxiety, and despair in the abstract reality of man in the real world. Rather than just treating it as a cosmological problem, existentialist situates it within the realm of self-freedom, and its relation to divine wisdom.[26] However, contemporary scholars define existentialism as a rising form of confronting morality, isolation, and loss of meaning.[27] Unlike the deeper pain, the existential suffering is more centered on selfhood and deals with the grappling situation of humans in a world where existence is being questioned, and the meaning of life is thoughtful, similar to the theological ideology that situates human consciousness.[28] Existential and spiritual suffering are not synonymously connected, yet they overlap in real contexts. Spiritual suffering, as defined in a broader context, is simply a state of distress due to religious concerns. Existential thinkers like Kierkegaard and Sartre have presented the conceptualization of suffering as an intrinsic dimension of oneself. Both have emphasized the individual and intrinsic dimension of human existence that emerges from inner tensions and consequences, and leads to the absence of meaning in one's life. Contrastingly, the theological perspective undermines that suffering is a divine testing model (*ibtila*).[29]

2.4. Islamic Theodicy and the Concept of *Adl* (Divine Justice)

Islamic theodicy is grounded in the attributes of God, pertaining to the idea that Good is just and powerful. Central to this idea is the concept of *Adl* (Justice), in which the formulation of suffering appears not as a failure of divinity, but more as a component of a higher purpose.[30] Suffering as a trial (*Ibtila*) in contemporary fiction is considered a formative experience of the individual, which highlights the Quranic premise "with every hardship comes the ease."[31] Conversely, the framework of existentialism and philosophy of absurdity emphasizes the formation of a universe in which human nostalgia and past experiences unite as an alien and incomprehensible reality.[32] Invoking Kierkegaard's term "knights of faith" transcends a deep form

[24]Ewerton Helder Bentes de Castro, Gabriela Monteiro da Silva, Larissa Marialva Cortez, Gabriella Masulo Gomes, Luccas Gabriel Dutra Vieira, Andreia Cristina Cordeiro, "Pact of Silence and Phenomenological-Existential Psychology: Understanding Specificities!" *Amazônica* 18 (3), (2025): 419-453.

[25]Stephan Theron, *The Orthodox Hegel: Development Further Developed* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

[26]Frédéric Neyrat, *Atopias: Manifesto for a Radical Existentialism* (Fordham University Press, 2017).

[27]Neil Cornwell, *The Absurd in Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2016), https://doi.org/10.7765/9781847791672.

[28]Anthony Grech, Adam Marks, "Existential Suffering Part 1: Definition and Diagnosis #319," *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 20 (1), (2017): 93-94, https://doi.org/10.1089/jpm.2016.0422

[29]Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Qur'ān: Semantics of the Qur'anic Weltanschauung* (Keio University, 1964).

[30]Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān* (The University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[31]Zain Ali, "The Problem of Evil, God's Personhood, and the Reflective Muslim," *Religions* 15 (2), (2024): 225–225, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020225

[32]Amber L. Griffioen, "Therapeutic Theodicy? Suffering, Struggle, and the Shift from the God's-Eye View," *Religions* 9 (4), (2018): 99, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9040099

of suffering and ignorance that shows the integral role of suffering in the life of faith.[33] Thus, cultivating the notion that *sabr* in suffering is submitting yourself to the disposition of God's will. Jason Throop's, in her contribution on the works of suffering and ethics reflected upon the experience of chronic pain. She was of the view that suffering-for in the *sabr* discourse is an intentional suffering, which may again move others in the everyday world to an alleviated level, so that it starts affecting their self and those associated with them. Interestingly, they then adopt *sabr* as a vision to cope with suffering and challenges in a virtuous way to please themselves, as well as being on the right path of spirituality. However, the presence of divine justice and wisdom could be witnessed in the moment of complex affective presence, which is an abstract future horizon for individuals.[34]

2.5. Theoretical Framework

The current study is an interdisciplinary attempt to integrate Islamic theology with modern literary fiction. Thus, this study aims to bridge this gap by developing arguments based on Islamic theodicy and existential absurdity through critical discourse analysis. Islamic theological concepts guide this study by building as fundamental pillars, which articulated moral and spiritual interpretation of suffering and silence. However, existential absurdity aims to cover the modern trends of human beings seeking meaning in a universe that is silent and never gives definite interpretations regarding purpose. Albert Camus, in his philosophy, thus proposes that individuals follow acts of rebellion and religious faith to confront absurd situations in their lives to attain personal authenticity.[35] The article further follows a critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly to study the key aspects of language, ideology, and social structures of the selected text. To develop a deeper understanding of the text, this study is guided mainly by a three-dimensional model developed by Norman Fairclough to conduct textual analysis, discursive analysis, and social practices. Textual analysis relies on linguistic features of the text, such as vocabulary, metaphorical representation, and narrative voice. Additionally, discursive analysis examines how texts intersect with cultural, spiritual, and ideological discourses. Thus, by combining social practices to understand the social-political and historical array of text, this study showcased how philosophical assumptions about suffering can be embedded with literary language and narrative voice. This integrated research aims to understand the broader concept of pain not from a theological perspective, but also through the modern depiction of absurdity and existentialism.

The research follows a qualitative comparative direction that is grounded in textual analysis. To study both the phenomenon of suffering and pain, two primary texts from corporus are selected: *The Stranger* (1942) by Albert Camus (1913-1960), and *Minaret* (2005) by Leila Aboulela (b.1964). The selected novels represent a contrasting philosophical dimension of suffering and divine silence. The Stranger is more focused on discursive practices, highlighting an ideological dimension; however, Minaret is more referenced towards Quranic concepts and Islamic theological ideas. Moreover, Camus's novel is centered on the intellectual movement of European existentialism, whereas Aboulela's work reflects Muslim experiences, mainly in the times of migration that added to the dilemma of spiritual rediscovery.

[33]Toby Betenson, "Anti-Theodicy," *Philosophy Compass* 11 (1), (2016): 56-65.

[34]Maria Louw, "Staying Behind: Divine Presence, Virtuous Emplacement, and *Sabr* at the End of Life among Older Kyrgyz Muslims," *Hau Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 14 (1), (2024): 33–46, https://doi.org/10.1086/729467

[35]Ilhama Mammadova, "The Concept of the Absurd: Camus' Literary Exploration of Existential Philosophy," *Global Spectrum of Research and Humanities* 1 (1), (2024): 111–120, https://doi.org/10.69760/gsrh.01012024010

3. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Contemporary fiction often presents suffering as caught between two deeply opposing ways of understanding the cosmic world. On one hand, it appears to have pain, suffering, fear, and isolation; however, on the other hand, lies the purposeful experience of an individual that may lead to wisdom, faith, truth, and divine reality.

3.1. The Metaphysical Foundation of Absurdity Vs *Adl* (Justice) in the Stranger

The metaphysical collision of Camus and Aboulela in *The Stranger* and *Minaret* highlights the two conflicting views of the universe at the same time; one that is absurd and silent, the other one which is based on justice, faith, and *adl.* For Camus, the absurd arises from the confrontation of the human and the ordeal structure of the universe.[36] While both protagonist in the novel depicts the discursive shifts between the displacement and divine silence, they at the same time offer a radically different stance of epistemological solutions of human sufferings. In *The Stranger*, Camus posits that the universe of his protagonist is "absurd." His depiction of human hunger for meaning and unrealistic silence pertains that his characters are true to moral teleology.

For Meursault, existence is a series of struggles and sensory details, which often represent the uncertainty of his existence. However, his differences with his paternal mother and her sudden death are not merely a reflection of evil, but more of a world where certainty is fragmented and void. Thus, Camus, through his protagonist, champions "defiant revolt" as the only authentic response to the absurd situation he was facing at that time. Hence, the rejection of God and the sudden imprisonment by legal systems to make him feel guilty of killing an Arab, a crime that compromised his moral values, Meursault found "tragic liberation" from the sufferings of the chaotic world. He claimed that he killed that Arab because of the sun: "The sun was starting to burn my cheeks, and I could feel drops of sweat gathering in my eyebrows. The sun was the same as it had been the day I had buried Maman, and like then, my forehead especially was hurting me, all the veins in it throbbing under the skin. It was this burning that I could not stand any more, which made me move forward."[37] The sun was the depiction of anger and rage that pushed him to commit a crime, as it was the same on the day of her mother's funeral. The notion that he shot four more times at a dead body created a troublesome situation that caused him unhappiness. His loneliness and alienation depicted the leap of faith he had during times of war. He was humiliated for his unreasonable past activities and was forced to repent for his inner sentiments. For Heidegger, this is "the human condition that is humiliated in this world. The only reality is 'anxiety in the whole chain of beings. To the man lost in the world and its diversions, this anxiety is a brief feeling of fear."[38] The death of Meursault's mother brought nothingness, which depressed him, yet he continued his struggle to live and relieve himself; for him, this is near death. One must live

[36]Daniel Henke, "From Suicide, to Acceptance through Faith, and then, to Defiant Revolt: Existential Absurdism in Albert Camus' The Stranger," M.A. English Literature Thesis (The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 2013), https://minds.wisconsin.edu/handle/1793/66336

[37]Bharat Ghimire, "Meursault's Indifference: Individual in the Historical Context of Albert Camus's Novel the Stranger," Masters Dissertation (Department of English, Tribhuvan University, 2006), https://elibrary.tucl.edu.np/JQ99OgQIizUxyjI9nB0on9OyLkqsGIf4/api/core/bitstreams/126c8db0-3ccd-4340-9a15-0ead40f5470f/content

[38]Ellmann, Richard, Charles Feeidelson, Jr., (Eds.), *The Modern Tradition Backgrounds of Modern Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1965), https://noteaccess.com/Texts/ModernT/MTPreface.htm

and make meaning in life; without the absence of motivation from God, one cannot attain meaningfulness in life. Even this is depicted through his last moments when he said: "Throughout the whole absurd life' I'd lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living. What did other people's deaths or the mother's love matter to me; what did his God or the lives people choose or the fate they think they elect matter to me. When we're all elected by the same fate, me and billions of privileged people like him who also call themselves my brothers?"[39]

3.2. Divine Presence Vs Absence in the *Minaret*

Abdennour Bidar (b. 1971) established the concept of "Muslim Existentialism" to sketch the contours of twenty-first century contemporary fiction.[40] Its continuation of European Islam aimed to look for a common ground for faith and reason in the modern world. Islamic European thought emerged as a field grounded in reason and revelation, which reflected experiences, perspectives, and Muslims in a liberal democratic world.[41] Bidar introduced his concept of Muslim existentialism to engage the development of Islamic thought in the Western world. His work on self-Islam and the existential reading of the Qur'ān focused on eternal life and conditions of modernity. He was of the view that "religion will not be abandoned in the era of modernity, but the way in which religion is lived will be different.[42] Muslim Existentialism emphasizes the importance of individual freedom, personal responsibility, and spiritual connection with the creator. This approach can help young people to learn about spirituality and choose freely. However, Bidar also identified two directions of Islam: self-service Islam and individualistic Islam, whereas he also added that authentic Islam gives freedom to individuals to search for meaning and form, which is convenient for them to adhere to while also following principles of justice governed by reason.[43]

Minaret narrates the dilemma of a Muslim girl struggling with the early exposure of western world. As the protagonist, it was hard for Najwa to maintain the appropriateness and modification of both worlds. Having been stuck between fatal trails and errors, she tries to grope with her religious identity. This struggle leads her towards a self-discovery to find her own faith, an Islam of her own.[44] Presenting an Islamophobic picture of Muslims packed with negative connotations, she shared her version of in-betweenness in the modern world. The novel talks about the division of identity of Najwa, the protagonist of the novel, once in Sudan and once in London. Her construction of identity in Sudan was solely based on 'Who am I,' which faced the dilemma of a hybrid identity crisis. In context: "Najwa embarks on personal, emotional, and spiritual journeys

[39]Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, Tr. Matthew Ward (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

[40]Nadia Kiwan, "Chapter 5: Abdennour Bidar," in *Secularism, Islam and Public Intellectuals in Contemporary France* (Manchester University, 2019), 129-161, https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526144270.00010

[41]Agus Riwanda, Abd A'la, "Unveiling the Essence of European Islam: A Critical Analysis of Abdennour Bidar's Concepts of Self Islam and Islamic Existentialism," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 23 (2), (2023): 327-355, https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v23i2.6904

[42]Abdennour Bidar, "The 'Outsiders of Islam'," *Diogenes* 57 (2), (2010): 3–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/0392192110393203

[43]Gözde Damla Çitler, "Islam and Existentialism in Turkey during the Cold War in the works of Sezai Karakoç," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (1), (2020): 70-85, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1758035

[44]Wafaa H. Sorour, ""An Islam of her Own": A Critical Reading of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret,"* in *Memory, Voice, and Identity: Muslim Women's Writing from across the Middle East*, eds., Feroza Jussawalla, Doaa Omran (Routledge, 2021), 151.

as she seeks a stable sense of identity in either England or Sudan. Aboulela's *Minaret* is characterized by two distinct phases: Najwa's life prior to adopting the veil and her life subsequent to this decision. In each phase, Najwa is portrayed as grappling with feelings of liminality. As a result, the inner dialogues depicted in the novel are strong and may be considered negotiations of the self with the self. These negotiations and efforts to overcome the sense of isolation, rejection, and uncertainty by forging a clear personal sense of identity occur in both her homeland of Sudan and in London after becoming a political refugee."[45]

It is further highlighted through her guilt and narrative voice that a part of her wanted to practice religious traditions, which were making her feel guilty in a foreign country, as she states: "We heard that dawn *azān* as we turned into our house. The guard got up from where he was sleeping on the ground and opened the gate for us. The sound of that *azān*, the words, and the way the words sounded went inside me; it passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had at the disco, and it went to a place I didn't know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me, I could hear another mosque echoing the words, tapping at the sluggishness in me, nudging at a hidden numbness, like when my feet went to sleep, and I touched them."[46] It was her faithless family that she was never raised in the religious way, she was questing for identity she lost, her true self that is connected with the divine, and its absence was creating hollowness and space that she was battling with while staying in London. Islam became a space of belonging for her, an affiliation she lost, which took her pain of displacement and gave her comfort in the times of alienation. It was Najwa's faith that gave her the freedom to practice Islam in a westernized world, hinting that Islam is not an oppressive religion and can be practiced through performative actions.[47] Thus, wearing a veil, praying, listening Qur'ān, and going to the mosque were all tools for self-healing in a chaotic world. Aboulela, in defining freedom of her protagonist, states: "Islam restrains me, but restraint is not oppression, and boundaries can be comforting and nurturing. Freedom does not necessarily bring happiness, nor does an abundance of choices automatically mean that we will make the right one. I need guidance and wisdom; I need grace and forgiveness."[48] She builds Najwa as an alter ego, who wore veil as a cultural and social task, but for her it is obedience to God's command.[49]

3.3. Literary Representation of Suffering and Divine Silence in the Stranger and Minaret

The Stranger is ontological, whereas *Minaret* is an epistemological representation of suffering and divine silence. In The Stranger, the peace comes from accepting silence and by accepting the fact that no one is judging, exercising freedom as a self-existence. However, Minaret presents another depiction where God is not silent because he is absent, but mainly his wisdom is transcendental through human actions and understanding. The character of Najwa tries to show

[45]Rouabhia Salma, Melaikia Fatima, "Muslim Arab Women: The Sense of In-betweenness in Leila Aboulela's Novel Minaret," Master's Thesis (Department of English, University of 8 Mai 1945 / Guelma, Algeria, 2020), https://dspace.univ-guelma.dz/jspui/bitstream/123456789/10753/1/M821.293.pdf

[46]Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (Grove Press, 2005), https://archive.org/details/minaret0000abou

[47]Irene Zempi, Neil Chakraborti, "Introduction," In *Islamophobia, Victimisation and the Veil* (Palgrave Hate Studies. Palgrave Pivot, London, 2014), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137356154_1 .

[48]Laylah al Maleh, *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (Rodopi, 2009).

[49]Marta Cariello, "Searching for Room to Move: Producing and Negotiating Space in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret,"* In *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature,* eds., Layla Al Maleh (Rodopi, 2009), 339-50.

her spiritual journey towards faith, only after she listens to her silence and guilt of in-betweenness. She retreats into herself by practicing *hijāb* as a sacred silence, while Meursault fights with silence as an evil problem, Najwa submits to silence as a divine justice, submission to God, which ultimately brought peace to her life.[50] The comparative analysis highlights that Meursault finds happiness in meaninglessness, a true depiction of existentialism and absurdity, whereas Najwa finds peace in embracing divine wisdom. *The Stranger* suggests the true notion of *Adl* (Justice) as a human invention in the atrocities of life, while *Minaret* takes a spiritual turn, highlighting that the absurd is spiritual blindness, and God is behind all the worldly sufferings.[51]

4. Conclusion

The current study has explored the Islamic theological perspective and existential philosophy as contrasting interpretations to understand suffering and divine silence in *the Stranger* and *Minaret.* The research, as showcased through a comparative analysis, reveals that existential narratives frequently frame and discuss suffering as evidence to present a strange silence in an indifferent universe. In contrast, the Islamic viewpoint presents a contradictory notion of silence, often connecting it with morally and divinely structured cosmic frameworks. The interdisciplinary findings of the study primarily focused on theology, philosophy, and literature. Contemporary Muslim fiction often discusses the struggles of Muslim in a marginalized world, which is surrounded by many existential questions, abandoning the realistic possibility of spiritual meaning. Thus, the findings aimed at establishing a viewpoint that this absence of spiritual connection leads to suffering and loss of faith in individuals. Likewise, the characters in the novels depicted suffering not as a human problem that requires an immediate solution, but rather as a human experience. Qur'ānic teachings suggest that human beings will be tested by difficult times and situations, which is not a punishment but a transformative experience for individuals that helps them overcome the dilemmas of self. The Muslim perspective often suggests that adversity is necessary for spiritual growth, a journey that requires faith and trust in God's plan, and following His directions to ultimately achieve tranquility and emotional stability. Thus, highlighting that Muslim Existentialism and theodicy intersect as a cogent framework, where evil is not a problem in faith, but it is a part of a deliberate test by divine order to achieve wisdom. Lastly, further research can be conducted on ecocritical theodicy, which is non-human form of suffering and was prevalent in both novels.

Author Contribution

Aiman Kamran contributed towards main article write-up, Synthesizing concept and analysis**.** Dr Sami Al Kamel Mohammed Barkah and Dr Mohd Aderi bin Che Noh contributed in reviewing writeup, adding relevant references and refinement of the conceptual understanding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

[50]Khawla Bendjemil, "Empowering Narratives: Female Solidarity and Religious Education in Leila Aboulela's Minaret," *Majalla Ishkalat fil Alugha wa al Adab* (*Ichkalat Journal*) 1 (13), (2024): 66-79.

[51]Zia ul Haq, "Illuminating the Shadows: A Qur'ānic Theodicy on the Problem of Evil," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 15 (2), (2025): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.152.01

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