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BEYOND THE BINARY: EXPLORING LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF ISLAMIC DIVERSITY THROUGH IRSHAD ABDULKADIR'S PRODIGAL

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the struggle between various facets of Islam within the contemporary Pakistani community as represented in the novel 'Prodigal' (2019) by Irshad Abdulkadir. The novel chronicles the journey of two young Muslim men on their separate yet parallel paths to discover their faith and find the right means 'to serve Allah'. The text challenges the Western stereotyping of Islam being a rigid and static entity that dissociates with changing socio-cultural norms of modern societies. The present study is qualitative in its nature and examines the selected text to see how the novel depicts various characters that represent the intellectual trends of Islamic thought in the contemporary Muslim world. Also, the study investigates how the author has woven different Islamic worldviews into the fabric of the novel's plot and character development. The analysis reveals that the text remarkably brings forth the positive image of Islam and pleads a strong case to advocate for the world's most misunderstood religion. The study also foregrounds the inadequacy of the categorization of Muslims and offers a critique of the taxonomies often proposed by the Western scholars to divide Islam into different varieties.

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Introduction

The diversification of ideas, beliefs, and practices of various groups within the Islamic community has been a subject of scholarly interest, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. After 9/11, however, the subject has garnered much attention, particularly by the Western academics, researchers, and policy-makers. Similarly, fiction writers have

also attempted to highlight the tension between Islam and the West in their texts while portraying Muslim characters that represent various Islamic schools of thought. Where mostly Western authors tend to portray Muslim characters as either extremists, fundamentalists, or terrorists, in their accounts, some Muslims authors, especially those living in diaspora, have reinforced the idea of Islam's struggle with modernity. As a result, they have added to the confusion and ambiguity in the minds of the Western reader about Islam. The literary accounts that counter the misrepresentation of Islam in a real sense are quite rare. One such text is Irshad Abdulkadir's novel *Prodigal* (2019) that the challenges the Western stereotyping of Islam being a rigid and static entity that dissociates with changing socio-cultural norms of modern societies, and highlights its more tolerant and humanistic aspects.

This paper addresses the struggle between various facets of Islam within the contemporary Pakistani community with reference to Irshad Abdulkadir's novel *Prodigal*, while focusing on its main character's development from a naïve youngster to a mature and enlightened grownup. In doing so, the study seeks to develop a conceptual framework by analyzing the current scholarship on the diversity of Islamic thought, specifically investigating the divide and fragmentation within the Muslim community. The novel chronicles the journey of two young Muslim men on their separate yet parallel paths to discover their faith and find the right means to serve Allah. Abdulkadir integrates different Islamic worldviews into the fabric of the plot and characters' development. The article analyses how the novel depicts various characters that represent the intellectual trends of Islamic thought in the contemporary Muslim world and how it clears misconceptions about Islam. The research is significant as it studies a Pakistani anglophone novel from the perspective of contemporary Islamic thought and presents a critique on a text that has not been studied as yet.

Irshad Abdulkadir is a well-known Pakistani writer, theatre critic and social activist. A graduate of Cambridge University and a Barrister at Law by profession, he currently resides in Karachi, Pakistan and lectures in law with specialization in Common Law studies. His articles on subject like socio-economic issues, governance and politics have frequently appeared in newspapers and journals. He has also authored a collection of short stories entitled *Clifton Bridge* (2013) and two other novels *The Deriabad Chronicles* (2018) and *The Lady of Sohanbela* (2021). *Prodigal* is his second novel, which was published in 2019 by Macmillan India.

The story of the novel *Prodigal* revolves around two young Muslim men on their voyage to find true meaning of their faith and self through their separate ways of discovery.

The two central characters of the novel are Akbar and Bairam who start their journey together but end up poles apart as one chooses the path of armed struggle and the other goes to the life of research. While some reviewers have considered the novel as depiction of "two sides of the same coin"[1] or a text that "deals with various facets of Islam"[2], the narrative is essentially a Bildungsroman[3] as it recounts the development phases of the protagonist from childhood to adolescence and then ultimately to a mature and enlightened person. A close reading of the text reveals that through development of the character of its protagonist the text challenges the stereotype and discriminatory portrayal of Muslims by the dominant Western discourse and clears the many misperceptions about Islam by highlighting its tolerant and humane aspects.

The word 'Prodigal' literally means 'wasteful,' 'extravagant,' 'reckless,' and refers to the "one who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly" or the "one who has returned after an absence."[4]. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the term 'Prodigal Son' refers to "a man or boy who has left his family in order to do something that the family disapprove of and has now returned home feeling sorry for what he has done."[5] The term contains reference to the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* in Bible which is one of the parables of Jesus Christ. The story is about a father and his two sons. The younger son asks his father of his share of property, who grants his son's request. However, he wastes all his money, returns to his home and begs forgiveness from his father. To the son's surprise father accepts him back, but when the older son objects, he tells him that his younger brother was lost and has found his way home back.[6]

1. Tabish Khair, " 'Prodigal' by Irshad Abdul Kadir reviewed by Tabish Khair: The heart of the Prodigal", *The Hindu*. August 17, 2019. https://www.thehindu.com/books/prodigal-by-irshad-abdulkadir-reviewed-by-tabishkhair-the-heart-of-the-prodigal/article29108553.ece.
2. Taha Kehar, "Polarity and the search for tolerance". *The News on Sunday*. April 12, 2020. https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/642313-polarity-and-the-search-for-tolerance.
3. The German word *Bildungsroman* means "a novel of formation": that is, a novel of someone's growth from childhood to maturity. https://web.archive.org/web/20110805212616/http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Terms/bildungsroman.html
4. *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Accessed April 12, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prodigal
5. *Cambridge Dictionary*. Accessed April 12, 2023, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prodigal-son
6. Parable of the Prodigal Son. In *Wikipedia*. Accessed April 9, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parable_of_the_Prodigal_Son

In the novel, both Akbar and Bairam are 'prodigal'. Akbar is a prodigal as he leaves his home against the wish of his parents, searches for meaning of his life, gets disoriented from his path, but at last, returns as a better and enlightened person. Bairam, however, is a prodigal who doesn't find his way back home and meets a tragic end.

The Growing Trend of Muslim Writing and *Prodigal*

In the aftermath of 'Rushdie Affair' and the tragedy of 9/11, 'Muslim writing' has been developed as a conceptual category in postcolonial literature to reflect the variety of approaches to Islam and the uncomfortable relationship that writers from Islamic backgrounds have had with the political and social conditions in their home countries as well as in diaspora. Amin Malak has fostered a meaning of 'Muslim writing', which, according to him,suggests the works produced by the person who believes firmly in the faith of Islam; and/or, via an inclusivist extension, by the person who voluntarily and knowingly refers to herself, for whatever motives, as a "Muslim" when given a selection of identitarian choices; and/or, by yet another generous extension, by the person who is rooted formatively and emotionally in the culture and civilization of Islam.[7]

Claire Chambers elaborates on the 'inclusivist extension' by noting that "many significant Pakistani and Arab writers are secular, agnostic, atheists, or… were not brought up as Muslims or come from other religious communities"[8]. Thus, their writing has a Muslim flavor not because of their religiosity or piety, but because they have access to a common "Muslim civilizational heritage"[9]. Ahmed, Morey, and Yaqin have also noted a 'semantic ambiguity' in the term 'Muslim writing' arguing that the ambiguity is apparent in the recognition of 'Muslim' writers who may range from "authors self-identifying as Muslims, or those for whom the rituals and inner promptings of faith are at the heart of their sense of identity"[10] and "authors hailing from a Muslim cultural background, for whom God and faith may have receded entirely from their sense of themselves and their affiliations in the

7. Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005), 7.
8. Claire Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 10.
9. Chambers, *British Muslim Fictions,*10.
10. Rehana Ahmed, Peter Morey, and Amina Yaqin, "Introduction." In *Culture, Diaspora, and Modernity in Muslim Writing,* edited by Rehana Ahmad, Peter Morey, & Amina Yaqin, (New York and London: Routledge: 2012), 3.

world."[11] However, they also indicate that between these two extremes there are a "range of positions combining faith and doubt, materialism and spirituality, individualism and community, in ways that undermine the distinct binaries into which those terms typically resolve themselves"[12]

In his elaborated study of fictional representation of Islam in Pakistani Anglophone literature, Nazir identifies that most writers have struggled with how to portray both inward and external religious experiences, probably because the two dimensions are frequently viewed as opposing rather than complementary. Their characters are either religious or secular, leaving the in-between positions identified by Ahmed, Morey and Yaqin, as stated above, comparatively unexplored in their fictional narratives. According to Nazir, there's hardly any characters in Pakistani English novels that came out after 9/11 whose spirituality is in opposition to their rituality and who combine the inward and the external religious dimensions.[13] Even though the majority of novelists attempt to distinguish between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political ideology, the religion is almost entirely represented by the Islamist characters in their works.

Some Muslim writers, however, as Nazir notes, "have demonstrated how this gap can be bridged with the creation of characters who combine the inward and the outward dimensions of Islam in their behavior and thought."[14] Nazir quotes examples of Ustaz Badri in Leila Aboulela's novel *Lyrics Allay* (2010) and Sami in Robin Yassin-Kassab's novel, *The Road from Damascus* (2008), who possess "both worldly ambitious and spiritual aspirations."[15] Ustaz Badri in Aboulela's novel is a Hafiz-e-Quran and a teacher of Arabic, yet he is equally obliged to his family's needs and captivated by his wife's sexual attraction. On the other hand, Sami, in Kassab's novel, initially a non-believer in religion, becomes a moderate but practicing Muslim after going through a series of failures and realizing flaws in his personality and thinking. The third example is that of Hanif Kureishi's infamous story, *My Son the Fanatic* (1994), which represents a father's ambivalent way of seeing his young boy's

11. Ahmed, et al., "Introduction", 3-4.
12. Ahmed, et al., "Introduction", 4.
13. Faisal Nazir, "English Fiction from Pakistan: An Indigenous Literary Tradition?", (PhD Dissertation, The University of Karachi: 2013), 232. http://prr.hec.gov.pk/jspui/handle/123456789/14247
14. Nazir, "English Fiction from Pakistan…", 232.
15. Nazir, "English Fiction from Pakistan…", 233.

inclination towards Islam as a revolt against his assimilation of western culture and ways of life, ignoring the fact that the son has become more organized and disciplined after

discovering his interest in Islam. It is this ambivalence and contradiction in character's relation to religion that is inadequately represented in post 9/11 Pakistani Anglophone fiction.

Other fictional works have also provided nuanced depictions of Muslim characters that highlight the diversity and complexity of Muslim identity. One such example is that of Amir, the protagonist of Khaled Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner* (2006), who enjoys a privileged upbringing as a Sunni Muslim of Afghan descent in Kabul in the 1970s, but also struggles with a deep sense of guilt over his failure to stand up for his best friend and servant, Hassan, when he is sexually assaulted. After emigration to the United States, he grapples with questions of religious faith and spirituality, particularly as he tries to make sense of the suffering and violence that have marked his life. Through the characters of Maya and Sohail, Tahmima Anam's *The Good Muslim* (2006), explores the tensions and contradictions of contemporary Muslim identity in Bangladesh, at a time when religious fundamentalism in the country is on the rise. The novel highlights the diversity of Muslim experiences, showing how different people interpret and express their faith in different ways. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2008) by Mohsin Hamid and *Home Boy* (2009) by H. M. Naqvi also explore the similar themes of complex nature of Muslim identity. Both Changez and Chuck, the main protagonists of the novels, struggles with questions of identity, belonging, and cultural difference when they experience discrimination and marginalization as Muslims in the U.S. Both novels ultimately challenge simplistic categorizations of Muslims and instead invite readers to engage with the nuanced experiences of Muslims living in a post-9/11 world.

Irshad Abdulkadir's *Prodigal* fills the gap in this tradition by portraying a character that embodies both inward and outward religious and cultural experiences. The novel challenges the concept of Islamic being a monolith and unidimensional religion, rather it advocates for its multi-dimensionality that resurfaces through the novel's main character's involvement in both worldly and spiritual affairs. As similarly pointed out by Kanwal in her study of Kamila Shamsie's novels that "Muslims across the globe cannot be generalized as one homogeneous group, given the vast differences in the public performativity and private beliefs of radical, secular, and moderate Muslims from various sects,"[16] Abdulkadir's novel

16. Aroosa Kanwal, "After 9/11: Islamophobia in Kamila Shamsie's Broken Verses and Burnt Shadows". in *Imagining Muslims in South Asia and the Diaspora: Secularism, Religion,*

also comments on various characterization of Muslims as Islamist, Radical, or Moderate based on their individual beliefs and acts and contests that individuals cannot be labeled in terms of fixed categories.

Contemporary Paradigm of Islamic Thought

The broadest divisions in Islam follow differences in authority and leadership – the tradition of Sunni, Shi'a, Ismaili, and so on – and then differentiate between legal schools of thoughts, and emphases on spirituality or rationalism.[17] Various scholars have attempted to map out this variation in Islamic thought, especially in the second half of the 20th century. These scholars have generally classified the division within the Islamic community into different groups, and sub-groups, based on their understandings of various Islamic principles and the social, cultural, and political practices of Islamic teachings. As a general principle, most of the scholars have suggested a tri-part division. Leonard Binder, for instance, divides Muslims into three core groups namely: Secularist, Modernist, and Traditionalist,[18] whereas, Fazlur Rahman distinguishes them as Modernist, Fundamentalist, and Reformist.[19]

Besides Binder and Rahman, other scholars have also offered similar discourses and mapping analyses. William Sheperd, for instance, has categorized the Islamic schools of thoughts based on their ideological orientation and relation with Tradition, Modernity, and Secularism. He further differentiates them as Radical and Moderate Secularism, Islamic Modernism, Traditionalism, and Neo-Traditionalism (both Accomodationists and Rejectionists), and Radical Islamism.[20] Contrary to the Western stereotypical representation of Islamic groups, Sheperd's classification has been made according to the approach and style of the group's message. For instance, the modernists represent liberal thinking within Islamic revival, Islamists refuse blind following of legal ruling of medieval Islamic era, and the traditionalists emphasize on Islamic scholarship, teaching, and preaching. While Youssef M.

Representations, edited by Claire Chambers and Caroline Herbert, (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 197.

17. Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction,* (London: Routledge, 2006), 6.

18. Leonard Binder, *The Ideological Revolution in the Middle East*, (New York: John Wiley, 1964).

19. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*. 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1979).

20. William E. Shepard, "The Diversity of Islamic Thought: Towards a Typology." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3 (1987): 307-335.

Choueiri divides Islamic fundamentalism into Revivalism, Reformism, Radicalism in the backdrop of specific social and historical circumstances,[21] John L. Esposito distinguishes four positions or attitudes toward Islamic modernization and socio-political change, namely:

Secularists, Conservative, Neo-traditionist, and Islamic reformist.[22] Another scholar, John O. Voll classifies various Muslim groups based on four styles of action: Adaptationist, Conservative, Fundamentalist, and the Personal and Individual Islam.[23] On the other hand, Charles Kurzman divides Islam into three separate categories: Customary Islam, Revivalist Islam, and Liberal Islam.[24]

While some studies appear to counter the Western misconception about Islam and Muslims, and seek to clarify whether all Muslims groups are prone to violence, or sympathize with those who carry out violent acts, others have been conducted to serve a specific political agenda, particularly after 9/11, which are mostly grounded in the stereotype and preconceived notion of Islam being solely responsible for the rise of tension between the West and the Muslim world, and being a religion in dire need of new interpretations and social reforms. Cheryl Bernard's *Civil Democratic Islam*, for example, provides a framework to the U.S. foreign policymakers that how should the United States deal with Islam. While offering a seven-part typology of Muslims–radical fundamentalists, scriptural fundamentalists, conservative traditionalists, reformists, traditionalists, modernists, mainstream secularists, and radical secularists–Bernard emphatically proposes a strategy to the U.S. authorities as to which Muslim groups should be supported and which should be opposed.[25] As the academic Jasser Auda has rightly pointed out that this classification of Islamic groups is a judgement with regard to US foreign policy and is not clearly related to Islamic law, Western values or modernity.[26]

Most of these studies, however, tend to distinguish the Islamic thought through a

21. Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism.* (London: Continuum, 1990).
22. John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics.* (Syracuse University Press, 1991).
23. John O. Voll, *Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World.* (Syracuse University Press, 1994).
24. Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Source Book.* Oxford University Press, 1998).
25. Chrryl Bernard, *Civil Democratic Islam; Partners, Resources and Strategies,* (Rand Corporation Santa Monica: 2003), 47.
26. Jasser Auda, 'Classification of Islamic Trends,' quoted in Tessa Kintail, "The Innovations of Radical Islam", (Master's Dissertation, Bangor University: 2017), 38.

Westernize conception of left/right spectrum, which does not accurately reflect the reality.[27] Alternately, some scholars have also proposed typologies that do not classify the Islamic thought along a left/right dimension and seek to achieve a greater degree of accuracy and truth. For example, Tariq Ramadan doesn't assign any left/right label to his classification of various trends of Islamic thought. Instead, Ramadan positions these trends on the basis of their attitude towards religious texts and reason. His typology of six tendencies in Islamic thought features Scholastic Traditionalism, Sufism, Salafi Literalism, Salafi reformism, Political literalism, Salafism, and Liberal reformism.[28] Similar to this approach, Abdullah Saeed makes no attempt to tie his typology to a left/right system of organization, rather he proposes a classification of Muslims based on the differences on several areas including religio-political differences, legal differences, theological differences, differences in the emphasis on spirituality, and differences in the emphasis on the rational aspects of Islam. Saeed identifies eight broader trends among contemporary Muslims namely: Legalist Traditionalists, Theological Puritans, Militant Extremists, Political Islamists, Secular Liberals, Cultural Nominalists, Classical Modernists, and Progressive Ijtihadis.[29] Both Ramadan and Saeed have made successful attempts to avoid the pitfalls that most scholars have succumbed to and demonstrated that the Western oversimplified methods of interpretation could lead to misconception about contemporary Muslim thinking which is otherwise too dense and complicated.

Within the specific context of Pakistan, Muhammad Qazim Zaman's book *Islam in Pakistan: A History* provides a historical survey of origins of various orientations of Islam in the sub-continent and how they provided a basis for the making of a modern Muslim state called Pakistan. His survey suggests that the emergence of various doctrinal orientations of Islam in the sub-continent, such as Deobandi, Brelvi, and Ahl-e-Hadith, that he terms as traditionalists, were in response to the political context of colonial rule, which points to the fact these categories have only emerged recently, i.e. during the 19th century. Also, he emphasizes that these doctrinal orientations are not abstract entities but rather defined by the people who adhere to and represent them. Further, by focusing on the diversity of Islamic thought and practice in the region he ultimately challenges essentialist understandings of

27. Alex Griffith, "Typologies of Islamic Thought", *E-International Relations*, (2011): 1, https://www.e-ir.info/2011/08/30/typologies-of-islamic-thought/
28. Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, (Oxford University Press: 2004).
29. Abdullah Saeed, *Islamic Thought: An Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 142.

Islam and highlights the dynamic and changing nature of religious beliefs and practices. [30]

Kersten's Taxonomy of Contemporary Islamic Thought

Possibly the most exhaustive and systematic survey of all trends of contemporary Islamic thought is presented by Carool Kersten, who identifies three broader categories namely 'Traditionally and Socially Conservatives', 'Reactionary', and 'Progressive Islamic Discourses'. These categories, however, refer to ideas rather than the people, as Kersten clarifies that "it is very well possible to be a pious and socially conservative Muslim, faithfully adhering to the religious traditions of Islam, while at the same time subscribing to progressive political ideas."[31] Similarly, a reactionary Muslim may opt to lead a life on the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad and his companions and peacefully preach his ideas to fellow Muslims without having a political agenda or imposing his thoughts to others through force or violence. While Kersten's taxonomy encompasses a wide landscape of contemporary Muslim world, from South East Asia to Europe, Middle East to North and South Africa, and North America, he also points out parallels and contrasts among key thinkers, philosophers, and intellectuals hailing from different geographical locations. More importantly, he includes Muslim female intellectuals alongside advocates of religious pluralism, who have seldom featured in any previous study on Muslim thinking.

The first category in Kersten's taxonomy '**Traditionally and Socially Conservatives**' refers to the Muslim groups who strictly adhere to the centuries-old Islamic doctrines, social values and customs. However, Kersten warns not to confuse them with the so called "traditionalists" whose thoughts are more radically oriented. Also, giving them the title of "moderate" is inaccurate as the followers of this trend consider themselves truly devoted believers.[32] Similarly, for the second cluster of ideas that he terms as '**Reactionary**', Kerstens points out that various denominations used for the groups proclaiming these ideas are often too vague and confusing. He takes the example of the term Salafism as broken down by the political scientist Quintan Wiktorowicz, who distinguishes three Salafistic groups:

30. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Islam in Pakistan: A History.* (Princeton University Press: 2018).
31. Carol Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in The Muslim World: Trends, Themes, and Issues,* (Routledge: Taylor Francis Group: 2019), 3.
32. Kersten, *Contemporary Thought,* 7.

"purists," "politicos," and "jihadis."[33] According to Kersten, the first group 'purists' cannot be associated directly with reactionary ideas as they are not involved in politics, but engaged in spreading Salafism through non-violent and non-political means, mainly through education and personal conduct. The other two groups, 'politicos' and 'jihadis', however, can be considered as Islamists due to their political agendas.[34] Nevertheless, not all Islamists are to be considered as politicised Islamists, nor do they all condone the use of violent means. Kersten, therefore, uses the term 'reactionary' for those Islamic groups who express general discontent about the circumstances in the Muslim world and are searching for a solution to solve these situations using the past Islamic traditions. The third group of ideas, which Kersten refers to as '**Progressive Islamic Discourse**' relates to perspectives that are frequently labelled as 'modernist' or 'liberal', but which, in his opinion, are not entirely acceptable terms for a thorough description. These ideas tend to advocate for a creative, critical, and future-oriented assessment of Islamic thought while attempting to find its proper place in the current globalized and postmodern world. The progressive thinkers offer their points of view in a straightforward and frequently challenging manner. Since their thoughts are outside of Islam's traditionalistic viewpoints, they straddle the line between acceptable and unacceptable, and conservative and reactionary thinkers frequently criticize them.[35]

Problem Statement

Muslim identity is shaped by a variety of factors including religious beliefs and practices, cultural norms, political ideologies, social class, and regional and national identities. No single category can capture the full range of Muslim identity. In the context of the contemporary paradigm of Islamic thought discussed in the previous section, the present study argues that it is difficult to conceptualize Muslim individuals in terms of fixed categories like "Traditionalist," "Modernist," and "Islamist," being abstract concepts. Identity is a complex phenomenon and individuals can have multifaceted identities, which cannot be easily reduced to permanent categories. Individuals and groups may shift their identities over time in response to changing social, political, and cultural contexts. Therefore, any such categorization is subject to re-evaluation and reinterpretation.

33. Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006): 207–239, As quoted in Kersten, *Contemporary Thought*, 11.
34. Kersten, *Contemporary Thought*, 12.
35. Kersten, *Contemporary Thought*, 16.

Methodology

The selected text for the present paper is studied in the light of the taxonomy proposed by Carol Kersten to see how the novel depicts various characters that represent the intellectual trends of Islamic thought in the contemporary Muslim world. Also, how the author has woven different Islamic worldviews into the fabric of the plot and character development. The analysis primarily focuses on Akbar Ali Samandar, the protagonist of the novel, and the characters that come into close contact with him, and influence his thoughts and actions. The researcher has used textual analysis as a research method. For this purpose, Catherine Besley's method for textual analysis has been used that carefully examines the text to reveal the embedded meaning. In her essay *Textual Analysis as a Research Method,* Besley claims that any real textual analysis depends on getting hold of how meaning works. According to her meaning is created through how people communicate with each other using things like words, sounds, and images. It affects the way we think about important things like values and rules, and can even cause us to fight for what we believe in.[36]

Analysis and Discussion

The novel *Prodigal* is set in post 9/11 Pakistan and England and is divided into three sections. Each section is set on a different location and in a different phase of the protagonist's life. The central story revolves around the protagonist Akbar Ali Samandar, the elder son of a Pakistani father, Javed Ali, who is the Chief Justice of the Sind High Court, and an English mother Lilian Armstrong. The antagonist Bairam Khan Afridi, is an orphan, living with his aunt and uncle in a poor neighborhood at suburbs of Karachi and having little education at a local mosque. The two meet each other in the very first chapter of the novel on their journey to the tribal area of FATA, a Taliban controlled territory near the Pak-Afghan border. Similar in physical appearances and age but dissimilar in their family and social backgrounds, both Bairam and Akbar, take on their path to "serve Allah"[37] in their separate domains; the former "by joining the mujahideen" and the later by "taking courses at a religious retreat."[38]

36. Catherine Besley, "Textual Analysis as a Research Method." In G. Griffin (Ed.), *Research Methods for English Studies,* (Edinburgh, NJ: Edinburgh University Press: 2013), 167.

37. Irshad Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, (India: Pan Macmillan, 2019), 5.
38. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 5.

From the very beginning, both young men feel a bond and are attracted towards each other. Akbar feels inclined to Bairam for the sake of finding a friend at last in his otherwise secluded and confined life surrounding his close family members. Bairam on the other hand is curious to understand why a privileged person like him with a family and education has chosen to abandon his modern style of living "all for faith".[39] While Bairam is clear about his objective of becoming a Mujahid, guided by "the fiery speeches of a fiery cleric"[40] and understands the value of the path Akbar has chosen, Akbar himself is caught under a dilemma and doesn't make out of his decision to abandon his luxurious life to live in the hard terrains of FATA: "Bairam murmured…I'm only running away from hell.' 'All of us in the truck are running away from something.' 'No Akbar, not everyone, you're special.' 'Come on Bairam, I don't see that.' "[41] Both the characters part their ways towards the end of the first chapter and thereafter the plot mostly proceeds with Akbar as the center of attention. From the outset, it becomes clear that Bairam's thoughts represent the cluster of ideas that Kersten terms as 'reactionary' since he intends to join the group of 'jihadis' who believe in armed struggle to enforce their agenda. On the other hand, what category does Akbar belong to is unclear, at least in the beginning, since he comes from the class of Pakistani society which is mostly liberal in their ideas and actions, but he leaves the comfort of his home and liberal environment in search of finding true meaning of his faith in the territories unknown to him.

Through flashbacks in the text, the reader comes to know about Akbar's life from childhood to adolescence; to the point when Akbar leaves home to go to Dar-ul-Aman, a religious seminary in FATA. Another dimension of his personality is his spiritual connection with God. Born with the numbers 786 (traditionally meaning 'in the name of Allah') inscribed on the left side of his chest,[42] Akbar establishes a strange connection with God from early childhood. He surprises his mother, Lilian, with his articulation of feeling presence of God in things around him: "He designed that.' 'How do you know?' Lilian would ask. 'Because only He can do that.' Would be the reply. Looking at a flower on one occasion, he had whispered in Lilian's ear, 'That colour is Him…the smell is Him…every flower, nothing but Him,' and 'a mother's love is Him'."[43]

Akbar's academic interests are also evident from the early age, as he trains himself in

[39]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 7.
[40]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 6.
[41]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 7.
[42]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 18.
[43]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 19.

various subjects with remarks of "genius" and "extraordinary talent"[44] at Karachi Grammar School, and learns different languages from his mother. At the age of eight, he completes recitation of Quran at Beyt-ul-Salah, a madrassa nearby his home, and starts memorizing it with intention of becoming a *Hafiz.* However, he soon abandons it after a fearful encounter at imam's chamber where one of the attendants in madrassa tries to molest him. After completing his schooling in Pakistan, with the guidance and encouragement of his father's elder brother, Ahmed Ali, Akbar proceeds to Europe, to study and submits a thesis on "The Muslim Footprint in France". [45] It is during his travelling to conduct research for the dissertation that Akbar first encounters the discrimination against Muslim immigrants to Europe, which lays the foundation stone for his decision of choosing the path of becoming a Muslim scholar. After returning back to Pakistan, Akbar is perplexed about his future and continuing further studies at Western institutions. Once again, his spiritual guide, his uncle comes to his aid and tries to clear his mind: "You are required to study rules and principles that will channelize your thoughts. No one expects you to adopt a religious lifestyle."[46] The character of Akbar's uncle, Ahmed Ali, represents the 'progressive' strand of Islamic thought as per Kersten's taxonomy. Being himself an ex-Cavendish scholar and visiting fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, Ahmed Ali believes in more scholarly and creative approach for his nephew's religious edification. Javed Ali, Akbar's father, however, is more skeptical towards his brother's approach, which represents the so-called 'liberal' mindset of the Pakistani elite class:

> You have to believe in it – if it is to be successful,' Ahmed Ali said, looking at his brother. 'Take him back to religion…to Dars-e-Nizami studies.'
> 'How will that help? Don't forget he gave up on religious studies when he was nine.'
> 'We'll make him realize that he has a duty to God to complete what he left unfinished.'
> 'By reciting prayers he doesn't understand?'
> 'He'll read the Quran again and, if need be, learn its meaning. He'll be trained to recite, memorize and internalize…the word of God. That will give meaning to his life.[47]

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[44]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 20.
[45]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 13.
[46]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 23.

Akbar reluctantly agrees to his uncle's suggestion and starts studying at Beyt-us-Salah, where one of his instructors at madrassa, Abdullah Saleh, is a 32 years old Austro-Hungarian converted Muslim. Ostensibly, Abdullah Saleh is a traditionally conservative Muslim who believes in following "what is prescribed" and "not looking beyond that."[48] Also, his argument with Akbar over interaction with good Christians or Buddhists demarcates his traditionalist approach: "Perhaps, those who are ahle-Kitaab – people of the Book – such as Jews and Christians are exceptions. All others are Kaffir or non-believers. They should be excluded from one's circle of friends."[49] So, he considers Akbar's line of questioning as "bidah… or innovation."[50] Nonetheless, his conventional thoughts are always confronted with the rational reasoning by Akbar.

Obviously, the people from the class Akbar belongs to are skeptical of his religious views and they even label him as "a Talib in our midst", "fundo", and "bearded bastard"[51] Even his younger brother Kamran perceives his decisions as irrational and against the social norms. He, on the other hand, always tries to clear misconceptions of people around him about stringent nature of Islam through his knowledge and rational reasoning. When his sister's friend Tooba Shirazi, a fashion model and designer, asks for his opinion of her profession, he tactfully deals with the issue and informs that Islam "disallows public display of a woman's body. But in your case we have to consider whether modeling is acceptable in our society"[52] Also, when Tooba points to a roadside hoarding with pictures of a girl in hijab showing beauty cosmetics to a female customer with the caption "Welcome to the realm of Islamic beauty products…Plus a whole range of Islamic cosmetics for beautifying the Begum,"[53] Akbar clarifies that the commercialization has nothing to do with Islam and "It's an example of free trade."[54] Again, when he is confronted by some of his brother's friends at a party at a beach house who wants to know why he has chosen to study at a madrassa, he politely explains "There are four major advantages – learning one's religion, learning Arabic, and learning in an environment in which Urdu is the medium of instruction…and where all

[47]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 21.
[48]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 47.
[49]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 47.
[50]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 48.
[51]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 43-44.
[52]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 38.
[53]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 39.
[54]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 39.

students are treated alike, despite differences in class or ability."[55] His justifications, however, are of no use as they indulge him into a heated debate that soon turns into physical scuffle. Through this confrontation between Akbar and his brother's friends, Abdulkadir has tried to expose the so-called liberal elite of the Pakistani society that view Islam with the Western gaze of being 'extremist' and 'violent' without knowing about its fundamental principles and how it advocates for peace and prosperity.

On another occasion, Akbar elucidates on the misinterpretation of Quranic text when he explains the meaning of the word *uttaku* with reference to fear of Allah as an obligation for a devoted Muslim. He justifies that the word *uttaku* is translated as 'fear' in non-Arabic languages in "the sense of being frightened"[56], whereas "*uttaku* refers to a reverence which is like love, which fears to do anything not pleasing to the object of love…a fear of losing the beloved. Also, fear may be equated with concern, that is, a concern for the well-being of the beloved."[57] Throughout the narrative Akbar is involved in many such conversations with people who have monolithic and biased views about Islam. At Beyt-us-Saleh Akbar shines as a student and grabs accolade from his teachers, peers as well as foreign scholars. However, the syllabus at the madrassa is unable to quench his thirst for a profound knowledge of Islam and become a more "aware Muslim"[58]. But when he finds the dark truth that the madrassa is being used as a hideout for weapons and militants, he leaves Beyt-us-Saleh once again. Dejected and outrageous he departs on the journey to the wilderness of tribal areas seeking peace for his troubled soul and spiritual enlightenment.

The second part of the novel 'The Highlands' accounts Akbar's life in the FATA. His quest for truth leads him to discover the tolerant and rational face of Islam at Dar-ul-Aman, a famous Islamic research center, situated in Taliban-controlled tribal areas of Pakistan, where he is groomed in meditative studies under the guidance of a Sufi Master Jalal Baba. Settling into the local scene, he learns to manage the seminary, marries a tribal girl Asmina, who is raised by Jalal Baba in his house as his adopted daughter, and ultimately interacts with a Taliban Commander, who turns out to be his old friend, Bairam Khan. Akbar benefits from the mystical persona of Jalal Baba, vast collection of Islamic texts in the library of Dar-ul-Aman and the secluded environment that gives him chances to meditate for longer hours. The initial conversation between Akbar and Jalal Baba represents the purpose of a true Muslim

[55]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 43.
[56]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 55.
[57]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 55.
[58]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 87.

when Akbar says that "I am done with Islamic studies devoid of human considerations. I feel religion should be a pulsating objective for living, breathing people, not something confined to the cold reasoning and arid discourse of academics. More than anything I want to be in touch with humanity…"[59] Jalal Baba's reply seconds his thoughts: "You serve God, when you serve mankind…so you don't have to look far for Him."[60] During his time in Dar-ul-Aman, Akbar comes face-to-face with the militants and their terror spread through their strict religious teachings and by killing those poor villagers who they doubt for spying for the Pakistan army. As their rigid madrassa culture is contradicted to the scholarly environment of Dar-ul-Aman that "rankled as a challenge in their eyes,"[61] their fear of losing control over the villagers is further aggravated by Akbar's enlightening teaching to madrassa students, entrepreneurial schemes of turning the orchards adjacent to the seminary into bee-hives business, and encouraging sports culture through cricket and football matches. They, however, are unable to take any action against him due to the sanctity of Dar-ul-Aman and the revered status of its administrator, Jalal Baba.

Another development of the character of Akbar comes in the shape of love, when he falls for the beauty of Asmina, the adopted daughter of Jalal Baba, who reluctantly agrees to marry them off only after the approval of the girl's immediate relatives from Afridi tribe living in Kyber Agency of FATA. The twist of events brings Bairam Khan into the story once again as a suitor of Asmina from her own tribe, but this time as a Taliban Commander, with the pseudonym of Tarrar Khan. Akbar confronts him and is shot on leg during the scuffle but is saved by a militant who tells the commander that Akbar had saved him once when he was attacked by bees. Finally, Akbar is married to Asmina, but she dies after giving birth to twins, a boy and a girl. Her death leaves Akbar devastated and questioning his faith once again as he thinks of himself abandoned by God. Despite his closeness to Him that he felt since childhood, Akbar thinks that God did not listen to his prayers to save his dearest wife. Overwhelmed by the tragedy of his wife's death, Akbar returns back to his home in Karachi. However, his brief time spent in Dar-ul-Aman and married life proves to be another turning point in his life and he proceeds to explore new avenues for his spiritual awakening.

The third part of the book entitled 'The Far Country' describes Akbar's life as a scholar in Cambridge University where he conducts research for a dissertation on Sufi doctrine and encounters enlightened western liberalism exemplified by the people he meets.

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[59]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 116.
[60]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 116.
[61]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 143.

While living among the scholars from different parts of the world and arguing on religious doctrines with his professors, Akbar's religious insights are put to test in a secular and liberal social setting. During his visit to a Muslim professor's home for seeing a manuscript he accidently uncovers a secret sleeper cell of terrorists and becomes a hero when law enforcement authorities apprehend them with his help. However, he is agitated when his supervisor Dr. Carla associates them with Islam and his argument that 'jihad' is different from 'terrorism' presents the novel's strong condemnation of monolithic perspective of the West towards Islam:

> 'Difficult to believe', she said. 'Professor Gibrilliac an Islamic terrorist… impossible.'
> 'Why the epithet "Islamic"?' Akbar interjected.
> 'What do you want me to say…Jewish?' she spat out.
> 'Why not mention the name of the terrorist organization mentioned in the report…it would be more accurate.'
> 'Don't tell me what to say, Akbar. I choose my own words.'
> 'In this case, Dr. Berkoff, I think you are wrong…very wrong.'
> 'Why are you so defensive about the Islamic aspect…of terrorism?'
> 'Because it has its origins in the political strategy of a particular sect of Muslims…terrorism per se is not part of Islamic dogma or practice…even the word 'jihad', at its core, implies no more than fighting for the faith…without recourse to terror.'[62]

Again, when he comes to Dr. Carla's house for his tutorial, she, under the spell of consumed alcohol, lashes him with her words: "you're all the same…you Muslims…can't face the truth about yourselves in your scramble to get to paradise…your stricken face says it all…can't take it from a woman anyway…and I thought you were different…but you're no better than the rest…dishonest and fake…for all your humbleness and piety…you're just a fake, Akbar…fake…fake…fake!"[63] His confrontation with Dr. Carla over her insulting attitude towards his religion ignites a sense of rage inside him, and he stumbles upon a sexual encounter with her. After the incident, he returns to his dormitory with confused mind, questioning his 'animalistic rage' and whether it was only his need to be with a woman or has

[62]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 265.
[63]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 280.

he lost his quest? But he regains balance in his life again by indulging in his thesis work. The description of the little episode of sex is more like expression of a repressed desire of two confronting worlds to devour each other:

> It happened in a flash. A violent madness fired their beings. They tussled like bloodthirsty savages, forcing their bodies together…her taut frame like an arched bow against his sinewy hardness…each taking possession of the other with a rage that seemed to make the room shake. The rage that welled up in Akbar wanted to destroy her…to still the vicious tongue that taunted him and all he stood for…to subjugate the superiority with which she reduced him to nothingness, by asserting his manhood over her. They were out to devour one another. Time stood still as they vented their anger…slaking a limitless thirst.[64]

The story reaches its climax when Akbar confronts Bairam Khan once again who conducts a terrorist attack on a hospital, where Akbar's grandmother is admitted. The terrorist under the command of Bairam Khan takes hold of the hospital and make the patients their hostages. They are soon surrounded the Special Forces and killed. Bairam Khan, however, takes refuge in the same room where Akbar and his grandmother are. He threatens to blow the hospital off with his suicide jacket, when Akbar takes hold of his M4 rifle and kills him. The aftermath of the event turns him into a hero and a savior of humanity. After completing his studies, he returns to Pakistan and starts working Tooba, his sister's friend, on the welfare project for the poor people belonging to minority groups. The novel ends on a positive note with a final proclamation in its epilogue that expresses the hope of bridging the gap between the polarized and colliding worlds and suggests a way forward for global peace: "When two persons wish to come together, there is always a way."[65]

Conclusion

One of the strongest points of the novel *Prodigal* is its description of Islam from an insider's point of view as Irshad Abdulkadir himself is a devoted practicing Muslim. Further, his first-hand experience of Western scholarly practices, being a Cambridge graduate, provides authenticity to his narration of intersecting debates between Islam and Western modernism. While on the one hand, the novel highlights contradicting views within different

[64]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 284.
[65]. Abdulkadir, *Prodigal*, 303.

sects of Islam, on the other hand, it exposes western monolithic views of Islam being a religion that supports 'extremism' and 'violence'. Throughout the text, Abdulkadir maintains his position as an advocate of Islam as a peaceful religion that holds humanistic virtues such as tolerance, honesty, humility, and compassion as its core values. But these values are often overlooked by the western dominant powers that use the political strategies of a minor segment of Islamic society as an excuse to create hatred against Islam. In his interview to *The News on Sunday,* Abdulkadir tells that "I was intrigued by the bipolarity of the life of an Islamic transcendentalist…Akbar provided a suitable medium for unraveling this phenomenon which includes a substantive life on earth [in addition to] a dimensionless, mystical experience in an outer world."[66]

The novel's protagonist Akbar goes through different phases in his life that nurture him as a mature and responsible person. He is a Muslim by birth but his faith is challenged at various points in the narrative, first when he finds that his alma meter is being used as a hideout and transaction point by terrorists, and secondly when his wife dies after giving birth to his children. He becomes skeptic of his divine connection that he feels from his childhood while struggling to grapple with the grief of his wife's tragic death. However, as a true Muslim, he submits to the will of Allah and transforms into an enlightened person who seeks to serve his religion by serving humanity. Throughout the novel, Akbar wrestles with different faces of oppositions and conflicts: Bairam Khan as an embodiment of rigid and extremist version of Islam; the society he lives in as liberal and apologetic as they think him being a practicing Muslim as an act of shame; scholars who have monolithic point of view and tend to take side with terrorists; and the Western dominant discourse in the form of Dr. Carla. The author successfully interweaves various characters that represent the contemporary intellectual Islamic thoughts into the plot that helps shape the narrative. The novel clearly marks a distinction between a true Muslim with in-depth knowledge of Islam and its practices and those who either follow its monolithic interpretations – such as Bairam and Abdullah Saleh - or who fall victim to its Western stereotype representation, like the people in the party at the beach, and so-called religious experts in his university. *Prodigal* remarkably brings forth the positive image of Islam and pleads a strong case to advocate for the world's most misunderstood religion.

The study finally concludes that it is difficult to conceptualize Muslim individuals in

[66]. Taha Kehar, "Polarity and the search for tolerance". *The News on Sunday*. April 12, 2020. https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/642313-polarity-and-the-search-for-tolerance.

terms of fixed categories like "Traditionalist," "Modernist," and "Islamist," being abstract concepts. Identity is a complex phenomenon and individuals can have multifaceted identities, which cannot be easily reduced to permanent categories. Individuals and groups may shift their identities over time in response to changing social, political, and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, the taxonomies proposed by scholars like Carool Kersten may be construed as categories not to stereotype or essentialize Muslims but rather as frameworks for understanding the diversity and complexity of Muslim thought and identity. These taxonomies, therefore, may not be taken as prescriptive or definitive but rather as tools for analysis and interpretation. It is necessary to realize that Muslim identity is shaped by a variety of factors including religious beliefs and practices, cultural norms, political ideologies, social class, and regional and national identities. No single category can capture the full range of Muslim identity. Hence, any study of Muslim thought and its diversity requires an understanding and openness to diverse perspectives and experiences of individuals who inhabit them, and any categorization of such individuals will always remain prone to revision and reinterpretation.

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