

Academic or Apologetic Studies on the Qur'an and Tafsir: A Critical Analysis of Theses and Dissertations at the Graduate School of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta (2019–2023)

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ABSTRACT

This study critically evaluates Majid Daneshgar's central thesis in *Studying the Qur'an in the Muslim Academy*, which posits that Qur'anic and tafsir scholarship within Islamic universities predominantly manifests as normative-apologetic discourse rather than rigorous academic inquiry. Through a case study analysis of 2019-2023 graduate theses and dissertations from Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University (UIN) Jakarta, the research applies the methodological framework developed by Andrew Rippin, Aaron W. Hughes, and Daneshgar to distinguish between academic, normative, and apologetic studies. Findings reveal that the majority – though not entirety – of examined works demonstrate a predominantly apologetic orientation in their engagement with Qur'anic texts and exegetical traditions. This systematic investigation contributes empirical evidence to ongoing scholarly debates about epistemological paradigms in contemporary Islamic higher education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Majid Daneshgar, in one of his works, *Studying the Qur'an in the Muslim Academy*, states that the study of the Qur'an in most Islamic universities is more worthy of being called an apologetic study of the Qur'an. Therefore, these studies cannot be classified as academic in the strict sense. Daneshgar formulated this statement following a comparative study of Qur'anic studies in Iran (his country of origin), Malaysia (where he pursued his doctoral studies), and New Zealand (where he was teaching at the time). He then defines apologetic study as “a set of entrenched scholarly approaches and practices within the worldwide Muslim academy that effectively shield Muslims from critical thinking about Islam and the Qur'an” (Daneshgar, 2020). Subsequently, Daneshgar stated that the apologetic study prioritises the defence of orthodoxy rather than methodology and analysis that is critical of Islam. In their other work, Daneshgar and Aaron W. Hughes define an apologetic approach aimed at “the preservation and propagation of religious teachings, elucidating what is imagined as proper Islamic teaching to the devout” (Daneshgar & Hughes, 2020a).

Daneshgar's statement above continues Hughes' criticism, which was previously also argued in the context of Islamic studies in the West. Hughes engraves, “The academic study of Islam as carried out in religious studies departments has become so apologetic that it has largely ceased to function as an academic discipline, preferring instead to propagate a theological and apologetic representation of the religion” (Hughes, 2012).

Daneshgar's thesis has received a mixed response from several scholars, which can be read from several articles in the journal *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 33 (2021). Aaron W. Hughes appreciates Daneshgar's project, which highlights the importance of academic studies in the Islamic academic context by importing and adapting some of the theories produced by Western scholars. He appreciates Daneshgar's work because “[He] not only argues for importing and adapting certain Western theories of religion into the Islamic academic context but also makes room for both Sunnī and Shi'ī scholarship.” (Hughes, 2020) Meanwhile, Sajjad Rizvi argues that the political and intellectual context in studying Islam and the Qur'an should not be ignored, whether it is studies conducted in Western academic institutions or Muslim academic institutions (Rizvi, 2020). In line with that, Lien Iffa Nafatu Fina stated that Daneshgar's thesis was overgeneralised and did not follow what she found at UIN Yogyakarta, where she has been teaching so far (Fina, 2020). Fina's statement and Daneshgar's thesis prompt the authors of this article to investigate further whether Qur'anic studies at Islamic universities in Indonesia fall under an apologetic framework or reflect a critical academic approach.

Notably, the academic approach seeks “to examine in an ostensibly non-partisan manner the many diverse historical, religious, legal, intellectual, and philosophical contexts in which Islam and Islamic studies have been articulated” (Daneshgar & Hughes, 2020b). More essentially, Devin Stewart and Gabriel Said Reynolds have emphasised that the critical study of the Qur'an and tafsīr was not an invention of the moderns but was also carried out in the medieval Muslim scholarship tradition, such as al-Sijistānī (d. 316/928) and al-Dānī (d. 444/1052) when critically analysing the orthography of the Qur'an (Stewart & Reynolds, 2016). Likewise, Muslim scholars analyse historically the Makkiyyah and Madaniyyah *sūrah*s. However, such historical-critical studies were not widely applied in studying the Qur'an and tafsīr and Islamic studies in the context of the Muslim Academy, as Daneshgar alleged.

To examine the thesis that Qur'anic studies in Muslim academic institutions are predominantly apologetic and normative, this research focuses on the study of the Qur'an and tafsīr at State Islamic Universities, with a specific case study at the Graduate School of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta. This study analyses a selection of thesis and dissertation manuscripts produced at the Graduate School between 2019 and 2023 that address topics related to the Qur'an and its interpretation. These manuscripts are evaluated using academic and apologetic criteria previously formulated by the researchers.

Several researchers have undertaken similar efforts by analysing scholarly interpretation manuscripts produced at State Islamic Higher Education Institutions (PTKI-Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam), particularly in the form of theses and dissertations. Some studies have examined thesis manuscripts from various Islamic higher education institutions in Indonesia. For instance, Imam Taufiq, in his research, analysed theses submitted at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta from 2012 to 2014 (Taufiq, 2015). Similarly, Abdul Mutakabbir studied thesis manuscripts at IAIN (State Institute for Islamic Studies) Palopo, focusing on works produced between 2020 and 2021 (Mutakabbir, 2022). These studies attempted to periodically examine the model of tafsīr studies in Indonesia in a certain period based on the thesis manuscripts of students specializing Qur'anic studies in Islamic higher education institutions.

The two studies above specifically examined thesis manuscripts, while several other studies used theses and dissertations as the object of study. The research conducted by Abu Bakar in his thesis at UIN North Sumatra is one example. In his research, Abu Bakar intends to elaborate the development of tafsīr studies in Indonesia by studying the thesis manuscript in the field of tafsīr at the Postgraduate School of UIN North Sumatra from 1995-2009 (Bakar, 2012). A similar research was conducted by Nurdin Zuhdi who studied dissertations at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta from 1984 to 2013 (Zuhdi, 2016). In contrast to the two studies which focused on thesis and dissertation manuscripts, by taking a case at UIN Alauddin Makassar, Asrul Syam studied both theses and dissertations from 2014 to 2019 (Syam, 2020).

Previous studies examined the theses and dissertations in each institution that was the object of study (UIN Yogyakarta, UIN Alauddin, UIN North Sumatra, and IAIN Palopo). Meanwhile, several other studies, such as those conducted by Uun Yusufa and Nur Rohman in each of their research, sought to broaden the research object by sampling manuscripts in several Islamic higher educations. In his research, Yusufa examined the model and development of thematic interpretation at UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta and UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta based on his analysis of the dissertations in each institution (Yusufa, 2015). As for Hamka Hasan et al, in their research took more complex samples by researching theses and dissertations at five PTKIs, namely UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, UIN Alauddin Makassar, UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, and UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, for the period of 2000-2020 (Hasan et al., 2021). In line with Hasan's research, Nur Rohman in his research also took samples from five PTKIs, namely UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, UIN Alauddin Makassar, UIN Walisongo Semarang, and UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, for the period of 2015-2021. However, unlike Hasan, who studied thesis and dissertation manuscripts simultaneously, Rohman specifically only studied dissertation manuscripts in the five Islamic higher education institutions (Rohman & Ahmad, 2022).

Based on the previous studies, the position of this study is clear. First, based on the object of study, this study specifically examines theses and dissertations at the Graduate School for the

2019-2023 period. With the object of this study, this research indirectly continues the research conducted by Suwito, which specifically examined dissertations at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta from 2008 to 2014 in the study of Islamic Studies in general (Suwito, 2014). However, unlike Suwito's research, this study examines theses and dissertations on the Qur'an and tafsir studies. Second, regarding its thematic focus, this study examines the academic and normative dimensions of thesis and dissertation manuscripts on Qur'anic studies at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta. This aspect has not been addressed in the previous studies discussed above. Based on these two considerations, this research offers both novelty and urgency, positioning itself as an integral continuation of previous studies that seek to understand, critique, and map the development of Qur'anic studies within Islamic higher education institutions in particular, and in the broader Indonesian context in general.

2. METHODS

The main data of this research is the theses and dissertations at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta for the period of 2019-2023, which analyze the Qur'an and its interpretation. The period from 2019 to 2023 is based on the leadership period of Prof. Dr. Jamhari, MA and Prof. Dr. Asep Saepudin Jahar, MA, as the Director of the Graduate School. The selection of the 2019-2023 period is none other than based on logical-pragmatic reasons, namely related to the availability of existing data, whereas in previous periods, such as the 2011-2015 leadership period of Prof. Dr. Azyumardi Azra, MA, and the 2015-2019 of Prof. Dr. Masykuri Abdillah, thesis manuscripts and dissertations were not all stored in the repository.

After a search through the repository, 33 thesis manuscripts and 13 dissertation manuscripts were found that studied Qur'an and tafsir at the Graduate School in 2019-2023. The existing studies in the form of theses and dissertations can be mapped into several study themes, such as the study of Qur'anic verses, the study of tafsir texts, the study of *mufasssirs'* thought, the study of the methodology of tafsir, and the thematic studies. Besides tafsir studies, one dissertation analyses the Seven Readings of the Qur'an (Nawawi, 2020), and a thesis on the publication of Qur'anic text (*muṣṣḥaf*) in Malaysia and Indonesia (Nurkhayati, 2021). Among these research models, research that focuses on studying the texts of tafsir from various perspectives is a study model often carried out at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta.

As mentioned earlier, studying the Qur'an and tafsir at the State Islamic Higher Educations ideally has an orientation to historical-critical-methodological studies. This historical-critical-methodological study of the Qur'an and interpretation by several scholars such as Andrew Rippin, Aaron W. Hughes, and Majid Daneshgar was later termed academic scholarship, as opposed to normative studies, let alone apologetic.

According to Rippin, academic studies in Qur'anic interpretation do not dwell on normative aspects, related to the right or the wrong interpretation. Equally, it is not apologetic that it seeks to display the superiority of Islam and the Qur'an. However, it emphasises the analysis of why and how the *mufasssir* interprets the Qur'an in certain way (Rippin, 2020). On the other hand, the apologetic study of tafsir, according to Daneshgar, has several characteristics, such as the rejection of Western scholarship, the ignorance of Sunnī sources by Shi'a researchers and vice

versa. We may add, normative study does not orient towards the development and contribution of knowledge, both from the theoretical and methodological facets.

In practice, apologetic studies do not lead a person to become *a relentlessly erudite researcher* but rather a person who is forced to believe and follow the beliefs of previous opinions, findings, and traditions (Daneshgar, 2020). Meanwhile, according to Hughes, apologetic studies, termed ‘Islamic Religious Studies’, are Islamic studies that are not based on critical-methodological studies but are theological with manipulative sources and produce distorted (not comprehensive) conclusions of the study (Hughes, 2014).

Finally, in his review of *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, vol. 1, Rippin asserts three criteria for academic scholarship: First, “academic writing engages an ongoing community of scholarship, not one that represent only the cultural heritage of the subject itself” (Rippin, 2016). This means that a researcher of a specific theme should refer to the academic debate and the findings of the previous scholars on the subject, either written in English, Arabic, Indonesian, or any other languages; either written by Muslims or by non-Muslims; and either by Sunnī or by Shi‘ite scholar. He or she then proposes a thesis statement as a new contribution of knowledge. The second criteria that Rippin suggests “academic scholarship is frequently, although not always exclusively, grounded in history in its approach.” Lastly, “academic scholarship is written for an audience of academic peers—that is understood to be the audience’s common factor; the language used, therefore, speaks not to other social categorization” (Rippin, 2016). This last category is, according to the authors of this article, the one that many Muslim researchers fail to accomplish, especially in their studies of the Qur’an and tafsīr. They forget that they write for academic audience and readers: Muslims and non-Muslims. They do not write for Muslims only. It is from Muslim scholar for academic peers.

These characteristics of academic and apologetic studies can be traced through three foremost works, namely *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary Deconstruction and Reconstruction* (2014) by Hughes, “Academic Scholarship and the Qur’an” (2020) by Rippin, and *Studying the Qur’an in the Muslim Academy* (2020) by Daneshgar. In analysing the theses and dissertations on Qur’anic interpretation at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta, the authors of this article will refer to these characteristics.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on several existing theses and dissertations, and on the above criteria, some manuscripts do not participate in all the norms of academic works, and some other fulfil many criteria. Among them is a dissertation entitled “*Dimensi Radikalisme dalam Penafsiran Ibn Taymiyyah*” (2021), in which the author not only analyse Ibn Taymiyyah’s interpretation of the verses of *jihād* and *qitāl* but also elaborate on the factors that influence Ibn Taymiyyah’s interpretation. Such an analysis model is in line with Rippin’s understanding of academic research of tafsīr, that does not focus on finding the most appropriate meaning of the Qur’an but focuses on discussions about how the work appeared, what are the background to it, and how the author of the tafsīr compiled his interpretation (Rippin, 2020). At the end of his analysis, the researcher also relates the results of his research to the main theme of his study, which is about radicalism in Islam, more specifically in the context of contemporary terrorism.

In addition, the author argues in his dissertation that Ibn Taimiyah's interpretation can be classified as soft textualism, which was influenced by his ideology and the socio-political context of the time. This finding, according to the author, is to strengthen the conclusions reached by Nasaruddin Umar, Jamhari, Yahya Michot and Jon Hover, and to disagree with the findings of Natalie Goldstein and Kholilurrahman (Danial, 2021). With this thesis statement, the dissertation is not only descriptive, but more importantly argumentative.

The academic study of Qur'anic interpretation may also be seen in a thesis entitled "*Tafsir Minoritas: Diskursus Non-Muslim dalam al-Qur'an Perspektif Abdullah Saeed dan Farid Esack*" (2020). This thesis generally captures the views of two modern Islamic thinkers, Abdullah Saeed and Farid Essack. The analysis presented is not only descriptive but also critical, as when the researcher comments on the consistency of the opinions of Saeed and Essack as follows,

"Dari uraian-uraian yang ditunjukkan Abdullah Saeed di atas, peneliti belum menemukan jawaban atas persoalan yang diajukannya sendiri. Saeed membiarkan persoalan penyaliban dan kematian Yesus tanpa memberikan penjelasan alternatif" (Muhammad, 2020).

(From the descriptions shown by Abdullah Saeed above, the researcher has not found an answer to the problem he posed. Saeed left the issue of Jesus' crucifixion and death without providing an alternative explanation)

"Sayangnya Farid Esack rupanya lupa bahwa produk penafsiran dari para mufassir klasik juga dilingkupi latar belakang sejarah konflik antara Islam dan agama-agama di luar Islam termasuk Kristen dan Yahudi. Hasil penafsiran mereka terhadap agama-agama tersebut tidak lepas dari cerminan situasi politik yang ada. Dengan demikian, penjelasan Essack yang menyayangkan produk penafsiran yang mengeneralisir makna kafir juga kurang tepat. Menurut penulis, produk penafsiran atas al-Qur'an memiliki tujuan dan konteksnya masing-masing" (Muhammad, 2020).

(Unfortunately, Farid Esack forgets that the products of interpretation by the classical mufassir are also surrounded by the historical background of conflicts between Islam and religions outside Islam, including Christianity and Judaism. The results of their interpretation of these religions cannot be separated from the reflection of the existing political situation. Thus, Essack's explanation that regrets the product of interpretation which generalises the meaning of *kāfir* is also inappropriate. According to the author, the product of interpretation of the Qur'an has its purpose and context.)

The existence of critical analysis as seen in the above statements, makes this research more objective and argumentative and far from descriptive. In Rippin's view, the term 'critical' is understood as an objectivity that arises because the researcher can keep a distance from the object of his research. (Rippin, 2020) In the case of the above research, the object is Abdullah Saeed and Farid Essack. The researcher's comments on the thoughts of the two figures show that the researcher can keep his distance to produce an objective study.

In addition to being critical, academic study of Qur'anic interpretation in Hughes' view also has a characteristic of self-reflexive discipline. The term means that the studies on the Qur'an, tafsīr, ḥadīth, and other objects of Islamic research need to be analysed using other sciences (non-Islamic sciences), such as social sciences and humanities.

"The academic study of religion, when it works best, is a highly theoretical, critical, and self-reflexive discipline that must square insider accounts of what they consider "religion" (or, even better, "religious experience") means with a set of accounts provided from other disciplines associated with the humanities and social sciences" (Hughes, 2014).

The use of non-Islamic sciences is certainly intended so that a researcher (Muslim) can critically analyse Islamic sources that are the object of his or her study. As Hughes points out, scholars are led to apologetic research due to a lack of self-reflexivity, in which a scholar does not dare to study, research, and discuss matters principled in his or her religion (Hughes, 2014).

The use of social sciences and humanities, as well as other sciences in the study of the Qur'an and interpretation, such as history, philology, semiotics, hermeneutics, semantics, and so on, makes the study of the Qur'an more dynamic. Research conducted by combining two or more sciences, which is then referred to as interdisciplinary studies, will eventually produce new knowledge. Likewise, interdisciplinary research is an alternative answer to new problems that arise (Sardar & Henzell-Thomas, 2018).

The thesis entitled "*Sosiologi Tafsir (Kritik Fenomena Bid'ah dalam Tamshiyah al-Muslimin Karya KH. Ahmad Sanusi)*" (2020) is one example. In it, the researcher uses a sociological approach to capture the KH Ahmad Sanusi's interpretation. The research focuses on discovering how KH Ahmad Sanusi constructs and produces certain views in his interpretation (Nur'aeni, 2020). Another example of interdisciplinary study of tafsir is a dissertation entitled "*Kota dalam Perspektif Penafsiran Interdisipliner: Kajian Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir oleh Ibn 'Ashur (1879-1973)*" (2021). The object of study is Ibn 'Ashur's *al-Tahrir wa Al-Tanwir*. In his analysis, the researcher used another science to expand and deepen the existing discussion: the science of urban governance. This can be seen in the discourses offered, such as 'the relationship between the city and the sustainability of faith', where the researcher argues that religious values need to be considered in the philosophy of development to realise an ideal and balanced city development (Muhammad, 2021). The author's argument is then associated with urban governance theories so that in conclusion, the research not only targets academic spaces but also has significance in the social field, especially about urban governance. Likewise, a dissertation entitled "*Ekoteologi dalam Tafsir Kontemporer*" (2021) is another example, not only discussing the theoretical aspect of Qur'anic interpretation but also its significance in ecology.

The above thesis and dissertation may be categorised as academic research in some respects. In addition to the fact that there was no indication of tendencies in certain ideologies, the studies also used references containing Indonesian, Arabic, and English sources. The richer the references (including references from foreign languages) used in a study, the more comprehensive the research will be. The references are both written by Western non-Muslim scholars and Muslim scholars, by Sunni scholars and by Shi'ite scholars. Conversely, limiting sources will ultimately result in incomplete and distortive conclusions. For example, limiting the sources only to those of Muslim scholars or Sunni scholars, since the others are considered not reliable because of their beliefs, can be dismissed as unscholarly work.

Theses and dissertations on Qur'anic interpretation at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta accommodate Arabic and English reference sources, although Indonesian sources are the most dominant in some studies. However, referring to Daneshgar's research, which found a polarisation in the use of Sunnī and Shī'ah sources, this can also be seen in the tafsir studies at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta. Sunnī tafsir dominates the works of tafsir that are the object of the study, such as Ibn 'Ashur's tafsir, al-Qurṭubī's *al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'an*, 'Alī Al-Ṣābūnī's *Ṣafwah al-Tafāsir*, Al-Shaukānī's *Fath al-Qadīr*, Wahbah Zuhailī's *Tafsir al-Munir*, and so on. None in this 2019-2023 period, thesis or dissertation on Shī'ite tafsir. Similarly, only very occasionally are Shī'ī sources are mentioned in these studies.

In his dissertation entitled “*Ekoteologi dalam Tafsir Kontemporer*” (2021), as many as 10 tafsirs of modern Indonesian and Middle Eastern scholars were used as objects of study, and all of them were Sunnīs. Likewise, in the dissertation entitled “*Kisah Nabi Musa dan Fir’aun dalam al-Qur’an: Studi Perbandingan Penafsiran Ishari Klasik dan Modern*” (2022), the two works of tafsir used are also Sunnī interpretations, namely *al-Baḥr al-Madīd fī Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-Majīd* by Ibn ‘Aḡibah and *Khawāṭir al-Sha’rāwī* by al-Sha’rāwī. Of course, some of the Indonesian tafsirs that are used as research objects in the theses and dissertations, such as *Faiḍ al-Raḥmān* by Ṣāliḥ Darat, *Tamshiyyah al-Muslimīn* by Ahmad Sanusi, *Tafsīr al-Azhar* by Hamka, *Tafsīr al-Mishbah* by M. Quraish Shihab, *Tafsīr al-Qur’anul Majid* by Hasbi Ash-Shiddiqie, tafsir by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, and other Indonesian tafsirs are all Sunnī.

In his research, Daneshgar in addition to highlighting the polarization of Sunnī and Shī’ah studies in the Muslim academy, he also emphasises the phenomenon of Muslim society’s rejection of studies conducted by Western scholars, which is represented in studies that do not accommodate the works of Western scholars, both as object of study and as a source of reference.

In the Indonesian context, Western scholarships are not completely ignored and rejected. Some figures and institutions reject it, but others are more open to the study of Islam carried out by Western scholars. Some figures, such as Adnin Armas, Syamsuddin Arif, Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, Adian Husaini, and several others, are directly rejecting most Western studies about Islam. Likewise, institutions such as INSISTS (Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought) are at the forefront of rejecting and criticising orientalist and revisionists (Rahman, 2019). These figures consistently write Islamic studies that have anti-Western nuances, because the Western scholarship contradicts with the Islamic worldview. The main principle, to use Daneshgar’s term, is “self-sufficiency”, i.e. the assumption that the sources written by Muslim scholars are sufficient. Therefore, Muslims must be able to meet their needs without relying on Western scholarship (Daneshgar, 2020).

The existence of IAIN as a State Islamic University represents the commencement of academic studies of Islam in Indonesia, namely the mixture of Western academic culture and the Middle Eastern scholarship tradition that influences Islamic studies at IAIN. The intellectual network between Indonesian scholars with the Middle Eastern scholars has been demonstrated by Azyumardi Azra in his many works (See Azra, 2004). The Indonesian and Western scientific networks began when President Soekarno invited Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Principal Cyril James from McGill University as guests of honour in Indonesia in 1957. Soon after, many Indonesian scholars studied in the Canada and other Western universities and then returned to Indonesia. These scholars occupy important positions in the government and educational institutions, such as Mukti Ali, who became the Minister of Religious Affairs; Harun Nasution, who became the Rector of IAIN Jakarta; and several other scholars. Therefore, through the existing policies and the curriculum designed at IAIN, Islamic studies in the West and Western academic culture directly influence Islamic learning in Islamic higher education (See further in Abbas, 2021).

Theses and dissertations on tafsir at the Graduate School generally incorporate reference materials in Indonesian, Arabic, and English languages. However, it is important to note that English-language references do not necessarily reflect engagement with Western scholarship. Many Indonesian, Malaysian and other Middle Eastern scholars write their articles in English.

Therefore, the mere presence of English references cannot be taken as a definitive indicator that a study meets the standards of academic discourse as recognised in Western scholarly traditions. Closely related, none of the 33 theses and dissertations on tafsīr at the Graduate School explicitly or implicitly reject Western scholarship. Hamam Faizin, for example, referred to Western scholars on the translation and Qur'anic translation, such as Andrew Chesterman, Sandra Bermann and Catherine Porter, Peter G. Riddell, A.H. Johns, and others in his dissertation on Indonesian translation of the Qur'an. (Faizin, 2021) Similarly, Zikri Riza in his M.A. thesis on sufistic interpretation of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's *The Study Quran*, referred to the works of Alexander D. Knysh, William C. Chittick, Kristin Zahra Sands, Gerhard Bowering, and others, in addition to the Arabic references by Abū al-Wafā' al-Taftāzānī, Muḥammad Ḥusan al-Dhahabī, Sahl al-Tustarī, and others (Riza, 2022). This is the expectation of academic scholarship. i.e., to participate and engage with ongoing community of scholarship.

Unfortunately, however, there are many theses and dissertations that we examine do not refer to the findings of the global academic community. Many of them only refer to the theses and dissertation written in Indonesian, or to Indonesians' writings. Meanwhile the subject has been studied by many scholars, either in English, Arabic, or other languages. See for example, the thesis written by Habibulah on al-Zamakhsharī's view of Qur'anic eloquence, where he only refers to the Indonesian scholars' writings, such as Nurwahdi, Thib Raya, Khairil Malik, Syamsul Wathani, and Yayan Nurbayan (Habibullah, 2022). Likewise, when discussing Muhammad Asad's translation of the Qur'an, Durrotun Nashah only refers to Indonesian researchers' studies which have analyzed Muhammad Assad, such as Zaimul Asroor, Abd. Hakim Abidin, Lili Saputri, and Jullu Wara (Nashah, 2022).

Furthermore, while we expect theses and dissertation to be argumentative to analyze, criticize the theories or to create new theories, some studies tend to be descriptive and do not present a critical argumentation. An example is a study entitled "*Dimensi Esoterik Pemahaman al-Qur'an: Analisis Tafsir Fayḍ al-Rahmān Karya Ṣāliḥ Darat dalam Surah Al-Baqarah*" in which the researcher elaborates descriptively the interpretation of Ṣāliḥ Darat. Some of these descriptions include (Rifai, 2021)

"According to Ṣāliḥ Darat, there is no faith for a person who has doubt in his heart..."

"Ṣāliḥ Darat in this context interprets..."

"Ṣāliḥ Darat in *Majmū'ah al-Shāri'ah* states, it is obligatory for any believer to pay zakat..."

"Ṣāliḥ Darat tried to interpret the above verse by saying that faith in the apostles means..."

"Furthermore, Ṣāliḥ Darat said that patience is of 3 kinds ..."

"The esoteric meaning (ishārī) of the above verse according to Ṣāliḥ Darat is that..."

The above narrations show that the dissertation only describes Ṣāliḥ Darat's interpretation. The analysis is left at the end. The reference in the footnote is also mostly his work.

One of the critical benchmarks in a religious-based research, including a research on Qur'an and Qur'anic interpretation, is that the researcher can maintain "a personal distance from the object of the study (maintaining a personal distance from the subject)" (Rippin, 2020). There are two dimensions in this, namely how a (Muslim) researcher (can keep his distance from his Islamic belief, and how a (Muslim) researcher can keep his distance from Islamic ideology or Islamic schools that he affiliates to. In the existing thesis and dissertation manuscripts, we rarely find indication of ideological tendencies in certain Islamic schools, but some manuscripts contain

styles, premises, sentences and languages that are not neutral and indirectly show exclusivity. Here is an example of the premises:

“Al-Qur’an tidak hanya diyakini sebagai petunjuk (hudan) bagi manusia, melainkan diposisikan juga sebagai khazanah ilmu dan pengetahuan” (Muhammad, 2021).

(The Qur’an is not only believed to be a guidance (*hudan*) for humans but is also positioned as a treasure of knowledge).

The above sentence indicates that the researcher did not consider non-Muslim readers and assumed that the study was only aimed at the Muslim community. Academic scholarship is inherently open and not limited to Muslim audience. It is written for academic community. The above sentence can be replaced with a more neutral statement, as follows:

“Dalam keyakinan umat Islam, al-Qur’an tidak hanya diyakini sebagai petunjuk (hudan), melainkan diposisikan juga sebagai khazanah ilmu dan pengetahuan.”

(In Muslims’ belief, the Qur’an is not only believed to be a guidance (*hudan*) but is also positioned as a treasure of knowledge).

The above two sentence have the same point. However, the second sentence is more neutral since not all humankind believe in the Qur’an as a guidance. It is only the belief of Muslims.

Another example, writing a thesis on the epistemology of al-Qurṭūbī’s Qur’anic exegesis, A. Fauzi starts his writing with this opening statement:

“Al-Qur’an merupakan sumber utama ajaran Islam yang harus dipahami, diamalkan, dan memberi solusi bagi persoalan kehidupan umat Islam yang semakin kompleks. Dalam rangka inilah penafsiran al-Qur’an dilakukan agar kandungan al-Qur’an bisa dipahami secara benar oleh umat Islam sehingga al-Qur’an mampu menjadi pedoman untuk menata kehidupan kita di dunia dan akhirat” (Fauzi, 2021).

(The Qur’an is the main source of Islamic teachings that must be understood, practiced, and provide solutions to the increasingly complex problems of Muslim lives. In this context, the interpretation of the Qur’an is carried out so that the content of the Qur’an can be understood correctly by Muslims so that the Qur’an can be a guide to organize our lives in this world and the hereafter)

The question is, what this statement has to do with al-Qurṭūbī’s epistemology of tafsīr. More importantly, to whom this statement is addressed. It is quite clear that in his mind, this thesis is written for Muslims—not for the academic peers.

Similarly, Habibullah who discusses the Eloquence of the Qur’an according to *al-Kashshāf* and *Ṣafwat al-Tafsīr*, writes:

“Al-Qur’an merupakan kitab yang mempunyai nilai sastra tinggi, kendati bukan kitab sastra. Hal ini terlihat dari susunan bahasanya yang fasih dan indah, sehingga tidak ada manusia yang mampu menciptakan Bahasa seindah Bahasa al-Qur’an, hanya orang-orang yang mempunyai kepandaian yang cukup dalam bidang ilmu sastra yang mampu merasakan keindahannya” (Habibullah, 2022).

(The Qur’an is a book that has high literary value, even though it is not a literary book. This can be seen from the fluent and beautiful arrangement of the language, so that no human being is able to create a language as beautiful as the language of the Qur’an, only people who have sufficient intelligence in the field of literary science are able to feel its beauty)

These narrations show that the researcher does not separate himself from his religion. Therefore, Rippin emphasised that if researchers cannot detach from their religious values, the studies will tend to be apologetic and not academic.

“Certainly, academic scholarship must be free of religious dogma; all would agree. It must be free from the tendency to make absolute truth claims. It does not accept anything as ‘obvious’ (Rippin, 2020).

The term ‘absolute truth claim’ is the biggest challenge in studying the Qur’an and tafsīr academically. Belief in the absolute truth of the teachings of Islam and the Qur’an can ultimately lead researchers (Muslims) to get caught up in this attitude. For example, in his dissertation entitled “*Dimensi Ekoliterasi dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur’an Kontemporer: Telaah Tafsir Al-Tahrīr wa Al-Tanwīr Karya Ibn ‘Āshūr (1879-1973)*,” the researcher uses an apologetic statement that favours Islam and the Qur’an, as follows:

“Penelitian ini sekaligus ingin membuktikan bahwa al-Qur’an dapat menjadi instrument untuk menyadarkan manusia betapa pentingnya menjaga alam semesta ini” (Qardlawi, 2021),

(This research also desires to demonstrate that the Qur’an can be an instrument to make people aware of the importance of protecting the universe...)

The above sentence does not directly state that the Qur’an is the most effective instrument to overcome the environmental crisis. However, in the view of eco-theological scholars such as Richard Foltz, Muslim environmentalists through their writings tend to be apologetic by simply stating that the Qur’an has eco-centric principles and tend to show the superiority of Islam in the face of non-Muslim communities (Foltz, 2001). Soumaya Pernilla Ouis also emphasised that instead of only seeking the legitimacy of the eco-centric principle in existing religious texts, Muslims should focus on finding practical solutions related to the existing environmental crisis (Ouis, 1998).

Finally, it is true that there is a dilemma surrounding Muslim researchers in their academic study of the Qur’an and tafsīr. On the one hand, the belief in the truth of the Qur’an in all its aspects (history, authenticity, redaction, and content). On the other hand, the researcher’s academic critical stance to the Qur’an and tafsīr. Many Muslim researchers trapped in apologetic studies, as seen in some of studies above, because they could not manage between the two. Likewise, too much respect towards the previous mufasssir and ‘ulamā’ made some researchers entangled in the dimension of *taqlīd*, which made the research non-argumentative, uncritical, and tended to be descriptive in its analysis. However, this is not to say that many Western scholars do not trap in apologetic studies. Rippin and Hughes have showed many of western studies of Islam could not be called academic. Rippin even describe some studies as “pseudo academic Islamophobic approaches to the Qur’an” (Rippin, 2012).

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that, though not entirely, the Qur’an and tafsīr studies at the Graduate School of UIN Jakarta between 2019 and 2023 tend to display apologetic characteristics. This tendency is evidenced by several indicators observed in the analysed theses and dissertations: (1) the absence of Shī’ah sources, both as objects of study and as references; (2) a descriptive, uncritical, and non-argumentative mode of analysis; and (3) the insider position of the researchers, which often prevents them from maintaining critical distance, resulting in subjective formulations and one-sided affirmations regarding the truth claims of Islam and the Qur’an, as detailed in the discussion section.

However, this apologetic tendency is not absolute. In terms of engagement with Western scholarship, often seen as a hallmark of apologetic resistance, many analysed works incorporate references in at least three languages: Indonesian, Arabic, and English. Moreover, while Shī’ah

perspectives are remarkably absent, the authors of this article do not find explicit anti-Shī'ah narratives or polemics within the texts. In the authors' view, this absence may reflect the broader academic culture or institutional curriculum rather than deliberate exclusion. Daneshgar also argues that the polarisation between Shī'ah and Sunnī perspectives in higher education is often reinforced explicitly or implicitly through curriculum design and syllabi, which tend to prioritise certain sources while marginalising others.

Considering these observations, some theses and dissertations do not participate in all the norms of academic works, and some other fulfil many criteria. It would be inaccurate to categorise the studies of Qur'an and tafsīr at the Graduate School as entirely apologetic. While they may lack the critical rigour characteristic of academic (in the Western scholarly sense) studies, they also do not fully conform to the defensive posture typical of apologetic scholarship. Based on Daneshgar's typology, apologetic, neutral, and academic (critical), (Daneshgar, 2020, p. 21) most of these studies fall within the "neutral" category: neither fully apologetic nor academically critical.

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