

Beyond the Veil of Patriarchy: Female Subjugation in Nadeem Aslam's Novel "The Golden Legend"

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Abstract

The present study is a feminist analysis of Nadeem Aslam's novel The Golden Legend (2017). The study draws on feminist literary theory that questions the historically and socially constructed gender hierarchies, which work out women as subordinate, irrational and the "Other" as opposed to men. This paper explores the representation of the patriarchy and its maintenance by literature, drawing from important feminist thinkers such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and contemporary theorists. The novel is a backdrop to the religious extremism and minority persecution in Pakistan today and hence is a key text for feminist investigation. The study is qualitative in nature, using an interpretative method to analyze secondary data from the novel, research articles, journals, and theoretical texts. The results show that The Golden Legend depicts a society which places demands and limits on women, demands for modesty, limits to the home sphere and primary tasks to the kitchen and housework. Violence or social ostracism is the consequence of any violation of these norms. In addition, the novel illustrates double marginalization, marginalization of women, but also, of the non-Muslim characters Helen and Nargis (Margaret) based on religious minority. It is illustrated how religious extremism prevents widows from remarrying and how honor culture is used to justify honor killings on unconfirmed rumors. Moreover, government officials and state policies are also repressive forces: when a widow must forgive her husband's killer. The study ends with the conclusion that feminist literary theory offers a strong framework to reveal the various and overlapping systems of oppression that limit women's lives. The Golden Legend presents a sort of network of oppression of women, the three forces of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and state. In the novel, the individual oppression of women is shown to be caused by a combination of the oppression of women by gendered, religious, and institutional forces. Keywords: Feminist literary theory, The Golden Legend, Nadeem Aslam, patriarchy, religious extremism, women's repression and Pakistan.

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Introduction

Feminist literary theory refers to the analysis of all the ways through which the political, economic, social as well as psychological oppression of women takes place in literature and other cultural forms. In this context various feminist thinkers offer different views related to the issues of women and their role in society (Shastri, 2014). They challenge historical as well as traditional views about the gender in which it was believed that man is rational, strong, protective, and decisive; however, women were seen as "emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive (Sultana, 2011; Tyson, 2014). Historically these gender beliefs have been employed to explain the current unequal situation between man and woman. However, feminist thinkers came up to challenge such gender division and the social inferiority of women. They said that the differences between man and woman is biological and should not be used as the criterion for judging and that women are not inferior to man (Parveen & Qadir, 2019; Khilaf, 2021).

They further argued that the gender division and role assigned to each gender is not a natural construct but in fact a historical and social construction. They are given particular role as historical and social norms have built these views about man and woman. Historically, however, these beliefs, which were actually the social

construct were used to elevate the status of man with respect to woman and to justify the social hierarchy between man and woman. At the same time these beliefs were given a sense of universality, therefore, they remained stable as well as unchallenged for many centuries. In this context and in order to challenge that socially constructed views that renders men a higher social, political as well as domestic position, many women thinkers came up to challenge such beliefs that solidified the hierarchical division that was based on the notion of gender (Siddiqi, 2016). In this regard Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) made a discussion over the writer such as Milton, Pope, and Rousseau and Virginia Woolf through her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) challenged the patriarchal ideology and portrayed the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood (Barry, 2009). Similarly, and in more recent times, Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) is also very important. According to Simon de Beauvoir, the system of patriarchy features that "men are essential subjects (independent selves with free will), women are contingent beings dependent beings controlled by circumstances (Robeyns, 2003; Tyson, 2014).

Men are agents of change, as well as system of meaning in this regard. But a woman must not have her independent system of meaning, women's notion of meaning is related to the meaning actually constructed by man. In such a way, women are not only different from men but also inferior to men (Tyson, 2014). In this social system, woman thus is viewed as 'other'. The woman, as an individual, has no identity, indeed she is designated as man's Other, as less than man, as a kind of alien in man's world, as a human being less than a man (Tyson, 2014). The feminist thinkers were engaged in giving their voice to one for one to two centuries, but the 'women's movement' in 1960s started once again the old feminist issues and challenges to the stronghold of patriarchy. In this context the modern feminist thinkers pointed out the concept that in the nineteenth century fiction the only concern of women characters was of marriage and the selection of their partner. However, there were very few women characters that earned their living and were independent in their lives. Moreover, during the next decade there had been shift in the feminists' thought and it became even more radical in exposing the system and working of patriarchy. In the regard specific analysis was made of the works of male writers that how male writer in their books constructed the typical image of women. Similarly, the feminist thought in the 1980s was even more altered and borrowed from the theories like Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism. The background of psychoanalytic theories helped these theorists understand what the psychological effects of patriarchy are and how in the circulation of norms man as well as women internalize these norms taking them as universal as well as natural values. Likewise, Marxism also facilitated these feminist thinkers to understand the exploitation of economic resources and the backwardness of women subjects under the dictates of patriarchy in economic and political domains. At the same time, they also changed their attention from the male authors to "exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience" (Barry, 2009).

This entire feminist history can be encapsulated in the words of Showalter who states that there was "a feminine phase (1840-80), in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then a feminist phase (1880-1920), in which radical and often separatist positions are maintained; and finally, a female phase (1920 onwards) which looked particularly at female writing and female

experience" (quoted in Barry, 2009). Nadeem Aslam (1966--) is a Pakistani award-winning novelist. His first novel titled *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993) won the Betty Trask and the Author's Club First Novel Award. His second novel titled *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) won Encore Award and Kiriya Prize. This novel was also shortlisted for International Dublin Literary Award. He is also the author of books such as *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), *The blindman's Garden* (2013) and the *Golden Legend* (2017). The *Golden Legend* is the most recent novel of Nadeem Aslam that was published in 2017. This novel depicts the religious extremism and the minor and women issues in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Various studies have been conducted in the field of feminist literary theory and this theory has been applied on many novels and short stories in order to study the representation of women in fiction and to expose the various form of patriarchy. In this regard Aryanika (2016) made a feminist analysis of Abidah el-Khalieqy's novel *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. The researcher came up with the understanding that this novel portrays the struggle of women to get their rights and freedom in their social and educational context. In this respect, the character of Anisa is very significant as she fights to protect the reproductive rights of females and control over one's body. Aryanika (2016) further states that the writer of these novel stresses the idea that no one has any right to dominate the body of other people. Thus, the body of a woman is a woman's body. Aryanika (2016) came up with more findings that Annisa receives treatment in her family that is different from her brother. In this family, the education is not even permitted for women at the same time. In addition, when her husband, Samsuddin, marries again Annisa is not treated fairly, but rather, she is denied justice. It is an unfair treatment on both a psychological and physical level. This reflects that in this novel the different kinds of patriarchy and their impact on the lives of women characters. In this similar way Diastuiti (2014) studied Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* from the feminist perspective. The researcher came up with findings that this novel portrays the women characters as lacking the opportunity of self-actualization as well in the system of entailment. This notion of entailment in this novel limits females from the ownership of the property.

This system of ownership of properties is limited to only male heirs. This can be observed in the Bennet family who does not have a male heir; this is the reason that their property is entailed to Mr. Collins. There are almost no opportunities for women to make their self-identities real, at the same time. Women characters are also not given a choice of what to do with their marriage; in this too they require the approval of their families. The researcher also observed that the protagonist of this novel Elizabeth represents the women's right to individualism, freedom of choice and right to equal opportunity. Elizabeth asserts her personality and is downright forthright in expressing her emotions. At the same time, she also openly expresses her moral right to speak about herself. Thus, the character of Elizabeth seeks to dismantle the old structures of patriarchy and assert herself and her position in society, as stated by the Diastuiti (2014). Thakur (2014) have done feminist analysis of Taslima Nasrin's novel *Lajja*. The overall goal of this research work was to examine the marginalisation of women in the novel especially in the context of religious minorities. In this respect the researcher had a realization that this novel provides a plethora of issues for the discussion in relation to the feminist perspective.

This novel abounds with such instances in which the women protagonists are treated in an unfair manner by the male fundamentalists in the Muslim community as

well as by male members of the family and also in the social life. Moreover, Thakur(2014) arrived at the conclusions that the double marginalization of women character in this novel occurs. On the one hand they are marginalized generally on the basis of their gender that is considered to be weak. But on the other hand, the body of the woman which is marauded, tortured and abused just because of the narrow nationalistic and fanatic mindset” (p. 66). Moreover, according to Thakur (2014) in this novel the concept of gender extremism is tied up with religious fundamentalism. This system of gender as well as the religious extremism subjects the women character such as Maya a brutal torture that causes her death. This way, Lajja portrays the female characters as the victims of not only the patriarchy but also of the religious fundamentalism.

Research Question

1. How is female’s characterization depicted and what formulas of repression are used against the females’ characters in the novel?

Research Methodology

It is a qualitative research study that is deemed appropriate in studying literary texts. In this context Gay (2009) suggests that “qualitative research data is collected on many variables in a natural setting and in this study ideas and things are studied in their natural being and existence.” The qualitative study involves various methods, but this research analysis uses the interpretative method that is seen as a reliable method to find the new meanings in the text. From this point of view, Barryman (2004) and Silverman (2005) prefer the interpretative method as it is very helpful in interpreting texts. The data of this research study has been gathered from secondary sources by using books, research articles, journals and online sources.

Analysis and Explanation

This novel demonstrates repression of female characters in multiple ways. Apart from the system of patriarchy, there are other factors as well that persecute the women characters. First, this novel depicts a society that expects the women to behave in a certain way. It has set the clear codes of conduct for women and if they follow those codes then they will be accepted in the society, however, there is no special reward for following these codes.

“Massud had been fifty-five years old the previous month and Nargis fifty-two years old, and although their meeting and marriage had been in their twenties, as he would confess to her later, he hadn’t had the courage to cast a direct second glance at her until a fortnight after the first, and she had seemed nothing like a real person, with her contemplative calm and beauty.” (Aslam, 2017)

In this passage, Nargis’ modesty, her “contemplative calm and beauty,” is described as her almost untouchable, unreachable quality that is in accord with the novel’s conception of the “good woman” in the patriarchal context. Her quietness and unavailability makes her all the more attractive because she acts the decorum of a wife, is not pushy, not too visible or too accessible. Massud is barely conscious when he first embraces her; even physical intimacy has to be reverent and restrained, not passionate or agency on her part. Any woman who commits a transgression, who moves about in the streets, who is seen in public, or who foregoes this shyness would be in danger of being an outcast. Female virtue is thus created as a virtue of

immobility, of invisibility: a woman's value is in being invisible, her body is a guarded place, and her marriage is a controlled place where even love is controlled.

“Well, most women don't like to show themselves at the door or wander around the lane like” (Aslam, 2017)

The expectation that women avoid appearing at the door or wandering the lane reinforces the strict spatial boundaries of their lives: the home is their designated sphere, while the street belongs to men. This division is not merely about physical movement but about honor and visibility a woman seen outside risks tarnishing both her own reputation and her family's. Inside the house, her domain shrinks further to the kitchen and domestic spaces, where she performs endless, thankless labor. These repeated acts cooking, cleaning, serving become the only acceptable expression of her existence. By confining women to these interior rituals, the novel illustrates how patriarchal control operates through both prohibition and prescription. Thus, a woman's entire identity is reduced to her utility inside four walls, and any longing for the outside world becomes a silent, forbidden transgression.

“In the kitchen Nargis was preparing tea. She switched on the radio when it was time for the news.” (Aslam, 2017)

The fact that Nargis is in the kitchen and the radio is the whole of her world, makes this a point to note: women get a public life only as a remote and disembodied sound; they never get it directly. Likewise, in Helen's case, her father is the dominant male and this domestic enclosure is not limited to the married status. As a wife or daughter, a woman's sphere is the home, her information is mediated by male authority.

“Helen was fixing the breakfast for her father. All the almond trees in the orchard spread their limbs over the little house, and there was Lily, mending the light over the front wheel of the rickshaw he drove for a living. Nargis and Massud had given him some money some years ago, so he could buy the three-wheeled car.” (Aslam, 2017)

There is this passage that reiterates the absolute division of gender within the family: Helen makes breakfast, while Lily mends the light on the rickshaw her father drives for a living, but even this repairing is related to the male economy. The women's work, domestic or mechanical, is utilised to the man's use in his day to day operations. Significantly, it is Nargis and Massud who were able to pay for the rickshaw and who are able to help finance it; even when financial aid is being given by women, their primary identity is still tied to the household service. This man is not seen in the kitchen or repairing anything for the house. This silence is telling: to do so would be to cheapen his honor, and in a world like this one, built on the strict separation of the spheres of men and women, honor is everything. A woman's going out of the house without permission, or her talking with a stranger, or her failure to attend to housework, is interpreted, not as her personal sin, but as an attack on the honour of the family. As the guardians of that honor, the male members are then socially legitimated to discipline and often torture, or even kill, the transgressor in order to regain their honor. This is repression in its most extreme form: the body that of the woman on which honour is guarded. Even the seemingly benign act of walking a lane or of showing up at a door is life and death stakes. This novel thus reveals how "honor" is not a moral property, but a weapon to be made and used by men, and imposed upon women through surveillance, containment and the looming threat of violence.

“Nargis became still as she listened, the newscaster telling her that a young woman had died at the hands of her brothers during the night, an

hour or so after a minaret revealed her trysts with a lover.” (Aslam, 2017)

The newscaster's report vividly shows the lethal force in the repressive system of male honor: “A young woman is killed by her brothers, on the basis of a rumor, after about an hour or so a minaret announces her trysts.” No trial, no proof, no defense. A hint of her sin is sufficient grounds for death. This shows that honor is not a question of what you actually do, but rather what you appear to do and what they say about you. Her sin is judged before any facts can be verified, through the eyes of the community and reinforced by religious institutions such as the Minaret which calls for people to pray. Her brothers are enforcers of male honor and play the roles of judge and executioner. This novel, therefore, sheds light on the systemic nature of honor killing and its roots in societal norms, rather than as an aberration or a flash of passion. This gender repression is exacerbated by religious marginalization. As women of minority groups, they are denigrated for being women and denigrated for being minority religions. They find themselves living in bodies that are sites of overlapping vulnerabilities for being female, and for being religious. This double marginalization can be said to be represented by Helen's character. Her time spent about Massud and Nargis is a time of relative safety and a time of some cross-communal solidarity. If she had been anywhere else, she could have followed a similar path to the fate of the anonymous young woman: a rumor, a call on the minaret and death at the hands of male relatives. It is only in these tenuous, fragile alliances, the novel implies, that women on the fringes can briefly free themselves from the double oppression of patriarchy and religious marginalization.

“Helen was the daughter of the couple whom Nargis had employed as housekeepers. Lily and Grace were Christian and were both illiterate. And Helen – who was now nineteen years old too would have grown up to be an uneducated servant in some Muslim household had Massud and Nargis not provided her with an alternative set of opportunities. They had paid for her education at Zamana's finest schools and she had been an assiduous and brilliant student until three years ago when her mother's life had come to a terrible end. There were several witnesses to the crime, but the murderer was a Muslim and this was Pakistan. The police were initially reluctant to even register a case. Eventually, however, the man was sentenced to life imprisonment – but the day before yesterday Nargis and Massud learned that Grace's killer had been released, as a reward for having memorised the entire Koran. He had served less than a year in prison.” (Aslam, 2017)

This passage uncovers the working of religious extremism as a tool of patriarchy that targets women from minority communities. Her mother Grace is murdered by a Muslim man, and the legal system, and the society at large, barely notices it, leaving Helen to suffer two types of oppression: that of being a Christian woman in a Muslim majority country, and that of a woman whose mother was murdered. The eventual release of the killer, for his memorization of the Quran, is a testament to how religious piety is cynically used to subvert justice. Scripture memory becomes a get out of jail free card, and a Christian woman's life doesn't matter enough to warrant more than a year's sentence for her killer. Religious fundamentalism as power, not spirituality; guarding the bodies of the dominant group's men while throwing minority women's bodies away. Likewise, the daughter of a religious clerk is a caricature of how women

are caught up in the logic of extremism even if they are Muslim. Her brother-in-law (after her husband's death) does not allow her to remarry, citing religious reasons that she should stay "pure" to join her husband in Paradise. This takes away her choice and her friendships, and any possibility of happiness in this world, for the promise of an afterlife. Her body and marriage status is not under her control, but under the control of another male family member who interprets God's reward. In both, religion is invoked as an argument for the subjugation of women: minority women are left unprotected by the law and majority women are locked away on the grounds of "purity". So the novel shows how religious extremism works—be it murder or prohibition of marriage—to maintain women in a helpless position, all women.

"There was the cleric's widowed daughter in the house behind the mosque, her bread waking Massud in the predawn darkness. She had come to live with her father because her husband had been killed by a missile fired from an American drone, a year or so ago, in the faraway deserts of Waziristan.

His daughter was in her early thirties, and after her husband was killed, the cleric had made attempts to arrange another marriage for her, but according to her husband's brother and his militant companions, a holy martyr's widow could never remarry. She had to remain untainted, for her eventual reunion with her husband in Paradise. So her prospective husbands were warned off. One man who persisted was beaten so severely he had lost an eye. Nargis was sure that the cleric and his daughter lived in fear of her former brother-in-law, who had taken up residence at the mosque, to ensure her continued purity." (Aslam, 2017)

This passage shows us the way in which religious extremism turns a woman's grief into a prison. The most basic of human needs, companionship, is denied to the cleric's widowed daughter, killed by the drone strike. The language of martyrdom and paradise is invoked by her husband's brother and his militant companions, who are in control of her body and her future. She has to be "untainted", kept like a relic for a heavenly union, which has only been believed. This is not holy but it is property. Her prospective husbands are violently dissuaded; one man goes blind for sticking around. The former brother-in-law literally resides at the mosque to keep an eye on her "purity" and transform the place of worship into a surveillance post. Her father, a man with a red star tattoo on his forehead, is as compassionate as he can be but lives in fear with her of the zealots who hold religious positions of power over them. This novel therefore uncovers the mechanism of taking women's autonomy in marriage, sexuality, and future life from them in the process of their radicalization. Her basic right to live her life by her own choice is taken away. This widow, unlike Helen, does not have an outlet of education and cross-communal care. Caught between the dead husband's ghostly assertion of ownership and the brother-in-law's brutality, her body becomes a battlefield where men's interpretations of God fight it out for her soul. In addition to the patriarchy and religion system, the government and officials' administrative policies also function as means of oppression towards women characters. This can be seen in the following example.

"Nargis was feeling all sense of comportment slipping away from her, and the man exhaled impatiently. There was a new firmness in the voice when he did speak again:

'You have to publicly forgive him. You have to declare that you want him to be free.'

Nargis tried to place her thoughts elsewhere, on to a more bearable reality. She could think of nothing.

‘You are the dead man’s next of kin, so the forgiveness has to come from you. The last blood relative was a sister, but she left Pakistan and is now deceased.’ (Aslam, 2017).

Nargis is forced and, at the same time, threatened by the government official to forgive the killer of her husband, Massud. This example shows that the government and its officials also act as repressive tools for the women characters in the novel.

The official speaks with no empathy whatsoever, only as a legal requirement: "You have to publicly forgive him. You must declare that you want him to be free. The state weaponized Nargis' family identity by resorting to the argument that "the dead man's next of kin," and it was not a question of justice, but absolution in public consciousness. Furthermore, when the deceased sister is referred to as "left Pakistan" it is suggested that escaping or dying are the only ways to get out of such coercion. But Nargis is not only caught in the trap of patriarchy, but in a bureaucratic system which distorts her grief and uses it for its purposes, stripping her of her autonomy and her voice from her forgiveness, which is supposed to serve the needs of the state and not of her.

Research Findings

The present research come up with the findings that The Golden Legend portrays a society that sets some specific and strict norms for the women to follow. Any transgression from those norms mainly causes ostracism from the social system. In the regard this novel portrays the norms such as modesty or restricting one's movement to the house for the women characters. Furthermore, the women characters are mainly assigned the domestic role. Their responsibility is mostly related to kitchen, and one can hardly find any role of the female characters in the life of Zamana (imaginary city of the novel). Basically, both Helen and Nargis are portrayed as doing domestic chores and it appears as though this is who they are. Furthermore, like Thakur's (2014) study, this novel also portrays the double marginalization of women characters. On the other hand, they are marginalized because of their gender by the patriarchal males of the family and other family members. But those non-Muslim, women characters like Helen and Nargis are more marginalized as they are from the minority community. In this sense, this novel depicts women characters as victims of the patriarchy, as well as religious fundamentalism. Meanwhile, women characters are also being the objects of repression by the government policies and its agents. In this context, this novel depicts the patriarchy, the religious extremism and biasness, and government policies and officials as the different types of women's repression.

Conclusion

This research study concludes that the feminist perspective in the novels provides theoretically strong ways to study the portrayal of women characters in the novels and short stories. This feminist perspective helps to highlight all ways that are used to repress the women and how far women can resist all those forms of repression. Moreover, the approach reveals the hidden tactics of patriarchy to sustain its role and restrict the freedom of women and to deprive them of basic rights. In this way of seeking the stability, the system of patriarchy also employs the religious fundamentalism and the general policies of the government which are also supportive of men.

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