

Sacred Oppression: State-Sanctioned Islamophobia in Nadeem Aslam's "The Golden Legend"

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Abstract

Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) brings forward the contradictions of state-sponsored Islamophobia in Pakistan, where a regime that presents itself as the custodian of Islam employs religious identity as a means of repressing minorities and dissidents alike. This article argues that Nadeem Aslam critiques the way that postcolonial states racialize Muslim subjects—religious and political subjectivities—a process theorized by Sahar Aziz in *The Racial Muslim* (2021), by portraying blasphemy laws and vigilante violence as tools to mark “heretical” communities (Christians, secular Muslims) as dangers to national purity. By synthesizing Aziz's theoretical model with Mahmood Mamdani's examination of religious polarization during the Cold War and Michel Foucault's theories of biopolitics, this research demonstrates how Pakistan's political and legal institutions codify the very anti-Muslim racism that they officially denounce. Through close readings of characters such as Helen, a Christian charged with blasphemy, and Nargis, a Muslim shielding forbidden knowledge, this paper illustrates how the novel portrays the state's hypocrisy and imagines resistance in gestures of remembrance and solidarity. The punctuating role of literature in this process gives rise to the concept of transnational religious racism; in the end, this narrative analysis challenges the usual Western-centric focus of the study of Islamophobia, and demonstrates how fiction offers a way to conceptualize transnational religious racism and the need to contemplate oppression outside the geopolitical framework.

Keywords: Intra-Muslim Racialization, Biopolitics, Muslim Identity, Oppression, The Racial Muslim, Pakistan, Racialization

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Introduction

In today's era, the research and academic discussion on contemporary academic discourses surrounding Islamophobia mainly centers around the geopolitics and prejudice of the West. On such occasions, *The Golden Legend* (2017) by Aslam poses a powerful counter-narrative, arguing that Muslim regimes within their countries enact anti-Muslim racism in the name of religious safeguard. Thus, in this intellectual terrain, Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) offers an important counter-narrative, and how anti-Muslim racism functions in the partitioned lands of post-colonial states like Pakistan, ostensibly in the name of preserving theological order. This novel is a fierce condemnation of the blasphemy laws and other forms of discrimination and state-sponsored violence faced by religious minorities in Pakistan, revealing a phenomenon that is not at all addressed in the traditional analytical framework. This typically views the entire situation from a Western perspective. The paper refers to the fact that Islamophobia research has concentrated mostly on Western states' policies—hijab bans, surveillance, counter-terrorism, etc.—and has neglected how states with Muslim majority populations internalize the same type of religious racialization policy. This is because Pakistan presents itself as a champion of Islam while the rights of minorities are suppressed and already marginalized groups are thrown into the darkness. This reveals a fundamental contradiction—how the Pakistani state has been able to assert its role as proclaiming itself as a champion of Islamic identity, yet racializes, marginalizes, and suppresses minorities and dissidents within its own borders.

In this paper, it is argued that Nadeem Aslam's novel is an extremely significant place for exploring and elaborating Sahar Aziz's (2021) theoretical perspective of the "Racial Muslim." Through Aziz's schema, we can better understand the ways in which state bodies profile and punish subjects whose behavior falls outside state-prescribed religious orthodoxy and are disciplined in institutionalized settings in the name of national security and/or theological purity. This paper offers a response to this imbalance and helps to theorize an under-examined intersection in postcolonial literary studies. Gaps in existing scholarship have to do with the global absence of analysis on the reproduction of localized and institutionalized anti-Muslim racism against South Asian nonconformist Muslim citizens and the official South Asian anti-imperialist and Islamic mask.

The theoretical framework for this paper is *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom* (2021) by Sahar Aziz. This

framework investigates how Muslims are discriminated against through geopolitical and legal identity construction. This framework elucidates the methods through which the Pakistani state and other similar states implement religious discourse, like blasphemy charges, to frame certain groups as heretical dangers to legitimize radicalization and exclusion. This analysis bridges Aziz's socio-legal theory into the realms of literature by highlighting how *The Golden Legend* (2017) presents the aftermath of state-sponsored Islamophobia in the lives of victims. This novel portrays characters such as Massud, a progressive Muslim architect murdered for his heterodoxy, and Helen, a Christian woman falsely accused of blasphemy. While Aziz's formulation primarily addresses the racialization of Muslim identity, this paper extends her framework to argue that the postcolonial state utilizes an identical majoritarian apparatus to consign both non-Muslim minorities and heterodox Muslims into a singular category of racialized, existential threats to the nation. Consequently, both characters come to epitomize the structural mechanics of the "Racial Muslim" dynamic—subjects who are unable to accept state-enforced orthodoxy and hence fall victim to state-sanctioned violence.

To further enhance the analytical dimensions of this study, this research implements Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004). This is to historicize how postcolonial majoritarian regimes inherit colonial statecraft to bifurcate their populations into compliant subjects and existential threats. This study also incorporates Michel Foucault's framework of biopolitics, specifically examining how sovereign power utilizes disciplinary mechanisms to regulate the population and police thought through state-sanctioned discourses. These theoretical lenses combine to reveal the ways the blasphemy laws of Pakistan reproduce the exclusionary logics of British colonialism. Methodically, this article explores how narrative aesthetics dramatize dissent through motifs such as the possession of secret and forbidden secular works, textual resistance that provides a counter-narrative to state hegemony, and reclaims agency for voices that are silenced subjects.

Finally, this article argues that *The Golden Legend* (2017) is an important intervention in global Islamophobia discourses and that it can contribute to remapping the process of racialization of religious identity across geopolitical boundaries. As the book highlights the socio-legal critique of the hypocrisy of institutions, Aslam's novel simultaneously makes a claim as an aesthetic space that marks unexpected sites of transnational resistance and cross-religious solidarity, from the perspective of narrative voice provided by the novel's "victim" protagonists, whose lives are predicated on a predatory state set against them. In doing so, this

study helps further the discussion on the interaction between state power, race and religion, and the novel form has a unique power to not only reveal the machinery of internal state oppression, but also its psychological apparatus.

This article answers an important research question that remains underdeveloped in postcolonial literary scholarship. Specifically, how Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) discloses the Pakistani state's deployment of Islam as a racializing instrument of domestic domination through the combined theoretical frameworks of Sahar Aziz, Mahmood Mamdani, and Michel Foucault. By persecuting the likes of Helen, a Christian woman victimized by a false accusation of blasphemy, and Massud, an extra-judicially murdered secular Muslim, the novel reveals a disturbing paradox—a state that, under the guise of protection, reproduces the very anti-Muslim logics identified with the West. By problematizing the West-facing model of Islamophobia, Aslam demonstrates the manner in which postcolonial states deploy religious identity to exclude minorities, women, and dissidents. The narrative also points to the intersectional nature of the violence and the machinery of ideology, where the blasphemy law is invoked not to protect religion but to target unorthodox or dissident bodies. Acts of resistance challenge and disrupt official narratives that profit from *Muslimness* and compliance, including Nargis's furtive possession of forbidden books. This article examines how this domestic Islamophobia may help one to analyze the dynamics from “domestic” to “left” or “right” using Sahar Aziz's “racial Muslim” model, and identifies a common authoritarian orientation that underlies such moves and defies East-West scenarios.

While this novel marks a localized evolution of the thematic preoccupations with faith, trauma, and transnational belonging that Aslam previously explored in *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) and *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), *The Golden Legend* (2017) uniquely exposes how postcolonial blasphemy laws are structurally weaponized to racialize domestic subjectivities. To do so, the analysis intersects three dimensions: first, it extends Aziz's concept of the “racial Muslim” to investigate how Pakistan's political system utilizes its legal framework to categorize both religious minorities and heterodox Muslims as heretical dangers. Secondly, it incorporates Mahmood Mamdani's work on religious polarization to historicize the genealogy of this suppression. Thirdly, it applies Foucault's biopolitical control mechanisms to deconstruct the portrayal of censorship, surveillance, and punishment present in the novel. Though the central text is *The Golden Legend* (2017), the paper also draws real-life parallels—like the blasphemy case of Asia Bibi—to highlight

fiction's ability to mirror systemic, state-sanctioned violence. The interdisciplinary spectrum is intentionally broad and extends beyond literary critique and critical race theory to challenge Western-centric models of Islamophobia and to highlight intra-Muslim and intra-state racialization.

There are a number of limitations to this paper. The analysis focuses on just one literary work – *The Golden Legend* (2017) – which, however, as rich as it is thematically, can by no means claim to reflect the multivariate manifestations of Islamophobic expressions of state policy across the Muslim world. The result of a comparative study with other literary works of Pakistan may provide more insights. Secondly, the analysis is based on the triangulation of Aziz's theory of racialization, historical materialism of Mamdani, and biopolitics by Foucault, thus potentially leaving other important frameworks, such as feminist or queer critiques of the blasphemy laws, out. Third, this paper is mostly concerned with the aesthetics of the text as opposed to actual data or interviews, restricting its analysis to the fictional experience with minor and occasional exceptions such as Asia Bibi's case. Finally, the specific focus on Pakistan might be susceptible to the danger of overlooking the extreme localness of the dynamics; future research could profitably be comparative, aiming at finding out about which aspects of Aziz's schema are transnational and which are not.

Research Questions

1. How does the state's enforcement of blasphemy laws (e.g., Helen's persecution) serve political ends, demonstrating how the postcolonial state extends the anti-Muslim racialization apparatuses to non-Muslim minorities?
2. What mechanisms connect vigilante violence (e.g., Lily's murder) to a joint regime of theological majoritarianism and anti-minority nationalism through the somatic racialization of the subject?
3. Why does the archive of secular art and literature become a vital symbolic site of resistance against state-imposed religious orthodoxy in the text?

Literature Review

Criticism of imperialism in the Western world has always played a significant role in shaping scholarly debates on Islamophobia; books such

as Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Sherene Razack's *Casting Out* (2008) have been very influential in establishing that the discursive construct of the Muslim identity is related to imperialistic and neocolonial subjugation. Said's writing helped set in place Western discourse on Islam as a threat within one blanket of the "backward" and a construction that was later adopted by others such as Arun Kundnani (2014) in his discussion on the modern practices of surveillance and counterterrorism. These foundational schemes offer an irreplaceable vocabulary with which to map out extra-territorial, imperialist dynamics, but at the same time their analytical gaze is overly focused on policies adopted by the West, such as the French hijab ban or the internal infrastructures of the War on Terror. Thus, this scholarship creates an analytical void on the capacity of postcolonial Muslim-majority states to mimic and/or make many of these very same practices of anti-Muslim racism in the name of religious purity.

The Racial Muslim (2021) by Sahar Aziz makes a welcome and substantive contribution to this debate in that it suggests that the governments of postcolonial nations such as Egypt and Pakistan will resort to using Islamic identity as a means of subjugating those ideas that are challenging it and racialize the religious minorities and secular Muslims as "heretical" threats to state purity. Aziz writes about how, for example, laws persecuting the Ahmadi community and other anti-Ahmadi killings by the state are not first and foremost about the protection of Islam, and how the state can even be said to mimic the motives of anti-Muslim racism. It is this paradox that is independently examined through a socio-legal lens in the novel, though Aziz has studied the same in her book, whereas Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) helps examine the paradox of literature.

Overall, the current scholarship on Aslam's novel has tended to regard it as an expression of postcolonial trauma or aesthetic innovation, with comments on its representation of religious violence and memory from scholars such as Aamir Mufti (2007) and Peter Morey (2018). For instance, Mufti discusses Aslam's novel as part of a "South Asian literary tradition...which addresses Partition's impact and legacy," and Morey places it in the category of "new British-Muslim fiction." But it is still only within a Western-centered construction of Islamophobia that they can be understood, meaning to even just ignore the novel's own critique of intra-Muslim racialization.

For example, consider Mufti's reading of Aslam's work to support this claim. Mufti's *Enlightenment in the Colony* (2007) is more of a reaction to the legacy of Partition and the persistence of communal violence in South

Asia” (p. 245). This framing fails to show how the novel’s specific condemnation of the Pakistani post-colonial state (not only communal tension) as an agent provocateur of religious persecution in *The Golden Legend* (2017). By concentrating on the violence and tensions of the Partition period, Mufti neglects to consider the country’s precise description of the blasphemy laws as a post-1980s state apparatus of racialization, as described by Aziz (2021) and considered as a modern phenomenon.

Similarly, Morey (2018) situates *The Golden Legend* (2017) within “contemporary British-Muslim fiction’s engagement with terror and trauma” (p. 112), emphasizing the novel’s aesthetic experimentation with memory and loss. Morey’s analysis is valuable for understanding Aslam’s narrative techniques, but it remains tethered to a Western reception context that reads Pakistani religious violence through the lens of the Global War on Terror. What Morey misses—because his framework is oriented toward British readerships—is the novel’s internal critique of how Muslim-majority states replicate anti-Muslim racism within their borders, a dynamic that cannot be reduced to Western Islamophobia or its afterlives.

The Golden Legend (2017) should also be reinscribed: it tells the tale of Helen, a Christian lady accused of blasphemy and impending doom, and Massud, a secular Muslim architect, who is murdered when he espouses progressive ideas. It is a testament to the racism in Pakistan’s judicial and lynching machinery, in line with Aziz’s “racial Muslims” theory. The novel’s discourse about State surveillance and vigilante violence by people is also an example of Michel Foucault’s biopolitics that shows the exercise of power through heresy discourse and public punishment. This study adds to literary analysis’ exploration of the racialization of Muslim citizens in a majority Muslim country through these converging theories.

The remarks need to be understood in the light of this. For this, many have sought the guidance of Mahmood Mamdani’s book, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004), which explains how the laws of blasphemy were made tools of repression in a Cold War geopolitical context. The colonial legal order, such as Pakistan’s blasphemy laws, “was pumped into and used by the postcolonial states to control religious uniformity in the unstated support of Western parties who were concerned with rolling back the Soviet threat,” Mamdani said. Aslam’s novel is typical in this regard because it highlights the fact that the postcolonial state of Pakistan, with all its anti-imperialist rhetoric, is a continuation of the colonial forces’ violence. Contrasting between Helen’s ordeal of oppression and factual incidents—most notably the blasphemy case of Asia Bibi—also shows

how fiction can help humanize the systemic oppression (Iqtidar, 2019). What is also a Foucauldian “counter-archive” to the rule of the state on historical discourses is Nargis’s hidden library, which harbors the forbidden secular texts. The resistance narrative, however, has not been fully theorized in current literature, which focuses more on the victim side rather than the resistance.

The intersectional interpretation of the novel, identifying religious racism with oppression by class and gender, requires subtler examination. The defenselessness of Christian woman Helen and the murder of secular intellectual Massud reveal the way states constrict dissent into deviance, an effect theorized by Aziz (2021) but represented by Aslam with visceral force. Although analyzed by critics like Ulka Anjaria (2021) as a trauma discourse, this article approaches the political significance of *The Golden Legend* (2017), putting it alongside books like Arundhati Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) in exposing state hypocrisy. Both books respond to the manner in which postcolonial states incorporate religious identity to constitute violence against minority communities, but Aslam’s particular emphasis on Pakistan’s blasphemy laws sheds particular light on the racialization of the Muslim population.

Last, this review underscores the requirement to situate *The Golden Legend* (2017) in transnational Islamophobia studies beyond those scholars like Razack (2008) who remained committed to West-centric theories to confront how racialization of Muslim identity occurs in postcolonial states. By synthesizing Aziz’s racialization theory, Mamdani’s historic materialism, and Foucault’s biopolitics, this study offers a novel way of reading Aslam’s novel—a reading which foregrounds literature’s capacity to critique and counter state violence. Future scholarship can take into account how other postcolonial fiction, like Mohammed Hanif’s *Red Birds* (2018) and Kamila Shamsie’s *Home Fire* (2017), addresses the same concerns to expand the geographic and methodological reach of research on Islamophobia.

Whereas Western Islamophobia has been the subject of extensive scholarship—through concepts such as Orientalism (Said), racialized surveillance (Razack), and securitization (Kundnani)—significantly less attention has been dedicated to how Muslim-majority states use Islamic identity to wield oppression. Sahar Aziz’s *The Racial Muslim* (2021) bridges this gap in socio-legal fields by analyzing how states like Pakistan racialize Muslim minorities and dissidents through religious discourse and blasphemy legislation. However, her focus is socio-legal and does not broach literature’s possibilities in unveiling this phenomenon. Works like

Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) vividly dramatize state-colluded Islamophobia—i.e., trumped-up blasphemy accusations and mob violence. Yet, while existing criticism on contemporary Pakistani fiction frequently examines the themes of religious nationalism and state violence, it rarely integrates structural racialization theory to examine these dynamics. This omission is significant, for fiction alone unpacks the formal, aesthetic dimensions that expose the paradox of states' racializing the very identity they claim to defend. By combining Aziz's theory and literary analysis, this study upends the Western-centric bias in Islamophobia research and illustrates how postcolonial literature reveals the transnational mechanisms of religious-racial oppression.

This study employs Sahar Aziz's *The Racial Muslim* (2021) as a theoretical background to investigate how Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) depicts Islam as a racialized political conception, which the Pakistani regime uses to repress dissent. Aziz's theory illustrates how Muslim identity is racialized as a category through state discourses that brand religious minorities and secular Muslims as "heretical" threats. While Aziz's formulation primarily targets the profiling of Muslim bodies, this paper contends that the postcolonial state extends this identical structural lens to non-Muslim minorities—a dynamic exemplified by Helen's false accusation of blasphemy. This is in accordance with Aziz's argument that anti-Muslim racism operates within Muslim-majority states as forcefully as it does within Western frameworks.

To historicize this, Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004) connects how the blasphemy laws of the colonial period were reshaped to suppress dissident voices under the rubric of religious deviance, mirroring the book's representation of state-sponsored extremism as a Cold War legacy. It is where figures like Massud—a secular architect—are silenced as "un-Islamic." In *Society Must Be Defended* (2004), the French theorist Michel Foucault uses the term "biopolitics" to describe the way that the modern state works on populations by establishing "normal" and "deviant" bodies. Biopower is different from sovereign power: it is power over life, not over death. The blasphemy laws and state-sponsored violence in *The Golden Legend* (2017) are biopolitical instruments which do not just dismantle individuals. They are performative acts of purity in which the national body is purified by the removal of puritanically defined religious outsiders.

This extension is valid, given that Aziz's schema makes clear that certain state practices, including legal profiling, blasphemy allegations, extrajudicial violence, and the discursive construction of "heretical"

threats to national purity, are not necessarily done in terms of the actual religion of the target. Helen the Christian and Massud the secular Muslim are treated alike under Pakistan's blasphemy laws. They both are accused of threatening the orthodoxy of Islam: they are both the victims of state-sanctioned or condoned violence. They are both portrayed as an existential threat to Pakistan's Islamic identity. The "racial Muslim" dynamic, as theorized by Aziz, also occurs when religious otherness is deemed an unchanging and racialized threat to the Islamic polity—and non-Muslim others are perceived as threatening its purity. The mechanism is the same because the 'bad Muslim' and the 'non-Muslim' are both rendered into one 'other' of the heretical outsider, and it is this 'other' that is targeted and silenced.

The novel's structure has been further explicated with the help of Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics as an elucidating framework. This highlights how the postcolonial state leverages mechanisms of censorship, surveillance, and spectacular punishment of the social body to protect the conformity of religion and politics in absolute terms. Collectively, these theorists create a tripartite framework that not only exposes the Islamophobia that is bolstered by the state but also exercises the forms of agency at the local level. The study brings together Aziz's theory on "racialization", Mamdani's ideas of "historical genealogies" and Foucault's ideas on "power analytics," which render Nargis's hidden library, for example, as a Foucauldian "counter-archive" actively contesting the state's monopoly on notions of historical truth. In the end, this double theoretical standpoint provides a way to see how an already-marginalised identity—postcolonialism—can become racialized by the state, and how ways of imagining space can help literature better imagine, and preserve spaces of resistance.

Methodology

Research Design

In the present study, data are gathered based on a qualitative design with a close reading approach. It does not intend to measure fixed variables but to attempt to understand Islamophobia and resistance conceptualized here as state-sanctioned, as it is articulated in *The Golden Legend* (2017). The novel is read as a cultural text with the voices, imagery, and characterizations as political and legal commentaries. The approach follows postcolonial literary studies and critical race literary studies on Islamophobia. Those fields or areas do not require numerical data, so the qualitative design is more appropriate. The analysis aims at depth of

interpretation, examining how fiction reveals the racialization of religious identity, and how state violence works in everyday life.

Data Selection Criteria

The Golden Legend (2017), authored by Nadeem Aslam, is the primary source for this research work. The entire novel was read, but analysis focused on instances where protagonists' religious actions come into conflict with the law, and where deadly force is more obvious as a form of conflict. Three groups of material are used to make the selection. First, the occurrences of blasphemy accusations against Helen are shown to depict the process of blasphemy working within the novel as well as the affective effects of these blasphemy laws. Second, scenes which have to do with the deaths of Massud and Lily and other episodes of 'mob action' are used to deconstruct the relationship between 'mob violence', 'majoritarian nationalism' and inherited 'good/bad Muslim' binaries. Thirdly, Nargis's hidden book room and her preservation of forbidden literature form a sustained motif of counter-archive and dissent.

The selection is purposive. The passages are chosen as the ones that address specifically the research questions on blasphemy, racialization and resistance. Real-world scenarios, e.g., the Asia Bibi case, and socio-legal literature about the blasphemy regime in Pakistan are used only as background. They serve only to situate the novel within a familiar legal and critical network of laws and discussions, but they are not marked as a second data set.

Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeded in stages. Firstly, the novel has been studied a number of times to comprehend the entire story, the framework, and the recurring images. Some accusations of blasphemy, racialized insults, mob violence, and archiving/reading were examined later in the readings. These notes were then grouped into initial themes: 'Blasphemy as biopolitics,' 'racialized Christian subject,' 'good/bad Muslim binaries,' 'vigilante sovereignty and counter archive and memory.' This is a manual coding focused on changes with regard to focus, focalization, tone, and metaphor.

These thematic clusters are then "read" using the selected lens. As such, through the mobilization of Sahar Aziz's notion of the 'racial Muslim', Helen's experiences of persecution were centered to highlight the text's ways of racializing religious identity. Episodes concerning Lily's death and other types of selective violence were juxtaposed with Mahmood

Mamdani's text on 'good' and 'bad' Muslims to explore how the publics of the state and the agents of policing are employed as "sorting machines". Using the framework of Foucault's biopolitics, discipline, and some of his concepts of counter-archive, descriptions of Nargis's library and her keeping of secular books were interpreted. Throughout the postcolonial history of Pakistan, the context of the law was used to fine-tune, rather than direct, the readings. This is a mix of formal close reading and the interpretation of themes with a theoretical approach.

Researcher Positionality

The reading is situated in a certain scholarly place. The researcher is trained in postcolonial literary studies and critical studies of racism against Muslims, generally, and South Asian Muslims, in particular. A particular focus of this background is on the issues of law, state power, and racialization in the text. This also could be taken to be a way of minimizing the importance of other emphases, for example, merely psychological or formalist interpretations. Because debates on blasphemy, Islamisation, and global Islamophobia are part of the contemporary scholarly and public conversation, this study assumes familiarity with these issues and uses them to frame Aslam's choices. This explicitness of positionality is meant to be a way of elucidating how *The Golden Legend* (2017) can be read and to allow other, differently positioned reading possibilities.

Results

Blasphemy and the Persecution of Helen

In *The Golden Legend* (2017), it is the blasphemy laws which pose a daily threat to Helen's life. Helen's story starts with her in a place where the things people do and the corruption of others— "some of the most securely concealed vices"—are "out in the open" (Aslam, 2017, p. 13). This scene suggests a lack of privacy in the city, and here, acts of rebellion and observation go hand in hand. As a Christian minority woman, Helen works in this space.

She is later a victim of false accusations of blasphemy. It has also been stressed that such a charge can be easily made. A character says "You can go to a police station and say 'My neighbor said that their law has resulted in innocent people being killed or jailed'" (Aslam, 2017, p. 98). The language is vernacular, but it reveals how a simple law comment can be transformed into an offence. The narrative shows the swiftness of rumors

regarding Helen and how the neighbors stalk her and the manner in which the charge impedes her everyday excursions in the novel.

Helen's story is one of the variation or gap between the purpose and the use of blasphemy legislation. They appear to be means of protecting the saintly. But, as the story unfolds, one proves them to be devices that put a minority woman at risk of legal wrath, society's suspicions, and potential mob violence. All of that is the inner struggle that she always fights throughout the chapters that tell of her ordeal: fear, confusion, and isolation.

Vigilante Violence and Lily's Killing

Lily helps to flesh out the larger sense of danger that shrouds the novel. His very sudden death was described as being unconstitutional and unprovoked. His murder is a pivotal moment, and an indicator of the dangers faced by religious minorities "generally," as the text puts it. After Lily's death, this novel is linked to the fate of the not-quite-safe Christian communities at large.

But there is racialized language in this violence, too—this racially charged language is accented by Aslam. One of the attacks took place when an "Ink Black" Muslim received beatings while a hostile mob was yelling "You black bastard, you pretending to be a Muslim!" at the victim (Aslam, 2017, p. 176). In this insult, skin color and religious suspicion are combined. It is not only an offensive word, but it is an example that the person is "out of place" in both race and religion.

The same is noted next to Lily's name. His "blackness" is fused with his Christian faith, rendering him a double outsider. After being extrajudicially killed, the violence spreads out. However, the mob's chanting 'Let's burn down all Christian houses before the recital of dawn' (Aslam, 2017, p. 116) becomes the focus not just from one victim to a community. Fire, night, chanting, again and again, here appears to be something of a ritual cleansing. The novel shows that in these events, the community uses race and religion as a justification for punishment, and mob action as its duty for the community.

Nargis's Library: Silent Protest

But between all this talk of the violent, *The Golden Legend* (2017) offers one other mode of resistance: Nargis and her secret library. It is the story of a private sanctuary that's also a library founded by Nargis and her

late husband, Massud. An illustration of that is in “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire in seven volumes” (Aslam, 2017, p. 141). This type of writing stands in contrast to the State’s particular Islamic renditions of history.

The novel is preoccupied with the manner in which Nargis interacts with these books. In Aslam’s portrayal:

She ran her finger along the spines, not reading but remembering. Each book was a door she had chosen not to close. (Aslam, 2017, p. 143)

The authorship would determine the book’s content and influence upon the student’s life. Given that the structure of the book is a door, it suggests the flow of time, place, and ideas. That the learning is about ‘remembering’, not ‘learning’, indicates that the knowledge held in the library is not new, but is out of the limelight and requires sustaining, reviving, and making alive.

From these actions, Nargis refrains from making any sound: these acts consist of her refusal to accept the obligatory ‘closure’ of the state in the domain of ideology. This collection is marked “private” and even “foreign,” indicative of the difference between this project and the official project of a pure Islamic nation. All of this—the novels she holds onto, the stories she keeps, the “doors” she does not shut—is a quiet defiance of the state in its efforts to have its certain histories retold and other memories erased.

Discussion

Blasphemy, Racialization, and the “Racial Muslim”

From the results of the effort regarding Helen’s persecution, the blasphemy in the novel is not merely a sacred line but rather a means of social and legal regulation. The mention of her Christian faith renders Helen clearly identifiable, as she is bound to be accused of anything and everything she said against the law, in a world that does not tolerate the slightest against it. Here, the story is about the dynamic that Sahar Aziz points to in *The Racial Muslim* (2021): weaponized religion creates categories of suspect subjects—and the identity of Muslims is, in this sense, by the very nature of that identity threatening. Much like Aziz’s statement that law and suspicion operate in tandem to signify that certain

bodies are permanently 'suspect,' a neighbor can bring suspicion against a person to the attention of the police.

Notably, the novel depicts a Christian woman in a Muslim-dominated state; hence the logic can also be applied to this context. Aziz doesn't just say that Helen's treatment is racializing a mechanism of "racial Muslim"; it applies to non-Muslims as well. She emerges as a character whose body represents the fears of state and local bodies relating to purity and loyalty. It is a part of the overall thrust of the article, which argues that anti-Muslim logics are used to select filters even within post-colonial regimes; that blasphemy law functions as a political tool and not only a theological proviso.

The relationship between the inside gaze at Helen and the outside gaze offers a Foucauldian interpretation. The blasphemy law does not just exist as a disincentive for acts of blasphemy in the future—it is a biopolitical mechanism that works to structure people's conduct. Before Helen is ever given a formal verdict, the law redefines her movements, speech, and thoughts. *The Golden Legend* (2017) is thus a narrative of the ways in which modern states rule, through various legal codes, rumors, and internalized self-policing.

Lily's Death, Nationalism, and Sovereign Violence

The scenes surrounding Lily's murder seem to contribute to this image and illustrate how State power and horizontal violence are mutually reinforcing. Lily's murder outside of court serves as proof that in the novel's world, the rights of minorities are both fragile and legally and socially uncertain. The call by the crowds to "burn down all Christian houses" suggests that this incident is not a crime but a purifying event, enacted by the community. This reasoning matches Michel Foucault's theory about sovereign power that makes decisions on life and death and biopolitics that act on populations. The decision by the sovereign to allow mobs to attack is used to extend the state's power unofficially in the novel.

In postcolonial states, the issue is well elucidated by Mahmood Mamdani's distinction between "good" and "bad" subjects. Lily is Christian, but his treatment would be typical of the attitude taken by postcolonial regimes against certain Muslims as dangerous outsiders. It is the same logic that has been used against "bad Muslims" that is being proclaimed against Christian citizens. Once the state has "sanitized" these binary oppositions, it is simpler to take or celebrate violence against the "other half."

But this schema is complicated by the racialized insult to the “Ink Black” Muslim character. It demonstrates that racialization is across confessional lines, with layers of authenticity and suspicion given based on difference. This reinforces the point that this novel is not just a representation of sectarian tension but that this is part of a larger regime in which race and religion together determine who belongs to the nation. In this regard, *The Golden Legend* (2017) does not limit the discussion on Islamophobia to a simplified dichotomy of ‘the West and Islam’, but takes an expanded trajectory by addressing intra-Muslim and intra-state racialization.

Counter-Archives, Memory, and Resistance in Nargis’s Library

The results of Nargis’s library reveal that it is not only about representing victims; the novel also imagines practices of resistance. Nargis’s library of secular/historical works directly challenges the state’s efforts to unify a single pure history. As Foucault discusses knowledge/power, the library seems counter-archive. It resists the temptation to depict stories purely and constantly; in fact, it tells stories of mixture, decline, and contingency. Strategies of hiding and preserving these books imply a denial of the state’s attempt to define a legitimate memory, ultimately allowing the preservation of these books.

She reads the material in this way, and her interaction with the reading materials supports this interpretation. “She’s remembering”—indicating it was once something carried around more easily. By running a finger along the edges and foregoing those “doors,” she is rejecting a closing of historical potential. This phrase “disciplining” of Foucault (modern power acts on what can be known, on the archive that can be remembered) here materializes in the archives of the state, which seeks to control and discipline not only bodies but archives as well; and in the archives of Nargis, whose mission is to keep an archive alive.

The restrictions of citizenship by religious identity imposed by postcolonial states create another layer, as Mamdani pointed out in his criticism of postcolonial states. But for Nargis, the political community’s imaginative space is expanded by her private archive if official history canvasses who can belong. Her vision of Pakistan is plural and historically entangled, open to difference. However, spaces of learning and memory have been found to have potential for resisting processes of majoritarian consolidation, as demonstrated in recent work in education and resistance in Pakistan, including discussion of pluralist curricula and critical pedagogy by Naseem. Nargis’s library is therefore not only a fictional

variant of the type of fragile but vital libraries, but it is also an experience that draws its life from the readers' activity as much as from the books and their creators.

Helen's persecution, Lily's death, and Nargis's acts of preservation demonstrate in combination a continuum of state-sanctioned Islamophobia and resistance in *The Golden Legend* (2017). Blasphemy laws, mob violence, and controlled histories are all elements of a shared system of racialization and narrowing of the boundaries of belonging.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how *The Golden Legend* (2017) reveals the Pakistani state's implementation of Islam as a means of domestic oppression from the very moment it attempts to build Muslim identity by opposing the West's imperialism. The novel shows that religion shields laws, which are used to discipline minorities and secular Muslims and even to make them targets as "heretical," and who are no longer citizens. These are narrative choices in Sahar Aziz's conception of the "racial Muslim" that normalize deviation from orthodoxy—set by the state—as a racialized threat that can only be responded to with violence. Both Mahmood Mamdani's historical framework and Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics help to shed light on this violence: Mamdani's by reading it as a Cold War legacy of "good" and "bad" subjects, and Foucault's by decoding this violence as the novel's privileged interest in censorship, surveillance, and spectacular punishment techniques for population management and the suppression of dissent.

The novel, on the other hand, does not only tell of oppression, but sketches a picture of forms of resistance as well. Massud's contemporary mosque architecture and Nargis's quasi-clandestine library serve as both gestures of care for knowledge that is at risk and as a tacit resistance to the state's ideological purity. These motifs point toward two themes: the literature can not only reflect the brutality of state power, but it can also present counter-narratives in which memory, secular learning, and cross-religious solidarity are viable. This analysis unfolds in the intersection of Aziz, Mamdani and Foucault, disrupting any simple East/West dualism, and highlighting the fact that there is a religious racism beyond these geopolitical demarcations, even in Muslim-majority nation states.

The study thus contributes in two ways. As regards literary scholarship, it serves as a paradigm for reading *The Golden Legend* (2017) as a sustained critique of intra-state Islamophobia and racialization, not just as

a trauma narrative or aesthetic experiment. On the subject of Islamophobia studies, it raises the need to enhance consideration of how postcolonial governments are involved in more practices of maintaining anti-Muslim logics within their own countries, albeit not towards non-Muslims but towards heterodox Muslims. Studies in the future may explore this method with other postcolonial novels, both in Pakistan and in the diaspora, to see how other novels react to the state hypocrisy and the intermingling of religious and national identities. In an era where authoritarianism is growing, where what constitutes belonging is increasingly politicized, Aslam's novel and this reading of it call for resistance to the imagined invisibility of the oppressed and the questioning, remembering, and re-writing of a "pure" nation-state which was homogeneous.

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