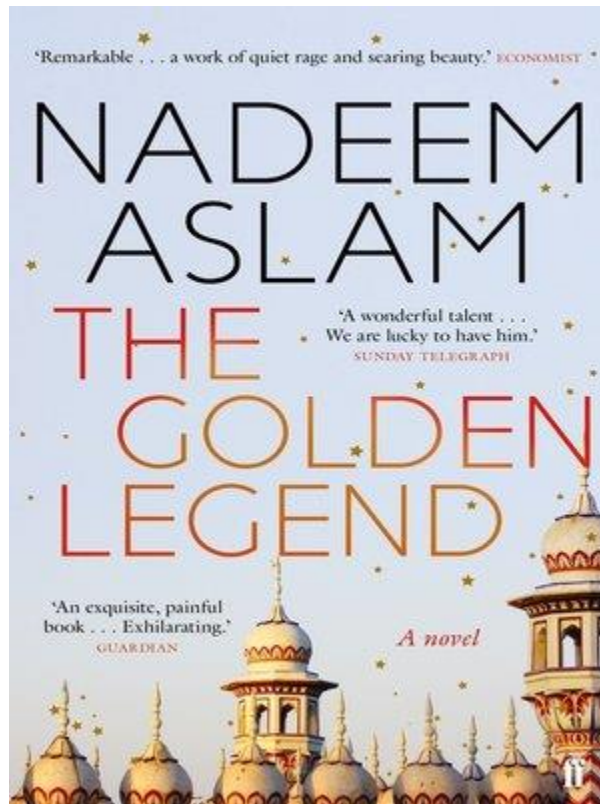


Violence and Hope in Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend*

Vandana Sukheeja



Abstract

Violence is quite a negative phenomenon prevalent in the present scenario. Nevertheless, its opposite side is illumined with a ray of positivity and hope for the humanity to move forward. Based on this theme, the recent novel of Nadeem Aslam *The Golden Legend* highlights the story of Massud and Nargis; Imran and Helen engulfed in the mire of terrorism aired by religious hatred and their courageous fight against it. The objective of the paper is to understand the novel and its characters in the light of the theories of violence and hope given by eminent scholars such as M.K. Gandhi, Frantz Fanon, Rene Girard, Thomas W Blume and C.R. Snyder. Violence and suffering in the novel under consideration give traumatic experience to characters who are pan-

national and pan-religious. The deep insight of the novelist in the political and social life of his native country Pakistan has the capacity to shake the reader.

Keywords: Nadeem Aslam, *The Golden Legend*, love, hope, violence, terrorism, suffering, religion

Nadeem Aslam, a Diasporic English Writer

Nadeem Aslam, a diasporic English writer, was born in Pakistan and now lives in England. He has written five novels and has carved a niche for himself in the literary world. His novels are – *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993), *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004), *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), *The Blind Man's Garden* (2013) and *The Golden Legend* (2017). *The Golden Legend*, his fifth novel, is published in 2017. His *Maps for Lost Lovers* and *The Blind Man's Garden* have been shortlisted for the IMPAC Prize and the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature respectively. He has won the Kiriyaama Prize and Encore awards for *Maps for Lost Lovers* and Windham-Campbell Prize for his literary achievements in 2014.

Violence and Decolonization

Twentieth century is the century of wars and revolution and according to Thomas W Blume “violence is a social phenomenon” (p 9). There is a great diversity in the world with different nations and varied cultures, so much so that no two individuals are same, even twins have a different trait. There are different races and religions. The principal cause of violence in the present scenario at the international, national and domestic levels is lack of tolerance for each other. The failure to give space to others and respect other’s viewpoint mounts up the problem. The violent psyche of a human being brings out bestial aspect and in that state physical or mental injury is the common result. Mohit Chakraborti quotes M. K. Gandhi in his book *The Gandhian Aesthetics of Non-Violence* that “the doctrine of violence has reference only to the doing of injury by one to another” (p 41). Moreover, aggression is simply not possible unless one is driven by rage and hatred.

Frantz Fanon in his landmark contribution on the issue of decolonization, *The Wretched of the Earth*, critically analyzes the colonization of Third World countries. He examines the role of violence in the process of decolonization. He also discusses the various colonies controlled and maintained by the Whites using their power and violence. According to him, Europe is a creation of the Third World as “the European opulence is literally a scandal, for it was built on the backs of slaves, it fed on the blood of slaves, and owes its very existence to the soil and subsoil of the underdeveloped world” (p 54).

Rene Girard, a great philosopher from France, describes a situation where a single object is desired by two individuals. The situation becomes conflictual and tense when they both try to obtain the same object. “Violence is generated by this process; or rather, violence is the process itself when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means” (Girard 1979, 9). Hannah Arendt, a German-Jewish political theorist of twentieth century, analyzes violence in political context. Violence is the main course undertaken by political parties who are in power and initiate and control military forces. Politics is a struggle for power often accompanied by violence.

Violence in *The Golden Legend*

In the present scenario, violence is very common that too in the name of God. The religious fundamentalism leads to destruction, pain and suffering. Nadeem Aslam’s novel *The Golden Legend* is replete with incidents of violence that raises the goose pimples of the readers. But at the same time, the plot has a silver lining of hope in the form of a love story of Helen and Imran and their love crosses the boundaries of religions and countries. Love always triumphs over hate, however hard one may try to suppress it.

The novel opens with the death of Massud, an architect, in a terrorist activity while shifting the books from the old library to the new library building. The building was designed by Massud and Nargis in a fictional city of Zamana in Pakistan. The human chain formed by citizens and mostly children were shifting the books because almost every book contains the

name of Allah and to load and reload the books in vehicles can desecrate and desecrate the sanctity of holy books.

In the violence on the street of Zamana, an American Ambassador opened shooting and Massud got killed while saving a child. Not only that, Major Burhan from the intelligence agency run by the military, a soldier-spy wanted the killer to be pardoned publicly in the court by Nargis, Massud's wife. It indicates that physical violence is often accompanied by mental trauma which becomes intolerable. Major Burhan told Nargis, "You have to remember that the world did not end the day your husband died. Nor did it begin that day. Many other facts and relationships have to be taken into consideration" (p 31).

Nargis

The repulsive atmosphere towards Christians in the city led Nargis to pose her religion as Islam rather than Christianity. She was born as Margaret to a Christian family. She, throughout her life, considered her being Christian as her another self – a ghost. She dared not to disclose her secret to her husband Massud. She did try once or twice but circumstances forced her to be mum. She had a view that "everything around her life was based on a dangerous lie" (p 61).

Major Burhan threatened her to reveal her secret if she did not agree to pardon the American shooter. It would have been another matter had she been converted to Islam with proper rites and rituals. She was a "despised Christian in a Muslim land" (p 99). She was living as Muslim in spite of being Christian without anybody's knowledge and that was a serious crime in the eyes of religious fundamentalists. It is considered a blasphemy and its penalty is not less than death.

Religious Conflict

Aspects of the religious attitude of Muslims in Pakistan towards Christians are highlighted in the novel. Muslims consider Christians infidel. Helen, a Christian girl, gives words to her agony, "At the beginning of high school, when she was fourteen years old, a teacher had asked her to stand up in class and 'justify taking place of Muslim'" (p 23). The feeling of

hatred is to such an extent that a delivery boy of about eleven or twelve years tried to kill Helen as he was told that Christians have black blood. The boy said, “My mother told me. I have to see” (p 26). The cradle of a child is claimed in the novel to be full of lullabies of hatred against Christians. Whenever Helen came home in distress, at having been maltreated for not being Muslim, Massud would tell her to keep her mind on her education as much as humanly possible. “‘There are rocks that shatter into small pieces when struck’, he had said to her once. ‘And there are rocks that withstand the blows. These are carved and worshipped as gods and goddesses’... But it was not always the case that surviving a terrible experience strengthened a person’s character. Sometimes a bad thing left you permanently weakened” (p 45).

Violence against Christians

Religious fundamentalism has given rise to violence and destruction. Badami Bagh was a neighborhood area of Zamana and was described as the poorest ghetto. The city of Zamana had continued to grow, half circled it and finally swallowed it, spreading far beyond. Muslim houses had surrounded the enclave of Christian houses from all sides. Even the roads to walk on are closed to them except giving them a single one. Nadeem Aslam remarks, “There used to be many others but they all opened into Muslim areas, and the Muslims has objected to Christians walking past their homes, and so eventually everything except one lane was walled off” (p 13). The national flags of USA, Israel, India, France, and Denmark had been painted on the floors of shops for customers to walk in and defile.

In an incident in the novel, the unruly mob set all the Christian houses to fire in Badami Bagh area only at the announcement of Lily, a Christian man, having an affair with Aysha, a Muslim lady. The Muslim houses were already marked to differentiate them from Christians. “They wanted to drive Christians out of Badami Bagh, kill as many of them as possible in the dead-end street” (p 142).

Militancy

But Aysha’s brother-in-law, Shakeel was a fundamentalist Muslim and could not tolerate this illicit relationship. Aysha’s father, the cleric in the mosque, had made attempts to arrange

another marriage for her but according to Muslim beliefs of Shakeel and his militant companions, a holy martyr's widow could never remarry. Shakeel had started living in the mosque to ensure purity of Aysha.

Aysha's husband had been given the nomenclature of 'holy martyr' who was nobody else but the militant killed in American missile attack on the house. Before marriage Aysha liked his seriousness because of the love he felt for Pakistan. He had started to find answers in militant Islam and because of his activities he was killed. Not only that she lost her husband, her aged mother-in-law also lost her life and her son Billu became handicapped who would be forced to spend his whole life with artificial leg.

Shakeel was a hard core militant. He and his men had "spread an Indian flag on the ground and cut the cow's throat onto it, an ugly gesture of soaking the flag with the blood of the animal that was sacred to Hindus. They had displayed the bloody piece of cloth with delight afterwards, taking photographs, filming the entire incident on a phone, to be made viewable on the internet afterwards" (p 93).

Shrewd persons such as Babur took revenge from Lily in the name of Islam. He excited the mob to let the house of Lily at fire and burn his auto-rickshaw to the ashes because of his jealousy. Babur was against Lily since when mobile phone tower was installed at the backyard of his house and he started getting handsome income out of that as rent. Aslam focused on the point that street fires are generally results of jealousy and given the name of religion and mob psychology is such that it can be taken to any extent of violence.

Another act of violence narrated by Nadeem Aslam in detail is the bombing of mausoleum by two suicide bombers where many people died and many others injured. Mausoleum was closed for the very first time in centuries. Violence has always led to destruction and loss of life and material; may it be Muslim or Christian or Hindu or any religion. Violence begets violence. Nadeem Aslam says, "Kill non-Muslims for not being Muslims. Kill Muslims for not being the right kind of Muslims" (p 299). It pollutes the mind with the idea that "no

Muslim could or would ever carry out such an attack on his fellow Muslims. So it has to be the work of either of India or the CIA of non-Muslims” (p 295).

Injustice to Individuals

Apart from the large scale violence, injustice with individuals on the basis of religion is attacked seethingly by Nadeem Aslam. Nargis’s sister Seraphina worked in the jewelry section of a department store. She was insulted and raped because of being Christian. Her body was used to take revenge against Christians and she was clearly made target. Her attackers were infuriated because she retaliated against the injustice done to her. The remarks of Nadeem Aslam clearly show the brutality of humans towards humans just in the name of religion:

“What the lines drawn with a marker pen on the small of her back meant. Four vertical lines bisected by a diagonal one. There were six sets of these. Thirty lines in all” (p 193).

Seraphina was so shocked by this incident that she could not recover from it and ultimately committed suicide.

Thomas W Blume in his essay “Social Perspectives on Violence” remarks

Violence in a political context—war and revolution—was seen as the inevitable outcome when opposing rulers struggled over resources or when an oppressed people attempted to free themselves. When the actions of an individual or a group of individuals were too hard to justify, societies protected themselves by judging the offender(s) to be different from other people. (p 10)

Grace was the mother of Helen and wife of Lily. Her life had come to a terrible end. There were several witnesses to the crime, but the murderer was a Muslim and the country was Pakistan. The police were initially reluctant to even register a case. Eventually, however, the man was sentenced to life imprisonment. But before serving even less than a year in prison, he was released for having memorized the entire Koran.

Dissatisfaction All Around

People living in Pakistan are not at all satisfied with the government. Helen always had a complaint. “There is no lack of talent in this country. All we lack is decent leaders” (p 111). On the contrary, Muslims have complaint to the whole world. A militant gives vent to his feelings:

I lived as an immigrant in a number of Western countries. You have no idea how your beloved secular world treat our fellow Muslims. My wife was spat on by men on three separate occasions because she wore a burqa. We are treated like a scum all across the Western countries, worse than dogs, and when we complain we are told we are inventing grievances, that what we have is scars without wounds. (p 114)

The Role of Battlefield

Militants are trained in such a manner that they must have no other idea in their mind except Islam and all religions are against Islam. According to them “There is only one place where Islam and the modern world can meet – and that’s the battlefield. The modern world forces women to behave like prostitutes and forces men into avarice, into unreasonable acts. Look around you – there is no justice in Pakistan, no food for our people, no clean water, no medicine. Is it Islam’s fault? No, it’s the fault of the modern world, and the corrupt swine who preside over it, both here and in the West” (p 118).

Atrocities by Indian Soldiers

There is another character in the novel, Imran. Taking a look at his life, readers come to know that life at Kashmir on the side of India is not very easy. Imran’s life is full of atrocities at the hands of Indian soldiers. The story of his birth reveals how people had to suffer. “Imran’s father had disappeared before Imran’s birth; and just a month ago, both of Imran’s uncles too had been picked up for questioning regarding the insurgency” (p 148). Another brutal incident reveals the cause of his physical deformity.

“There was a slight imperfection in the line that joined his right elbow to the wrist, noticeable only to him. Twenty-three years ago, his mother was in the ninth month of the pregnancy when she had demanded to know the whereabouts of her

missing husband from Indian soldiers. They had beaten her so savagely that Imran was born three days after with a broken arm” (p 134).

Imran and his brother Laal, were tortured severely by Indian soldiers when they were only teenagers. In retaliation, Laal killed the Indian soldier who tortured him. Nadeem Aslam remarks, “There he had seen two Indian soldiers move past the bakery and had recognized one of them and had gone out and walked up to him and shot him point blank in the heart. He was the one who had interrogated Imran and Laal in their village, hanging them from the ceiling by their wrists and applying electric shock to their bodies, pouring lighter fluid onto Laal’s genitals and setting them on fire” (p 243).

It’s not that story stopped here; rather suffering became more acute and the feeling of revenge becomes severe in Indian soldiers. Nadeem Aslam further narrates the traumatic story, “His brother was gunned down outside the baker’s shop, the corpse dragged through the streets behind a military vehicle over the coming days, until nothing remained at the end of the rope. Imran managed to disappear” (p 243).

Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining

But every cloud has a silver lining. Even in such pessimistic circumstances, Nadeem Aslam is able to find a ray of hope to let the life going and keep one’s faith and belief intact. A silver lining of hope in this novel is relationship between Helen and Imran. Helen was a Pakistani girl belonging to Christianity and Imran was a Muslim boy from Kashmir, India. Their love acts as balm over the bruises caused by religious animosity. The most part of the novel is illumined with the light of the building up of their relationship in the secluded island. Their understanding of each other’s lives - past and present, facing the hard circumstances together, caring for each other’s sentiments lighten the tense environment of the novel.

Another bright side of the novel is the loving relationship between Lily, a Christian man and Aysha, a Muslim woman, both targeted by violence and torn by destiny of their life. Lily was a widower whose wife Grace was murdered by a Muslim and Aysha was a widow whose

husband was a terrorist and was killed in a missile attack. Both found solace in each other's company. And Badami Bagh got disturbed because of their love relationship.

Third glimmer of the novel is the life of Nargis and Massud. They were a Muslim couple who employed Grace and Lily, a Christian couple as their housekeepers. Apart from that they adopted their daughter and raised her as their own. Adoption of Helen as their child by Nargis and Massud bespeaks the fact that religions are not barriers in unity. And it is rightly said that religion unites never divides. They had paid for her education at Zamana's best school whereas both Grace and Lily were illiterate. After the death of Grace, they were the only hope for Helen apart from her father.

The Island of Hope

Wikipedia defines hope as an "optimistic attitude of mind that is based on an expectation of positive outcomes related to events and circumstances in one's life or the world at large." C R Snyder in his Hope Theory defined hope as "the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals, and motivate oneself via agency thinking to use those pathways" (p 250). And in the literary world it is a well-known phrase of Alexander Pope written in his *Essay on Man* "Hope springs eternal in the human breast".

The island, where the trio – Helen, Nargis and Imran fled, becomes the symbol of peace and harmony surrounded by the violence widespread in Badami Bagh. Besides, there is an island on the other side of the city and there is a building designed by Nargis and Massud during peaceful days. A mosque was built in it. "The mosque had four entrances. When she and Massud decided to build it, it was with the idea that people belonging to all four sects of Islam would come to worship here, entering through different doors but converging at a common prayer hall at the center" (p 170). It is just like the Golden Temple in Amritsar, Punjab, built by fourth Sikh Guru, Guru Ram Das Ji with four entrances symbolizing that it is opened not only for Sikhs but for all religions.

The sewing of the pages of the book torn by Major Burhan using golden thread by Nargis, Helen and Imran is the symbol that all is not lost. It shows that there is still a hope that relationships can be maintained and rebuilt. Discord can be changed into harmony. Religion cannot and should not be the cause of disharmony and violence. Nadeem Aslam wants to highlight the point that at times national issues become so important that individuals get lost somewhere. Violence-ridden Pakistan and Kashmir (India) are the most prominent example of it. Individuals like Imran, Helen, Nargis, Massud, Grace, Lily and Seraphina – all became victims. Massud, Grace and Seraphina had to pay the price of this violence without any fault of their own. But it is true that goodness has to sacrifice for goodness to be prevailed.

Violence is the Negative Aspect of Human Nature

Thus, violence is the negative aspect of human nature as well as the consequence of a damaged psyche. And hope brings feel good factors which is an essential part of life. Violence and hope forms the two sides of a same coin. Pankaj Mishra, a famous Indian English writer, remarks that writing like *The Golden Legend* deepens our knowledge of the world and this novel, in fact, makes us aware of certain facts which we take for granted. This novel, in reality, highlights horrible experiences of violence along with the golden lines of hopes and desires. Furthermore, Nadeem Aslam, without favouring any side, gives his partial views – whether it is Pakistan or India or the Western countries.

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah. "On Violence." *Crises of the Republic*. Penguin, 1970, pp. 83-163.
- Aslam, Nadeem. *The Golden Legend*. Penguin, 2017.
- Blume, Thomas W. "Social Perspectives on Violence." *Michigan Family Review*, vol.2, no.1, 1996, pp. 9-23.
- Chakrabarti, Mohit. *The Gandhian Aesthetics of Non-Violence*. Atlantic Publishers, 1991.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Atlantic, 2004.
- Gandhi, M.K. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with the Truth*. Navjivan Publishing House, 2007.

Girard, Rene. "Mimesis and Violence: Perspectives in Cultural Criticism." *Berkshire Review*, vol.14, 1979, pp. 9-19.

_____. *Violence and the Sacred*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.

_____. "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with Rene Girard." *Religion and Literature*, vol.25, 1993, pp. 9-33.

Pope, Alexander. *Essay on Man: Moral Essays and Satires*.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2428/2428-h/2428-h.htm>. 29.06.2017.

Snyder, C.R. "Hope Theory: Rainbows in the Mind." *Psychological Inquiry*, vol.13, no.4, 2002 pp. 249-275.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hope>. June 2017.



Vandana Sukheeja
Assistant Professor English
Miri Piri Khalsa College
Bhadaur 148102
Punjab
India
vsukheeja@gmail.com