An Exotic View of Contemporary Pakistan: Re-Orientalism in Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend*

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Abstract
This study situates Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Golden Legend* (2017) in the broader context of re-Orientalism and postcolonial theories to unravel the complex issues concerning the identity of the Christian community living in contemporary postcolonial Pakistan. The study aims at critically examining its portrayal of Christian community and narrative structure as well as the socioeconomic context in which the novel is set. It is investigated how Aslam employs exoticisms to show poverty and marginality of the Christian community in a country faced with religious extremism, intolerance, and discrimination against religious minorities in an over-simplifying and dramatising manner. The juxtaposition of re-Orientalism and staged marginality enables a deeper comprehension of the interplay between social injustice, collective struggle, and the agency of individuals resulting in partially imaging the communities in question.

Keywords
Pakistani Christian community, staged marginality, Pakistani Muslims, exoticised portrayal, homogenising tendencies, re-orientalism theory

Introduction

South Asian writers of the 21st century are perceived as representatives of countries previously colonised by Britain. However, some of them often adopt a Eurocentric perspective of the East. While they attempt to represent indigenous culture, this representation reinforces "Eurocentric hegemony" (Dwivedi 96). In the past, Western writers have portrayed the East as backward, dangerous, and exotic. However, a new generation of South Asian writers has continued the

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colonial discourse, effectively replacing Western writers in shaping representations of their countries of origin. These writers may be termed as re-Orientalists, for they "are seen to be perpetrating Orientalism no less than "non-Orientals" and, moreover, perpetrating certain and selected types of Orientalism" (Lau and Mendes 1).

They exhibit a tendency to exhibit only dark aspects of the native culture and are not making any significant effort to subvert the colonial discourse. Their writings implicitly echo the long standing view that "depictions of poverty by the West seem to signify backwardness" (Desai 77). Moreover, it has been noticed that certain postcolonial authors from South Asia are marketed as authentic representatives of former colonies, positioned as voices from the periphery. These Oriental South Asian-origin authors are "promoted in order to make a marketable commodity out of exoticising the Orient or products from the Orient" (Lau and Mendes 1). Through these writers, the exoticism has reached the cultural centre, as they draw upon "a commodified discourse of cultural marginality" (Huggan 20)**.** While global readers expect a holistic portrayal of the natives, re-Orientalism theory suggests that South Asian authors promote "only very select aspects of the orient at the expense of a more holistic representation" (3).

Aslam emphasises the oppressed status of the Christian community in Pakistan that putatively continues to face religious persecution. As a diasporic author, his own sense of marginality is reflected in his depiction of Pakistan's Christian community. *The Golden Legend* addresses the themes such as violence, religious discrimination, persecution, blasphemy, and the corruption pervading institutions like the police, judiciary, and military. The marginalisation of minorities stems not only from governance but also from Pakistan's broader socioeconomic and sociopolitical trajectory. The hegemony of Muslim-majority rule pushes religious minorities to the margins. Preckel (2024) observes that Christians in Pakistan "live under the shadow of fear, and cannot move freely, speak freely, or work freely. They might not be physically threatened at the moment, but fear dominates." Founded in the name of Islam, Pakistan's legislation has consistently been shaped by the religious ideals of the Muslim majority.

The novel portrays the Christian community of Badami Bagh in the fictional city of Zamana as living in an underdeveloped area, forced into menial jobs for survival. They are depicted as deprived of basic rights to education and employment, humiliated and maltreated by Muslim countrymen, and systematically marginalised because of their faith. The failure of the state

institutions leaves them vulnerable to recurring atrocities at the hands of the Muslim majority.

Postcolonial South Asian writers often focus on marginalised communities, where marginality becomes "a primary strategy of commodity culture, which thrives on the retailing of cultural products regarded as emanating from outside the mainstream" (Huggan 94). Promoted as voices from the margins, these writers engage in the re-Orientalist practices to gain global visibility, involving in process in which "minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged, to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other" (Huggan 95). The novel demonstrates this staging through Babur's ridicule of Lily during their dispute over the installation of a mobile tower, "You think you'll climb that tower all the way to Paradise?" (Aslam 42). For members of the Christian community, enduring mistreatment was a routine matter. Aslam underscores the vulnerability of the Christian community, accentuating their differences and portraying them as cultural others.

The novel foregrounds poverty and marginalisation in urban spaces to construct a dark, negative, and pre-modern image of South Asia. This involves "a romanticization of poverty … as a way to mark its lack of modernity (Desai 77) and a reliance of "representations of poverty, displacement, and corruption" (Dwivedi 104). This functions as an exoticising strategy, fulfilling the global mainstream's objective "to keep the margins exotic" (Huggan 22). The Third World countries are commodified by these so-called representative authors to emphasise the issues of poverty, destitution, and marginality. Lily is blamed for the destruction of the houses and the deaths of fellow Christians. His old friend, Hector, furiously exclaimed that "my Martha is gone because of you. I will kill you, you motherfucker. I will drink your blood" (Aslam 184). Aslam recounts Martha's brutal death by burning. They felt that all other atrocities, including the burning of their houses, beatings, and wrath of Muslims inflicted upon the Christian community, were also invited by Lily due to his alleged affair with the cleric's daughter and his entering the masjid. Aslam homogenises the dark aspects of contemporary society by presenting an oversimplified picture dominated by oppression, poverty, and marginalisation.

Huggan defines staged marginality as "the process by which marginalised individuals or minority groups dramatise their "subordinate" status for the imagined benefit of a majority audience. Staged marginality, far from being a form of necessary self-subordination, may function in certain contexts to uncover and challenge dominant structures of power" (Huggan xii). Following the suicide attacks at the Charagar mausoleum during the annual celebration, people

speculated that "no Muslim could or would ever carry out such an attack on his fellow Muslims. So, it had to be the work either of India or the CIA. Of non-Muslims" (Aslam 260). In order to identify the third suicide bomber, an unusual strategy was adopted. Men were asked to lower their trousers for inspection and if a man were circumcised, he "would go free, but if uncircumcised he would be detained for further questioning at the police station" (Aslam 260). Aslam employs the theatrics of marginality to highlight the oppression of minority communities and to emphasise the exoticism of the indigenous culture. These events reinforce the marginalisation of Christians as a vulnerable community, offering a stereotypical and over-simplified portrayal of the Pakistani Christian community. It also hints at the perceived threat associated with the minority community which gives Aslam an opportunity to emphasise the theatrics of marginality.

Postcolonial novelists often focus on "theatricality and on their staging" (Huggan 87). Aslam is himself celebrated as "marginal on account of … ethnicity?" (Huggan 85). By claiming authenticity to an indigenous culture, and staging his own marginalised status, Aslam foregrounds the struggles of a cornered community. The concept of 'staged marginality' derives from "staged authenticity" which refers to "the ways in which tourists are given access to "real life" settings or, alternatively, to touristic objects that are made to display their "authenticity" (Huggan 87). Aslam shows that members of the Christian community routinely endured abusive remarks from their Muslim countrymen. This is illustrated in the novel, as it is said: "Look at him . . . Just look at the dirty bastard looking at me with his eyes, with his Goddamned Christian eyes!" (Aslam 189). Lily remains silent, having grown accustomed to ignoring such remarks. Aslam adds that "there wasn't a single street in the entire city where they or their wives and children hadn't been abused for being Christians. Not a single one" (Aslam 184). Aslam's "narrative takes on a cryptic tone" (Jumaah 115), creating a reality effect that caters to the expectations of global readers, emphasising the exotic appeal of indigenous people. As a postcolonial writer from previously colonised land, Aslam stages his marginality with a claim to authenticity, thereby reinforcing the exoticism of marginal voices.

Depictions of the poor as public spectacles potentially may further the othering of these communities. Lau and Dwivedi (2014) argue that "India's perennial problems of caste, violence, corruption, disorder, and poverty upholds the centrality of the colonial and oriental vision" (124). Postcolonial writers foreground the cultural and social marginalisation of their characters. Through fictional characters, Aslam depicts members of the minority community as socially out of place. He employs a similar strategy similar to that of diasporic

writers who often "fictionalise their own experiences of displacement" (Huggan 85). The narrative demonstrates that Alice's husband was arrested for clicking the 'like' button on a disrespectful comment about Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on Facebook in the blasphemy case. Although sentenced to death, he was later "found hanged less than an hour after he arrived back in his cell after the verdict. The wardens said it was suicide, but couldn't explain why he was still handcuffed" (Aslam 276). The novel also hints at the judge's remarks, stating, "[Y]ou claim to respect and honour Muhammad, peace be upon him. Then why don't you convert to Islam?" (Aslam 276–277). Aslam highlights the social prejudice against the minority, thereby reinforcing the Orientalised image of contemporary Pakistan.

Re-Orientalism theory highlights how postcolonial authors continue to **"**to hold the Orient as a completely separate entity, as separately Oriental, as essentially Oriental" (Lau and Mendes 6). Aslam emphasises the misconceptions and stereotypes about the minority community within contemporary Pakistan and also highlights their vulnerability to oppression. Aslam demonstrates the perceived misconception about non-Muslims in a country predominantly inhabited by Muslims. Postcolonial exoticism implies that the "cultural difference is politicised: it reveals through its representations the traces of unequal relations of power" (Huggan 13). A young boy asks Helen, "Are you an infidel?" (Aslam 21) and doesn't accept Rooh Afza from her hands and says, "I am a Muslim, I can't accept a drink from your hand" (Aslam 21). This episode illustrates the self-Orientalism embedded in the social fabric by portraying the Christian community as the cultural other. It also reminds Helen of her school days when she was a girl of fourteen years and asked to stand up in class to "justify taking the place of a Muslim" (Aslam 21). The narrative emphasises an exoticised view of contemporary society, conveying a sense of otherness. As Huggan notes that this "staging of global otherness, in which the 'ethnic' signs were twisted" (68) serves an ironic counterpoint to cross-cultural ventures.

Re-Orientalism theory addresses questions of representation particularly how "cultural producers with Eastern affiliations come to terms with an Orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether" (Lau and Mendes 1). Aslam depicts Christians as non-citizens, subject to humiliation by Muslims. Lily wants to protest against these atrocities. At one point, Lily declares that "if Pakistan were a person he would kill it" (Aslam 63). Despite facing discrimination due to his faith and lower socioeconomic status, Lily expresses love for his country while drinking vodka at the No Tension bar, and he is at times "glad to be part of the beautiful mess" (Aslam 63). Aslam demonstrates

that the minority community has a complicated relationship with their sense of belonging. Aslam tends to be representative of indigenous people while depicting a minority community. However, his narrative appears complicit in catering to Western expectations.

Representation of marginality in *The Golden Legend*

Postcolonial novelists commodify marginality to add value to their literary works. Huggan (2002) argues that postcolonial studies capitalises on "its perceived marginality while helping turn marginality itself into a valuable intellectual commodity" (Huggan 20). Aslam too commodifies his intellectual product, relying on its perceived cultural value. The novel foregrounds the Christian community, situating them at the centre of the narrative, which largely revolves around the atrocities they suffer at the hands of Muslims. The narrative illustrates that small houses were built in Badami Bagh to rent out to the Christians as they "worked as servants in the houses of Zamana's Muslims, or cleaned the city's roads and sewers, and were docile and obedient" (Aslam 7). Their poverty has been emphasised in the novel. By the 1950s, "Badami Bagh was the poorest neighbourhood in Zamana, a ghetto" (Aslam 7). Badami Bagh has been depicted as "the enclave of Christian houses with Muslim ones on all sides" (Aslam 7). This setting underscores their position as a marginalised and cornered community within a postcolonial city.

Postcolonial writers occupy a significant place in the global landscape and are often marketed as voices from the margins. Huggan (2002) states that postcolonial authors are "perceived either as marginal or as coming from other places (India, the Caribbean, Pakistan)" (p. xii), despite holding longstanding British citizenship. These writers negotiate their marginality and respond to the centre by exposing the internal forms of marginalisation within their indigenous culture. Aslam portrays Lily, a Christian rickshaw driver, as an impoverished character whose rickshaw was financed by Nargis and Massud. Lily also relies on their financial support for his daughter's education. He attempted to repay the loan in monthly instalments, but failed, and the couple never pressed him for repayment. However, he could not manage, and both husband and wife never demanded their money back. Lily purchased his small house "with a loan from Nargis and Massud" (Aslam 37). Lily's marginalisation is compounded by his vulnerability to hostility on account of his poverty, minority faith, lower socioeconomic standing, and racial identity. Through this novel, Aslam's narrative, thus, reinforces Orientalist discourse, aligning with Iqbal's (2021) argument that "imperialism, racism and colonial discourse go hand in hand, resulting in the Orientalization of the orient" (14).

Re-Orientalism theory highlights the persistence of cultural prejudices. However, European hegemony has framed these prejudiced perspectives as the "definitive – truth about complex non-European places, ideas, histories, customs or peoples. A failure to realise this leads to an inevitable repackaging of Orientalism" (Khair 145). Aslam's narrative demonstrates that Oriental writers have internalised these prejudices and started viewing these biased viewpoints within their own culture and their narrative also signifies the partial representation by highlighting a partial and selective view of Muslims against the minority community. The narrative presents Babur, a conservative Muslim, who resents the selection of Lily's house for a mobile tower installation. He mistreats Lily, and while shaking the keys to his nine houses, declares "nine out of ten houses in this neighbourhood are mine. That tower should be on one of my properties" (Aslam 41). Babur further mistreats Lily, accusing him after the mobile tower initially considered his property but was diverted to Lily's house. However, they were seduced by Helen, as the narrative discusses that "they came to one of my houses, but your daughter lured them away" (Aslam 41). Babur's interaction with Helen underscores the prejudiced attitude embedded in the narrative. At this point, Lily intervenes, saying: "Don't talk to my girl like that. You heard what she said, and you've heard her say it before" (Aslam 41). Babur further degrades him, mocking his occupation as a rickshaw driver and suggesting that "sweeping and cleaning is too lowly a job for you" (Aslam 42). Babur does not miss any opportunity to bully Lily. While fleeing from the police and the crowd, Lily hurriedly drank water from a tap. His fear was heightened by his Christian identity, considering "if someone were to discover he was a Christian, he could be accused of polluting the water" (Aslam 184). Through these episodes, Aslam foregrounds the systematic prejudice and social exclusion faced by the minority community.

Discussing Indian Writing in English, Liddle and Rai (1998) observe that "two images of India that are recognizable to people today in both Britain and the USA are those of poverty and mystery. What 'sells' a country like India to the West, as seen in tourism advertisements for example, is its 'exotic culture' in the context of its economic poverty" (498). Thus, postcolonial authors often highlight the exoticism associated with poverty and marginality, portraying native communities as mysterious and threatening. Aslam narrates that Christians were barred from entering masjids on account of their faith. It would have made the premises impure. Since childhood, Lily had avoided entering mosques, as he was "not absolutely sure if Christians were allowed into neighbourhood" (Aslam 64). As a Christian, Lily was conscious of his marginal position in contemporary Pakistan. A priest had once told him as a boy that "sometimes a man has to be

great enough to know how insignificant he is" (Aslam 66). Christians were taught appeasement and restraint, rationalised by the belief that they should endure their present condition as if they reacted or protested against such humiliations, it would be assumed that they "are too weak to accept the world as it is" (Aslam 66). Thus, they were compelled to accept the ill-treatment and the status of half-citizen under the guise of contentment.

Aslam romanticises the marginality of the Christians, foregrounding their poverty and the discrimination they face at the hands of Muslims. As Lau (2014) argues, "this strategy of marketing literature is said to have glorified, celebrated, and romanticized poverty" (16). Aslam depicts Grace's disappointment at the prejudice directed towards her. She recalls her Muslim countrymen saying of Christians that "they think we see fewer stars when we look at the sky... Or no stars at all" (Aslam 66). Christians were routinely subjected to humiliation by Muslims. Lily wished to avenge Grace's murder, but the killer threatened him to leave and "stay away from me or I'll tell the police you swore at the Prophet" (Aslam 67). Blasphemy laws shielded the culprits, who manipulated them to further suppress and marginalise Pakistan's Christian community.

The West readily accommodates the marginal voices from the Third World on all contemporary issues. As Lau (2014) argues, "poverty and marginality are tricky issues to ethically commodify, especially where a third world country is concerned" (16). Western publishers and critics often market and promote it as minority literature. Such narratives reinforce colonial discourse. Aslam narrates that Helen is maltreated and never feels accepted as an equal citizen of the country. Her presence unsettles the Muslim girls who respond with open disgust. She feels excluded. She is branded irreverent for the way she speaks of djinns. People protest asking, what she was "doing in Zamana, what she thought she was doing in Pakistan." They were told: "You should go and live in a Christian country. This is a country for Muslims" (Aslam 107–108). Helen is systematically excluded and denied the rights of equal citizenship.

Lau (2014) notes that within re-Orientalism theory "depicting and illustrating slums, poverty, and destitution should be applauded for… greater attention to be paid to these communities and their needs" (16). Writers who focus on such themes are often promoted, admired, and marketed globally. Aslam's novel illustrates the dehumanisation of the Christian community in contemporary Pakistan. It has also been depicted through a young boy who, holding a sharp knife in order to confirm his mother's claims that "Christians have black blood" (Aslam 23). Helen insists that her blood is red, showing him, "just like yours" (Aslam 23). It reflects the prejudice against people from different religious and ethnic groups embedded in their minds. Helen stabs the tip of her

finger through a safety pin to show him that her blood is red. Helen keeps on telling him that her blood was red. She says to him, "[Y]ou've seen now that it's not black. Look at it" (Aslam 24). This episode underscores the sense of otherness and fear that marginalised communities often experience. This incident reinforces colonial discourse, which constructs Eastern communities as potential threats.

In the context of poverty and marginality, re-Orientalism Theory argues that "commodification of such issues demeans those being discussed and, opportunistically and exploitatively, makes a profit from the struggles and sufferings of the marginalised" (Lau 16). Postcolonial authors commodify and manipulate marginality, presenting themselves in the global literary landscape as voices from the margin. In doing so, they often exploit poverty and marginalisation as recurring themes in their narratives. Aslam highlights the marginalisation of Solomon, a bishop humiliated while searching for his missing niece, Seraphina. She realised that she was "the only Christian" (Aslam 168) still in detention. Solomon was misinformed that Seraphina had been released, only to discover that she had not returned home. Later, he was deceived into believing that she had been transferred to another police station in Civil Lines for further questioning. At Civil Lines station, Solomon was humiliated for being Christian, and when he requested to use the phone he was told that "they could not allow him to touch the instrument" (Aslam 168). When he revisited the police station and demanded an explanation from the officer, the response was violent. A policeman "reached across the desk and struck his face with great force" (Aslam 168). The following day, Seraphina returned but Margaret observed "the absence of life in her face" (Aslam 169).

Huggan (2002) argues that defining the margins can "be seen as an exoticising strategy… to fix the value-equivalence of metropolitan commodity exchange" (Huggan 22). The commodification of culture reshapes both literary expectations and authorial intentions. Postcolonial authors often write from the margin while simultaneously engaging with the demands of the global literary market. Aslam also commodifies the cultural aspects of indigeneity and tries to meet the expectations of global readership, as depicted when Nargis observes Solomon coming out of his house with a man from the military-intelligence agency. Nargis could feel that "[i]t was the photograph from the house in Badami Bagh, she was sure… her mind was too numb to think what they could be asking him, what they were threatening him with" (Aslam 243). This episode highlights how marginality is framed in commodified terms. Aslam attempts to depict natives as exotic and strange. Huggan (2002) further explains that "to keep the margins exotic—at once threateningly strange and reassuringly familiar—is the

objective of the mainstream; it is an objective which it can never fail to pose, but which it can never reach" (22).

Literature from formerly colonised nations is experiencing significant transformation. It originated in the subversion of colonial discourse in the name of a culture of resistance, but has gradually adapted to the expectations of the Western audience. Huggan (2002) argues that Third World literature is often reduced to "the object of a homogenising metropolitan gaze" (81). Western readers often rely on stereotypes and misrepresentations of indigenous cultures. Writers from the margin often compromise their position by selectively representing native cultures in the narratives. In Aslam's novel, a cleric delivers a sermon from the minaret, "O Believers, take not Jews and Christians for allies; they are allies of one another. Whoso among you takes them as allies is counted as their number" (Aslam 123–24). The instance demonstrates that Aslam makes selective use of the Qur'an to homogenise the metropolitan gaze. The selective quotation reinforces the exotic view of contemporary Pakistan.

The poverty of the Christian community in Pakistan is exaggerated to underscore their vulnerability as a minority group. Re-Orientalism theory engages with the portrayal of poverty in contemporary writing. Such depictions emphasise the hardships of marginalised groups in ways that render them unfamiliar and mysterious to readers. Lau (2014) observes that "depictions of the poor as public spectacle potentially could also have the effect of furthering the othering of these communities" (16). Such emphasis on poverty frames the natives as a cultural other. In the narrative, Babar's houses are all rented to the Christians "for whom – men, women and children – he found cleaning jobs in the richer areas of the city" (Aslam 41). Because the area was largely inhabited by the Christians, and due in part to Babur's influence, no government school was established in the neighbourhood. The novel also showcases the social issues encountered by people from the Christian community. They are portrayed as a community living under harsh conditions, such as frequent power cuts during the hot seasons. The narrative notes that, "there had been a power cut in the evening and she had lit a kerosene lantern. As she slept, it had extinguished itself and the room was perfectly dark around her" (Aslam 25).

As the narrative goes, the Christian community in Pakistan faces marginalisation not only by government policies, but also through entrenched cultural, religious, and ethnic prejudices. Moreover, "Pakistan's draconian blasphemy laws aren't concerned with blasphemy at all, but based on earthly greed" (East, 2017). In this context, the novel questions the hegemonic structures that sustain such injustices. The study draws on the framework of re-Orientalism to critique the binaries of majority and minority in Pakistan's socioeconomic

environment, highlighting the complexities of representation. The novel foregrounds the identity crisis of the minorities in a postcolonial nation founded in the name of Islam, yet claiming to provide a peaceful space for all non-Muslims. According to the United States Department of State (2021), "the [Pakistan] government was inconsistent in safeguarding against societal discrimination and neglect, and that official discrimination against Christians" (23). Ultimately, the novel underscores that the founding dream of an inclusive, independent state remains unrealised for Pakistan's minority communities.

Homogenising corruption tendencies

Aslam depicts corruption within the judiciary, police, and military to present a distorted and negative image of indigenous culture. The Third World is often depicted by writers residing in the UK, the USA, and other European countries who claim to represent their homelands. Such narratives are often questioned for their homogenising tendencies and for creating a hierarchical taxonomy that "sets up the third world as a vacuum to be filled by the economic and political manoeuvrings of the first two worlds" (Mohan 32). These writers frequently address contemporary issues but locate their causes within indigenous culture. They emphasise selective negative aspects of their culture and present them as a comprehensive portrayal of society. The novel narrates the case of Helen's mother, Grace, who was murdered, yet justice was denied to her family. Although the murder occurred in front of many witnesses, the police initially refused to register the case, citing the fact that the murderer was a Muslim. Eventually, "the man was sentenced to life imprisonment" (Aslam 10). However, the murderer was later released. Nargis and Massud were informed 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 10). The judicial system appears influenced by religious practices, allowing prisoners to be absolved even of charges as serious as a murder.

Postcolonial writers subvert the colonial discourse by questioning the stereotypical and biased representation of native communities. The positionalities of these writers, particularly their diasporic and marginal locations have empowered them to challenge the dominant narratives. They articulate resistance as part of a counter-discourse, turning it into an intellectual commodity. As Huggan (2002) argues, "marginality … indicates something other than a social burden—it suggests that resistance itself has become a valuable intellectual commodity" (83). Aslam draws on his own marginality as a diasporic author, employing the literary platform to transform resistance discourse into an intellectual commodity. In his narrative, Aslam highlights a minority community

and, by emphasising its peripheral position, commodifies its marginality. Aslam emphasises the painful loss of Helen's mother, Grace. Her grief has been depicted in an exoticised manner, serving as evidence of the tragic lives of marginalised people in the East. Helen learns that Grace's murderer has been released, a fact deliberately withheld from her father. The loss of Grace, compounded by the loopholes in the judicial system is portrayed as profoundly painful. As the narrative recounts, "twice the trial had had to be postponed because the police claimed they had lost the case files, but Nargis and Massud had insisted the paperwork be reconstructed from carbon copies and scans" (Aslam 20). The depiction of their grief has been rendered dramatically, emphasising the emotional intensity of mourners. The emotional outburst is more melodramatic that contrasts with the restrained expressions of grief associated with Western culture.

Caricaturing Pakistani Muslims as violent

The narrative intricately details the episodes of violence, highlighting the exoticised portrayal of Muslims, depicting them as engaging in acts of aggression and discrimination against the minority communities. The narrative also underlines the danger and unpredictability faced by non-Muslims, perpetuating a pervasive sense of fear among minority communities. Aslam, residing in England, writes about Pakistan with conviction, positioning himself as a representative of his country of birth. However, postcolonial writers often write "extensively about their adopted country… from a perspective that shows awareness of a marginal position" (Huggan 87)**.** Aslam projects a prejudiced view of contemporary Pakistan by emphasising selective aspects of indigenous culture, informed by his awareness of his own marginal position. Aslam describes discriminatory practices, such as the marking of white circles on the Muslim houses. It reflects the marginalisation of the Christian houses and the discrimination they face while residing in Badami Bagh. Helen remarks with a frown, saying: "I think the mark is there only on the Muslim houses" (Aslam 93). Subsequent events reveal that the small circles painted on the doors made it "obvious now that they had planned it all for some days, if not weeks. They had been waiting for an excuse" (Aslam 117). People were instigated by men with the prayer-stained brows, who "wanted to drive Christians out of Badami Bagh, kill as many of them as possible in the dead-end streets" (Aslam 124). Babur was powerless to stop them from inflicting further atrocities on Christians in Badami Bagh, despite his concerns for protecting his houses. Aslam alludes to a convert who fled his home to escape threats from both his family and the police. Lily and Grace sheltered him in their home. A smuggler was paid to help him flee to Europe, where he hoped to seek

asylum. However, his application was delayed, and returned to see his family, particularly his son who "had died, poisoned, everyone suspected, for being the child of an apostate, by someone" (Aslam 153). Aslam underscores the harsh circumstances faced by minority communities in Pakistan.

Huggan (2002) asserts that "the discourse of postcolonialism itself is found to circulate as a commodity. This puts a rather different perspective on the staging of marginality" (93). Aslam accentuates the marginality of the minority community while highlighting and commodifying the violent attacks perpetrated by the Muslim majority against minorities. The text evokes the violence against Christians through sensory detail, such as the lingering smell of smoke coming from the burnt houses. As it states that "the houses with the white circles were the only ones unaffected. The rest were charred, the fires having consumed the windows and doors" (Aslam 133). The narrative emphasises the marginality of the Christians reflecting on the visit of the politician on the plane with the long banner attached to its tail. The incident of violence was disturbingly glorified and celebrated as a blessed and holy act by political actors. As the narrator says, "The shower of petals was his way of celebrating the blessed deed that had taken place at Badami Bagh" (Aslam 134). The plane was raining rose petals on people surrounding "the roofless ruins" of Christian houses. Lily's house was also demonstrating the picture of the ruined place. These incidents illustrate the indifference and dehumanising attitude displayed by sections of the Muslim majority. Aslam foregrounds the differences that enhance the commodity value of his narrative.

Aslam depicts Pakistani Muslims as menacing figures towards non-Muslims. His narrative highlights the exoticisation of Muslim characters, framing them as a perceived threat to minorities. Aslam emphasises the cultural and religious distinctiveness of non-Muslims, depicting them as vulnerable to Muslim aggression. The narrative foregrounds the minority community, stressing their marginalised status using dramatised representation of marginality. Huggan (2002) observes that "the staging of marginality involves a strategic redeployment of commercialised forms of the exotic" (xii).

Aslam exemplifies exoticism through depiction of aggression, violence, and mistreatment of minority communities by Muslims. He commodifies this exoticism by oversimplifying and homogenising selective portrayals, instead of offering a holistic view of contemporary Pakistani society. Aslam showcases the peripheral status of Helen and her father through the episode at the masjid where leaflets were distributed. In these leaflets, "a reward was promised for information leading to their capture" (Aslam 136). Imran tries to collect information about the burnt houses. People consider the Christians responsible

for all atrocities inflicted on Muslims worldwide and also speculate on Lily's death. The generalisation of this victimhood leads to the positioning of Christians as scapegoats for global Muslim suffering. The text alludes to Muslims who say: "We Muslims are being murdered and insulted and persecuted everywhere, in Kashmir, Burma, Palestine" (Aslam 136). Aslam crafts an atmosphere where the exoticism of Muslims is conflated with notions of unpredictability and danger.

The minority community has been depicted as inherently vulnerable. Their portrayal positions them as easy targets to oppression, marginalisation, and violence, while casting native Muslims as dangerous and threatening to the survival of non-Muslims. As Huggan (2002) observes, "marginality… is a primary strategy of commodity culture, which thrives on the retailing of cultural products regarded as emanating from outside the mainstream" (94). The novel illustrates Helen's arrest as an extension of marginalisation. The policeman says "you're the girl wanted for blasphemy, aren't you?" … "Is your father here too?" (Aslam 300). During the arrest, the policeman "grabbed her sleeve, taking care not to touch her skin"(Aslam 301) as it might impure him. In Pakistan, female suspects are usually arrested in the presence of Lady police. Helen's arrest by a male officer, however, underscores her vulnerability as Christian girl. Rumours circulated that "the fire started because the traitorous Christians had been burning the Pakistani flag" (Aslam 183) and people were holding Lily Masih responsible for the burning of houses in Badami Bagh. Aslam commodifies the marginality of the Christian community through oversimplification and homogenisation. In doing so, he contributes to self-Orientalism, emphasising the exoticism of the native culture.

Conclusion

Aslam's novel portrays the factors such as poverty, social injustice, misuse of blasphemy laws, and unequal opportunities of employment and education. Such depiction contributes only to the marginalisation of the Christian or minority communities in postcolonial Pakistan. However, it remains silent on how the same factors render the mainstream Muslims voiceless against the overarching oppressive regime characterised by the ever-present threat of violence against the masses regardless of their socio-political, religious and cultural affiliations. Hence, it has been maintained that the novel's dark or skewed representation of contemporary Pakistan and oversimplification of the marginality of the Christian community as 'other' not only discard a holistic view of the society in question but also paves the way for its global recognition and acceptance. The novel seems to be ingrained with the re-Orientalist implications as it inflates the ethnic differences between the Muslim and the Christian urban communities and

neglects the rural spaces predominantly characterised with acceptance of differences, mutual respect, religious tolerance, engagement, and fewer communal issues.

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