


ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

 Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 05 No. 02. April-June 2026. Page# 2236-2254

 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20800584) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20800584)

 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20800584)
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20800584>


Incredulity Toward Metanarratives: A Lyotardian Deconstruction of Nation, Religion, and Cultural Identity in Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend*

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ABSTRACT

*This research paper examines Nadeem Aslam's famous novel *The Golden Legend* through Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern theory of incredulity toward metanarratives. The study focuses on how the novel disrupts totalizing and universalizing discourses of nation, religion, and culture by representing them as fragmented, contested, and ideologically constructed. The main problem addressed is the persistence of grand narratives that claim stability and unity in defining identity, truth, and belonging, despite the novel's depiction of social and ideological instability.*

*The analysis is guided by Lyotard's concepts of metanarratives and "language games," alongside postcolonial and postmodern theoretical perspectives on identity and discourse. Through thematic examination, the study investigates how meaning is produced and destabilized within narrative structures. The findings reveal that *The Golden Legend* represents the nation as a fractured and exclusionary construct shaped by competing historical, political, and social forces. Religion is depicted not as a universal truth system but as a contested discourse influenced by power relations and contextual interpretation. Culture is shown as hybrid, fluid, and continuously evolving through intertextual exchange and historical interaction. These representations collectively challenge the notion of fixed identities and unified ideological systems.*

The study concludes that Nadeem Aslam's particular novel resists grand narratives and instead foregrounds multiplicity, fragmentation, and instability. It demonstrates that identity and truth are not absolute but are continuously constructed through competing discourses, making the novel a significant postmodern critique of nation, religion, and culture.

Keywords: *Metanarratives, Fragmentation, Nation, Religion, Culture, Hybridity, Postmodernism, Discourse Analysis*

Introduction

This paper examines the issue of totalizing discourses of nation, religion, and culture in Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) through the theoretical framework of Jean-François Lyotard (Lyotard, 1984). Lyotard introduces the concept of "incredulity toward metanarratives," which refers to the rejection of universal systems of truth that claim absolute authority over knowledge and meaning (Lyotard, 1984). Metanarratives are dominant discourses which shape social, political and cultural reality and exclude other points of view (Lyotard, 1984).

According to postmodern theory, there can be no certainty and knowledge systems are fragmental, plural, and unstable (Hutcheon, 1989). It stresses the fact that the world is not understood by means of one single conceptual model but rather a number of competing

conceptual models. (Connor, 2004) In the postmodern era, knowledge is no longer available in the form of universal “laws” but in “language games” that are local (Lyotard, 1984).

In contemporary scholarship the concept of nation as a single entity has strengthened the doubts. The doubts about the nation as a single entity have been widely questioned in the contemporary scholarship (Anderson, 1983). Anderson states that a nation is a “social construct” or else, an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983). It is also Hobsbawm's attention to the way in which normality is established through partial traditions and institutions that make the state of his writing particularly strength. Hobsbawm also makes selective traditions and institutional practices part of the construction of nationalism, what is more a historical tradition. These buildings tend to quell internal diversity and minority identities in the country (Bhabha, 1994).

In addition to religion as a dominant metanarrative, there is also one about thoughtfulness which sets itself up as a universal truth and a moral authority (Adorn et al., 2012). According to Asad (1993), religion is not an immutable nature it is a historically created system and system of systems in which the dynamics of power relations are being produced. There is a strong association between knowledge and power, and there are institutions that control truth by means of discourse, such as religion (Foucault, 1980). Thus, religious authority is an ideological control (Foucault, 1980).

Traditions and traditions of constructing culture as stable and unified, but in line with postcolonial theory, culture is rather fluid and continually evolving (Hall, 1996). According to Hall, cultural identity is continuous and refers to the cultural experiences, which have been lived through and represented in the past (Hall, 1996). The notion of 'hybridity' which Bhabha introduces indicates that identities are negotiated in the 'in-between' rather than the fixed (Bhabha, 1994). This goes against the essentialist notion of culture (Bhabha, 1994).

What is also emphasized in postcolonial theory is the power relations that are constructed through colonial discourse of representation (Said, 1978). Said's work discusses the power to portray the “Orient” as the Other in Westerns schemes of thought (Said, 1978). Marginalized groups may be voiceless in dominant knowledge systems, Spivak argues (1988). These theories are relevant to the study of the ways in which literature is not ideologically dominated (Spivak, 1988).

The study reveals that Pakistani Anglophone fiction presents themes that revolve around the concepts of identity, religion and political conflict in South Asian countries (Rahman 2011). Nadeem Aslam, violent, a story of migration, and cultural fragmentation in other tales (Morey, 2011). His fiction reveals the ways in which ideological systems influence human relationships, and social realities (Chambers, 2011). These critiques defy basic concepts of Pakistani nationalism (Raja, 2010).

In the novels of Nadeem Aslam, recurring themes of faith, nationalism and belonging are explored (Aslam, 2004). His analyses of the psychological and emotional effects of political and religious violence (Aslam, 2008). He also represents people in a narrow-minded ideology (Aslam, 2013). He is not only a narration that has infused moral complexity with social conflict, but also a difficult-to-give-up political coloring (Munos, 2013).

The Golden Legend (2017) is believed to be set six months before the current situation in Pakistan with religious and political antagonism in society being a theme (Aslam, 2017). The novel raises several issues including sectarian violence, state surveillance (Aslam, 2017). Describes the fragmentary plot which symbolizes the instability of the identity and ideology (Raza, 2022). It also portrays the cultural and religious conflict of everyday life (Ali 2021).

Religious minorities are especially represented in the novel's condemning of the dominant ideology (Ahmed, 2020). The novel illustrates how minorities are not included in the dominant

nationalist narratives (Ali, 2021). These depictions raise the political question of a national identity (Bhabha, 1994). Rather, they emphasize the multiplicity and difference in society (Hall, 1996).

In the novel the idea of religious authority is fragmented and contested (Aslam, 2017). Faith confusions of interpretation are about power wielded in society (Foucault, 1980). Means of religious significance are demonstrated in construction instead of being static (Asad, 1993). This reflects the disdain for claims of universal truth (Lyotard, 1984).

As a result, in the novel identity with culture is not fixed but rather fluid and hybrid (Hall, 1996). The social and political conditions create a sense of flux in regards to the characters' identities (Khan, 2023). Those identities are inconclusive and are hard to be categorized (Bhabha, 1994). This problem of essentialism of culture is questioned in the novel (Hall, 1996).

Though a number of studies have dealt with *The Golden Legend* in the context of religion, gender and identity (Ahmed, 2020), few of them directly applied Lyotard's theory with the text (Raza, 2022). Ali (2021) notes that most research is done with either a postcolonial or feminist lay of the line and not with a postmodern epistemology. This will fill in the lack of studies in the literature (Khan, 2023).

Therefore, this study applies Lyotard's theory of postmodernism to analyze how *The Golden Legend* challenges totalizing discourses of nation, religion, and culture (Lyotard, 1984). This novel is preoccupied with a fragmentation, multiplicity, and marginal voices (Hutcheon, 1989). It proves unstable nature of identity and truth which can be socially constructed (Bhabha, 1994). Nadeem Aslam's fiction is an expression of postmodern opposition to universal narration (Lyotard, 1984).

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how *The Golden Legend* disrupts the idea of the nation as a unified and totalizing metanarrative by exposing its internal contradictions, exclusions, and fragmented identities.
2. To examine how the novel challenges religious absolutism by representing faith as a contested, plural, and power-driven discourse rather than a single universal truth system.
3. To investigate how *The Golden Legend*, deconstructs fixed cultural identities and represents culture as hybrid, fluid, and constructed through multiple competing narratives.

Research Questions

1. How does *The Golden Legend* challenge the idea of the nation as a unified and homogeneous metanarrative?
2. In what ways does the novel question religious absolutism and present religion as a fragmented and contested discourse?
3. How does *The Golden Legend* represent culture as a hybrid and unstable construct rather than a fixed and essential identity?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant as it applies Jean-François Lyotard's concept of incredulity toward metanarratives to Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) in order to explore how the novel challenges dominant discourses of nation, religion, and culture. This leads it to postmodern literary criticism as it makes clear that Aslam does not create a unified and totalizing system of identity and meaning, but multiple, plural, and competing systems. The study also serves to the postcolonial literary field by illustrating various ideological conflicts emanating from the contemporary society with special focus on religious authority, national idea and cultural representation as shown in the Pakistani anglophone fiction. Moreover, it gives insight into the

literature as a resistance site to some kind of hegemony that power up and in some cases protests against the structures dominating the history and ideology.

Literature Review

Lyotard (1984) suggests that knowledge systems in the modern age are based upon "metanarratives" that send various messages of universal validity and the supremacy of knowledge only to truth. He describes those grand narratives, like progress, 'enlightenment', religion, and nationalism, as efforts to provide systems of explanation for human experience. Lyotard (1984), however, argues that these stories are no longer credible in postmodern times as they would not address diversity, contradiction, and the experiences of the margins. He emphasizes that knowledge can no longer be understood as a single, coherent system but is instead fragmented into multiple competing discourses that resist totalization.

The new experience of "language games" is added to the discussion by Lyotard (1984) to describe how meaning occurs in society. He believes that language is not designed on the basis of general rules but specific and local semantic systems. There are social groups or institutions corresponding to each language game, and for each one, there is a notion of what is true or invalid, the one that fits their practice. Moreover, the variety of language games is incompatible and cannot be summarized in one universal system for meaning and truth, as Lyotard (1984) explains.

Another issue under the impact of postmodern society is the fragmentation of knowledge, as stressed on by Lyotard (1984). He believes that the conditions of thought and culture in the present day do not accommodate any kind of universalistic explanatory philosophy which aims to explore all aspects of reality. Rather, knowledge is decentralized and dispersed instead, across discourses, practices, and institutions. Proponents such as Lyotard (1984) note that this fragmentation gives rise to a multiplicity of competing truths, and not to a singular, overarching truth, to a preliminary epistemological challenge.

The postmodern in fiction is of a self-reflexive nature, as proposed by Hutcheon (1989). She argues that texts like these tend to focus on the constructedness of the text itself, thus questioning the view of transparent representation. Further, Hutcheon (1989) highlights that postmodern literature typically challenges authoritative conventions by challenging certain historical and ideological views or truths. She writes that irony is one of the most important traits of postmodern texts, as it enables the writer to address dominant stories and disturbs static meanings.

Hutcheon (1989) also reports that postmodernism "crosses the line between history and fiction. She suggests that historical texts are not factual but are also influenced by narrative techniques which are used in fiction. With this mixing-up of genres, the idea of an honest history and clear intended meaning suffers questions of approach. For Hutcheon (1989) such narrative practices expose dominant ideology by exposing the way knowledge is created and not discovered.

From his point of view (Connor 2004), postmodernism is a state of cultural disorientation. He says the conditions of postmodern societies do not allow for unity in meaning and representation, because there are no shared cultural frameworks. Connor (2004) stipulates that this fragmentation results in a situation where multiple interpretations exist and none of the interpretations can be said to have an authority that outweighs the others. He also claims that the attitude of plurality is a new mark of postmodern thinking, where coherence and stability are no longer sought after.

Postmodernism is tightly related to the cultural logic of late capitalism, Jameson (1991) points out. He argues that all of these would be considered postmodern cultural expressions tied to the economic apparatus of high capitalism, the very apparatus in which consumption and

commodities appear. Jameson also goes on to point out that in this context cultural production is broken into sections, shallow and lacking in historical "context," as he puts it (1991). He associates the fragmentation with an economic system that puts more emphasis on market logic than on coherent cultural or historical narratives.

According to Best and Kellner (1991), postmodern theory serves as a criticism of the modern ideological systems. They state the postmodernism opposition to universal truth, as the characteristic basis of the modern political and philosophical personae. Best and Kellner (1991) add that this criticism is not only theoretical, but has political repercussions; it helps show the ways in which power is expressed through knowledge systems. They emphasize the possibility, caused by postmodernism, of other points of view and voices of the edges.

Anderson (1983) has described the nation as an "imagined community", a socially-constructed place rather than a place of natural existence. He points out that while a nation member would not know most of his or her nation members, he/she would imagine having shared nation identity. Anderson (1983) maintains that such a feeling of nurturing through a sense of belonging can be achieved through common stories, symbols and practices. He also states that nationalism is based on imaginary culture rather than on real or biological unity.

However, as Hobsbawm (1990) says many traditions are 'invented' not 'historical' in nature. This concept may be a modern creation that is being invented in contemporary society to reflect contemporary national or cultural phenomena, a practice often described in ancient terms, says he. History is also 'selectively made up' to justify a nationalist agenda, as Hobsbawm (1990) claims. He connects nationalism to political power, demonstrating a state's role in the creation of invented traditions, which lend legitimacy to political power and population unification.

Roughly speaking, Gellner (1983) maintains that nationalism is a modern phenomenon, which is unique to industrial society. He says that a standardized approach to culture, education and communication is needed in modern economic systems to operate. Gellner (1983) also claims that nationality generates this standardisation of the culture through the development of the national identity. On this point he stresses the fact that nationalism cannot simply be a "natural" progression and must exist structurally in modern industrial society.

Hybridity of cultural identity is introduced by Bhabha (1994) explaining the formation of identity in between the fixed or pure cultural identity. He challenges the prevalence and formalization of notions of colonial or postcolonial identities as fixed and permanent, claiming instead that he is an "ongoing translation [...] of the encounter, negotiation, and interaction between different cultures. He sets himself against a notion of stable formalized colonial/ postcolonial identity, claiming that, instead, he is an "ongoing translation [...] of the encounter, negotiation, and interaction between different cultures. Bhabha (1994) goes on to question essentialist ideas about culture by demonstrating the relational, rather than unified, identity and the always changing of identity. In his theory the importance is placed on displacement and interaction as mechanisms for the creation of cultural meaning, thus creating an identity that is always unstable and hybrid.

The ambivalence of colonial discourse too is present in the discussion by Bhabha (1994) who notes that the colonial rule is never secure nor always complete. He asserts that this contradictions of colonial representation run are antithetical to its claim to dominance. For Bhabha (1994), the meaning of colonial discourse is always in flux as a result of the resistance and reinterpretation by the colonized subject. He emphasizes the importance of these ambiguities in allowing spaces for negotiation and resistance and for challenging dominant power structures from the inside.

Cultural identity is socially and historically constructed and fluid (Hall 1996). He maintains that the act of representation also engenders identity and that it is not a stable essence. Addressed also are historical experiences, social conditions and cultural practices that can be seen as affecting the process of identity formation and which Hall (1996) highlights as impacting on this process. He draws attention to the fact that identity is not a thing – it's a process.

respectively, Hall (1996) helps to unpack diaspora identity formation by examining the reconfiguration of cultural belonging in the context of migration. The presence displacement, historical memory and adjustment to environments create diasporic identities, he states. Hall (1996) also notes that many people in migratory communities can have multiple and multiple combined identities. He stresses that in these contexts cultural belonging is multiple, liminal and in flux.

Foucault (1980) suggests that there is a close tie between power and knowledge and that one cannot be separated from the other. Institutions like religions and states and schools manufacture knowledge, he says, when they use discourse. What is taken to be “truth” is formed by these power relations not by objective reality, according to Foucault (1980). He underlines that the truth, therefore, is a socially created and socially upheld reality as it becomes a product of the institutional authority.

Foucault (1977) studies the mechanisms of discipline and provides explanations for how today's institutions control human action. He believes that the forms of discipline are surveillance, normalization, and controls. Foucault (1977) also provides an example of this where people take on the anti-social expectations of institutions to which they belong and they control their behavior based on those expectations. He emphasises both the repressive and productive aspects of power, effects on subjectivity, behaviour etc.

Asad, (1993) holds that religions are not universal or fixed systems, but are historically built categories that are dependent upon power relations. He then tells us that religious authority is not only shaped socially, politically, and institutionally but also differs from spiritual truths. Asad also rejects essentialist ontologies of religion and insists on a sometime, somewhere, however religion, which he reiterates (1993), pointing to the discursive and sometimes nature of religion. He stresses the need to consider the role of religion in historical and cultural context.

Said (1978) holds that Orientalism is a language of power which allows the western imagination to create the “Other” of the East. He reveals that the Western depictions of the Eastern societies are not neutral, but are biased in favour of the context of colonial interests. In Said's (1978) portrayal, knowledge production is also connected to the process of political control and how academics and literary texts helped in the process of imperial control. Representation is a key issue that he emphasizes as a facilitator of unequal power relations.

Said (1993) also places criticism on cultural imperialism, and explains how dominant cultures superimpose their meaning and values on others. He contends that no representation is ever merely neutral and all is always politically motivated. Said (1993) underscores the fact that cultural stories, in many cases, do carry an ideological/political agenda. He argues for the role of resistance in alternative narrative, counter-narrative.

Spivak (1988) claims that subaltern voices are mostly suppressed by the dominant discourse systems. She states that marginalised communities don't have easy access to Western academic and/or political discourse - nor do they have anyone speaking on their behalf. Spivak (1988) also contests apprehension of the subaltern which presents itself as an intellectual framework without recognition of its limitations. Describing the Issues of Voice, Power and Representation in a postcolonial context.

Spivak (1999) talks about representation and the responsibility of the academic discourse. She stresses that when spoken on behalf of others, this can be an act of epistemic violence if not critically dealt with. Spivak (1999) also points to the ethical issue of the “ethical representation” of those who are not in the mainstream, without effacing their will. There is a need to be conscious of the power dynamics in knowledge production, she says, and that is where scholars fail.

Ashrorage argue that post colonial literature is a type of resistance movement towards imperial domination in Griffiths and Ashcroft (2002). They argue that the literature in postcolonial contexts is not only aesthetic but political as well. Also, Ashcraft, Griffiths and Tiffin (2002) note that texts rewrite and challenge the colonial narrative by securing voice and agency for the colonized. They emphasize the importance of cultural rewriting as a key method that postcolonial writers use to challenge imperial ideology and create new, different stories.

Colonialism has utterly transformed identities in colonized societies—which is why, it explains, “Although this is Copland's field, it is not solely a white one” (Loomba 2015). She contends that the impact of colonial rule goes beyond political independence to social order, cultural identity and cultural realities. Furthermore, loomba (2015) indicates that in the post-colonial society, there still exists structural inequality in the inherited colonial system. In postcolonial scenarios, identity is thus marked by historical disruption, and continuing power imbalances.

According to McLeod (2010) post-colonialism is essentially about “the analysis or examination of power and identity in the context of colonial history. He describes himself as a person whose experiences in literature is one that reflects and interrogates colonial experiences via descriptive representation of narrative. Hybridity and resistance are key concepts of postcolonialism, as noted by McLeod (2010). He emphasizes that the postcolonial materials attempt to overturn dominant ideas with contrary one or more perspectives on culture.

The postcolonial critique is a theory for countering the Western cultural image and ideas (Young, 2003). He clarifies that this postcolonial theory aims at uncovering the reverberations of colonial power system in contemporary world's knowledge system. That cultural transformation as societies are postcolonial is also a point of focus in postcolonial critique highlighted by Young (2003). It is a transformation which requires a rethinking of identity, history and representation, he says.

The concept of ‘hybridity’ continues to be elaborated by Bhabha (2004) who highlights the perpetual act of negotiation of identity in the postcolonial field. He explains that identity is never fixed, but it is continually being made, shaped and changes with cultural interaction and translation. Bhabha (2004) points out that cultural meaning is created in “third spaces” of the intersections of different cultures. He argues that through such culture-translating process, one's sense of identity and belonging become destabilized.

According to Rahman (2011), in the case of Pakistani English literature, there can be found many times writers' concerns about the loss of identity revealed by colonial context and postcolonial realities. He states that often in the expression of literature themes such as national and religious themes prevail in Pakistan. Rahman (2011) also notes that these texts are representative of the rich controversies surrounding culture in today's society. Pakistani literature is a vehicle that negotiates different identity discourses, he notes.

Morey (2011) claims that “Nadeem Aslam's fiction always addresses themes of violence, displacement and fragmentation”. He notes that in the stories that appear in the work of Aslam, “identity has been formed by political and religious unrest. Morey (2011) also notes that his fiction portrays broken down social and cultural realities. He underscores that Aslam's work is one that focuses on instability in both personal identity and collective identity.

In Nadeem Aslam's novels, Chambers (2011) contends that the novels have dealt with 'complex moral challenges that must be confronted by a man in this unjust world'. Aslam's characters often will encounter moral dilemmas that are as a result of ideological pressures, he explains. Furthermore, these tales signify the mental toll of violence and re-pression, as Chambers (2011) notes. "Ethical ambiguity is a crucial aspect of Aslam's storytelling," he states emphatically.

In a review of Pakistani literature in the gender and colonial history field, Suleri (1992) is quoted. She describes how colonial heritage has had a profound effect on the formation of identity in Pakistani literature. Subsequently, Suleri (1992) also points out that women's subjectivity is frequently perceived within a postcolonial perspective, i.e., in relation to present experiences within the boundaries of colonial paintings. She stresses the intertwining of gender and national identity as creating literary representations.

According to Raja (2010) "Pakistani fiction does not only give a façade of a unified national identity, it also mocks it." He notes 'the multiplicity and competition of various identities' in literature that comes from Pakistan. These stories are also not easily homogenised and highlight diversity (Raja, 2010). He stresses that Pakistani fiction portrays a disjointed cultural and political world.

For Shamsie (2017), it is the Pakistani fiction that increasingly addresses with its global themes which are not quite literary but literary cultural. Modern writers link local experiences with global stories," she says. Another point to emphasize is that this literature represents transnational identities of migration and globalization identified by Shamsie (2017). She hammers home that Pakistani fiction has become part of a literary environment.

The Golden Legend is the subject of analysis in Ahmed (2020). The novel, he insists, reveals that there is a system of marginalisation that goes on in Pakistani society. Further, Ahmed (2020) emphasises the critique of exclusionary nationalisms in the narrative. He stressed minority identities as a crucial focus in the novel's political critique.

Ali (2021) has studied the issue of sectarianism in Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend*. Religious differences help determine identity and social relations, he says. Ali (2021) also emphasises the extreme narrative fragmentation that arises due to the clash of ideology as it is a novel. He stresses that sectarianism is the main bearer of the shaping framework of experience in both individual and collective sense in the text.

The Golden Legend is the subject of an ideological violence study conducted by Raza (2022), who suggests that the extremism is manifested in the social and political structures in the narrative world. The idea of violence is not an accident but part of the cultural system that he explains, he adds. Raza (2022) also points out that the novel exemplifies "cultural instability" generated by "ideological rigidity." He stresses that Aslam faults systems of power "where violence is normalised".

Khan (2023) examines identity in Nadeem Aslam's fiction and suggests that identity is malleable and constantly in a state of change. Aslam's characters cannot be neatly fit into particular categories, he writes. Moreover, hybrid representation plays a critical role in Khan (2023)'s understanding of the Aslam's strategy in narrating. He emphasizes that identity takes shape in the process of cultural interaction and clash, and construction of identity is happening rather than within which.

While studies of nationalism, religion, and cultural hybridity in Pakistani Anglophone fiction, as well as studies of postcolonial identity, have increased over a number of years, there is little which has tried to use Jean François Lyotard's metanarrative theory for his complex study of *The Golden Legend*. Previous research mostly has been done within a postcolonial, feminist and discourse analytical perspective that has centred on notions of violence, sectarianism, and

identity fragmentation. But these investigations fail to thoroughly analyze the novel's method of the fundamental destabilization of such grand stories of nation, religion and culture from a postmodern epistemological perspective. Specifically, little consideration has been devoted to the impact of Lyotard's views of the "incredulity towards metanarratives," "language games," and "fragmentation of the narrative" on the structure and thematic issues of the novel. This study attempts to address this lacuna by presenting a Lyotardian interpretation of *The Golden Legend* that posits the text as an assault against the totalizing ideology, and draws attention to its plural, localized and competing narratives of truth.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design used in this research study is qualitative, interpretive and literary analytical, which is specifically suitable in this research to destabilize the discourse of nation, religion and culture that is totalizing in the postmodern Lyotardian framework of the research in relation to Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017). The qualitative approach enables a detailed analysis of the narrative strategies, the formation of the ideological aspects and the representational patterns in the novel with respect to the fragmented identity and conflicting truth systems (Creswell, 2018). In terms of its close reading of cultural, national and religious metanarratives which are established and put under pressure by the novel's narrative, language, symbols, structure and characters, the literary-analytical approach in this research focuses on cultural-, national- and religious metanarratives that are supported or challenged by literary elements of the novel (Barry, 2009).

Careful reading of the text is a central feature of the research and enables detailed study of how Aslam uses unusual narrative structures, changes their perspective and adopts different ideologies throughout the text. In doing so, it is possible to explore the concept of nation, religion and culture as not only being mutually given but also as being contested and unstable discourses. Using this approach the researcher can also recognise the ways the language and narrative practices help to deconstruct the totalizing meanings and allow for multiple interpretations of the novel (Bailes, 2020).

It is this interpretive approach that is particularly appropriate because no hard and fast meanings or any one specific ideological finality is found in *The Golden Legend*. Rather, it offers stories parallel to one another, indicating a sense of conflict, marginalisation and division of ideologies in society. Thus, the methodology enables a critical analysis of the relationship between power, identity, and language to the creation of meaning within the text, with focus on issues of religious violence, national identity crisis and cultural hybridity.

In addition to this broad classification, a thematic analysis is carried out, moving the themes presented to the readers, including themes of violence, exclusion, sectarian conflict, national fragmentation and cultural hybridity. Themes are analysed to gain insight into the types of literary critique Aslam builds in terms of totalising discourses. Close reading is accompanied by the thematic approach, which allows creating a systematic analysis of the process of meaning production, contestation and destabilization in the novel.

The overall approach of the methodology is to focus on the representation of literature as a place where systems of ideas are created and broken down. It shows how *The Golden Legend* combines the shifts in national, religious and cultural identity in postmodern contexts where no one single story can have a monopoly on truth.

Research Methods

The research methods of this study are based on qualitative, interpretive, and literary-analytical techniques, which primarily employ close reading and thematic analysis as the main tools of investigation. This method effectively centers around textual analysis, in which meaning is built through language, negotiated and destabilized through the structures of this narrative and the efficacy of literary devices in the narrative of *The Golden Legend* by Nadeem Aslam. Close reading involves the analysis of the voice of the narrator, symbolic elements, dialogue within the text and the patterns of the structure, to achieve an understanding of the ways that ideological meanings can be situated and/or dislodged in the text using tactics of the text (Barry, 2009).

The study identifies and examines fragmented identities and ideological conflicts relative to nation, religion and culture that the novel represents as demonstrated by its close reading. It delves into the ways by which language and storytelling reveal instability of meaning and critique the rigid claims of identity and reality. This approach is especially useful for analyzing a text that challenges the processes and products of dominant culture with multiple explanations and points of view within the literary context and with narrative strategies that involve breaking the text up from conventional forms. The postmodern condition of uncertainty and multiplicity is shown through these textual features.

Major recurring themes are explored and analyzed in the novel: religious conflict, national fragmentation, cultural hybridity and instability of identity. The themes are thoroughly explored with a view to comprehending the process by which Aslam produces a critique on the language of totality in his literary practice. The results are correlated to Lyotard's notion of metanarratives, which suggests that we should rule out the universal truths for specialized and competing discourse local to each situation (Lyotard, 1984).

As a whole, the methodology of textual analysis in this study reveals that *The Golden Legend* emphasizes literary form, complexity of narration, and stylistic breakdown as a means to challenge nation, religion, and culture discourses in an all-embracing way. It shows that the novel reflects a dislocated socio-political reality in which there is a constant indeterminacy, contradiction and plurality of meanings.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern theory, particularly his concept of incredulity toward metanarratives, which critiques universal systems of truth such as nation, religion, and culture (Lyotard, 1984). The philosophical position adopted by Lyotard (1984) doesn't base the modern systems of knowledge on common truths but fragmentation and plurality. He stresses that the power of the grand narratives is lessened in postmodern societies in which there are competing, many discourses.

In addition, Lyotard (1984) presents another concept, namely the notion of language games and how meanings are created within certain social and institutional frameworks. Under this concept, truth has no universality and is created by utilizing the various systems which operate with their own rules of meaning. This framework is one key to thinking about nation, religion and culture as different and competing language games in *The Golden Legend*.

In this theoretical approach the concept of the nation becomes a (falsely) constructed metanarrative which tries to attain a sense of unity and coherence. But Lyotard (1984) challenges these all-encompassing forms and regards difference and fragmentation as defining characteristics of postmodern society. The same applies to the notion of religion, considered to be a discourse establishing absolute truth, which is undermined by other interpretations and power relationships that can be found within the novel.

Lyotard's thinking of culture in terms of fluidity and non-essentials. It is continuously generated through a kind of shifting narration and not a fixed identity. This enables the study to examine

cultural representation in *The Golden Legend* as hybrid, unstable and as a result constructed from multiple discourses, not as a category by itself or as an essential.

The use of Lyotard's theory in this study leads to a critical examination of *The Golden Legend* as a postmodern text which is not closed texts and does not cooperate with totalizing ideologies. It showcases the potential for fragmentation of meaning, as well as for alternative truths to exist within the narrative system.

It is a useful theoretical framework for an analysis of the deconstructive on-going entanglement of the concepts of nation, religion and culture as metanarratives and their exchange for plural and contesting meanings around the novel.

Data Analysis

This section examines the role of *The Golden Legend* (2017) in the Nadeem Aslam's work—how it deconstructs discourses that totalize narratives of nation, religion, and culture in a Lyotardian postmodern perspective showing how fragmentary narratives and diverse systems of ideology generate and produce an unstable meaning in the text. The novel fragments the narrative, shifts perspective and uses symbolism to break this down into a multiple and provisory notion of truth, creating a similarity to Lyotard's account of the inability to find metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). As readers and viewers construct meaning based on careful examination of the text, one could see that nation, religion and culture are competing “language games” and meanings can shift or even collide, illustrating the fragility of the process of ideological articulation and securing power. The narrative also seeks to bracketed religious absoluteness by taking an account of the politics and society of the religious discourse rather than its inherent and universal truth. Likewise, national identity is presented as broken and underserving, as a result of multiple historical and ideological discourses that exclude questioning voices. Cultural identity also is described as fluid and hybrid, constantly being defined as it is interacted, remembered and represented. Overall, the novel shows the milieu of fragmentation of which it speaks, the space in which meaning gets distributed and constantly reshaped, and which foregrounds plurality, instability, and ideological multiplicity, making Aslam's narrative an almost postmodern presentation of a multiple and rewritable space of meaning.

Nation as a Fragmented Metanarrative

This section offers a critical analysis of *The Golden Legend*'s ability to undermine the concept of a totalizing, unified national myth, through its internal tensions, exclusions, and multiple personal identities. In the novel, the nation is not a unifying unit or a fixed form, but rather an ambiguous field of contestation where violence, historical disconnect and contestation of political discourse play a role. In the process of offering close reading of the texts, Aslam shows how exclusionary and selective narratives shape and build national identities, highlighting some voices while ignoring others and leading to a false sense of national unity. A number of things about the novel correspond directly to Lyotard's concept of the rejection of metanarratives: the novel seems to dismantle one narrative, a single unified national narrative, in favour of multiple, possibly conflicting versions of belonging, history, and identity (Lyotard, 1984). The overall picture that emerges is of a rather disunified nation, marked by the coexistence of fractured identities and not a common collective consciousness.

“By the 1950s – the British had left by then and Pakistan was an independent nation....., and were docile and obedient.” (Aslam, 2017, p. 16)

The passage highlights how the notion of a nation as a single and growing community is undermined by the exposure of its internal economic or social hierarchy within post-Independence Pakistan. Often the world it presents is set in the history of national independence after the British withdrawal, but processes of capitalist expansion, land commodification and

social exclusion are immediately brought into focus to complicate the celebratory language of national-building. The conversion of the orchard into a place where houses can be built echoes the fact that national advances will not occur without economic exploitation and restructuring along the lines of classes. The national space in which the land was originally understood to be connected and shared becomes fragmented and privatized: market logic comes into play. Moreover, the institutional segregation of space in the Christian housing program reveals a deliberate spatialization of socially marginalized citizens, mapped as having a place in servitude roles, further underlining the continuation of segregation based on religion and class in the idealized national community. The state space is laid bare as partially effective in articulating a national identity, instead it regurgitates the hierarchy between Muslims and Christians, masters and servants, center and margin. This language that considers Christians to be “docile and obedient” also emphasizes how preeminent ideology moulds subordination and legitimates the exclusion of Christians in the national framework. This is a description of a disintegration of a single national metanarrative into different and unequal “language games” and a non-universality of belonging, stratified and conditional according to Lyotard (1984). So, the passage indicates that the postcolonial nation is not a unity but a divided structure defined by the economic, the religious, and the passed down colonial power structure.

“They stared at each other without saying anything.....a small nation of love.”
(Aslam, 2017, p. 32)

The extract sets up the intimacy of a domestic space, a bedroom space, where warmth, connections with the group, artistic expression and emotion are shared, rather feel connected; but as is nephew, Aslam, Aslam uses narrative disruption and symbolic anticipation to begin to unsettle the apparent harmony. The depiction of collective eating, music and family reunion gives the impression of unity — ‘a small nation of love’ — a unity implying metaphorical nation as harmonious and cohesive group (Aslam, 2017, p. 32). However, this metaphor is baffled by the sudden absence of Massud's brother, and he adds uncertainty and fragmentation in the very fabric of story. What seems previously a shared existence, losing a unity in community, is instead a sudden sea change of disappearance that must be read on the eve of the destruction, within which lies such a fragile harmony as to national identity or community.

This transition, from a Lyotardian viewpoint, is a result of the articulation of a singular, cohesive story into discontinuous and fragmented experiences, and in which there is no continuity or stability, but, at best, fragmentary, dependent unity. The term “a small nation of love” itself is poignant: it highlights the inversion of the definition of “nation” turning “smallness” into “love” — while revealing the elusion of the structural permanency of the nation by the emotional idealization. Wine, music, familiarity and a cosy comfort characterize the conviviality, and evoke for a brief moment and in a confined space a “language game” that generates meaning and feelings of belonging but is interrupted from without by the unexpected of disappearing: a “language game” here and now that spatiotemporally emerges and falls apart. In the ending, then, the idea of a nation is broken down as a metanarrative, presented as an ephemeral moment constructed emotionally, tearin and empties.

“A decade ago, when the world learned that Pakistani nuclear scientists had been selling atomic secrets to Iran, Libya and North Korea, the chief nuclear physicist A. Q. Khan covert nuclear-sales programme.” (Aslam, 2017, p. 32)

The extract uncovers the fragility and self-contradictory nature of the nation-state by foregrounding the institutional origins and control of the official narratives of sovereignty, security and moral authority. The image and message of the state is one of quartering peoples' lives and instilling in them the feeling of being part of a legitimate state. The state tries to

popularize itself as a uniform and body of powerful law but behind the paraded picture of national responsibility there are hidden lines of political manipulation and institutional complicity (Aslam, 2017, p. 212). The televised admission of guilt by A. Q. Khan is more of a performance of state-driven truth that has sacrificed individual agency to the process of shaping or maintaining the national image and coherence. In this way, truth does not show up, but is created, which is exactly how the national discourses function; through selective visibility and strategic silences.

Added to the official metanarrative is the discovery of the daughter's hidden removal of documents, an alternative counter-narrative to the "constructed" version of truth adopted by the State. It involves a conflict between the public claim from the truth and the facts being known to the individual, and capture the tension that Lyotard (1984) spoke of in his conception of competing "language-games" in which distinct language plays produce divergent versions of truth without any leading authority to resolve the conflict. The nation, then, does not appear as the concordant organism it purports to be, but rather a disunified system of power relations, where the truth is discussed, buried, and reshaped by institutional motives. The passage challenges the concept of nationalism in its claim to unity, the idea that unity is seamless, blending together but it is far from that, between the secrecy, the coercion, and the idea of systemic ideological control.

To summarise, *The Golden Legend* undermines the concept of the nation as a common story by exposing the fragmentary and exclusionary nature of the common story within each of the individual retellings. The novel illustrates the formation of national identity in terms of economic disparity, religious-class dichotomy, sublimity and institutional domination (Aslam, 2017, p. 16, 32, 212). The textual instances provide a clue that unity is nothing more than the projection of certain stories and truths that are ignored.

These paradoxes are not a national truth, but rather are evidence of the presence of "language games," from a Lyotardian point of view (Lyotard, 1984). In conclusion, the novel provides a picture of the nation as an unfinished entity, whose "belonging," "identity," and "authority" are hazardous and always provisional.

Religion as a Contested Discourse

In this section, the contributions focus on the effects of *The Golden Legend* when it refutes religious absolutism by rendering religion as a contested, plural, power-laden discourse as opposed to a single or universal truth system. Religion is described as a construct that is firmly woven into social, political and ideological matrix and is given multiple meanings that can be influenced by authority, context and competing interests. The narrative tension and representation of character serve to focus on the constant process of religious meaning negotiation, reinterpretation and/or manipulation—including alternatively as an instrument of control, resistance, and/or identity construction. This is a part of Lyotard's language games (Lyotard, 1984) which he refers to, in which the notion of truth is not invested with an absolute but rather is achieved through different discursive domains, with different rules. As a result, in the novel religion is not portrayed as a coherent set of moral rules, but rather as a space of subjectivity and contest.

"Later in the day, and during the rest of the brief stay in Zamana..... convert to the Only True Religion." (Aslam, 2017, p. 155)

The passage provides examples of the ways that *The Golden Legend* challenges the notion of religious absolutism by showing that faith and an identity with a given faith is social, performative, and fluid, rather than universal or fixed. "playacting" and "a dare" indicate that faith is not something settled once for all but instead is a situational performance that is formed

by context and survival. To enter “the new country” metaphorically is to invoke the concept of meaning as a set of “language games” that are understood by the people in a certain place at a certain time, not by God at some unspecified moment in the future (Lyotard, 1984).

There are no judgments on her about how and when she should have converted to the “Only True Religion,” which belies the pressure and exclusivity of religious talk in daily life. This is not just a matter of religious belief but the instrument of social control that aids in establishing the purity of the social group, its belongings and exclusions. When bodies are stigmatized and their worth questioned because of their religious affiliation, as in the case of bodily stigma, religious ideologies become embedded in social control and consequently who is accepted and who is 'othered' and marked as impure. Therefore, it successfully demonstrates that religious identity in the novel is contested, negotiated, and flexible, and not fixed and universally Agreed.

“After her sister had been brutalisedsaying they weren’t really ‘that religious’.” (Aslam, 2017, p. 203)

This passage shows how *The Golden Legend* undermines religious absolutes and presents Islam less as an established and universal system of belief, valued as a symbol and burden alike, than as a discourse which is socially negotiated and unevenly experienced and internalized. A lesson to be learned from Margaret's transformation into Nargis, when her younger sister's brutalization suggests an identity based on trauma and very possibly survival and/or reinvention rather than conviction. By studying and learning the “intricacies” of Islam, she demonstrates that Piety can be learned in the manner of some absolute learning, but it can also be acquired and executed within a social sphere.

Meanwhile, Muslim students' “not that religious”-ish attitude if they slip up and make a mistake also reveals the frailty and fluctuation of religious identity itself. This contrasts with any one or official version of faith, suggest a contextual relocatable and individual faith expressed as a “language game” in Lyotardian paradigm, with meanings and commitments moving accordingly. (Lyotard, 1984) So, the novel as a whole show that understandings of religious identity are not fixed or uniform, rather are negotiated, fluid and contestable, and negotiated in the social, relational and embodied contexts of power relations.

“That religion is inappropriatenot find anything that has been promised” (Aslam, 2017, p. 253)

This passage challenges the dogma of religious absolutism by emphasizing that faith does not bring “love and salvation” to all people, but rather, is exclusivist and conditional in that it values a small select few. There is the issue that ‘religion is unsuitable for the majority of people’ which directly challenges the notion of the universal availability of spiritual meaning, and implies that the availability of meaning is unevenly distributed and selectively given. Nathan appears to reject the claim that it is the “religion of love” to imply that it is a discrepancy between the ideal and the real, or that it “promises good,” which is recognized by the people involved in the community. It also underscores the way religious authority creates a hierarchy of value, in which only the “chosen, the strong and powerful” can be granted access to its benefits. Such is the replacement of religion in terms of universal moral system and inclusion/exclusion. The dialectical tension between ideology and experience here— “suffer his cross” but “will not find anything that has been promised”—shows a place of faith and disillusionment and demonstrates that the realm of religion is not a realm of certitude but a realm of power. From a Lyotardian perspective, this is the religion as a broken up “language game”, in which meaning is not inherent or universal, but is constructed through competing interpretations and structures of authority (Lyotard, 1984). Therefore, it is an exploration of the religious absolutism and we are able to see faith shifting, hierarchical, and contested in each accompany.

Finally, *The Golden Legend* refutes religious absolutism; it understands religion as a social construct, as divided from one another, and as dependent on power rather than being a one-for-all system of truths. In each of the selected passage's religious identity is found to be performative, context-dependent, and sometimes exclusionary whether in the context of actual social engagement, institutional life, or ideology.

These shifts are viewed as fruits of competing language games, where (as Lyotard saw, 1984) religious meaning is not static but continually negotiated. The overall effect of the novel is to deconstruct religious absolutism and to unveil faith as a pluriverse of contestation and conflict in terms of social and ideological power relations.

Culture as Hybrid and Fluid Identity

This section looks at how *The Golden Legend* challenges inherited cultural definitions of self identity and defines culture as flexible, hybrid, and as multiple competing narratives. The novel refuses the essentialism and homogenization of culture by showing how cultural identity can be constantly diagnosed, negotiated, challenged, and as a whole, transformed. The characters occupy changing (and overlapping) cultural points, conveying the fluidity and mutability of those positions, and unmasking how belonging is built through the constructions of positionality. Aslam sketches a view of culture as a process, constantly in motion and not a thing that exists in the world, hermeneutically, through symbolic and narrative means, in a model that does not distance itself from the distinction put forward by Lyotard (1984) between parts of meaning and a process of meaning. In the novel, therefore, culture becomes a multiple space in which multiple and conflicting storylines live side by side and meet.

“It was 987 pages long..... Prophet Muhammad’s miraculous journey to Paradise and Hell before he wrote The Divine Comedy” (Aslam, 2017, p. 21)

This passage highlights the attitude of *The Golden Legend* of one that rejects fixed and essentialist definitions of culture; culture itself is hybrid, hybridized, interconnected and historically interdependent. In describing what is described as a "987-page document celebrating "countless ideas and thoughts that had travelled over the ages", cultural formation is presented as an open and ongoing system of exchange, rather than a closed or pure one. Rather than viewing East and West as demarcated civilizational spheres, the text emphasizes how traditions, histories and ideas are continually intertwined, and throws doubt on the existence of any cultural purity and exclusivity.

“Nothing in the East, nothing in the West” denies the essentialist cultural discourses that create boundaries to identity. The text shows how cultural production comes through the establishment of transnational formations of knowledge, memory and narrative borrowing that might have taken place in the mind of Dante writing about the Prophet Muhammad's journey. Cultural-historical and literary histories are not separate, but relational histories, built upon mutual influence and shared imagination, as shown by the intertextual connection. It is the fragmentation of large congeries of culture into several overlapping “language games”, and the definition of meaning through difference, interaction and circulation, not by a single origin or authenticity (Lyotard, 1984). Therefore, culture in the novel is not static, and continues to evolve, change and become hybrid, never to be fixed or pure.

“Ten with shells, ten with stones.....and mulberry, apple, pear, fig and lemon were in the third” (Aslam, 2017, p. 139)

The extract does not view the notion of ‘culture’ as a static or essential identity; instead, it sees it as an intertwining and symbolic structure created by the interplay of memory, mythology, and material practice. The ‘thirty kinds of fruit’ connection to Islamic tradition of Adam being cast out of paradise not only indicates the role of religious tradition in shaping cultural meaning but also

reminds us of the imagination of history and environment in the process of creating cultural meaning. Indeed, the planting of these fruits in the ground of the mosque reflects the way that cultural identity is constantly produced and lived with the help of human beings, in which myth becomes a space-like activity which is living, evolving, yet never without a clear meaning.

Nearly 20 different fruits were divided into three boxes— “ten with shells, ten with stones, and ten that had neither shell nor stone”—to represent the orderly but multiple character of cultural formation. The order this happens in implies that culture is not a random arrangement of ideas and events, but rather is made up of numerous layers, each with multiple meaning and elements, which exist concurrently and interactively. Existing in an “untamed profusion” is another sign of the organic and uncontrollable growth of cultural shapes over time, reiterating hybridity as a natural state, not an exception. According to Lyotard this is akin to what happens when one moves toward the disenfranchisement of the cultural metanarratives, which instead become plural “language games” where meaning is continuously produced by variation, adaptation and reinterpretation without ever locating means in origin or authenticity (Lyotard, 1984). In this way the passage shapes culture as fluid, hybrid and ever in change.

“Joachim? Well. Joachim was Mary’s father..... to St Anne in the city, promising them a child.” (Aslam, 2017, p. 21)

This passage shows how *The Golden Legend* operates an idea of culture as a multiplicative layering of transmitted stories, rather than as a univocal identity. The narrative of Joachim, St Anne, and Mary reveals a process in which over time and across space, religious forms and modes are constructed, constantly being reworked or reinterpreted. Cultural knowledge is dynamic and is contingent upon narration and memory, highlighted by the presence of “tradition,” “belief,” and “interpretation” in the passage.

The story also depicts the process of interrogation of the meaning of culture in a way in which the images of divine events are experienced by the same individuals, but in different locations, the “desert” and the “city”. This coyness challenges any linear or singular cultural authority and offers meaning in a diffused, relational manner. The willingness of people to accept a definition of infertility based on notions of divinely displeased anatomical integrity also illustrates the social construction of experiences that are ideas, not facts, and rely on cultural beliefs. This sort of fragmentation in Lyotard’s sense is manifested in multiple “language games” in which the religious and cultural meanings come out in a variety of context-dependent narratives, but not as a unified system of truth (Lyotard, 1984). So, there is culture in the passage that is fluid, interpretive, and ever-reshaping mediated by competing traditions and viewpoints.

Finally, *The Golden Legend* challenges ideology of essentialist nature of culture, rendering it hybrid, fluid, and always in the process of being formed through interweaving stories of history, religion, memory, and interaction. The novel demonstrates that cultural identity is neither fixed nor pure throughout the selected passages but is constructed by movement, intertextuality and reinterpretation of culture, in which the East and West, the sacred and the secular, and the myth and the history are deeply intertwined. In all three uses of culture in the findings of this study, the works described call attention to the fluidity, mobility, and evolvment of culture rather than its fixity and stability.

These coexisting meanings are seen as multiple “language games” from a Lyotardian standpoint, where any sense of cultural coherence and unity remains provisional and is continually created through differences, interactions and re-interpretations (Lyotard, 1984). Finally, for the novel, culture constitutes a multiplicity and movement where identities can be always in forming, interconnected and unstable.

Conclusion

The present research took *The Golden Legend* as its object to investigate its engagement with totalizing discourses on the level of the national, religious, and cultural dimensions using postmodernism as a theoretical framework. Aslam's story always challenges the notion of fixed, coherent systems of meaning and sets them in opposition to competing and fragmented interpretations. The country is depicted in a state of internal division, exclusion, inequality and ideology, not cohesion. This is a contestation over religion, as it is a subject shaped by social power and context-driven interpretation, which is viewed as being open to doubt. In addition, as is the case with culture, it is shown to be hybrid and fluid, created by ongoing dialogue, memory and intertextuality rather than a culmination of essence or purity.

In all three areas, the novel exemplifies Lyotard's idea of "language games," the meaning of which is not universal but is constructed within a variety of competing game spaces of language. Finally, the study shows that *The Golden Legend* postulates no grand narratives and maximizes postmodern understanding of the world, where identities, truths, and belonging are elusive, frayed, and negotiated at all times.

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