

## **Female Muslim/Christian Polarities in Pakistan: A Holistic Model Analysis of Counterfeit Religious Conversion in Nadeem Aslam's**

### ***The Golden Legend***

#### **Abstract**

The article explores fictional representation of the religious conversion of the main protagonist, Margaret in Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Golden Legend* (2017). The depiction of religious transformation is not very common in Pakistani Anglophone novels, and those that exist have not been analyzed by any notable literary critique. By drawing insights from the Holistic Model Framework proposed by Charles E. Rambo (1993), this study conducts a hermeneutic textual analysis of this text to comprehend the dynamics of religious conversion. Margaret's performative act of fake conversion configures an intricate network of intermediations between the social, historical, psychological, materialists, and gender based reasons through which the relation of her Christian self with her Muslim self is negotiated. The act of conversion, in this narrative, constitutes a feminist and materialist rationale in articulating the identity construction of Margaret. By incorporating the contemporary historical realities of Pakistan with the historical allusions from Christian and Islamic traditions (Queen of Sheba, St. Margaret, Prophet Solomon), and mythological references (Nargis, Margaret's Muslim name means Narcissus flower), this text develops a discursive discourse of secular/materialist religious conversion. The article contends that Holistic Model Analysis is not only suitable to study real life religious conversions, but it also has the flexibility to be extended for the hermeneutic textual analysis of fiction. The textual analysis demonstrates that counterfeit female religious conversions might occur because of the prevailing patriarchal hegemony in the underdeveloped societies, religious discrimination, sexual harassment, and tyranny of the religious majority.

**Key Words:** Religious conversion, Islam, Christianity, Holistic Model, Pakistan.

## 1. Introduction

This article examines the occurrence of a female character's religious conversion in Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Golden Legend* (2017). The phenomenon of religious conversion is one of the most mysterious fields of studies for contemporary researchers. Many sociologists, psychologists, historians, anthropologists and economists have endeavoured to provide justifications and rationale behind religious transformations of individuals. Most of the studies, in this specific field, have been conducted under the aegis of Social and Behavioral Sciences. However, this research intends to explore religious conversion from a literary perspective.

Since fictional accounts provide a unique imaginative spectrum to study religious conversion as both verisimilitude and artifice, this research is a valuable addition to the already existing research content in this domain.

By analyzing the relevant textual instances, language, and characters, this paper demonstrates that the religious conversion of the main protagonist of *The Golden Legend* is neither spiritual nor devotional; it is a materialist and secular conversion of a female Christian character Margaret. She converts to Islam for avoiding religious persecution and gender based violence in a Muslim majority country of Pakistan in the twenty-first century.

The account of this fictional religious conversion provides a unique paradigm to draw attention towards the false conversions which are also an authentic reality recorded by historians and religious scholars. The main argument of this essay is that counterfeit religious conversions are a part of the field of religious conversion and females are more prone to such conversions due to their marginalized status in most of the societies in the world.

By drawing insights mainly from Charles E. Rambo (1993), Rambo and Farhadian (2014); and partially from feminist praxis (Kent 2014), and semiotic analysis (Leone 2004) on the phenomenon of religious conversion, this paper conducts a hermeneutic textual analysis of *The Golden Legend*. This paper studies a character who was named Margret as a Christian and

later on she chooses the name Nargis for herself when she pretends that she has converted to Islam. This study is going to be one of the very few pioneering studies in this field and another unique characteristic of this research is the exploration of a conversion which is not really a religious experience but more of a sham. The research aims to find out whether this kind of fake conversions can be placed on the religious conversion continuum and how these kinds of ambivalent narratives unravel the hidden intricacies, and ‘human’, materialistic, and feminist aspects of the religious conversions in the current milieu.

## **2. Literature Review**

Many social scientists believe that religious conversion is an “elusive concept” (Rambo and Farhadian 24). This phenomenon has been open to many questions regarding the reliability, truthfulness, and honesty of the religious convert (Lamb & Bryant 1). Permanent conversions, forced conversions, and conversions of convenience have been happening since the beginning of time (Koningsveld 88-89). Many theorists have tried to incorporate sociological, psychological and spiritual frameworks to analyze the dynamics of religious conversion till the 1970s. In the beginning, only spiritual accounts of an individual’s conversion were analyzed but with the passage of time, there was a need to include other forms of narrative in order to expand this field.

Fiction has been identified as a potential site to explore the intricacies of religious transformation (Kostova & Mitsi 7; Taylor 732; Liewald 4). Nevertheless, there is a dearth of literary critiques in the arena of religious conversion. Very recently literary critics have started paying attention to the literary expression of religious conversion. Literary theorists have analyzed poetry (Kindermann 2019), fiction (Valverde and Bosco 2019), autobiographical accounts (Untea 2019), press reporting (Pennarola 2019), and memoirs (Ożarska 2019) to investigate the phenomenon of religious conversion.

Nonetheless, most of these literary analyses are focused on the Western literature and paradigms. Therefore, the studies which explore the phenomenon of religious transformation in nonwestern literature are almost nonexistent. This research fills this research gap by studying the phenomenon of religious conversion in Nadeem Aslam's Anglophone novel *The Golden Legend*.

Persecution of the religious minorities is a gruesome global reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Minorities are mistreated everywhere in the world and postcolonial Pakistan is sadly one of those countries where religious discrimination is rampant. Some fiction writers raise their voice against the maltreatment of Christian communities in Pakistan. For instance, Alice Bhatti, the main Christian protagonist, in Muhammad Hanif's novel *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* (2011) takes a heroic stand against religious discrimination and exploitation of religious minority females.

Nadeem Aslam is perhaps one of those very few fiction writers whose novels almost always portray ill-treatment of religious minorities. In his novel, *Season of the Rainbirds* (1999), Elizabeth Masih is persecuted and in *The Wasted Vigil* (2008), a character Marcus converts from Christianity to Islam to marry a Muslim lady but ultimately faces difficulties. However, *The Golden Legend* (TGL) portrays a brave Christian girl who goes against all odds and starts pretending to be a Muslim girl to escape from discriminatory behavior of Muslim majority.

She carries on with the fraudulent Muslim identity to achieve a secure social position and get married to a Muslim man, Massud. In TGL, Christians are presented as a phenomenon evident in Aslam's other novels: a perception of "Non-believer as the hated other" (Butt 161) which forces Margaret to adopt "faux Muslim identity" (Mushtaq, 2017, *The Washington Post*). Clements (2016) argues that Aslam's novels "convey the different ways of being Muslim" (91). This novel also highlights another way of being Muslim—fake Muslim. This fictional representation of a Christian girl's conscious decision to pretend as a Muslim provides a

vignette to critically analyze the factors which create an insecure environment for females from religious minorities in Pakistan.

### 3. Methodology

Over the years, many research frameworks have been proposed to study the incidents of religious conversion (James 1958; Lofland & Stark 1965; Straus 1970; Heirich 1977; Long & Hadden 1983; Snow & Machalek 1983; Richardson 1978; Gartrell and Shannon 1985; Rambo 1993). These research frameworks provide the guidance to study a religious conversion from spiritual, materialistic, divine, social, economic, psychological, feminist and semantic standpoints. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, there emerged a need to incorporate more paradigms to investigate phenomena ranging from Rambo's Holistic Model paradigm to a globalized secular, post-secular, and materialistic praxis through which the instances of converting from one religion to another can be analyzed. The current study is conducted mainly according to the Holistic Model proposed by Charles E. Rambo in 1993. This model is applied to this text for the study of religious conversion phenomenon because it is the most comprehensive, multidimensional and flexible method.

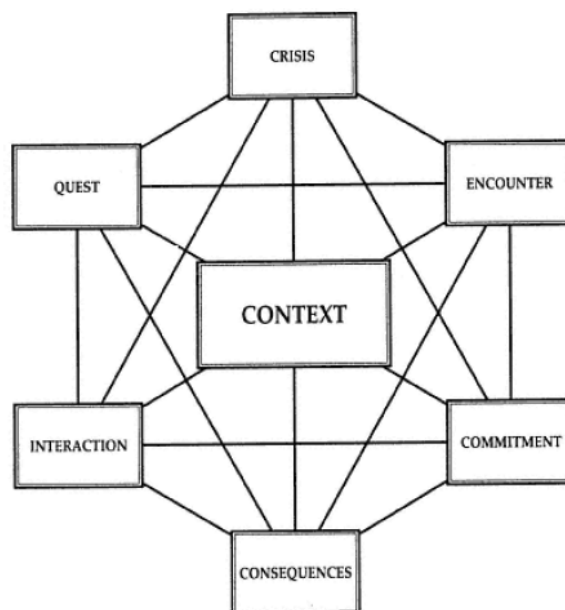


Figure 1- Holistic Model by Charles E. Rambo (1993), p.18

The model divides seven stages of religious conversion into *context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequence* (Rambo 18).

#### 4. Discussion

The case of religious conversion of Nargis from Margaret is an intricate one. The novel is story of “A Christian who had spent her life pretending to be a Muslim” (Aslam100). The discussion demonstrates that it might be called a counterfeit, fake, or quasi conversion but it is still a conversion and has the potential to be studied under the domain of religious conversion studies.

The novel chronicles the uneventful life of the main protagonist, Margaret, who is a Pakistani born Christian and starts pretending to be a Muslim at the age of fourteen. Margaret finally decides to adopt a false Muslim identity in order to marry Massud (a Muslim man), however, remains unable to forget her Christian past, her uncle and her sister Seraphina. Massud and Nargis (Margaret’s Muslim identity) have a happy life together until an American agent shoots Massud on a road. Later on, Nargis is forced by an ISI agent to publically forgive the American agent so that the country can obtain some international benefits.

On her refusal, the ISI agent tortures her to give consent in the favour of public amnesty for the American spy who killed her husband. In the end, she had to concede and forgive the American agent who mercilessly shot her husband. So, the text illustrates that women, whether Muslim or Christian, are never secure in the patriarchal societies such as Pakistan.

The fake religious conversion of Margaret raises many thought-provoking questions, such as: What kind of religious conversions are happening in the contemporary multi-cultural and global world? Are they real or counterfeit conversions? What kind of spiritual, material or social reasons are giving rise to this kind of religious switchover? This study is looking for answers to these questions by applying the theoretical framework of the Holistic Model.

#### *4.1. Stage 1: Context: Dynamic Force Fields*

The first stage, context, is the most crucial and significant aspect of the study of religious conversion. Context is the “overall environment in which change takes place...the ecology” which is further subdivided into three more “interconnected spheres”, namely: Micro, Macro and Meso context (Rambo & Farhadian 24). I argue that to analyze a literary text, it is important to add another subdivision to this already very well developed framework. This subcategory can be named as ‘Literary Context’ and I hope it would enhance the richness and heterogeneity of the aesthetic discourse of religious conversions in a text. Therefore, in this essay the religious conversion of Margaret will be analyzed according to four types of contexts (macro, micro, meso, and literary).

##### **4.1.1. Macro-context**

Macro context refers to “large-scale domains as political systems, religious organizations... and economic systems” (Rambo & Farhadian 24). The macro-context of Margret (The fake religious convert) in TGL is that she lives in a Muslim majority country which looks down upon Christian minority, and she has to face discrimination everywhere. She had to carry “her own glass, cup and spoon”; people usually said that she “smelled faintly of sewage”; and she was “prohibited from using the bathrooms at school” (Aslam 190). As soon as she gets the chance to speak at a school level declamation as Nargis, she grabs it and she enjoys the privilege of being a Muslim and not being discriminated. Then she carries on with the pretension till it becomes her permanent identity.

Postcolonial Pakistan is the immediate macro context of Margaret’s religious conversion. Pakistan has a unique position for the study of religious conversion because the country has colonial baggage of hatred against the Christian colonial masters. Statistically speaking, Christians are 1.9% of Pakistan’s total population. In most of the subcontinent, Christianity is seen as an “alien or foreign religion... tribal and marginalized of the society...

chuhra [sweepers]” (Wilfred 41- 48). Nevertheless, Christians also perceive Muslim as a challenge and they see Muslims as “antagonistic”, “confrontational”, and “hostile” (Wilfred 40-42). Thus, both Muslims and Christian communities are mostly hostile to each other.

Since Pakistan has got an international notoriety for discrimination against Christian minority, the country is often accused of threatening and violating the human rights of minorities (Pater 32; Pelster 40-41; Helemba 196-98). However, Gauci reports that in the Asian and Middle Eastern regions minorities are being discriminated against whether they are Muslims or Christians, Shi’a or Sunni (201). In this context, Margaret lives under the false pretense of being a Muslim. Leone (2014) asserts that this type of “fake” conversions happens in such scenarios (370). Similarly, Walbridge postulates that the reasons of Pakistan’s issues of minority discrimination “an archaic caste system, poor education, political corruption, concentration of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority, warfare spilling from its borders” are “often addressed through the discourse of religion” (Walbridge xi). Therefore, the multiple factors of patriarchy, religious intolerance, poverty, political corruption, and illiteracy make it difficult for the minorities to live peacefully in Pakistan and were the reasons behind Margaret’s deceitful conversion.

In the case of Margaret, her macro-context goes beyond contemporary Pakistan because both Christians and Muslims have been hostile to each other for many millennia. The text also incorporates metaphors and narrative strategies to hint at this century’s old historical context of Margaret’s religious conversion. For instance, at the very beginning of the novel Helen (the daughter of Margaret/Nargis’ servant) is shown in the library at the home of Nargis and Massud. She is walking between the wooden cabins carved in the shape of Cordoba Mosque and Hagia Sophia (Aslam 2). These two monuments are perhaps two of the best examples and instances of the perpetration of violence and aggression of Muslims and Christians against each other.



Both Hagia Sophia and Cordoba Mosque had been converted from church to mosque and vice versa (Durseteler 21-22; Thackeray and Findling 13). So, not only humans but spaces also go through religious conversions, thus, Hagia Sophia and Cordoba Mosque have been used as metaphorical spatial constructs to hint at the forced conversions in Muslims-Christian history. Muslims were converted forcefully to Christianity and those conversions always remained doubtful (Radushev 447). Moreover, the historical examples of fake religious conversions are mentioned frequently in TGL. There is an example of the Muslim Arabs converting to Christianity in Italy in order to save their lives (Aslam 34). Thus, the text reconfigures the long history of real, forced and counterfeit conversions in Muslims and Christians communities for materialistic and security reasons.

Hence, the macro context of Margaret's religious conversion is a combination of the hostility between Muslim and Christian communities as well as the contemporary postcolonial Pakistan's dilemmas of religious intolerance, lawlessness, and patriarchal hegemony.

#### **4.1.2. Micro-context**

Micro-context comprises the "personal world of the individual, such as family and friends, vocation, and other aspects of a person's life which have a direct impact on the person's thoughts, feelings and actions" (Rambo and Farhadian 24). Nargis belongs to the lower middle class and her parents are dead. She lives with her elder sister (Seraphina) and her uncle (Solomon) who is a bishop. Her sister Seraphina is assaulted by Policemen which affects her psychological health (Aslam 193). Her uncle could not avenge his niece's rape (Aslam 193). This makes Margaret believe that in order to be safe from the tragedy which happened to Seraphina, she needs to pretend to be a Muslim.

In addition to her larger family life, another important angle to study the micro context of Margaret's fake religious conversion is her gender. Eliza E. Kent (2014), a feminist theorist, is of the view that "the specificity of women's experience of conversion led to the recognition

that man's experience could not adequately serve as a default or generic representation of human experience" (306) of religious conversion and Feminist theory on religious conversion "needs more exploration" (Kent 305). Margaret's pretense as a Muslim is her defense mechanism which saves her from double edged sword of religious and gender based discrimination. She had to face more sexual harassment as compared to her female Muslim age-fellows, she observes:

The older Muslim boys did not make as many coarse remarks about Muslim girls as they did about her... they did not think they could waylay Muslim girls as they could her; to demand certain favours. (Aslam 190)

The harassment which she had to face was far worse and unbearable for a Christian girl as compared to a Muslim girl in Pakistan. So, her gender was a major factor in her decision to carry on with her counterfeit religious conversion. Thus, it is evident that Margaret's gender, middle class background, lawlessness, and the rape of her elder sister made her more susceptible to her religious conversion pretension.

#### **4.1.3. Meso-context**

The factors which construct the meso-context are those agencies which "mediate between the macro-contexts and micro-contexts, such as local government, regional politics and economics, and local religious institutions" (Rambo and Farhadian 24). The major institutions which played a vital role in her need to pretend as a Muslim are school and law enforcing agencies such as the Police.

Margaret had to face religious discrimination at school (Aslam 190). Moreover, Policemen, from a state agency of the country, assaulted her sister (Aslam 193). Furthermore, even after establishing her identity as a Muslim woman, an ISI agent persecuted her after her husband's death (Aslam 63). The country's law and order situation never helped her in getting

justice both as Margaret and Nargis which is another hint at the marginalized position of females in Pakistan be they Muslims or Christians.

#### **4.1.4. Literary context**

This research contends that in addition to the three types of contexts proposed by Rambo, literary context is another important dimension to be taken under consideration. The linguistic analysis of metaphors, symbols, motifs, and semantics is of prime importance in this regard. The invocation of the religio-historical figures such as St. Margaret, Solomon, and Queen of Sheba add on to the multiple layers of meanings to the depiction of contemporary religious conversion in this text. In this section, historical and religious allusions, metaphors, and symbols will be analyzed to further develop the discursive discourse of religious conversion in this narrative.

Aslam borrowed the title of the novel from a hagiographical book *The Golden Legend* by Voragine which was originally published in 1260 AD. The book consists of the popular stories of saints and prophets from the Christian tradition who are celebrated for their perseverance and stoicism in the face of religious coercion. The author of this text uses two names Solomon and Margaret for his fictional characters from the stories of King Solomon and St. Margaret narrated in this book.

The names inspired from this book do not only connect past and present but they also give an extra layer of interpretation to the stories of forced religious conversions and violence perpetrated in the contemporary world. This book, which inspired the title of Aslam's novel, includes the story of a beautiful fourteen year old Christian girl, Saint Margaret, who was pursued by a provost. The influential man tortured her till death to convert her religion but she did not concede. She died but she did not leave the religion of Christianity (Voraigue 368-370).

Margaret in the novel was also shown with the possibility of changing her religion at the age of fourteen. She was not tortured but out of her own free-will she started pretending to

be Nargis—a Muslim girl (Aslam 190). The name, Margaret, implies shades of St. Margaret story but it is a depiction of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Margaret who converted for materialistic, modernist, humanist, and feminist reasons. Thus, the text implies that the narratives of religious conversion of the past are no more applicable to an increasingly globalized and materialistic world.

The Muslim name which Margaret has been given, ‘Nargis’, is an Urdu language equivalent for the flower of Narcissus. The text narrates, “[t]here were days when Nargis felt that she contained another self- a ghost” (Aslam 61). She is divided between Margaret and Nargis and split between two religions. This novel is a modern retelling of the myth of Narcissus in the religious conversion context. The story of Narcissus is described in Ovid’s book *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus was a very beautiful man whom a deity named Echo loved but Narcissus did not respond to her love. Echo cursed Narcissus that he may never get his true love. Consequently, Narcissus sees his own reflection in water and he falls in love with his own image. Obviously, no matter how much he laments or moans, he could never consummate his love with his own reflection. Ultimately, Narcissus turns into a flower to avoid all the pain and misery.

The mythological narrative of Narcissus’ story was used by Lacan in his famous ‘mirror stage’ psychoanalytic theory which is also applicable to the story of Nargis. According to Spaas, “[i]n all the restagings of Narcissus, the tragedy of the split... remains fundamental” (3). Just like Narcissus, Margaret saw the image of a Muslim “Other” in the name Nargis and she let herself drown in that illusion of being Nargis she “othered” her “Self” and in the process she lost her real life for an illusion. Spaas (2000) postulates that “when the self projects his narcissist image upon the other, a course of personal... destruction may set in” (9). This fake conversion causes a fracture in Margaret’s identity formation.

The internal or psychological effects were, however, more profound and significant. She could always feel as if she is not real and a fake version of herself. She felt that her Uncle Solomon and her sister Seraphina are mirrors which she is trying to avoid (Aslam 251) and her unconscious would always conjure images from the Bible and lives of saints “At twilight the words of St Augustine came to her. *And I enter the fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures the countless images...*” (Aslam 29).

During the course of the novel, it is shown that Margaret becomes uncomfortable and anxious because of her religious conversion sham. The novel narrates, “The years had passed and, yes, she did live through moments of anxiety-it would lose intensity and then strengthen, then weaken again” (Aslam 256). The case of Margaret’s religious conversion, analyzed according to Lacan’s theory of the formation of self, clearly illustrates that her “identification” with her Muslim “Other” (in the Lacanian sense) was not strong enough to efface her real self. Her desire to be acceptable by society and social security forced her to pretend to be Muslim. In order to fulfill her lack of social security and achieve “Ideal I” (Lacan 1286), she lost her “Self” and became anxious and restless. This ideology of the other gave her the illusion that all her social status desires will be fulfilled which never happened (75).

Margaret’s Muslim other in the mirror was Nargis and she was so much in love with that illusion that she “othered” her own “self” in order to cope up with the demands of the symbolic order around her. Nonetheless, Margaret could never forgo her real self and her placement in the realm of the ‘Real’ and her conversion only remained a sham.

The symbolic significance of narcissus flower has been further extrapolated in this text by incorporating the Judeo-Christian, and Quranic tales about Queen of Sheba’s riddle of twin flowers. The following excerpt adumbrates the interconnections between the symbolic significance of flower, Margaret’s identity construction and her fake religious conversion. The omniscient voice in the text narrates:

Nargis.

Margaret.

A preoccupation of medieval Christian scholars was attempting to solve the Riddles of the Queen of Sheba, not specified in the Bible. Depicted in medieval tapestries of the time, one popular riddle was Sheba presenting Solomon with two identical-seeming flowers and asking him to identify which one was genuine. The wise King had had bees brought in and they had flown to the real one. (Aslam 270)

The allusion to Queen of Sheba in the context of this text is actually used as an analogy to Margaret's conversion because it is a story of 'conversion' because the queen ultimately submitted to the God of Solomon after the king solved her riddles (Ostioia 74; Elias 63). The presentation of the 'identical-seeming flowers' in the riddle of the Queen of Sheba can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it can be interpreted as a reference to fake religious conversion of Margaret/Nargis. The fake flower might be interpreted Nargis' false allegiance to Islam and real flower is reference to her real loyalty which lies with Christianity. Secondly, Margaret's character might also be explicated as a symbolic representation of the trickster queen (Sheba) who beguiles people with her deception of counterfeit religious conversion. In the riddle, the King Solomon calls upon the bees but, in the novel, the act of Margaret's uncle Solomon's suicide forced her to come out of her hiding and reclaim her religious loyalty to the religion of her birth—Christianity.

By drawing insights from symbolic significance of the flowers, invocation of the riddles of Queen of Sheba, and allusions to Saint Margaret and King Solomon, in the text, it can be argued that Margaret's fake religious conversion has perhaps only two justifications based on materialistic gains such as the safety from the tyranny of majority and escape from the patriarchal order and female exploitation.

#### *4.2. Stage 2: Crisis: Catalyst for Change*

The second stage of religious conversion is ‘crisis’ which refers to “disordering and disrupting experiences that call into question a person's or group's taken-for-granted world” (Rambo & Farhadian 23- 25). In the case of Margaret, she always feels discriminated and inferior to the Muslim majority in the country. She plays her first pretension rank at the age of fourteen (Aslam 61). However, one instance in her life causes her ultimate detachment from her persona of Margaret and completes her integration and evolution as Nargis.

In that significant instance, Margaret tells her sister Seraphina that she has been feigning to be a Muslim and she is afraid as someone is sending her threatening notes about disclosure of her pretention (Aslam 274). So, the Police might come for her. Seraphina, who is raped by Police men, commits suicide after this confession of Margaret because she does not want to face any Police man again in her life (Aslam 272). Margaret tells her uncle that Margaret’s story about pretending to be a Muslim and possible arrest by the Police led Seraphina to commit suicide. After her confession, her uncle (Bishop Solomon) becomes angry and disowns her forever (Aslam 274-277). After losing both her loved ones, she finally decides to become Nargis for the rest of her life.

#### *4.3. Stage 3: Quest: Searching for Salvation*

The third stage in the analysis of religious conversion is ‘quest’ where the main motivation for religious conversion of the potential protagonist is analyzed. This stage is “assessment of motivational structures. What motivated the individual to convert?” Many people convert in order to gain economic or material gains (Rambo & Farhadian 27). Same is the case with Margaret. She wanted a better social position in the overwhelmingly Muslim Majority. She became Nargis at fourteen just as a joke but when she felt that she is treated better as a member of religious majority she decided to keep on pretending as Nargis when she goes to college in order to keep a hold on the social privileges gained by the Muslim majority (Aslam 61). As it

is narrated in the novel, “In her grief-stricken mind, to pretend to be Nargis would be expedient while in Zamana, the deception freeing her from the daily aggression of the Muslims” (Aslam 193). So, Margaret’s main motivation behind this fake conversion was the hope to escape the atrocities of religious discrimination which aims at materialistic salvation not at spiritual elevation.

#### *4.4. Stage 4: Encounter: Engaging New Options*

Encounter is described as the “contact between questing persons and the advocate of a new alternative” (Rambo & Farhadian 23-24). In Margaret’s case, her first encounter with the engaging new option was the time when her classmate Nargis could not make it to the debate competition and she had to replace her (Aslam 61). It provided her with an option to present herself as Nargis and pretending to be Nargis exposed her to the possibility of getting a better social recognition and status as Nargis. There are three major components in this stage: “advocates” which was Nargis the missing girl, second is Margaret who is a “potential convert” and the third is the setting which is the setting of debate competition where Margaret pretended to be Nargis for the first time (Rambo & Farhadian 28).

Another level of comprehending the encounter stage is to analyze what the potential converts see as the “benefits of conversion” (Rambo & Farhadian 29). In Margaret case, it was escape from discrimination. She was not called smelly and no one asked her to use her own separate plates for eating for the first time. She was treated like all the other majority Muslim girls (Aslam 190). This perception about the possible benefits led Margaret to extend the pretension of being a Muslim girl.

#### *4.5. Stage 5: Interaction: Creating New Identities*

The process of interaction is “an intensification of the process in which the advocates and potential converts ‘negotiate’ changes in thoughts, feelings and actions” (Rambo & Farhadian 24). This stage denotes the necessity to follow the “guidelines for new behaviour and values”



(Rambo & Farhadian 29- 31). As Margret does not convert for spiritual reasons, her thoughts and feelings towards the new religion do not matter. She just makes certain changes in her external behaviour in order to carry on with her act of religious conversion. Nargis is not religious “Nargis believed that God was just another word for ‘consolation’ (Aslam 56). As a result, she learns to repeat certain words, signs and rituals in order to fulfill the expectations of the community in which she is trying to blend in. In order to carry on with her pretension, she learns the main teachings with the help of “little books and pamphlets” which taught her the correct manner of saying her prayer. She also learns to fulfill the expectations of the group by learning “the basic stories from the life of Muhammad. She told herself to always say, ‘Peace be upon him’ after his name” (Aslam 193). According to Leone, the performance of these signs is a “complex orchestration of signs” and a “semiotic theatre” (Leone 371). Margaret fakes conversion by interiorizing the Muslim Pakistani “cultural code” (Leone 372). Thus, Margaret’s pretension as a Muslim was a semiotic theater which helped her in signifying her religious change but in reality, those signs were just orchestration of certain cultural practices.

#### *4.6. Stage 6: Commitment: Consolidating New Spiritual Orientations*

Commitment refers to a person’s decision to devote his life “to a new spiritual orientation” (Rambo & Farhadian 24). Since Margaret never believed in God (Aslam 56), her motivation might not be explained in spiritual, metaphysical, and intangible terms. Margaret just wanted to escape from religious discrimination; and in her case, Susan Jacoby’s (2016) secular explanation of religious conversion is more relevant. Jacoby argues that people do not always convert for spiritual reasons but they also change their religious affiliations for reasons of security, inconvenience, marriage, and simply as an escape from difficult situations. Rambo’s Holistic Model can become more comprehensive and inclusive if materialistic orientations are also incorporated alongside spiritual ones. So, I argue that if this stage’s title might be revised and rephrased as ‘*Commitment: Consolidating New Spiritual or Material Orientations*’, it

would become an all-inclusive and its analytical scope can be expanded to incorporate the instances of religious conversion for materialistic reasons as is the case in this text.

#### *4.7. Stage 7: Consequences: Assessing the Effects of Converting*

The last stage of religious conversion is “Consequence” which involves “cumulative effects of various experiences, actions and beliefs that either facilitate or hinder converting”. The consequences of the religious conversion process are multi-dimensional, “interactive and cumulative” (Rambo & Farhadian 24). This stage analyses “how many aspects of the convert's life are affected and how comprehensive these changes are”. The consequences might include “affective, intellectual, ethical, religious, and social / political domains” (Rambo & Farhadian 32).

When Margaret becomes Nargis, she has to face both internal and external consequences which are related to her overall self and being. The external consequences were the changes in her external behaviour. The way she started following the rituals of Muslims was one of the ways she was changed externally (Aslam 193). Secondly, her uncle disowned her. Her uncle did not recognize her on the train (Aslam 99). Although she keeps on going back to her home town to see her uncle from a distance, she could never reconcile with him. Thirdly, ISI agent believes, “She will cooperate... She will have to. There is no record of her ever having converted. Her life in Zamana is based on forgeries, we know. If we expose her, she'll face very serious charges. Pretending to be a Muslim ....” (Aslam 321). Despite all, she could never reconcile with her act of pretense and always felt remorse. She loathed herself:

[T]he pretense became too much at times, her mind-evolving into new ways of thinking, processing new experiences- was beginning to accuse her. There was complexity in the situation where she had only expected simplicity.... She told herself she was a deceitful person on the whole, that she was dishonourable and a liar in all aspects of her life. (Aslam 251-252)

The fake conversion made her unhappy with her life and she felt as if her entire life was an illusion and a deception. Moreover, her fake religious conversion led her to be easily blackmailed by an ISI agent who threatened to expose her fake religious conversion, if she did not forgive the American agent who killed her husband. Therefore, Margaret's secular religious conversion did not fulfill its aims. Thus, regardless of a lifetime of guilt, remorse and shame on her deceitful conversion, she had to face persecution and violence at the hands of a corrupt legal system and patriarchy.

## 5. Conclusion

A Holistic Model analysis of the novel *The Golden Legend* proves that a counterfeit religious conversion is a conversion in any case. The analytical model proposed by Rambo and Farhadian (2014) unpacks the multiple layers of discursive discourse of religious conversion embedded in TGL. The textual analysis demonstrates that the narrative incorporates myths, hagiographical literature, history and spatial constructs to diversify and enrich the interpretation of the phenomenon of religious conversion in contemporary times. The study finds out that the phenomenon of religious conversion is not always spiritual but there are many economic, social, psychological, anthropological, historical, and personal reasons for religious conversions.

In other words, the research argues that Margaret's conversion is a complicated human act which needs to be understood according to her context. She feigned conversion in order to avoid the mistreatment as a Christian minority member in Pakistan, but more importantly as a female member of a minority she felt more vulnerable and insecure amidst the rampant injustice and lawlessness. Therefore, female experiences of religious conversion are different from male religious conversions in terms of motivations and reasons behind these conversions. Hence, this essay proves that the fictional account of Margaret's fake conversion proposes that the twenty-first century females from religious minorities inhabiting the Third World are more

susceptible to fake and secular/materialistic religious conversions because of their marginalized and disadvantageous position in the socio-political hierarchy of these poverty-stricken, religiously intolerant, and politically corrupt legal systems.

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