



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Biopolitical Control and Subjectivity in Aslam's *The Golden Legend* and Hamid's *Exit West***

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**ABSTRACT**

This research paper, by applying Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, offers a Foucauldian analysis of two contemporary novels: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) in order to examine the relations between biopolitics and subjectivity. Using Michel Foucault's lens, this research paper looks at how these novels represent the ways in which power is used over bodies and people. It also analyzes how the main characters' lives are affected by governmental tools, organizations, and technologies. The study of biopolitics in these novels throws light on how the characters discuss their lives in environments marked by political change and migration, including the handling and management of bodies. The research further investigates the development and modification of subjectivity under the setting of biopolitical governance. By exploring the nuances of power methods that form the characters' impressions of both themselves and other people, it investigates the relationship that exists between individual agency and the larger systems of power. The research paper attempts to further the discussion on the incorporation of political and philosophical topics in contemporary fiction. The research paper examines the complexities of biopolitics and subjectivity as they appear in these novels, revealing valuable insights into the ways in which contemporary Pakistani Anglophone fiction both depicts and resists the current socio-political landscape.

**KEYWORDS** Biopolitics, *Exit West*, Michel Foucault, Mohsin Hamid, Nadeem Aslam, Subjectivity, *The Golden Legend*, Contemporary Pakistani Anglophone Fiction

**Introduction**

The connection of politics, identity, and society has been regarded as a constant matter in contemporary literature. Literature grabs the difficulties of forced efforts, cultural conflicts, and individual insights, conferring a wide depiction of human understanding amongst the subtleties of contemporary life. This research paper finds the intricate affiliations between biopolitics and subjectivity in the narratives of two prominent literary novels: Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017). Using the Foucauldian groundwork as a lead, the paper attempts to highlight the force affairs that influence the lives of the characters in these novels as well as the techniques that huge biopolitical powers build, challenge, and periodically liberate discrete subjectivity. With his ground-breaking theories on power, discipline, and biopolitics, French philosopher, sociologist, and historian Michel Foucault has had an important influence on modern literary and cultural studies. Understanding the complex

mechanisms through which power builds society and controls people's lives has been made possible thanks in large part to Foucault's findings. Using Foucault's theoretical framework, this paper has a goal of critically interrogating the techniques in which biopolitical dogmas, observation networks, and national intercessions influence the agency and perception of self of the characters in Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017).

Foucault describes biopolitics as the method by which various agencies, especially states, govern bodies through social regulations and healthcare (medical laws). For this, it controls and sustains the biological processes, structures, and communities that impact the core aspects of human existence. While much has been said about biopolitical subjects, writers have had reason to investigate the ways political perspectives pressure individual existences in literary worlds. Both the novels: Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017) demonstrate how biopolitical interventions shape the lives of their protagonists. This paper aims to investigate the characters' agency and modes of resistance by exploring sites for subversion, and resilience against biopolitical constraints. The paper also suggests that literature itself is an expression of resistance to biopolitical norms. To generate perspectives in narratives, the stories must be up-to-date with discourses and offer these through writers' creative skills. In their nuanced storytelling, Hamid and Aslam demonstrate how literary fiction can resist hegemonic looks to make possible a critical conversation, in part by taking readers behind the curtain on humans dealing with the challenge of biopolitics.

This research paper asserts that like Foucauldian perspectives of biopolitics, Hamid and Aslam both brilliantly represent the struggle between biopolitics and subjectivity. The research paper also aims to illustrate how characters manage their subjectivities within the broader arrangement of biopolitical governance by analyzing state-controlled procedures, migration guidelines, and the socio-political landscapes in each work. Applying Foucault's concepts of power, governmentality, and population management, this paper attempts to highlight how these novels reveal major insights into the complex patterns of individual identity formation under external institutions of authority. Applying Foucauldian optics helps us to gain an understanding of the analytical nature of literature and the complex relationship between biopolitics and subjectivity in modern society. The paper extensively examines authority factors, control, and the emergence of individual images in the context of biopolitics. This study continues by considering the intricate connection that exists between biopolitics and subjectivity.

## Literature Review

Moutafidou (2019) presents an analysis of the entangled space and time as represented through doors simultaneously crossed in Hamid's novel (pp. 317-330). Singh (2019) focuses on how individuals respond to migration in Hamid's *Exit West*. Majorly looking at the coexistence theme the research spotlights the ways the characters solve the problems of migration and adapt to new environments (pp. 13974-13978). Bilal (2020), challenges the prevalent natural-law belief that a work must originate in a national literary tradition to be regarded as a global novel. He says that Hamid's novel breaks this notion by providing a story that is fundamentally global (pp. 410-427). Sadaf (2020) finds that Hamid's *Exit West* ignores conventional limits by proposing an unusual picture of world travel via magical portals. This piece of science fiction envisions a period when it would be possible to travel immediately between distant locations, dramatically changing our sense of geography and history (pp. 1-12). Sadiq, Saleem, and Javaid (2020) explore the idea of subjectivity in the context of migration as portrayed in Hamid's novel

(584-593). Wahla and Asif (2020) explore gender slippage in Hamid's novel largely through the relationship to gender-nonconforming characters concerning migration (pp. 27-35). Hassan (2023) explores the relationship between technology, symbolism as well as transformation. Nowadays implementation of technology and figurative elements, to produce different story ranges, has also dominated modern literature (pp. 225-232). Ismail and Alhaisony (2024) try to clarify the intricate relations between the colonial past with such contemporary phenomena as immigration, multiculturalism, war on terror, identity fragmentation, and displacement (pp. 79-91). Haq, Khokhar, and Shah (2024), talk about the issue of exile in literature. Their biggest point of contention is how the theme has since developed in a world where immigration and post-colonial repercussions are quite rife (pp. 1518-1526). Tahir and Rabbani (2024) focus on the damage of trauma evidence over time, as with Agnew's note: it prickled like red pepper; damaged concatenation solely takes strings (pp. 244-253).

Mushtaq (2017) believes that Aslam's novel realistically displays the daily life of a widow who is negotiating the challenges of present-day Pakistan (pp. 23-45). Sukheeja (2017) examines the underlying concepts of hatred and desire in Aslam's novel. Through a careful reading of the novel's complex narrative architecture, her research queries at Aslam's work through abuse, both emotional and physical, cast within an aura of resistance (pp. 351-362). Miller (2019) analyzes the subject of opposition using connection and knowledge. Miller considers that literature may serve as an effective instrument for independence and discontent in restrictive environments. She underscores how narrative enables characters to defy prevailing perspectives and acquire power (pp. 341-355). Mu'ad (2020) focuses to see how Aslam portrays hatred of religion against Pakistani Christian people (pp. 1-89). Shahzadi, et al. (2021) analyze how Aslam describes the development of nationality and the conditions that contributed to its creation in the novel. The main objective of this research is to explore Aslam's novel from the perspective of Benedict Anderson's nationalism theory (pp. 1609-1615). In the writing of Batool, Ajmal, and Masum (2022), the complete picture of how the book represents its multifaceted state is developed further. Using an evolutionary analytical lens, the authors examine how characters in the book keep their many views on spiritual and cultural diversity found within Pakistan (pp. 23-38). Zahoor, Ilyas, and Ajmal's (2023) study strongly rejects actions that compromise the worth of others and support for the freedoms of spiritual minorities. Their research addresses the complicated relationship between imbalances of power and spirituality, which is especially apparent in Pakistan as well as worldwide (pp. 241-251).

Previous research on these two texts has primarily concentrated on religious themes, power dynamics, and subject submission. The aspect that is missing is how the state governs people's behavior, attitudes, and beliefs. It also controls how people create their identities and view the world. Applying Foucault's concept of biopolitics to both the novels the paper offers to describe that how biopolitical control impacts on individual subjectivity. The literature review shows that many academic studies have already been done on these two texts from various angles, but this paper's approach is unique because it deals with biopolitical aspects in both the novels and their impact on individuals and society as well as how the characters perceive the world around them.

### Material and Methods

The research paper adopts a Foucauldian approach to analyze the dynamic connection between biopolitics and subjectivity in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and Nadeem Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017). The research paper seeks to clarify how these novels serve as literary spaces where state-mandated procedures and individual

subjectivities meet, building on Michel Foucault's fundamental texts on dominance, governmental behavior, and the biopolitical governance of individuals. The term 'biopolitics' was first introduced by Foucault during his 1975-1976 lectures published under the title *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault, 2003). Foucault's idea of biopolitics focuses on managing populations by applying different methods to govern life, health, and physical bodies. In his book *Society Must Be Defended*, he describes the switch of states from having ultimate authority over death to regulating life (Foucault, 2003). Foucault's *Security, Territory, Population* (2007) explores how security mechanisms impact populations. Foucault, in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, connects biopolitics to neoliberal governmentality, where economic reason regulates societal arrangements (Foucault, 2008). Biopolitics is therefore interrelated with governmental power and societal regulation. The close analysis of *Exit West* (2017) addresses biopolitical issues, which include physical barriers and rules governing immigration, and explores how people maintain subjectivity in the face of these sociopolitical limitations. In a similar vein, *The Golden Legend* (2017) is examined to determine what it means to have agency in the face of societal expectations, political unrest, and biopolitical dictum. The two works are then analyzed separately to emphasize the complex entanglement of subjectivity and biopolitics in contemporary literary fiction.

## Results and Discussion

### Biopolitical Control and Subjectivity in *Exit West*

Mohsin Hamid demonstrates Michel Foucault's notion of biopolitical control in *Exit West* (2017) by using surveillance cameras, checkpoints, curfews, and identity systems. According to Foucault's concept of biopolitics, individual bodies are governed and communities are controlled (Foucault, 2003).

#### *Checkpoints and Curfews*

Checkpoints and curfews are instances of state-imposed limitations and surveillance systems are used in the novel to limit liberty and regulate adherence from refugees. "There were two checkpoints on their way, one manned by police and another, newer one, manned by soldiers. The police didn't bother with them. The soldiers stopped everyone" (Hamid, 2017, p. 19). Checkpoints are an example of the government's need to restrict and track the mobility of people: "The curfew Saeed's parents had been waiting for was duly imposed, and enforced [...] but also howitzers and infantry fighting vehicles and tanks with their turrets clad in the rectangular barnacles of explosive reactive armour" (p. 33). The execution and monitoring of a curfew with an extensive military presence, such as infantry defense vehicles, stainless steel checkpoints, and tanks with destructive response shields attest Foucault's notion of biopolitical control, which focuses on how authorities regulate people and sustain order through multiple forms of regulation and monitoring.

#### *Security Cameras to Observe the Movement of People*

Security cameras can be considered an example of the continuous observation that is found in Foucault's study of biopolitics, which argues that power is exerted via the observation and control of bodies. "On a security camera, the family could be seen blinking in the sterile artificial light and recovering from their crossing" symbolizes the interplay of biopolitics, monitoring, and humanity as a whole (p. 54). *Exit West's* applying the "small quadcopter drone" observation serves as a prime instance of the pervasive control that regulates the daily activities of people that live on the margins (p. 55). The

calm quadcopter lingering over the Tamil-speaking family brings attention to the practices of biopolitical control, in which government power expands using technology. Drones become a living manifestation of the pervasive look that regulates bodies in travel, in addition to delivering real-time movies to security vehicles and main surveillance points.

### ***Military Enforcement and Biopolitical Control***

The military is an excellent instance of biopower because it values security over personal freedoms and governs people's behavioral and emotional states, converting individuals into things of state control and limiting their capacities to act freely in their daily lives. Music "was forbidden by the militants, and their apartment could be searched without warning" shows the biopolitical control (p. 50). A feeling of safety or independence that citizens may have is ruined by the "militants banging on the door in the middle of the night" and the constant monitoring system that attacks their private realm (p. 50). By revealing how authority is gained over people through grouping and monitoring, the line: "The night the militants came they were looking for people of a particular sect, and demanded to see ID cards, to check what sort of names everyone had," (p. 50) illustrates Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics.

### ***Restrictions on Refugees***

The state imposes control over the daily activities of refugees by limiting their movement, making them objects of regulation, and underlining the relationship between identity, power, and existence in the setting of compelled migration: "That night the electricity went out, cut off by the authorities, and Kensington and Chelsea descended into darkness" (p. 83). Biopolitics involves several crucial factors, which are elaborated in this section. First of all, an intentional action of the government to unplug the light is an open part of the decision-making process which holds the refugees subjugated. Thus, the government controls such vital assets as electricity, thus controlling and observing the refugees' life conditions as an effective form of biopolitical power. This deprivation affects all aspects of routine life and, at the same time, makes the refugees aware of their vulnerability and weakness. The absence of a call to prayers due to the unavailability of electrical power is a relatively pointed biopolitical strategy. It is found that refugees suffer from feelings of loneliness and vulnerability due to constant monitoring and inadequate acclimatization. This absence of authority in the refugee camps is not just a sign of the neglect; it is also an index of refugees' reality of the fundamental crises they endure. They hardly allow one to live quietly, study, or work and have somewhat a normal life. Decomposed facilities in such areas demonstrate that refugees are denied their basic social and economic rights every day.

### ***Biopolitical Influence on Characters' Subjectivity***

Nadia's compliance with the instructions, which were received as a model of subjectivity formation within the framework of biopolitical control, demonstrates her strengths. The sociopolitical circumstances impact Nadia's subjectivity constantly but she stays vigilant and manages to maintain a conception of self even as there are forces that seek to oppress her. Nadia's decision to initially put on a black robe, albeit not spiritual, is a deliberated act of self-assertion in response to culture and standards. This kind of choice is a perfect example of power subjectivity as an external construct created based on the power relations. Thus, the robe that Nadia wears is a protective gear against the tough scrutiny and ordeal she has in her strict culture. In her words: "So men don't fuck with me," she wanted to show the way in which she tamed her independence within the

context of limited options by using culturally constructed iconography (p. 15). Nadia's individuality becomes even more apparent when she refuses to live with her parents, which is uncommon in her neighborhood. This action demonstrates her dedication to retaining her autonomy in the face of traditional expectations, displaying her strong will and resistance to patriarchal authority.

Like Nadia, the other major character is Saeed. His ideas, his feelings, and his sense of identity are influenced to a large extent by the sociopolitical context, the state of war, and his relation to Nadia. In this sense, the shift in Saeed's subjectivity when he experiences biopolitical control and starts adapting to the new reality. When saying prayers, he used to touch a bead that originally belonged to his grandmother. This is the case since Saeed's subjectivity is primarily built on his loyalty to the traditionalist interpretation of Islamic teachings. This aspect of responsibility as well as a deep commitment to family falls at the core of Saeed's character in the novel.

### *Resistance and Adaptation of Biopolitical Forces*

Doors that lead individuals to the desired regions are one of the most expressive symbols of freedom from biopower tyranny. These doors provide an eccentric method to embrace a Radical Negative, to decline the biopolitical regime practices that aim at regulating, generating, and controlling individuals' existence. These parameters are present in the doors which offer an escape path to the people and problematize dominant control mechanisms, opening the possibilities to exist life beyond the governmental reach. Foucault's biopolitics theory stresses how modern states control people and their population using different techniques and tools such as frontiers and bounds, watching towers and watches, and rules and norms. These systems are supposed to manage and improve the population's existence, often sacrificing individual liberties and rights. The magical portals provide an opportunity for an unusual type of protest to these limits since they "could take you Elsewhere" (p. 45). Thus, when opening these doors, Nadia and Saeed, counteract the biopolitical wheels that strive to decree their authorization. The doors represent the liberation from coercive frameworks that limited their residential options as well as the possibility of subjugating someone, routes they could take, and the like. This escape is dual in the physical and the metaphysical sense because it seeks to redefine their existence liberated from the confines of their earlier life.

The line: "To flee forever is beyond the capacity of most: at some point even a hunted animal will stop, exhausted, and await its fate, if only for a while" explains how the main characters constantly struggle, and at the same time adapt for the constant biopolitical forces put on them (p. 96). Escape is one of the forms of rebellion and a protest against submitted situations, as well as against the governmental and social control powers. However, the above statement confirms the innate tendency of man to resist everything that is constant. Surpassing a fleeing person, who will eventually get tired, persons running away from conflict, persecution or institutional oppression will get discouraged and will get tired one day. This fatigue does not show that everything was done in vain as may be perceived, but a reality check on the timeline for any human to follow. They have stated that resistance is vital, but at the same time, it signifies that resistance is a long-lasting process that cannot be carried out endlessly but with breaks. The line: "Tales were told at these places that people from all over now gathered to hear, for the tales of these natives felt appropriate to this time of migration, and gave listeners much-needed sustenance" captures the linked themes of resistance and adaptation in a time of global upheaval (p. 113). In the setting of migration, storytelling becomes an important tool for fighting the erasure of cultural identities and adjusting to new situations. Sharing narratives, acts as a form of resistance to the homogenizing pressures

of displacement and assimilation. By maintaining and repeating their observations, migrants defend the importance of their cultural heritage and fight biopolitical pressures that want to erase their distinct sense of self.

### **Biopolitical Control and Subjectivity in *The Golden Legend***

In Aslam's *The Golden Legend* (2017), biopolitical management is described in great detail as state's religious and social influences over and on the body and the population. The story reveals a society where being watched, religious commands, and authorities' decisions define people's liberties and legal requirements. It presents characters who confront a world with control of bodies through certain direct and concealed methods like forced faith and social exclusion.

### ***Legal and Institutional Mechanisms of Biopolitical Control***

Legal and institutional structures affect social dynamics and people's lives by serving as weapons of biopolitical control in Aslam's novel. The story highlights how the court system frequently reflects prejudices, especially in the situation of Grace's killer, who might avoid full punishment because of his Muslim background: "There were several witnesses to the crime, but the murderer was a Muslim and this was Pakistan. The police were initially reluctant to even register a case" (Aslam, 2017, p. 10). In this particular instance, the functioning of the judicial system builds an argument that promotes the worth of those who obey the rules of society and religion while discounting the lives of people like Grace. "Our politicians and army men are very shrewd, he declared. They will say that under Sharia Law the relatives of the dead can accept blood money in exchange for pardoning a murderer" (p. 59). This argument highlights the religious and moral aspects of Islam, calling for dedication to standards above constitutional allowances; it demands the rejection of state-sanctioned actions that transform life and death, thus opposing the biopolitical control established by the legal system. Foucault suggested that biopolitical control takes place via rules and regulations that handle populations. "Solomon went to the police station and was told to wait. Over the coming hours he watched as one by one the other cashiers were released. At midnight only Seraphina remained in detention" (p. 191). Consequently, this instance demonstrates the mechanism of biopolitical control in which people's categories and prejudices are supported and reproduced by the law and its enforcement.

### ***Biopolitical Control through Religion and Violence***

Religion is an interaction of the human beings with supernatural powers in the matters concerning their individual bodies. Nargis' sister's brutalization at the hands of the police will turn her into Nargis, the Muslim. It is very crucial and influential in the lives of people especially in Pakistan where it is inextricably linked to government and societal conducts being the official religion of the country, Islam. When Nargis was assaulted by the police, her sister was also brutalized, which led the former to adopt Islam because the religion holds the biopolitical authority in Pakistan. When Nargis came to Lyallpur, the heated debate about her true identity underlined Pakistan's wide biopolitical control through religion. The particular instance in which a "doctor used a different syringe for her" exemplifies how deeply ingrained prejudices regarding religion may impact even the most regular areas of life, expanding biopolitical control over individuals (p. 190). The phrase "Kill non-Muslims as they are not Muslims. Kill Muslims for not being the right kind of Muslims" actually depicts the brutal biopolitical control of people through religion and assassination (p. 299). In Pakistan, this depicts a raw prejudice, sectarian war against religion, and sectarianism that forms and reflects the

political-cultural determinations of people's lives, communities, and politics. The line "Let's burn down every Christian house before daybreak" is a disrupting instance of the overbearing biopolitical control imposed through religion and assault, particularly in religious warfare (p. 140). This call to aggression highlights how faith identification can function as an argument for targeted enmity permitting minority populations to be persistently excluded and eliminated.

### ***Biopolitical Influences on Character's Subjectivity***

Biopolitical influences have an important effect on Nargis's life, shaping her identity and viewpoint. Living in an era where religious and political conflicts control the limits of existence, Nargis needs to discuss an uncertain and tracked landscape. It also implies that her life depends on the implementation of the sociopolitical standards set within the society or the state. Nargis's "dangerous lie" that her existence revolves around shows the various fictions and imposed selves she must construct to survive and cater to those she considers (p. 61). Aslam presents the character of Nargis whose psychological experience may not be easy because of the world she faces. Her subjectivity is a tapestry of her individual experiences, fears, and the brutality that exists under a military dictatorship. She perceives the world surrounding her as an environment in which survival needs performance, and the truth regarding her personality and principles must be concealed beneath an appearance.

"At the beginning of high school, when she was fourteen years old, a teacher had asked her to stand up in class and 'justify taking the place of a Muslim'" clearly shows the biopolitical interactions that shape Helen's existence and subjectivity (p. 23). Helen's view of the world is thus defined by a clear awareness of her lacking status and an ongoing defense of her identity amid restricting circumstances. "Every time Helen came home in distress and having been maltreated for not being a Muslim" emphasizes the outstanding and widespread effect of biopolitical challenges on Helen's life (p. 45). "Stay away from me or I'll tell the police you swore at the Prophet" clearly illustrates the biopolitical effects that primarily influence Lily's existence, perspective, and subjectivity (p. 76). This risk highlights the fundamental power relationships and social structures that affect and control people, particularly those from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds. Lily's subjectivity is formed by the ongoing push of these biopolitical aspects.

### ***Resistance and Adaptation in The Golden Legend***

This novel strongly interrogates questions of defiance and compliance within the contexts of biopolitics and in relation to a decidedly troubled Pakistan. Aslam's novel is a poignant analysis of how and who in relation to state and societal power, people and groups negotiate their identity and meaningful autonomy. Nargis' non-cooperation with these demands is a symbol of rebellion against such a forceful urge. The refusal is quite shocking in terms of envisioning Nargis as a subject who rejects the state's efforts to domesticate her suffering. Helen's relationship with Imran, a Kashmiri Muslim, exposes the state and society's sectarian divisions. Their love becomes a kind of resistance to the biopolitical forces seeking to govern intimate and communal relationships. In a society where books have been burned and cultural significance is threatened, Lily's art signifies a type of adaptation-based resistance.

### **Conclusion**



We can grasp using Michel Foucault's theory of biopolitics as a lens that how both of these novels provide accounts for the mechanics of power that regulates individual corporeality and populations. One cannot help but turn to Foucault's idea of biopolitics as the potential system of understanding the ways of control presented in these narratives is most clearly revealed through government, rules, and laws. Hamid and Aslam are keen to explain how deconstructed social relations are and how the state does its part, demonstrating the possibility of subject transformation when people redefine themselves within intolerant sociopolitical environments. Analyzing from Foucault's biopolitical perspective, modern governments are not just constitutional powers and territories; they are the control of life, its order, its health, reproduction, and improvement. Throughout *Exit West* (2017), Hamid presents an alternate but not valueless powerful instance of biopolitical domination. Foucault's ideas on biopolitics are visible in the manners in which regimes limit individual's entry and travel, managing persons through migration rules and tracking frameworks. The protagonists, Nadia and Saeed, negotiate some constantly harsh surroundings where their ability to live is dependent on the social and political circumstances of the locales they live. This notion is made rather grotesque in *The Golden Legend* (2017) by the concept of the restrictive administration mechanism, by which people are controlled and watched.

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