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**DOUBLE MARGINALIZATION AND BEYOND: REPRESSION OF
WOMEN IN NADEEM ASLAM'S *THE GOLDEN LEGEND***



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Abstract

*This research paper conducts a feminist analysis of Nadeem Aslam's novel *The Golden Legend* (2017). The study is grounded in feminist literary theory, which challenges historically and socially constructed gender hierarchies that render women as subordinate, irrational, and the "Other" in relation to men. Drawing upon key feminist thinkers from Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf to Simone de Beauvoir and contemporary theorists, this paper examines how literature both reflects and perpetuates patriarchal structures. The novel is set against the backdrop of religious extremism and minority persecution in contemporary Pakistan, making it a significant text for feminist inquiry. The study is qualitative in nature, employing an interpretative method to analyze secondary data collected from the novel, research articles, journals, and theoretical texts.*

*The findings reveal that *The Golden Legend* portrays a society that imposes strict, specific norms upon women, including mandatory modesty, restriction of movement to the domestic sphere, and primary assignment to kitchen and household chores. Any transgression of these norms leads to social ostracism or violence. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates the concept of double marginalization: women are oppressed not only on the basis of gender but also, in the case of non-Muslim characters such as Helen and Nargis (Margaret), on the basis of religious minority status. Religious extremism is shown to deny widows the right to remarry, while patriarchal honor culture justifies honor killings based on unconfirmed rumors. Additionally, government officials and state policies act as further agents of repression, as seen when a widow is forced to forgive her husband's killer.*

*The study concludes that feminist literary theory provides a robust framework for exposing the multiple, intersecting systems of oppression that constrain women's lives. In *The Golden Legend*, the repression of women is not monolithic but operates through the interlocking mechanisms of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and state authority. The novel thus serves as a powerful critique of how gender-based, religious, and institutional forces collectively deny women their fundamental rights and agency.*

Keywords:

*Feminist literary theory, *The Golden Legend*, Nadeem Aslam, patriarchy, religious extremism, double marginalization, women's repression, Pakistan.*

Introduction

Feminist literary theory refers to the analysis of all the ways through which the political, economic, social as well as psychological oppression of women takes place in literature and other cultural forms. In this context various feminist thinkers offer different views related to the issues of women

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and their role in society. They challenge historical as well as traditional views about the gender in which “it was believed that man is rational, strong, protective, and decisive”; however, women were seen as “emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson, 2014 p. 85). These gender beliefs were historically used to justify the state of inequality between man and woman. However, feminist thinkers came up to challenge such gender division and the social inferiority of women. They argued that biological differences between man and woman should not be the standard of judgment and do not make women inferior to man. They further argued that the gender division and role assigned to each gender is not a natural construct but in fact a historical and social construction. They are assigned specific role because the historical as well as social norms have constructed these views about man and woman. However, historically these beliefs that were actually the social construct were exploited to render man a higher social, political as well as domestic position and to justify this social, political as well as domestic hierarchy. At the same time these beliefs were given a sense of universality, therefore, they remained stable as well as unchallenged for many centuries.

In this context and in order to challenge that socially constructed views that renders men a higher social, political as well as domestic position, many women thinkers came up to challenge such beliefs that solidified the hierarchical division that was based on the notion of gender. In this regard Mary Wollstonecraft in her book *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) made a discussion over the writer such as Milton, Pope, and Rousseau and Virginia Woolf through her book *A Room of One's Own* (1929) challenged the patriarchal ideology and portrayed “the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood” (Barry, 2009; Khokhar & Mashori, 2018). In the similar way, and in the recent times the *Second Sex* (1949) written by Simone de Beauvoir is also very important. Simone de Beauvoir argued that in the system of patriarchy “men are considered essential subjects (independent selves with free will), while women are considered contingent beings (dependent beings controlled by circumstances) (Tyson, 2014, p. 96). In this regard men are the agents of change as well as system of meaning. However, women cannot have an independent system of meaning, because their notion of meaning is related to the meaning actually constructed by man. In this way “women are defined not just in terms of their difference from men, but in terms of their inadequacy in comparison to men” (Tyson, 2014 p. 96). Therefore, in this social system woman is seen as ‘other’. A woman has no individual identity; in fact she is identified as “man’s Other: she is less than a man; she is a kind of alien in a man’s world; she is not a fully developed human being the way a man is” (Tyson, 2014, p. 96).

Although, the feminist thinkers were trying to make their own voice for one to two centuries, however the ‘women’s movement’ of 1960s renewed the old feminist’s challenges and views against the strong hold of patriarchy. In this context the modern feminist thinkers highlighted the notion that the nineteenth century fiction portrayed women characters as only interested in their marriage issues and their choice of partners. However, there were very few women characters that earned their living and were independent in their lives. Moreover, during the next decade there had been shift in the feminists’ thought and it became even more radical in exposing the system and working of patriarchy. In the regard specific analysis was made of the works of male writers that how male writer in their books constructed the typical image of women. In the similar way, the feminist thought of 1980s underwent even more changes and drew from the theories such as Marxism, psychoanalysis and structuralism. The background of psychoanalytic theories helped these theorists understand what the psychological effects of patriarchy are and how in the circulation of norms man as well as women internalize these norms taking them as universal as well

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as natural values. In the similar way Marxism also helped these feminist theorists understand how patriarchal norms exploit the economic resources and keep women subjects backward economically as well as politically. At the same time, they also changed their attention from the male authors to “exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records of female experience” (Barry, 2009). This whole feminist history can be summed up in the words of Showalter that first of all there was “a feminine phase (1840-80), in which women writers imitated dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards; then a feminist phase (1880-1920), in which radical and often separatist positions are maintained; and finally, a female phase (1920 onwards) which looked particularly at female writing and female experience” (quoted in Barry, 2009).

Nadeem Aslam is a Pakistani award-winning novelist who was born in Gujranwala in 1966. His first novel titled *Season of the Rainbirds* (1993) won the Betty Trask and the Author's Club First Novel Award. His second novel titled *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) won Encore Award and Kiriya Prize. This novel was also shortlisted for International Dublin Literary Award. His other novels include *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) *The blindman's Garden* (2013) and the *Golden Legend* (2017).

The *Golden Legend* is the most recent novel of Nadeem Aslam that was published in 2017. This novel portrays the religious extremism and the issues of minorities and women in Pakistan.

Literature Review

A literature review is a critical overview of existing research on a specific topic. Rather than just a list of summaries, it synthesizes information to show the current state of knowledge, identify gaps, and provide a foundation for new research (Maitlo et al., 2023; Ahmad, Bukhari & Maitlo, 2025; Ahmad, Khokhar & Shaheen, 2026). Its function is to provide the foundation for new research (Maitlo et al., 2024; Soomro et al., 2025; Yousaf, Ahmad & Riaz, 2026). A literature review acts as a critical bridge between existing knowledge and your new research, ensuring your work is relevant and well-grounded (Jalbani et al., 2023; Murtaza et al., 2025; Mehmood et al., 2026). In a nutshell, its importance lies in its ability to justify, contextualize, and strengthen your academic efforts (Cheema et al., 2023; Ansari et al., 2025; Shaheen et al., 2025; Yousaf et al., 2025).

Various studies have been conducted in the field of feminist literary theory and this theory has been applied on many novels and short stories in order to study the representation of women in fiction and to expose the various form of patriarchy. In this regard Aryanika (2016) made a feminist analysis of Abidah el-Khalieqy's novel *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban*. The researcher came up with the understanding that this novel portrays the struggle of women to get their rights and freedom in their social and educational context. In this regard the character of Anisa is rather very important who struggles to defend the reproductive rights of women and the possession of one's body. Aryanika (2016) further states that the writer of these novel stresses the idea that no one has any right to dominate the body of other people. This way, the body of a woman belongs to herself.

Aryanika (2016) came up with more findings that Annisa receives treatment in her family that is different from her brother. At the same time the education is also not allowed for women in this family. Further, in relation to the second marriage of her husband Samsuddin, Annisa also does not get justice and is treated unfairly. This unfair treatment is physical as well as psychological. This shows that this novel portrays the various forms of patriarchy and how these forms affect the lives of women characters.

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In this similar way Diastuiti (2014) studied Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* from the feminist perspective. The researcher came up with findings that this novel portrays the women characters as lacking the opportunity of self-actualization as well in the system of entailment. This system of entailment as given in this novel restricts women from possessing the ownership of the property. This system of ownership of properties is limited to only male heirs. This can be observed in the Bennet family who does not have a male heir; this is the reason that their property is entailed to Mr. Collins. At the same time there are almost no or very little opportunities for women to actualize their self-identities. The women characters are also not free to choose their spouse; in this regard they need the agreement of their families.

The researcher further noticed that the main character of this novel Elizabeth stands for the rights of women specifically for their sense of individualism, freedom of choice and right to equal opportunity. Elizabeth claims her sense of individuality and is rather quite frank in the expression of her feelings. At the same time, she also openly expresses her moral right to speak about herself. This way, according to the Diastuiti (2014) the character of Elizabeth tries to break the old chains of patriarchy and make her own identity and place in society.

Thakur (2014) made an analysis of Taslima Nasrin's novel *Lajja* from the feminist perspective. The main objective of this research study was to analyze the marginalization of women in the novel specifically in the context of religious minorities. In this regard the researcher came up with the understanding that this novel offers a host of points for the discussion in the context of feminist perspectives. This novel is full of such examples where the women characters are unfairly treated by the Muslim male fundamentalists as well as by the Hindu male members within the family and also in social life.

Furthermore, Thakur (2014) came up with the findings that in this novel the double marginalization of women character takes place. On the one hand they are marginalized generally on the basis of their gender that is considered to be weak. However, on the other hand, the "body of the woman which is marauded, tortured and abused simply because the narrow nationalistic and fanatic mindset" (p. 66). Furthermore, Thakur (2014) states that in this novel the notion of gender extremism and religious fundamentalism move together. This system of gender as well as the religious extremism subjects the women character such as Maya a brutal torture that causes her death. This way, *Lajja* portrays the female characters as the victims of not only the patriarchy but also of the religious fundamentalism.

Research Questions

How women characters are portrayed in the novel?

What forms of repression are used against the women characters in the novel?

Research Methodology

Research methodology is the systematic plan or "blueprint" used to conduct a study, ensuring that results are valid, reliable, and address specific research objectives (Ahmad et al., 2021; Rao et al., 2023; Khokhar et al., 2025). While research methods are the specific tools (e.g., surveys, interviews), research methodology provides the logical framework and justification for choosing those tools (Amin et al., 2023; Shaheen et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2025; Khokhar et al., 2025).

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1. Nature of Study

This is a qualitative research study that is considered to be a suitable way to study the literary texts. In this context Gay (2009) suggests that “qualitative research data is collected on many variables in a natural setting and in this study ideas and things are studied in their natural being and existence.”

2. Interpretative method

The qualitative study involves various methods, but this research analysis uses the interpretative method that is seen as a reliable method to find the new meanings in the text. In this context Barryman (2004) and Silverman (2005) favor the interpretative method because this method is quite useful for the interpretation of texts.

3. Data Collection

The data for this research study has been collected from the secondary sources using the books, research articles, journals and online sources.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

This novel portrays the repression of female characters in various perspectives. Apart from the system of patriarchy, there are other factors as well that persecute the women characters. First of all, this novel portrays a society that assigns the specific code of behavior to the women. It has laid down the certain strict norms that women should follow, and in return of adherence of those norms there is no special reward for them, but in fact those women will only become acceptable in the society.

“Massud had turned fifty-five years old the previous month, and Nargis was fifty-two. They had met and married when they were in their twenties, and as he would confess to her later, he hadn’t had the courage to cast a direct second glance towards her until a fortnight after the first. With her contemplative calm and beauty, she hadn’t seemed like a real person at all. Much to his embarrassment, he had almost lost consciousness the first time he had taken her into his embrace.” (Aslam, 2017)

This passage reveals how Nargis’s modesty—her “contemplative calm and beauty,” her almost unreal, untouchable quality—aligns with the novel’s patriarchal ideal of the “good woman.” Her stillness and inaccessibility make her desirable precisely because she performs the modesty expected of a wife: she is not forward, not seen freely, not known too easily. Massud’s near-loss of consciousness when he first embraces her suggests that even physical intimacy must be framed by reverence and restraint, not passion or agency on her part. Any woman who transgresses—by moving freely in the streets, by being visibly present in public, or by abandoning this performance of shyness—would risk becoming an outcast. Thus, female virtue is constructed as immobility and invisibility: a woman’s worth lies in her absence from public life, her body a guarded territory, and her marriage a space where even love is mediated by social control.

‘Well, most women don’t like to show themselves at the door or wander around the lane like . . .’ (Aslam, 2017)

The expectation that women avoid appearing at the door or wandering the lane reinforces the strict spatial boundaries of their lives: the home is their designated sphere, while the street belongs to men. This division is not merely about physical movement but about honor and visibility—a woman seen outside risks tarnishing both her own reputation and her family’s. Inside the house, her

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domain shrinks further to the kitchen and domestic spaces, where she performs endless, thankless labor. These repeated acts—cooking, cleaning, serving—become the only acceptable expression of her existence. By confining women to these interior rituals, the novel illustrates how patriarchal control operates through both prohibition and prescription. Thus, a woman's entire identity is reduced to her utility inside four walls, and any longing for the outside world becomes a silent, forbidden transgression.

“In the kitchen Nargis was preparing tea. She switched on the radio when it was time for the news.” (Aslam, 2017)

This placement of Nargis in the kitchen, with the radio as her only connection to the outside world, underscores how women receive public life only as distant, disembodied sound—never through direct experience.

Similarly, Helen's situation, with her father as the controlling male figure, shows that this domestic confinement transcends marital status. Whether wife or daughter, a woman's rightful place remains the kitchen, her access to news filtered through masculine authority.

“Helen was making breakfast for her father. The last of the orchard's almond trees spread its branches above the small house, and Lily was in the courtyard, repairing the light above the front wheel of the rickshaw he drove for a living. It was Nargis and Massud who had given him money some years ago to purchase the three-wheeled vehicle.” (Aslam, 2017)

This passage reinforces the rigid gender division within the household: Helen makes breakfast, Lily repairs the rickshaw's light—yet even this repair work, though practical, remains tied to the male-driven economy (the rickshaw her father drives for a living). The women's labor, whether domestic or mechanical, serves the man's daily functioning. Notably, it is Nargis and Massud who provided the money for the rickshaw, highlighting that even when women contribute financially, their primary identity remains tethered to domestic service. The man never appears in the kitchen, nor is he shown mending anything for the household. This absence speaks volumes: performing such tasks would diminish his honor, for honor in this patriarchal framework depends on maintaining clear boundaries between male and female spheres. The kitchen, the courtyard, the repair of objects used by men—all become extensions of women's invisible labor.

This intertwining of male honor with female behavior creates a dangerous logic of control. A woman's transgression—stepping outside without permission, speaking to an unrelated man, neglecting domestic duties—is read not as her individual act but as an assault on the family's honor. The male members, as custodians of that honor, are then socially authorized to discipline, torture, or even kill the transgressor to restore their reputations. This is repression at its most extreme: women's bodies become the terrain upon which honor is defended. Even seemingly benign acts, like wandering a lane or appearing at a door, carry life-and-death stakes. The novel thus exposes how “honor” functions not as a moral quality but as a weapon—one forged by patriarchal norms, wielded by men, and inscribed upon women through surveillance, confinement, and the constant threat of violence.

“Nargis became still as she listened, the newscaster telling her that a young woman had died at the hands of her brothers during the night, an hour or so after a minaret revealed her trysts with a lover.” (Aslam, 2017)

The newscaster's report chillingly illustrates how male honor operates as a lethal tool of repression: a young woman is killed by her brothers based on nothing more than a rumor—“an hour or so after a minaret revealed her trysts.” There is no trial, no proof, no defense. The mere suggestion of her

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transgression is enough to justify murder. This reveals that honor is not about actual behavior but about perception and reputation. The community's gaze, amplified through religious structures like the minaret's announcement, condemns her before any fact is established. Her brothers, acting as enforcers of patriarchal honor, become both judge and executioner. The novel thus exposes how honor killings are not aberrant acts of passion but systematic violence sanctioned by social norms.

Compounding this gender-based repression is religious marginalization. Women from minority groups face a double bind: they are devalued for being female and further dehumanized for belonging to a faith outside the dominant majority. Their bodies become sites of overlapping vulnerabilities—suspect both for their gender and their religious identity. Helen's character embodies this doubly marginalized existence. Living in Massud and Nargis's neighborhood offers her a rare space of relative safety and cross-communal solidarity. Had she been elsewhere, her fate might have mirrored that anonymous young woman's: a rumor, a minaret's call, and death at the hands of male relatives. The novel suggests that only through such exceptional, fragile alliances can women on the margins momentarily escape the twin prisons of patriarchy and religious exclusion.

“Helen was the daughter of the couple whom Nargis had employed as housekeepers. Lily and Grace were Christian and were both illiterate. And Helen – who was now nineteen years old – too would have grown up to be an uneducated servant in some Muslim household had Massud and Nargis not provided her with an alternative set of opportunities. They had paid for her education at Zamana's finest schools and she had been an assiduous and brilliant student until three years ago when her mother's life had come to a terrible end. 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. Eventually, however, the man was sentenced to life imprisonment – but the day before yesterday Nargis and Massud learned that Grace's killer had been released, as a reward for having memorised the entire Koran. He had served less than a year in prison.” (Aslam, 2017)

This passage exposes how religious extremism functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control, disproportionately victimizing women from minority communities. Helen, as a Christian woman in Muslim-majority Pakistan, faces compounded oppression: her mother Grace is murdered by a Muslim man, yet the legal system—indifferent at best, complicit at worst—barely registers a case. The killer's eventual release, rewarded for memorizing the Quran, reveals how religious piety is cynically weaponized to override justice. Memorization of scripture becomes a get-out-of-jail-free card, while a Christian woman's life holds so little value that her murderer serves less than a year. This is religious fundamentalism operating not as spirituality but as power: it protects the dominant group's men while rendering minority women's bodies disposable.

Similarly, the daughter of the religious clerk exemplifies how extremism traps even Muslim women within its logic. Her deceased husband's brother refuses to let her remarry, invoking religious justification—she must remain "pure" to meet her husband in Paradise. This denies her agency, companionship, and any chance of happiness in this life for the sake of an imagined afterlife. Her body and marital status are controlled not by her own wishes but by a male relative's interpretation of divine reward. In both cases, religion is deployed to justify female subjugation: minority women are left legally unprotected, while majority women are imprisoned by theological claims about purity. The novel thus demonstrates that whether through murder or marriage prohibition, religious extremism serves patriarchy by keeping women—all women—in a state of powerlessness.

“There was the cleric's widowed daughter in the house behind the mosque, her bread waking Massud in the predawn darkness. She had come to live with her father because her husband had

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been killed by a missile fired from an American drone, a year or so ago, in the faraway deserts of Waziristan.

His daughter was in her early thirties, and after her husband was killed, the cleric had made attempts to arrange another marriage for her, but according to her husband's brother and his militant companions, a holy martyr's widow could never remarry. She had to remain untainted, for her eventual reunion with her husband in Paradise. So her prospective husbands were warned off. One man who persisted was beaten so severely he had lost an eye. Nargis was sure that the cleric and his daughter lived in fear of her former brother-in-law, who had taken up residence at the mosque, to ensure her continued purity." (Aslam, 2017)

This passage reveals how religious extremism transforms a woman's grief into a prison. The cleric's widowed daughter—her husband killed by a drone strike—is denied the most basic human need: companionship. Her husband's brother and his militant companions invoke the language of martyrdom and paradise to control her body and future. She must remain "untainted," preserved like a relic for a celestial reunion that exists only in belief. This is not piety but possession. Her prospective husbands are violently warned off; one man loses an eye for persisting. The former brother-in-law literally takes up residence at the mosque to monitor her "purity," turning a place of worship into a surveillance post. Her father, though sympathetic, lives in fear alongside her—unable to protect his own daughter from zealots wielding religious authority. The novel thus exposes how extremism strips women of agency over marriage, sexuality, and future. Her fundamental right to live according to her own choice is annihilated. Unlike Helen, who escapes through education and cross-communal care, this widow has no such refuge. She is trapped between a dead husband's imagined claim and a living brother-in-law's violent enforcement—her body a battlefield where men's interpretations of God determine her fate.

Apart from the system of patriarchy and religion, the administrative policies of the government and its officials also act as agents of repression for the women characters. This can be observed in the following example.

"Nargis was feeling all sense of comportment slipping away from her, and the man exhaled impatiently. There was a new firmness in the voice when he did speak again:

'You have to publicly forgive him. You have to declare that you want him to be free.'

Nargis tried to place her thoughts elsewhere, on to a more bearable reality. She could think of nothing.

'You are the dead man's next of kin, so the forgiveness has to come from you. The last blood relative was a sister, but she left Pakistan and is now deceased.'" (Aslam, 2017)

Nargis is forced and, at the same time, threatened by the government official to forgive the killer of her husband, Massud. This example shows that the government and its officials also act as repressive tools for the women characters in the novel.

The official's language is devoid of empathy, framed instead as legal necessity—"You have to publicly forgive him. You have to declare that you want him to be free." By invoking Nargis's status as "the dead man's next of kin," the state weaponizes her familial role against her, demanding not justice but public absolution. Her emotional collapse ("all sense of comportment slipping away") is met with impatience, revealing how administrative procedure dismisses female trauma. Moreover, the mention of the deceased sister who "left Pakistan" implies that escape or death are the only exits from such coercion. Nargis is trapped not only by patriarchal custom but by a

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bureaucratic system that exploits her grief to serve its own ends—erasing her autonomy while forcing her voice into a script of forgiveness that benefits the state, not her.

Findings

This research study come up with the findings that The Golden Legend portrays a society that sets some specific and strict norms for the women to follow. Any transgression from those norms mainly causes ostracism from the social system. In the regard this novel portrays the norms such as modesty or restricting one's movement to the house for the women characters. Furthermore, the women characters are mainly assigned the domestic role. They are mainly given the kitchen responsibility and there seems almost no role of female characters in life of Zamana (an imaginary city in the novel). Both Helen and Nargis are mainly seen to be doing the domestic chores and it seems that this domestic life becomes their identity.

Furthermore, like Thakur's (2014) study, this novel also portrays the double marginalization of women characters. On the one hand they are marginalized on the basis of their gender at the hands of patriarchal males of the family and outside. However, the on the hands those women characters that are non-Muslims such as Helen, Nargis face more marginalization because they belong to the minority group. In this regard, this novel portrays the women characters as the victims of not only patriarchy but also the religious fundamentalism.

At the same time the government policies and its officials also act as the agents of repression for the women characters.

In this regard, this novel portrays the system of patriarchy, religious biasness and extremism and government policies and officials as the various forms used for the repression of women.

Conclusion

This research study comes to the conclusion that the feminist perspective in the novels provides theoretically strong ways to study the portrayal of women characters in the novels and short stories. This feminist perspective helps to highlight all ways that are used to repress the women and how far women are able to resist all those forms of repression. Further, this method exposes the covert strategies of patriarchy to keep its position stable by limiting the freedom of women and by denying them their fundamental rights. In this quest of stability, the system of patriarchy also makes use of religious fundamentalism as well as the general policies of the government that also go in the favor of men.

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