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Explicating Violence and Suffering in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

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Abstract

Afghanistan has been plagued by conflict for nearly four decades now. It has always been women and children who have suffered as a result of this war and its situation. Women in Afghanistan have been enduring adversity and navigating an insurmountable challenge in order to shape their destinies and establish a place for themselves in society. *The Pearl that Broke Its Shell*, the debut novel by Afghan-American author Nadia Hashimi, is a poignant tale of the lives of women who are kept silent in patriarchal societies such as Afghanistan. In her writings, she depicts the struggle and suffering of female characters. Women in Afghanistan are oppressed by a patriarchal system, which is reflected in the novel, and defines a woman's place in the face of violence both within and outside the home. The paper would explore the predicament of women in Afghan society. It will also examine how Afghan patriarchal society oppresses women and how this has wreaked havoc on the status of women in Afghan society.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Trauma, Violence, Oppression, Identity Crisis

INTRODUCTION

Nadia Hashimi is an Afghan-American writer who made her debut in 2014 with the publication of the novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. Powerlessness, fate, and the yearning to have a voice in one's own destiny are explored in this heartbreaking story that combines the cultural flavour and emotional relevance of Khaled Hosseini's and Jhumpa Lahiri's writings with a contemporary twist. A gripping story of two young Afghan women who, separated by a century, disguise themselves as males in order to survive in a patriarchal society. Throughout the novel, the plot shifts from Rahima's and Shekiba's points of view, weaving them together to create a fascinating and terrifying tale. It is superbly written, with a riveting plot and realistically dynamic characters to keep you turning the pages of the novel. These are stories about women who live in a patriarchal culture that is governed

by men. Every action they take must be meticulously planned and executed with extreme caution, as other women zealously preserve their positions of power.

There are significant differences between countries in terms of the status of women in society and the community. Female empowerment has consistently improved in certain countries, whilst it has decreased in others, and in some circumstances, has remained stable. Women in Afghanistan, for example, must battle for their own lives in order to survive. Most women in society are marginalised in terms of culture and tradition. Patriarchal societies have evolved societal standards that require men to be the leaders and women to follow and behave in a subordinate manner to the men in their communities. According to Simon de Beauvoir, "One is not born as a woman; one is transformed into a woman". In her argument, she asserts unequivocally that social and cultural constructions influence women's identities. Her misery and oppression are directly related to culture. When it comes to a woman's life, social and cultural customs are quite essential. Deborah Cameron, in her book *The Feminist Critique of Language* explores how social taboos and limits prevent women from expressing themselves freely and effectively. She makes the following observation:

Ever where it seems that women could speak if they chose, the conditions imposed on their lives by society may make this a difficult or dangerous choice. Silence can also mean censoring yourself for fear of being ridiculed, attacked or ignored. (4)

Nadia Hashimi is one of the number of authors who have written on the plight of women. *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* highlights the concerns about a woman's fate of being married off by her father to a guy who would mistreat her, as well as her family's rejection of her if she has a physical defect. Moreover, it raises the question of whether it is an Afghan woman's fate to be swept away by life's winds into any situation or destiny.

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The novel follows the story of two Afghan ladies who grew up hundred years apart. It is Rahima, the story's heroine, who is transformed into an Afghan bacha-posh in contemporary Afghanistan. Rahima's tale is intertwined with the story of Shekiba, Rahima's great-great grandmother. Rahima, like many other Afghan women, was born with a disease that is exclusive to women. Her mother decides to disguise her as a boy in order to be able to work outside the home as well. Bacha Posh is an ancient ritual that encourages girls to be treated as if they were boys before they marry their respective partners. Rahima's independence will only last for a short period of time, as her father will marry her to a wealthy businessman who is almost as old as her father. It was the exorbitant bride price that attracted and seduced Rahima's father, who was also an opium addict at the time. Bacha Posh also spares the family from the societal stigma associated with not having any male children, which they would otherwise face.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is societal pressure for families to have a son to carry on the family name and to inherit the father's property. In the absence of a son, families may dress one of their daughters as a male, with some adhering to the belief that having a bacha posh will make it more likely for a mother to give birth to a son in a subsequent pregnancy. ("Bacha Posh", The Guardian.)

By telling the story of Afghan people through the main characters Rahima and her great great grandmother Shekiba, Nadia Hashimi conveys a timeless message that hasn't changed for decades. The title of the novel seemed to be apt for the protagonist, who is struggling to overcome the challenges of everyday life. She tries valiantly to break free from the suffocating shell and emerge as a pearl from its confines. After cursing herself for being a girl on countless occasions, her mother has always reassured her by that she is as precious as pearl is to the world. It is only now that Rahima comes to terms with the fact that she is important, like a pearl, and that she should not take life for granted. She has a strong attitude and spirit that helped her discover a safe refuge from her husband, unlike other women who give up thinking that it is their Naseeb (destiny). In an interview, Hashimi asserts:

I see Rahima and Shekiba as every woman. When I read Rumi's lines, the sea is Rahima's inner voice, expansive and powerful, beckoning her to break free and realize her potential. We all need to mind that voice that lives within, that tells us to want better for ourselves, to

not throw up our hands in defeat. (Interview, July 29, 2014)

Rahima is the protagonist of the novel and the primary storyteller. She represents the narrative of thousands of repressed female voices who have been afflicted by "naseeb" and have been forced to bury their dreams and aspirations. This is the story of two women who live in two very different contexts: one on the verge of modernity, and the other on the verge of collapsing under the weight of the battle between the Taliban and Western powers, respectively. Rahima and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba confront similar challenges as living in a patriarchal culture where women's obligations are limited to bearing sons and doing housekeeping. A fusion of the two stories has been created, with the current melting into the past. Rahima has the misfortune of being the family's third daughter, which is a difficult burden to bear. A social and economic crisis is unfolding in Afghanistan as a result of a lack of boys. Due to her inability to attend school and her inability to leave her home without the assistance of a male accomplice, Rahima has been restricted to her home for the most of her life. She is one of five sisters who, with the support of their aunt Shaima, have the guts to question their own identities and to question the patriarchal code in which they are raised. Although Rahima is outspoken, the other sisters are more reserved, yet they all want to be free of the oppressive tyranny that they have been subjected to. Her father is an opium addict who doesn't do any work, if any at all. He maintains his faith in the disenchanting warfare that he has been engaged in with the local tribal warlord Abdul Khaliq for the past many years. In the presence of Rahima's adored aunt Shaima, Rahima's mother is reminded of an ancient ritual known as "bacha posh" which includes treating a young girl as if she were a boy in families where there are no male children. Despite the fact that her hair is short and her clothing is childlike, she is permitted to work, play, and attend school outside of the family complex. Her true identity is concealed behind boyish clothing as a result of this circumstance. She morphs into Rahim, a boy who can run to the store without worrying about the boys harassing him, and who could play games. Rahima is known as Rahim to everyone between the age of nine to thirteen, even those in her own immediate family.

Women's issues are addressed by Nadia Hashimi through the character of Rahima, like the issues that most

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Afghan women have been dealing with, such as the right to education for girls, the right to live without being viewed as indecent. Although it may seem ironic, similar questions were raised in Shekiba's life in the past. There has been little change in Afghan society and the attitudes it has engendered; child brides like Rahima continue to exist, and women's roles limited to wifehood and motherhood still predominate in the face of adversity. The concept of bride price is pushed into this community until the girls are sold off in marriage. The daughters are offered in marriage to Abdul Khaliq and his cousins when they have been able to pay a total of one million Afghanis to the family. No consideration is given to the age of the grooms when the girls are married. While Rahima seems to be a "bacha-posh" her identity stays unchanged. She is still a woman whose character is prescribed and conditioned by the patriarchal order, in which she is expected to first obey her father's bidding and then her husband's thereafter. Even after her marriage, Rahima's freedom to leave the house was restricted:

If you think you will see your sisters, though, don't get your hopes up. Neither of them brings their wives when they come by. The women of this family don't travel much. Get used to these walls. They're going to be all what you see. (165)

Khala Shaima narrates the story of Shekiba, their great-great-grandmother, who lived in the early 1900s and is remembered by her grandchildren. After Rahima's wedding, she pays her a visit and expresses her wish for her to have a happier and wealthier future. She describes Shekiba's story and seeks to take a lesson from it, stating that Shekiba somehow managed to escape from a far worse naseeb. Shekiba's face was splashed with hot oil when she was a youngster, and her appearance was horribly deformed as a result of a lack of medical attention. She manages to survive, but at the expense of "daughter with a burned scar". Following her father's

death, she is taken in by her father's mother to live with her and serve as a slave in their household.

CONCLUSION

The novel views patriarchy as the main cause of women's subjugation, highlighting the importance of subverting society's patriarchal structure, which enables men to move freely, set rules and standards, and alienate women within the four walls of home. The protagonists are subjected to a sequence of calamities despite the fact that they are still living in a complicated Afghan society. The novel is mostly concerned with the challenges of Afghan women. The characters Rahima and Shekiba, created by Hashimi, are a pair of strong female characters that are presented with seemingly insurmountable hurdles in their life. These two courageous Afghan women fought to break free from their shackles and alter the direction of their life. Other Afghan women in their culture and circumstances may have succumbed to powerful forces, but these two courageous Afghan women fought valiantly to break free from the shackles and changed the direction of their lives.

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