



QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN AFGHAN WOMEN ILLUSTRATED BY NADIA HASHIMI IN  
“THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL”

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ABSTRACT

Afghanistan, an Islamic country has, always been counted as the most barbaric country for women to live in. Under decades of war, the Taliban regime has been yielding the most oppressive lives for Afghan women. Purdah custom, chador, banned excursions, escorting of men, forced polygamy, and gender segregation has become the staunch and hardcore rules for women of Afghanistan only. Islamic manifested Customs and traditions which are undoubtedly cradled by centuries-old patriarchy are the sole root cause of damaging the integrity of women even in the contemporary world of Afghanistan. Demolishing the rudimentary rights of women in Afghanistan has made women weak, marginalized and subjugated to men's power. This research paper through the novel “The Pearl That Broke Its Shell” tries to reflect the insuperable and inapposite patrilineal society which probes us to think about the critical condition of Afghan women. The analysis focuses on the female characters such as Rahima, Shekiba, Zamarud and Khala Shaima who seek solutions to their unfavourable conditions and emerged as strong women. This paper also shows how far, strong self-consciousness and determination become the primary stride for every woman to get rid of male domination and to proceed in their life, as well as in society. Through this literally evidence, radical feminism reveals ongoing efforts of women to rescue their identities and their rights which mean the lack of opportunity and resources for women are still resonating in society.

Keywords: Taliban, Feminism, Patriarchy, Dominance, Bacha Posh, Oppression, marginalization.

Feminism has continuously been a most evoking and reckoning voice since the early twentieth century. Despite spreading awareness concerning women's rights around the globe, the news of sizeable crimes, discrimination, marginalized women, meek voices, and loss of identity of girls looks endless these days. Designed social structure never permits a woman to become a revolutionary voice against them. Afghanistan is considered one of the foremost savages countries for women to live in. Geographically Afghanistan is within the middle of Asia finite by Iran to the west, Pakistan to the south, China to the far northeast, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. An inland landlocked mountainous country, Afghanistan has faced one of the worst human tragedies of modern times. Having brooked the violence, treachery, and discrimination during Afghanistan's civil war under the Taliban (1996-2001) and the U.S.-led invasions impacted severely on women. The history of Afghanistan has been tumultuous, dissatisfactory, violent, and disappointing, particularly once it involves women's right. The discriminatory regime of the Taliban has questioned the existence of women. They place restrictions as

exhausting boundaries denying women's legitimacy. They are drawn out from the schools, and offices, illegal excursions without men escorting them, and are stripped off their rudimentary rights even. According to one spokesman of the Taliban who claimed it "The face of a woman is a source of corruption for men".

After 1990, when the Taliban regime was eradicated, the Islamic republic government genuinely endeavored to change the women's condition however the Taliban regime somewhere had provoked the men's subdued will to oppress and subjugate women that never got modified. Again in the era of Mujahedeen, the government issued an order to state functionaries and government agencies to dismiss all women in their employ, though the decree was never applied. Taliban mentioned that women are only permitted to study Qur'an.

Qur'an which is an egalitarian and anti-patriarchal, in some matters gives the authority to men on top of women. According to verse 34, mentioned in the fourth chapter of Qur'an adjudges the role of husband as a preserver and sustainer of his married woman's life and the way he ought to manage the infidelity. Some Islamic feminist cluster interprets this verse as the justification of domestic violence (though the translation of the verse varies). To perceive the Qur'an exegesis as an interpretation one should understand the historical context of Qur'an. However, Muslim male especially staunch believer of Islam definitely have misinterpreted Qur'an exegesis that might satisfy their appetite of dominance, that's why men take this as their basic right to rule over women. The masquerade patriarchal society usually puts women in second place. They suffer force, domestic violence, abuse, corruption etc. and if women attempt to disencumber themselves from such commotions, they invariably face social stigma, social isolation and forced expulsion from their families. Henceforth, women have started a basic cognitive process that it is their destiny which holds everything related to their lives; from daily insults to violence done on a large scale. Marry Wollstonecraft, an English writer of the twentieth century in her work "A Vindication of The Rights of Women" 1792 states about a woman that "She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever dismissing reasons he chooses to be amused".

Nadia Hashimi's diligent study of Afghanistan's socio-cultural aspects gives a bit indication of her belongingness, whereas her intentions reflect to bring a revolution in Afghan patrilineal customs via her writings. "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" (2014) illuminates the plight of marginalized women in Afghan, who are mere puppets of the male-oriented society. This novel is not simply a comprehensive study of the victimization of Afghan women, but additionally provides an intimate cross-check of cultures and society treat a woman and how religion is being misused for personal advantages. The story of the novel, "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" oscillates back and forth, handling the leading characters Shekiba and Rahima. Though Shekiba and Rahima live a century apart, but are tied by legacy. It is a story that transports you to the state of "Dysphoria" (a state of unease) where the poor souls of Afghan women continuously have the probing for a higher life and self-consciousness.

As the novel opens, we tend to see the protagonist Rahima, who is depicted as a subservient women. Rahima is a great-great-granddaughter of Bibi Shekiba, another plot in this specific novel. Though the stories are being separated by hundreds of centuries, or we can say Rahima's story is the modernized version of Bibi Shekiba. Rahima is a nine years old girl who is the third child in a girl-filled family. Customarily in Afghan having a son always been a matter of pride however the birth of a girl is rarely welcomed and often said to be a curse or a punishment.

"Why do we have a house full of girls, not one, not two, but five of them". In Afghanistan Bacha Posh is a legend that walking under a rainbow changes girls into boys and boys into girls. Rahima's mother begins to dress her as a boy to give her a leg of freedom. As a Bacha Posh, she has the liberty to work on the market, play football and go to school and above all she becomes the dear to her father. But as soon as Rahima hits the stage of pubescence she was again brought back to the girl and sold out as an artifact to Abdul Khaliq at the cost of bride price by her opium-addicted father. The Bride Price which is an adopted custom in Afghanistan is a kind of reasonable compensation given by the groom to the girl's family. Nowadays it has become a euphemism or locution, calling bride price a tradition in many countries. Rahima was forced into polygamy, where she becomes the fourth wife of warlord Abdul Khaliq. The journey of Rahima from being a bacha posh is nothing but total

devastation. Here she is merely expected to live for her husband and is taken account nothing quite a maid who is certain to all the household chores. The patriarchal system makes the man; father, husband, or a son the sole representative of everything. He has complete control of things, and the ability to do, including physical abuse, torture, murder etc. As Rahima puts it:

"Men can do whatever they want with women".

Another storyline is of Bibi Shekiba the great-great-grandmother of Rahima. Shekiba is a contemporary girl in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Shekiba-e-shola was an orphan by the epidemic of Cholera, and she transmuted herself into a boy, but it was not endured by her uncles -aunts, grandmother, and society.

"A girl by herself! What dishonor this could bring to their family".

Bibi Shekiba was handed over to Azizullah as a maid just to pay her debt by her uncles. And from Azizullah house she was given as a guard of the Harem of king Habibullah where Shekiba becomes Shekib, a manly figure." Shekiba-a gift. This is the problem with gifts, they are always given away".

Back in the early century, the rulers of Afghanistan customarily had a 'Harem' of four official wives additionally as an outsized range of unofficial wives for the tribal marriage diplomacy. In the novel Bibi Shekiba was assigned to guard of King Habibullah's harem. The main purpose of having harem in the palace is just to please the King. Once when one of harem's women Benafsha is caught, having an affair with some other man, she was sentenced to death by lapidating. As the king is the supreme of monarch, no one questions his actions. The title of the novel "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" is quite relevant to both the characters Rahima and Shekiba who are toiling hard to break out of their shell to find their identity amid such adversities. Rahima and Shekiba do not retaliate against the strict norms of patriarchy until they realize the vision of freedom is the core solution to their dilemma. Afghanistan is a country with a vast history of feudalism, war, monarchy foreign invasion, rigid tradition, religion, etc. The Afghan men implement a patricentric system in society and practice it in their homes and domestic structure. Girls are tutored by their mother in their childhood itself that they are obligated to fulfill men's desires. In the essay "The Vindication of Rights of Women" 1792 Marry Wollstonecraft says:

"Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, the softness of temper 'outward' obedience and scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of property, will obtain for then the protection of man."

The thirteen years old girl Rahima was told, it is her Naseeb, and Shekiba was told she is equivalent to a gift. Naseeb plays a very crucial role in the lives of these two women. In western culture destiny stands out as a quality, whereas in Afghan folk tend to relate Naseeb to misfortune, simply to justify the cruel and heinous crimes done against women for the gratification of men's impulses.

"What I am supposed to do? Clearly, this is what Allah has chosen as their naseeb -oh, the hell with naseeb! Naseeb is what people blame for everything they can't fix"(Hashimi, 139)

The above quote depicts the incapacitated feeling of Rahima's mother towards her three daughters who are just married away and she leaves her all worries in Allah's hand and prays that he will take care of her daughters. Khala Shaima is the only striking character in the novel who doesn't believe in Naseeb. She is such a dauntless woman who stands against wrong doing and always expressed her resistance against societal codes which impaired women. Khala Shaima incorporates a distinctive and unique perspective of life where she has fed up with a spineless patricentric society. She is so fearless that she corrects even Mullah three times in a room choked with men when he was reciting incorrect Verses of the Qur'an.

In the novel, Khala Shaima is the sole propulsion behind the Rahima's emancipation. Rahima has mentioned that it is Khala Shaima who remodeled her by narrating Bibi Shekiba's story. Throughout the novel, we see Khala Shaima in the novel that supports and emphasizes girls' education .In the very beginning of the novel she was the one who raised her voice when Rahima and her sisters were withdrawn from school. Education becomes very essential weapon for every woman to urge the true essence of their life. Education is the only key to remove the social stigma, elimination of social evils, specially breaking of the shackles of patriarchy which

oppresses them. Being a bacha posh Rahima was able to study a bit further, she knows how to write and read and consequently she becomes the assistant of Badriya in Parliament, Kabul.

In Kabul Rahima inquisitiveness leads her to learn computer by Ms. Franklin. She got to see the inner workings of parliament and anticipated how the decision made by a few impacted many. Rahima's these credentials and enlightenment made Rahima to envisage her freedom. Apart from these two leading characters, Rahima and Shekiba, we have other minor characters too who also struggle hard to make their life meaningful to some extent. Rahima's mother, who was heartbroken and depressed after the marriage of her three daughters and finally find relief in opium. Rahima's younger sister Parwin who had a deformed body finds escape from domestic violence by setting herself on fire. Zamarud who stands boldly against the corruption in parliament becomes the prey of social rage. Family honor and respect for elders and cultural values have great importance to Afghan men. But they easily violate their laws, traditions, and values. Their traditions and cultural values are just mere lies and justifications for their wrong things. There is not any place where a woman is a free-form patriarchal claw. It has become difficult for women to question the status quo because whenever women try to question they are forced to remain silenced. When Rahima's mother transforms her into a bacha posh, it seems acceptable for society but not for monarchs. Abdul Khaliq marries Rahima to make her realize that she is a woman and an object and not more than this. On the other hand, when Shekiba tries to raise her voice for her Property right she is abused and told that it is not a woman's right to question anything in Afghan society. "Girls, you know nothing of tradition".

Through the story of Rahima, we get the intuition that many Afghan girls are treated as mere objects to carry descendants (only males). Rahima condoned domestic violence without any objection. No law provides women with a hiding place and they have no room of their own. Rahima was a sanguine person to take advantage of her opportunity to leave the house of her husband and seek shelter in Kabul.

Rahima was brutally bitten, abused, and blamed for the death of her only child by her husband. Men are so apprehensive that even the thought of losing a male child haunts them. Having a male child is directly compared to social status and pride. So, when Abdullah lost his son, he was hit by the social stigma, and felt that he lost his social standing. As a result he resorts to physical violence on Rahima to maintain his dominance. Rahima blames herself; she might have taken her son along with her in Kabul and curses herself for not caring for him properly as a mother.

"I was a little girl and then I wasn't. I was a bacha posh and then I wasn't. I was a daughter and then I wasn't. I was a mother and then I wasn't".

Rahima was fascinated by the lives of women in Kabul and wondered how female politicians could become so flagrant and glaring the best example of such women brought up by Nadia Hashimi are Hamida, Sufia, and Ms. Franklin. Such women also inspired Rahima to break the manacles of restrictions. Hashimi in "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" also explains the psyche of Afghan culture which is being driven by men just to fulfill their choices. When we read the novel it reminds us that it was mainly because Rahima and Shekiba were able to give birth to sons, then only they were able to modify their lives a little bit. If Bibi Shekiba had given birth to a daughter, she would have been thrown out by Asif, who just married her because she told him that every woman in her family conceived boys. Last, Shekiba meets the Queen Soraya who was an actual figure in Afghanistan's history at the sort of taken liberty with character but the queen Soraya indeed wanted to champion a new age for Afghan women.

Last, the ending of novel creates an optimistic air. This work by Nadia Hashimi is indeed a pearl in the literary world. No doubt throughout the novel Virgo women Rahima and Shekiba become the epitome of bravery for other women residing in Afghanistan against the cruel demon of patriarchy. In this novel Nadia Hashimi has created spirited women in Rahima and Shekiba who face invincible challenge in their lives and stood against their insurmountable conditions. This novel "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" exhibits feminist outlook that illustrates them as the calamity of their own patriarchal society and social conventions and shows the wrestling of Afghan women to emerge from circumstances that forbidden them. Via this novel, Hashimi tries to focus on terribly major issues in Afghanistan culture, believing that sooner or later it may bring a revolutionary change in

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the attitude of the people. Contemporary world of Afghanistan under Taliban regime is still weaving hardships for women to live there. Where European countries are giving full fledged freedom and equality to women, survival of Afghan women has become really extremely tough. But the women who are active member of the society and well acquainted with their subalternity and marginalization do their best to break the shell of the conservative society. Today many organizations are working on the issues of women and to improve the status quo. Education ,creative skills, active participation of women are the only medium through which women can show that they are not the mere puppet or mouthpiece of men but they can speak and stand for their own empowerment.

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