



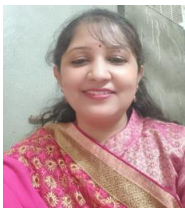
## Nadiya Hashimi's The Pearl That Broke Its Shell: A Searing Tale of Cracked Identities and Intergenerational Trauma of Afghan Women in the Maelstrom of Gender Dynamics

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### Abstract

Since the dawn of civilization, a perpetual struggle for equality and freedom has raged on among societies worldwide. One noteworthy aspect of this enduring battle is the commendable efforts made by numerous countries across Europe and Asia to enshrine principles of liberty and equality within their constitutions, particularly in regard to the rights of women. Over time, these nations have adapted and refined their laws and societal norms to better reflect the evolving needs and aspirations of their female citizens. However, amidst the progress and evolution seen in various parts of the world, Afghanistan stands as a poignant reminder of a nation where the journey towards gender equality and empowerment is still fraught with challenges. Attaining equal rights between the sexes – man and woman, has become a global phenomenon. Women across the world are chained under the patriarchal society and are still treated as the “weaker sex”. They struggle to accomplish their target of achieving women’s rights, respect, and proper recognition. This is because women’s identity has been exploited and abused, which made them initiate and involved in a movement calling for women’s liberation. The lives of women around the world are incredibly diverse, with significant variations in right and opportunities from one country to another. While all women inhabit the same planet, they face vastly different challenges and experiences. The concern of the study is to compare the lives of Afghan women to those in other Muslim majority countries and highlights their dire circumstances in the era of globalization, where there is no hope for betterment. The life of women in Afghanistan is filled with

battles, restrictions, and social discrimination. She is the object in the hands of men and therefore she cannot visualize her identity without the help of a man. Due to this, women had to battle each day for their very existence. Islamic Government imposed brutal laws against women and they were restricted even to laugh or talk loudly. Even though women in the twenty-first century started celebrating their freedom and empowerment, women in Afghan society are still fighting to attain their basic freedom, name, and education. They were neither treated as humans nor as living beings. Demolishing the rudimentary rights of women in Afghanistan has made women weak, marginalized, and subjugated to men's power. Afghanistan has been plagued by conflict for nearly four decades now. 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 have become the staunch and hardcore rules for women of Afghanistan only. It has always been women and children who have suffered as a result of this war and its situation. It defines women's place in the face of violence both within and outside the home. Women in Afghanistan have been enduring adversity and navigating an insurmountable challenge to shape their destinies and establish a place for themselves in society. The paper will explore and examine the tumultuous predicament of women how Afghan patriarchal society oppresses women and how this has wreaked havoc on the status of women in Afghan society.

KEYWORDS: *Animosity, gender subalternity, patriarchy, marginalization, gender politics*

## INTRODUCTION

"Afghanistan is a land of widows and widowers, orphans and the missing. Missing a right leg, a left hand, a child, or a mother. Everyone was missing something, as if a black hole had opened in the center of the country, sucking in bits and pieces of everyone into its hard belly. Somewhere under our khaki earth is everything we've ever lost." -- Nadiya Hashimi

To quote **Mahatma Gandhi**: "*Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacity*". In spite of Women in Western literature have often been depicted as submissive, illiterate, vulnerable, and having no identity at all. For ages, gender has always remained an alarming concern for patriarchal power discourse and thereby has been omitted from securing an important place of discussion

in parity to the world's economic, political social, and cultural crisis. Women are disproportionately affected by violence the roots of which can be linked to distorted local traditions and customs and exacerbated by lack of effective governance and the rule of law. Afghanistan continues to be one of the most insecure places in the world for women. The position of women in Afghanistan has traditionally been inferior to that of men. This position has varied according to age, socio-cultural norms, and ethnicity. Afghan women are the slaves of their father, husband, father-in-law, and elder brother. Violence against women in Afghanistan appears in many shapes and forms. These include severe beating, forced and underage marriage, self-immolation, rape, exchange of girls to end animosities, rape, murder, taking away women's property or preventing women from receiving inheritance, and many more. The oppression of women in

the society is happened mostly in the name of culture and tradition. *"When men are oppressed, it's a tragedy. When women are oppressed, it's tradition"* The concept and definition of women have been a crucial area of focus since time immemorial in numerous regions. The patriarchal societies have made some cultural norms in which males can be the head and women have to obey them and act as subordinate to men. **Simon de Beauvoir** stated that *"One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"*. (web) By her statement, she vividly says that social and cultural constructions make women. It is the culture that makes her suffer and it suppresses her. A country like Afghanistan is the worst place for a woman to survive because of its patriarchal culture. Though the government has given equal rights to both genders, the Taliban laws deny women their rights. They are drawn out from the schools, and offices, illegal excursions without men escorting them, and are stripped of their rudimentary rights even. Taliban laws never allow Afghan women to get an education, walk alone in the streets without a male escort, or say no to their parents and husbands. The soldiers and warlords harass women and girls, they rape and tantalize them and treat the girls as an object which is granted to them.

Nadiya 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 own destiny are explored in this heartbreaking story that combines the cultural relish and emotional relevance of Khaled Hosseini's and Jhumpa Lahiri's writings with a contemporary twist. "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" is a gripping story of two young Afghan women who, separated by a century, disguise themselves as males under the tradition of 'bacha posh' 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. The novel illuminates the plight of marginalized women in Afghanistan, who are mere puppets of the male-oriented society. This novel is not simply an ambient study of the victimization of Afghan women but additionally provides an intimate cross-check of how cultures and society treat a woman and how religion is being misused for personal advantages. Khaled Hosseini remarks: *"Nadiya Hashimi has written, first and foremost, a tender and beautiful family story. Her always engaging multigenerational tale is a portrait of Afghanistan in all of its perplexing, enigmatic glory, and a mirror into the still ongoing struggles of Afghan women"*.

The novel "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" beautifully captures the struggle of its characters to break free from patrilineal norms and conservative traditions. The protagonist, Rahima, bravely embraces the custom of bacha posh, defying societal expectations and choosing to live according to her own desires. In doing so, she symbolically becomes the pearl that breaks its shell, liberating herself from the constraints imposed by society. The theme of gender subalternity, a longstanding issue in society, is skillfully explored in the novel. Women have historically been marginalized and subjugated to men, considered as the "Other." *"Man is the subject and absolute but woman is the other"*. (De Beauvoir, 1988, p. 13) The author deftly weaves a narrative that highlights the challenges faced by Afghan women in a male-dominated society, portraying their struggles for survival amidst tyranny, oppression, and domestic violence. Through the parallel stories of Shekiba and Rahima, separated by time but connected by shared trauma and destiny, the novel delves into the turbulent political landscape of Afghanistan. It sheds light on significant historical events such as the Soviet and American invasions, illustrating the profound impact on the lives of Afghan women. The narrative evokes a sense of "dysphoria," a state of unease, as Afghan women yearn for a better life and self-awareness

in the face of adversity. The author vividly portrays the harsh realities of women's lives in Afghanistan, from dehumanization to the stripping of their rights under oppressive regimes like Taliban. Overall, "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" serves as a poignant exploration of resilience, sisterhood, and the enduring spirit of Afghan women in the face of adversity and injustice. It revolves around the life journey of two Afghan families, focusing on the personal iterations of the two female protagonists; Rahima and Shekiba. The tales of both are separated by almost a century but the graph of their experiences almost runs parallel with a politically chaotic backdrop of the Islamic extremist group; The Taliban. For polar reasons and circumstances, Rahima and Shekiba take on male roles, disguised as men; Shekiba is a guard to the female-only harem of the king, and Rahima is a son to fulfill the duties of the family and also as a security measure. Bibi Shekiba was handed over to Azizullah as a maid to settle her uncle's debt. Later, she was given as a guard in the harem of King Habibullah, where she transformed into Shekib, a masculine figure. **"Shekiba-a-gift. This is the problem with the gifts, Madar-Jan. They are always given away"**. Hashimi's novel is a sweltering narration of powerlessness, torture, uncomfortable transitions, marital rape, and the abuse of women, drenched with the perspiration of dreams eyeing the luxury of freedom and choice, which constructs the spine of the plot. The combination of cultural marginalization and emotional sonority to create an impactful and unique storytelling process compels the readers to think deeply about these disturbing realities. As the novel unfolds, we are introduced to the protagonist Rahima, depicted as a subservient woman in a society that values sons over daughters. Rahima's journey mirrors that of her great-great-grandmother, Bibi Shekiba, despite being separated by centuries. Rahima defies societal norms by becoming a Bacha Posh, a practice where girls are dressed as boys for freedom, only to be married off at a young age to a powerful warlord, Abdul Khaliq. The

concept of Bacha Posh symbolizes Rahima's temporary liberation as she enjoys the privileges of being seen as a boy, such as working in the market, playing sports, and going to school. However, her return to girlhood marks the loss of her agency, as she is forced into marriage and polygamy, becoming the fourth wife of Abdul Khaliq. Rahima's realization that **"Men can do whatever they want with women"** echoes the patriarchal control and oppression prevalent in Afghan society. Parallel to Rahima's story is that of Bibi Shekiba, who transforms herself into a man, Shekib, to survive in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Shekiba's fate as a maid and later a guard in King Habibullah's harem exemplifies the strict gender roles and power dynamics in Afghan society. The harem serves as a tool for pleasing the king, with no repercussions for his actions, even as one of its members faces a brutal death sentence. Rahima's story is a modernized version of Shekiba's, who lived in a different era. Shekiba was also forced into a life of servitude and abuse, but she managed to find a way to break free and protect the King's mistresses in the royal palace. Both Rahima and Shekiba face similar challenges, including domestic violence, polygamy, and the expectation to obey their husbands and fathers. They both are subject to the societal norms that restrict women's roles and opportunities. The novel highlights the struggles of Afghan women in a society where men hold complete control. The patriarchal system makes men the sole representatives of everything, and they use religion as an excuse to oppress women. Women are expected to obey their fathers, husbands, and sons, and their primary role is to perform domestic chores and give birth to sons to dignify their men's name and status. In her 1792 essay "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman", Mary Wollstonecraft argues that from a young age, girls are taught by their mothers to be meek, obedient, submissive and focused on superficial accomplishments in order to attract men. Wollstonecraft states:

*"Women are told from their infancy, and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man." She argues this "artificial weakness" leads women to tyrannize and use cunning to gain power over men". (Wollstonecraft.1792)*

Wollstonecraft asserts that without this damaging ideology, women could become true companions to their husbands and make valuable contributions to society. The title of the novel, "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell," aptly reflects the struggle of both Rahima and Shekiba to break free from societal constraints and find their identities. They navigate a society dominated by feudalism, patriarchy, rigid traditions, and religious norms that oppress women and restrict their freedoms. *"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"*. Despite being told that their fates are predetermined (Naseeb), Rahima and Shekiba ultimately challenge these beliefs and seek autonomy and self-determination. Through the characters of Rahima, Shekiba, and the courageous Khala Shaima, the novel critiques the systemic injustices and misogyny that pervade Afghan society. Rahima's story poignantly illustrates the oppression and lack of rights faced by many Afghan women. As a bacha posh, Rahima briefly experienced the freedoms afforded to boys, but this ended abruptly when she was married off at age 13 to a brutal warlord. Rahima's husband subjected her to severe domestic violence, including beatings that caused the death of their infant son. *"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"*. ( Hashimi. P, 384) Afghan women are often viewed as vessels for producing male heirs, which grants men higher

social status. Rahima internalized this misogyny, blaming herself for her son's death and the violence inflicted on her. She had no legal recourse or safe haven from her abusive marriage. Rahima's story is a microcosm of the harsh realities facing Afghan women, who are denied basic rights and freedoms. Trapped in a patriarchal system that treats them as property, they face immense pressure not to report domestic violence. Even when cases are prosecuted, women often face retaliation and ostracization from their families and communities. Hashimi's powerful narrative gives voice to the struggles of Afghan women like Rahima, who are denied autonomy over their own lives and bodies. Her story underscores the urgent need for legal reforms and social change to protect the rights and dignity of Afghan women. The women in the story face hardships, violence, and subjugation under the guise of tradition and destiny. Ultimately, "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" sheds light on the resilience and strength of Afghan women who strive to break out of their shells and claim their rightful place in a male-dominated world. Khala Shaima brings a revolutionary perspective to the narrative as a fearless and outspoken character who challenges the patriarchal norms of Afghan society. Her bold act of correcting the Mullah during Quran recitation in front of men showcases her strength and determination to stand up against injustice. Throughout the novel, Khala Shaima emerges as a guiding force for Rahima, introducing her to the empowering story of Bibi Shekiba and advocating for girls' education as a means of liberation. She is instrumental in shaping Rahima's awareness and inspiring her to seek knowledge and independence.

Education emerges as a powerful tool for women's empowerment in the novel, with Rahima's ability to learn and grow through her experiences. As a Bacha Posh, Rahima gains access to education and eventually becomes an assistant in Parliament, where she learns about

governance and decision-making processes. Her exposure to new ideas and technologies, such as computers, broadens her perspective and fuels her aspirations for freedom and self-determination. The novel also delves into the struggles of other minor characters like Rahima's mother, who finds solace in opium after her daughters' marriages, and Parwin, who tragically chooses to set herself on fire to escape domestic violence. These characters highlight the harsh realities faced by Afghan women within a society that enforces strict gender roles and places little value on their lives and well-being. The pervasive impact of patriarchy is a central theme in the novel, as seen through the characters' experiences of oppression, abuse, and loss. Women like Rahima and Shekiba are viewed as objects for bearing male heirs and are subjected to violence and control by men who prioritize societal status and lineage over their humanity. The constraints imposed by tradition and cultural norms restrict women's ability to question or challenge the status quo, perpetuating a cycle of silence and submission. Despite these challenges, the novel offers glimmers of hope through characters like Rahima and Shekiba, who demonstrate resilience and courage in the face of adversity. Their journeys towards self-discovery and emancipation serve as a beacon for other Afghan women grappling with oppression and repression. By shedding light on the struggles and triumphs of these women, the novel challenges entrenched beliefs and customs, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society. In essence, "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" transcends mere storytelling to become a powerful commentary on the complexities of Afghan culture and the enduring spirit of its women. Through vivid characters and compelling narratives, Nadia Hashimi invites readers to contemplate the multifaceted layers of patriarchy, tradition, and resilience that shape the lives of women in Afghanistan. In weaving together the stories of Rahima, Shekiba, and other characters, Hashimi crafts a poignant exploration of female agency,

empowerment, and the quest for freedom in a society marked by oppression and inequality.

According to the Pew Research Center's 2009 study, there were 1.57 billion Muslims worldwide, representing 23% of the global population of 6.8 billion. By 2020, the Muslim population had grown to approximately 1.8 billion, or more than 25% of the world's population. The vast majority of Afghanistan's population is Muslim, with estimates ranging from 99.7% to 99.8%. However, the situation of Afghan women and girls has become dire since the Taliban's return to power in 2021. According to UN experts, the Taliban's policies have effectively erased the progress made on women's rights in the 20 years since their previous rule. Afghan women now face severe restrictions, including strict dress codes, travel bans without a male guardian, and exclusion from public office and the judiciary. They also lack access to healthcare and support, especially victims of violence, while the number imprisoned for "moral crimes" has increased by 50% in 18 months. The UN study revealed that 80% of Afghan women experience domestic violence, and 95% of women and girls in prisons have been jailed for "moral crimes" such as sex outside marriage. The plight of Afghan women, marked by widespread suffering and oppression, requires urgent action from the government and international community to uphold their fundamental rights and freedoms. The plight of Afghan women is a complex issue rooted in the interplay of religion, culture, and education. While Islam, like other major religions, preaches equality and respect for women, the application of its teachings in Afghanistan has led to the oppression and subjugation of women in the name of religion. Afghan women face severe restrictions on their rights and freedoms, often being denied access to education, employment, and even basic healthcare. This is a direct consequence of the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law, which has been used as a tool to control and subjugate women. It is important to note that Taliban's

interpretation of Islam is not shared by the majority of Muslims worldwide. In fact, Islam has a rich history of female leadership, scholarship, and empowerment. The Quran, the holy book of Islam, emphasizes the equality of men and women and condemns the mistreatment of women. The plight of Afghan women is not solely a religious issue but also a cultural and societal one. Afghanistan's patriarchal society has long perpetuated the notion of women as inferior and subservient to men. This mindset, combined with a lack of education and exposure to alternative perspectives, has made it difficult for Afghan women to challenge the status quo. It is crucial to understand that the problem lies not in religion itself but in the misinterpretation and misapplication of its teachings. Religion should be a source of betterment, not a tool for oppression and control. To address the plight of Afghan women, a multifaceted approach is necessary. This includes promoting access to education, raising awareness about women's rights, and challenging the cultural and societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality. The plight of Afghan women is a tragic consequence of the misuse of religion for political and social control. Women are bound in Afghanistan. They suffer innumerable violent acts at the hands of the men in their families. Any attempt to mend the laws to benefit women is seen as losing control over them. The other is to bring into the limelight the rampant hegemony of patriarchy prevalent in these countries. This blinded society denies any platform for discourse related to women's rights, much less for the voices against injustices done to them daily. The situation of women in Afghanistan stands in stark contrast to the experiences of women in many other Muslim majority countries. While women in several Islamic nations have made significant strides in achieving greater rights, opportunities, and societal acceptance, the conditions for Afghan women remain dire and severely restrictive. Afghanistan, under the Taliban's oppressive rule, has become one of the most challenging places for women to live. The

Taliban's interpretation of Islamic law has led to the systematic suppression of women's rights, denying them access to education, employment, and basic freedom that are often enjoyed by their counterparts in other Muslim majority nations. In contrast, countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Turkey have witnessed a gradual but steady improvement in women's status, with increasing female participation in the workplace, politics, and various sectors of society. Women in these nations have been able to pursue higher education, hold leadership positions, and contribute to the economic and social development of their countries. One shining example of female empowerment in the Muslim world is Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Malala's unwavering commitment to girls' education and her resilience in the face of adversity have made her a global icon and a powerful reminder that progress is possible, even in the most challenging of circumstances. She observed: *"We must listen to the voices of Afghan women and girls they are asking for protection, for education, for the freedom, and the future they were promised"* Nadia Hashimi, a pediatrician, and writer relates to both of these conditions. Her writing reflects her sensitivity toward her roots. Where Afghani women are given the platform to speak, reflect, and argue. The platform is brutally denied to them in the current socio-political scenario of the country. Rather, it should touch the cord of empathy in our consciousness. These women need to be seen and considered as strong and competent. They are radical and self-sufficient. When such people are wronged, we cannot let it go with just a hint of mercy. The powerful voices of Afghan writers like Nadia Hashimi play a crucial role in shedding light on the plight of Afghan women. Through her poignant narratives and compelling storytelling, Hashimi invites readers to witness the struggles, sacrifices, and resilience of Afghan women as they navigate a landscape marked by adversity and inequality. Indeed, without the dedicated efforts of writers like Nadiya Hashimi, the world at large may

remain oblivious to the harsh realities faced by Afghan women on a daily basis. By bringing attention to their experiences, Hashimi and others offer a window into the lives of Afghan women, highlighting their courage, resilience, and unwavering spirit in the face of immense challenges. In a world where the fight for gender equality continues to be an ongoing battle, the stories and voices of individuals like Nadiya Hashimi serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of amplifying diverse perspectives and advocating for the rights and empowerment of all women, especially those who have long been marginalized and overlooked. Through their words and narratives, these writers illuminate the struggles and triumphs of Afghan women, inspiring greater awareness, empathy, and solidarity across borders and cultures. In doing so, they contribute to a more inclusive and equitable world where every individual, regardless of gender or background, can live a life of dignity, respect, and opportunity. Dr. Olga Davidson, Boston University states: *"The struggles experienced by the dispossessed come to life in this universalizing picture of human resilience. Nadia Hashimi has gifted the reader with an unforgettable lesson in human hardships and the will to survive with dignity."* (web) The gist of the paper and Nadiya Hashimi's vision of a new Afghanistan, and the potential for a brighter future for women, can be succinctly summarized by the following couplet by a Hindi scholar: *"Andheri kaid se hayat ye zindagi to hai; diya na sahi par roshni ki baat to hai..."*. This couplet, conveys the idea that no matter what challenges or obstacles lie ahead, there is always hope for a better future. It serves as a powerful reminder that even in the face of adversity, women can continue to strive for a brighter tomorrow.

## CONCLUSION

*"The human spirit, you know what they say about the human spirit? It is harder than a rock and more delicate than a flower petal."*

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 the loss of identity of girls looks endless these days. 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 rights. Cultures have usually robbed the subalterns, especially women brutally and stripped them of their rights. Humiliation, tyranny, and powerlessness are the issues of women in many cultures. Despite much progress, female is always subjugated to male and man-made societal norms. For centuries women have become helpless victims of cultural and societal norms. Besides male-oriented norms, religious fundamentalists have also made the lives of women more vulnerable. In Islam, Hadith 4:464 states, *"The Prophet said, 'I looked at Paradise and found poor people forming the majority of its inhabitants, and I looked at Hell and saw that the majority of its inhabitants were women.'" The Pearl that Broke its Shell (2014) is a well-read novel by Nadia Hashimi. This story revolves around Afghan Families, especially two female characters, Rahima and Shekiba. This story is a comprehensive study of the treatment of patriarchal society with women in Third World countries, especially Afghanistan as Hashimi depicts in her novel. Gender subalternity, humiliation, powerlessness, and tyranny are the issues shown in the story. As Shilpi Somaya Gowda reviews: *"A fascinating look at the unspoken lives of Afghani women, separated by generations and miles, yet achingly similar. This is a story to transport you and make you think."* (web). Through her writings, she*



conveys the cultures of the Afghan people and their nexus with gender discrimination. Nadia Hashimi's diligent study of Afghanistan's socio-cultural aspects gives a bit of indication of her belongingness, whereas her volition ruminates to bring a putsch in Afghan patrilineal customs via her writings. *"Afghanistan's secret weapon has always been her women. But, Boba I'm just a girl. What a thing to say! as if a girl is made of lesser materials. Have you forgotten the words of Rumi? You are not a drop in the ocean. You are the entire ocean in a drop".*--Nadiya Hashimi

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