

Subordination, Tradition, and Empowerment in Nadia Hashimi's 'The Pearl That Broke Its Shell'



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Abstract: *Society places women in an inferior position, which leads to their subordination. This phenomenon arises because of the widespread presence of a patriarchal system in a particular country. The patriarchal system enables men to exert dominance over women, spanning from educational institutions to professional environments. This condition restricts and regulates women's actions. The author conducted an analysis of the phenomenon of female subordination in Nadia Hashimi's work, The Pearl That Broke Its Shell. The tale emphasizes the subordinate position of Afghan women in society. In addition, women engage in a cultural practice called Bacha Posh to achieve gender equality with men. Nevertheless, this custom fails to elevate the social standing of women, as it necessitates them to assume male identities in order to avail themselves of the same chances as men. The author utilized a qualitative approach to analyze the data, taking into account its textual format and the vocal depiction of the result. This study employed a feminist methodology. The researcher examines and elucidates the character's speech and storytelling by the narrator, which signifies the presence of gender-based subjugation, female camaraderie, and female empowerment. The findings demonstrated Rahima's effective utilization of her authority to terminate the discriminatory subjugation she encountered based on gender.*

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Tradition, Exploitation, Society, Empowerment

Background of the Study

Literary works can be categorized into two main types: fiction and non-fiction. Djikic et al. (2013) state that the word "fiction" has its etymology rooted in the concept of "something made." Non-fiction typically refers to a subject matter that is based on factual information, distinguishing it from fiction. Non-fiction refers to a literary work that accurately portrays real occurrences, with the authors having personally encountered the events. The text may take the form of a letter, diary, or biography, and the author has responsibility for the accuracy of the information. In the realm of fiction, the author

employs a narrative style to convey their story. The author skillfully structures a narrative in a captivating manner, free from any constraints. Examples of literary works of fiction include poetry, short tales, novels, and other similar forms of writing.

Within society, there is a prevalent pattern where men frequently exert control and influence over women in several domains, including employment, decision-making processes, and educational opportunities. Women are frequently regarded as a subordinate collective that is required to conform to the regulations set by men, owing to their perceived inferior

position in society. Women are frequently placed in positions that are superior to those of men in society. This not only poses a challenge for women in attaining gender equality with men, but it also frequently leads to limitations on specific activities. Sultana (2011) asserted:

The term 'women's subordination' refers to the inferior position of women, their restricted access to resources and decision-making, and the prevailing patriarchal control they encounter in the majority of nations. Women's subordination refers to their inferior or lower status in relation to men.

The pearl that shattered Nadia Hashimi, an American-born lady of Afghan descent, authors the book titled "It's Shell." The novel was published by William Morrow on May 6, 2014, and it was nominated for the 2014 Goodreads Choice Award for Fiction and Goodreads Author. The novel is set in Kabul, Afghanistan. This work portrays the dynamics of a family, their hardships, and the cultural customs of Afghanistan.

The novel "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" features two distinct storylines, both centered around different protagonists, Shekiba and Rahima. Furthermore, each narrative unfolds within a unique temporal context. Shekiba's encounter as a Bacha Posh took place in the early 20th century, while Rahima's experience happened in 2007.

Shekiba hails from a rural village located a considerable distance away from the main city. She was the third offspring among a total of four, comprising two male siblings and one female sibling. In 1903, a conflict broke out in the community, resulting in disorder and a rampant epidemic. All of her siblings perished due to the virus. Consequently, Shekiba was compelled to assume her brothers' roles in order to labor and oversee her father's property. After a span of two years, Shekiba's father succumbed to a sickness, compelling her to reside with her grandmother. Shekiba's grandmother consistently regarded her as a domestic worker. Shekiba was denied the right to inherit a share of her father's land by her grandmother, who held the belief that it was inappropriate for a daughter to inherit her

father's property. Shekiba has demonstrated her ability to be self-sufficient and independent, without relying on others. She persevered, relying on her expertise as a Bacha Posh. In addition to Shekiba, there was Rahima, a little girl who underwent female subjection and assumed the role of a Bacha Posh during her childhood.

Rahima was the third offspring of a family consisting of five female siblings. Rahima lived in a remote area away from Kabul. Due to the absence of male siblings, Rahima had to independently protect herself and her sisters from boys' harassment whenever they left the house. Rahima's mother subsequently opted to convert one of her daughters into a male, selecting Rahima as the recipient. Upon assuming the role of a Bacha Posh, Rahima gained various advantages, including the ability to protect her siblings from harassment, the chance to receive an education, and the capacity to negotiate in the marketplace. Rahima was compelled to get into a marriage with an elderly gentleman when she was only 13 years old. This scenario emerged because of her father's financial needs. After getting married, she encountered multiple difficulties in her life, which were further intensified by her mother-in-law's strong hostility towards her. Without deliberation, she decided to revert back to being a Bacha Posh.

We chose this novel based on various criteria, such as its adherence to tradition and its exploration of relevant topics. The custom depicted in the story is extraordinary and has the potential to completely revolutionize a family's dynamics. The tradition of Bacha Posh, which is depicted in the novel, is only practiced by specific individuals. The tradition pertains to an Afghan girl who matures by assuming the role and demeanor of a boy. The overview implies that Bacha Posh is an enduring and inherited tradition. Shekiba assumed the role of a Bacha Posh during the early 1900s, and Rahima underwent the same experience in the 2000s. The narratives demonstrate the significant role that this custom holds for individuals in Afghanistan.

The portrayal of women as subordinates in

society, as illustrated in the novel, is limited to households without male offspring. If a family exclusively consists of female offspring, society will perceive it in a certain manner. The tale also portrays the harsh truth about parents who should not confine their daughters within the household for an extended period of time. Furthermore, in the event that the daughter does not undergo a gender transformation, she is obligated to marry an individual who can augment the prestige and worth of her lineage, regardless of his age surpassing hers. Moreover, the tale portrays the imperative for women to promptly modify their conduct, irrespective of the obstacles they encounter. As an illustration, Rahima, a prominent character, was designated as a Bacha Posh at the age of 13, forfeiting her ability to identify as a male. As a result, she was compelled to marry due to her parents' economic necessity. At the age of 13, she was compelled to adopt masculine conduct, exert considerable effort to alleviate her family's financial predicament, safeguard her siblings, and engage in negotiation at the marketplace. Furthermore, upon marriage, she was required to embrace a more feminine demeanor and assume the duties of a wife. She promptly gave birth and had to assume the role of mother.

The ritual portrayed in the novel is quite intriguing. Women in Afghanistan may experience subordination due to cultural traditions. The author of this paper seeks to illustrate to the readers that the subjugation of women in society is a longstanding custom. This study employed a feminist perspective to examine and interpret the data. As per Walsh's (1917) findings, the feminist approach is a concerted effort to achieve parity in rights and opportunities between males and females. Feminism is the advocacy for gender equality between women and men.

Objective of the study

The study aims to elucidate the mechanisms underlying women's subordination in Afghanistan, as well as the strategies employed by Afghan women to attain gender equality, even if it necessitates personal transformation.

Research Methodology

This research work is qualitative in nature, we used secondary sources for data collection. Secondary sources encompass literary works such as books, novels, and essays published in scholarly journals. In order to gather empirical evidence, the author precisely documented observations after multiple readings of the text. To get the essential information for the study, the writer fully engaged with pertinent literature. The writer classified the data collected from the novel based on the study's particular issue. Subsequently, after a thorough examination of the situation, the writer confirmed the accuracy of the facts obtained from reading the novel. The data in this study consists of dialogues between the characters and accompanying descriptions.

Discussion and Analysis

Hashimi's novel, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, features two primary protagonists who share a common fate. The individuals in question are Rahima and Shekiba. Both protagonists encounter the subjugation of women in society. They must engage in a struggle to reduce their state of being subordinate. Nevertheless, their families' specific conditions influence the degree of women's subordination. In addition, the cultural tradition known as Bacha Posh plays multiple roles in Rahima and Shekiba's lives. This study aims to investigate women's subjugation and analyze potential approaches to counter it by examining the practice of Bacha Posh.

Hurdles in Education for girls

In situations where women are subordinate, men frequently assert dominance over women. Women are typically the primary recipients of this subordination due to the societal perception that women possess less value compared to men. This could potentially elucidate the reason behind the prevalence of male dominance over females. According to Shastri (2014), women often encounter gender inequality or discrimination as a result of society's perception of their inferiority and fragility. The female characters in the narrative, including Rahima and Shekiba, likewise undergo women's subjugation.

Initially, Rahima's parents granted her permission to attend school after receiving a thorough explanation about the importance of education from Parwin's instructor. Upon Rahima's return from school, she consistently encountered a group of lads eagerly awaiting her arrival on the street, prepared to engage in acts of bullying. Parwin experienced harassment from the boys when returning home from school. Rahima's father granted them permission to attend school, despite the consequences of having to confront hazardous situations. In addition, Rahima was required to get her father's permission before begging.

We beseeched Padar-jan to grant us permission to resume our education. One of Parwin's instructors, who happened to be a close friend of Madar-jan from childhood, made an appearance at our residence and attempted to persuade our parents. Padar-jan had previously shown a willingness to change their mind, but this particular occasion was distinct. He wanted us to attend school, but he had difficulties ensuring the secure implementation of this plan. What would be the perception if young men from the area openly courted his daughter? Terrible (Hashimi, 2014, p. 5).

The conversation above suggests that Rahima and her sisters had to convince their father to give them permission to go to school. Arif struggled to get permission for his girls to go to school because he thought the neighborhood boys would be a nightmare. The passage indicates that Arif tacitly endorsed the notion that women were not required to pursue an education. Arif's inclination to retain their daughters at home instead of enrolling them at school will hinder women from accessing educational opportunities. Sultana (2011, p. 8) argues that girls face prejudice as a result of the restricted educational opportunities that are accessible to them.

Raisa, the wife of Arif, concurred with his decision to prohibit his daughters from attending school. She diligently protected her daughters and ensured their safety within their home. She allowed them to participate in any activity they chose, without fear of any negative consequences. Rahima's aunt, Khala Shaima,

visited her residence one day and was shocked by Rahima's and her sister's condition.

She held the belief that Rahima ought to attend school rather than remaining at home. Subsequently, she asked Raisa about the reason for her daughter's departure from school. Shaima was of the opinion that both Rahima's parents and the Taliban, a Sunni Islamic nationalist movement that held significant power in Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001, would agree to close the schools. Despite Shaima's lack of formal education, the family always employed alternative means to ensure Rahima and her sisters received an education. "If you impede the progress of these girls for that reason, you are no different from the Taliban, who shut down educational institutions." Hashimi (2014, p. 11). Subsequently, Rahima's mother elucidated the events that transpired when Rahima and her sisters arrived home from school, resulting in their father prohibiting them from attending school any further. Shaima rejected Rahima's mother's explanation due to its lack of coherence and potential to negatively impact her daughters. In fact, she devised a superior strategy to assist Rahima and her sisters in reducing the level of subordination they experienced. Nevertheless, Rahima's mother had unwavering faith in her husband's decision.

Breaking Tradition

Nadia Hashimi, an Afghan-American author, recounts the story of two female protagonists who grapple with the predicament of bacha posh traditions, each navigating and triumphing over their challenges in distinct manners. Nadia Hashimi portrays Afghan women's lives and the authentic backdrop of Afghan civilization. The *Pearl That Broke Its Shell* narrates the tale of two Afghan girls. Rahima, the main character of the novel, is a nine-year-old girl living in Afghan society. Her transformation into a Bacha posh, a cultural practice where girls dress and raise themselves as boys, brings about a significant change in her. Rahima is the third child in her family. Her life coincides with that of her great-grandmother, Shekiba. Shekiba, who was suffering from cholera, wore clothing typically worn by men. Despite Rahima's modern role, Afghanistan has experienced minimal change.

Rahima adopted a masculine appearance in order to have access to employment prospects beyond her usual scope. She cherished the autonomy that allowed her to attend school, frolic on the playground, and relish her existence without any difficulties. The Afghan people follow the ancient tradition of Bacha posh, allowing girls to dress like men until marriage. Despite briefly experiencing freedom, Rahima's father compelled her to marry an affluent, older guy. Rahima is his fourth spouse. He married her with the sole intention of pleading for a child. Despite marrying a man of advanced age, Rahima felt at ease with him and successfully gave birth to a son. Subsequently, she felt an overwhelming desire to give priority to the needs of her spouse and child. Consequently, she relinquished the pursuits that had always been her aspirations in life. She articulated her frustration by posing the question to herself, "What course of action should I pursue?" Undoubtedly, Allah has ordained this as their destiny. However, she expressed her anger by asking, "What steps should I take?" "Naseeb is the scapegoat for any unresolved issue that people attribute blame to (Hashimi, 139)."

Solidarity Gained By Rahima

The novel "The Pearl That Broke Its Shell" narrates the tale of Rahima, a little girl who experiences a lack of attention from her parents. As a result, Rahima's aunt, Shaima, felt compelled to always offer assistance and affection to him. Only Shaima consistently ensures the correct meeting of Rahima's needs. The following narrative presents compelling evidence in support of this claim. "Khala Shaima oversaw all aspects of our lives, ensuring our academic performance was satisfactory, providing appropriate winter clothing, and checking for the presence of lice in our hair." She served as a safeguard for any tasks or responsibilities that our parents may have been unable to do on our behalf (Hashimi, 2014).

The aforementioned comment demonstrates Shaima's apprehension about Rahima. Shaima provides exceptional care and affection for Rahima, surpassing even the level of care provided by Rahima's birth parents. The empathy exhibited by Shaima towards Rahima

fosters a strong connection between them. This link fortifies Rahima, enabling her to endure challenging circumstances.

Shaima's assistance persisted even after Rahima married Abdul Khaliq. Shaima frequently engages in visits with Rahima for the purpose of conversing and exchanging views. One day, Rahima notified Shaima about the election of Abdul Khaliq's primary spouse, Badria, to parliament. Abdul Khaliq instructed Badria to travel to Kabul and carry out her responsibilities. After receiving this information, Khala Shaima recommended that Rahima accompany Badria to Kabul. Shaima argues that Rahima is qualified to be a member of parliament due to her ability to read and write, in contrast to Badria, who lacks literacy skills. Rahima first had reservations about the plan, but she became more open to it after hearing Shaima's suggestions. "However, in Kabul, you will encounter diverse sights and experiences." It is a form of education. Observe the local lifestyle, examine the architectural structures, and witness the legislative activities of the parliament. This presents a favorable occasion for you (Hashimi, 2014).

The preceding discussion indicates that Shaima is attempting to inspire Rahima by providing a visual representation of the life that Rahima will encounter in Kabul. Shaima is concerned that Rahima may squander a valuable chance that has the potential to significantly alter her destiny. Rahima's aunt's tales about Kabul filled her with anticipation and assurance, fueling her confidence in her ability to accompany Badria on the journey.

According to the feminist author Bell Hooks in her 1984 essay, women ought to consider the idea of living and working together in a spirit of unity and support. The data above illustrates the robust solidarity between Rahima and her aunt. Shaima is a pivotal character in Rahima's personal development, as she significantly contributes to the growth of Rahima's resilience and belief in oneself. Shaima's capacity for understanding and sharing the feelings of others, her drive and determination, and her encouragement establish a strong connection of unity that empowers Rahima to become more

resilient. Bell Hooks (1984) posits that women form connections rooted in mutual abilities and assets. Rahima's effective establishment of unity resulted in a favorable perception of herself, empowering her to confront the difficulties of life. Subsequently, Rahima harnesses her inherent potential to liberate herself from the shackles of gender-based subjugation.

Empowerment: In The Pearl That Broke Its Shell

Abdul Khaliq approved Badria's request to appoint Rahima as her assistant in Kabul. During her time in Kabul, Rahima utilized her spare time to acquire a multitude of knowledge. She frequently attends the training center alongside the other members. "We took turns every day." On one occasion, she would instruct us in fundamental English skills, while on the subsequent day, we would resume our computer activities, acquiring knowledge in Internet navigation or note-taking. I was exhilarated by the prospect of being a student once more and yearned for an authentic classroom environment, replete with peers of my own age with whom I could acquire knowledge, engage in lighthearted banter, and partake in soccer matches (Hashimi, 2014).

The aforementioned quotation suggests that Rahima gained a multitude of knowledge and skills during her tenure in Kabul. She acquired fresh knowledge. Rahima utilizes her available opportunities and personal talents to further her personal growth. According to Bell Hooks (1984), power is the capacity to lead a creative existence in which a woman can delve into the inherent strength inside herself.

Rahima not only acquired a substantial amount of new knowledge, but she also formed numerous new friendships. This increases Rahima's propensity to engage with other individuals. She was acquainted with other accounts of women who had experienced sexist oppression, similar to her own. The women successfully halted the discrimination by seeking refuge at the women's shelter. These stories motivate Rahima to emulate the same actions." Ms. Franklin and I proceeded directly from the teahouse to a women's shelter that she

had found." The shelter we had heard about was not the one we encountered. We found another location further away from the parliament building, towards the western outskirts of the capital city. Hashimi (2014) is the cited source.

The aforementioned comment demonstrates Rahima's willingness to make significant choices in her life. She journeyed covertly to a refuge located a considerable distance from Kabul. This demonstrates Rahima's effective utilization of her authority to halt gender-based discrimination. Bell Hooks characterizes power as the capacity to lead a self-assured and independent life, enabling women to govern their own lives independently of external influences. Rahima has demonstrated her autonomy by making independent decisions in her life, free from external influences or constraints. Moreover, Rahima did not employ her authority to exert control over Abdul Khaliq; rather, she utilized it to emancipate herself from the shackles of gender-based subjugation.

Conclusion

Nadia Hashimi's work, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, addresses social themes. The artwork portrays the continued existence of women's subjugation in contemporary society. To achieve gender equality, a woman must assume a male identity in order to gain societal acknowledgment. Bacha Posh is a tradition in which women assume male identities in order to access the same opportunities as men. Families without any boys primarily practice this tradition.

The author portrays the main character's ordeal throughout the book and demonstrates methods of overcoming adversity. The narrative also portrays the spiritual odyssey of Rahima, who has perpetually yearned for an improved existence. The title accurately reflects the novel's content, as it portrays a girl who endeavors to overcome her introversion and, while facing challenges, perseveres in discovering her unique individuality. The title "The Pearl That Brought Its Shell" indicates that Rahima receives great care and importance in the novel. Since an early age, she has encountered significant adversity and had no

desire to live a wretched existence similar to that of other Afghan women. She was resolute in her pursuit of the liberation that comes with being a woman from Afghanistan. Consequently, she resolved to liberate herself, endeavor to evade life's challenges, and begin on a voyage towards her ideal existence. In a subsequent part of the narrative, she realizes that her significance is comparable to that of a pearl, and it is important not to underestimate her value. Rahima, despite being a victim of Bacha Posh, derives comfort from adopting a male identity, which enables her to investigate and evade the terrible facts of her situation.

The study above demonstrates that Rahima experienced diverse manifestations of sexist oppression, encompassing inadequate security in public spaces, coerced marriage, and objectification as a sexual entity. Due to the sexist mistreatment she endured, her aunt, Khala Shaima, formed a strong bond of solidarity with her. Rahima got solidarity in the form of empathy, inspiration, and support. Shaima's assistance bolstered Rahima's increasing resilience. Ultimately, Rahima harnesses her agency to flee to the women's refuge, liberating herself from the shackles of gender-based subjugation.

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