

Crossing Boundaries: Gender, Identity, and Resistance in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*



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Abstract: *Nadia Hashimi's The Pearl That Broke Its Shell is a deeply resonant narrative that interlaces the lives of two Afghan women Rahima and her great-great-grandmother Shekiba across generations, highlighting the oppressive gender norms embedded in Afghan society. Set against the backdrop of war, political turmoil, and deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, the novel explores themes of identity, resilience, and resistance. Central to the narrative is the cultural practice of bacha posh, wherein girls are temporarily raised as boys to circumvent gender-based societal restrictions. This tradition not only exposes the severe limitations placed on women but also reveals the constructed and performative aspects of gender roles. Through the parallel journeys of its protagonists, the novel illustrates how Afghan women have historically found subtle and overt ways to navigate and challenge oppressive structures. By applying feminist theoretical frameworks including Simone de Beauvoir's concept of "the Other," Judith Butler's gender performativity, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist generalizations the novel can be understood as a complex critique of both internal cultural patriarchy and the oversimplified narratives imposed by external observers. This paper examines how The Pearl That Broke Its Shell contributes to feminist literature by offering a nuanced portrayal of Afghan women's lived experiences, emphasizing agency, trauma, and the importance of intergenerational storytelling. Ultimately, the novel does not merely recount suffering but foregrounds the strength and autonomy of women who, despite systemic repression, continually assert their right to self-definition and empowerment.*

Keywords: Bacha Posh, Gender Performativity, Feminist Literary Criticism, Patriarchy in Afghan Society, Intergenerational Trauma, Female Agency and Resistance

Introduction

In recent decades, literature emerging from or about Afghanistan has gained increasing attention in global literary and academic circles, not only for its depiction of war and conflict but also for its exploration of the lives of women in deeply patriarchal societies. Among such works, Nadia Hashimi's debut novel, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014), stands out for its nuanced portrayal of female resilience across generations. The novel does not merely present

the oppression of women as a static condition but foregrounds the evolution of female agency and the complex cultural forces that shape gender roles in Afghanistan. Through dual narratives set a century apart, the story of Rahima a young girl living in post-Taliban Afghanistan—and Shekiba—her great-great-grandmother navigating life under monarchical rule—interrogates the intersections of gender, tradition, and identity.

At the heart of the novel is the Afghan practice

of *bacha posh*, which allows a girl to be raised and treated as a boy until puberty. This custom, though functional in its immediate intent, is emblematic of a culture that intrinsically values male identity over female. For Rahima, being *bacha posh* provides temporary access to freedoms otherwise denied to girls: education, mobility, and a sense of autonomy. Similarly, Shekiba's journey, which involves disguising herself as a man to survive, further emphasizes how the fluidity of gender performance can both subvert and reinforce patriarchal norms. The novel deftly weaves these individual experiences into a broader commentary on the ways Afghan women navigate, resist, and adapt to systemic repression.

This paper argues that *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* can be productively analyzed through feminist theoretical lenses, particularly those that address non-Western contexts. Simone de Beauvoir's notion of woman as "the Other" is especially relevant in understanding how Afghan society marginalizes women by defining them only in relation to men. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps explain the psychological complexities that arise from the characters' experiences as *bacha posh*, while Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of Western feminist discourse warns against oversimplified portrayals of "Third World women" as passive victims.

Rather than presenting Afghan women as helpless or voiceless, Hashimi offers them as agents of their own change women who, though constrained by societal norms, still find paths to empowerment through education, storytelling, and solidarity. The dual timelines in the novel do more than mirror each other; they illuminate the endurance of patriarchal structures over time and the intergenerational strategies of resistance women employ to cope with them. Through the exploration of themes such as autonomy, identity, resistance, and transformation, this paper seeks to highlight how *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* contributes meaningfully to global feminist literature and offers a culturally grounded yet universally resonant narrative of female empowerment.

Historical and Cultural Context

To fully grasp the feminist themes in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, it is essential to understand the historical and cultural context of Afghanistan a nation shaped by a complex tapestry of tribal traditions, religious conservatism, and successive regimes that have variously suppressed or enabled women's rights. The novel, set in both early 20th-century Afghanistan and the early 2000s, captures a society where female subjugation is not only systemic but culturally embedded. This historical backdrop informs every facet of Rahima's and Shekiba's lives, from their lack of autonomy to their restricted mobility and limited access to education.

Afghan society has long operated under a patriarchal framework, wherein a woman's value is often determined by her role as a wife, mother, and bearer of sons. Practices such as early and forced marriages, purdah (the seclusion of women), and gender-segregated education have contributed to the deep marginalization of women. The Taliban regime, which ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001 and resurfaced in 2021, further institutionalized gender oppression by banning women from working, attending school, or appearing in public without a male guardian (Kumar, 2022). Even after the Taliban's initial fall, the remnants of their ideology lingered in many parts of the country, especially rural areas where tribal customs continued to dominate everyday life.

The cultural institution of *bacha posh*, central to Hashimi's novel, reflects these gendered imbalances. While this practice may seem empowering on the surface granting girls the freedom to act as boys it is fundamentally a survival strategy within a rigidly patriarchal context. It underscores the extent to which gender equality remains unattainable in a system that grants privileges solely based on perceived maleness. As scholars have noted, *bacha posh* serves as both a form of agency and an indictment of a society that forces girls to forsake their gender to access basic rights (Alvares, 2023).

Moreover, the historical narrative of

Afghanistan has often been told through male perspectives, whether through political leaders, tribal elders, or foreign invaders. Afghan women's voices have frequently been silenced or misrepresented, both within the country and in international discourse. Hashimi's novel seeks to challenge that silence by foregrounding women's stories, not as mere footnotes to male heroism but as narratives of courage and complexity in their own right.

Furthermore, Afghanistan's post-conflict society presents a paradox: while the global community has invested in women's education and political participation, these efforts have often clashed with deeply ingrained social norms. In this tension between progress and tradition, Rahima and Shekiba become symbolic of the broader struggle Afghan women face—negotiating their identities in a space that is continually shifting between oppression and potential liberation.

By embedding her characters in this historical and cultural milieu, Hashimi offers more than a personal story of hardship and resilience. She provides a lens into the broader structural forces that define and confine Afghan women's lives, making *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* both a feminist text and a socio-political critique.

The Practice of *Bacha Posh*

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Nadia Hashimi uses the tradition of *bacha posh*—a cultural phenomenon in Afghanistan where girls are dressed and raised as boys—as a central symbol of gendered oppression and resistance. Through Rahima's experiences, the novel brings visibility to a little-known practice that functions both as a temporary liberation from patriarchal constraints and a stark critique of the society that necessitates it.

In Afghan society, the value of a male child often far surpasses that of a female, both culturally and economically. A male presence in the family is associated with social prestige, security, and authority. Women without sons are often pitied or marginalized, and daughters are seen as burdens due to dowry expectations and restrictions on their mobility. The practice of *bacha posh* emerges in this environment as a stopgap solution a way for families without sons

to access male privilege through the temporary transformation of a daughter (Alvares, 2023).

Rahima's transformation into Rahim enables her to attend school, roam the streets freely, and run errands without a male escort. These freedoms, though seemingly trivial to outsiders, represent a seismic shift in a girl's life in a highly gender-segregated society. However, this change is not without consequence. The return to girlhood, often required when the girl reaches puberty, is deeply traumatic. Rahima experiences psychological disorientation as she is forced to give up her autonomy and re-enter a world of confinement, where her movements and decisions are no longer her own. The novel captures this transition as a loss of identity and agency highlighting the double-edged nature of *bacha posh*.

From a feminist theoretical perspective, *bacha posh* powerfully illustrates Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity. According to Butler (1990), gender is not an innate quality but a set of repeated behaviors and norms that produce the illusion of a stable identity. Rahima's ability to convincingly live as a boy for several years underscores the performative aspects of gender. Her behavior, speech, dress, and social interactions are all altered to align with male expectations, revealing how gender roles are culturally constructed and maintained.

Yet *bacha posh* is also a form of resistance albeit a constrained one. It allows Afghan girls to glimpse a life outside their prescribed gender roles and provides families with a way to navigate societal expectations in the absence of a son. However, this form of resistance is inherently limited and temporary. It does not dismantle the patriarchy; instead, it operates within its boundaries. The very existence of *bacha posh* is a reminder that to gain basic human rights, girls must cease to be girls—even if only for a short time.

Hashimi also draws a historical parallel through Shekiba, Rahima's great-great-grandmother, who similarly assumes a male identity out of necessity. Disfigured in a childhood accident and orphaned by a cholera epidemic, Shekiba is shunned by society and eventually finds work as

a guard in the king's harem a position that requires her to dress and behave as a man. Her experience further complicates the notion of gender identity, as she does not simply pass as male for convenience, but inhabits a liminal space that allows her more freedom than traditional womanhood ever could.

The dual narrative illustrates how *bacha posh* is not a modern anomaly but a recurring adaptation to rigid gender hierarchies. Both Rahima and Shekiba struggle to reconcile the relative freedom of their male identities with the harsh limitations of their actual gender roles. Their stories raise fundamental questions: If society can accept a girl as a boy without hesitation, what does that reveal about the arbitrariness and fluidity of gender? And why must femininity be shed in order for a girl to live freely?

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, *bacha posh* is not just a plot device but a lens through which readers can examine the construction, restriction, and rebellion embedded in gender identities. Hashimi's portrayal neither romanticizes nor condemns the tradition; instead, it lays bare the psychological toll it exacts while honoring the resilience of girls who find ways to survive and subvert the systems stacked against them.

Models for feminist theory

To grasp what *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* means to feminist thought, one should look at it using established feminist theories. Hashimi's text is an excellent place to study how gender, power and identity are created and opposed in regions outside of the West. Reading Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and Chandra Talpade Mohanty gives us a way to look at Rahima's and Shekiba's experiences thoughtfully.

Simone de Beauvoir's View on "The Other"

She claims in *The Second Sex* (1949) that women are seen as "the Other" in most patriarchal cultures. People often locate men at the center and accept them as the 'true' or 'natural' while positioning women as the odd ones, the ones that do not hold the central meaning. In Hashimi's book, women tend to be explained by their connections to men such as

being daughters, wives or mothers. Her family and community regard Rahima only for her marrying prospects and the number of sons she is able to have. Shekiba's appearance, not sending the message of a common idea of femininity, makes her unique in a double way; first, because of her gender and second, because of her disfigurement. Both her gender and her appearance make her become invisible and she is only allowed to act as a male harem guard for a short time.

It results in a book that is about regaining personal identity. Although each protagonist manages it differently, both attempt to show they are real individuals, not just puppets, by making their own decisions.

Judith Butler and the Thesis of Gender Performativity

Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender is a role people play repeatedly through social interactions. As a result, gender is a process of acting, not a fixed identity we have. This framework is essential to understanding what *bacha posh* faces in Hashimi's novel.

Rahim is created when Rahima cuts her hair, takes on male-identifying clothing, walks as a man would and is not subdued in public. Surprisingly, these small changes afford her more social advantages than a girl, showing that gender rules are based on performance. We see how, in the novel, Afghan society's simple binary terms could easily be challenged or switched.

Yet, athletes must face the serious emotional and mental effects of giving such performances. Butler notes that though gender is enacted, individuals who act outside expected norms are often punished by authorities. After Rahima reaches puberty and must revert to wearing girl's clothing, both her community and she themselves lose her freedom. The return to traditional femininity causes deep pain and demonstrates that gender roles are usually forced upon those who don't follow them.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty and the Postcolonial Feminist Movement

Mohanty criticizes the way Western feminist

thinkers tend to overlook differences among women in the Global South and view them as people who need to be saved. In Mohanty's view such narratives don't consider how local conditions, culture and various methods used by women to resist patriarchy influence these women's lives.

Hashimi's work provides a new and well-grounded understanding of life for Afghan women. Rahima and Shekiba find ways to overcome adversity in their difficult environments. Accepting a male identity is Shekiba's smart way to stay safe and claim some freedom. She desired education and began questioning her marriage situation as she became self-aware and started to resist, rather than following ideas brought in from others.

By setting resistance within cultural customs like bacha posh, the novel supports Mohanty's view of feminist solidarity, as it acknowledges differences, highlights individual power and avoids thinking that all kinds of oppression are the same. Hashimi presents her characters as having agency, even as we see the serious challenges they must overcome.

What is Intersectionality and Identity?

The novel explores the ways in which gender, class, physical looks and experiences of history overlap which parallels the idea of intersectionality, even if Crenshaw's writings are never quoted. Shekiba is further affected because of her looks, her gender and her status. She is shaped differently because of being poor and unprotected by the government, while also a girl. Because of these many forms of marginalization, a feminist analysis needs to look at more than just gender.

Struggling and Acting

An important point in the novel is the way women resist and take charge within a society ruled strictly by men. Don't let their exclusion from many of life's choices fool you; both Rahima and Shekiba are strong and flexible. Nadia Hashimi demonstrates that feminist theory recognizes that opposition can appear in several ways, even when conditions are very harsh.

Rahima's Peaceful Challenge

Her opposition is not immediately obvious. First, she simply accepts the restrictions given to girls—not going to school, not being free to move around and eventually getting married to a warlord at thirteen. But even a short spell as bacha posh leads her to break with the rules. Being Rahim lets her daydream about life outside what domestic work requires. Living on her own and going to school make it obvious how pointless many gender rules can be. Vonnegut doesn't forget what she was able to do as a man once her identity is changed. As a result, this memory helps you act in opposition to injustice.

Rahima actually shows defiance in the early days of her marriage. At first, she's nervous around him but starts wondering if he's acting the way he should. She joins forces with women around the house, including her co-wives and staff members and learns to handle the challenges in her mind and heart. She hears her aunt's stories about Shekiba, gains knowledge from them and thinks about constructing her own future. Her commitment to complete her education and be in charge of her life, despite the risks, strongly demonstrates her resistance in society that tries to block such achievements.

Shekiba's Choose Your Own Adventure

Shekiba resisted in many open ways and in more covert manners. Because she lived in a different time, she experiences deep shame as a woman with a scar on her face from a young age. Because of her appearance, she becomes a stranger to both men and women. It is funny, because being marginalized gets her the job as a guard in the king's harem and this position demands her to present as male.

Shekiba sees the role as her only path to achieve independence and favors it accordingly. She uses her version of masculinity to get a hold on power she was not able to access before. Even though she is ruled by both the monarchy and her husband's family, her position affords her some control readers will not always have. The way she worked illustrates the kind of resisting that matters in strict systems resistance that doesn't break the system but finds realistic ways

to create important places in it.

Acts of Resistance People Do Every Day

The book shows the value of women using invisible ways to demonstrate their autonomy every day. For instance, Rahima's aunt uses stories to protect female history and inspire people who follow, showing them what women can do. The oral stories defy the main historic accounts that overlook or reduce what women have experienced.

In both females' lives, women coming together gives them the necessary strength to resist against impossible forces. Even if it's a maid keeping secrets for her mistress or one wife speaking kindly to another, these are ways for women to help each other in a world where they are pitted together in competition.

Another name for resistance is evolution.

Significantly, resistance is not shown by Hashimi as an instant, outstanding event. Trauma, their life lessons and the things they learn help Rahima and Shekiba change gradually. Most of them need to work to gain agency, as it is not something they have by nature. Because they resist gradually, their experiences seem more realistic and strong. The story shows that feminist awakening happens gradually, resulting from the decisions and awareness we build up along the way.

Intergenerational Trauma and the Solidarity Found Across Generations

Generated by both trauma and ties among generations, emotion connects the stories of Rahima and Shekiba throughout the book. Although women of different times faced various challenges, their common experiences of being oppressed, shut out and strong give their stories a continuous theme that reminds readers that trauma often repeats from one generation to another, while telling and remembering stories unites women helping them recover and build lasting bonds of strength.

Feelings of Past Trauma Appearing Later

Like many others, Rahima is influenced by her current experiences as well as by the inspiring stories passed along by women such as Shekiba.

The tales told by Rahima's aunt are meant to encourage, rather than just frighten and they honor the strength women have shown in dealing with cruelty. Shekiba feels marginalized because of her appearance and the way others treat her, while Rahima experiences marginalization when she must quit being bacha posh and at an early age be forced into marriage. The emotional pain they experience does not exist by itself; it is part of a series of harms regularly suffered by women in cultures dominated by men.

As a result, "historical trauma" comes to mind, where groups of people with inherited injuries from former generations experience injustice, violence and dehumanization and these effects influence their culture as well as their minds and genes. Since Rahima wasn't part of Shekiba's life, she still carries the same emotions. She gets a sense of how Shekiba feels displaced, desires freedom and protests her lack of control.

Working together by sharing stories

In addition, Hashimi demonstrates that trauma is not something people passively inherit. Rahima uses storytelling to change the hurt of earlier events into a powerful force within herself. The story her aunt tells about Shekiba is a powerful form of resistance because it keeps women's stories alive in a quieting world. These accounts give Rahima other ways to think about life besides the ones she has always been told to accept.

Even the less direct connection between older and younger women is important for them emotionally and in their social and political lives. It points out how women's memories matter and add to the transformation history brings. Consequently, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* becomes a novel about both trauma and the way female strength is passed from mother to daughter.

Analysis of Patriarchal Structures

Nadia Hashimi highlights in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* the negative impact of Afghan society's strong patriarchy. The fact that the story has two voices allows readers to find out how unfair societal structures treat different

genders. Their oppression comes from established systems, teachings, family arrangements, community values and official government bodies, rather than simply from one person.

It's very clear from the novel that patriarchy finds its strongest presence in an area that molds us most our very own family. Rahima's father abuses opium and is mostly gone, but he maintains more social authority than anyone else in the household. It is a tribal custom, baad, that shapes her fate and girls are given away when a relative is accused of a crime. This way of seeing women under patriarchy as things to be traded or owned is very dehumanizing.

Her story also supports these arguments. What makes her important is mostly how she appears and if she marries. After both her parents died and she was disfigured, her family members no longer wanted to care for her. Her only chance at freedom is when she masquerades as a guard which marks once more that being a woman here means being powerless.

Hashimi addresses how religion applied as an institution maintains these challenges. Religion is acknowledged in the novel, but it points out that religious rules tend to be used to control or subjugate women. Most village religious leaders insist to the girls that they should not get an education and that getting married at a young age is what God decides. Since religion is used to justify patriarchy, questioning it can easily be seen by some as showing disrespect toward the faith.

Hashimi demonstrates that women can play a part in maintaining patriarchy if they have come to accept its norms. Many times, it is up to female elders to direct younger girls' actions, ensure purdah is followed and organize uncomfortable marriages. Such behavior points out just how much these norms are part of our culture.

The Importance of Learning

Knowledge is only a part of education in *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*; it is also a key symbol of freedom, self-appreciation and transformation. Learning for Rahima and

Shekiba simply equals being treated as human beings. Hashimi makes it clear that teaching and learning are major ways to oppose patriarchal structures that want to make women silent, unequal and dependent on men.

Without going to school because she was a girl, Rahima is now able to discover a side of herself as a bacha posh filled with intellectual possibility. She enjoys understanding new things and believes in herself because others treat her as someone with skills, not as someone to worry about. But even a short time exposed to politics leads to rebellious thoughts. Rahima uses her memory of classes as a way to remain free inside her new home. Going back to school matters to her, because she's unwilling to accept the role that others chose for her.

But Shekiba's connection to education is not directly expressed. School is rare for her, but we can see that her curiosity about learning is great. Navigating the complex system of the court as someone who didn't grow up in it, just shows that she learned a different way through action and instinct. Her ability to deal with challenges is strong no matter where it was learned.

Hashimi explores education in a way that reflects the country's ongoing political debates. When the Taliban was in control, girls were entirely denied the opportunity to learn, with terrible outcomes. After the Taliban was defeated, many areas in the countryside still struggled to give students the chance to learn. The book reveals the challenges women faced, as education could lead them to social change or remain a barrier for women wanting to grow.

It's important to note that magic education never solves every problem. A girl's focus on learning is acknowledged for the difficulties it can create in her community and for herself. Yet, education helps build agency, capacity for critical thinking and personal autonomy.

Education is shown many times in the book which highlights the positive impact learning has on women and their communities.

Conclusion

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell is a remarkable story that also scrutinizes the politics of

Afghanistan. The way Rahima and Shekiba's stories are told shows how patriarchal traditions have limited Afghan women over the years. However, it gives us another perspective: resilience, resistance and the slow rise of personal agency.

Through examining bacha posh, the novel weaves together criticism of how women are seen with how the concept of gender is understood, in parallel with Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Because of Simone de Beauvoir's idea, we realize these women are denied being subjects. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has pointed out that Afghan women are not simple victims but alert players who manage or resist their situations using their own cultural actions.

It makes clear that education is important, that intergenerational support is essential and how women in their routines find ways to express themselves. Though Rahima told her story in the past and Shekiba in the present, their resistance to great difficulty is similar.

The book represents significant work within feminist literature since it explores gender and power deeply in an area far from the West. It allows readers to watch the pain of oppression and equally recognize the amazing power of women working to escape from these restraints.

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