

Breaking the Shell: Women's Struggle and Resilience in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*

Parneet Kaur

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sri Guru Granth Sahib World University, Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab, India

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Abstract— The paper explores the condition of women in Nadia Hashimi's novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* (2014). The novel follows the lives of two women, Shekiba and Rahima, who belong to different generations but share a similar fate as they struggle to survive in a patriarchal society. It demonstrates that, regardless of the time period, women continue to face oppression and must constantly fight for their survival and dignity. The study examines how both Shekiba and Rahima encounter similar social restrictions despite living generations apart. To escape discrimination and gain opportunities denied to girls, both are compelled to adopt the tradition of bacha posh, disguising themselves as boys and concealing their female identity. Through their experiences, the novel highlights the persistence of gender inequality and the enduring impact of patriarchal norms on women's lives. This paper not only explores their suffering but also examines how one woman's experiences inspire the other to challenge patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, both Shekiba and Rahima break free from the metaphorical 'shell' of social restrictions, assert their identities, strive to live their lives delightfully, and reject the norms of patriarchal society. However, they faced a lot of exploitation, lost their family members, were deprived of various rights such as education, property rights, playing freely, and choosing their life partners, and so on. It further emphasizes that despite continuous oppression, challenges, and social injustice, women demonstrate remarkable courage and determination.



Keywords— Gender Inequality, Identity Conflict, Patriarchal Society, Resilience, Women's Exploitation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell is a debut novel by Nadia Hashimi, published in 2014. Hashimi is an Afghan-American pediatrician and novelist best known for her three novels: *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, *When the Moon is Low*, and *A House Without Windows*. She was also the first Afghan-American woman to run for US Congress. Through her writings, Hashimi presents human emotions while highlighting the history, culture, and social realities of her beloved country, Afghanistan. Her writings particularly focus on the lives of Afghan women and the various challenges they face in patriarchal society.

Women in patriarchal society often experience discrimination and oppression due to male dominance. They struggle to survive and seek freedom while overcoming numerous social and cultural barriers. Many become victims of gender inequality because they are

denied the right to make decisions without the permission of a male family member. Discrimination profoundly shapes their lives, restricting them to the domestic spheres and limiting their opportunities. They are often deprived of education, freedom of movement, and the right to participate in public life. However, when they adopt a male identity or dress as boys, they gain access to rights and privileges that are otherwise denied to them. Through this contrast, Hashimi exposes the deep-rooted gender inequality in her novel *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* that continues to affect the lives of women in Afghan society.

II. OVERVIEW OF THE PEARL THAT BROKE ITS SHELL

The Pearl That Broke Its Shell is about two women, Shekiba and Rahima, who shared similar fates despite living in different eras. Rahima, a modern Afghan

girl, is interwoven with the life of her great-grandmother, Shekiba. Rahima was born and brought up in a drug-addicted father's house. She has two sisters and no brother. They rarely attend school or play outside. Their only hope lies in the tradition of 'bacha-posh', which allows young Rahima to live freely as a boy until her marriageable age. Then she was married to a much older man, and her life was stuck in household chores. But Rahima is not the first in her family to adopt the bacha posh tradition. A century earlier, her great-grandmother, Shekiba, left orphaned by an epidemic, saved herself but lost all her father's property, as girls don't have any right to family property. Then acquired a male identity to serve as a guard for the harem of King Habibullah. Then married Agha Aasif Baraan and became his second wife, and he hoped she'd bear him a son, which she did.

III. GENDER INEQUALITY

Gender inequality is one of the most persistent social issues, continuously affecting the lives of women across cultures and generations. In patriarchal societies, women's lives are largely shaped by gender inequality, which restricts their freedom, limits their choices, and reinforces male authority. This unequal power structure is vividly portrayed in Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*. The novel presents gender inequality as a deeply rooted social problem that affects women's lives from childhood to adulthood. The novel illustrates how patriarchal traditions deny women equal rights, independence, and opportunities, forcing them to struggle for dignity and survival. Rahima experiences gender inequality from an early age. As a girl, she is denied the right to education and has no claim to her father's property. Later, after her marriage, she becomes the third wife of Abdul Khaliq and is subjected to neglect, control, and unequal treatment within the household. Similarly, Shekiba is deprived of her inheritance after the death of her parents. Her paternal uncles seize her family's property and force her to live as their servant while making her work alongside them in the fields.

"Shekiba, when you have finished with cleaning this floor, you are to go out into the field and help your uncles with the harvest." (Hashimi, 2014, p. 54)

Shekiba demands her share of the family property because it is her legal right, but everyone tells her that, as a girl, she has no claim to it.

"Shekiba-jan, you are asking a ridiculous question. Your father's land will go to his family, since your brothers are dead, may Allah grant them peace."

"But what about me? Am I not rightfully an heir to the land? I am his child too." (Hashimi, 2014, p. 82)

Hashimi further demonstrates that gender inequality is not limited to the lives of the two protagonists but is deeply embedded in Afghan society. Rahima's sisters are also denied educational opportunities and the freedom to make their own choices. Their marriage was also arranged without their consent. Her sister Parwin says,

"One by One, the birds flew away..." (Hashimi, 2014, p.136)

Likewise, Rahima's sister-in-law, despite being appointed to parliament in Kabul, has little authority over her own decisions, as her husband controls both her personal and professional life. Although she holds a prestigious political position, her independence remains limited by patriarchal expectations. Although the decisions appeared to be her own, they were indirectly dictated by her husband.

"Each time the director asked the parliament to vote on a candidate, Bandriya waited until this man raised his paddle", (Hashimi, 2014, p.305)

Through these characters, Hashimi exposes the widespread nature of gender inequality and highlights how women, regardless of their social status, continue to face discrimination and oppression in a patriarchal society.

IV. EXPLOITATION

Exploitation is a persistent form of oppression experienced by women across different eras. Women have long been subjected to various forms of exploitation, including physical, emotional, economic, and social exploitation, which continue to limit their freedom and dignity. It is another challenge for women in a male-dominated society. Through the experiences of Shekiba and Rahima, Hashimi demonstrates how exploitation becomes a part of women's everyday lives, restricting their freedom, dignity, and opportunities.

Shekiba experiences exploitation from an early age after the death of her parents. Instead of receiving care and protection, she is subjected to cruelty by her paternal family. Her uncles, grandmother, and aunt treat her harshly and deny her the love and security she deserves. Eventually, they sell her to the king, where she is forced to serve as a guard in the royal harem.

The exploitation continues within the palace. Benafsha, one of the king's wives, is brutally murdered by the king after he discovers her affair with Agha Aasif Baraan.

"Soon after soon, scream after scream, until Benafsha went silent and still." (Hashimi, 2014, p.330)

Although Shekiba is innocent, she is unjustly punished and imprisoned for failing to prevent the incident.

"Know this guard! An offense this grave does not go unpunished. My name has been besmirched. One look at your face and it is obvious you are damned! Have her locked up! And Benafsha too! We will swift examples of them both." (Hashimi, 2014, p.290)

Later, Agha Aasif Baraan rescues her out of guilt, as he believes he is responsible for the circumstances that led to her suffering. He marries Shekiba and hopes that she will bear his child, which she eventually does. Through Shekiba's journey, Hashimi reveals how women are repeatedly exploited by both their families and the patriarchal system, often becoming victims of circumstances over which they have no control.

Rahima is subjected to physical abuse by both her husband and her mother-in-law. Although Rahima and Parwin live in neighboring houses after Parwin marries Abdul Sharif, the brother of Rahima's husband, they are not permitted to meet each other. When Rahima asks Shahnaz about the visit of Abdul Sharif's family, Shahnaz replies:

"He does, but not as often as his brother. If you think you will see your sisters, though, don't get your hopes up." (Hashimi, 2014, p. 165)

Parwin's life is marked by continuous suffering. Because she is physically disabled, her parents-in-law treat her with cruelty and neglect. One day, Rahima hears the news that Parwin has allegedly committed suicide; however, she understands that the reality behind her death is far more complex. Rahima realizes that Parwin's unbearable circumstances and relentless oppression drove her to take such a drastic step. Similarly, Kala Shaima believes that harsh circumstances often leave women with no alternative but to seek an escape. She repeatedly remarks,

"We all need an Escape." (Hashimi, 2014, p. 215)

Kala Shaima believes that perhaps death was Parwin's only means of escaping the cruel and oppressive world in which she lived.

V. IDENTITY CONFLICT

The Bacha Posh tradition gives rise to an identity crisis among young girls who are compelled to assume a male identity to gain the privileges reserved for boys in a patriarchal society. Although this transformation is temporary, it creates a conflict between their lived experiences as boys and their socially assigned roles as

girls. When they are required to return to their female identity at puberty, they often experience emotional and psychological difficulties as they struggle to readjust to the restrictive expectations imposed on women.

In *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell*, Rahima is forced to adopt the *Bacha Posh* tradition because her father, weakened by alcoholism, is unable to fulfill the responsibilities traditionally assigned to a male family member. She is transformed into Rahim as part of the *bacha posh* tradition. Her mother tells her,

"Bachem, from now on we're going to call you Rahim." (Hashimi, 2014, p.35)

As a *Bacha Posh*, Rahima performs tasks that are socially considered the duty of a son. She enjoys freedoms that were previously denied to her, such as moving freely in public, attending school, and playing with boys. Her life appears more independent and fulfilling only because she is recognized as a boy. This tradition is acceptable as it is not new.

"I wasn't the first bacha posh. This was a common tradition for families want of a son". (Hashimi, 2014, p.36)

However, once her marriage is arranged, she is compelled to abandon her male identity and resume the traditional role of a woman, taking on numerous domestic and social responsibilities.

Similarly, Shekiba adopts a male identity to protect her family's property after her family members' deaths, but her efforts are unsuccessful. Later, she disguises herself as a man to secure a position as a guard in the king's palace. Through the experiences of Rahima and Shekiba, Hashimi illustrates how the *Bacha Posh* tradition offers women temporary freedom while exposing the deep-rooted gender inequality that forces them to suppress their true identities to survive.

VI. FROM OPPRESSION TO EMPOWERMENT

Despite facing continuous oppression, exploitation, and discrimination, both Shekiba and Rahima display remarkable resilience in challenging patriarchal norms. The title *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* symbolizes the courage to break free from the social restrictions that confine women. Shekiba refuses to surrender to the hardships imposed upon her and repeatedly reinvents herself to survive. Likewise, Rahima gains confidence during her time as a *Bacha Posh* and eventually develops the strength to question the limitations placed upon her. Rahima receives permission to attend parliamentary meetings with her sister-in-law, Badriya, as she is more educated than her. During these meetings, she develops friendships with the parliamentarians, Sufia and Hamida.

She later joins the resource center, where she meets Ms. Franklin, whose guidance broadens her perspective and strengthens her confidence. In the end, Rahima once again adopts the identity of a boy, boards a bus out of town, and escapes from her abusive husband, Abdul Khaliq, in search of a new life.

"I had done my best to tie down my breasts with a head scarf, but it was harder now than it had been a few years ago." (Hashimi, 2014, p.444)

Before leaving, she writes a letter to her aunt, Kala Shaima, who has always encouraged and supported her, and recounts the story of Shekiba. She signs the letter as Bibi Shekiba, symbolizing the inspiration and strength she draws from her great-grandmother's life. Similarly, after enduring years of hardship and oppression, Shekiba eventually finds a home where she is treated with greater respect, enjoys a measure of dignity and security, and builds a more stable life. Through their journeys, Hashimi suggests that even in the most restrictive societies, women possess the resilience and inner strength to challenge traditional gender roles and redefine their identities.

VII. CONCLUSION

Nadia Hashimi's *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* presents a powerful portrayal of the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Through the parallel lives of Shekiba and Rahima, the novel reveals how gender inequality, exploitation, and identity conflict continue to shape women's lives across generations. The *Bacha Posh* tradition, while offering temporary freedom and opportunities, also exposes the unequal social structure that forces women to suppress their identities to survive. Despite enduring discrimination, violence, and social restrictions, both Shekiba and Rahima demonstrate remarkable resilience and determination. Their journeys illustrate that women are not merely victims of patriarchal oppression but are also capable of resisting injustice and reclaiming their dignity. The title *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* symbolically represents the courage to break free from the constraints imposed by society. Ultimately, Hashimi's novel serves as a strong critique of patriarchal norms while celebrating the strength, endurance, and hope of women who continue to challenge inequality and strive for a life of freedom, identity, and self-respect.

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